# Caniformes

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**Caniformes**

by give_it_a_little_nudge
In a world in which people evolved from both Primates and Canids, Alpha Dr. Castiel Novak has taken on the monumental task of rebuilding a society broken from years of neglect. The most Dominant Alpha in living memory, Castiel's calling to renew his species' dying culture is shared by mesmerizing alpha-Submissive, Dean Winchester. Always close, scene partners, unmatched colleagues, and best friends, the two men's quiet pining for one another fools no one but themselves. Although desperately in love, alphas cannot mate with alphas, and all too soon, disaster walks into the American Caniforme Research Institute in the form of April Anderson, who is destined to ensnare Castiel whether he wants her to or not. True-Mate Triggers cannot be resisted, and a bereft Dean flees the ACRI and the agony of watching his beloved, now tied to another forever. But the Universe has its own plans, and Castiel’s young mate may prove the very catalyst that Dean and Castiel never knew they could hope for. Just as all their stars seem finally to align, they're in for another body-slam. Enter Michael Lancet, Dean’s unexpected True-Mate, an Omega unlike any they’ve ever imagined, and the one who may hold the power to unhinge it all.

Notes

This is my first effort, and I think I've bitten off more than I can chew, so please be gentle with me. It's been in my head for a few years now and demanded I put it down into actual words.

One quick note: This effort has totally taken off on me, and it's really fucking long. It's intended to be consumed chapter-by-chapter episodically, like the show I adore. Taken like that, the length might not seem like quite the behemoth it's word count otherwise indicates.

Be aware that many chapters start with SPN-type "THEN" sections. At no point are these sections critical to the plot. If you are more interested in the action, skip 'em. If you want to delve into the minutiae of the world of the wolves, that's what they're there for. Also, you can always ask me if you have questions. I'm nice, or so my dogs tell me.

See the end of the work for more notes.
NOW:

“Arising from Caniformes, \textit{(Order Carnivora)}, and Simiiformes, \textit{(Order Primate)},” Cas tilted his voice to his lecturer’s timbre, “and often called, in formal environments, the Lupins and the Simians, or Lupine Sapiens and Homo Sapiens, or to simplify further, often called the wolves and the apes by every day folks, the Pack and the Troop, dogs and monkeys, or most frequently on the street – us
and them – ” He lowered his chin and raised one eyebrow at her. He had heard her outburst and intended to make sure she knew it.

“We evolved independently, in parallel, to produce two species that bear remarkable resemblance to each other in ontogeny, capacity, and function, despite our very different philological lineage. In other words, while we are all simply people, human people, and we look almost the same, we aren’t the same. Simians are recognizable by their rounded ears and their long dexterous fingers. Lupins uniformly have points to the tips of their ears and generally have short and somewhat furry, Hobbit-like fingers.” He held his hand in front of his face and examined his own thick fingers. “There are more anatomical differences below the surface, but these are the easiest to look for when you meet someone for the first time and need to be certain.”

He was babbling. He stopped speaking to collect himself, and as expected the exasperated woman across his office desk huffed an annoyed sigh into the break. “DOCTOR Novak,” she said with as much disdain as she could fit into two words, “Don’t give me a ninth-grade science lecture. Give me my son back!” Her voice had risen in volume and intensity as she rose from her chair and leaned menacingly over the desk. “I have been very patient with you, but my patience has run out! My son is a minor, and you will return him to me this minute, or I will have the police collect him and charge you with RAPE!”

Castiel wasn’t intimidated, but his Facility didn’t need a protest lawsuit right now, and the boy needed to stay where he was. This is why it’s bad policy to allow Simians to adopt Canine children, he confirmed silently. They don’t understand. You spend your entire adult life educating people about the needs of the Pack. You build the facilities and support structures, the communities and the laws that will protect them. Endless hours spent in research and in front of Congressional committees and eight years into it, you find yourself in front of a woman who should most definitely know better, with your cock still damp from having been tied inside her son’s channel, trying to explain to her why he needs this; trying to calm her, bring her back to the front part of her brain. That reptilian section of the brain – both species shared that. Emotions run high sometimes, and Castiel wasn’t helping. His calm was revving her up even worse.

He sighed.

“Mrs. Lister, Jeremy is sixteen years old. You knew this day was coming when he Presented as an Omega. I remind you again that as a Lupin, he is a full grown adult now. He entered The Facility of his own accord, on his own two feet, with full agency to do so. He is in good hands…”

“It’s not the HANDS I’m worried about, and you know it, Doctor!” she interrupted, still not retaking her seat. “I know what goes on back there. You wrap it all up in medical words, but you and your dogs are raping him while you distract me in this office, talking! I’m not leaving until you give me my son back!”

Castiel ran a hand down his face in frustration then schooled himself back to calm. “Jeremy is in Heat, Mrs. Lister, and he needs care. He is too old – too developed – to go through it alone. The risks are real and substantial. I am very sorry that you and I had no opportunity to discuss Jeremy’s care before he checked himself in, but I assure you that he’s precisely where he needs to be. If he leaves with you and he doesn’t get the care he needs, he faces physical, mental, and emotional complications – possibly irreversible ones, possibly severe ones.”

Castiel allowed his voice to grow firm and authoritative. “No one, I repeat NO ONE, is being raped on these premises. Jeremy is being closely monitored with cutting-edge equipment. He’s being knotted by highly trained professionals who have only his best interests at heart. That may sound like rape to a Simian, but I assure you it’s not. Jeremy will be Claimed – temporarily Claimed,” Cas was
quick to interject as he saw her face darken again, “By three of our staff members who will also serve as his instructors over the next twelve weeks.”

Castiel paused to allow the new information to sink in then added, “One of those three instructors will be me. I had only just come untied with your son when I was called to my office to speak with you. I assure you, Mrs. Lister, your son is fine. He’s responding well to the Claiming process, we’ll provide you and your husband with a full explanation of his test results, and his Heat is running its course as well as can be expected. He will not, however, be leaving The Facility for the next three months. He needs this training period more than most wolves his age. To be completely frank, he is woefully behind his peers in understanding his own biology and his place in the Pack. He is in a vulnerable position right now. Were I to allow you to pull him out before he completes the process, he runs the very real risk of permanent mental, emotional, and physical damage. It is imperative that you understand this, Ma’am. Omegas can DIE from Heat-distress if they do not receive the care they need. It happens every day. It’s not going to happen to your son, not under my watch.”

***************

Castiel strode aggressively through the bright, overlit hallway, bursting through swinging doors with a purpose. A portion of his brain that sounded very much like Dean noted that he probably resembled one of the characters from Dr. Sexy responding to a STAT call, and he chuckled to himself despite his stirred state of mind. It had taken far too long to get that woman who never should’ve been granted a wolf pup to raise in the first place, to give up her tirade. Cas finally managed to hand her off to Billie and escape. Billie and Charlie would take care of everything – calm her and explain where her Primate maternal instincts were leading her wrong – much better than Castiel was doing. The ignorance that still suffused every part of the common populace was exhausting to Castiel.

It’d been five long years since he and a few fellow researchers had started their crusade to apply their findings to real people – to try to lower the mortality and insanity rates of young Lupins.

The Pack had lost so many Omegas over the last 200 years; corresponding with the cultural shifts that brought the Pack out of their rural, forested communal villages and into the cities; corresponding to the Lupin rejection of their ancestral ways in attempts to assimilate with the Primates. 200 years of utter abandonment of Pack wisdom and common cures, their stories, their rituals, their practices, their sacred way of life had resulted in a rapidly disintegrating population of wolves, trying desperately to be what they’re not, wasting away and going crazy in back allies. They’d traded their sense of Pack for the shiny glass and steel skyscrapers and the horseless carriages the apes had, and the Pack was suffering for it. Castiel fumed every time he thought about it, and it was raising the hairs on the back of his neck as he busted through another swinging door on his way back to check on the boy. Wolves were not apes. They needed the Pack. They needed the hierarchy, the Claiming, the discipline, and the sex. Wolves needed to be bathed in the semen of their alphas and needed to feel the iron hard hand of their Dominants on their flanks. Every scientific study over the past twenty years showed the same result, in unequivocal terms: Wolves were not Apes.

Cas finally arrived back at the South Wing where new arrivals were processed. He walked into the control room between rooms 107 and 108 and addressed Dr. Harvelle who only glanced up at him
briefly before turning back to her screens. “How’s he doing?” he asked her.

“He and Jo just untied. The Claim reads strong and clean – not as strong as yours, but... She did a good job with him. He’s clearly straight, Alpha. Reading his body language, I don’t think he’s ever been with a man before. He was much more relaxed with Jo. Of course, he’s only sixteen... might not have fucked many people at all yet.”

Cas just hm’d in response. He’d picked up one of the clipboards and was scanning through the readings. Hormone levels, pheromone spikes, musk releases, heart rate all normal for an adolescent in Heat after a solid Claim-fuck. Cas glanced through the one-way glass into the room. Jo was standing now, dressed in a robe and leaning over the boy’s head. One hand stroked gently through his hair, and he subtly leaned into her touch as the fingers on his right hand twitched slightly. Cas couldn’t hear her words, but he trusted her to care for the pup.

Cas had known Jo almost as long as he’d known Dean. Those two were practically a matched set, always together, nearly siblings in their closeness. She was barely more than a pup herself in some ways, but once she’d Presented as an Alpha and her penis had unsheathed for the first time, she learned quickly to harness the power that her Secondary gender brought with it.

Jo was good. Very good. Jeremy’s body looked like it had melted into the thin mattress. He was utterly relaxed. Cas resisted the instinct to enter the room and assert his more dominant Claim which was fresh enough to pull at him. He wasn’t needed here right now, and everything was under control. He looked back at Ellen in front of the glowing screens.

“Jo’s last?”

Ellen took a moment to respond and seemed a little distracted when she looked up from the report that had her focus. Then her brain caught up with the question. “Uh, yeah. Yes, Alpha. Benny followed right after you. No complications, everything went textbook. We’ll let him sleep a bit, then we’ll have Charlie clean him up and get him fed before showing him to the dorm. Usual process except we sped it up a lot due to his Heat and in case that nutcase tried to break him out. Was that really his mother storming the castle? What was that all about?”

“Yes.” Cas ground his teeth a bit, then intentionally released the tension in his jaw. “She’s not Pack. I have no idea how an ape couple adopted a wolf-pup, but she apparently tracked him here, as you say, ‘stormed in’, and demanded that we stop raping her son and release him back to her custody. There may be trouble if Billie can’t get her to understand.” He ran a hand down his face again, pressing a bit into his eyes to extinguish the premonition of losing everything he and Bobby, Benny and Dean had built.

He blew out a breath and stiffened his posture. That wasn’t going to happen. They’d built it carefully. They had allies in Congress, in the State Legislature, and even locally, who had painstakingly placed laws over the years to protect the Pack from just this sort of Primate interference. They were solid. They were fine. Young Omegas like Jeremy would never again have to face the cold, awful claws of insanity in the face of ignorance and fear. Never again. Cas caught Ellen’s concerned, maternal look and huffed a laugh.

“I’m worried about you, Alpha,” she admitted with a shrug. He smiled kindly and placed a firm, calming hand on the back of the Omega’s neck. Ellen, Dr. Harvelle, was a shining poster-child for the possibilities that were within reach of an Omega who got all the care they needed to thrive. She’d persevered through the bias and assumption that an Omega was just not capable and come out on the other side a world-renowned researcher with a Doctorate and a bedside manner unlike anything the betas or alphas could mimic.
Nevertheless, she was an Omega and prone to the needs of that designation. An Alpha’s firm touch went a long way to keep her grounded. Castiel never let a single interaction go without touching her. They both needed the connection, and with every simple touch, the Pack grew stronger. Ellen had faced the world alone for too long. Now she was Cas’ to care for, whether she knew it or not, and he held that responsibility sacred. Ellen took a few breaths of the Alpha’s scent and then shook herself a bit. “Cas, we’ve got this. Aren’t you supposed to be somewhere else? I thought Dean was waiting for you.”

“He is,” Cas admitted. “I needed to swing by and check on Jeremy before I lock us in for the afternoon. I, um, I think I need this time more than Dean does, and it may take a while. Did someone check that the suite is stocked? It’s not time for our Ruts yet, but you never know….” Cas trailed off. He was looking back into the room beyond the glass which had been darkened. Jo was seated to the side, quietly cleaning a probe while the pup – no not a pup anymore – the Omega, slept peacefully. Cas’ eyes really didn’t register what was in front of him. His mind was elsewhere.

Ellen looked up at him knowingly. “Yes, Alpha. Fully stocked. You’re good to go even if one or both of you Trips over into Rut.” She paused, then continued carefully, “Do I need to have medical on standby?” In the room beyond, Jo stood and opened the door to a quiet knock from Charlie. The redhead smiled as she entered. With no prelude, Charlie approached the sleeping form and began gently to sponge him down with warm cloths. A surge of pride struck Cas. These people were so Good; good at their jobs, good with each other, good to their clients. Charlie didn’t know that the Facility Director was watching her work, and yet every touch was tender and careful. The staff of The Facility, all of them, genuinely cared about their clients and about each other.

Cas couldn’t repress an overwhelming feeling of pride in what they’d built together. The mission of The Facility was understood and shared by everyone involved, from Becky at intake, to Sam the Lead Enforcement Officer, from Research to Outreach and everyone in between. Cas heard Ellen chuckle again and mutter quietly, “Better get going, Alpha, or you may find a less compliant Sub in your suite than you expect.” Cas brought his attention back from where it had wandered with the realization that an inability to focus was a classic symptom of a growing need to Scene. Ellen was right, he needed to get going.

He tightened his hand on the back of her neck a bit in gentle remonstrance, lest she forget her place, then released her. “Let him wait,” he chuckled darkly. Cas was actually hoping Dean would be a brat today. He needed the release that came with an intense scene, and no one brought that side of Cas out better than his alpha-Sub, longtime research and business partner, but never-more-than-friends-who-scene-together…where was he going with this? Oh. Right. Down the rabbit hole that was his relationship with Dean. Cas turned on his heel despite his previous statement and left the room. Dr. Harvelle was right. She, Jo, and Charlie had young Jeremy well in hand. Billie obviously had Jeremy’s mother lined out if Charlie’s presence in the processing room was anything to go by.

Over the next couple of days, Jeremy’s bonds with Cas, Benny, and Jo would be used to help him adjust to his place in The Facility and to his classwork. He would be evaluated, examined, and tested, physically and emotionally. Today’s Keller Test results would be fed through the computer algorithms to determine Jeremy’s Tertiary designation. So far, Cas knew he was a healthy, if somewhat maladjusted straight cis-male Omega. The Keller Test would tell whether he was Submissive, Neutral, or Dominant. Cas could nearly always predict the results before they came out. He was famous for it, but ethics forbade him from using that instinct where clients were involved. There was too much risk of damage being done by forecasting a designation that turned out to be wrong. The data were never wrong. They would wait for the data.

His mood darkened and settled as he left the South Wing and headed back toward his own suite of rooms in the North. Dean had probably already been waiting for him when Cas and Mrs. Lister were
shouting at each other what seemed like ages ago right next door. Dean was not patient when he got the itch, and Cas was late. He was stopped twice on the way: once by Becky to sign Jeremy’s matriculation form, and once by Bobby to confirm that Cas would be at tomorrow’s Board of Director’s meeting. Neither interruption took very long, but Cas was antsy by the time he reached his door. He stood for a moment outside, took a calming breath, slipped easily into his Alpha-Dom persona, schooled his face, then turned the knob and walked in, letting the door close and lock behind him on its own. The only words that made it to the hallway before the door latched were, “Up, Sub. Over the arm of the sofa. Ass in the…” He didn’t open the door again for the next sixteen hours. As it turned out, a call to have medical on standby would’ve been a good idea.
Wednesday, February 15, 2017

Chapter Notes

I swear upon all that is holy that this is a Destiel story. But fair warning, it's a Poly story too. True-Mates in this Universe are incontrovertible, so the trick is to figure out how to work with that barrier, not try to get around it. Trust me on this. It's doable. If you're motivated.

If the idea of widening the space within the Profound Bond isn't something that intrigues you, this may not be the story for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN:

Dean was a nineteen-year-old undergrad majoring in Secondary Education at a small, private college in the heartland; one that catered to Lupins and that butted right up against the monolith that was the imposing University of Kansas. He was nearing graduation and stopped in at the campus dive to celebrate with a few classmates. Dean liked living in a town comprised mostly of Pack. The rules were different here than they were out in Main Street USA. The bar, for instance, took custom from wolves who were still legally underage, honoring the tradition that Lupins reached their maturity and majority at 16. The party had fizzled out – too close to finals. One by one, his stressed friends vanished to cram for their tests in the last few hours before they had to sit for their tests.

Dean was about to shrug it off as a lost cause and join the great cram-fest, but was startled on his way out the door when he caught sight of his professor for Gender Studies stomping the rain from his boots under the awning outside. “Good evening, Dr. Novak,” Dean said politely. He held the
door as the professor approached.

“Ah, good,” said the doctor. “Just the lad I was hoping to see here. Are you leaving?” he asked.

Confused, Dean frowned a bit and replied, “I was about to, I guess. My friends all took off to study, and I felt a bit guilty, so…” Dean trailed off and looked down. His teacher always left him feeling a little off kilter, as if he knew something shameful about Dean and was waiting for the right moment to reveal it. Dean hoped this wasn’t that time. Why would his professor be hoping to run into one specific student out of so many? The last time Dr. Novak had fixed his stern blue eye on Dean specifically was a fiasco that still made Dean’s blood run cold, and that was years ago now. He was in no hurry for a repeat.

“Very wise decision.” Dr. Novak held his gaze for a second longer than seemed customary, but Dean couldn’t look away. Was he in trouble for something? Again? He’d turned in his project and both papers. Oh God, maybe he’d bombed the assignments. Then the prof continued, “However, if you can spare a few moments before you leave, I’d like to speak with you. I’ll buy you a drink if you’ll join me. It won’t take long, I promise.”

Dean considered the offer, his brow still furrowed. Was his teacher making a pass? Was this one of those skanky ‘situations’ that everyone warned Dean about? They all said he was too pretty and needed to stay alert to inappropriate advances. He imagined stuffy, droll Dr. Novak trying to back the young alpha into an alley, and the thought made him laugh. Whatever this was, it wasn’t that.

“Something funny?” asked Dr. Novak, raising one eyebrow in a way that made Dean reconsider his assumption that the good doctor was a dweeb.

“No, uh, sorry Professor,” he stammered. “I can stay for a few minutes. What do you want to speak to me about?”

“Your future, Dean. I have a proposal for you. In fact, I have two.” Dr. Novak led Dean to a booth at the back of the bar. He looked extremely comfortable sliding into the seat. He looked like he lived here. Actually, come to think of it, he always looked at home.

Interesting.

Dean’s wolf cocked his head, thoughtful. Weird that he’d had never noticed before. Dean wasn’t usually one to miss a detail like that.

Once seated, the professor caught the eye of the bartender, raised two fingers, then dismissed him entirely.

Huh.

That wasn’t the kind of communication Zeke usually responded well to. Dean’s wolf cocked his head the other way and furrowed its brow. Dean watched the interaction and filed it away for…he wasn’t sure what.

He was knocked out of his reverie when those deep blue eyes turned back to him. “I want to ask if you’ve considered graduate school, Mr. Winchester. I know you’re graduating. Frankly, I think I have an ideal place for you in my project, and I’d like to pitch it to you – see what you think – that is, if you don’t already have a plan for after you graduate.”

Dr. Novak stopped talking abruptly and looked at Dean. Dean sputtered. The fuck? A minute ago, he thought he was about to get reamed for unacceptable work and now the professor wanted to give him a job? Two beers were set on the table. The teacher thanked Zeke, who’d left the bar to deliver
them himself.

Huh.

Dean had never seen him do that before, not for anyone.

“Any time, Alpha,” responded the bartender.

Dean was normally a quick study where people were concerned, and he heard the capital “A” in the bartender’s pronunciation of the honorific. He ran quickly through what he knew about his teacher and realized he’d really never seen him before.

“I haven’t got my after-grad plans in place just yet, but I’m looking for a post out west,” he mumbled, fidgeting.

What? It wasn’t like he hadn’t been trying, but jobs always seemed to open up for Simian applicants. Lupins were seen as too unpredictable and violent, especially alphas, and it was hard to land a teaching job without prior experience. “I don’t really have the money to keep on with school though, even if I wanted to. I was barely able to swing three years of undergrad.”

“I wonder if you would do me the courtesy of hearing me out? I think most likely, there are a few options we can take advantage of in terms of tuition and expenses.”

Seriously? Who talks like that? Dean was intrigued though, and as he said, he was approaching graduation without a job, so…whatever.

He nodded, sipping his beer.

“As I’ve mentioned in class, I’m leading a research project that will study issues of gender, sexuality, pack hierarchy, and the population decline of healthy, viable Lupins in North America. It’s a huge endeavor, probably biting off more than I can chew, but if I can pull it together, it could mean a great deal to our species everywhere. The scope is pretty small right now. The funding for the full study I have planned is not there, but if we can just get our teeth into it, I really think it could be important.”

The professor had forgotten his drink and was leaning across the table, earnest and entreating.

“Sounds, um, cool. What does it have to do with me?”

“Dean, my interest in you is twofold: one is professional and the other…” He paused, glancing up at the ceiling as if choosing his next words carefully. “First, I don’t know if you realize this, but you are a top-notch researcher. You’re quick and insightful, you know how to keep digging until you get to the root of an issue, and then you explain it in a way that’s…captivating. I always look forward to reading your papers. I want you on my team, Dean. I’m convinced that you will do great things. Our funding is small, but I have enough to hire a small staff. You’d be paid for your work and given an office plus room and board. All I ask is that you consider my offer. I can show you the premise if that would help you decide.”

Dean stared in shock. Then he burst out laughing. Dr. Novak waited for him to quiet again. “I’m completely serious.” His dark tone was unlike any Dean had heard from him before. It sent a shiver up Dean’s spine and made his eyelids flutter. He took another drink. “You said twofold, Professor,” he reminded his teacher. “What’s the other?”

“First of all, please call me Castiel; or Alpha if you prefer. I’d like to work closely enough with you that we become comfortable in one another’s presence.” He paused long enough for Dean to nod.

Castiel? Really? Yeah, OK, Dean could do that.
“Second, Dean, I want to scene with you. Regularly. I believe you and I are ideally suited to keep each other balanced. I have had a terrible time of late finding anyone who fits the bill – at all, actually.” Castiel had held Dean’s eye through his offer, and he looked to be serious, but what the fuck?

Dean didn’t respond right away. He didn’t even blink, so the Alpha continued. “I don’t know to what degree my reputation has filtered into the undergraduate classes, but you may know that in terms of Keller scale ratings, the um…well the scale had to be redrawn after I took the test. It’s an uncomfortable position to be in as it means, among other things, that I find it extremely difficult to find a satisfying partner.”

Dean still hadn’t moved. Castiel’s voice had begun washing over him in a way he couldn’t explain, and he was mesmerized at the images his brain was supplying. “Omegas, even strong ones, are too delicate for the practices I prefer. Betas really don’t interest my Tertiary at all. What I want is a young, strapping alpha who’ll let me… Are you all right, Dean?”

“Uh, yeah,” Dean’s eyes snapped back into focus. He wiped his chin when he realized he’d drooled a little. Jesus, how embarrassing. “Hold on. What makes you think I’m the right person for you? I haven’t even taken my Keller test yet. Don’t you warn us in class to never assume someone’s Tertiary gender until there’s data to back it up?” Dean was randomly throwing out words. He needed to stall long enough for his brain to click back into gear and tell him what the hell was happening right now.

“Very good, Dean,” his teacher praised, and Dean blushed. Damnit. “Yes, ordinarily that’s true, but I have been blessed with an uncanny knack for predicting the outcome of the Keller test. I don’t really need it to know where the data places you on the spectrum. Although,” and Castiel angled his head to allow the raised eyebrow to have more effect, “You will need to complete your evaluation prior to the launch of any sexual activities between us. I may know your Tertiary designation, but the test also pinpoints predispositions for a variety of kinks, and I would need to know those as well.”

“Kinks…” Dean whispered to himself. He was half-chubbed and leaking just a little. He shook his head like a dog and slapped his palm on the table, more to startle himself back into a rational headspace than to emphasize his point. His forebrain was finally catching up. The Alpha across from him didn’t flinch. He waited calmly for Dean’s response. “Did you just offer me a job so you can get your rocks off all over me? What the hell, sir? Is it even legal to ‘launch sexual activities’ with a dude who works for you? You may have my gender pegged, I doubt it, but whatever, but you don’t know me. I hate to pop your bubble, Alpha, but ain’t that kind of a girl.” Dean moved to the end of the booth seat and started to stand. The chill bumps on his arms were wigging him out.

“Dean, please hear me out. It’s not like that. I’m being 100% genuine with you and completely honest. There is nothing untoward about my proposals. They each exist independently of the other. You are free to accept both, either of the two, or neither. And yes, it’s perfectly legal. Courts have ruled that where Lupin Dom/sub relations are critical to the health, wellbeing, and sanity of the wolves involved, there is a waiver for all conflict of interest claims unless there is evidence of abuse. It’s not illegal for you to accept a position on my project team and in my bed simultaneously. I assure you, my health and wellbeing are at risk if I can’t find a suitable scene partner.” Castiel lowered his chin and looked at Dean with dark eyes. “I expect you’ve struggled with the same problem.”

Jesus Christ, what this guy could do with his voice. And his eyes. And…fuck it all! Dean scooted back into the seat. “You know you sound like the worst type of cheesy romance novel about Lupins in Heat. You know, the ones written by Simian housewives with too much porn on their computers?” Dean muttered it nearly under his breath, but the professor heard him, and Castiel chuckled.
“You read those, do you?” the doctor teased.

Dean leaned back and resumed nursing his beer. “Tell me about your research project. Let’s start with that.” Castiel lit up, leaned forward, and began speaking with the lighthearted excitement of a child.

Two hours and two more beers later, they were still deep in discussion. “You don’t understand, Dean. Yes, there are studies that hint at all of this, but their conclusions contradict each other, they really don’t focus on anything actionable, and there’s no peer review going on at all. We need to dig into the ugly guts. For instance, we know that traditional Pack families who follow hierarchy and Pack Discipline in the home have much lower rates of mental illness, especially among the Omegas. We know the difference in the rates, but we don’t know WHY! Is it something about the stability, everyone knowing their places? Is it the open sex or the corporal punishment?”

“Cas, there are literally thousands of studies, like I said…”

Castiel cut him off, “But nothing ties them all together. That’s part of what I need to do here. I don’t just want to add another study on top of the rest that gets buried in some dusty file somewhere. Dean! I want to do all of it!” He was shouting and gesticulating, the passion uncontainable as his life’s ambition poured out of him and all over Dean in a deluge of words.

“We’re going to pull those studies together, separate the real data from the crap, and then build from there. We need massive numbers and deep investigations. I want to track individual subjects for years. We’re going to find out not only why Lupins behave the way they do, but what to DO about it when it’s harming them. I need volunteers for test subjects, and we’re going to need a test facility where they’ll be safe. I’m going to build a training resource center, one that Primates have no access to.

“We need to pull the sex workers out of the back allies, train them responsibly, and put them in clean, safe rooms - provide a place where people can manage their Ruts and Heats with professional care. We need legislation to protect us from the fear and ignorance of the larger population. We need sanctuaries where any Lupin can seek respite, get a scene, have a good hard spanking, whatever they need. Can you imagine a world where Omega Submissives can have successful professional careers? What if we find a way to keep them balanced all the time? Wouldn’t they be as capable of leading fulfilling adult lives as the rest of us?

“And what about all the things we just don’t know? Everyone just makes assumptions, Dean. Like, why is the Posterior womb only capable of single births? Why do nursing Omegas stay fully balanced without needing to be adjusted? We don’t know these things because all the research has been geared toward treating our lineage as a disease; drumming all trace of our heredity out of us. We’re not apes, Dean! We’re never going to be apes! It’s time we started LEARNING ourselves, so we can SAVE ourselves!”

In later years, when Dean tried to nail down the exact moment he fell hopelessly in love with Alpha-Dominant Doctor Castiel James Novak, he always came back to this one. Dean was hooked. He was all in. He had it bad. How, oh, how had he never seen this side of his boring professor before?

“What do you need from me, Cas?” Dean broke in. “Do you know where you’re going to start?
What’s your budget? This is going to take money – a whole hell of a lot of money. Do you have a plan for funding?” Dean watched Castiel’s face turn sheepish.

“We have a grant from the College’s research fund for next semester, and I was planning to make enough progress to support refunding it again after that.” The Alpha ran a finger over his upper lip, back and forth.

“My God, Cas!” The nickname had come easily and immediately. Dean had fallen into the circle of Alpha, and now he too was completely at home. “You don’t have a plan at all! ‘Aight.” He pulled a napkin to him, dug a pen from his backpack, and started to scribble notes. “I’m on it.”

Dean looked up at Castiel without lifting his head. He knew he looked coy, but he also knew he was so gone, and he was “on it” in more than one sense. “This’ll be my first assignment. I’m going to secure you funding. How much do you need?”

They talked until closing time then agreed that the rest could wait. Castiel held the door for Dean and offered him a ride back home, but Dean declined.

Not yet, he thought.

“Hey, Cas,” he called down the sidewalk. “About the other thing… seriously, what makes you think we’re, what’d you say? Compatible?”

“It’s easy Dean.” Cas came back toward Dean slowly, like a hunting cat, his eyes deep, dark pools in the evening light. “I’m the most Dominant Alpha ever to be tested using modern tools, and I find you irresistible. I suspect that when you test, we may find you fall as far off the scale as I do – in the opposite direction.” Dean began to draw himself up, but Cas put a firm hand on the back of his neck, and all resistance failed him. “Just consider it. Please.”

“I’ll take your stupid test under one condition,” whispered Dean. When Castiel cocked his head for him to continue, he finished. “That you anchor it for me.”

“I can do that,” Castiel assured him.

NOW:

Dean would be fine. As a Board-licensed physician, Castiel was equally capable of treating wounds as he was of inflicting them. In fact, Dean looked spectacular. He lounged on the sofa on his side with his long limbs stretching like a cat. Castiel huffed at the feline image in his head as he bent over the back of the sofa and bandaged the gouges on Dean’s back. How could someone so innately Canine look so much like a cat when he relaxed?

“Better?” he asked.

“’M awesome,” Dean slurred. He would be asleep soon, Cas predicted. Castiel allowed himself the luxury of taking in the beautiful lines of Dean’s long, pale body. He felt so much more grounded and present after their afternoon, and night, and morning together. They’d put their scening off too long – a sacrifice of their disjointed schedules and too many responsibilities. Dean’s role as Director of Training kept him on his toes round the clock, and Castiel’s title as Facility Director spoke for itself. The irony of running an institution predicated on providing wolves with the resources to keep themselves balanced and healthy, but then failing to take advantage of those resources often enough
for themselves was not lost on either of them. There just wasn’t enough time in the day.

“Do you have anywhere you need to be today Dean?” Cas queried although he was reasonably sure he knew the answer.

“Uh, yeah. Got a Sub class at four. I haven’t pulled my notes together yet or even looked at my syllabus to see what I need.” Dean grunted as he tried to rock himself to a seated position. Cas’ restraining hand on his shoulder and the dawning realization that his ass was much too sore for sitting sent him rolling right back down onto his side with an “Oomph!”

“Easy there, Tex,” said Cas with a smirk when he spotted Dean’s pained expression. “Not yet. You need a solid two- or three-hour nap first.” Cas was in too good a mood to argue, so he imbued his words with his full Alpha-Dom authority. Dean’s Sub melted back into compliance, relaxing his head down onto the armrest and cat-stretching again. “Besides, you wrote the curriculum for this class. You can do it with your eyes closed. Sleep, then eat, then prep, THEN teach. I don’t want to see you with your head in your notes before 2:30. I’m speaking as your boss, your Dom, and your friend, and I’ll know if you disobey me. I’d be happy to reawaken the sting in your ass if I need to, Pet.” Cas finished his instruction with a hint of humor that Dean didn’t find funny.

“Yes, Sir. I’ll be good. Think I’ve had enough sting for a while.” He strained his neck to assess the color of said ass before slumping back down. Cas was finished with the bandage on his upper back. He walked to the closet and pulled out a clean blanket.

“Sofa or bed?”

“ ‘M good right here,” Dean mumbled. Cas pulled the blanket over him, retrieved a bottle of water and a couple of Ibuprofen from the kitchen. He nudged Dean into swallowing the pills, set the bottle on the coffee table, kissed Dean’s forehead, then left the suite for his adjoining office.

It was only after the door to his office closed behind him that he realized he’d kissed his friend, and he sucked in a startled breath. Damnit. That was outside of a scene. Had Dean noticed? Was Dean awake enough to realize? Cas quickly scrambled through an assessment of the possible damage. They didn’t do that. They weren’t together. They were many, many things to one another, but they could never be THAT.

Cas’ own Keller score placed him as the most Dominant Alpha ever to be tested. He was a near perfect corollary to Dean’s Submissiveness. They matched in a satisfying Yin and Yang. Dean was the only wolf Cas had ever met who could take what he needed to dole out. And vice versa. Dean’s need to be controlled, beaten, and fucked was intense. They had started scening together years ago; the hunger in their eyes matching one another so perfectly they could communicate instantly without words. Both of them wanted, needed the other.

But.

Both wolves were alpha. They weren’t mates. Couldn’t Mate. Only betas could Mate with their own designation. It wasn’t fair, and it hurt so badly that despite their mutual desire to connect and the perfection of that connection, they never spoke of it. Never. Not once. To admit to each other in words how desperately they felt pulled to be lovers in every sense of the word, was to be confronted with the finality of how fruitless the attempt would ultimately be. It couldn’t be. To make matters worse, any day now either of them was likely to chance across his own True-Mate. So many Omegas came through The Facility each session. How neither of them had been confronted by his True-Mate yet was a bafflement to everyone.

Yet it was bound to happen, even for wolves as far into the edges of the chart as they.
Cas slumped into his desk chair and put his head in his hands. He loved Dean; was IN love with Dean. He had been for years, maybe from the moment he first saw Dean. Nothing could come of it though. As soon as his True-Mate entered the scene, Cas would be compelled by instinct to Mate with them. And what would happen to Dean? How could he initiate a relationship with no future? He could never do that to Dean. His love. His only love. The situation was hopeless.

A foolish part of Castiel longed for the day that one of them would meet and Mate with their True-Mates and put an end to the agony. He also dreaded that day. Watching Dean Claim some hapless boy would destroy Cas. Utterly. There was nothing for it, though. He had proven to himself numerous times that he was both incapable of walking away and unwilling to move forward. He was stuck. They were stuck. So, they researched together, wrote grant proposals together, co-authored legislation bills, served on community outreach committees, scened together to keep each other balanced, built up The Facility, aka The American Caniforme Research Institute, and silently loved one another with all their hearts. It would never be enough, but it was better than nothing. Maybe.

Just as he had done for the past eight years, Cas swept thoughts of Dean from his mind and got back to work. He went methodically through emails, sorting, answering, deleting. He made several phone calls and checked up on Jeremy and the two other Omegas who had matriculated at about the same time. Everyone was stable. Cas wouldn’t be needed for another few hours to work with them. He pulled a tray of peanut butter and crackers from his mini-fridge and ate them slowly, washed them down with a bottle of water, and ignored the strain in his gut pulling him to return to the Sub in the suite next door.

Cas spent two hours at the mundane tasks of a Facility Director. It was officially Administrative Boredom. This was not what he got into research to do, but it was what he needed right now – mundane, mindless tasks: schedules and rosters, budgets, funding, approvals, reviews, planning. Cas was finally starting to lose himself in the mindlessness of his work. It took several minutes for his conscious mind to clue in to what he was beginning to smell.

Before he was even aware, Cas’ body went rigid and his nose began huffing, straining toward the door into the exterior hallway. When his mind caught up, Cas white-knuckled the desk and began salivating. His world rocked and his axis tilted.

What the fuck was happening? What was that scent?

Cas stood without thinking, zombie-walked to the door, and left the office, passing directly into the hallway outside, and leaving Dean without a thought. He didn’t remember doing so. Pupils blown wide and red streaks starting to spread across his vision, he moved down the hall, slowly at first and then with increasing speed as the scent grew ever stronger. Cas was unaware of being spoken to. Bodies in his path were barricades to his destination and were moved aside with no more thought. It wasn’t until a pair of strong arms encircled him from behind and stopped his forward progress that Castiel realized how far he’d travelled. He was back in the South Wing, steps away from the Omega changing room where new clients were bathed and prepped for their initial tests and C.F.’s.

“What’s your hurry there, cher?” rolled the smooth voice of Cas’ colleague from between his shoulder blades. Cas looked down at where his own hands were already trying to pry Benny’s fisted grasp from his solar plexus. Cas was confused and horny. Why would Benny be stopping him from getting to that scent?! That delectable, unbelievable scent. What the fuck was that smell?

Another pair of arms appeared near Benny’s, and Cas looked to the side where Sam stood rooted to the ground, braced and ready to tussle if Cas started fighting. Fighting sounded like a really good idea. He had to break free, and there would be hell to pay for these two. Cas would make heads roll,
but not right now. Right now, he had to get to that scent. It was inside his head now, inside his body. His cock was rock hard and leaking. Growls, starting from his gut, worked their way through his clenched teeth. Every fiber strained toward getting through that door. Getting to his Omega. His Omega.

Oh.

OH!

_Oh, Fuck!_

It dawned on him that he didn’t have an Omega, not one of his own anyway. Cas grabbed lucidity like a lifeline and held on. He stopped straining against the arms around him. He looked down again. There were now four fists holding him. The growling stopped. Jesus, did he really sound like that?

“Someone get Ellen, and find Dean!”

That was Sam shouting, his mouth too close to Cas’ ear for comfort. Someone else took off down the hallway. All four pairs of arms began tugging, jerking him to another door, not the one he wanted, but the next one back up the hallway. Cas didn’t exactly cooperate, but he wasn’t fighting with his full power either. Benny huffed an appreciative laugh into the back of Cas’ head.

“There you go, Alpha. Easy does it, brother,” Benny soothed. “We’re going to get you to your mate, but we gotta check some things out first. You’ll thank us later.” Benny and Sam were methodically easing Cas toward the room next to the changing room. Had Cas not been out of his mind with want and lust, he would have named it the “Scenting Room.” For the moment, he didn’t give a fuck what it was called, only that it wasn’t where he needed to go.

True-Mate matches were common enough in The Facility that a process to protect both parties had been developed and practiced often enough, and everyone knew the routine, knew the signs. Everyone took up their roles without question. The other two pairs of arms, Cole’s and Garth’s, it turned out, were also leading him the same direction. Four on one, and it was still quite a challenge. Cas was Cas after all. With a final shove, all five men tumbled through the door. Garth managed to slip back out, pull it shut and lock it before Cas threw off the other three and regained his equilibrium.

Locked in, locked away from the scent of mate, Castiel’s instincts warred with each other. His fight instinct told him to defeat every wolf in the room, dominate and conquer. The fresh air in the scenting room though, also cut the intensity of the odor enough that Cas managed to get almost full use of his faculties back. He shook his head, sloughed the remaining hands from his person, and stood panting in the middle of the room. Benny, Cole, and Sam arced around him, blocking him from trying to burst through the door.

“Castiel?” Sam tried. “Are you with us, Alpha? Talk to me.” Cas said nothing, just heaved deep, jerky breaths and tried to come back to himself. That was a mate-scent? It was indescribable. Incredible. Nothing he’d ever experienced or researched had prepared him for this. He was animal response. He was millions of years of instinct crammed into a human package. He hadn’t even seen this individual, and he knew. He knew unequivocally.

Mate.

Forever.

Mine.
“She’s fine, Cas,” confirmed Benny. “She’s right next door. She responded before you did, so we knew it was someone on premises. They’ve got her. She’s not going to get hurt. She’s being washed and changed. She’s being prepped. For you. Give us just a bit, and we’ll pipe your scents through the ducts just to be sure.”

Benny’s voice floated over Cas, eliciting images. Bathing: water sluicing over creamy smooth skin. Skin that belonged to Cas. Prepping: a firm, wet dildo pressed sweetly in and out of a welcoming orifice. Cas’ orifice. She. They’d said ‘she’. Cas’ mate was a woman. He’d always wondered. Cas, as a pansexual, would’ve had no way to know what primary gender he’d be matched up with by the Universe. Secondary and Tertiary were no brainers; he’d get an Omega-Submissive, but he’d always wondered if it’d be a girl or a boy. God, now he was babbling in his own head.

Sam’s radio crackled with Bobby’s voice. When Sam acknowledged, Bobby continued.

“Sam, Ellen’s got Becky starting the paperwork. We’re notifying the girl’s parents. They only just dropped her off about fifteen minutes ago. They shouldn’t be too far away yet. We should try to hold him off until they respond in case they want to speak with him first.” At the words, ‘hold him off’, Cas started growling again, low in his throat. His wolf didn’t like that idea at all.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks Bobby. Has anyone told Dean yet?” Sam asked quietly. The room was not large and Sam couldn’t have spoken softly enough to keep Cas from hearing. Cas’ head whipped around at the mention of Dean’s name, but he didn’t move. His eyes burned into Sam’s. Sam immediately lowered his gaze.

“Yeah, but when Meg told him…he split. She didn’t know where he went, but his car’s gone. Looks like he really left.” Sam blew upwards into his long bangs which fluttered with his frustration. His big brother had bolted. Sam wasn’t surprised; disappointed, but not surprised. Everyone knew how Dean felt – everyone but Cas. The two of them, dancing around each other for years and years, acting like each was alone in their feelings when everyone who knew them knew the truth. Frustration wasn’t the word. “Okay then, we’re doing this without Dean,” Sam muttered back into the radio.

Ellen’s voice came through on the heels of Bobby’s. “Hey Sam. We’re ready over here. She’s ready. Have we heard from her folks yet? Should I start the scent fans?”

“Hold off on the fans a bit, Ellen,” Sam replied. “I don’t know what the status is on her parents. How old is she anyway?” he added as an afterthought. Cole was blocking the door, and Benny stayed just out of arms’ reach of Cas as the Alpha huffed and panted and tried to keep himself stable. Cas knew, with the brain-power he had left, that he had to wait until everything was ready, vetted, and signed, but God above, it was hard. Literally. Pre-come leaked through his trousers in a constant dribble. There was a keening in his ears that his forebrain suspected was coming from his own throat.

“Paperwork says she’s seventeen. Probably just graduated high school,” came Ellen’s voice. “She looks younger though, maybe fifteen if I had to judge from her face. We better wait for her alpha to sign off before we let Cas at her.”

There was a challenge in those words that Cas’ Alpha wolf sussed out immediately, and he jolted into motion toward the radio, captured it from a surprised Sam’s hands and growled into the transmitter, “I’m her Alpha, Ellen! No one has a say but me, you got that!!”

“Hear you loud and clear, Alpha!” Ellen shot back, uncowed. For an Omega, she was annoyingly hard to intimidate. Cas relinquished the radio and began pacing the perimeter of the room, looking for a way directly through to the girl he needed.
Mate.
Forever.
Mine.

His wolf paced with him. He began shucking clothing as he walked.

“Hold on there, Chief,” said Cole. Cas snarled heatedly at him, and he took a step back. “Alpha, I mean. We’re gonna get there soon, but you gotta hold out a few more minutes. No one’s going to try to stop you. She’s yours. Your mate.” At that phrase, Cas actually purred. “We just need a few things in place first, Alpha. Please try to stay calm, and uh, maybe keep your clothes on just a bit longer…”

Fuck that. Cas was losing the battle to keep his wolf at heel. He glared at Cole, resumed pacing and pulled his button-down over his head, popping a couple of buttons in the process. The shoes came off next.

“They’re working as fast as they can. I swear, Alpha.”

“Cole, man, just shut up. You’re distracting him more than you’re helping,” offered Benny. The radio crackled back on to the sound of Bobby’s voice. “All right fellas. I got alpha Anderson and his mate here. They’ve been apprised of the situation, but it seems like they need a little convincing. I told ‘em who she was Mating with, and they don’t believe me. Ya hear that? They think I’m lyin’! Can Cas talk right now? They wanna talk to him.”

“Jesus, Bobby, really? It’s all we can do to keep him from killing us and breaking through the wall! He’s holding on by the skin of his teeth right now!” Sam cried. “They want to have a discussion?!”

Cas had about had it with waiting. He grabbed a chair, stalked toward Cole at the door and brandished it like a weapon. “Move beta. Right now.” His voice was remarkably calm, but scarce was a simple beta capable of refusing his Alpha authority. Benny slid into position to replace him as Cole dropped to the side. Benny put his hands up in front of him in supplication. Cas growled at him, but didn’t attack.

“Where’s Dean when we need him, damnit.” Benny muttered acridly.

They all froze when a knock sounded from the other side of the door. Bobby called through, “Alpha? You in there?” Bobby clearly meant Cas’ sentient mind, not the room. Everyone in The Facility knew he was in the room.

“Robert Singer, open this door! Immediately!” Cas ordered.

“Soon, Alpha. Hold onto yourself just a bit more.” Cas was getting very tired of hearing that phrase. “I got an alpha here wants to have a short word with you. I want you to talk to him. You may not believe me now, but you’re gonna thank me later. I swear, Castiel. You need to talk to him. He’s your mate’s father.”

“Open the door.” Cas growled at Benny.

“Come in Bobby. Real slow.” Benny spoke through the door. The lock clicked from the outside, and the door cracked open. Bobby’s head peeked through, followed by his body. After Bobby, and guarded by Bobby’s bulk, came a man, an alpha of medium build. Cas drew himself to full height and postured at the man for all he was worth, snarling. Sam and Benny joined Bobby wordlessly as a human shield between the two alphas. Cole resumed his place by the door.
The man seemed unaware of the danger he’d placed himself in – himself and the others in the room. Castiel was holding his humanity by the thinnest of threads. Blood and destruction poured from his scent. Cas’ wolf was ready to kill to get out of the room and take his mate. This was crazy.

“All right, man. You see him here. I know you recognize who that is. Ya believe me now?” Bobby was trying to end this quickly and without bloodshed. Cas didn’t care either way. He took a step toward the man, and everyone in the room stiffened further. Legally, the young woman’s custodial alpha had a right to confront his daughter’s suitor. In reality though, doing so was an extremely dangerous undertaking, especially where an Alpha of Castiel’s stature was involved.

“Seriously, dude, this is crazy!” said Sam. “Get out. Sign the damn paper, and let him Mate your daughter. You know you can’t stop it even if you wanted to.” The man looked completely out of his element.

Benny took pity on him. “Look, brother, I know you wanna protect your daughter, do what’s best for her, but believe me, she couldn’t be in better hands than to have Dr. Castiel Novak as her True-Mate. She’s gonna be safe, I promise. She’s gonna be fine. You just gotta let this happen now.”

The man met Cas’ bloodshot eyes, which couldn’t have been easy for him, even as a full alpha in his own right. “You promise not to hurt her?” he asked. “You swear you’ll take care of her? I didn’t bring her here to get hitched. I don’t believe in this True-Mate crap. I mean, uh, I never did before. Is he for real?” He directed this question at Sam on his right.

“Completely,” deadpanned Sam.

“Right. Um, yeah, uh right. I guess. Jesus, I’m not prepared for this.”

“Aaand, that’s enough,” interrupted Bobby. “You gonna sign? Cause we don’t really need it, just a formality really…”

“Bobby, stop.” Cas’ voice sounded forced, and everyone froze again. “What’s your name?” he asked the man standing between himself and everything he wanted.

“Reginald. Reginald Anderson.” Reginald seemed finally to be aware of the precarious position he was in. His voice quaked a bit, and he took a couple steps backward.

“Reginald Anderson,” Cas spoke with more control than could be believed of one in his position. “Your daughter is my True-Mate. She is mine, and I will brook no challenge to my Claim. I assure you, however, that she will be cared for for the rest of her long life, will want for nothing, and if it is within my ability to make her happy, she will be happy. Period.”

“Thank you, Alpha.” Reginald whispered. He had backed to the door and stood pressed against it, his hand behind him fumbling with the knob. “That’s all I wanted to know. I…I’ll sign the paper. She’s yours, Alpha. Please, please be good to her…she’s a good girl…” Reginald babbled his way from the room, and everyone but Cas breathed a sigh of relief.

Chapter End Notes

What the hell am I doing?
Wednesday, February 15, 2017

Chapter Summary

The best day in Cas’ life is looking to be the worst day in Dean's. But it's complicated.

Chapter Notes

I suck at tags. Added a few that I missed the first round. Please let me know if there are others missing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THEN:

The university seminars and punditry were Castiel’s idea. They provided the perfect audience to explore these issues in an open, honest, safe, and professional way. Each seminar not only allowed his team the opportunity to educate the public, both apes and wolves, but the registration fees brought in a significant revenue for The Facility’s maintenance. Usually, all four Facility Leads attended the panel discussions, either giving lectures about the results of their latest research or taking questions from the students in attendance and chipping away at the ignorance and fear between the two species. Even after years of public outreach, there always seemed to be more misinformation than good.

On the other hand, the conventions were PURE DEAN. Raucous, coarse, obscene sometimes, and flavored with an air of titillation, they drew a completely different crowd. The Cons didn’t just raise money, they rolled in it. Cash absolutely poured in from conventions. As much as Castiel hated the
idea that a huge portion of their annual budget came from drunk Simians drooling over his colleagues (his Dean) and getting off on the Lupin spanking demonstrations, he couldn’t deny the fact that the Cons provided an educational route to a different, but still critical-to-reach demographic. Plus, he had admitted once, they were fun. Dean was beautiful, and charming, and carefree, and willing to talk about anything. Lupins and Primates alike adored Dean and his brother Sam and reveled in the relaxed party atmosphere. Dean hired a house band to rowdy up the crowd, and then he and his brother appeared on stage like Rock Gods basking in the adoration of their fans.

The crazy thing was that they had fans, tens of thousands of them, maybe hundreds of thousands, and more every day. Everyone knew and loved Sam and Dean. And Dr. Novak was famous for his research and his, well, his Bad-assness? Well-respected in the scientific community long before he published his groundbreaking research, Cas’ fame skyrocketed afterward. His straightforward manner and his gravitas lent just the air of respectability the issues required to pull them out from being crude and inappropriate frat house fare to being acceptable dinner table conversation and activists’ rallying cries.

Cas was invited to participate in TV news show debates as a pundit for the legitimization of Canid traditional pack behaviors in public. He also became a regular on Late Night and Morning talk shows as a medical professional on a mission to correct the thinking patterns of two entire cultures that were still steeped in ignorance and bias. He was persuasive, calm, passionate, erudite, and sweet. He always gelled easily with his interviewers, making everyone feel comfortable and at home.

And yet, out of his mouth dropped the coarsest language that television audiences had ever been permitted to hear over public airwaves.

Here was this nerdy-looking professor with a perpetual classroom demeanor casually using phrases like “ass fucking” and “Claim-fuck” and “Anal slick” right out in the open – right there on the morning TV shows. But his cause was so dire and his passion for the subject so intense, that they allowed it. Audiences were riveted. It was ratings gold for the networks. Give people the sex that always sells, but couch it in terms of public health; make it respectable.

Cas’ testimony in front of Congress in defense of the “Lupin Public Facilities Establishment” Bill was telecast in its entirety. Cas spoke for two hours on the history of the devolution of Omega mental health and how critical it was that Lupins be provided safe sanctuaries and public spaces to give and receive spankings, Mating-bites, Domination-fucks, and the like. In the end, Congress approved the funding, new public facilities began to pop up in the bigger cities, and the television networks high fived all ‘round.

Cas was proud of his work to build public awareness and gain acceptance. But he washed his hands and rolled his eyes at the whole convention circuit. To Cas, that was just Dean scratching his itches.

NOW:

Dean sucked down the two fingers of whiskey like it was mother’s milk. ‘Yikes, that’s a gross analogy’, he thought. Even his thoughts were starting to slur and lose coherence. The scene in his head wasn’t fading though. It ran on repeat, over and over and over again:

Dean had just been waking up on the sofa, feeling sore and deliciously relaxed; feeling balanced and solid, and – Fuck! – really fucking sore. Cas, as usual hadn’t held anything back. Dean’s ass and the backs of his thighs were bruised. Beautiful, beautiful marks from his Dom. Like kisses. Like a brand.
Dean had hissed as he reached around and touched the hot flesh of his ass. He’d managed to gain his feet and stumble to the bathroom to pee and check the damage to his back. Cas had applied bandages, and Dean knew there’d be hell to pay if he removed them. He sighed at the missed opportunity to see the artistry and just let them be.

There was a pounding at the door. Dean painfully pulled his sweats back up over his ass. He opened the door to find Meg, out of breath.

“Thank God!” she over-emoted.

Seriously, he hadn’t been in hiding. Dean was certain his short nap hadn’t girded him enough to handle Meg yet.

Thank God?

She shoved her way in, saying, “Cas’ True-Mate is here at The Facility. She’s here right now! It’s going down RIGHT NOW! Dean, he’s Triggered.” Meg was getting hysterical, but Dean had grown cold and still. “Dean! Did you hear me?! You gotta come, man! He isn’t going to listen to anyone but you. I saw him. His eyes were, like solid red. He’s lost it. He’s going to hurt someone. Wait, where are you going?”

Dean had turned on his heel. His head was buzzing and his heart was pounding in his ears. He walked away from the hysterical beta. He entered the bedroom, grabbed his clothes, which a disconnected part of his brain registered had been laundered since yesterday afternoon. God, Cas really thought of everything. He dressed without answering Meg’s question. She fell silent, trembling by the door; the room full of tension that he didn’t try to comprehend.

Dean tied his boots in place, grabbed his keys from the side table and met Meg at the door. “Let me get this straight,” he addressed her much more calmly than he felt. “Cas Triggered. He’s meeting and Mating his True-Mate right now?”

“That’s what I said! Dude, you don’t need your keys. Just, c’mon before there’s blood everywhere.”

Meg’s face fell slack with disbelief when Dean nodded firmly, and then walked past her and out the exit turnstile nearby. She hovered in the doorway, unmoving, but Dean just kept walking without looking back. He started up his car and silently apologized to his Baby when her tires peeled on the roadway as he hit the blacktop outside. It wasn’t Baby’s fault, but it was time for a drink.

Hours later, he was definitively sloshed and mumbling nonsense into his chronically empty glass.

“Zeke! C’mon man. ‘Nother one.” ‘Snockered’ may have been a better word.

Zeke hung up the phone and looked over his shoulder at Dean, his eyes full of pity. The fuck? “Sorry, Dean. I’m cutting you off. Sam’s on his way to pick you up, take you home to sleep it off. If I put a glass of water in front of you, you gonna drink it or toss it at me?” Dean just looked back at him, his eyes red and swollen. “Thought so.” Zeke turned away, saying softly over his shoulder, “Just be sure to get some water in you before you pass out, alpha, or you’re gonna hate yourself.”

(Too late), Dean’s wolf pointed out, as Dean lay his head on the cool wooden bar.

***************
“This isn’t a good idea,” Benny repeated. Cas was alone in the scent room. The fans had been turned on and the electrodes attached to his chest recorded his powerful response to the young Omega’s scent. They all agreed, when the electrodes’ receptors spiked off the chart, that leaving the room had been the safe thing to do. If Cas had been difficult to control with just a whiff of Omega scent in the hallway, he would’ve been completely unmanageable when hit with her full, unmitigated odor. Her heart rate was likewise off the chart.

Based on the readings, the two wolves were unmistakably True-Mates. The Omega’s familial alpha had signed the release ceding her ownership to Castiel, a formality that wasn’t legally required, but smoothed the path to full ownership after the bite. Billie found the Andersons a comfortable room to await news of the outcome, although she warned them their daughter wouldn’t be available for them to visit for days at the very least. Nevertheless, they settled in to wait.

Cas and his Omega were both dripping with lust and ready to go, but the team had unearthed a … snag.

17-year-old April Anderson was dropped off that morning by her parents for her Keller test. The test hadn’t even started, and in fact her parents were barely out of the parking lot, when April began showing Mating-response signs. Now, with a Dominant Alpha pacing within a locked room, his nostrils full of the scent of his Mate and muttering “Mine” over and over again while searching for a weakness in the drywall, the staff was discussing how to manage the Keller test the young girl still lacked without getting them all killed by said Alpha.

“He’s going to be pissed when he finds out we made him wait just so she could be knotted by two others before we let him out of the room.”

“Yeah, thanks, Cole.” Sam rolled his eyes. “He’s going to be pissed anyway, and if we don’t go ahead and run the test, he may never be capable of letting anyone else near her. He can’t do the test all by himself. We need three different individuals, or we can’t build the chart.”

What had started as a research project – running Kellers on volunteer Canids to gather data – developed rapidly into a community service for all wolves to verify their Tertiary gender. The process couldn’t take place until the individual reached full sexual maturity, usually about three to five years after Presenting a Secondary gender at the onset of adolescence. The Keller test involved putting the test subject through three rounds of penetrative sex, fully to completion with fluid exchange and knotting (when alphas were involved), and then evaluating their vitals, hormone levels, behaviors, and physical responses.

It was a brilliant process, virtually fool-proof when proctored by a competent doctor. Dr. Harvelle was the best. Under her administration, a whole population of Lupins were being carefully directed to exactly the course of care and balancing that was right for them. Without the test, the special proclivities that came with the Tertiary gender were anyone’s guess. Guessing wrong had proven fatal to some wolves. Bobby, Benny, Cas, and Dean had partnered in expanding the scope of The Facility to give all wolves a safe, clean, and reliable place to learn their own special needs definitively. It was their life’s mission. There was no way Castiel Novak, visionary of the project, was going to allow his own mate to skip the crucial life-saving test.

Unless.

“You know, True-Mates are pretty much always a perfect fit with their partner,” Bobby interjected.
“We know Cas’ Tertiary gender is Profound Dominant, and his Secondary is Deep Alpha. Maybe we can let them go ahead and Mate. I mean, if she’s for Cas, then she’s, what… Profound Sub and Deep Omega, right? Do we really need the test? If it’s important to him, he can schedule her later.”

“We have to ask Cas what he wants to do.” Sam was decisive as he slid off the desk he’d been perched on. “I’m going to talk to him.”

“Be careful, Sam!” Jo called after him, but no one made a move to stop him.

Sam stood outside the door, listening through the intercom. High-pitched huffs, growls, and occasional shifting of furniture sounded through the speaker. “Alpha?” he called softly. Cas responded immediately.

“Sam? Let me out right now!” A thump whumped against the door. “Where is she, what’ve you done with her?!” He sounded close to tears.

“Alpha, I can have her ready for you as soon as you say, but I have to ask you a question first. Can I, I mean, do you think I can talk to your uh, your Doctor side or your Alpha, not your wolf? Alpha, it’s important for your mate. For April.”

“April? My mate’s name is April!?”

“Cas, FOCUS! Please, Alpha, just listen to me.” Sam was beginning to doubt this plan would work.

“Samuel! Speak!” Cas ordered, clearly gritting his teeth in effort. Yeah, so here goes nothing. Sam expected at the very least to be looking for a new job tomorrow.

“You see, Alpha, she hasn’t had her Keller test yet. That’s why she’s here today. You were actually scheduled to anchor for her, you know, but now… Well, we, we all think we should go ahead with the test as planned. That way you can still anchor, finish up with a Mating-Claim, not just a Claim-Fuck like usual. The data will all still be usable and you’ll start your lives together with all the information available to you to give her everything she needs. What d’ya think? Alpha?”

Cas had gone too quiet. A couple of minutes dragged by. Snuffling noises meant Cas was still right by the intercom, but Sam couldn’t guess his state of mind. He was about to give up when he heard Cas whisper, “Who?”

Sam knew this was the most dangerous part. If Cas allowed the test, but then lost it later when his wolf wanted revenge on anyone who’d touched his mate, people could get hurt. “Who do you want, Alpha? It’s your call. Who can you live with?”

“I, I think Garth for the first traunch,” whispered the Alpha, his voice shaky. “Then, Dean. I would be okay with Dean.”

Sam breathed a sigh of relief to hear Garth’s name. The beta was mild and sweet, he was impossible to be angry with or jealous of. He’d treat April well and kindly. But Dean. Choosing Dean was fraught with danger. Dean was cocky and assertive and hypersexual, plus he and Castiel worked side-by-side every day. And of course, there was that thing between them, that not quite relationship. It would be an explosion waiting to happen. Also, not to put too fine a point on it, Dean had taken off. Sam had an inkling where he was, which, if correct, would mean Dean was likely too soused to test anyway.
Sam had another idea.

“Dean’s gone for the day, Alpha. I think he’s probably drinking. Would you let me do it in his place? You know I’m careful. I promise not to fuck this up. Can you wait that long? We can push through quicker if you need us to.” A pause. “Alpha?”

“Dean’s drinking? He left … me?” Castiel’s voice sounded bereft, and Sam didn’t know what else to do. He needed to get Castiel’s mind off Dean.

“Alpha? Let me. I won’t let you down, I promise.”

There was a pause. Then, “Sam. Yes, I’ll wait. I’ve got hold of the wolf now. I need some water. Please. Sam, please be careful. Don’t hurt her. I…I can wait. I can weather this. I’ve waited this long to find my mate, I… can hold him for a while longer. Just, please Sam. Don’t hurt her…” Cas’ voice faded away with a whoomph that sounded like his legs had given way. Sam could picture him sitting against the wall below the intercom. A rush of sympathy filled him. The melodrama was quite unlike the great Alpha. He had to be significantly outside of himself to sound like a teenaged drama queen.

Sam turned to see Jo striding up with a bottle of water and a key. She unlocked just the tray slide and pressed the water through. Standing back up and grabbing Sam by the hand, she pulled him down the hall with her.

“Charlie’s getting April,” she explained while tugging him along. “Garth’s already in the Green room. Mom’s working out how much time she needs between sets. Usually, there’s about two hours between each round, but you know…Cas is already impatient. I can’t believe you pulled that off.” She glanced back at him severely. “Wouldn’t wanna be you right now though. ‘Don’t fuck up’ is putting it mildly.” Sam huffed and followed her into the control room.

“You heard?” he asked Ellen when they walked in, but it was Jo who answered.

“We had the intercom feed on. That was fuckin’ brilliant, right Mom?” Jo winked, and Sam rolled his eyes.

“Language, JoAnna Beth, please,” Ellen responded. Turning to Sam, her tone turned serious. “Sam, Garth’s going to try to work quickly. We think that making April wait as long as we have will help. We think we can start your round after just half-an-hour. She should be able to respond to both of you, even on a compressed timeline. Charlie is explaining everything to her now. I messaged Charlie while you were talking to Cas, and she’s onboard. She says the girl’s anxious and horny, but okay. Sounds like we’re a go, but it all depends on you. Garth’s got it easy. After waiting so long, April will willingly bend over for anyone with a dick on the first round. After that’s worn off though, she’s not going to be as receptive to you. You’re not Mate, and she’ll know it. You will have to be assertive. No hesitation, none of your sweetness. You have to get in there and take her hard and fast, understand?

“Yeah, I get it.” Sam got it. He knew the risks. He just didn’t have a choice. Dean was gonna feel the rough side of Sam’s paddle when the dust cleared though. Sam was absolutely sure of that.

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“She’s ready. Again.” called Charlie through the intercom. She mumbled the last word under her breath, but everyone heard it. Finally. There were other projects going today. There were classes and
seminars scheduled. There was supposed to be a Board meeting. There were other Omegas matriculating into Eval and Training. There were three other Keller tests on the docket, but everything had come to a screeching halt over the Mating of Dr. Castiel Novak, heart and soul and spirit behind The Facility. Known and loved by all, he was their Alpha. His long term failure to Mate had been a worry on everyone’s mind through the years. Today was a big deal. No one wanted to be left out.

Sam took up a spot in the Green room. He fluffed Garth’s cock casually, speaking to him softly. The first round was a milk run: if the testee was an Omega, the first round just called for him or her to be fucked. Simple. Didn’t need to knot, so a beta would do. Didn’t need to Claim, so it didn’t have to be a Dom.

The testor’s designations were fed into the computer along with the sensors’ readings, and the algorithm did the rest: Did she submit to a beta-Neutral? The algorithm factored in a certain weight toward her level of Submissiveness. Did she try to Dominate an alpha-Sub? Easy calculation for the computer program. It needed a certain number of variables though. That’s why three rounds were required. Sometimes the findings were obvious, just validation of what everyone already knew. The sensors didn’t lie though. Some Subs tried to pass themselves as Doms. The computer caught them every time, and the subsequent training taught them why it’s harmful to try to escape their true designations.

“Okay, Garth. You’re up. She’s in place. You’ve got this, man. Go get ‘er.” Sam shoved Garth gently toward the door. Cole pulled it open when the light flashed green, and Garth walked through.

The room was brightly lit. It was large enough to serve multiple purposes and hold a variety of instruments and equipment. Garth walked purposefully to the bed in the center. Both he and the girl were naked. She lay on her back watching him approach and writhing. There was a soft mewling sound coming from her throat, and her eyes were lust-blown.

She’d been fully aroused for over an hour waiting to be taken, waiting to be Mated, and in her lust, she was beautiful. Garth wasted no time. This was not his mate, it was just his job. Everyone on staff took turns in Keller testing. No one could skip an assignment based on their own sexual orientation or gender.

In essence, the way it worked was, Dr. Harvelle referenced the tables and determined which designations were ideal to evaluate a particular candidate, reviewed the staff options and made assignments. When your assignment came up, you fucked or bent over to take the fucking. Whoever, however, whenever. It was not a bad gig for a wolf. A Canid’s libido was roughly 5 times that of even the randiest primate, and they weren’t capable of an internal sense of sexual shame from their Tertiary aspects. Sexual congress for a Lupin was both less and more important than for a primate.

But we digress. There’s fucking going on.

Garth mounted the bed from the end and crawled awkwardly on hands and knees up to where the girl lay. Her eyes tracked him, but she made no move to reach out to him or to push him away. She showed no fear or revulsion. Her pulse quickened and her breath became shallow. Garth knew careful notes were being taken. Every sensor was recording every signal her body put out. Some were reading his own responses as well, for calibration purposes. It was all very complicated.

Garth leaned gently over her and kissed her mouth, testing. He caressed her cheek softly. She shifted her head into the touch, and spread her legs just a bit. He reached down and guided his hard cock to her soft folds. This time would be missionary position and vaginal penetration. Garth pressed in with his hips until he encountered the barrier. She squeaked minutely, and then gasped loudly and moaned as her hymen broke.
‘Ah, shit’, thought Garth. ‘She’s a virgin. Was a virgin. Jesus, Cas is going to kill me. Too late now’, he thought, and he began to fuck her in earnest.

It really wasn’t sexy at all, just a routine test fuck. Garth pumped mildly in and out until the friction built in his cock. The Omega made almost no noise after her initial deflowering, but she breathed more and more heavily and squeezed her eyes shut. Just before Garth toppled over and spilled inside her, he felt her vaginal walls pulse and squeeze his cock as her orgasm throbbed through the warmth surrounding him. He followed her, pumping through his release until they were both spent and semen leaked out around his flagging cock.

Garth gently guided her chin up until she looked him in the eyes. She was flushed and open. She was catching her breath, but murmured a soft, “Thank you, beta.” Garth smiled sweetly down at her. Kissed a benediction to her nose and her forehead, checked again that she was okay. She looked happy. He pulled out of her warmth, climbed off the bed and left the room without another glance. Aftercare was not his role.

Charlie entered the room on the heels of Garth’s departure. She carried a strange electronic meter about the size of a large cell phone. Lights on it blinked, and occasionally it beeped. Charlie spoke soothingly to the Omega while passing the meter in the air all around her body, pausing a bit near her head, her breasts, each armpit, her groin, and near her feet.

When she finished, she glanced at the one-way glass, just a mirror from this side, and evidently received a response of some kind, for she nodded and tucked the meter into its holster on her hip. Then she pulled an orange juice bottle from a small fridge in the room and brought over a blanket. Charlie climbed right into the bed next to the girl in her elastic foot-coverings, pulling the blanket over both of them. She cracked open the juice, put one arm around her young charge, and helped her to drink it.

“You did great, sweetness,” Charlie cooed softly. She smiled and continued, “We’ll give you about half-an-hour to rest. If you need a toilet, I’ll take you. You hungry?” The girl shook her head, took another sip of juice and snuggled in.

“Is it time for me to meet him?” she asked Charlie with big eyes, trusting completely.

“Not yet,” Charlie reminded her. “You have one more test round before you get to see your mate. You’ll like Sam. He’s nice, and he’ll be good to you.”

The Omega huffed sulkily. She’d waited a long time. It had felt like hours of beating her fists against the changing room door while Charlie did her best to calm her. Merely knowing that her True-Mate was just outside the door and she couldn’t reach him had exhausted the girl. She didn’t want to wait, but she was tired. She slipped into an easy sleep while Charlie held her close and stroked her stomach with the lightest possible touch.

Chapter End Notes

This is a weird AU. It makes sense in my head, but if it isn't coming out clearly, let me know. Questions help me figure out where I need better explanation.
Chapter Summary

Somehow, even the things they're good at as a team, get screwed sideways when Dean's not around.

THEN:

“How ‘bout you in the tan shirt, on the end of the row.” Benny pointed him out, then waited for the microphone to make its way to the young man. He looked Simian from up at the front of the seminar classroom.

“Oh, yeah, hi. Thanks for coming all the way out to Maryland,” the man began. They all acknowledged his politeness with a nod. “I’m a senior here studying Public Relations. I was wondering if you could explain the difference between a Domination-Bond and a Claim-Fuck and why you don’t consider them rape.” His blush was visible from the front of the room, and Benny thought it adorable. Benny heard Bobby shift at the end of the panel table and deferred to him with a gesture. The question really touched on both Benny’s and Bobby’s areas of expertise, so it didn’t matter which of them answered.

“That’s an important question, young man,” began Bobby. “For wolves, as you no doubt already know, sex is not just a matter of pleasure, intimacy, procreation, connection, or love expression as it is for primates. Of course, it serves all of those purposes in our intimate private relationships with our special loved ones, but for us as a community, sex is one of two essential means of establishing hierarchy in our Pack, (um, the other being corporal punishment). And hierarchy is the core of establishing a balanced stable state of mind for individual wolves.
“Now, there is no such thing as a Domination-Bond, as you put it. There’s the Domination-Fuck…” Bobby interrupted himself parenthetically with a wave of his hand. “For all of you Primates who don’t like that word, I hate to be blunt, but the door’s over there. It’s a perfectly serviceable word, and there’s not another one that means the same thing, so if you’re going to stay, get used to the word ‘Fuck’. Say it out loud with me.” Bobby pointed out into the audience and gestured like an orchestra conductor. Everyone spoke on cue, all together.

“FUCK!” There was laughter.

“One more time: FUCK!” Bobby nodded, satisfied.

“Good, okay, that’s out of the way. Where was I?” The audience and the other panel members were still laughing as he picked the thread back up.

“Right, the D.F… Stay with me here, it’s a little complicated. A Domination-Fuck asserts or reasserts the hierarchy between two individuals in a way that creates a chemical response, a hormone release, in both of their bodies which Reinforces the hierarchy. It’s a means for the Top to “put the Bottom in their place.” He used finger-quotes to clarify. “It keeps uncertainty out of the interactions between them, but it doesn’t create a permanent metaphysical bond between them after the act is completed. Domination-Fucks are used a lot during Omega or Sub training to help keep the student in the right state of mind to be receptive to the staff. Many traditional families also use the practice at home as part of their Pack Discipline regimen.

“The Claim-Fuck, or C.F. for short, is different in that it creates a very real and measurable, although usually temporary, chemical AND metaphysical connection or Bond, between the two individuals that they carry with them when the act is over. The Mating-Claim, which involves the act of placing a scarring bite upon the Bottom’s body during the act of aggressive fucking, is the most intense version of Claim-Fucking, and is of course, permanent. Claim-Fucking is an act of domination and aggression, not sexual pleasure. It has a great deal in common with the Simian concept of rape, in that it’s most definitely more about power play than about sexual satisfaction. It is exclusively hierarchical in purpose. It’s exactly what it sounds like. It’s the staking of ownership of one wolf over another.

“I guess, C.F.s have that in common with the Dominance-Fuck too,” he added, looking at his colleagues for a confirmation nod, “but here’s the difference between these two practices and rape: The Claim-Fuck only produces a viable bond, and the Dom-Fuck only provides a sense of stability between them if the Bottom submits willingly to the Top. For wolves, the act of domination, done with respect, authority, and healthy intent, triggers the release of a variety of powerful hormones and body responses that then trigger responding releases within the willing submissive.

“If the appropriate authority to Dominate or Claim is not present, and if the submissive isn’t capable of rolling, there’s no connection. And in this case, when I say submissive, I really mean whoever’s the Bottom at the time. Depending upon the relationship, Tops and Bottoms can and do switch when appropriate. In our facilities, we monitor all testing and training interactions closely for signs of distress hormone from the Bottoms. Everyone receives assertiveness and self-defense training so we can keep one another safe. Omegas and Subs are trained that they have full agency over their own willingness when it comes to Tops who don’t have authority over them.

“For instance, as an alpha, I can’t grab a strange Omega on the street, knot her against her will, and produce a Claim-bond between us. Behaving in that way is rape – pure and simple. But if she is in an imbalanced state and her custodial alpha stakes a claim over her body, she will submit willingly. Then even though the act is aggressive, the outcome is very different. One is harmful and destructive. The other brings peace, mindfulness, stability.”
NOW:

There was already a battle underway when Sam opened the Control room door. Voices, all raised, hit him from several directions at once. A smaller man might have stepped back, blown backward into the hall at the volume, but Sam wasn’t small. He slipped through without being much noticed and let the sound sink in, trying to figure out the cause of the ruckus.

“Second round. We’ve been over this. She needs a knot! Period!” Bobby had a vein standing prominent in his neck. They were all stressed.

“She’s covered without a knot, I’m telling you, Sam’s dominant enough to make up the difference! Jesus, just let me do my job!”

“Cas picked Sam - and Garth, come to think of it. You wanna be the one to tell him we swapped ‘em for someone else?! To Claim-Fuck his mate? You’re suicidal, Bobby.” Jo was definitely pushing the boundaries of acceptable discourse to a superior, but everyone was stressed.

“You wanna try to explain to him later that we hafta start the whole rigamarole all over again ‘cause the data’s fucked?” Bobby turned on Jo. Jo just huffed and headed for the door muttering under her breath. Bobby wasn’t having it. “Wanna say that loud enough for the whole class?” he used his alpha voice.

“I said, ‘It’s your funeral,’” Jo shot back and disappeared through the door.

Benny was slouched down in a rolling office chair in the corner with one hand on his brow. “Where the fuck is Dean? We need ‘im for this. Hey, Sam!” shot Benny, noticing him standing there with wide eyes, his checklist loose in his hand at his side. “You seen Dean? Can you fetch him, brother? This is right down his alley. It’s gonna be a clusterfuck without him.”

“Uh, yeah. I see that. No, actually I haven’t seen Dean since yesterday morning. I heard he took off, and my calls are going straight to voicemail.” Sam looked around at the group, noting the tension hadn’t abated at all. “I think I know where he is, but he’s probably not in any condition to work a Keller at the moment…or maybe even his own feet right now.”

“Can anyone here really say they’re surprised?” Bobby added. “He’s had it bad for the Alpha for so long. I’m surprised he even still eats off his own fork sometimes. No way he was gonna handle this; not without some liquid enhancement.”

“What do you need Sam?” Ellen looked up dolefully, her face was flushed and her eyes a bit glazed. “Shouldn’t you be fluffing by now?”

“Oh, it’s the checklist, Ellen.” Sam seemed hesitant to bring it up in front of two Directors. “It’s blank. Did you maybe give me the wrong one? We could just talk it through?” He looked around the room, noting that Benny and Bobby both had hard eyes on Ellen. “Or, uh, maybe you’ve laid it out somewhere, and I just picked up the blank one by mistake…” Sam trailed off for a moment. Benny had sat up straight and was nailing Ellen with his eyes. He looked…pissed. “Like, just let me know, are we going vaginal or anal on this one? And do I do a full C.F., or just my usual dominance? Is she gonna have a plug in?”

“Ellen?” Benny broke in, one eyebrow at full attention and his mouth a hard line.
Dr. Harvelle was flustered and searching around the desk where she kept her forms, but didn’t come up with anything. She didn’t meet Benny’s eye. He resumed, “Did you send Sam into a test with Alpha’s True-Mate with no instructions?”

“Of, of course not alpha…It’s just… here somewhere…it all happened so fast. I know I did it. I. Maybe…” She stopped and looked at the floor. Her face had gone pale.

“Is that why Garth didn’t know he had a virgin on his hands? Christ, woman! This is not just any Omega!” Bobby was shouting at her and she cowered.

“Hold up!” Sam held a hand up between them. “Ellen,” he started, kneeling and speaking as kindly as he could. “When was your last Release? Are you overdue?”

Ellen looked up at him, stricken. Without speaking, she reached into her desk drawer for her phone. They waited while she pulled up the Lupin App that Omegas used to track their Balance adjustments, among other things. She was muttering to herself and shaking a bit. “It’s not been that… I mean, I know I had an appointment with…” Ellen sucked in a breath when the calendar came up on the screen. Balefully, she admitted, “It’s been three weeks, Sir.” She met his eyes, knowing she was in trouble.

Bobby stood. “Sam, to answer your questions: it’s anal, expect her to be untouched, come inside her, full Release if you can swing it. And yes, it’s a C.F. with full domination. You need to cow her and bond her. You can’t knot her,” he glanced meaningfully at Ellen but didn’t resume his previous argument, “So you gotta give her all you got. No holds barred. Also, use a bit of pain to tweak her. I think you should see if you can draw her out without touching her clitoris. You got it?” He looked at Sam intently until Sam nodded. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then glanced at the empty form in his hand, tossed it unceremoniously onto the desk in front of Dr. Harvelle, turned to the door and disappeared without a word.

Bobby turned his attention to Benny. “You want to take care of this, I take it?” Benny nodded decisively. Bobby regarded him for just a moment, then turned the doorknob and said over his shoulder, “I’ll send Cole in. You’ll need it documented.” And he left pulling the door closed behind him.

Ellen seemed to realize just how much shit was about to splatter across the proverbial fan, and she shrunk down a little in her chair, her eyes on the curled papers Sam had left.

“Who’s your Dom?”

“Travis,” she said softly.

Benny scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Of course, … And who’s your Alpha?”

Ellen looked up sharply at this question, surprised that he’d asked. “Jo.” Her response was weighted
with disbelief. Omega custody always fell to familial alpha unless Mating or a court order altered it. Benny knew who her alpha was. It had to be a test of Ellen’s capacity for rational thought.

Benny held her eye with a razor-sharp glare. “Your daughter let you get this far out of balance?”

“Alpha…” she protested, then realized she had nothing. “Uh, it’s not like… I mean, she didn’t know,” she finished up lamely, looking back at her feet. Shoelaces suddenly seemed very interesting.

The door opened, and Cole stepped in, looking expectant and eager. Benny didn’t give him an opportunity to speak. He held his hand out in expectation and waited a moment. “Hand me your paddle,” he said, when Cole seemed slow on the uptake.

“Hand me your paddle,” he said, when Cole seemed slow on the uptake. Cole’s hand strayed protectively to the elongated pocket down the outside of his jeans leg. He looked baffled. Borrowing an Enforcement Officer’s paddle was much like asking to borrow a policeman’s sidearm, and Cole didn’t want to comply. One look at Benny’s face convinced him the normally laid back alpha was in no mood to argue. Benny smirked humorlessly and raised one eyebrow. That eyebrow said, “Or else…”

“Uh,” Cole said shrewdly. He balked for just a moment, then produced the paddle and laid it, handle first, in Benny’s outstretched hand. Benny’s smirk deepened to smugness. He silently congratulated himself on killing two birds with one stone.

Beta-Doms had a well-earned reputation for being overbearing alpha-wannabe’s, and Cole was starting to fall into the trap of throwing his weight around, demanding attention and obeisance without the alpha authority to back it up. Really, it just made him a prick. Benny felt it was time to knock the beta down a peg. If only they could all be like Sam, he thought. Sam’s sense of protectiveness and care seemed to extend to everyone around him, especially Omegas. He was the most popular trainer and E.O. at The Facility. Even after having their backsides busted until they wailed, the Omegas he’d paddled adored him. He cared so much about them, and they respected, no, loved him for it. Cole was no Sam. Not yet anyway, maybe not ever.

“Keep the record for me,” Benny instructed him. “Also,” he swung the paddle loosely, “Make a note in the record to follow up with Travis and Jo. This whole episode reeks.” Benny turned to Ellen who hadn’t moved, while Cole sputtered a bit behind him. Benny ignored him. He knew Cole would obey. “I’ll catch up with those two later. Right now, I’m going to set you back to rights.” Benny lifted Ellen’s chin until she met his eye. She looked ashamed. Good. “I’m going to take care of you, Doctor.” His voice was not loud, but there was iron in it. Ellen nodded as much as his grip allowed.

“On your feet. Turn around. Clear the desk.” He was suddenly all business. Cole shuffled around a bit by the door, getting his cell phone in order. Sulking, Benny gave Ellen enough time to make a clean space on the desk. “Kick your shoes off and put your palms flat on the desk.” She complied wordlessly.

“Why am I about to paddle your ass into next week?” Benny’s voice was mild. He might’ve just been curious, but his hands were businesslike and efficient as he lifted the back of her skirt and tucked it into the top of her blouse, catching it on her bra strap. He edged the fingers of his left hand under the elastic of her panties and swept them to her ankles.

Ellen answered at once. She was already steadier, the tension sloughing off her like a flush of water. “I skipped my adjustment appointment, and I, um, I got flustered and confused. And I could have hurt someone?”

“That’s right,” agreed Benny, bringing the paddle powerfully down into sharp contact with the lower half of her right cheek, right where the crease with her thigh marked the bottom of her ass. It was meant to sting and throb. Heat suffused quickly through Ellen. She sucked in a quick breath and lowered her head between her arms, bracing herself for the long haul. “This behavior is not
acceptable from you,” he reminded her conversationally, applying another swing with a pop to the exact same spot. Ellen held position but squeezed her eyes shut. “You don’t have the luxury of slipping up, Omega. Too many vulnerable people rely on your good judgment. Yes?” He swung again. Ellen whimpered, but answered with a nod. “All right, then. Let’s get this done.”

Benny began a steady, hard rhythm. It went on for several minutes. He struck the same spot over and over again, never varying the speed, intensity, or location. Ellen struggled to get her breath right. Just when she let a breath out, another blow would land, and she’d suck in with no control. She feared hyperventilating, but Benny was watchful, and Ellen’s panic was unnecessary. The stinging burn built and spread from her backside into her middle. She could feel the building Release. She focused on it with all her might, trying to grab it and force it to explode. The strikes kept landing. Benny had nothing more to say. Ellen was on her toes, pressure in every breath and muscle building as each hit popped and echoed in the small room. It seemed to go on forever.

Finally, the heat began to crescendo. Ellen keened and dropped her head onto her hands, offering her ass fully to the will of the alpha behind her. The Release, when it came, took her breath away. It spread with a concussion out from her center and into every part of her body. She shuddered and groaned, low and deep, and loud. Benny landed one more strike for good measure. He flexed his arm and handed the paddle back to Cole.

Ellen was bent flat over the desk, panting into her folded arms. Her right butt cheek was practically glowing red, slightly abraded, sure to bruise.

“Better?” asked Benny.

“Yes, alpha,” breathed the doctor.

“All right, cher. You’re okay now. Just breathe for me. Get yourself together.” Benny released the back of her skirt and retrieved her underpants from where she’d kicked them across the room. He handed them to her. “Look at me, sweetness.” She looked up through tear-filled eyes. “Can you do this now? Or do I need to get Charlie to finish the test?”

“NO! I mean,” she lowered her gaze and found herself a tissue from the box in the corner of her desk. “I can do it. I just. I didn’t realize it had gotten so bad.” She swung her head from side to side. “I honestly just forgot. I haven’t done that before.” She looked up at him again. “It won’t happen again, sir. Forgive me?”

“You’re forgiven Omega. We still need to take care of your punishment, but let’s get Cas hitched first. The rest will keep.” Benny was back to his calm, soothing self. He wasn’t angry at Ellen, but both knew that an infraction this potentially dangerous couldn’t be allowed to pass with just a Balance adjustment. Ellen’s Release may have restored her equanimity, but she had yet to atone for the mistake. That would be a very different spanking.

With her head pulled back out of the fog and her body fully under her own control again, Ellen slid her panties back into place and retook her seat. If she leaned to her left a bit, well, she needed to list to port for the moment. She met Cole’s eye and nodded. He typed a quick response into his cell phone, then held it out for Benny to sign the screen.

“Am I excused, alpha?” Cole huffed.

“You can go,” Benny gruffed at him. “But Cole, we’re gonna have a chat later.” Cole blanched, mumbled an almost respectful response, and fled. Benny let him go. Priorities. As the Facility’s Director of Behavioral Studies, Benny was responsible for the E.O.s. The Enforcement Officers reported to him directly. He was beginning to regret hiring Cole. It looked like he wasn’t suited to the
job. Not like Sam. Sam spoiled his boss. In the same position, Benny mused, Sam would’ve accepted the alpha’s decision, monitored the punishment dutifully, giving it his full attention, and offered the Omega comfort when it was over. Sam operated on compassion and instinct. Cole just seemed to want to hit people.

Enough.

Benny texted Bobby and discovered that, as exciting as Cas’ Mating was, Bobby had picked up the dropped reins that were needed to keep The Facility running. Someone had to keep the lights on. In the short time since he left Benny, he had contacted the Board members and cancelled the meeting, rescheduled the afternoon classes, and checked in on the other recently enrolled Omegas.

Good.

Next, Benny called in to the Green room and spoke to Jo.

“Yep. He’s fluffed and ready. Get a move on though, he’s growling at me,” Jo sassed.

‘Thin ice, young alpha’, thought Benny, but he let that go too (for now), and he turned to the room beyond the one-way window. Ellen was speaking softly into her intercom, talking to Charlie. She looked up and caught Benny’s eye. Her gaze was clear and steady if a little tight. She was back. She nodded. Everyone was ready. Benny returned her nod and stepped back, crossing his arms and leaning his butt against one of the narrow tables full of monitoring equipment. Normally, a number of assistants helped out in here, but Dr. Harvelle could run this room by herself, and Benny wanted to observe her at work.

Benny couldn’t help the self-recrimination running through his mind. Dean would have handled this all smoothly and so much faster. How much had Castiel and his new mate suffered because Benny, not Dean, had been running the show. But then, he reminded himself, when shit got real, Benny stayed and slogged through. Dean had fled. Benny sighed. He couldn’t blame Dean at all. He was only human. A certain aspect of this Mating felt like a death in the family.

Benny’s train of thought stopped when the light above the door turned green and the door inside the test room burst open. Sam came through like a rhino bent on destruction. He wasn’t sultry or seductive, he was decisive. He was a conqueror. Ellen shivered a bit, her eyes on the Dominant approaching the bed, but she kept working, her hands moving easily across the monitors.

Sam was naked and glorious. His erection stood out from his groin, red and angry. His eyes blazed. He wasted no time. Taking hold of the Omega’s ankles he tugged, pulling her off the end of the bed while flipping her onto her belly. She yelped and grabbed for the headboard but missed. “NO!” she shouted in a breathy high-pitched voice. “You’re not my mate!” The girl sobbed and kicked out at Sam, but he held her fast. He bent her across the end of the bed and leaned over her, biting her on the ear and growling, full of menace. His cock pushed up along her crack and he leaned deeper, pressing it into her. “Be still!” he directed and the authority in his voice was unquestionable. She trembled, but stopped struggling. His right hand took hold of her hip. His left held her firmly by the shoulder, more firmly than strictly necessary. The Omega whimpered again. It was pitiful, and she looked over her shoulder with wide eyes, but remained motionless otherwise. “Eyes front unless I tell you to look at me.” Sam was stern, commanding, and utterly in control. She snapped her head forward and closed her eyes for good measure.

In the Control room Benny whispered, “Damn…” and blew out an impressed breath.
Sam didn’t look down or use either hand to line himself up. He rutted like a dog, fast, hard, and painful, searching by feel until his cock sank into her channel. She was swollen and slick, open and welcoming. Her ass embraced Sam’s groin, and she pushed back slightly at the feel. The Dominant slapped her ass and repeated, “Be still!”

She froze immediately.

Sam planted his feet, gripped her tight and plunged in, fucking deep and meaning business. The Omega went completely slack. Her body jolted and shifted with each punch. She had stopped trembling. Instead, a continuous punctuated moan emanated from deep in her throat, throbbing with the Dom’s hard thrusts. She curled her toes and went boneless.

The girl’s first orgasm brought with it a powerful Release from her Omega gland, the concussion visible to everyone watching and spiking the instruments under Ellen’s care. The second flooded her neocortex and her adrenal glands as the Claim landed. Wave after wave of hormone release reached out into the room and grabbed onto Sam’s as her conscious mind let go of all intent. The bond struck between them, and they both gasped, shocked at the recoil. Sam redoubled his efforts, rushing to completion.

He came with a howl as she reached her third climax on the aftershocks of the second. They screamed their release into the room, subsumed with pleasure. Then Sam collapsed on top of her and panted shallowly, his vision blacking out for a moment even as his cocked slipped from her ass. It had taken no time at all. Or maybe it had taken hours. Sam didn’t know.

Ellen breathed out very slowly, glanced over her left shoulder at Benny and remarked, “That girl was a virgin an hour ago.”

Sam sucked in a breath and rolled off the Omega. April, he reminded himself. Her name was April. He pushed her hair gently behind her ear to get a look at the side of her face where it was tucked into her arms – to check if she was okay. The trembling had returned. Sam ran a hand firmly over her back. The bond between them lit with pleasure even as she leaned slightly into his touch. He chuckled softly. “Yeah,” he whispered just for her. “Me too.”

She peeked at him from over her arm, clearly uncertain. “It’s okay, April.” Sam continued his touch and helped with his other hand to pull at the blanket Charlie was spreading out over them both. He leaned a little further onto his side, creating distance for her. “You’re fine. This was good. You were so good for me. Your Alpha is going to be pleased…so proud of you. You did great.” He eased her up and back onto the bed as he spoke gently into her ear and dragged the blanket along with them. He rubbed at her legs underneath the cover to check for stiffness and then moved on to her shoulders and arms when he found none. She was in good shape. She was strong and pliable. He found faint bruises on her shoulder and hip from his grip, but otherwise she was perfect.

“You’re perfect,” he told her.

Charlie was moving calmly around the bed, wielding the peliomometer as she went. She hummed to herself with satisfaction. Glancing at the mirror for just a moment for some sign only she could see, she nodded and put it back in its holster. Charlie brought a chocolate bar and a cereal bar, holding them out for Sam to choose. He picked the chocolate, unwrapped it and fed April small pieces.

“What about my Alpha?” she asked timidly. “My mate? Is he going to be angry with me? Charlie said to let you… That is…” April began to worry herself into tensing up, shoving toward the end of the bed as if to flee the scene of her ‘crime.’ “She said I should let you have me. Like that other beta, before. But you weren’t like him.” She was beginning to cry now, panicking in the wake of too many hormones, and reaching toward Charlie. “Oh God! Oh, Charlie, what’d I do!!”
Sam shushed her quietly and eased her back down. Her bonded body responded and went easily, confusing her flustered mind. “Alpha’s not angry, sweet girl,” he assured her. Charlie stepped up and crawled onto the bed to bracket her, stroking her hair and murmuring sweet assurances in her ear. April stopped fighting and protesting. She slowly relaxed. Wide-eyed, she ate the small bits of chocolate that Sam fed her, and she began to listen to the comforting words they wrapped around her head like soporific balm. Slowly, she fell back to sleep.

In the booth, Ellen waved Benny over to look at the readings blinking on her monitor. As she slept, April’s slick production was beginning to go into overdrive, and her temperature was rising. A quick check of the readings from Cas’ electrodes showed that he too was starting to show the signs of a Triggered cycle. Benny grunted his acknowledgement. “We need to speed this up, get them Mated, and get them somewhere private. I don’t really want to have to watch these two at the height of their Heat and Rut. And once they’ve ramped all the way up, there’s no way we’re going to be able to move them to a private room.”

“You may not want to see it, alpha,” said Ellen flushing, “…but I kind of do. Just imagine Cas, in all his Dominance, completely unleashed.” Ellen’s eyes glazed over as her mind supplied images, “It’s going to be glorious.”

“It’s going to cost us a fortune in broken equipment if it all goes down in here.” Benny rolled his eyes. “How long before we can let Cas at her?”

“Her body needs at least another hour to process Sam’s Claim and rest.” Ellen responded.

“All right, then. Set the countdown clock. We’ll get Cas to the Green room in about 30 minutes. I don’t imagine he’ll need any fluffing.” Ellen chuckled and thought, ‘yeah, probably not’.
Chapter Summary

Castiel takes a mate, and Dean can't handle it.

Chapter Notes

Just in case it helps to have a visual of some of the going's-on at the Cons:

**SOB + Whipping Post - VegasCon**

This is not my video to share, but it's pretty bad-ass. Credit to YouTube poster, SpnConGirl.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN:

“Hi, Dean! Hi, Sam!” she shouted into the mic cheerfully. “You’re my favorite, Sam, I want you to know. But my question is for Dean.” The two men shoved each other playfully on stage, ribbing good naturedly as if keeping score. “So, if you’re an alpha, but also a Sub, like, do you usually do the pitching or the catching in bed?”

Dean smiled in her direction, although he couldn’t really see her with the lights in his eyes. He considered the question a moment as if it weren’t the single most frequently asked question at conventions. “So, it really depends on the situation and the circumstances. When I’m working, it’s all about the needs of whoever I’m with, you know? When it’s play though…” he stopped and chuckled, a little abashed “I guess it still depends on who I’m with and what I’m looking for. I like to switch it up. A word of warning though for you alpha- and beta-Subs out there, and any Primates in the audience, this is for you too. Listen up. Anal sex is way more complicated for non-Omegas. If you don’t have a channel, you have to be very careful with this stuff. Before you play, get yourself trained. Don’t get hurt.”

Dean’s relationship with his boss – no, relationship wasn’t the right word – Dean’s intimacies with Dr. Novak were not a publicly disclosed thing. That was private. As far as the public knew, they were close friends and colleagues, although Dean was aware there was a subset of the fanbase that had begun a ‘shipping’ campaign, insisting the two were closer than friends.

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“Do you prefer one over the other, though?” she persisted.

“It’s actually kind of hard for me to know anymore.” Dean leaned forward on his stool, frowning in
thought and deliberately avoiding his brother’s eye. There was judgment there. Dean could feel Sam poising to interrupt. He continued without giving Sam a chance to break in. “I spend so much of my professional time fucking…and being fucked,” he admitted with a tilt of his head. “…that I think my own personal needs are often met at work without trying. I can tell you that outside of work, I Bottom more than I Top, but if I wasn’t in this line of work, I mean, who knows, right?” Dean had no intention of relating just how rarely he wanted to Top his partner in his private life. That’s what ‘Private’ meant after all.

Dean enjoyed showing off on stage. It was much more fun than those boring, interminable seminars Cas dragged him to. Honestly. How do you make talking about fucking up into someone’s ass so hard that slick literally splatters out into a boring subject? It’s like all those dullards had no sexual response whatsoever once you got them into a classroom. This, on the other hand, was awesome. Dean shifted his focus across the room to the microphone set up on the opposite side of the stage from the first to listen to the next question.

“Hello, my name’s Janine. I’m a beta-Sub from Portland. My question is for both of you.” She paused to let them nod for her to continue. “So, I don’t have an alpha right now. My folks are both betas, we don’t have any other family close, and I’m single. I know there are Lupin centers opening all over the country, but Portland doesn’t have one yet. I’m kind of struggling ‘cause I can’t find a Dom who gets me. There’s a matching service, but they keep matching me up with pussies, uh sorry, excuse me…I mean, they keep matching me up with Doms who won’t go intense enough for me. Is that a big deal? Like, should I settle for what I can get, or…?” She trailed off, looking at the boys on the stage in misery.

Sam started first. “Hi, Janine. Thanks for your question. It was brave of you to ask, and it’s the kind of question that could wind up helping a lot of people, so I’m really grateful to you.” Dean nodded his agreement. “I want you to remember that you shouldn’t ever settle for care that isn’t right for you. Yes, it’s a big deal if you can’t get your bitch stroked the way she’s demanding. There’s a reason you feel those needs, and it’s really unhealthy for you to ignore them.” He fixed Janine with a stern look for even considering taking on a Dom that she didn’t respect. At least he hoped he was glaring at her. The lights were fucking blinding.

“Janine,” Dean broke in, “Do you have your Keller score?”

“Yes, alpha,” she answered promptly.

“And the matching service has it too?”

“Yes, sir. I included the full report with my application.”

“Dicks!” said Dean vehemently. He worked his jaw a bit and then glanced her way again. “It’s not an ACRI service, is it? It’s not us sending you pussies?”

“No, alpha,” she laughed. “It’s one of your competitors.”

Dean nodded in relief and went on, dodging the desire to trash the competition further. “Look, I know it’s hard to find a match sometimes, but Portland’s not that small. I know there’s gotta be someone who fits with you. What’s your Sub-rating, if you don’t mind telling me? …And my brother, and a thousand perfect strangers?”

“Um. I don’t mind. It’s um, that is, I’m a Profound, rating of 15.” She turned bashful when the audience laughed at Dean’s clowning.

“Yeah, no,” Dean remarked seriously. “That’s not so rare. You shouldn’t be having trouble. Are you
in the one-on-ones later? We can make an assessment and give you some resources, get you squared away.”

“Yes, alpha. I have a ticket for 1:30.”

“Great!” Dean enthused, winking at her cheekily, “I look forward to it.”

Sam broke back in, “Thanks Janine, see you in a bit. And for anyone else out there who’s having trouble finding a match. Do not, I repeat, DO NOT settle for less than you need. If you are having trouble getting it, contact us by website or phone call. It’s a free service. It really works. We have the most extensive networking system in the world, and we don’t fuck around with PUSSIES!” Sam was pissed that the community services in so many places were still often lackadaisical and backward.

The audience broke into boisterous applause. Yep, thought Dean, this is awesome.

NOW:

Moving Cas from the Scenting room to the Green room was no easy task. He was irritated and impatient, barely holding his wolf back by the scruff of its neck, and he’d stripped his clothes off some time ago, unwilling to pretend at civility any longer. He was single-minded and completely lost in the mandates of anatomy and internal chemistry. It took four alphas, plus Cole, to escort him safely into the Green room with a minimum of property loss or personal injury. Castiel growled and snarled at everyone. Benny considered trying to fit a muzzle on him before the transfer, but decided that would just piss him off.

The chemistry behind the True-Mate bond was not one that was fully understood yet. Many Lupins didn’t believe it really existed, writing the anecdotal evidence off as heat-of-the-moment Mating due to an alignment of Heats and Ruts that made Mating seem like a REALLY good idea in the fog of the hormones. But those wolves hadn’t seen what the staff at The Facility had seen. Too often, wolves who weren’t anywhere near one another would go suddenly feral at a scent that had no effect on anyone else, and make a beeline toward someone who was sprinting their direction as well. They would crash together, all teeth and claws and claiming, Mating on the spot with no shame or hesitation, caring not a fig about who might be caught as an unwitting witness, and showing no regret afterward. When that happened, evaluations done on the pair later always showed a near perfect correlation of genders and proclivities, even down to the intangibles. The same Universe that made life so hard on the Canid species at times, clearly had a genuinely sappy heart as well to give them this. The problem was, wolves had to be in scenting distance of each other to Trigger the reaction. There was no way to predict a match on paper yet.

Castiel paced in the Green room, every muscle tensed. His cock was engorged and enormous. Slippery spots on the floor where he’d dripped pre-come were scattered from one side of the room to the other. His eyes were nearly completely red, and he kept one hand wrapped firmly around his erection as if ready to guide it to its target. He tried the door every time he passed it and huffed like a beast when it remained locked. He knew she was in there, and he only had one thought in his head.

Mate.

Ellen kept an eye on him through the closed-circuit feed. “Charlie, you and Jo clear out of there as soon as she’s in place. I don’t want anyone else in the room when he enters. We’ve got to trust that
his instincts will keep them both safe until the bite takes hold.” There were instances they’d all read
about where an alpha accidentally maimed his own mate once lost to the fever pitch of Rut and
Mating drive. But this was Alpha. He wouldn’t hurt her. Castiel had never caused any injury that he
didn’t intend. Ever. Property damage happened on occasion but never unintentional harm to a wolf.
He was the ultimate ideal of a Dominant Alpha in control.

Charlie finished positioning her – belly down, resting on her shoulders, ass up, face pressed into the
bedding, feet spread wide. She was a perfectly presented gift, and her mate should zero in on her ass
as soon as he entered the room. The Omega writhed and moaned, turning her head to one side.
“Hurts, Charlie,” she complained. “Everything’s on fire…please. I need…”

“Shhhh, baby. You’re okay. You’re going into Heat. I know it hurts. Your Alpha’s coming. He’ll
make it all better. Listen to me. He’s going to mount you, okay? It’ll feel weird at first. He’ll knot
you, so it won’t be like Sam. It’ll be better. I promise. Way better.” She stroked April’s back softly
and repositioned her backside where April had let it drop, trying to thrust her hips into the mattress in
response to the Heat driving through her veins. “He’s going to bite you, and you’re gonna want him
to. It’ll make you feel so much better. Don’t be scared if it hurts and bleeds when he does it. Just…let
him. Promise me? Don’t fight him. Remember what I said. Listen to what your wolf wants you to
do, and do just that. Only that.”

“Oh, Charlie,” she replied in a tiny voice. Charlie scanned the room quickly, checking that all the
instruments were set correctly and everything was in place. She gestured Jo out of the room and
followed her into the Control room. There was no way she was going to miss this.

The Control room was packed. Everyone had the same idea. Bobby put his finger to his lips to
remind the two women to avoid distracting Ellen from her work. Dr. Harvelle glanced around the
room to make sure all was in readiness. Then she reached over with a shaking hand and released the
door lock to the Green room, turning on the green light.

Everyone watching seemed to freeze and stop breathing in anticipation. Alpha-Dom Doctor Castiel
Novak wasted no time. He threw open the door and burst through it. As expected, his eyes zeroed in
on his target, and he was on her in a second, all motion and aggression. Completely feral, Alpha
snarled and clawed at her body, manhandling her into the placement he wanted and shoving his cock
as far in her channel as it would go. He mouthed at the back of her neck, chewing aggressively, but
not breaking the skin. He shook her by the back of her neck with his teeth like a terrier with a rat.
The Omega went completely pliable under his attentions.

One large hand circled around her small middle, pulling her body into his, and the other braced them
both, straight-armed against the bed as he drove his cock into her, hard and fast and relentless. The
growling continued, deep and raw from his throat, and she answered with a high wail. She strained
her head up and back, seeking his face and baring her throat to him. The arm around her middle
shifted to reach all the way across her chest to grasp her opposite shoulder, pulling her torso off the
bed entirely and bruising a handprint into her upper arm. Her arms dangled loosely, and he held her
up, their weight on their knees and his braced arm, his thrusts driving them up the mattress. They
both edged awkwardly forward on their knees to stay balanced. He used her hard and mercilessly. It
was an act of complete ownership, acknowledged chemically by both bodies. His mouth sought the
side of her throat, and he sucked and teethed, teasing bruises along her throat.

She cried out and thrashed her head against him in panic. The Alpha roared, and he slammed her
down against the mattress, driving her face into the bedding with the force of his weight, fucking into
her harder. He grunted loudly with his effort, each thrust driving his burgeoning knot into her
channel ruthlessly and then dragging it back out again, covered in her profuse slick. He continued
rutting into her open channel. Any resistance from the Omega forgotten or abandoned. She
submitted. She was his. Utterly.

Sweat ran down the two bodies, their coupling an aggressive blur of motion, thrusting and grunting, and building. She moved her lips, silently at first, and then whispering the same words on repeat, “Alpha, Mate me. Please.” she said it over and over, the Alpha’s thrusting put sharp punctuations in the words as her volume increased, “ALPHA! Mate Me!... ’M Yours!” and she came suddenly. A spasm that originated from her Omega gland and passed through her cunt and her channel bathed him in slick, a baptismal benediction of their union.

The Alpha’s mouth found her right shoulder, and he took her between his teeth, high at the curve where her neck became her shoulder, above her collarbone; high enough it would be difficult to hide with a shirt collar. He tightened both arms around her and pulled her into his body, mindlessly shoving his knot in once more where it locked and stayed. They shared a powerful grunt of effort between them. He covered her body with his own, flattening both against the bed, crushing her small frame, and he came, throbbing. His teeth sank deeply into her flesh, and the Mating-bond burst into place with a punch that made both of them cry out, the Alpha’s lips pulling into a rictus and flexing against his straining voice without pulling his hold free. His hips continued thrusting and grinding through his orgasm. He moaned and rocked into her, thoroughly debauched and utterly lost to instinct.

Except for her uncontrollable trembling, the Omega went completely still under her Dom’s weight. She barely breathed. Sweat, blood, spit, slick, and come bathed her, covered them both. She lay boneless, trembling from the adrenalin, but peaceful, spent and exhausted, waiting on her Master’s will. For a few moments they simply breathed together, shallowly, as he covered her with his body, then his hands began to release their tight grip. He started stroking them up and down her sides, his palms big enough to wrap nearly around her waist. His strokes were tight and firm, leaving white bloodless trails where they’d passed and then pulling folds in her flesh on the way back down. He breathed in heavily through his nose and seemed to realize that he still had his teeth buried in the flesh of her shoulder. Slowly, he released his bite and pulled his head back to look at the damage. He flattened his tongue and licked hard slowly across the bleeding wound. The Omega responded by tucking her head and tensing her body. She moaned in pleasure, and he felt an aftershock ripple through her channel and massage his cock where it was tied fast. He shuddered at the sensation. His cock released another spurt of come deep inside her ass. He pulled himself carefully up onto his arms, allowing her to breathe easily at last, looked down upon his mate and said in a rough awkward salutation, “Hello April, welcome home. I am Castiel, your Alpha, and I’m a very lucky man.”

It was iconic awkward Cas, but Dean wasn’t there to roll his eyes and call him a dork.

His mate twisted around enough to regard his face and get her first real look at the wolf she’d just tied her life to. His eyes were Cerulean blue, deep and beautiful and concerned. She allowed herself to feel the Mating-bond now attached deep in her middle, right at her center of gravity. It felt, weird; like an elastic cord that stretched from its starting point at her spine about even with her bellybutton and extended through her navel and attaching at its other end to the wolf whose huge cock was tied inside her ass. She closed her eyes and collapsed back to the bed, exhausted and unable to hold herself up any longer. She still felt too warm, her ass and her cunt both still throbbing and wet with her Heat, and now she was sticky.

Her mate’s hand reached gently around her and guided her body to the side so that he was no longer lying on top of her, and they relaxed into a more comfortable spooning position. He didn’t remove his arm but tightened his grip, holding her close. He laid gentle kisses along her neck and throat, occasionally passing a flat tongue across the Mating-bite and stroking her hair with his free hand. She
breathed and felt the newness of it all, taking it in; his touch, the firm lines of his body behind hers, his large cock tied tightly in her channel still pulsing occasionally as he completed his release. She felt utterly safe, safer than she’d ever felt before in her life.

And she felt completely naked in more ways than just physical. She was aware that the couple were being watched, but more than that, she was aware that he could feel her inside his head, as she could feel him. She examined the feeling carefully and felt his wonder expand as she pushed at their new bond. He returned the sensation, and it felt good – amazingly good. She sent a stroke down the length of the bond, and he shivered at the touch inside his mind. His responding touch included a huff of amusement and a tightening of his grip around her body.

The door cracked open slowly. Jo cautiously slipped just her head in. After a moment, she followed with the rest of her body. Cas spotted the intruding alpha and growled deep and menacing from his throat, a warning and a promise.

“Right, sorry,” said Jo. “I’ll get Charlie.” She backed out of the room. Charlie replaced her immediately. She moved easily around the room, never looking directly at the tied couple and never getting closer than strictly necessary. Charlie had years of experience dealing with possessive alphas who were still tied after Claiming an Omega. She had told the alphas in the Control room it was stupid to try to send Jo in first, but nobody listened to the beta.

Charlie pulled a clean blanket from the shelf and passed it to Castiel, approaching the bed slowly, keeping clear of the Omega’s side, keeping her eyes down, extending her arm as far out as she could so he could lean backwards and take it from her. She began taking peliometer readings while he worked to spread the blanket over his mate and himself. She looked toward the Control room and was about to put the meter away, but was notified somehow through the glass, and she ran the readings again. After the second run-through, she evidently received a green light to holster the meter.

Once it was stowed, she pulled two bottles of juice and Castiel’s favorite protein bars from the fridge. Approaching the bed again, she stopped when the Alpha started to growl at her. This kind of possessiveness was common from several of the alphas on staff, but she’d never seen Cas do it before. She stood completely still, her eyes down. After a minute or two of tension, Cas’ hunger and thirst seemed to rear their objections.

“Hand me those,” he said, with a gruffer-than-normal voice.

Charlie stepped forward slowly and put the snacks into the hand that reached backward to her, then repeated the action with the drinks after he’d set the snack bars on the bed behind himself.

“Charlie,” Cas intoned, breaking her out of the glaze she’s slipped into, probably a response to the high oxytocin levels suffusing through the room. “Go away.”

Cas meant it, and she fled.

***************

Sam pulled the door open and stepped into the cool, dark dive-bar. His eyes adjusted quickly, and he walked in. “Hey Zeke,” he greeted with an upward thrust of his chin.
“Hello Sam,” replied the bartender. He didn’t pause his work, but did glance up briefly.

Sam stepped up to the bar, approaching the spot where his brother had his head down nestled into his arms. Sam picked up a loose wipe-rag from the counter, flipping it around a few times until it was coiled tightly on itself. He flicked it out expertly to snap perfectly right on the seat of Dean’s ass with a loud “Pop!”

“THE FUCK?!!?” Dean jerked off his barstool, immediately awake and alert. Also pissed. He spun around, rubbing the pained spot with his hand and fixing Sam with an alpha glare. “Damnit Sam! Fuck, that hurt! You EVER do that to me again, I swear I’ll rip both your balls off!” Dean’s eyes were red from drinking, not alpha hormones, so Sam wasn’t especially moved. He knew his older brother too well to be much cowed by him anyway; knew everything Dean was capable of, and even in his deepest alpha state, Sam wasn’t scared of him. They just didn’t work that way.

Sam congratulated himself on a well-executed strike. ‘Just like a pro’, he thought, then chuckled because, I mean, Sam’s job was to strike people on their asses, so yeah, he was a pro.

“S’not funny, dude,” Dean protested. ‘I’m still bruised from last night. That was way outta line.’ Dean tended toward bitchy when he was drunk and morose.

“I don’t wanna know about last night. But you totally deserved that pop, man. You cut out and left all of us high and dry. We needed you there.” Sam wasn’t about to baby his brother.

“I seriously, seriously don’t wanna talk about this with you right now. Or ever. With anyone. Ever.” Dean sank back down on the barstool and started to lay his head back down.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Sam hauled him back up with a grip on his upper arm and frog-marched him to the door. “I’m taking you home to sleep it off. Then we ARE going to talk whether you want to or not. Thanks Zeke!” he called over his shoulder as he helped his brother through the door.

“Of course, Sam.”

Sam drove mechanically, his mind on the matter at hand rather than his driving. He’d walked the short distance to the bar from The Facility which was located right on campus, so he grabbed Dean’s keys and parked his brother in the passenger side of his own car.

“Try not to puke,” he instructed as he slid into the driver’s seat. Dean glared at him, but didn’t speak.

At the house they shared, Sam practically lifted Dean out bodily and carried him to his bedroom, one arm pulled over Sam’s shoulder and most of Dean’s weight supported by his brother’s strength. Sam unceremoniously dumped him in his bed and began removing shoes. When Dean spoke, Sam wasn’t certain Dean really wanted to be heard; his voice was so quiet.

“Did he go through with it, Sam?” Sam’s heart broke for his big brother. He looked up to the head of the bed and sighed. Dean’s body was slack, but his head was lifted, looking back down the bed, meeting Sam’s eyes. His whispered voice sounded broken.

“Yeah, Dean. He did. I’m so sorry, man.”

“What does.” Dean tried to brush it off. Right. As if. “Was bound to hap’n sooner or later.” He dropped his head back to his pillow. He spoke to the ceiling. “I guess I’m in the market f’r new Dom. Oh, hey baby brother, you’re a Dom…y’all all run round t’gether right? Y’know anybody wants to beat a alpha ass every now an’ then? Not right away, ‘cause I seriously think I’m good f’r a few weeks at least… Went out with a bang and shit…”
Sam didn’t answer. He pulled his brother’s boots off for him then unbuckled and removed Dean’s belt, sliding it through the loops and around his body. He went for the button on Dean’s jeans. Dean stopped him with a hand to his wrist. “Leave it.”

Sam huffed up at his bangs. Dean was in for a world of hurt over the next few months. Sam wanted to be patient with him, but… Sam pulled his wrist out of Dean’s grasp and went right back to work. “You’ll be asleep in no time, and I’m not going to leave you to sleep in denim. Just take them off and go to bed.” Sam succeeded in slipping the jeans down both legs and over Dean’s feet, taking his socks with them. Dean closed his eyes, harrumphed and rolled onto his side. Sam sucked in a quiet breath when he saw Castiel’s marks down both of Dean’s thighs. Wow. That was… Yeah. Sam shook his head. None of his business is what it was. It was none of his business. Dean had to know he’d flashed his bruises at his brother, but he seemed not to care.

Sam was an E.O., so he knew impact bruises and abrasions. He knew Dean’s body, too. Sam had been called in to correct almost every member of the staff at one point or other (some bratty Subs more often than others. Thanks for that Dean.) And too, he’d grown up with Dean. Sam knew in precise calculable terms just how much force over how long it would take to leave marks like that on his brother’s thighs. He suspected that Dean’s dark underwear hid even more severe damage. Cas always focused on the ass when he punished. It’s something you knew about the people you worked closely with.

“You want me to bring in some arnica for the bruising?” Sam asked softly.

“I said leave it!” Dean answered without turning back over. Sam left the room and closed the door. He texted Benny to let him know Dean was safe at home and to check on Cas. Sam had skipped out on witnessing the Mating, too concerned about his brother’s state of mind and getting him home. Sam wanted to be there for his brother. He hurt so badly for him. He wanted to try to fix everything. Maybe nothing would have to change. The Facility staff included a number of workers who were Mated outside of work. Their society didn’t even pretend to expect monogamy where hierarchical or therapeutic sex was involved. There was no reason on paper that Castiel and Dean couldn’t carry on scening as they always had, except that Dean’s heart had just shattered into a million pieces, and once Cas emerged from his Mate/Rut craze, his would follow.

Sam grabbed a beer from the fridge and headed to his room. It was early, but he was done for the day.

Chapter End Notes

I know oxytocin doesn’t work that way, but think how chill everyone would be if it did.
Wednesday, February 15, 2017

Chapter Summary

Dean's hung-over and none-too-pleased with the Universe. Three naughty wolves get what's coming. Cas is in la-la-land.

Chapter Notes

Still working on figuring out how the formatting works. I will probably go back and reload the first chapters with paragraph breaks so that they're readable. Take out some of the typos and stuff. Bugs me.

Also, the pace of updating is going to have to slow way down from this point. My family is kindly reminding me that having 1/4 of its membership with her head perpetually in a laptop is not good for Pack dynamics. Sigh, adulting is hard.

Apologies (not really) for drawing out the angst. I didn't want to tag it as a slow-burn because I don't really see it that way, but that's me. I know where the story is going, and that makes it easier for me to wait.

Thanks for the kind words and kudos. They make my day. (Insert smiley emoji of your choice here)

THEN:

Sam punched Dean in the shoulder affectionately when both brothers were loaded into the SUV, heading back to the hotel nearby. He teased, “You know, I’ve heard you spin some of your answers a little before when they get kinda personal, but I’ve never heard you straight-up lie like that before. Something you want to talk about?”

“The fuck are you talking about, man?” Dean wasn’t really listening. He was deciding between different cuts of steak for dinner and trying to remember if the hotel restaurant had more than one type of pie.

“When that girl asked you if you’d rather Top or Bottom,” Sam replied, fixing his too-astute eye on his brother’s face. “You said you switch it up depending on who you’re with, even in your free time.” He paused a beat, then continued when Dean didn’t respond. “Dean, when was the last time you were with someone new in your free time? Never, right? Not since college? Dude, you are so monogamous, it’s like, you could be a Christian preacher or something. And yeah right, as if Castiel would EVER Bottom. Like, I can’t even picture how that would work. So, if you’re not sleeping around, and you’re not Topping your scene partner, when exactly do you Top?”

Dean snorted. “Mind your own fucking business, Sam, and quit picturing us fucking. It’s creepy.”
There was alpha warning in his voice.

The alpha tone had no effect on Sam. In public, Dean’s persona tilted toward the alpha. He was confident, charismatic, assertive, and pretty damned cocky. But from his private relationships, Dean’s Submissive wolf took what it needed. The Doms in his life who knew him and cared about him stroked his wolf in private, freeing him from having to show a Submissive side to the world. Sam was a major part of that matrix, and he knew it. It’s how they rolled.

“See? That’s what I mean. You’re way too touchy about the subject even to talk about it with me. You never used to keep stuff from me. C’mon, Dean. Lighten up. You can trust me, man. And I really think you’re holding stuff in that you need to talk about to someone.” Dean still didn’t respond. He was typing into his cell phone, his face a hard line. “If you can’t talk to me, at least try talking to Jo, okay? Dean?”

“Jesus, Sammy! Can you drop the touchy-feely crap? Please? I don’t really feel like lighting candles and playing Yanni and going full Dr. Phil with you about who I’m fucking in my free time! Why do you care?”

Dean’s mistake was ending his tirade with a leading question. Sam took it as permission to continue. “I care, big brother, because you being hopelessly in love with your scene partner is not something you can avoid dealing with like this. One or both of you stands to get really hurt.” Sam was ready to stop all the bullshit deflecting and get serious with this conversation, make Dean face it head on for once, so he turned his Dominant voice all the way to the “ON” position and spoke directly to Dean’s Sub. “Just tell me, yes or no, are you in love with Castiel Novak?”

Dean visibly struggled with his Sub wolf to keep it from rolling onto its back in submission and start spilling everything. “None of your fucking business, Sam,” he finally managed.

“I’ll take that as a ‘Yes.’ But Dean, you need to get your head into a place where you can admit it straight up. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, I think it’s great. If it would help, I can paddle you into the right head space.” Dean’s eyes darted to the paddle handle sticking out of Sam’s leg pocket and his tongue moistened his lower lip nervously. Sam was never without it, and it wasn’t a bullshit offer. Sam was good at his job. He knew how to work Dean into a deeper connection with his wolf. Dean shuddered, but didn’t speak. He put his hand to the car door and unbuckled his seatbelt. “We’ll talk later,” Sam added as the SUV pulled up at the hotel door. “I’m serious, Dean! This conversation is not over!” But Dean was already through the sliding door and bolting to the elevator in the lobby.

Dean’s mind buzzed with frustration and upset. Nope, nope, not gonna happen. Nope. Sam can just butt the fuck right back out again. Him with his stupid beta-Dom, ‘tell me right now’ fucking voice. I’m the fucking alpha here. Who does he think he is? I don’t owe him a Goddamned thing…Butt the fuck out. He was starting to repeat himself while he paced and muttered in his hotel room, so he headed for a shower and decided on a solo dinner in his room to avoid giving his brother another chance to ambush him.

He was just dressing in sweats when someone knocked heavily on his door. Shit. He rolled his eyes and considered leaving Sam in the hall to fester, but his big-boy brain reminded him it wouldn’t do any good in the long run. Sam was a pit bull when he got his teeth into something he’d decided was important and never let go until he got what he wanted. Dean’s whole body sighed in resignation, and he slunk to the door, checking the view port before twisting the doorknob to release the lock. He didn’t pull it open, though. He just walked away and took up a spot at the other end of the room, his posture defiant: arms crossed, chest out, chin high and firm, feet spread just enough to make him look as big as he could. Dean was by no means a small man, but against his moose of a 6’4” brother, he’d need all the posturing he could manage.
Sam pushed the door open and entered, allowing the spring to slam it closed again behind him. “Really, Dean?” he admonished. His brother’s childishness was not helping. Sam held up the bags of fast food takeout and set them on the small table along the near wall. “We need to talk.”

“I was planning on steak for dinner tonight. Thanks for asking,” bratted Dean.

“That’s fine. I’ll eat mine. You can order up room service or wait until we’re done talking and go find whatever you want. I don’t care. But you’re not leaving this room until I’m satisfied.”

“Little too kinky for me, little brother. I’m not into incest,” Dean pushed. He knew how this was likely to go, and he knew he wasn’t going to win, but he could never seem to help it when his mouth took off on him like that.

Sam ignored the remark, digging into one of the bags and spreading out his food. “Just tell me this, Dean. Why won’t you admit you have feelings for Cas? It’s not like you to be ashamed of, well, anything.”

“What do you want me to say?” Dean didn’t relax his stance or his defiance. There was no point to this conversation. Nothing he could say was going to change the circumstances. He told Sam, “Nothing I could say is going to change the circumstances.”

“What circumstances? You gotta know he cares about you as much as you do him.”

Dean scoffed loudly and turned to face the window. He felt shame spread through his body, and he didn’t want his brother to see it on his face. “Right. Of course.” Dean took a shaky breath. THIS is why he never had this conversation. “Sam, he’s Castiel Fucking Novak. He’s the greatest Lupin researcher like, ever. He’s a fucking genius, and he’s powerful and important. He saves lives. I’m just his scene partner. I get him off so he can focus on his job and do it right. It’s not an L-O-V-E, LOVE thing. It’s...therapy.” He turned back to see how his words were being received.

“Jesus, would you listen to yourself? You really do have your head so far up your own ass you don’t see it. Yeah, man, he’s ‘Castiel Fucking Novak’,” Sam rolled his eyes, but then they hardened and pierced Dean with intent, “But you’re Dean Fucking Winchester! Dude, you two are so freakin’ perfect for each other, it’s, it’s crazy.” Sam straightened in his chair and took up an official-looking expression.

‘Shit, here it comes’, thought Dean.

“Dean, I want you to talk to Castiel. Tell him how you feel, and see what he says.”

“No.”

“Dean.”

Dean broke. “I said NO, Sam! You don’t get it. It doesn’t matter if I love him! It doesn’t matter if he was stupid enough to love me back, which he doesn’t. It. Can’t. Happen.” Dean advanced on his brother slowly, punctuating every word with an air jab of his pointed finger. “How would that even work? Huh? ‘Boyfriends?’” he finger quoted and imbued the word with sarcasm. “Marriage and Mating and pups? I’m not equipped!” He gestured at his midsection. “What happens when his True-Mate shows up? Huh? Or mine, if I even have one?” Dean sent his voice into a high register and affected a simpering expression, “Oh, look, I’m really sorry. I know we’re True-Mates and your hormones are in overdrive, and what I’m saying will ruin your life and all, but I’m already kind of off the market with this alpha dude over here – who I’m not Mated to – and I’m totally resisting my own instinctive drive to Mate you ‘cause, I just really love this dude
soooo much that I can throw millions of years of evolution out the window for him. Sorry ‘bout the fact that you’re Triggered now with me, and you can’t ever Mate anyone else, and you’ll go insane with want and need and…”

Sam’s stern face gave way to pity. “Jesus, Dean. Is that what you think? Look, alpha-alpha couples aren’t common, but they do happen sometimes. There’s gotta be a way.”

“There isn’t!” Dean interrupted him. “You want me to confess?! Fine! I am completely lost on Cas. I love him with all my heart and soul and body. I have since the beginning, and it’s not ever going to change. He doesn’t love me. Not like that. I mean, yeah, he loves me. He’s Alpha, and he loves all his Pack. He loves you and Bobby and Garth and even Meg, but not like, LOVE, love. Not like I love him. And even if he did, it wouldn’t matter. You say there’s gotta be a way, but there isn’t. There isn’t, Sammy. Sometimes I think about nothing but this. I’ve been over every possible crappy scenario there is, man!” Dean’s voice cracked and his eyes moistened. Damnit! “It. Can’t. Happen. So just drop it!”

Sam was rendered speechless. Dean felt the tiniest spike of smugness tinged with guilt. His brother had insisted on pushing. Serves him right.

Sam’s voice was quiet and kind when he spoke, “I’m glad you told me, man. I’ll help however I can, but just…” He stopped speaking, not knowing what he wanted from Dean. This sucked, and his heart went out to his big brother. “I know one thing, though. You’re totally wrong about Cas. He’s just as gone for you as you are for him.”

“Really, Sam? He told you this?” Dean was raw and wrung out. He wanted out of this conversation like, yesterday. “Like, just walked up to you and threw it on the table: ‘Sam, I have it real bad for your brother’. No? Damn right, no!”

“What are you, in the fourth grade? No, okay? He didn’t write me a note and pass it in class and say, ‘Hey Sam, I like your brother, do you think he likes me back? Circle Yes or No’. But, Dude. Seriously. Seriously?!”

“Listen. I’m not in denial. I know you think I am, but I get to see him in a way no one else does. He’s not anybody but himself when we’re… scening… together. I would know if he was, like, in love or whatever. I would know.” Dean was done. He stalked into the small bathroom and slammed the door.

Sam sighed, picked up his meal, leaving Dean’s on the table, and left.

NOW:

The audience in the Control room all started breathing again at the same time. Meg was the first to speak. “Goddamn, that was hot.” She was nothing if not classy.

“Jo, I want you to go in first. See if you can get the readings. I expect Cas may try to attack, and I want some strength in the room,” decided Bobby.

“Guys, he can’t attack. He’s kinda tied down right now. Better send me in. He won’t feel threatened as much by a beta,” Charlie supplied.

“I’m not taking any chances with your safety, Charlie. Be ready, but let Jo go first,” the alpha wasn’t
changing his mind.

‘Whatever’, thought Charlie with a clandestine roll of her eyes.

After the two ladies left through the Green room door, Benny cleared his throat. “I believe y’all all have work that needs attending to. Thanks for coming and all, but party’s over. Everyone back to your own stations. Get moving. Let’s let Dr. Harvelle finish up without the zoo getting in her way.” He started herding them out but pulled Travis and Cole to the side before they made it out the door. He was about to lay into them when Jo pushed back through the exiting bodies. ‘Good’, he thought. ‘Set ‘em all back on their heels at the same time’. He gestured Jo over.

Once the room was clear but for the five of them, Benny checked in with Ellen. “You got this, sugar? You need anything before we go?”

“I’ll be fine, alpha.” She looked over her left shoulder, still leaning that way quite a bit. “Thanks for your help. All of it.” Ellen put enough meaning in the words that he heard what she meant. “Is it all right if we settle up later? Tomorrow, maybe? Or, whatever you think, of course, Sir.”

“Don’t worry about it right now. I want you focused on nothing but this.” He gestured with his chin at the Processing room where Castiel was up on one elbow, leaning over his new mate, slowly licking along her throat and still lazily pumping his hips just a bit, ignoring Charlie. “Tomorrow is fine. I’ll get Sam to take care of everything. When those two are ready to move, call me. I want to help with that.”

Benny turned back to his three charges who were looking confused and decidedly nervous. He made his voice iron. “Come with me.” And he left the Control room, not bothering to hold the door for them.

They wound up in one of the empty Omega classrooms which was outfitted with all kinds of standard dungeon punishment equipment. He faced them. “You three are all due a serious Come-to-Jesus meeting, and we’re gonna do it right now. I want your full attention while we talk, so I want you to go ahead and strip from the waist down and face me. Shoes, socks, underwear…everything. You can leave your shirts on.” Benny knew that the quickest way to make a lasting impression on a non-Omega was through humiliation, and he wanted to make this impression last. Half dressed, asses hanging out, standing shoulder to shoulder was damned humiliating.

It took a moment or two for the three of them to process the order and realize he was serious, then they quickly complied, still baffled. Two beta-Doms and an alpha-Neutral stood in front of Benny with wide eyes and genitals exposed. “I’ll start with you, Travis.” Benny placed himself directly in front of the beta. “You Dom for Dr. Harvelle, correct?”

“Yes, alpha,” said Travis, still not aware of where this was going.

“When was her last Balance adjustment? Do you know?” asked Benny with an eyebrow raised.

“Oh. Um. It was, I guess… uh. Yeah, I was sick, like a week and a half ago, I guess it’s been now. We had scheduled a spanking, but I had to cancel. Told her to reschedule with another Dom through Becky. Did she not…”? It was dawning on Travis where this was going, and as he made the connection, Jo followed suit.

“Wait,” said Jo. “Didn’t you check up on her after you got back to work?”

“Did you?” Benny fixed his gaze on Jo. “Travis may be her assigned Dom, but dammit, Jo, you’re her alpha. This is primarily on you! So, your mother, with all her responsibility and everything she’s
got on her plate and all the wolves who depend on her has TWO, count ‘em, TWO wolves placed to watch over her and neither one of them could be bothered to notice that she was out of balance for a WEEK!” He paused and let the guilt and discomfort sink in long enough that they were both very uneasy.

“It’s unacceptable for any Omega, but it’s downright dangerous for an Omega with her responsibilities. Shut up!” he snapped when Travis looked like he was going to say something. “No excuses. I’m not even gonna ask what you’ve got to say about this, because there’s nothing TO say. You’re both in the wrong here, and you know it. You’re both getting strapped for this. I trust it’s not going to happen again.” Benny gestured to the spanking bench in the corner and selected a leather strap from several hanging on the wall. “Travis, you’re up first. Put your ass on the bench for me.”

“Yes, alpha,” Travis responded glumly. He didn’t hesitate to get into position though. He knew he had it coming and just wanted to get to the other side. Benny stepped up, flexed the strap between his hands, giving it a quick but thorough look over and then reached back and laid it down hard on Travis’ backside. The beta grunted and flinched but didn’t break position. Benny took up a steady rhythm of heavy strikes, leaving red welts across his butt without breaking the skin. Travis squeezed his eyes and grunted in time with the landing blows, holding tight to the hand bar. After fifteen hard strokes, Benny stopped, helped him rise, and told him the punishment was complete. Beta-Doms didn’t respond to lengthy reprimands the same way a Sub or an Omega would. Better to keep it short and powerful. Make an impression hard and fast, and then be done.

“We ever going to have to do this again?” the alpha asked him sternly. Travis shook his head and sniffled, not really capable of speech for the moment. Benny accepted it. “Put your clothes back on, beta,” Benny told him. “Then sign the form and leave it on the desk. You’re excused.”

As Travis was leaving, Benny turned his attention back to the two remaining culprits standing beside one another, still uncomfortably nude from the waist down. “Just hang on,” he said to Cole, noticing the beta’s impatience. “You really don’t want to rush me through this, I promise.”

“You ready, Jo?” he asked, as if any answer but, ‘Yes, alpha’ would be acceptable.

“Yes, alpha,” she said, her eyes still on the floor in front of her. Without looking at him, she approached the spanking bench and lay across it, her bare ass lifted higher than her short stature was accustomed to. Benny wordlessly adjusted the bench settings, lowering her to the correct spot so her abdomen and back didn’t take any strain. “I’m sorry, alpha,” she managed miserably. “I don’t know how I let that happen. Is she, better now? I mean, did someone take care of her already?” Jo was craning her neck around, seeking Benny’s eyes with her own.

“She’s fine now, Jo. She and I had a little chat between rounds one and two. With your permission, I’m planning to see to her punishment too.” Jo nodded her acquiescence. “All right, then. Don’t go bugging her about it. She’s Balanced, and she’s well in hand, so I want you to let it go, ya hear?” ‘Should’ve told Travis that too, before I let him go’, thought Benny. ‘Man, I’m getting sloppy in my old age’.

“Yes, alpha. And Benny, I’m really very sorry. It won’t happen again.” Had Jo been an Omega or a Sub, Benny would have added an extra swat for using his name during a punishment, but alphas didn’t work that way, so he let it go.

“I know, sweet girl. We’re going to take care of it right now, once and for all. I trust you to see to your Omega Mom from here on.” He took up his spot and readied himself. “Here we go. Brace yourself,” and he swung the strap. He laid twenty hard swats against Jo’s trembling ass. She took it very well for an alpha. She broke position a couple of times, and she didn’t even try to stop the wails and the free-flowing tears, putting all her focus in staying on the bench and not making a run for it.
Alphas did not do well with corporal punishment generally. Most of the time, it was counterproductive, but Jo was young enough that her body still remembered what it was like to be a pup, and her transgression had been egregious. She deserved this strapping and Benny gave it to her in full.

She was limp and sobbing when he stopped. He laid the strap across the bench and placed his hand tenderly on her back, rubbing lightly. “You’re all done, my little alpha,” soothed Benny. “You did great. I’m proud of you. C’mon, now, it’s all over. Just breathe. You’re all right. It stings, but you’re not damaged. You’re just fine, sweetheart.”

She looked up at him with snot, spit, and tears making a mess of her face. “Stings?!?” she managed. “Oh, my God, Benny!” she sniffled hard and hiccupped. “I think you flayed my ass off!” Benny chuckled. She was fine. That’s the sassy Jo he knew and loved. He helped her stand.

“Watch the sass, there, alpha,” he scolded good-humoredly. “I can lay you back over and have another go if you need it.”

Jo’s face went even whiter and her hands covered her striped backside. “No, please. I get it. Shutting up now.”

“All right, then. Get dressed, give me a hug, sign the damned form, and get out of here.” Benny hugged her tightly. He loved the little alpha a lot, and he hated punishing her.

Benny took a deep breath to re-center himself. This one wasn’t going to be so straightforward.

“Cole,” he started, meeting the beta’s eye coldly as the door closed behind Jo. “Do you remember back at your pre-hire interview, I asked you a question about how you saw the role of the E.O. in the Pack? You remember your answer?”

“I think I said something like how the E.O. brings the structure of the Pack into focus, puts the nails in the boards that hold the structure together. Something like that. That’s still how I see it, alpha. Something wrong with that?”

“Maybe I’m just starting to understand that you’re focused mostly on hitting those nails, and not so much on watching out for the integrity of the boards.”

“We done with this analogy now, alpha? ‘Cause I don’t know what you’re on about.”

Benny growled fiercely at him and stepped right up into his space. “Watch your tone with me, boy! I’m not about to put up with it. Sam may let you off-leash a bit, but rest assured, I’m gonna choke right up on that fucker until you get the picture.” Benny was seething, and Cole was barely resisting stepping backward out of the direct line of Benny’s brutal eyes. “You don’t like that analogy, fine. Let me lay it out for you in plain English. I’ve seen you brutalize and intimidate your charges for the last time. You are here to ENFORCE the rules. You are to apply appropriate punishment where it’s warranted – and at the staff’s direction ONLY, not whenever you feel like it, however you feel like it. You’re a fucking train wreck, man – and a lawsuit waiting to happen if you don’t get reined in. I’m beginning to think you don’t have any fucking idea what your role here is.” Benny stepped back. Cole stood motionless, in shock.

“Now. That said, you’ve got a lot of potential. I’ve seen you act well on instinct when you aren’t trying to be something you’re not just to impress somebody. You’ve got good responses, when you get the fuck out of your own head – your own expectations. I don’t know who put those on you. None of my business. But Cole, if you don’t figure it out, and soon, you got no place here. Am I clear?”
“Crystal clear, Sir.” Cole was not happy, and he wasn’t taking the message well.

“Way I see it, you got two options right now,” said Benny reasonably. “You can lay your ass across that bench and take the strapping you deserve for being a domineering asshole, or you can get dressed, clear out your locker, and leave for good. I’m serious, beta. Your choice. You decide right now if this role is for you or not.”

“Jesus, Benny,” breathed Cole. “I don’t want to quit. I like it here. If you weren’t happy with my work, you could’ve just said.”

“I did just say. And I don’t remember ‘whining and self-pity’ being one of the two options.”

“All right, all right, I’m going.” Cole shuffled toward the bench.

“Excuse me, beta?” Benny was so done with this conversation. He wasn’t getting through, and part of him said he should cut it short right now, fire Cole, and skip the punishment. There was no use strapping the boy if he wasn’t going to make it as an E.O. anyway. Benny reminded himself that there was a steep learning curve for many of their new hires. Most of these pups had been raised without the traditions and Pack standards to fall back on. He resolved to keep trying with Cole. There really was a spark of potential in the beta, if he could just get over not Presenting as an alpha. It was a common problem.

“I’m sorry, Sir. I meant, yes, alpha.” Cole adjusted the height of the bench for himself, then draped his body over it, settling in like he’d done this a few times. No doubt he had. Probably had a domineering alpha bring him up. That would explain a lot. Benny resolved to recruit Sam to work with him more regularly as a mentor; try to draw out any protective instincts from deep within him; try to build up his confidence. But that was for later. Benny picked the strap back up and inspected its integrity again. He took a couple of swooshing swings. “I’m not gonna warm your ass up before we start, so brace yourself. We’re just going to jump right in to the main event like I did with Travis and Jo. You hear me?”

“Yes, alpha,” came the muffled reply. Cole’s face was buried in his crossed arms.

Without further conversation, Benny swung down hard. His fourth punishment in as many hours, and his arm was really feeling it. ‘This is what we have E.O.s for’, he thought. Why am I doing this myself? Cole’s body jolted forward, and his arms came unfolded. His hands reached for the holding bars where they should’ve been from the outset. He yelped and sucked in quick, fast, loud breaths. His body was too tense. “Relax your butt for me, or this is gonna hurt way more than I intend it to, beta.”

Cole just groaned. He tried, but relaxation was beyond his reach at the moment. Benny smoothed his hand over Cole’s clenched cheeks for a few passes, until the beta managed to loosen up just a little. “There you go. You can do this. You’re going to be fine. It’s just a spanking… Breathe for me, man.” Cole took in a lungful and let it back out. He managed to keep his butt unclenched. Barely.

Benny took his position again. He wasted no time applying the strap back to the beta’s ass. Benny and Cole both wanted to be done with this experience. Benny was as methodical as usual. His arm was hard, giving no quarter. If it was worth doing, he was going to do it right. The strap popped loudly across the beta’s reddening backside, landing precisely where the alpha wanted it, leaving stinging welts up and down the curve of his ass. Cole stiffened again, but Benny pressed on. Better to get it over and done than to keep trying to relax the man who was in too much pain to make any conscious decisions about his body tension. Cole cried out with each stroke. Like Jo, he let himself voice his pain, the snot and tears flowing freely.
At last, Benny stopped swinging. He strode away long enough to hang the strap back in its place then helped Cole stand. “That wasn’t a good time for me either, brother,” Benny told him. “I don’t want to have to bend you back over that bench, but I will if you force my hand. Totally up to you now. If you got a question about how to handle a situation with one of the students or staff, and you’re not sure what we want from you, you come ask me. Or talk to Sam. No more going off half-cocked and swinging first, asking questions later. I mean it, Cole.” Benny fixed the beta with a piercing eye, trying to assess where his head was at right now. He really couldn’t tell. It didn’t bode well, but the next few interactions would tell if Cole’s ass would send the message up to his brain.

“All right, get dressed and get back to work. I want a one-page report from you by end of day tomorrow on what we talked about here and what changes you plan to make. NO, complaining.” Cole had almost broken in with a whiny complaint but thought better of it and stayed quiet, pulling his pants back into place. Benny let him go, shaking his head.

***************

Dean had never in his memory regretted anything as much as he regretted waking up. His stupid, fucking, stupid digital clock, in its stupid, sarcastic, judgmental, glaring red laser lights announced that morning was just about gone. Dean didn’t even get a brief respite of blank space in his stupid mind before everything crashed down in his memory in full technicolor.

Nice.

He was supposed to be at work right now. He was supposed to be at the front of his Sub class, guiding young hearts and minds, leading them into a grand and glorious future, teaching them the wonders and freedom of fully embracing their submission, owning it, loving it…

Dean hadn’t called in to let his team know he was…incapacitated this morning. He jammed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets, hoping to just spring the little fuckers free so they’d stop pulsing in his head, and he rolled onto his back….aaaaand, he rolled right back onto his side.

Damnit, Cas!

Dean breathed in deeply through his nose and let the pain pass through his body. He deliberately relaxed, letting go of each muscle group one by one, counting slowly and breathing evenly as Castiel had taught him to do years ago. His head throbbed. Nausea sent him dashing to the toilet before he’d finished the routine. ‘Christ’, he thought, wiping his mouth with the hand towel he’d swiped from the bathroom and stumbling back toward his room. ‘Could things get any suckier’?

“Mornin’, princess.” Benny’s voice floated from the kitchen as Dean crossed the hall. Yep, now it’s suckier. Dean groaned, but reversed his path and headed toward the coffee pot in the kitchen. Benny and Pam were seated at his kitchen table with Sam.

Great.

‘The shrink is here. For me’. By the look of things, they’d all been comfortably ensconced and chatting about him, strategizing, no doubt. Dean filled a mug with old coffee, killing the pot. He rinsed it out and replaced it under the brewer. He inspected the sludge in his mug. Part of him urged himself to drink it black as punishment for his weaknesses, but he expected his stomach would
probably reject it as-is, so he dumped a crap ton of milk in. He straightened his shoulders, schooled his face, and turned around to face the jury.

“Morning. What brings half the Behavioral Department to my house this morning?” he snarked, sitting at the only empty chair and sipping his sludge.

“We’re worried about you, Dean.” Pam said bluntly. “You seem to have taken Castiel’s Mating pretty hard, and I want to offer to talk through it with you. When you’re ready.” She noted his closed-off body language and the green tinge in his face and knew it wasn’t going to be today. “Also, we wanted to check on you today. Make sure you’re okay.” She reached for his hand where it rested next to his mug. He didn’t draw away from her touch (’Cause he’s a touch-slut, all right? Sue him), but he didn’t look at her or thaw any either.

“All right, well… you’ve seen me. I’m fine. Hungover as hell, but fine. Just, I probably need to take the whole day off.” He directed this last to Benny who, since Cas was indisposed, was officially Dean’s boss for the moment. “I’ll be back tomorrow. Pick up where I left off with the Subs. We’re in good shape, they can afford to lose a couple of days. I’ll make sure they catch up in no time. I think today was mostly practice anyway.”

“Dean, stop babbling,” Sam broke in.

“Take the week, Dean,” said Benny. “I want you to do whatever you need to to get your head back in this game, and I won’t listen to any arguing. You’re no good to anyone fucked up like this. I’m not letting you anywhere near clients until Pam signs off on your mental state. You got me, brother? That means no teaching, no contracting, no testing.” Dean nodded, miserably. “Call Becky and schedule any services you need. I mean it. You’re important to all of us. Frankly,” he admitted, “Yesterday taught me just how much we all depend on you. We can’t do this without you, but we need you at your best. Not wasted, exhausted, strung out, miserable….”

“Thanks Benny, I think he’s got the picture,” said Pam. Dean shot her a grateful look.

He liked Pam, really. They got on well, had partnered quite a few times in demos and training classes. They gelled, flirted, sassed each other. But Dean had never ‘used her services’ as a psychologist, as such. He wasn’t sure how successful talking things out could be. It wasn’t like he had issues he didn’t understand and needed help sussing them out. If anything, Dean was too self-aware. He didn’t need a psychologist, he just hurt. The grownup that lived really, really deep inside him told him there was nothing he needed but time. And distance. (And Cas. ((Seriously, shut the fuck up. Right now.)))

…counting parentheses in his head made it throb again.

“All right. I’ll take the week. Sleep it off. But seriously, folks, I’m fine.” Dean looked around and realized no one was buying it. God. Fuck them. He didn’t need this bullshit. Dean scraped his chair back rudely and stood, leaving the undrinkable coffee. He left them all sitting there and returned to his room, slamming the door way too hard for his tender condition. Let them finish talking about him and what’s best for him, and how to ‘help’ him, and… Just. Jesus. Fuck them. Don’t they have better things to be doing right now? Dean fell face down on his bed, wallowing pathetically. When had he turned into a thirteen-year-old Omega? Oblivion sounded pretty good right about now. He closed his eyes and sought refuge in sleep.
Chapter Summary

Castiel gets to know his new mate, in depth. Dean is sleeping, I guess?

Chapter Notes

Ok, I'm a liar. I couldn't stop myself from pounding out one more chapter. But it's Sunday night and that means early bedtime, up and off to work tomorrow. Someone has to pay for Social Security, right?

Also, a qualifying note: I have all the respect in the world for BDSM and its practitioners. Please excuse any misunderstandings and misrepresentations. My world of dominant & submissive wolves is not BDSM. As Dean will explain, it's very different, but please don't mistake - I don't take the world of the Dom/sub lifestyle lightly at all. It awes me.

Please forgive the lack of progress toward bringing our boys back together. I tried to remind Cas that he's got a love in his life already, but he's pretty lost in the hormones right now, so he wasn't listening to me.

Carry on, my friends.

April Renée Anderson Novak Winchester
Omegasubmissive A/b/Bk: 23, D/N/n: 17, Z-Scale: 35, Pack Rank: 9
cla-Female, Heterosexual, b. 1999
Mated to: Castiel James
Wolf Avatar: Gray Wolf, Tawny - full

THEN:
“SUBMISSIVE” – Dean wrote in big block letters on the chalkboard at the front of the room. He underlined it and turned around to face the students, still holding the chalk in his hand as he wandered a few steps forward. “Welcome to your first day of Sub class. We’re gonna have a good time together. Going to learn a lot, grow in confidence and power, gonna braid each other’s hair, and build a campfire where we all hold hands and share our darkest fears… Nah. I’m kidding, of course.” Dean’s class laughed nervously. They would soon begin to shed their tension borne from the unknown – just a bit. Obviously, if their instructor could make jokes right off the bat, he couldn’t be all bad, right? He’s either pretty fucking cool or a complete psycho. They were optimistically hopeful for the former.

The rumors about Sub class, usually from teens whose best friend’s cousin’s neighbor’s big brother had been through it, was that it was practically an orgy of bending over, being endlessly fucked and spanked, and screaming, “Thank you, sir, may I have another!”

The class was understandably scared out of their wits.

“No, what we’re going to be doing in this class is giving y’all the resources and skills to go back into your own lives in the environments you know, with the people you care about, and be your authentic, Submissive selves. Now, note that I didn’t say ‘subservient,’ or ‘passive,’ or any of the other synonyms your cell phone will bring up for you. In fact, let’s do that. Get your phones out and Google the word, ‘Submissive,’ and let’s make a list of synonyms up here on the board.” Dean headed back to the chalkboard and waited. “Just shout ‘em out to me. I want everything Google has to give you.” A couple of voices started at once and Dean began to write.

“Compliant,” “Docile,” “Obedient…”

The list took a few minutes and by the end, most all of the students were speaking up. Dean marked who seemed reticent to join in and made a note for himself to check their profiles for shyness ratings. He had ways to draw them out that weren’t confrontational.

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For all of the Canid species, all the way back to the first dog-like whatever… foxes, I guess, I dunno … the Submissives of the pack have shown a certain set of behaviors. It’s instinctive, and it’s necessary. A pack made up of all lead-dogs wouldn’t be a pack at all, right? For us Lupins,” he gestured around and included himself, “the instinct has crystallized into a formal set of behaviors that are controlled by the wiring inside our brains and our endocrine systems. It isn’t voluntary, it cannot be altered, and it’s somehow determined before birth. For those of you interested in the research, I can hook you up with some really long, boring reports. For the rest of you, just know that we’re still digging hard into the physiological and psychological pre-sets that determine the Tertiary designations for all of us.” Dean smirked at them, “As for me, my ‘hypothesis’,” air quotes from Dean, “is that my Mom ate too many Brussels sprouts while she was carrying me, and it turned me Submissive. I hate those nasty little balls of green slime! I’m convinced there’s a link.” Several students giggled.

“So, being Submissive isn’t something we control, but what IS it? ‘K, well, in essence, it’s a need to demonstrate ‘Compliance’ and ‘Obedience,’ or rather, by having Compliance and Obedience drawn from us by an appropriate authority figure, or Top.” He underlined those two words on the board.
He turned around and snapped his fingers for their attention. “I want this to be super clear, folks. When I say ‘Top’, I don’t mean the one doing the fucking versus the ‘Bottom’, who’s getting fucked. Yes, it works that way most of the time, but throw out your Primate vocab. For us, the ‘Top’ is whoever’s in charge. It’s that simple. Whether they are catching or pitching, the Top is always the one calling the shots, and the Bottom is to one expected to comply. Subs are Bottoms when they Sub. Period. Any questions about that? Ask me now while we’re on this subject. Otherwise, you’re gonna get real confused, real fast. No?”

Dean gave them a minute to think about it, and then nodded and returned to the board.

“For wolves (meaning us, meaning the two-legged kind), Submissiveness shows itself in the need to be ‘Taken-in-hand,’ or ‘Directed’.” Dean paused, thoughtful, then continued, “Even for Subs who want to be good for their Doms, those who really choose to be obedient, they need to have their wolves sparked with some kind of an initial Dominant trigger; a voice, a direction, or an action that their wolf responds to. Just being good to a Dom is not enough to stroke the Sub wolf. It has to react to something.”

Dean marked out a new section on the board with a “T” table. Above the left side he wrote, “Lupin,” and above the right, he wrote, “Simian.” “I wanna make this VERY clear to all of you. Submissiveness as it works out for wolves is NOT the same thing as what the apes are doing. We’ve all seen the movies and read the books out there about ape BDSM practices. 50 Shades sold how many copies? Right? So, let’s take a look… Can anyone tell me an aspect of the Simian form of submission? Don’t worry if you’re right or not, we’re just makin’ a list here. Shout some words out at me.”

Someone said, “Service,” and someone else said, “24/7,” then “Bondage.” Dean heard a contemptuous voice from the back shout, “COLLARING!” and Dean made a face as he wrote that one. Apes trying to mimic Lupins had been using collars on their submissives for decades, and it rubbed wolves the wrong way every time. Collars were for dogs, not people. It was Dean’s only real point of contention with what the Primates did.

They continued filling out the list with Dean writing as fast as he could. When the voices petered out he dropped the chalk and walked around his desk, resting his butt against it. His face went serious. “Y’all listen up ‘cause this is important. What the apes do when they live a Dom/sub lifestyle is different from what it is for us. BUT. And get this now because I’m going to have zero tolerance for any kind of disrespect about their practice in my classroom…yes, that means I will spank your ass… what they do is awe-inspiring at the very least.

“Everything they do is done by connecting through external forms of communication with one another without any kind of biological base-instinct or bond connections. Most apes who live this way will tell you that they feel it’s a personal affinity or drive of theirs, that they are inherently dominant or submissive, but in the human version of the Primate Troop, there’s no definitive hierarchical structure that’s maintained through this kind of behavior. Submissives among our ape colleagues place themselves voluntarily into the Service of their Dominants – capital “S,” Service. That’s not what YOU can expect to do with your Doms. We’ll get into the differences more later. In fact, I’ll be bringing in a Simian guest speaker who lives “The Lifestyle” as a 24/7 Submissive to share his experience with us and answer our questions. He’s a really interesting guy. I think you’ll like that class.”

Dean stood again and returned to the chalkboard. “No, what we do is, like I said, different.” He began scribbling a few words on the board under the title, ‘Lupin’. “For Lupin Submissives, the best correlation I can give, and don’t hate me for this – I’ll explain in full over the next few weeks – is that we’re a little like naughty pups when we’re in this state. It’s not a matter of providing the Dom
with ‘the gift of our Service.’ It’s that we need to be ‘Taken-in-hand,’ - controlled and corrected and dominated. I guess you could say that in the Simian version, the focus is on what the Submissive can GIVE to the Dominant and vice versa, while in the Lupin version, it’s about what the Dominant TAKES, what the Top has to ELICIT from the Sub to pacify the needs of both their wolves. In a way, it’s not true submission at all, you see, because it isn’t voluntary.

“Frankly, I think the Simian way is deeper, more real, and certainly more of a gift…but, we’re stuck with our biology, soooo…it is what it is. I will warn you all that playing BDSM with the Primates is a very risky endeavor. I do not encourage cross-species power-exchange play. Seen too much go wrong with that dynamic over the years. Now, it is possible to set up your own households to mimic what the Primates are doing, if you and your Dom wanna do that, but just know – it’s harder than going with your instinct. Way harder… Remember, this is complicated shit. That’s why we need three months to teach it to y’all. Pay attention, and you’ll do fine.”

Dean continued with the class, introducing important topics one by one to pique the class’ interest, get them looking forward to the weeks to come, not be scared of it. Just before time ran out and they’d finished their practical exercise, the class was putting their clothes back on and getting their breath back, several unsatisfied slowpokes grumbling that there hadn’t been enough time on the buzzer. Dean broke in with a loud voice over the hub-bub.

“Another point for y’all to think about! Look around you. Notice there are no Omegas in this class. Someone give me a guess as to why that is.”

“Because separating us out keeps us from getting distracted and fucking them all the time?” shouted a mouthy alpha-Sub in the back whose erection was still hanging out of his pants.

“100% wrong, Neil. Thanks for guessing, and get your chubby buttoned in before I come back there and smack it. No. Omegas are in a class by themselves because they are in a class by themselves. They deserve the highest level of attention and respect we can give them. You lot (much as I love you), can get by just fine on instinct and reading through a pamphlet from your high school Health teacher. You’re not going to go insane if you get this wrong, you’ll just be really uncomfortable. And by the way, Neil, and anyone else who thinks Omegas are toys to play with – I am 100% deadly serious. You get zero warnings in this class or anywhere in this Facility. You keep your body parts and your comments to yourselves, or your ass will pay the price. Do it twice, and you’re kicked out for good. While you’re a student here, you fuck only when instructed, and you are NOT going to be allowed to fuck any Omega students. I’m gonna teach you respect if I have to pound it into you. Clear?”

“Yes, alpha,” the class responded in chorus.

“Neil?”


Still projecting his voice, Dean continued. “If you’re an alpha, your first responsibility is to protect and honor the designations who submit to you. PROTECT, not FUCK. Fucking is secondary, and there are safety rules we’ll go over later.

“One last thing, Hey! Listen up! Ever notice that when we write, we always capitalize ‘Omega’ and only ‘alpha’ when referring to a Pack Alpha, even when it’s an honorific on someone’s name?”

“And at the beginning of the sentence,” called a beta girl in the front.

Dean needed to learn all of their names. “Yeah, and at the beginning of a sentence, you grammar
nerd.” He winked at her playfully, and she blushed crimson. He called out to the class who was starting to gather their belongings to leave, “For next time, each of you is to write two pages about why that might be. Why do Omegas get a capital letter, and you don’t? You don’t have to do any research. I want your opinions on the matter. Think it through for me and hand it in tomorrow. Yeah, yeah, you guys are killing me. Go on, class is dismissed, get out of here.” The grumbling faded as they hustled out of the room and either to the parking lot to head home or up to the dorm if they boarded onsite.

Dean grinned as he erased the board. He really loved teaching. ‘I’ve got these fuckers’, he thought.

NOW:

Cas came back to himself slowly, floating gently back to Earth on a blissful cloud. He was fairly certain he’d slept at least a little, for returning to consciousness was like waking up from a long sleep. He knew where he was and the essence of what had happened, although many of the details were fuzzy. Probably for the best. He vaguely remembered using his bluntly trimmed nails as claws and chewing (chewing?) on the Omega’s neck. His body was still vibrating a bit, just a gentle buzz. He hummed with pleasure and stretched out, arching his back to work out the kinks. It was very rare that he had the opportunity truly to feed the beast inside him. If he could have seen the great, hulking wolf right now, it would look bloated and sated, lolling on its side with distended belly, picking unconcernedly at its teeth with a toothpick and belching. The wolf was utterly satisfied, for once.

Cas reached out to the small Omega spooned in front of him. She was lovely. Her features were even and delicate. Her hair a dark blonde, medium length and sleek. He remembered wide-set, pale blue eyes, although for the moment, she slept, and they were hidden. He stroked her face and hair with the lightest of touches, in awe at the feelings she already elicited from deep inside him.

Cas was aware he’d come untied from the girl. The wetness that covered the mattress where their groins had met was cold and sticky. It was becoming uncomfortable. As much as he’d love to stay curled up around his mate and never move again, Castiel was a very practical man. He could feel the stirrings of his Rut, Triggered prematurely by the Mate-scent, starting slowly to ramp up again. He was back from the fog of Claim/Mate/Mine, but still had to contend with another three or four days of Mate/Breed/Fuck before his body would be purged of the powerful hormones driving him to reproduce.

Castiel estimated he had somewhere between 15 and 45 minutes before he succumbed to his Rut and felt compelled to take her again. She looked exhausted, so probably a shower would have to wait. But a change in venue was definitely in order, a sponge-bath at least, and maybe something more to eat. Castiel sighed in happiness. Happiness felt really nice. He hugged his mate close for a moment, then sat up slowly, careful to move slowly in case he became dizzy.

As he sat, his bare legs dangling over the side of the bed, getting his bearings, Ellen opened the door from her Control room and slipped in. “Alpha,” she said simply, sniffing the room for signs of aggression pheromones, getting a feel for how safe he was to approach. She balanced between keeping her eyes focused down, and surreptitiously scanning his face for signs he might attack. There was no need for the trepidation. Cas was back to full control. “Come in, Ellen,” he told her gently. “I trust everything went well? How is she?”

“Yes, Alpha. Everything’s just great. You both did really well. She’s very strong, and from
preliminary data, you look to be a good match. Not that that would be a surprise, but it’s really lovely to see a couple come together like that. I’m happy for you.” While she spoke, Ellen filled a wash bowl with warm soapy water and wheeled it on a cart over to where Castiel sat. She handed him a clean washcloth. “I expect you want to do the honors, Alpha.”

“Thank you, Ellen. You’ve done an excellent job watching over us both. You have my deepest gratitude.” The Alpha touched Ellen’s hand in a quick connection, then wetted the cloth in the soapy water and began sponging off his mate’s limbs. She moaned obscenely when he washed between her legs, and he chuckled at her. “Had quite a day, hasn’t she?”

“You both have. I’m sorry that your Mating took so long. We couldn’t think what to do about the Keller test, and I think it all worked out okay, but it couldn’t have been easy to wait so long with her scent in your wolf’s nose.”

Castiel rinsed the cloth off and started wiping her back and buttocks after rolling her gently over and out of the wet spot. “It was – difficult, but you and the others made the right call. I’m glad it’s done. I certainly wouldn’t want to share her now that we’re Mated.” He was thoughtful for a moment, engrossed in staring at her damp skin. “Gives me new respect for wolves who undergo the test after they’re Mated. I never realized what a sacrifice it is to know someone else has a Claim on my mate.” Castiel paused again, thinking. He stood barefoot on the slippery floor and began washing himself the same way he’d cleaned his mate. It would have to do for now. There wasn’t time for anything else. She was stirring, chilled as the warm water cooled on her flesh.

“Help me remember, Ellen. I know I chose Garth and Dean to test with her, but it seems like that’s not what happened. Who…?”

Ellen stepped in quickly with an answer. “Garth didn’t leave a Claim, and Sam took the second round. It’s Sam who’s got a Claim on her right now. We’ll take care to keep him away from her until the Claim wears off. I’m sure you won’t need him close to her for anything. You’ll be able to care for her just fine on your own over the next few weeks.” Cas nodded. Yes, he could most definitely do that. The problem would be when he needed to go back to work, having to tear himself away from her. That wasn’t going to be easy.

“Does it look like she’ll be rating out at the edges, like me? Can you tell anything yet, Ellen?” Cas ran a single finger down the delicate line of the girl’s face, peaceful in sleep.

“I can’t really say yet for sure, Alpha, but I don’t think she’s extreme; rare maybe, but not…we’ll just have to wait and see.” Ellen fidgeted with the bathing bowl, and Castiel could tell she was troubled by something. He lowered his head to grab her eye, and raised his brows in question.

“She was a virgin, Sir. Garth took her vaginally, and Sam through her channel. I fucked up, and didn’t leave that for you. It got hectic today, and I was unBalanced, and I’m sorry. Um, Bobby had to take over with the test instructions to Sam, and he didn’t think about it reserving you her virginity. It’s my fault for letting my adjustment lapse. I fucked up. Sir, I’ve got an appointment tomorrow with alpha Lafitte for my atonement, but I wanted to let you know so you can add to it. You should, Sir. I damaged your property.” Ellen’s verbal diarrhea took Castiel completely by surprise.

“Shh, shh. It’s all right, Ellen. I’m not angry. There’s nothing we can do about it now. I’m sure Benny will do a fine job of covering for whatever misdeeds you owe without input from me.” He pulled her face upwards gently with a hand under her chin. “Are you Balanced now?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

Cas turned back to April. “She doesn’t look old enough…and a virgin. How old is she?”
“She’s seventeen, Alpha. I can’t account for her still being a virgin. This last year her Heats must’ve been intolerable. Sir, her parents just left. They waited until we knew the outcome and that she came through healthy and safe. They seem to care for her. I don’t think they are the kind of people to deny her access to an alpha, and she looks healthy. It’s a mystery. You’ll have to ask her.”

Ellen saw his eyes go soft as he met his mate’s eyes, just fluttering open and focusing up at him. His eyes stayed locked on the girl’s, but he spoke to Ellen. “I love her so much, Ellen. I only just met her. I…I don’t even remember if I’ve heard her name, but I already love her like she’s been a part of me my whole life.”

“April, Alpha. Her name is April, and it looks like the feeling’s mutual. So how about you go over to the closet and grab a couple of robes, get yourselves moderately decent, and take another snack and drink from the fridge. You two were asleep for two hours. I’m going to call Bobby and Benny to give you an escort back to your suite.”

The Alpha nodded vaguely, but didn’t move as Ellen stepped back out. He couldn’t tear his gaze from the depth of his mate’s pale blue eyes. They were bottomless, weren’t they? They were… beautiful.

“Alpha,” she said softly, sitting up. “I’m cold. The doctor said there was a robe in the closet?” She slid down from the high bed, breaking their staring and followed the Alpha who shook off his reverie to meet his Omega’s needs. They clothed themselves, and he helped her select a snack.

After they ate the small protein bars, he looked seriously at her, taking both of her hands and sitting on the edge of the bed to put his eyes nearer her level. “My apologies, April. It was rude of me to talk about you like that, as if you weren’t right in front of me. I don’t know what to say…Everything feels very awkward to me right now. I don’t really know you at all, but I feel as if I know you more intimately than I’ve ever known anyone. It’s very strange. Please, be patient with me.”

It was the strangest speech from an Alpha she’d ever heard, and she didn’t know quite what to do with it. She settled for sending a caress through the Mating-bond, straight into his mind. A confirmation that she too, felt intimately connected to him. She settled herself in his arms, tucking her head against his chest beneath his chin. He responded by wrapping her tightly and resting his chin atop her hair. He sighed, replete. ‘Yeah’, they both thought, ‘this is good’.

The intercom crackled on. Bobby’s voice was too loud, and it disturbed the peace of the Processing room. “All right, folks. We’ve got your Honeymoon suite all set up. Whenever you’re ready, just head out the door through the Green room, and we’ll get you safely back home.”

Bobby joined them, and they set off for Cas’ private suite. “The escort isn’t necessary, Bobby.” Cas grumbled. Bobby just grunted back at him. No one else was in the corridor and Castiel suspected they’d cleared it deliberately. ‘Christ’, he thought, ‘what did I turn into under the Mating-hormones that they think THIS is necessary’?

Once safely delivered to the Novak suite, everyone made themselves scarce very quickly. Bobby reminded Castiel he need only call or text if they needed anything and that Bobby, himself, would be
checking in periodically to make sure no one needed bandages. Bobby suspected he had a pretty good idea what kind of play any True-Mate match of Castiel’s would want to get up to. Cas wasn’t for the weak of heart. Or body. The Universe would not be cruel enough to match him with a mealy, delicate Omega. Of course, if she did turn out to be too mild for her mate, there was always still Dean, but that wasn’t a consideration right now.

The Rut/Heat cycle hormones and the smell of Omega slick were getting thick enough to smell in the air, so with a last reminder to Cas to leave the hormone sensors on in the whole suite, he beat it back to his own office.

Truly alone at last with April and her blue eyes, her silky, silky hair, and her slim build, Cas didn’t try to fight off the building need. Standing in the foyer where they’d been left, he lowered his chin and fixed a predatory gaze on her face, stripping off his robe as he stood. “I want to take you, April.” He said it matter-of-factly, like he was mentioning it had started to rain, but the look in his eyes spoke differently. His eyes were the window to his wolf. The wolf had cast aside its toothpick, licked himself obscenely, and risen to full glory once more. Its head was low, eyes fixated, ears pointed forward toward its target.

“I want to take you right here on the hard, cold tile floor, but I’m going to ask you first. I want to hear your answer when I ask. You’re going to answer me out loud, do you understand?” Cas was enjoying the slow build in his gut, in his groin. There was a fire in his belly, but it simmered rather than exploded, and he reveled in the control he somehow maintained even as his Rut caught hold of his genitals and swelled them obscenely.

“Yes, Alpha. I understand. I want you to…”

“Not yet, Omega.” He stalked toward her very slowly, holding her eye like a predator does its prey. “Mind that you follow my instructions exactly. I will always tell you exactly what I want. If you obey me, in word, action, spirit, and thought, you will be rewarded. For every act of disobedience, you will be punished. For some things, you may get no warning. I expect complete submission from you. You will not say ‘No’ to me.” He narrowed his eyes as he continued striding forward very slowly, not quite reaching her although the distance wasn’t far. “Do you understand me?” His voice was cold iron scraped over gravel.

She whimpered, but whispered, “Yes, Alpha. I understand.” She breathed shallowly. A dribble of slick broke free and ran down the inside of her right leg and all the way to the floor. Her eyes had gone golden, masking most of the blue. Her cheeks were flushed, and she trembled.

“Good girl.” He took the last step and drew himself up to loom over her, using his immense Alpha-Dominant power to make his position as her mate abundantly clear. “April,” he intoned. “May I fuck you on the cold, tile floor until your back is red and raw and you’re gaping with my seed?” He reached for her, one hand sweeping her thin robe off her shoulders to pool on the floor, and the other grasping her hair at the back of her head and craning her head back sharply.

It wasn’t really a fair question, since he’d already fed her the correct answer, but April’s wolf was a horny bitch, and she’d waited long enough. “Please, Alpha! Please fuck me on the floor. I want you to take me right here.” There was barely enough breath control for her to get the words out, and his arms swept her literally off her feet. She hit the floor hard with an ‘Ooomph’ although the hand in her hair protected her head more tenderly than might should have been expected, and she landed safely.

He put three fingers to her mouth and she took them in immediately, sucking them and slaving them with her tongue. Her eyes slipped closed, and she lost herself to the sensations rocking back and forth between them through the Mating-bond.
“Open your eyes,” he told her sternly. “Look at me. Always at me.” She snapped them open and found his face. “I expect you to stay focused on me at all times while I touch you unless I tell you otherwise or your position makes doing so impossible. That is a rule, and I WILL punish you if you break it. You’ll not get a warning.” As he spoke, he pulled his fingers from her mouth and drove them deep into her. She locked her eyes on him and groaned, almost a growl, driving her hips up and back to pull him in deeper.

The Alpha chuckled darkly, pulling his hand away and spanking the side of her thigh, leaving a perfect handprint. “You take what I give you, and nothing else. It is not your decision how fast, how hard, or how deeply you get fucked. Or even if you get fucked at all. You are mine. Your body, your pleasure, and your pain belong to me to do with as I will.” He resumed fucking her roughly with three fingers in her pussy. The slick ran copiously down the crack of her ass, and she cried out, trying so hard to hold his gaze and keep herself still at the same time. She wondered with what little thought she had left if the noises coming from her throat were permitted. He hadn’t said to be quiet, and she didn’t think she could stop them in any case. She thought that if he didn’t take her within the next twenty seconds, she would explode. She didn’t have any control left, and the pain of her Heat was building again.

“That’s my very good girl,” he told her. His eyes had lost all but a tiny ring of blue around the iris. A mix of Alpha red and blown wide black pupil changed his visage entirely. She hoped her eyes were responding with a ring of gold, but they would do whatever they were going to do. She couldn’t tell, and she couldn’t worry about that now.

Castiel held back long enough to turn his wolf into a slathering, demanding beast again. Then he released hold of it. He snatched his fingers out of her wetness and thrust them back into her mouth. She tongued at them hungrily, taking whatever he gave, just as he’d told her to. He lined his cock up and pressed slowly into her hot, silken center, testing her resolve, giving her a chance to be good for him…or not. She growled again, and whined high in her throat, but she didn’t close her eyes, and she didn’t press her hips up to meet his.

“Good, good, good girl. So good for me. How did I get so lucky?” The question, of course, was rhetorical. He fucked her powerfully, smoothly, and rhythmically, not really in control, but apparently, his wolf wanted to draw it out as long as possible. Her ass and shoulders squeaked against the tiles as his thrusts drove them relentlessly, but slowly across the foyer floor. “Close your eyes, Omega.” He spoke harshly, unable to avoid allowing his wolf to speak for him. They broke their gaze, and he tucked his head over her shoulder so he could really get to work, picking up the pace with a slow build into a ruthless pounding, curling his mass around her tiny form.

She clawed at his back, trying to find purchase somehow. She felt like she was falling, endlessly falling through space. Her whole body zinged with a pleasure she couldn’t have known before today. She kept her eyes tightly closed and felt his mouth close around her right nipple, sucking harshly. She was so tired. Too tired to process. Too tired to feel, and yet, the ceaseless thrusting continued, and it felt sooooo good. “Alpha, help me!” she wailed. “I’m falling! Help me.” She finished weakly, hardly catching her breath.

“Fall, Omega! That’s a good feeling. You’re safe to let go. Let go and fall! I’ll catch you!” She came with a scream that felt like it ripped from her throat. Her Alpha caught her and held her tight through the pulses that went on and on. Slick was everywhere. Maybe it was Alpha come, she realized they were tied again, although he was still thrusting and grunting heavily. Most of his weight rested on top of her, pinning her down. It didn’t feel confining though. It felt like a safe place to let go of herself. She floated, blissful and took what her Alpha gave her, slowly drifting away into a safe cocoon of sleep. He never let her fall, and when she awoke, daylight was breaking through large windows over an enormous white bed. Her Alpha snored softly beside her, his hair ridiculously messy, but his
embrace warm and snug. The Omega drifted back to her cloud of sleep.
Chapter Summary

Everything goes to shit. Sorry.

Chapter Notes

I really don't like how this chapter turned out, but fucking with it is only going to make it worse. In my head, their fight is way more epic. What ended up in words sounds like a cheap melodrama to me. I'm going to try to keep pushing through, and maybe the next bit won't suck. One more chapter to go before things begin to turn around. Finally, Poor Dean hasn't had a good day since Chapter one. He needs to be cut a little slack. Don't you think?

*Edited 5/16/17 to fix the time-line. Also added a bit of a teaser about Gabriel's backstory that should've been there from the start.

NOW:

Castiel’s wolf was frolicking when he awoke. He kept his eyes closed for a few more minutes, watching the great black monster roll in the warm grass joyfully, letting the sun warm its belly while the grass took care of that itchy spot in the middle of its back, flinging its huge head from side to side and snapping at its own tail at each apex, only to flip back to its feet and bound across the flower-strewn lawn in ecstasy. It was a few minutes of pure bliss. Cas was smiling when he opened his eyes to find a pair of pale blue ones, laughing at him.

“How have a good dream, Alpha?” she asked him. Castiel hummed happily and pulled her warm body on top of his.

“How as good as what I’ve woken up to.” He kissed the tip of her nose. Castiel could feel his Rut pulling his attention back down south, and he could think of no reason to deny the urge, intrigued to discover that it was an urge and not a demand, a soulful pull toward the warmth of her crotch, but not the usual mindless fire inside his gut. It was almost like observing another alpha’s Rut.

Registering the sensation of building Heat within their new bonds, and her thrumming desire that mirrored his, he lifted her hips easily and wiggled a bit as he lowered her back down, angling himself to spear her on his engorged cock. They shared a low guttural moan of deep satisfaction. The ping that sang to him through the Mating-bond was new and delightfully strange. He could feel her pleasure as he filled her. He could send satisfaction right back through the bond, and it became a reverberating, echoing, building harmonic of pleasure passed back and forth between them as they fucked leisurely.

Cas was in no hurry; a novelty considering he was still mid-Rut. It was the strangest Rut he’d ever
experienced. His wolf, usually so insistent and demanding, so severe, couldn’t be bothered to stop skipping in the sunshine. Cas rolled his eyes at the big dog and pulled his Omega’s hips down hard, burying his knot while he drove himself up into her warm body again and again and let the smooth, wet heat embrace him.

He built speed and power slowly, taking his time, working himself into a slow but steady frenzy. Cas felt her Omega gland Release again as she came hard on nothing but the feel of his cock inside her, clutching his shoulders and calling out. He marked that she didn’t need clitoral stimulation to reach orgasm in a compartmentalized section of his brain and counted himself lucky. He’d always enjoyed the sensitivity of an easy ‘O’. Her eyes never left his face. He thrust a few more times, slow and hard, grinding her groin against his on his upstroke before clenching his jaw and following his beautiful mate over the edge with a load groan.

After, they spooned tenderly together, speaking saccharine things and petting one another’s wolves who lay curled together in the soft grass.

Cas’ Rut only lasted for a couple more days, and April came back to Earth shortly after. It was a strange cycle for both of them. Their wolves seemed content to couple slowly and sensuously instead of the usual hard-driven pounding Claim that makes the romance books about Lupin-love 100% accurate. Two weeks after that, two weeks that saw them both keeping isolated from the rest of the world, holed up in Castiel’s small but well-appointed suite, Castiel accepted a cup of coffee and a smile from his mate in his suite’s small kitchenette.

“Thank you, April,” he purred at her, touching the small of her back. He rarely stopped touching her when she was within arm’s length. She poured a glass of juice for herself and began to take a spot on the floor next to his feet, but he raised her gently and motioned toward the empty chair. “Not right now, love. This is about you, and you’re entitled to be a part of it. Go on Ellen. You were saying?”

Ellen and Bobby sipped their coffee, and the four Canids went over the results of April’s assessments. April found the discussion well out of her depth and intimidating, so she opted to listen without comment for the most part. To Cas, none of it was particularly surprising, but he was advised he’d have to find an inspired way to provide true punishment for the girl’s Sub training without sparking her intensely Masochistic pleasure response. “It’s not going to be easy, Alpha. She still needs frequent Balance adjustments – probably about twice a week – so you can’t just give her creative pain-free punishment. If you whip her, she’ll probably Release for you, but she’ll enjoy it too much, it won’t be effective as punishment, and her ability to learn may be hampered. On the flip-side, she tested extremely low for brattiness. She’s a good girl who will try to please her Dom. I don’t expect she’ll deliberately break many rules.”

“Would you suggest working in her Releases as part of a system of rewards?” Cas asked. “If she enjoys impact-play, and she needs it to Release, I see no reason it can only be applied as punishment. Maybe we can find something else she dislikes for that. There’s no rule I’m aware of that says Ozzies can ONLY be punished corporally.

Bobby nodded. “That’s true, but you might want to talk it over with Benny. It may be an easy fix to just work pain and Release into her play time. I expect there may be a curveball we’re missing. I get the sense she’s not that simple.”

“What my alpha father always said is that,” interrupted the Omega, “…he said he could only get me to fully Release when I was in trouble for something, but I don’t like to break alpha’s rules.” She stopped speaking abruptly and looked at her hands in her lap. Cas didn’t like seeing her so uncomfortable in a talk that had so much direct impact on her life. He sent her support and comfort
through the bond, and she nodded at him silently but didn’t say anything more.

It was a strange puzzle, but Castiel was determined to deliver everything his Omega needed. He spent late evenings researching ways around the Omega-Sub’s highly Masochistic base setting. He tried a few things out with April and discovered the key lay in her sense of guilt when a rule was broken. When he struck her for play or stimulation, she loved it, moaning her orgasm to the sky and thanking her generous Alpha for providing, but she never Released. However, when her Alpha-Dom applied the same strap with a stern visage and a harsh voice after she failed to meet his requirements, she cried out piteously, her Omega-gland Released completely, and she swore to behave, seeking forgiveness. She and Castiel agreed that she needed many, many rules, too many to adhere to, too many to remember; providing opportunities to fail, seek harsh reprimand, and then find absolution and Release.

His relationship with April mostly stable, for the next few weeks, Castiel began slowly increasing his work responsibilities while keeping his main focus on getting to know April. For the time being it was easier to continue to live in the Facility suite provided to him as Director and Institutional Pack Alpha. Cas planned to move his mate into his own home for good once her Ozzie training was complete. He focused most of his hours on orienting his Omega to his preferences and his strict rules and helping her learn how to make her way around The Facility. Slowly, he also began scheduling some meetings and trying to catch up on email – so much email.

Cas was disappointed to see that Dean had declined his meeting requests, filing his reports electronically just prior to the meeting times. He missed seeing the green-eyed Sub, missed his goofy sense of humor and lack of respect, missed his razor sharp analysis of the goings on in the world. He just missed Dean. Somehow, wherever Cas was and whatever he was doing, he found himself trying to share his thoughts, observations, or experiences with Dean, only to realize that his favorite alpha wasn’t there. It was unnerving to say the least. He felt like his left arm had been removed somehow. His texts went unanswered and his calls went straight to voicemail.

The two hadn’t seen each other since before the Mating. Cas thought he caught the back of Dean’s head as he entered rooms on several occasions, but didn’t intentionally pursue his friend. They were just on different schedules, right? Busy, like always.

But no, as the weeks passed, Castiel saw and spoke to the rest of his Facility Pack like normal but never ran into Dean. Sometimes he kept April close, occasionally he left her alone in the suite, and sometimes he left her with Meg or Charlie. She seemed to be making friends with both women. Cas wasn’t sure how good an idea a friendship with Meg would be, but he wasn’t about to try to control his mate’s relationships. Maybe April would turn out to be a good influence on the bratty nurse. But wherever Cas was, it seemed Dean wasn’t. What’s more, he began to hear and see signs that Dean’s work was suffering. It was most definitely not like the alpha to submit poorly thought out reports, skip crucial planning meetings, or fail to register the new round of research volunteers. He even canceled two scene sessions with Cas. THAT was really strange. Dean usually jumped at the chance to get his freak on with the Big Bad Wolf himself.

Despite his fierce reputation, the Alpha was truly a very patient man. Perhaps, if you’re the most dominant of Dominants, it isn’t necessary to yell a whole lot to get your way. At least, that’s what Cas always found. But Dean’s behavior was beginning to irk him. He made a note to seek him out soon.

It came to a head on a Tuesday, late in the afternoon.

“Alpha.” Jo barged into Dr. Novak’s office just as he was clearing up to head back to the suite. “I’m glad I caught you. I need to know, are you planning to enroll your mate in this session of the Ozzie
class? We’ve held it up a couple of weeks to make sure she didn’t miss anything. Dean didn’t want to get started and make her wait a month for the next one, but it’s getting to the point we can’t wait any longer.”

“I don’t understand, Jo. The Omega-Sub class was scheduled to begin two weeks ago, was it not? Surely you haven’t postponed a whole class just for one student. We don’t do that. We never do that. Besides, I’m perfectly capable of seeing to April’s Ozzie training myself since she missed the enrollment period. I’d expected to, in fact. Whose decision was this, and why was I not consulted?”

He was not himself. He felt constricted in his own skin, and he was quite irritated. He felt as if he hadn’t scened recently, which was ridiculous. He and April shared an intense session just yesterday afternoon that had been immensely satisfying. She was so GOOD for him. The white coat still only halfway off went right back on, an unconscious attempt to posture and intimidate the young alpha. It worked. Or something did. Maybe it was just Cas.

Jo stammered, clearly not expecting his snippy response. “I, oh, well. We thought you would wanna…I mean, I know you can, but you’re so busy, and Dean’s such a good teacher. Plus, she’ll make friends with the other Ozzies. It’s good for her socialization, so we just…”

“I asked you questions, Jo. You’re babbling, not answering.” She didn’t get to finish her thought.

“Yes, Alpha. Um, I guess it was Dean’s call to postpone the start, and I didn’t realize that he didn’t ask you about it. I guess?” Her inflection went up at the end of her statement, a clear indication she had no idea what to say, what he was looking for. He hated when people tried to mollify him.

“That’s it!” he snapped, heading briskly to the door. “I’ve had enough. Where’s Dean? I’m getting to the bottom of this right now!”

“I…” was all Jo knew to say. She’d never seen Cas so, cranky.

Cas passed out of his office and into the corridor just in time to see Dean approaching the exit to the parking lot. “WINCHESTER!” he bellowed. Dean, almost to the turnstile, tucked his head immediately at the sound and looked for a moment like he would keep going, but then turned slowly and walked gravely back up the hall.

“Yes, Alpha?” Dean was perfectly respectful except for how he wasn’t.

“You put eight Omega-Subs in a holding pattern for two weeks instead of starting their class. I want an explanation. Right now.” The Alpha gestured Dean into his office, shooed Jo out, and closed the door in her face.

“We were waiting for you and your mate to come down from the clouds, or whatever. Wanted to let her take part. Ya know, if that’s what you wanted, not that you’ve been doing much communicating on the matter.” Dean shrugged and faced the wall, studying the diplomas he’d seen thousands of times, adopting an air of nonchalance although the tension across his shoulders gave away the lie.

“And what have the other students been doing for the last two weeks?”

“Orientation, mostly. We’ve got them doing some practice exercises and working out as a group in the gym.” Dean really sounded like he didn’t give a rat’s ass.

Cas just stared at Dean for a moment. What the hell? “Why did you not seek my permission to alter the schedule?”

Dean lit up with fury and spun to face Castiel. “Because I’M the fucking Director of Training, that’s why! I’M directing their training. That’s MY JOB! That’s what I’m here for! I shouldn’t have to run
every miniscule decision past you. I don’t need a fucking babysitter!” He planted his fists on the desk and loomed over it, getting right up in Castiel’s face.

What on earth? “Dean, what’s gotten into you? I don’t understand this behavior.” Cas was unnerved by the Sub’s reaction. There was a raw rage etched deep in the lines around Dean’s mouth and eyes.

“Whatever.” Dean deflated and turned to the door, placing one hand on the knob and looking at the floor. “From now on we’ll stick straight to the training schedule as posted. If you want your girl in the class, have her there tomorrow at eight. Can I go?”

“What? No! Sit down and tell me what’s going on with you.”

“No. You asked me a work question, which I answered. It’s past my shift, so I figure I’m off the clock and under no obligation to hand over my personal life just ‘cause you feel like playing Oprah.”

“Why are you so angry with me? Have I done something wrong?”

Dean scoffed rudely. “Nope.” He popped the ‘P’. “You’re peachy. I’m just really hungry. I’d like to go home now.” As usual, he could have quit while he was ahead and not given away the whole kit and caboodle, but his mouth was a little bitch which betrayed him. As usual. “Just go on back to your sweet submissive Omega mate.”

“Ah,” said Castiel coolly. Inside, he began to squirm uncomfortably as if this conversation was starting to scratch at an area he needed to keep undisturbed. Dark still waters moved menacingly beneath the surface. He adopted a stoic face and proceeded as if he had no emotions in play. “I understand. Dean there’s no reason to feel threatened by April’s and my Mating. It needn’t have any effect on my scening with you. I’ve been looking forward to reconnecting with you, and I’m sorry if I wasn’t clear about that.” Inside, Cas’ wolf was beginning to pant uncomfortably and whine, pawing at Cas’ leg to get his attention, but Castiel ignored him. “In fact, I was very disappointed that you canceled two scenes with me. You could clearly use the opportunity to let off some steam.”

“Threatened? Fuck you, Castiel!” Dean was livid. Cas’ wolf lowered his ears and snarled, incensed that the Sub would speak to his Dom like that, but Cas didn’t allow any sign of his turmoil to show on his face.

“I can smell the Cortisol you’re putting out. You need to scene. Badly. It’s not good for you to get this stressed.” Cas was really struggling to keep everything he’d always hidden from Dean locked beneath his stoic visage.

“Fine. I’ll check if Raphael is free.” Dean turned to go again.

“What?! No, Dean! Raphael would be a terrible Dom for you. Look, as your boss, your friend, your Alpha, and your Dom, I insist you let me…”

“I don’t want you to TOUCH me!” Dean lied, rage pouring from his eyes. His wolf threw himself against Dean’s chest and demanded he walk the declaration back, but he stood firm. “You’ve got NO say in this, Castiel! You’re my boss, and yeah we’ve been friends for a long time, but you ain’t my Alpha, and you’re not my Dom unless I agree to it!” Castiel’s wolf let out a mournful whine, sitting next to his knee and looking up plaintively into his face. Something was terribly, terribly wrong, and the wolf didn’t like it at all. “My play time is none of your Goddamned business!”

Castiel was at a loss. He couldn’t make heads or tails of Dean’s behavior or his ire. This wasn’t the time or place to call the Submissive down. He needed to understand. Flummoxed and desperate, and beginning to panic, he pleaded, “I don’t understand. What do you want from me, Dean?” his cool
demeanor finally cracking under the simultaneous onslaught from his Sub and his wolf, both.

Dean went still, focused on the wall again, refusing to look at Castiel. He sucked in a deep breath as if steeling his nerves. “I want you to sign my transfer papers to work for Henrickson in Dallas.”

Dean’s voice had grown still and cold again, belying the fact that a bomb had exploded in Castiel’s head. (The Sub’s leaving,) cried the wolf in Cas’ mind, (You can’t let this happen - tie him up! Don’t let our beautiful Sub go!) “The new Facility down there isn’t drawing the clients it should, and their statistics are crap. Victor thinks it has to do with the training department. He offered me a job playing snoop. I’m gonna take it.”

“What?!” Cas sputtered. “Nonsense! You can’t leave. You’re needed here. You run…everything, almost. We’re lost without you. I’m lost without you. What on Earth are you talking about?! All the classes, all the studies…”

“You can let me transfer to Dallas, or I’ll just quit and go to work for Gordon.” Dean sounded defeated.

“Dean!” Castiel was appalled.

“It’s your choice, Alpha.” Dean turned to face him, taking a shaky breath. “It’s only ever been your choice.” He finally met Castiel’s eye, green met blue, and then the green overflowed. He wanted to stop talking, but couldn’t. “Just answer me this: all this that we’re doing here, all the precision and scheduling, the research and training, all the control and the trust…if it doesn’t give us any damn choices, about our own lives, ‘bout our own destiny, if in the end, we’re still just slaves to our own bodies…what’s it any good for? What’s the fucking point?”

“Oh, Dean.”

“You know what, man?! You can take your self-righteous, holier-than-thou, big-bad Dominant PITY and cram it up your ass! I don’t want it!”

“Dean, no.” Castiel was shaking and pale now. His wolf leaned heavily against him, seeking comfort that wasn’t there to give. “You can’t leave me.” He stopped and caught Dean’s eye again reaching across the desk but not quite touching him. “I love you.”

Castiel’s voice was meeker than Dean had ever heard it before, and he wanted. Dean wanted so badly to accept the invitation that lay on the other side of those words. But he couldn’t. He was forced to shove his own wolf out of the way. It steadfastly blocked his path, leaning in heavily and bracing against being moved, but he managed it, barely. He had to stop this conversation in its tracks. It couldn’t be allowed to go down that path, couldn’t allow himself to consider it. It would shatter.

He shoved right into Castiel’s space, Dean fumed. “You don’t get to say that to me! Not like this. Not now! Not after…” Dean was breathing hard through his nose as he snapped his mouth closed. He closed his eyes, forcing more tears to fall shamefully down his cheeks. How had he turned into this? Who WAS he anymore? What the hell did Castiel even mean by that?

He continued after a moment, in a voice utterly devoid of emotion, “I’ll have Jo and Sam get the Ozzie class started for you tomorrow at eight and let Ellen know to reschedule all my test appointments. I…” There was nothing left to say that wouldn’t destroy his resolve and shame him to his core. He closed the door behind him.

Motionless in the office, Cas stared blankly at the door through which his love had vanished.
Castiel’s wolf lifted its head and howled.

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Bobby found him late that night, sitting at his kitchen table, idly stroking his Omega’s hair as she leaned against his leg. She looked exhausted and miserable. Bobby put her to bed then confronted his friend.

“Heard about Dean from Jo. Heard he’s leavin’. You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

“I was stupid, Bobby.” Cas lifted his gaze, wholly bereft, and met the older alpha’s concerned eyes. “And now it’s too late.”

“Well, fuck,” agreed Bobby.

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Six weeks went by. Dean breathed through his nose, fast and shallow, his lips closed and pulled tight across his teeth. He grunted as the strap added another line across his flank. Tears had sprung up. He let them fall freely. There was no shame in crying through a strapping. It was cathartic and kinda the whole point. His grip turned white on the hold bar as he held on with all his substantial strength, and his mind raced. Another stroke landed. Another stripe. This time an open-mouthed shout. ‘Maybe the next stroke will knock me out of my head’, he thought. The punishment was going wrong. All wrong. Yeah, it wasn’t fun, it hurt like hell, and he would most decidedly find a way to avoid riling up this particular beta again if he could, but he wasn’t living in his Submissive. He shouldn’t have been able to occupy his alpha mind right in the middle of a punishment that he had coming to him. That’d never happened to him before. It was fucking with his head. It was entirely the wrong persona for the situation, but he just couldn’t get there. And God, he needed so badly to get there. He moaned in frustration.

In the six weeks since his move to north Texas, Dean had yet to try out a scene partner. He meant to. He had logged onto the Facility Scheduler several times, only to back right out again. He couldn’t bring himself to do it. This one was a freebie, in a way: not requested, but granted nonetheless. Only, it wasn’t enough, and Dean had no idea what to do about it. He held on tightly, let the tears splash across the wooden spanking bench, and hoped better times were coming. Please, God let better days be coming.

The strap stopped falling. Dean didn’t try to rise. He lay with all his weight on the bench and breathed. The tears didn’t abate.

“Do you have something you’d like to say to me, Submissive?” Ruby’s voice was silky and pretentious. She was such a bitch.
Dean realized that he was holding his jaw muscles so tightly he couldn’t answer at first. His mind bounced back and forth between: ‘give her the answer she wants’ and, ‘be a little shit’.

“You hit pretty hard for a beta,” he ground out.

She didn’t rise to the challenge though. She knew what he was doing and she refused to be baited. She was here to apply punishment, not stroke his wolf into blissful submissive oblivion. ‘Cas would’ve humored my wolf’, he thought. ‘Aaargh! Stop it! Enough! God, I need help’. His mind was racing again, and he dissolved into sobs upon the bench.

Ruby misinterpreted the outward manifestation of Dean’s inner turmoil. “Well, hard-hitting or not, your backside is practically glowing, soooo, once I hear the three words I’m looking for, we’ll be done here”

The words, ‘Kiss my ass’ sprang immediately to mind, but Dean was certain those weren’t the ones she was expecting. He sighed and reined in his tears. There was no use dragging this out. It was a lost cause where his Sub was concerned. “I’m sorry, beta,” he finally gave her.

She grinned at him. “Thank you, Dean. Perhaps you’ll remember from now on that just because you were hot shit up in Kansas doesn’t mean you’re anything whatsoever in Texas. Down here, you answer to me, got it? If I say an Ozzie’s earned a punishment, then you agree with me. It’s how it works around here, and don’t you forget it. Next time you interfere with my training techniques, you’ll walk away bloody.”

Wow. Dean didn’t even try to enumerate everything that was wrong with her tirade. She had it all backwards and upside down. And he’d be on a slow spit in hell before he’d let himself walk past an Omega being punished unfairly. He stood up from the bench and forced himself to move with dignity despite the fact he’d left it on the leather cushioned bench, left it back in Kansas in Castiel’s spartan office. She didn’t have to know that. He checked in with his wolf, but got nothing but his great grey back and a cold shoulder. The wolf still wasn’t speaking to him.

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“Hey, Bro!”

“Ah, Gabriel,” Cas intoned as he entered his office to find his older brother slunk low in the visitor’s chair with his feet crossed upon Castiel’s desk. “Get your feet off my desk.”

“You look like you were dragged through a paper shredder,” offered Gabriel helpfully. Then he went on:

“Backward.

“In a wind tunnel.

“While it’s raining.” Those crossed feet hadn’t moved.

Cas waited with enduring patience. He’d learned through the years that Gabe needed to be Gabe and any attempt to alter his behavior was fruitless. “Have you finished?” asked Castiel tonelessly.
“While being swarmed by bees.”

“You’re going to tell me this doesn’t bother you?” Gabe wasn’t buying it, but Cas had long since given up on understanding their mother.

“What do you expect me to say? Naomi has made her decisions and chosen her own path. I have no more control over her life choices than I do yours.”

“So, it’s ‘Naomi’ now?”

“She hasn’t been much of a mother in a very long time,” Cas wasn’t giving Gabriel the emotional response he wanted, so he tried another tack.

“I just wanna know what you’re going to do about it. You want me to arrange for some well-positioned pipe bombs? I know a guy.”

Cas huffed a small laugh. It felt nice. “Keep your pipe bombs under wraps, big brother. Please. I beg you.”

“Whatever you say. You’re the boss.” Right. As if Gabriel Novak had ever acknowledged an Alpha’s claim over him, much less his baby brother’s.

Cas took a deeper look at his brother and spoke again, “You didn’t come here to talk about our mother. You knew I was already on it.” Gabe just quirked a smirk at him. “What do you want? And get your Goddamned feet off my desk!” Cas abruptly shoved the Omega’s feet, toppling his brother unceremoniously out of his chair and onto the floor.

Gabe didn’t respond to his rude upheaval. He merely stood, pulled the chair back upright and made himself comfortable again, tossing one of Castiel’s stress balls to himself as he spoke. “I’m worried about you, Castiel.” He paused, and after a moment rested both feet, crossed at the ankles, upon Cas’ desk. “Not sleeping very well, are you? Having trouble concentrating on your work? Word around the halls says you rarely eat in the cafeteria with the Pack anymore, and I wonder if you’re eating much at all. Your eyes kinda sunk into your face.” Gabriel delivered the whole thing without once looking away from the ball as he tossed it into the air, caught it and repeated again.

Then he caught the ball and held it, fixing his brother with his eye and becoming serious. “Are you taking CARE of yourself, Castiel? And I don’t mean dental hygiene. ‘Cause, man, you really do
look like crap.”

“I’m fine Gabriel, and it’s none of your business.”

“Aaaaaaand, THAT’s the biggest load of horseshit you’ve ever tried to cram down my throat.”

“Gabe.” Cas tried. He really did, but his brother was right, and he was too tired to keep up a front. Had it been anyone else in the world running this intervention, Castiel would have had no trouble keeping his Alpha-Dominant persona firmly in place. But his brother knew how to read Cas better than anyone. (Not better than Dean), spoke his wolf. True. Not better than Dean. But Gabe was good. Gabriel knew when to press and when to brat and when to wait it out and say nothing at all. This time he waited silently and looked Cas in the eye, his head low and his brow lifted in expectation.

“I really, really miss him,” Cas admitted although it was news to no one.

“So go get him.”

“I can’t. He left me. HE left me. He walked away, Gabriel. He made it abundantly clear he wants nothing from me, and he moved a thousand miles from here. I can’t follow him. That’s not what he wants.”

“I’ve never known you to walk away from ANYTHING you want without a fight, Cas. I watched you on live television confront your own mother in congressional committee and call her delusional in front of the whole world. I never expected to see you act a coward.”

“What do you want me to do? He left. I’m Mated. That’s all there is, end of story. Besides, I couldn’t do that to April. I need her too much. I love her too much, and she’s so good to me. I couldn’t do that to either of them.”

“STOP. Stop coming up with bullshit excuses! Jesus. Christ. Just. Here, listen...try this: say you got to CHOOSE for yourself, Cas. Just imagine that your wolf could point his muzzle toward what he wanted most in the world and could just keep traveling until he reached it. If you could have what you want, just for you...what would it be? No bullshit this time. There’s no rules, there’s no biological mandate...just you deciding what’s best for you. What do you WANT, Castiel?”

“I want Dean! I have wanted Dean forever, but...”

“No but, Castiel. You can’t imagine what it’s like to have what you really want ripped away from you to where you can’t ever get it back. Not ever. You’ve got a chance to fix this. I didn’t get that chance. Look at your wolf right now. What’s he doing?” Gabriel was intent on keeping Cas’ eyes locked with his.

Castiel’s wolf stood tall and stubbornly resolute, daring to hope that his master would act on his brother’s words, but Cas barely glanced at him. “Gabriel, I can’t. What would I even say? How would it work? How would I talk to him? God, I want...!” Castiel pushed his hands through his hair and then rubbed at his face in frustration. How was it possible to love two such different people with all his heart? He loved them both, needed them both, equally.

Differently, but equally.

“Okay, then, sounds like you’ve got some strategizing to do. I’ll leave you to it. Good talk.” He smacked his palm on the desk and stood, Gabe’s normally chipper demeanor appearing from nowhere as if the intense and piercing version of his brother had never been. It threw Castiel. He sat motionless and stared at his office door, reminiscent of weeks ago. He sat long enough for his
Omega to come looking for him and find him rocking wordlessly. She knelt to hold him tightly, offering all the comfort she could to her grieving Alpha through their shared bond, and then she took him to bed.
Tuesday, May 2, 2017

Chapter Summary

Castiel reaches his breaking point. At last.

Chapter Notes

There's no Dean in this chapter. Sorry. So sorry. It hurt me more than it hurts you. But Cas is so far behind, he needed a whole chapter to catch up.

Also, the first half of the chapter is pure Universe exposition. If you don't give a shit what makes Omegas tick, skip to the "NOW" section.

For everyone who told me they want Cas to hurt, you got your wish. And for everyone who dislikes April, I hope you feel a little warmer towards her after this. Love y'all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THEN:

“Our guest speaker today has asked me to keep his introduction short, so I’ll just quickly mention that he is a practicing physician specializing in adolescent Lupin development, he’s a renowned research scientist who has, almost singlehandedly turned everything we thought we knew about
Canids on its ear.” (Castiel cleared his throat uncomfortably at ‘singlehandedly’, but didn’t interrupt.)

“He’s the founder of a massive specialized research and implementation facility for the betterment of Lupin lives across America, which is now expanding to include three new facilities in as many states, and he’s been a longtime advocate and activist for the enactment and defense of laws protecting wolves’ rights to live authentically as wolves. Please welcome our esteemed guest lecturer today, Alpha Dr. Castiel Novak!”

The large seminar room erupted in applause as Cas took his place at the lectern and picked up the slide projector remote, fiddling with it a little.

“Wow. Thank you for the kind words.” Castiel stood stiffly. He was annoyed at his friend. They’d agreed to a simple hand-over of the podium, and now he had to sacrifice some of his precious lecture time re-humanizing himself to the student audience. He looked out at the assembly. The room was crammed full, even to bodies standing along the back and down both sides. “I didn’t, um, realize that ‘General Human Anatomy’ was so popular a course these days.” The class chuckled as a group. Clearly, many of those in attendance weren’t enrolled in this course. Evidently, his celebrity and reputation preceded him. Castiel didn’t mind the class-crashers; the more people, especially Primates, he got a chance to talk to, the more ignorance fell away. Fame and charisma could be useful.

“When I took this course as an undergrad, we didn’t even fill a room a quarter this size. I thank you all for coming. I hope to be of use to you in your growing understanding of the beautiful living, breathing entities that make up the Lupine Sapiens Omega population.” He removed the mic from its stand and stepped off the podium so he could pace and move freely. Movement soothed his wolf and helped him think more clearly. As he spoke, Castiel settled into his element. This is where he was most at home in his professional life; in front of a class, speaking passionately about his work.

“I trust some of you will continue on in the same direction I followed, going on to become doctors or scientists. For those participants, I implore you to keep an open mind about wolves and to learn everything you can to assist you in your work. We desperately need ape allies. We actually need all the help we can get to keep our movement headed in the right direction. For those whose interest in the subject is less professional, please know that you are equally welcome here and equally important in helping us to become free to be, as Dr. LaMarque stated, ‘our authentic selves.’ So, let’s begin.”

He pressed his remote’s button and brought up upon the large screen a drawing of a male Omega’s lower abdomen, his genitalia, digestive tract, and reproductive structures. “Your class is far enough into the semester that I know you’ve learned about the reproductive structures of your own Homo Sapiens’ anatomy. (And by the way, parenthetically, I will be mostly using the terms ape and wolf to distinguish between the populations. It’s just easier that way. Please note that I am aware you are not apes any more than we are wolves. I reject the notion that Homo Sapiens are somehow more entitled to the terms, ‘human’ or ‘people’ and I will not be using those terms. I do beg your forbearance and ask that for the purposes of this lecture, you please just go with it.)”

Most of the class chuckled. Not all, but most.

‘Good enough’, thought Castiel.

“So, as you’ll notice on the screen, the male Omega wolf is strikingly different in form than the same region of a male ape. His penis is smaller, both in girth and length than is average for an ape, although of course, there is a significant range of what’s ‘normal.’ In general, Omega’s penises are between two and five inches when fully erect. Also, the scrotum and testicles are less prominent. However, the myth that male Omegas lack paternal fertility is just that: a myth. Male Omegas DO produce fertile sperm, and, they can impregnate females, producing viable offspring. It occurs infrequently because of the numerous other contributing factors that funnel male Omegas away from
opportunities to father pups, such as social, biological, physiological, and psychological drives for him to take a receptive role in sexual encounters. But they should be respected and honored as one of only two gender designations among sentient beings on this planet with the capacity to play both maternal and paternal roles in reproduction. The other being, of course, Lupin alpha females, but since today’s topic is Omega anatomy, we’ll leave the alpha ladies for another lecture.”

He clicked his remote again, and the next slide focused in closer on the posterior uterus and channel. “As you can see, the male Omega has developed maternal reproductive organs. We’re not going to get into the evolutionary theories about how the posterior uterus came to be, but I will be including links to some of the most promising research on the topic with your professor for him to share with you all.

“The anatomy of the posterior uterus, ovary, cervix, and channel can be seen in this image in fairly good detail. It resides just above the sigmoid colon and posterior to the small intestine which, unlike in apes, winds its way around a small depression where the uterus lies. They essentially occupy the same space until pregnancy advances far enough that pressure from the growing uterus forces the entire digestive tract into a caudal position. So, the developing fetus is positioned on top of its mother’s intestines. Omega males frequently suffer from digestive difficulties during late pregnancy, and this is the primary reason. It’s vital that the Omega mother practice a regular exercise routine to strengthen the pelvic floor and uterine musculature to prevent the uterus’ support structure from getting lazy and just lying upon the intestines.

“The Omega’s posterior womb is associated with one ovary, seen here. The ovary and Fallopian tube mimic that of female humans, with the exception that there is no pairing. Incidentally, and we still don’t understand this, Omega pregnancies through the Posterior uterus never produce multiple births…only singles. There are several research projects underway to discover what prevents multiple fertilization from single eggs as happens occasionally in Primary uterus pregnancies, but they’ve not been completed yet. These are exciting days to be a Lupin researcher. We’re making enormous discoveries all the time, and I encourage you all to consider adding your voices and talents to the search.” He grinned, blushed, and cleared his throat. “Sorry, commercial over. I get a little excited sometimes. Where was I?”

“So, the cervix, also a virtual replica of the female’s structure, leads to the Omega channel. The channel, like the posterior uterus, is unique to Lupin Omegas. Both primary genders have these structures, and both are fertile through them.” He changed slides again. The new image showed the same male diagram, but now also included the female Omega reproductive system as well. The female’s primary womb, with its dual ovaries and classic T-shaped Fallopian tube structure could be clearly seen, but she also had the identical posterior womb as the male.

“Yes, it is possible and not at all uncommon for an Omega female to carry pregnancies in both wombs simultaneously. It’s riskier, of course, and birth-weights of the pups carried this way are usually a little lower than those of single-uterine pregnancies. There’s just not a lot of space in there and having pups growing both above and in front of the digestive tract does uncomfortable things to the Omega in question. But Lupin gestation takes a mere 31 weeks in comparison to the 40 weeks that you Homo Sapiens endure.

“The shorter gestation supports larger litters; plus, Omega females are generally rugged and strong. Too, they have a very high tolerance for pain, and they heal quickly. This kind of pregnancy is everyday stuff to our strong and beautiful Omega women.” Cas smiled at a young ape lady in the front row, and she blushed. “There is a short window for fertilizing both wombs at once. Once the pregnancy hormones ramp up, they stop all further ovulation for the duration of subsequent pregnancy and nursing. So that means it’s not possible to have staggered pregnancies at the same time. Usually, both wombs are fertilized during the same cycle of the Omega’s Heat, when she is
most receptive and most fertile.”

“Let’s talk about the channel for a few minutes.” Castiel clicked to the next slide. It was a photograph of a male Omega’s ass as he lay on his back with his legs spread obscenely. His small cock was erect and standing proud over the man’s pubic hair. His balls were pulled up close to his body, out of the way of any activities. The Omega’s anus gaped open. It was drenched with slick which covered the entire region and appeared to be flowing freely from the red, puffy orifice. The camera flash showed the glare of wetness down the cheeks of his buttocks. A frisson of energy passed through the room at the titillating image.

“This is the male Omega in full arousal. The muscles of the anus have relaxed, the production of channel fluid, a natural lubricant we call ‘slick,’ is in overdrive, and the entire region is swollen, both interior and exterior. What you can’t see from the picture is that as the channel swells inside the Omega’s body, it pinches off the rectum’s access to the anal channel. Let me make clear, while the digestive system and reproductive channel share the same orifice, only one has access at a time. It is in all ways the same type of mechanism that keeps the male bladder from passing urine through the urethra while the penis is fully erect.

“When penetrative sex occurs, the partner’s penis fills the Omega’s channel, not their rectum. Of course, if sex is attempted with an Omega who is not in the least aroused, rectal penetration may occur, and it can do significant damage to the Omega. This usually only occurs in cases of rape of the Omega. On the plus side, Omegas are extremely responsive to sexual signals from their partners and Pack-mates. Their reaction time is nearly immediate. Not that I’m encouraging anyone to try to take an Omega by surprise to see if you could catch their channel off guard. Doing so is rape. Don’t even think about trying it. But from a hypothetical standpoint, as long as the Omega is remotely willing to couple, the channel will prepare itself, pinch off access to the rectum, and lubricate itself quickly enough that the couple need not be concerned about ‘hitting the wrong hole’, even if they go from ‘zero to sixty’ in a matter of seconds.” Cas air-quoted twice. He found over the years that using some everyday language in his lectures cut through the tension and stuffiness of the subject, letting him communicate better.

“Controlling this response is the Omega gland. It’s located near the Omega’s lower mid-spine, anterior to it and attached to it through connective tissue and numerous ducts. It’s just about even with the navel. The Omega gland connects directly to the Reptilian center of the brain, where involuntary response and instinctive behaviors arise. It also has direct connections to the posterior reproductive structures, creating a hormonal super-highway connecting the Omega’s instinctive impulses from their brain with the mechanical structures of their channel. This gland controls so much of what an Omega experiences in his or her life, that essentially, regardless of the lack or presence any other classically ‘Omega’ anatomical structures, having this gland is what makes an Omega, an Omega.

“One aspect of the Omega gland that we have struggled most to reconcile our modern civility with, is its constant output of a stress hormone that is unique to the Omega, called Omesol. Over time, if allowed to build up, Omesol creates a disturbance in virtually every organ system in the body. Omegas often describe its initial effects as similar to living in a fog or having a swarm of bees stuck in their head. From there, if allowed to continue to increase in concentration, the effects worsen. Its purpose is unknown. Some have postulated that since it keeps the Omega dependent on regular care from the Pack, it prohibits the most fertile members of the Pack from venturing away independently. It ties the pup-producers into a specific, subservient place in the societal structure. Again, let me reiterate, this is an ongoing struggle within the wolf-pack in general. As modern humans, we value the humanity and agency of every member of the Pack, and are striving to overcome our past failings. But there is simply no way yet developed to render an Omega completely independent. Their level of this hormone MUST be constantly managed. Omegas who are allowed to go too long
without releasing the buildup of Omesol face dire consequences to their health and sanity.

“I’m getting off the subject of anatomy now, but I believe it’s vital that the ape population be educated about this most misunderstood part of wolf societal behavior. The wolf practice of stimulating a ‘Release’ in the Omega – that is, manufacturing an artificial situation that causes a sudden release of adrenalin which neutralizes the Omesol – is the single most controversial aspect of our societal Pack behavior. There has yet to be developed any therapies or safe substance which can be administered to the Omega, including direct injection of adrenalin, which are at all effective in reducing Omesol levels. Until we develop one, or one of you develops one, we are limited to behavioral remedies.” Castiel clicked to a slide that showed a table of gradually worsening symptoms of Omega hormone poisoning. He didn’t read it to them, but he let them scan it for themselves while he continued to speak.

“There are three effective means of stimulating a Release: intensely satisfying sexual stimulation, intense and sudden fear response, or intense and prolonged pain. Obviously, you’ll have noted that they all have in common the need for intensity, but also obviously, where a pleasurable route can be taken, that’s much preferred. That makes sex the pathway of choice for many. But that precludes the idea that the Omega in question has a safe partner to participate in sex with, and it’s important to note that this is also the least reliable route. The certainty of Release through sexual orgasm is not at all sure, even when the Omega is very well satisfied.” Castiel played up the end of that sentence, and the audience of students laughed outright.

“One note to be aware of: unlike orgasm through masturbation, a hormone Release CANNOT be achieved alone. An Omega can’t Release him- or herself; they have to be acted upon by another individual. Believe me, many, many have tried. All fail.

“The option of scaring the daylights out of the Omega is forbidden by Pack law. The Omega’s reactions are impossible to control, and real harm can be done psychologically and physically when the situation becomes uncontrollable like that.

“That leaves prolonged physical pain as the safest, most reliable, and easiest to administer route for many Omegas. They tolerate it well, again, heal quickly, and it also often fills a psychological need deep in the Omega’s psyche, especially for the Ozzies, the Omega-Submissives. And of all the techniques to deliver pain, spanking is the least likely to cause injury, so it is the most common technique. Spanking and paddling are easily the most ubiquitous form of these techniques, although when combining triggering a Release with administering a punishment for misbehavior or training, strapping, caning, and switching are sometimes utilized.”

Castiel was aware that his reference to the Pack’s use of Domestic Discipline sent an unhappy riffling of tension through the apes, but he decided not to explain himself unless it came up during the Q&A. Wolves were not apes, and he was here to teach them about Omegas, not give a full treatise on everything Pack.

“Any questions so far?” Hands shot up all over the room.

NOW:

Castiel was lunching with Billie in the cafeteria. He’d decided Gabriel was at least right about that. He mustn’t let his depressive state impact his connection with the Pack. Billie was ostensibly finished eating, while Castiel had just started, but she remained, toying with the oil droplets floating in the
juice her serving of green beans left behind. They’d talked through the latest developments from Congress; from his mother. Damn his mother. The issue was annoying, but well in hand. And now the two were chatting idly. Cas noted her reticence to get back to work. It was unlike the highly motivated beta who served as the Facility’s PR manager, and he wondered about it just a little. Maybe she was just enjoying reconnecting with the Alpha. A little connection meant a lot in the Pack.

“Hey, boss!” said a voice from behind him. Cas turned to find Balthazar with a full tray.

“Ah, Balthazar. Please join us. It’s been much too long, Omega. What have you been up to?” As Balthazar sat, Castiel caught a lightning-fast interaction between him and Billie; just a slight raising of a brow and a slight nod in return. Had he not been watching at just the right time, he would have missed the exchange.

Oh.

Now he understood why Billie was still sitting despite her empty tray. As if to confirm his suspicions, she suddenly excused herself and stood, clearing her lunch. Cas watched her go.

I’m being ‘managed,’ he realized. Has the Pack put some kind of watch on me? I may have been down lately, but surely a round-the-clock watch isn’t necessary. He thought back over the last few days and realized that since his conversation with his brother, he hadn’t been left alone for more than a few minutes. He found himself offended, but as always, chose control. He vowed to find the wolf who was orchestrating ‘Project Watch Alpha’, though. He had three prime suspects, maybe four.

“Did you know, Alpha,” began Balthazar with his full mouth muddying his English accent, “...that Mating regulations governing Lupins are completely separate, legally, from marriage laws that apply to humans in general?” Cas nodded at him. Yes, he knew Mating regulations well, as he’d helped author many of them. They didn’t interfere in any way with state or federal marriage laws. “So, for instance, if I got married to the beautiful Julia today, I could still Mate with Julianne tomorrow, and both unions would be legal.”

“Yes, that’s true Balthazar. Are you considering either? I thought you liked your relationships non-committal?”

“Oh, well, yes, I mean, that’s me, isn’t it? I’m not one to settle down. You know me. But I mean, hypothetically. As wolves, we have the option to Mate for life with that one special person, yadda-yadda, but Primates don’t have that. All they have that fills the same slot is marriage, right? But what about if a wolf wanted to get married? We’re human too, just like the apes.”

“Oh, I thought you had figured that out by now.” Castiel was confused. He couldn’t figure out what Balthazar was driving at. But Bal seemed barely interested in his own topic of conversation. He stuffed food down his gullet like a man starving. Castiel scented him discreetly, checking for signs of impending Heat or imBalance, but found nothing untoward.

“But you know,” Balthazar angled a very cunning glance at Castiel. “There’s no law that says a wolf has to Mate and marry the same individual.” He slurped up the last of his pasta. “Excuse me, I’m late for a scene. Got a new alpha client, and she’s really hot! Must dash. ‘Ta, Alpha.”

And just like that the Omega was gone.

Cas sat there with his mouth hanging open. When had he lost his grip on the pulse of his Pack? What was that even about? Balthazar, married?! No way. Even Mating seemed unlikely unless he
encountered his True-Mate. Bal was The Facility’s most requested Omega scene partner. He had clients who came from three-hundred miles away every couple of weeks to scene with the sexy Omega or hire him twice a year to work through their Rut. Balthazar was a Neutral, but he loved sex and could play any role from delicate Sub to Topping from the Bottom. The Alpha had never known him to seek an actual relationship with anyone.

Castiel didn’t remain alone for long. Dr. Barnes swung by his table and saw that he was finished eating. “Are you ready for our appointment, Alpha?” she asked. “It’s just about that time. I was heading back to my office now. We could walk together if you’ve finished eating.”

No. He wasn’t ready to spend an hour talking to the shrink. The Board had expressed grave concerns about his mental stability and demanded he sit down with Pamela for a professional assessment. It was a formality, he told himself. He was fine, and he’d make her see that, but he wasn’t looking forward to it in the least. There was no getting out of it, so he simply stood and carried his tray back to the front to drop it off. He followed her out into the corridor.

As they emerged, a class of Omega-Subs was passing into the lunchroom. It wasn’t the one April attended. Hers was weeks ahead of this one. These Ozzies were still wearing their light blue tunics, designating them as third-week students. Castiel let a quick reminder that the color-coded uniforms were Dean’s idea, (and it had been inspired) cross his mind. With the tunics that were changed out weekly, everyone in The Facility could spot the Ozzies at a glance and knew what level they’d reached in their training. It allowed them to be treated with kid-gloves early on, and then more strictly as their capability developed.

Several of the Ozzies squealed when they spotted the Alpha. They broke ranks and clustered around him, seeking connection. He smiled affectionately and hugged each in turn, offering tender touches and gentle words of encouragement and acceptance. They were sweet and vulnerable at this stage, and it added an endearing glow around each young face. “Go and get some lunch, now. We need you well fed. I’m sure your Dom has big plans for you after lunch. You all be good, now, do you hear me?” He smiled as they made their way in.

As the last passed through the door, Cas swatted him on the ass simply for being last. It was a gentle reminder to keep up and remember to stay in a Pack. The Omega boy yelped in surprise, and hustled to catch up. Castiel chuckled indulgently then nodded as Sam followed his class in to eat lunch. Sam smiled back, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. And just like that, Castiel was back in his depressing constant awareness that Dean had left not just Castiel, but also Sam and all his friends and family. Cas knew Sam blamed him for Dean’s departure. Hell, Cas blamed Cas for Dean’s departure.

Pamela waited patiently, and they resumed their trek to her office. To Castiel, it felt like walking to his own guillotine.

“Make yourself at home, please, Alpha,” she gestured. “This needn’t be formal in any way. In fact, I was just about to stop by for a chat when Bobby told me to call you for an assessment.” Ah, yes. No doubt it was also Bobby who put the Pack on 24/7 Cas-watch. “I am very worried about you. I’m sure you’ve noticed that everyone is. You are a very good Alpha, Castiel. You notice everything. You take care of everyone, and I’m just wondering…” She sighed heavily. It was a touchy situation. A shrink had to get through to the uncomfortable parts of a patient’s psyche, but alphas were notoriously closed off, and this was not just ANY alpha. This was THE Alpha. She could screw this up badly if she wasn’t very careful.

Pamela sat in a soft chair across from where he perched stiffly on the sofa. “Castiel, who takes care of you?”

Cas was taken by surprise. That was not a question alpha-Dominants get asked. Ever. He thought for
a moment. “Well, I guess everyone does to some extent. Certainly, my needs are met when I find connection with my mate, when we stroke one another’s wolves through scening. But also, when I work with clients; the tests, the training, and the contract scenes all give to me as much as I am giving to others through them. Does that make any sense? Plus, I’m sure you’re in on whatever is going on with the Pack…how someone ‘just happens’ to be with me all the time? Watching over me?”

She smiled a private smile, proud of him for catching on to the plot. “Yes, Alpha, that’s all true, but I mean, who takes care of you, not just where do you get your needs met?”

“I don’t know what you mean. What’s the difference?”

She was silent for a long beat, thinking about how to break through his walls. She really wanted to talk to his wolf. She knew one direct route, but it was kind of a low blow to go that way. Pamela threw caution to the wind. “Cas, tell me about your relationship with Dean Winchester.”

“What? No. No way. That’s private. No, I mean, it’s over and done with. There’s no point.”

“You said it’s private, but you were never private about your friendship with him. You’ve been best friends for years. You never tried to keep your relationship as scening partners private. According to our records, neither of you ever slept with anyone but each other outside of work. So, what’s private about it Castiel?”

Cas didn’t respond. He was embroiled in an internal struggle and a little too preoccupied to speak. Dean wasn’t Castiel’s best friend. That was Benny; had always been Benny. Dean was…something different.

“Castiel, you’re in love with Dean, aren’t you?”

He looked at her, straight into her eyes and held her gaze. “You already know the answer to that,” he accused.

“I do,” she admitted to him, still holding his eye. It was difficult not to break the stare, but he needed to be able to read the honesty from her wolf right now, to know he was safe enough to let himself be vulnerable.

“Does everyone?”

She nodded slowly but said, “Everyone but Dean.”

Castiel reeled. EVERYONE knew? Of course they did. He’d failed to keep himself under control. His great black wolf was always pushing, always demanding, always wanting and never caring who got in the way.

“I don’t know what to do about it,” he admitted miserably. “Dean was right to leave. I’m a menace. I hurt everyone I know. I’ve tried so hard for so long to figure out how to control myself by feeding my wolf, learning how to teach others to feed and stroke their wolves, but it didn’t do any good…”

He was stopped by a sob. He clenched his eyes, suppressed the crying, and continued. “It’s too much. I can’t hold it all back. He’s too big and too demanding, and I can’t control him. I thought being Mated would satisfy him. April gives me everything. She trusts me implicitly to give her whatever she needs, and she lets me do whatever I need. WHY is that not enough?! What more do I have a right to demand?! God, I’m the most selfish man I know.” He sucked in a breath. “My mother was right about me. It’ll never be enough. Nothing is ever enough.”

“Castiel, look at me.” She waited until he met her eyes. “It’s not selfish or a sin to love someone. It’s a gift. Always. Loving Dean does not harm him. There’s no greater blessing a person can give to
another than his love. Look, as I said, you take care of everyone, and you use up everything you are and everything you have on this Pack. And, Cas, I mean the whole American Lupin Pack. You are the least selfish human being I’ve ever known. It’s a cop-out to look at what you’re going through and take it all on yourself.”

He stiffened at the word ‘cop-out’. Who did she think she was to tell him what he felt? But Pamela didn’t give him a chance to break in. “I suspect if you had had the chance, you and Dean would’ve Mated within weeks of meeting. You’re that perfect for each other. But you couldn’t, so you both stuffed all that love, all the desire to build a life together under wraps, took what you could and pretended the rest wasn’t there. Am I right?”

He nodded. It was all out of the bag anyway. No use trying to hide anything anymore. Maybe she’d be able to teach him how to move on.

Wait. She’d said, “You both…” No. That wasn’t right. This fucked-up mess was Castiel’s alone. Wasn’t it?

Pam watched his face and guessed where his mind had taken him. She took pity on his inner dialogue. “Alpha, everyone knows you’re in love with Dean, except Dean.” A pause to make sure he was listening. “It’s not really my place, but this is out of control, and it needs to stop. Listen to me. Everyone also knows that Dean’s in love with you. …Except for you.”

Castiel gasped. He actually gasped, and his world reeled for a second time. That wasn’t possible.

“You two knuckleheads have provided this Pack with years of amusement as you danced around each other, completely oblivious. Both of you have your heads up your asses about the truth. I mean it Castiel, and this is serious. Don’t - please don’t - write this gift off as a weakness or selfishness. It’s the most important thing in your life right now. It’s more important than your research, more important than your Pack, more important even than your adorable, innocent young Omega. Don’t lose this, Alpha. Don’t let go of Dean Winchester. It will destroy you both and take the rest of us with you.”

Castiel stared at her. He couldn’t think at all. She wasn’t telling him how to move on, she was telling him to HOLD on. It didn’t compute. His wolf was suddenly standing as large as he could, with his head low and his ears forward, intent and focused and so, so hopeful.

She kept on, battering at the defensive wall he’d held up for so long, “All of your life has been about control. You don’t trust your wolf. You don’t trust yourself. You build walls around yourself with data and structure, and you’re right! For most Lupins, you’re right. It’s what we needed to do, all of this; to get back to our roots and instincts, to find a path to civilization that goes straight THROUGH our wolves instead of around them. We’d forgotten who we are, and it was killing us. But you’re forgetting some crucial points, Alpha.” She leaned way forward, nearly into his space, ignoring the tears that were flowing freely down his face.

“We are not only our biology. We’re seriously fucked if we forget who and what we are at our core, but we’re so much more than that. We’re also people. We need intimacy, and not just the chemical kind. We need someone to connect with on our own level. We need someone to love simply because they are endearing to us, and not just because we share a Mating-bond or a familial tie.

“It’s got to be so much harder for you wolves out on the fringes of the scale. I wouldn’t know. As a beta, I can connect on the same level with most wolves I meet. But you, Castiel, you’re both a Profound AND a Deep. There aren’t enough wolves out there that you can truly connect with for you to have the luxury of throwing one of them away.”
“I don’t know what to do,” he whispered. “Dean was so angry. I don’t believe he loves me like that. How can you be sure?”

Pamela laughed at him. Actually laughed. At him. “Oh, Alpha.” She let herself end with an affectionate chuckle and sat back upright in her chair. “You’re too close to it all to see it for what it is. If it happened to Benny or Jo or Meg, you would have figured it out for them, then locked them in a room with whoever they were in love with and refused to let them out until they’d straightened themselves out. And don’t think I didn’t consider doing just that to you and Dean over the years.

“I have a few questions for you to think about and then I’ll let you go until next week. I want to talk again after you’ve had a chance to mull this conversation over for a while.” Cas didn’t think ‘conversation’ was the right word. He’d barely managed to get a word in edgewise. “Just think about this: Why was Dean so angry with you if he’s not in love with you? What does he have to be angry about at your Mating unless he loves you? Also, why did he leave if not to protect and try to heal a broken heart? Another question I want you to think about long and hard, Alpha: Could you have acted any differently when you encountered your True-Mate? Are you angry with yourself for succumbing to the biological mandate? Are you angry with her? Are you angry with Dean? Just think about it Castiel.”

Cas returned to his suite before April was released from class. She was doing well with Jo as her instructor. She was learning the basics of Omega obedience, her own sexual range and how to control it, also how to please both Doms and Alphas. She wouldn’t be using those skills separately like some of her classmates no doubt would, but some of the distinctions were important.

His mate was a quick study when she applied herself, and she accepted her paddling well when she was caught with her focus wandering. Learning to accept correction gracefully was a critical part of the class. Even the most astute students and the best behaved couldn’t avoid the paddle. It was a given in the class. Sometimes the instructor set the class to competitive games in which the winner received an orgasm in the manner of their choosing, and the last place loser got paddled hard in front of the class.

Castiel had worked closely with Dean to build the structure of the class. It was essentially an artificial form of Domestic Discipline applied to a classroom setting. All punishments were public and on-the-bare. (E.O.s needed always to be able to see the damage they inflicted.) The rules were explicitly stated. Follow them well, and you would be rewarded. Break them, and you would be punished. For instance, if the rule for a particular game was, ‘don’t come in last’, then everyone knew someone would be using the bench at the front of the room.

Despite the strictness and the constant application of the paddle, the students enjoyed their work. They were learning a great deal, and they bonded closely with each other as friends. They were lighthearted and playful, reveling in the freedom of letting their wolves be themselves and knowing they’d be guided in the way their alpha wanted them to go. Jo was never unfair. She was gentle and kind, offering support and positive reinforcement more often than she took them to task. They hated disappointing her more than anything.

Well, April hated disappointing Jo almost more than anything. For April, a standing rule in her home
was that any punishment meted out upon her person by a party outside of her home would be
delivered again twice-over by her Alpha when she returned to him. That’s exactly how he put it to
her in his gravelly voice. She shivered with pleasure when he read this rule out to her, but she’d
come to hate it in the last few weeks.

April let herself into the suite promptly at 4:33. She went looking for her Alpha immediately and
found him moving laundry into the dryer. It never ceased to amaze her that the Facility Director
and all-around important Alpha did laundry and housework for himself. He was too cute for words.
“I’ll do that, Alpha.” She stepped forward to take over, but he was already finished and turning on
the machine.

“No need, sweetheart, but thank you for offering. How was your day?” As he turned to face his
Omega, April saw that his eyes were red-rimmed and his face was puffy. He’d been weeping again.
She hadn’t noticed internally, but then, he often dimmed the bond during his work day to keep from
distracting her. She wanted to ask him about it but refrained for the moment. She knew his house
rules, and it wasn’t time yet.

“I learned a lot today. We talked about Omega instinct and how to fight it when the wrong Top gives
us an order, you know, one that doesn’t have the authority. Alpha Jo says she’s going to teach us
self-defense, so we can fight if we need to. Oh, and I got to thirty minutes without coming today.
That’s the longest yet.” She sparkled with excitement, so Castiel let her youthful enthusiasm feed
him, a balm for his upset spirit.

“Good girl. And I know you can do even better. Would you work on it with me tonight? I would
love to see just how far we can push your training. “

“Of course, Alpha. Anything.” She settled into his arms, still standing awkwardly next to the
rumbling dryer. She moved easily with him as he guided her into the kitchen. “But I also got three
paddlings today. I’m sorry, Sir.”

He held her away from him so he could see her face. “What were they for?”

April dug the punishment report from her pocket and handed it to him. He held it but he didn’t
unfold it, waiting for her to tell him. Verbal confession was a big deal to him, so she met his eye
carefully and said, “I left my homework report here in the suite when I left this morning, that was the
first. Then I came in last place at the memory game. Do you know that one? Alpha gives us a long
set of complicated instructions and we must wait until she’s though with all of them before we start.
Then we execute them exactly as we’re told and in the right order. It’s really hard!” she whined.

“I know it’s difficult, April, but learning to listen carefully to instructions from your Top is very, very
important. I’m surprised and disappointed you lost that game. Last place? You deserved to be
paddled for that. And the third?”

This one was the hardest for her to admit. It was actual misbehavior, not simply failure to succeed
like the other two. She felt very guilty, and knew she was going to get it. She ducked her head low
and mumbled something incomprehensible.

“Unacceptable, Omega,” he corrected her sternly and lifted her chin. She still couldn’t meet his eyes,
but she spoke clearly the second time.

“I fought with Veronica and Jimmy. They were being little punks, and I got in trouble for yelling at
them to shut their stupid faces.” She bit her lip.

Castiel almost laughed out loud, but stopped the outburst in time. Barely. She was so young and
innocent and sweet. He sighed and released her face.

“What was it all about?”

“I’d rather not say, Sir. It’s embarrassing.” She pouted and turned her back on him.

“April.” That’s all he said, but there was much communicated in that one word; that and the persistent command he pushed through the bond.

“They were teasing me that with our age difference, you and me, there’s no way we have any kind of relationship but parent-to-child, like a…a Daddy-thing or something. I told them both it wasn’t like that, but…it got pretty ugly. I said some things I shouldn’t have said.”

“All right. I know how much it eats away at you when you feel guilty, so we’re going to take care of this right now.” He opened the report so he could determine what the stroke-count should be and whether she’d Released during her previous run-ins or not. “Afterward, I want you to take an Epsom-salt bath and relax while I make dinner. Go ahead and get yourself placed.” According to the report, she was given 10 for forgetting her homework, just 5 for losing the game, and 20 for arguing in class. He owed her 70 tonight and could expect a substantial Release. She was a little overdue. He reminded himself to ask her more about the fight over dinner.

April was already naked and kneeling on the floor in front of the chair he preferred. It had low, wide armrests that didn’t get in the way during an over-the-knee spanking but provided enough structure that cuddling afterward was supported. He sat and reached for her wrist, tugging gently to have her rise and place herself on his lap.

His wolf loved this part. Having his warm, young, compliant mate naked over his lap made almost everything right with the world; almost everything, for as long as she was there. He touched her bottom gently, inspecting the damage the paddle had done over the course of the day. It wasn’t bad, just a little redness left now. There were no abrasions or bruises. Good. He intended for her to feel this, but he didn’t want her hurting in the salt bath.

“I’m extremely disappointed with you, Omega. You’ve already paid for your transgressions, and I believe you’ve learned your lesson. But I need to know I can trust you to meet your obligations to me when we’re apart. And I can’t have another wolf leaving a bigger imprint on you than I do. It upsets the balance between us. Take a deep breath, you’re getting 70 right now.”

He lifted his arm up, made his hand a flat plate of warm steel and brought it down hard. She barely moved, but he saw the line of tension that formed across her shoulders. So good for him. His mind went and broke the rules again, reminding him that Dean’s shoulders did exactly the same thing at the start of a long spanking. Castiel managed to push the thought away and concentrate on the job at hand, pun intended.

He spanked her hard and quickly, not so fast that it would be over too soon, but fast enough that she would struggle to deal with one blow before the next rained down. It was a spanking meant to create a feeling of building, rising, ever increasing tension. He didn’t ask her to count or think or anything at all except just take it. He wanted her to in her Sub mindset. He wanted to activate her deepest self, pull up all the guilt and then let it wash out of her once and for all in a gush. It was a spanking designed to Release both her Omega gland and her Deep Submissive.

She began to struggle, kick, and cry out. She begged for him to stop, but he cinched her back in by her waist, caught hold of her flailing arm, pinning it to the small of her back, and kept on. Her ass was glowing red now, from the fullness of the roundest part to the tops of her thighs. He felt it coming as much as she did. The Mating-bond was thrown wide, and while he didn’t experience her
pain and impending Release the way she did, he could sense it all.

She Released with a deafening scream right at 60, leaving him free to quicken and deliver the last 10 in a rush, overwhelming her. She broke into uncontrollable sobs as he stopped and began to rub gentle circles on her back with his left hand while his right rested lightly on her throbbing backside. He let her cry out the last of her guilt and waited for her to come back to him.

Somewhere in the middle of all of that, his cock had stiffened. He knew she could feel it against her belly, and he wanted. He pulled her to stand in front of him, supporting her with his large hands, to check her face. Was she too far gone? No. She was fine. (That’s my strong Omega.) She met his eyes, sniffling hard and still hiccupping, trying to bring the crying under control, but there was raw lust in her eyes. He stood and swept her up in a bridal carry, dumping her unceremoniously on the sofa. She yelped when her ass hit the leather but didn’t protest.

Castiel made quick work of his buckle, button, and zipper, pulling his cock out and letting his pants fall just enough to avoid scraping her flesh with the rough metal. She let one leg fall off the sofa’s edge, and put the other over the back. His wolf breathed out in admiration. Their Omega was limber and willing. Castiel mounted her like an animal, thrusting fast and hard. It was the same tempo he’d kept with his hand, but it worked for this too. Her ass was too sore for much contact right now, but with her legs as wide as they were, he could get to her pussy just fine.

There was no play, no kissing, no holding or touching or caressing. He was savage and powerful, and they both loved it. His Omega craved his knot, wrapping her legs around his back as he got close, but he denied her this. He loved to ride the power of the wolf in him while keeping enough control to snap it back when he wanted. It was an exercise in control for himself as much as what his mate experienced in her class. She came hard, digging her nails into his shoulders. He pounded her through her orgasm, reveling in the pulses of tension he could feel massaging his cock, then he pulled out before his knot locked into place. Her feet and legs were forced to separate as he pulled up onto his knees, stroking himself to completion.

He painted her belly and labia with his copious fluid while she writhed beneath him. Now sated, his Omega’s ass covered with his handprint and no one else’s, and his Omega painted with his come, he slowly stopped stroking and breathed himself back down.

April was soon delivered, exhausted, to the bath, and Cas wiped down, redressed, and cooking spaghetti in the kitchenette. That’s when everything inside him collapsed with no warning.

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Castiel knew how to make spaghetti. Dean taught him to blanch and crush fresh ripe tomatoes, to select tender herbs and cut them with scissors so they wouldn’t bruise. Dean knew everything about cooking. Castiel wanted to make a wholesome meal for his mate. She’d been so good for him, and she deserved it. She would emerge from her bath relaxed, sleepy, and very, very hungry. He planned to have the meal ready to share by then. For the two mates, dinnertime was a very special part of their day. It marked an important change of persona in their interactions with each other. Cas aimed to have any corrections or Releases for the day meted out and over with by dinner time so they could both come to the table with nothing hanging over them, no reason they needed to occupy their Secondary or Tertiary gender spaces. He wanted it to be a time that Castiel Novak and April Novak,
though separated in age by nearly twenty years, could come together as two Mated adults and share a contented meal together.

He liked to share the joys and stresses of his day and to hear hers. He liked to be domestically intimate with her. It was often a struggle, but they were getting better at it as they got to know each other. He admired so much about her spirit. He loved how spunky she could be and how she saw everything with a perspective his jaded age had robbed from him.

He chopped fresh garlic while he opened up the Mating-bond, checking on her state of mind and sending her assurance of his love.

Love.

It was the strangest emotion. Not really a single emotion at all, but a cluster of everything that ties one person to another in an unbreakable bond. It was regard, affection, admiration, respect, amusement, pride, endearment, lust, wonder… it was strange and hard to nail down, but unmistakable nevertheless.

Castiel had loved April from the moment the Mating-bond snapped into place. He never wanted to be without her. But it was a completely new kind of love for him. He’d heard new mates describe it so many times. It was not like most other types of love: neither learned nor earned, it was present just because. It couldn’t be questioned or broken. It just was. It was similar to the instant and unbreakable love that a parent feels at the birth of a child although not the same love as that at all either. His love for April was carnal, hungry, and raw, not parental, but it came from a similar place in his heart. Nothing could ever destroy it. It was pure and whole.

Castiel didn’t see it coming. One moment he was stirring the red sauce, musing over his mate, and the next he’d flung the pan across the kitchen to splatter like blood against the wall with a loud clunk and a deafening racket. His breathing felt torn from him with a gasp as his legs gave way. He crumpled to the floor in the mess, the spilled tomatoes burning his arms where they’d splashed in his violence. He tucked himself into the tightest ball he could manage and sobbed great loud, ugly, heaving cries of raw unmitigated pain.

In no time, April was tucked in with him, still wet and naked, and now coated in red sauce, but tangling herself into his tight coil. He grabbed onto her and wept harder than he’d ever done before, rocking back and forth. She cried into his chest and held on tight, letting him have a release of his own. Not speaking, not asking anything of him, but staying close; a warm, loving body for him to hold onto, keep him from flying apart.

After an unknown length of time, he quieted and stilled. She spoke softly into the silence. Now was the time – according to his rules, even. It was suppertime, and that meant he didn’t need her submission. She could speak openly and freely, so she did.

“I met him once, Alpha. Did you know? Before he left you?” Castiel didn’t answer. He had nothing left to answer with. He just listened, letting her soft, sweet voice soothe him. “He came here to collect some of his things that he’d left. He didn’t know I was in the back, and he let himself in with his key. I was surprised and a little weirded out when I heard someone out in the living room, but I went out to check. I, Alpha, I’m sorry, but I was home alone, and I was naked. I expected it must be you, so I went to check. He was there with a box and he was putting books and CDs into it. He heard me and turned around. He saw me, like this.” She gestured at her nudity. Castiel still didn’t speak, but he clutched her and smoothed her wet hair. How could he be angry with her when he was in this state and there was spaghetti sauce dripping down the far wall? The pool underneath him was a little warm, but not hot enough to burn anymore. It’s amazing how quickly sauce cools when it’s spread over every surface of the kitchen.
She went on. “He was kind to me, Alpha. He was sweet and gentle. He told me he was happy for us. I knew him of course. I knew all about both of you before I ever came here. I thought I might be lucky enough to pull one of you for my tester, but I never dreamed I’d Mate with one of you. And Castiel,” she used his name so rarely that it broke through his trance, and he looked down at her. “I never dreamed in a million years I’d be the cause of you losing your best friend and your only love. No, don’t.” He’d begun to protest. He loved Dean, he could admit that to her if he had to, but Dean wasn’t his only love. That wasn’t fair. But she kept on, not letting him break in. “I saw it when he spoke to me, Castiel. I knew in that instant what you are to each other, and I knew it was never going to fade. I see the same pain in you every moment of every day, and I saw it in him for just the few moments I had in his presence.”

She paused and stroked a red stripe down his chest tenderly. “What I don’t understand is why you’re letting yourself do this to yourself, to me, to Dean, to Sam and everyone here who loves you, and that’s everyone here. Castiel, we can’t go on like this. No, please listen to me. I give you my trust with no doubts and no questions asked. I trust you completely. Why can you not trust me, too? Aren’t we two sides of the same coin? Isn’t that how True-Mates work?”

“I trust you, April, but this isn’t about you,” his voice was gruff from crying.

“Not about me? Of course it’s about me, and you and Dean as well, but don’t you think for one second that I am not being torn apart by all of this right beside you. You owe me more, Castiel. I deserve a strong wolf who will give everything he has to give for me. You deserve the same from me. Isn’t that what you told me? Right now, you’re broken. I never know from one day to the next what state you’ll be in, and Castiel, God! It’s all for nothing. All this pain and drama, for nothing.”

He just looked at her blankly. What was she talking about? Nothing?

“You and I can never be equal partners, my Alpha. We’re too far apart on the spectrum. No matter what we do or say, we’ll always have a power difference between us. Always.”

“April, no! Shhh, don’t talk like that. I can’t live without you.” He was shaking and had started to cry silently again. “Please don’t leave me. Please…”

He’d misunderstood her completely, so she flooded the Mating-bond with love and comfort. No, no sweet little Alpha, not going anywhere. She held him tightly until he calmed back down a little, humming to him soothingly. ‘This is going to be a hard sell’, she thought, ‘but I have to try, for all of us’.

“Just listen to me, Castiel. You told me that learning to listen is important, right?” He nodded mutely. “Okay, look, you love me. I know you do because I can feel it through our bond. But more than that, you treat me with respect and so much gentle care. You are careful with me. I see it all the time. You give me the dominant hand that I crave and need. You knot me with passion and strength, and it’s perfect. You love me, Alpha. Please say it for me?”

“I do. I love you very much, my sweet Omega.” He was barely holding it together.

“That’s right. And I love you, too – just as much, but in a mirror image. We’re a perfect fit for each other as mates. But we can never be partners, can never be equals. My love, I am not your equal, nor you mine. Do you understand?”

He thought he did, so he nodded, but he needed more. He still didn’t know where this was going, and he was entirely spent. It wasn’t a new argument. Castiel’s research touched on the disconnect between mates at opposite sides of the spectrum, but it felt unexpectedly wretched in real life. He was aghast at the thought of being incapable of supplying all of her needs for intimacy and
“You love your brother, right? You’d do anything for him? I don’t know if you know this, but even though he’s older than you, from what I’ve seen of the two of you, Gabriel is who he is because of you. That’s how strong your bond is with him. And yet, being his brother doesn’t mean you love me any less. If anything, having a supportive brother who watches out for you makes you a better mate for me because you’re a better person for your time with him. Still with me?”

“I am. I think I may have an idea where you’re going with this, but baby, it’s too big. I need you to say it straight out for me. I couldn’t bear it if I were guessing wrong. Please, April, just say it.”

“Good little Alpha,” she praised. “Okay, I need you to trust me more than you’ve ever trusted anyone in your life, way more than you trust yourself because I know how far that goes, and it’s not very far. Castiel, I need you desperately, but I need you whole. You aren’t EVER going to get over loving Dean Winchester. That’s not something that stops. You’re mourning as if he’d died, but he’s still alive, Castiel. Meanwhile, you’re falling deeper and deeper into the abyss, and you’ll destroy yourself, me, Dean, everyone.”

“Please tell me what to do? I’m so lost. April, please…” It was a singular moment of vulnerability for the great Alpha, one that would never come again, and April held it close with the awe that it deserved.

“Take me with you tomorrow. We’ll go shopping together. We’ll choose a ring. Then you bring me back here and leave me with Jo.”

“What?”

“Go get him, Castiel. Bring him home, and marry him. And don’t you ever, ever doubt that this is the right thing to do. I need you, Alpha. I will NEVER leave you, or stop loving you, or doubt your love for me, but Dean fills something for you that I can’t. You need to fix this. Go get Dean and bring him home.”

Chapter End Notes

No seriously, I love Comments.
Wednesday, May 3, 2017

Chapter Summary

Things are looking up for the boys. Still depressingly little amounts of smut. I meant to write more. I swear.

Chapter Notes

Just please note, I'm not going to try fill every plot hole, and I’m not going to follow up and show every punishment that’s promised. Just know, if it’s scheduled or promised, it happens – sometimes out of sight, but it happens.

From here on, and in some places in the previous chapters, parentheses around a bit of text indicates an internal comment or dialogue with an individual and their wolf. I needed something aside from quotation marks, and in my ignorance, still can't figure out how to format italics and stuff.

I stole the Mating bond idea from Robert Jordan. I love the idea of being able to feel your mate’s emotions from far away.

Thanks for sticking with me. I hope you like this one, and it doesn't feel like an emotional cop-out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Alpha Novak!!” Becky screeched as she flew toward him down the corridor just outside his suite. He was escorting his Omega to class after a tense and silent breakfast. Neither had wanted to burst the delicate bubble of hope that hovered just above Castiel’s head, so they barely breathed in one another’s direction this morning. It seemed too susceptible to... but Becky Rosin had no such compunctions.

“Calm yourself, Omega!” Cas snapped out with stern Alpha authority. He took hold of the back of her neck as she slid to a stop before him, and he pulled her face close to his. Wide brown eyes met blazing blue. “There are rules that govern how we comport ourselves in public spaces in this facility, are there not?” She nodded quickly and broke his gaze to study the floor, but didn’t speak. “Would you please remind me what they are?”

She was breathless from the mad dash to catch him, but too, from standing before him in his anger. She was too readily excitable, and she’d fucked up again. She took a gulping breath and told the floor, “No running, no yelling, no horseplay, no unauthorized sex.” His grip tightened on her neck to an almost painful degree, but he didn’t say anything more. Becky risked a sidelong glance at his face. It hadn’t softened. She whimpered.

“I’m sorry, Alpha. I thought I might miss you this morning, and I need you to sign the security release for the new Omega Coordinator? He’s meeting Rufus at the foyer at 6:45, and he can’t get in if we don’t have the form signed.” Becky managed the whole thing without a breath and at top speed.

“I see,” responded Castiel, removing his large hand from her neck. “And pray tell, why would a text message or phone call to me not have sufficed? I’m certain either method would have served us better.” He pulled a pen from the pocket of his white medical coat and held his hand out for the form which Becky handed him.

“I didn’t think of that, Alpha,” she gave back extremely sheepishly.

Castiel scanned and signed the form quickly. He knew the name on it, had selected Jo’s replacement himself, and felt The Facility was lucky to have hired the new Coordinator. He clicked and pocketed his pen, handed the clipboard back to the excitable Omega, and fixed her once more with his eye. “To assist you in remembering in the future, please submit a Punishment Order for yourself and present yourself to any E.O. of your choosing. Enter it as a ‘4-C’ level. Omega, I will not tolerate this kind of behavior. Screeching in the hallways is a particular pet peeve of mine. I am confident that you knew that as this is neither the first nor the second time we’ve had this conversation. Will there need to be another?”

Oh shit, he was doing the eyebrow thing. “No, Alpha! No, I’m so sorry. It won’t happen again, I swear.”

“Thank you, Omega. See that it doesn’t. If there’s another occurrence, you’ll be answering to me directly. And Becky, the Coordinator is a ‘She’, not a ‘He’. Jody’s a woman.”

“Oh.”
Rufus burst forcefully through the door to the entrance foyer startling the middle-aged beta woman who was studying the arrangements of plaques on the wall. She spun to face him and dropped her bag. “Shit,” she swore and stooped to pick it up again.

“You the new hire?” he asked aggressively.

“Um, yes,” she managed and stuck a hand out for him to shake. “Jody Mills. I’m going to be the Omega Coordinator and Dorm Mom.”

“I don’t care what ya’ are, just as long as you follow my rules. So listen up! I hate going through this shit twice.” He left her hand hanging there awkwardly and turned to the security desk.

“Uh, right.” She put her listening face on and straightened up, following behind him.

“This here’s the employee entrance. We stagger the employee start times because the entrance process takes some time. You’re in the 7:00 a.m. pool. That means your butt walks through THAT door every day between 6:55 and 7:00. Not earlier, not later. Got me?”

“Got it,” answered Jody. She was a beta, and she could smell that he was as well. He wasn’t going to get a ‘Sir’ from her just because he was cranky and authoritarian. That was going to have to be earned.

“You got your ID?” He held out his hand.

“Uh, yeah, it’s…” she had it ready in her pocket and handed it over to him.

“First thing we gotta do is get Mark here to scan your ID and issue you a Security Badge with your picture and thumbprint.” He handed the ID to Mark through the slot in the glass.

“Please stand on the line and look at the camera,” Mark told her. He grabbed a quick and terrible shot of her face, then took her thumb print using a touchpad on his desk. “Give me just a minute,” he told her and wandered toward the back of his small room to make the badge.

Rufus addressed her again. “He’ll issue you an Employee ID number that will tie in to your medical monitoring records through that badge. Every day at 7:00, you swipe in at one of these kiosks, like this,” Rufus used his own badge to open the little kiosk door. He entered the tiny space and ushered her in as well. It was too tight for two people, so she hovered in the doorway to observe. “Process works like this: you let it read your thumb print here on the screen. Don’t be a dumbass and try to read a different thumb than the one you just gave Mark.” Jody chuckled while Rufus put his thumb upon the designated spot on the screen. It lit up and his name and personal data appeared on the screen.

He turned and caught her eye, “You ever do this and somebody else’s name pops up, you call me immediately. No fucking around. Got me?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, so now it’s a two-step process from here. Security and Medical are looking for an ID match and to check that all your chemical, birth control, & medication levels are normal, and that you’re not sick. So you…and it don’t matter which one you do first…you spit into one of these tubes, up to this mark,” he filled the tube to the mark with his saliva. It wasn’t much as it was a small tube. “Snap it all the way closed. It makes a God awful mess if you don’t get it closed, so listen for it to snap.” He demonstrated clearly. Seemed simple enough to Jody. “Then you shove it in this slot and close the
You see the screen says, ‘Received?’”

“Yes, I see,” Jody responded politely.

“Yep, so then you grab one of these cups and pee up to this mark here.” Rufus casually unzipped and pulled his penis out with one hand, aimed at the inside wall of the cup and filled it just to the mark, then capped it with one hand and tucked back in. Jody was impressed with his control. “You got more to give than the cup holds, you just aim into that little basin behind you.” Jody turned and saw a tiny urinal on the wall at the back. ‘Oh, yeah. THAT would be convenient for women’, she thought sarcastically. She imagined trying to squash her thighs and torso close enough to the wall to get positioned correctly and resolved to ask another female employee how it was done. But Rufus demonstrated, saying her, “You just pull it out by this little handle on the bottom and straddle. Then shove it back into the wall when you’re done.”


“The pee-cup gets shoved into this hole here, then press the Go button.” Rufus continued his tour. “Wash your hands and wipe down anything you touched and any drops you scattered with one of these wipes here. Then wait for your results. It doesn’t take very long.” As if to prove him right, the screen blinked green and flashed, ‘Entrance Accepted, Rufus Turner, Security Director’.

“Then you take the samples back out, throw ‘em in the trash right here, and you’re good to go. And for the love of all that’s holy and sacred, clean up after yourself. None of us is your mama, and nobody wants to stand in someone else’s pee.” He motioned her back out of the kiosk and approached the turnstile at the end of the foyer. “When you get the green light, swipe your badge here, scan your thumb again, and push through the turnstile. If there was a problem with the test or your readings were off, the door over yonder to medical will let you in. They’ll figure out what’s wrong and get you squared away. If your ID doesn’t jibe with our records, the screen in the kiosk will tell you to go see the security window. Hey, Mark!” he shouted over Jody’s shoulder. “You got this beta’s badge done?”

“Yes, sir, Rufus. Right here.” Mark slid the badge to her through the slot with her ID. She reached for them, but Rufus got to them first and held them up in front of himself, holding her attention by holding her credentials hostage.

“DON’T lose the badge. Don’t come to work without it. The system screens for anything abnormal: drugs and alcohol, pregnancy, STDs, hormone imbalance, infections and illness, all kinds of science-medical crap that I don’t have to know. Don’t do ANY drugs that are not on your medical profile and keep up with your birth control. We’ve never had an accident here and we don’t want to start now.” His eyes remained sharp as he spoke, not fucking around in the least. “When you’re on your own time, you fuck who you want, but you gotta report every instance of unprotected sex or sex with a new partner to your supervisor and medical immediately when you get to work next shift. They’ll assess your risks, limit your sexual contact with clients however they need to, and run tests for STDs until they’re sure you’re clear. Most of us just stick to fucking other Facility staff. Keeps the tests simple and keeps it all in the family, but it’s up to you. You go off and fuck some stranger you got no idea what they might be carrying and you can just kiss ANY sexual contact onsite goodbye for the next six months.” Jody just smirked at him. She was happily Mated and monogamous on her own time. It wouldn’t be a problem.

“Don’t try to bring your pee in with you in a cup or baggie. The temperature won’t be right, and you’ll get busted. Happens all the time; new folks don’t wanna use the kiosk to pee, then they’re stuck out here ‘til I come smack their ass for being stupid dumb-shits.”

“Mornin’, Rufus,” said a cheery red-headed beta woman on her way in the door headed toward one
of the kiosks on the other side of the foyer. There were five on each side.

“Morning, Charlie,” Rufus called back. “Oh hey, Charlie!” he stopped her from stepping in. “You mind walkin’ in with Jody here. It’s her first day.”

The beta’s eyes widened and her face lit up, “Absolutely! I mean, no, I don’t mind. I’m thrilled to meet you again. I’m Charlie!” She extended her hand. Jody shook it.

“Jody Mills. I met you at my interview.”

“That’s right. That was me. Okay, I'll be out in a sec. You cleared already?”

“No, not yet. I just need my badge,” Jody looked at Rufus expectantly.

He handed it to her saying, “You got 10 minutes from the time the kiosk releases you until the turnstile will lock you back out and make you do it all over again, so don’t be screwin’ around in here too long.”

“Thanks Rufus. I appreciate your help.” Jody told him sincerely. She liked him a lot. She expected they’d get along swimmingly once they got to know each other. Jody always preferred a straightforward, even gruff personality if it was genuine, to someone who was hard to read and fake no matter how nice they could seem.

“Okay, then, you know what you’re doing in there?” Charlie nodded to the kiosks.

“I think I’m good,” Jody responded, watching Rufus disappear through the turnstile.

“All righty. See you in a sec.” Charlie stepped in and pulled the door closed, and Jody entered the one next to Charlie’s. More employees had come in, and the kiosks were filling fast.

It was going to be a whirlwind first day. Jody dropped her pants and positioned the cup.

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Castiel felt fidgety. His body carried far too much energy to be sitting in the conference room discussing income streams, budgets, and future capital plans, but he kept himself contained and focused. Dean taught him years ago that none of his dreams would ever amount to anything without funding and thorough planning, and he’d been right. It was Dean, learning how to tap into the deep pockets of wealthy Lupin alumnae of the college, that made their first research project an unmatched success. Castiel paid attention and never again made the mistake of skipping over the dull stuff.

But today sucked. Sitting here through the interminable details sucked. Last night he’d given up trying to clean up and had left the red-orange mess in the kitchen to dry and stain the walls, ordering April a meal from the cafeteria. He couldn’t have eaten if he’d tried. The kitchen was officially closed, but there was always someone on staff ready to whip up a grilled cheese sandwich for the Heat/Rut rooms. Cas felt guilty for leaving the mess in his kitchenette for the Facility janitors, but it was beyond his capability to manage. He’d mopped up most of the liquid. April assured him with a gentle laugh that it was fine for the Facility Director to let the cleaning staff do their jobs once in a while.

After showering them both clean, he had made love to his mate gently and sweetly. He wanted her to
feel how deeply honored he was by her trust in him and to connect their wolves. He had kissed down her throat to her Mating-bite, sucking the scar into his mouth and tenderly torturing it with his teeth and tongue while thrusting slowly into her. She had clung to his back and moved with him easily. Her pleasure spiked when he bit down harder on the bite-scar and she came with a startled gasp. (Oh, that’s interesting,) his wolf perked up and took notice. (Wonder if that would work without a cock up inside her. Or when she’s wearing clothes.)

(Down boy), Castiel thought to his wolf. (Not the right time.) He had finished up by knotting her, and they’d spoken quietly together very late into the night as he caressed her hair and skin. He needed her reassurance that it hadn’t been her distress talking earlier. She was right, he’d realized. He didn’t fully trust her. Hell, he still didn’t really know her. But he expected (demanded) that she trust him. It was unbalanced and unfair. The Mating-bond stood wide open. She was all there to be examined under his wolf’s sharp eye. There was no ulterior motive, no deception. April watched him watching her with cautious optimism. She was a book open to be read, and she was clearly fearful that he’d reject her proposal out of a misguided attempt to do the noble thing (which was very much in his nature,) his wolf pointed out unkindly.

But Castiel was through being noble. The more he put together all the conversations he’d had in the last few weeks that had touched on his feelings for Dean, the more he realized what a ‘Tool’ he’d been. (Is that the word Dean would use?) (Yep, that’s the one. Maybe douchebag.) They’d all tried to get through to him. Everyone had been pointing him toward this decision. He’d been stupid and blind, determined to push through something that couldn’t be pushed through and convinced no one would feel its impact but himself. He’d lain awake for hours, holding his miracle-of-a-mate in his arms, listening to her reassure him time and again that she wanted Dean in their Pack. She’d called him her Mate-in-Law. She’d sworn the three of them could make it work and tempted his wolf with how delicious it would be to have two Subs to play with, two that belonged to him for good. The wolf had needed no convincing. If wolves packed for travel, his bags would already have been stuffed in the car and he’d be panting out the window, nose in the wind.

Castiel was convinced too. After fighting it so hard for so many years, after seeing no way past this conundrum and repressing everything he felt for Dean for so long, his tiny teenaged mate entered his life and swept all his excuses to the side.

Just marry him.

It was so simple! The controlled part of his brain, the one that he was loathe to acknowledge for the moment since he blamed it for EVERYTHING, spoke up like a little white angel perched on his shoulder. It pointed out that not knowing what kind of True-Mate lay in Dean’s future could be a sticking point. Surely, whomever Dean was destined to meet would want Dean all to himself? It was a fair point. Cas certainly wanted Dean all to himself. What damage would it do to Dean’s future relationship with his mate if they forced a previously cemented marriage to another man on top of it against the unknown mate’s will?

April shushed him and stroked his face. Castiel had been unaware that he was speaking his worries out loud, but she whispered comfort into his ear. “We can do this, sweet little Alpha. Dean would not be True-Mated to someone unreasonable or overly possessive. It would be a bad fit. We just need to take each day as it comes; do what we need to do for the three of us, and when we become four, then we’ll make it four. We’ll all adjust. Trust me, please, and go to sleep. You’re so tired, little Alpha.”

**************
It wasn’t as easy or as simple as simply packing up and heading to the jewelry store or the airport. April couldn’t afford to miss class. Jo was introducing self-defense techniques and assertiveness training. While Cas had no doubt that his mate could be assertive when she ought to be, he wanted her to have the jargon and rules of The Facility’s policies under her belt so she could avoid any misunderstandings that could get her in trouble. And Castiel also had commitments he couldn’t ditch, much as he wanted to. He was still closely involved as a Claimant-trainer in several of the students’ training. He had a session later in the morning with young Jeremy, and another after lunch with Cecelia. After that, he needed to put in several hours of work on his own at his computer doing administrative drudgery and he owed the medical wing two hours of clinic time before the end of the day. For right now, the staff meeting was finally drawing to a close. He cleared his throat.

“If I may, before you all scatter for the day, I need to apologize for my behavior of late. It’s no secret, I’m sure, to any of you, that I have been inappropriately distracted and distraught. I’ve been allowing my personal life to interfere with my work as a professional. I am sorry for the burden my actions have placed upon you all, and I assure you that I have a plan that will alleviate the problem one way or another. Some of you, especially alphas Bobby and Benny have been picking up my slack without complaint. To you, I say a heartfelt thank you. I appreciate your bearing with me through this troubling time in my life, and I humbly ask if I can burden you further by asking you to continue covering for me for a little while longer.”

It was Castiel-speak, formal and awkward, but it cut right through the attendants’ activity. Those who had been shuffling papers or beginning to rise from their chairs froze. Every eye focused on Cas at the head of the table. He looked around the room, briefly meeting every eye before continuing his speech. “As you know, I am recently Mated. My taking a mate, while it is a blessing both to me and to April, my lovely mate, it has also been the catalyst that has driven a wedge between me and my longtime friend and work partner. What’s more, it’s damaged this Facility’s stability by driving Dean to transfer to another state and toppling a line of dominoes which are still rippling through us six weeks after his departure.” Castiel gestured to Jo near the other end of the conference table and nodded at her before he spoke further.

“We’ve moved Jo Harvelle into the position of Acting Director of Training, and replaced her as Omega Coordinator with a highly qualified and personable beta-Neutral named Jody Mills. Some of you know Jody already, at least by reputation, but I urge all of you to get to know her better. Jody will be a wonderful asset to the Training Department, and she starts work today. While I’ve offered Jo the job of Training Director full time, she’s communicated to me that she will not accept the position, but would be happy to take an assistant role under another Director’s leadership. The Board has agreed to create and fund such a position contingent upon finding the right wolf to head the department. This of course leaves us with a hole still in the Training Director’s chair. I intend to rectify this vacuum by going personally to Dallas and bringing our Director of Training back home to refill the post where he belongs. I will need all of your assistance to cover my appointments and commitments in my absence.”

He stopped speaking, looking around at the motionless wolves at the table. No one moved.

“Um. Please?” he prompted.

“What are you saying, Alpha?” Billie tried.

Cas frowned at her as if she’d spoken Cantonese. “I’m saying I want to go to Dallas and convince Dean to come home.”

“But what are you gonna tell him that would convince him to do that?” inserted their Head Nurse,
Meg, leaning far forward in her chair.

Castiel considered bullshitting them, but they all knew the truth anyway, apparently. So, he sighed and went for broke, busting through eight years of deception. “I’m going to ask him to marry me and offer him his old job back.”

The room went nuts. Papers literally flew into the air in the rush of bodies to reach him and shake his hand or hug him. The feeling of relief was palpable, like when the news of a ceasefire finally makes it to the front lines and everyone can stand down. Sam worked his way to Castiel, his face carved from stone, immune to the celebratory atmosphere. Castiel braced himself. He wasn’t going to back down no matter what Sam had to say, so he faced the beta-Dom directly, making no move to posture. Castiel respected Sam a great deal, and prayed they could soon be brothers.

“Don’t you dare do this to him if you don’t mean it, Castiel,” bit Sam. “I’m serious. He’s been through enough over you. If you flash a ring in his face and then balk at the first sign of trouble, I’ll end you.”

“Sam. Please. I hear you. I do. And you’re absolutely right.” The room was just about empty now as the crew headed to their various appointments. Jo punched Cas’ shoulder on her way back to pick up his mate’s class from their time at the gym. Cas kept his eyes on Dean’s brother. He needed Sam’s buy in, and he deserved this from Sam. “I’ve been a fucking coward. For years. I deserve all your anger and suspicion, all of it. I won’t even try to convince you I don’t. But I’ll make you the same promise I’m going to make to Dean and April: I’m all in for this. I’m utterly committed to building a relationship with your brother based on mutual love, respect, and equal partnership, and I’m not ever going to change my mind.”

“Tell me how you’re going to make it work,” Sam demanded, not softening to Castiel at all. Cas was ready for this, so he started talking. By the end, Sam was on board. He shook his head slowly at Cas though, trying to picture what kind of reception Cas had waiting for him in Dallas. “He’s really, really pissed at you, man. I just don’t know…”

It was another fifteen minutes before Castiel managed to make it back to his office to prepare for his session with Jeremy. He felt wrung out. Charlie had promised him she’d put her head together with Becky and Ellen to get his appointments divvied up. All he had to do was get through today, and he was a free man. Cas got to work, and soon he’d assumed his necessary persona again. He slipped through the halls to the small practice room where Jeremy awaited him.

“All right, Omega!” snapped Castiel as he closed the door behind him and found Jeremy kneeling in position in the center of the room, naked on the floor mat. “Let’s see what you remember. I’ll know if you haven’t been practicing.” Cas let a trace of a nudge eek through his temporary Claim-bond to remind the Omega that his Dom could sense deception. “Position 4.”

The Omega kept himself on his knees, flattened his chest to the mat, pulled his spine into a downward, concave bow, and lifted his hips. Number 4 was indeed a presentation position, but his ass shouldn’t be angled outward. This position was primarily for spanking, not fucking. It required that the spine stay just slightly bowed up like a cat or mostly flat, not pulled downward to display his hole like Jeremy had done. Standing near Jeremy’s right shoulder, Castiel brought the switch in his hands down sharply along the crack of his ass, directly against the Omega’s hole. If he was going to
display it so flagrantly, who was the Alpha to miss such a lovely invitation? The Omega screamed and tucked his butt under to protect it.

“Let’s try that again, shall we? Position 4, Omega.” This time the Omega-Neutral remembered the correct angle of his spine. His form was good, but Castiel noted that he still held more tension in his muscles than he should. He would learn to relax with time and trust. Cas sent praise and pleasure to him through the bond. “Very good. And now show me position 12.”

The Omega flattened himself and rolled onto his back, pulling his knees to his armpits and holding them there with the insides of his own elbows. He was obscenely on display. Number 12 was Castiel’s personal favorite during scenes. It wasn’t good if you wanted access to an Omega’s penis or clitoris, but you could initiate any type of anal play from this position. “Relax your head Jeremy. Just set your gaze on the ceiling. You don’t need to worry about where I am. Your Alpha will tell you if they want your eyes on them. If you don’t hear that instruction, keep your gaze straight in front.”

Kneeling down on one knee, Castiel slowly pushed two fingers into the Omega’s ass. He was already well-lubed and prepped. He felt young and ripe. The Alpha thrust aggressively into his hole for a few moments, watching the response in his face and his cock, feeling for an increase in slick. Cas could tell the moment Jeremy stopped thinking and just relaxed. “As a Neutral, you won’t need to learn Submission to a Dom to feed and stroke your wolf,” Castiel let his voice drop in timbre to let his Alpha communicate directly with the boy’s Omega brain, “But as an Omega, your pleasure and your pain belong to your Alpha. YOU, Jeremy, belong to the pack Alpha. Right now, until your custody is decided, that’s me. You don’t need to think about anything but pleasing me.” Castiel added a third finger and picked up the pace, watching the Omega begin to pant. “Don’t think, just answer…what does your Alpha want from you right now? What would please me?”

“Ahh, God. Oh… nnnn, just… hold position and relax, keep my eyes straight ahead, please, Alpha…Ahhhh! Just feel whatever you want me to feel.”

“Good boy. Very good. Do you want to come today, Omega?”

“Please, Alpha, YES!”

Castiel chuckled darkly. The Omega had too little control still. It wasn’t time for rewards like that. “I’ll tell you what, sweet boy. If you can come off just my fingers, just like this in the next five minutes, it’s yours for the taking.” Castiel reached over and pulled hard on one nipple, stretching it painfully while he kept three fingers thrusting fast in and out of the boy’s anus. He made no move toward the Omega’s prostate. It was virtually an impossible task, but Cas had seen Omegas do it before, so he worked hard to give the boy what he could by way of friction.

“You’re tensing up again, Omega. I need you to concentrate on staying relaxed. You need to focus.”

“AALPHA!!! PLEASE!!!” He wasn’t going to get there and the teasing was driving him crazy. Cas fed him encouragement through the bond they shared and let Jeremy wash his frustration back over the Alpha.

“Time’s up, I’m afraid.” Castiel was only a little disappointed as he removed his fingers. “Maybe next time. You need to keep in mind that the pleasures of your body belong to me. If I choose to grant you a climax, you’ll receive one. If not, then not. However, you’re doing really well, considering how far behind you were from the others who grew up in Pack homes with an Alpha. Let’s see…show me Position 7.”

They continued. Near the end of the hour Castiel finished the session with a light spanking to check the Omega’s emotional response to correction through the bond and examined his anus and channel
with a speculum for signs of wear or irritation. He looked good: at ease now and fully Balanced. His records showed he’d Released yesterday evening during a punishment paddling. Perfect.

“I’m very pleased with your progress, Omega.” Cas let his Alpha voice do the talking again. “Just keep doing what you’re doing. Try to focus on the specific rules that are hardest for you and practice those positions. I’ll see you again as soon as I can, but I may be gone for the next couple of sessions. Do you have any questions for me?”

“No, Alpha. Thank you for taking so much time with me.”

“You’re very welcome, sweet Omega. You’re worth it.”

Castiel headed back to his office after dropping Jeremy off where his Omega class was assembling in the lunch room after their private sessions. On the way, he paused to observe Cole’s work in the hallway. He had Meg holding her ankles with her slacks and underwear near her knees. Her backside was already quite red as Cole’s paddle fell several times in quick succession. Her vulva peeked between her cheeks red and swollen, but Cas had no reason to believe that was Cole’s doing. Castiel didn’t announce his presence or interfere. He was merely curious. He knew Meg Masters well enough to be confident she’d earned the reprimand, but he also knew that Benny had expressed concern over Cole’s domineering behavior, and Cas wanted to observe for himself.

“All right,” Cole said in a neutral voice, tucking his paddle back into its pocket. “Up you go.” He helped her to balance as she stood. Neither wolf had noticed Castiel off to the side yet. Cas watched Cole search her face with his eyes while he wiped the tears from her cheeks. “You’re okay, now. It’s all over. I’m really proud of you, Meg. You did great, sweetheart.” Cole tucked the moist tissue into his pocket and stepped back, indicating she could get dressed again. “Do you have any concerns or questions? You know why that was necessary, right?”

She just nodded, and gave him a shy hug. Cas marveled. The only time Meg was ever shy was just after a spanking. He was a bit envious of Cole’s place right now, considering how rarely Meg graced any of them with this kind of vulnerability. Cole hugged her back and chuckled softly. “Go on then, back to work.” He kissed the top of her head.

Castiel was very pleased and was about to say so, when Sam stepped out from a recess Cas couldn’t see from his vantage point. “Really good, man,” Sam told Cole. “That was way better. You see how she was relaxed when she left? That’s what you’re looking for. You can’t think of it as punishing people for being bad. That makes you work from an angry place. You gotta think of it as helping them work through their guilt. Totally different mindset. Keep it simple. Don’t give out anything but what they need you to give.”

Castiel shifted and both beta-Doms turned to notice him. “Very good work, both of you.” It was short and sweet, but it was just the right message for them both. They nodded with a warm “Thanks, Alpha” and moved on, still conferring with their heads together. Cole looked back over his shoulder at Castiel with a pleased half-smile.

Castiel returned to his office and booked a flight to Dallas/Fort Worth. Maybe it really was that simple.
Castiel deplaned with the rest of the passengers into the humid Texas airport. He always flew coach, so he was right in the middle of the herd that headed toward baggage claim. He couldn’t justify spending The Facility’s precious money on giving himself a little more legroom for a 500-mile flight.

He ignored the frisson of energy that followed him as he made his way to the baggage carousel. Many people, both wolves and apes, recognized him. The wolves who didn’t know him directly could still sense his Deep Alpha designation and dominance through his scent and bearing. No one approached him, but a number of cell phones tracked his movement and wherever he walked an open space magically appeared all around him. Castiel was accustomed to the phenomenon and ignored it all. He had much bigger fish to fry.

For one, there was a ring box burning a hole in his pocket. Too, he felt fragmented at the vast distance that now separated him from his mate. He could still feel her through the Mating-bond, but only distantly. Castiel clutched the box in his pocket, worrying the smooth velvet with his thumb while he waited for his luggage. His big black beast paced – back and forth, back and forth, swinging his huge head like a lion. (Stop that, you’re making me nervous,) shot Castiel to the creature at his core.

Castiel finally collected his luggage and hailed a taxi. “American Caniforme Research Institute,” he told the driver. “Do you need the address?”

“Nah,” said the large man behind the wheel. “I go out there two, three times a week.” The driver inspected him through the rearview mirror. “You don’t look like the usual scared wolf pup I usually drop off though. You’re older.”

“Yes, that’s right,” agreed Castiel but offered nothing further. The driver let it drop and got down to business. Castiel closed his eyes and tried to rehearse what he wanted to say. It didn’t do any good. His mind was blank. God-fucking-damnit. This was a terrible idea! Cas just breathed hard through his nose. (I can do this,) he thought. (You fucking BETTER do this!) his wolf interjected. (Shut up,) Castiel explained.

Cas directed the cabbie to drop him off at the employee entrance. He badged in as an employee, as the networks between facilities were all connected to the same database, and he went to meet with the Facility Director, a former colleague of his from Kansas, Victor Henrickson. It was a courtesy call. As Alpha, Castiel didn’t need Victor’s approval to transfer Dean back to Kansas, but it would be a douche move to do it without giving Henrickson a head’s-up. No Director deserved to be blindsided like that.

“Alpha Castiel Novak!” Victor greeted him effusively. “I haven’t seen you in forever, man! What brings you to Texas? You should’ve told me you were coming, or is this some kind of a surprise inspection from the home office?”

“Nothing like that.” Castiel extended his hand for Victor to shake. Henrickson was a good man. Cas liked him. “I want to talk about Dean. If you have a few minutes?” Yeah, dropping in without calling ahead was a shitty idea. There was never enough time in the day for a Facility Director. Cas could’ve shown up only to find the Director was deeply involved in something he couldn’t extract himself from. It looked like Cas was lucky as Victor ushered him into the office and closed the door.

“What do you want to know, Alpha?” Victor prompted.
“To start with, how’s he doing? As you know, Dean’s important to me, and we didn’t leave things between us in a very healthy state. I’m worried about my friend. Is he scening?”

Victor seemed to take a minute to try to read Castiel’s question for hidden agenda. He answered directly, though, “Not that I’m aware. If he is, he isn’t doing it here. There’s nothing in the schedule with his name on it and he hasn’t reported any offsite sexual activity. Maybe he’s got a side piece that just whips his ass without the sex. That wouldn’t have to be reported.”

Castiel felt physically ill. He knew Dean. Sex was a major component to his submission. If he wasn’t having sex, he probably wasn’t doing any of it. It’d been almost three months since Castiel’s last scene with Dean. He had to be in agony by now. Cas’ wolf lowered his ears and growled at the Alpha, demanding he fix this. (I’m working on it,) he reminded the wolf.

“How has he been doing at adapting here, at fitting in?” Pshh, Dean Winchester could fit in anywhere. Anywhere.

“Tell you the truth, Alpha,” Victor looked dead serious, “His heart’s not in it. He spends all his time arguing with his colleagues. He’s doing the bare minimum he has to to not get his ass fired. He’s…I hope you don’t mind if I speak frankly, I know you’re friends with the guy…but he’s not the Dean Winchester I knew in Lawrence.”

Castiel took it in. He let his gaze fall to the front of Victor’s desk where a long scratch mark marred the front surface. He breathed. He processed. Finally, he looked up and spoke. “Victor, would your training department be too adversely affected if I transferred Dean back to Kansas?”

Victor scoffed. “You’re the Alpha, Cas. You’re going to do whatever you want, aren’t you?”

Castiel just looked at him, waiting.

“Nah. I’ll be all right. He’s about finished with what he came here to do, anyway. He did some ferret work for me, but I never got the impression he’s planning on putting down roots. We’ve been discussing his recommendations for changes. I think he’s right on a lot of what he’s saying. What say, I put in a request for some staff upheaval, maybe a headcount boost to see it through. You take your boy home, and we call it even?”

It was extortion, and Castiel didn’t really need to acquiesce to it, but he did want to preserve Victor’s good will. “I can do that,” he agreed. “Call Donna in the business office and tell her what funds you need. Ask her to shoot it straight through to me for approval.” Castiel stood. He felt dirty. He extended his hand for Victor to shake once again, vowing to himself to check more deeply into the goings on in the Dallas office. “Thank you for your understanding. Please let me know if I can be of assistance during your transition.”

“Always a pleasure, Alpha. Don’t you want a tour while you’re here? The staff and students would love to see you.”

‘I’ll just bet they would’, thought Cas with a bitter taste in his mouth. “No thank you, alpha. I really don’t have time at the moment. Do you happen to know where I might find Dean just now?” Castiel was overwhelmingly grateful that a dominance fight hadn’t been required to bring Victor to heel. He’d been aware of the manipulation tactics, and it was something he could willingly give. If Victor had chosen to dig his heels in more, Castiel might’ve been forced to take him. He hated doing that. It was bestial.

“Dean’s off today.” Victor’s reply broke through Cas’ thoughts. “He’s probably at home. I’ll get Bela to pull up his address from the file.”
“Thank you. That would be very helpful.”

Twenty-five minutes later, Castiel stood outside Dean’s apartment door, willing himself to knock and just get it over with.

Finally, he forced his fist up and out and…

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Dean decided to sleep in on his day off. Fuck it. He had the next two days off too, in fact. His plans for the long weekend were intricate. He was going to sleep until two, jack off at least three times then get up and shower, change the sheets (yeah, ew!), and eat whatever was in his fridge. He was going to dress to the nines, drive to Fort Worth where the really hot cowboys were and then hole up in an old-fashioned honky-tonk for the rest of the night, dance, flirt, get shit-faced, and hopefully let some beautiful blue-eyed, black-haired wolf fuck him into the fucking mattress.

He was at step four, with his mouth full of a nuked bean burrito left over from three nights ago when someone knocked on his door. The fuck? Everyone he knew in Dallas was at work right now. Prolly some fundraiser or magazine salesman. Whatever. Dean pulled the door open without checking the peep hole.

He froze. His vision did that crazy dream-scape special effect thing from the movies where it looked like his visitor was both closer and further away than he really was. Dean couldn’t breathe. His eyes locked onto a pair of concerned bright blue irises that weren’t looking away. He stumbled backward, unable to feel his legs moving him, tried to speak but couldn’t get anything out, and noted the concern growing more intense as the blue eyes seemed to get taller very quickly. Then everything went black.

“…hear me? Dean!” Something struck his face.

“Dude! Enough with the slapping, already!” Dean opened his eyes to find his head cradled in Castiel’s lap, his body strewn carelessly on the floor. “I’m okay! Cas, I’m okay! Jeez, let me up.”


“The fuck are you doing here, Castiel?” Dean sat up slowly and shifted away from Cas to get some air and space and just, it’d be easier the further away he was. He didn’t try to rise off the floor, though. The floor seemed the safest place right now. Castiel followed his lead and remained sitting on the crappy, threadbare, bulk rate apartment carpet.

“I came to check on you. I was worried. And it’s been a terrible few weeks without you. I needed to know you’re okay. Are you okay, Dean?”

“They don’t have phones in Kansas anymore? There are easier, cheaper ways to do this, man.”
“I needed to see you for myself,” Cas admitted. “I need to talk to you.”

“Ah. Right. Yeah. Talk to me. Where’s your mate, Alpha? You didn’t leave her five-hundred miles away, did you?” Dean leaned back onto the foot of the couch and let his head fall onto its seat.

“I did. Jo’s looking after her, and Jody. She’s staying in the dorm until I get back.” Cas kept his eyes glued to Dean’s beautiful face. Dean wore a mask of anger, resentment, and hurt right now, but his face was as beautiful as ever. Cas had missed him so desperately, he couldn’t look away. “Dean, I know it hurt you deeply when we Mated.”

“NOPE!” Dean cut in. “Not gonna dredge that conversation back up. Just. Don’t go there, Cas. Talk about something else, anything else. Not that.”

Castiel sighed and changed the subject. “I spoke to Victor. He said you have some suggestions for changes here in Dallas?”

“Man, this whole place is jacked!” Dean sat forward, suddenly full of vigor and passion. “They’ve got Alistair and Ruby fucking up the whole training department. They’ve got it all wrong, and they’re beating and scaring the shit out of the Omegas and the Subs! You gotta rein this shit in fast, Alpha, or we’re going to lose everything.” Dean finally made eye contact again, “YOU’RE going to lose everything. God, they think it’s all about forcing and flinging their fucking weight around and yelling their asses off and throwing ass-beatings left and right! There’s, like, there’s no compassion. No one tries to understand where the students are coming from, what they’ve been through, what they’re scared of… It’s just. It’s fucked up, that’s what it is. They’re building an assembly line of Omega fuck-holes to sell to the highest bidder. I’ve about got my final report ready to send up to Kansas. You can take the damned thing with you hard copy now. This place needs an overhaul or a razing.” Dean’s rage focused in on Castiel. “How the FUCK did you let it get this bad, Alpha? This is on you!”

“I didn’t know. Dean. I didn’t know. I haven’t been down here since we opened it, and the reports from Victor don’t make it look anything like…” Castiel stopped. (No excuses, Alpha.) Dean was right as always. This was on Castiel.

Dean scoffed, “Victor! Victor Henrickson wouldn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground. He lets Alistair make all the hiring choices, except for mine, and good ol’ Al fills all the empty spaces with his sadistic cronies. It’s sick. That man is a menace!”

“I’ll take care of this, Dean. Fixing Dallas is now my second-highest priority, and it’ll get taken care of. Immediately.”

“Second-highest? You serious? What the fuck is more important than the clusterfuck going on down here?!”

“You are.”

“What⁉”

“You are, Dean. You are my highest priority right now.” Cas huffed a laugh in self-deprecation. “Pamela even told me so.”

“No. Whatever you’re selling over there with your fucking blue eyes, I ain’t buyin’. NO!”

“Dean, just listen to me. Please. We need to talk. We left everything so broken between us. It’s tearing me apart. From what I’ve heard, it’s doing the same to you. Victor said you’re not scening at all. Just, please hear me out. If you want me to leave once we’ve talked, I’ll go. I know you’re very
angry, and I want you to tell me why. Do you know? What did I do wrong, Dean? Please. It’s killing me."

“What did you do?!” Dean lifted himself to the seat of the couch. He found that he suddenly preferred a bit of a height advantage if they were really going to have this conversation. “You got fucking MATED, man! You threw me over and got MATED to a teenaged virgin you’d never even fucking MET!” Dean’s eyes were wild and he white-knuckled the edge of the couch.

‘Good. Now they were getting somewhere’, thought Cas.

“Oh, yeah, and then you threw out that you love me to manipulate me into staying in Kansas and keeping me as an offseason spare fuck! Fuck you, Castiel!” He was on his feet by the end of the tirade, looming over Castiel with violence etched in every clenched muscle. Cas wasn’t concerned about the violence. Dean couldn’t harm him, but he ached for the pain Dean was in.

“That’s all true, except...” Cas forced his voice to stay calm and rational, and not trip into Dominant tones. If he had any chance of convincing Dean he was capable of an equal partners’ marriage, he couldn’t sway Dean now with his power advantage. Dean hated it when Cas chose calm while Dean was furious, but Castiel saw no other way.

“I deeply regret telling you the way that I did, but I don’t regret the words. I wish I could go back to the beginning and have thrown away all of my fear and have confessed what I feel for you from the start. I wish I’d been brave enough to be honest with you years ago, but I can’t change what I’ve done.”

Dean was breathing hard with the exertion of his rant and still hulking over Cas, but now he just looked confused. What the hell was Cas saying? “Cas, what the hell are you saying? You lost me.”

Castiel’s eyes went wide, he breathed in deeply through his nose, set his mouth, screwed his courage to the sticking place, stood up, and just went for it.

“I know you’re angry. I’ll do whatever you need me to do to make up for the pain I’ve caused you. But, Dean, I HAD to Mate with April. I didn’t have a choice and you know it! You would’ve done the same DAMNED THING!! When you confront your True-Mate, whenever he shows up and sweeps you off your feet, you’ll fall just as hard as I did, and YOU KNOW IT! You KNOW how this works!! So, WHY are you so angry with me?! I’m in love with you, Dean Winchester, but that couldn’t stop what happened! Nothing could have. Dean, I need to know, are you in love with me, too!? Please, I need to know.”

Dean stepped backward and landed hard back on the couch. His mouth hung open. Those blue eyes. He didn’t know what was going on with his own eyes, but he couldn’t look away from Castiel’s blue. Castiel’s fury seemed Alpha. His eyes should be swamped by red, but they weren’t. They were deep, ocean blue like always, like when he was just Cas.

“What are you asking me?” Dean’s head was swimming. He was knocked back to when he was nineteen years old and expecting to wait tables after graduation because no one would hire an alpha Lupin to teach high school, and then was magically saved by a pair of blue eyes and a couple of crazy proposals. He needed to figure out what the hell was happening right now, but his brain had shut down. He looked to his wolf and found him alert and upright for the first time in weeks. Fucking traitor.

Castiel took a step closer but didn’t try to touch Dean. “I’m asking you whether you are in love with me, as I am in love with you, Dean Michael.”

“REALLY!? Like this!?!” Dean broke away and put the couch between them. No way was he gonna fold like some cheesy rom-com. No way. “You wanna do a big, romantic reveal after eight FUCKING YEARS and you got your mate underneath you, and now you want to come running
into my arms with a fucking, ‘I’M IN LOVE WITH YOU’!?!’

“Then just tell me, if you don’t love me back, why are you so angry? Why won’t you at least keep on as my friend and scene partner if it’s not that?” Maybe Pamela had been way off the mark. It had all made sense in Castiel’s mind back in Lawrence, but now the idea that Dean might love him back seemed preposterous.

“OF COURSE I’M FUCKING IN LOVE WITH YOU, YOU MORON! WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK, CASTIEL!?! You may be un-be-fuckin-lievably blind, but there’s NO WAY you did not know that!”

“Dean, please. I didn’t know. I swear.” Cas put his hands up to show no ill will and advanced slowly. “Did you? Did you know about me before I told you? I’ve loved you since before we spoke in Zeke’s bar for the first time. You spoke to me through your eyes in class and the papers that you turned in…they were, captivating. I fell so fast and so hard. For you. I’ve loved you forever.”

Dean was struck dumb again. Cas had him there. He hadn’t known. Castiel had hidden his feelings too well. Hidden them just as Dean had done. They both did this. “Just, please Dean. Put yourself in my place for a moment. We both made the same mistake. We were both wrong to lie to each other for so long, but if it had happened the other way around, could you have done any differently? I didn’t choose her over you. I didn’t choose at all. Could you have done differently?”

Dean’s anger and his resolve crumbled. No. He would’ve grabbed hold of whoever the Universe set in front of him and he would’ve fucked the daylights outta the guy and bitten a hole through his neck. Dean knew he would’ve. He had no idea what it felt like, but he’d witnessed it too many times to think there was any choice in the matter.

“I’m not really mad at you, Castiel. S’not your fault. I’m not mad at her either. What’s her name? Erica? April! She’s innocent. Truth is, if she’s that right for you, I’ll probably love her too. I’m just. I’m too sad and broken to think. I love you.” He lifted his chin from where it’d fallen against his chest and met Cas’ eyes with a look that was world weary, hopeless. “I love you, but it doesn’t matter. It never has. It doesn’t make any fucking difference, because of our FUCKING biology! Really? This is what it comes to? We both pop a knot so that means we’re just screwed?! What the FUCK do we do now? I can’t. Cas, I can’t be your side piece. I need more than that. I need you, all of you. I can’t get by on just dribbles of your mate’s leftovers. And I can’t stand there and watch you give her what you can’t give me.”

“It doesn’t have to be like that, Dean.” Cas moved in and took both of Dean’s hands in his own. “Come home to Kansas with me. We’ll work it out between us. I love you Dean, and I’m all in, completely committed. If you just say yes, you’ve got me forever.”

“What are you talking about? You aren’t going to dump April. Dude, I saw you two together. Even if I wasn’t pissed, you would’ve been nauseating the way you look at her.”

“No, no, Dean. It’s all April’s idea. She’s the one who sold me on it. It’s perfect. She’s all in. I’m all in. We get you, and then the only thing that’s not set is how your True-Mate will respond when we find him, but we’ll deal with it. We’ll deal with it DEAN! It’s like how sometimes a True-Mate might already have a pup when they get Mated. You don’t throw the kid out, you just make the Pack bigger. You take your mate as they are and accept their family as Pack. April’s going to take me as I am, Dean, and I come to her already attached to you. You’re a part of me. We’re a set.”

Castiel was bobbing with excitement, trying to make sure Dean was with him, but he couldn’t slow down. He was like a snowball crashing down the slope. “Right now, my Pack is just me, April, my brother, my estranged bitch of a mother, and a cousin I have legal custody of but have never actually
met who lives as an ex-pat in Bolivia. I want a Pack, Dean, with you. I want you and me to Alpha a Pack together! God, I'm doing this all wrong…FUCK!"

“Castiel. Man, you need to breathe or I’m going to be picking YOU up off the floor. Just, take a breath and start over. You lost me again.”

Castiel closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Time seemed suspended for a moment, and he was blessed by the Universe with a moment of crystal clarity that would imprint itself in his mind forever. He released one of Dean’s hands, and lowered himself to one knee, reaching into his jacket pocket for the small velvet box.

Dean’s face lost all color, and he clutched at Castiel’s hand. No, nope, no, there’s no way this is going where his imagination had dared take him only in the dark and only in the middle of the night and only in that spare few minutes between being awake and asleep. But then Castiel produced a velvet box, and he flicked it open awkwardly with his free hand. Dean wasn’t about to let go of his other one. Dean was transfixed by the platinum ring nestled in the blue velvet. Blue like Castiel’s eyes. All of the hurt and resentment and fury melted as he lifted his eyes from the ring to his love’s blue, blue eyes. He saw that those blue eyes had overflowed, and Castiel let the tears fall. His own green eyes answered back tear for tear.

“Dean Michael Winchester. I have loved you forever with a love that is deep, and timeless, and pure. Will you do me the honor, the unbelievable honor, of becoming my beloved husband?” Castiel’s voice didn’t shake. It held true for him thanks to the support of the great black wolf inside of him who leaned with all its weight against Cas’ heart, holding him steady.

Dean on the other hand, was a mess. His hands shook, and his legs were jelly. He let himself fall to his knees, level with his love, closer to those blue eyes, and he leaned against Castiel’s strength, just as he had always done, just as he had permission now always to do. He kissed Castiel hard on the mouth, then shifted to breathe against him, searching for something solid.

“Is that a yes?” asked Cas, looking very worried in case there was some way he could be misreading this. “Dean, we’ll figure out how to work out the pack dynamics. I’m not asking you to share my mate. I know she’s not yours. How does Mate-in-Law sound for the two of you? I don’t know how it’ll all come together, but we’ll work it out. Right? Please tell me we can work it out.”

Dean began to laugh at Castiel’s babbling, his joy, tears, and relief all overflowing. “Dean!”

“YES, Castiel! It’s a YES. Castiel James Novak, I will marry you if you EVER stop babbling and give me that ring!”

Cas couldn’t get the ring on Dean’s finger fast enough.

Dean admired it, spinning it round to see the flush-set stones from every angle. “I’ll have to change my business cards again. I just got them printed for Dallas.”

Cas lazed on the couch next to him, lost in a blissful stupor and dropping kisses every now and then. “No, you still have a couple of boxes back home in the store room. Just throw away the ones from Dallas. This city sucks!”
Dean laughed, “I agree, but I still need new cards. I want them printed with my married name, “Dean Novak, PhD.”

“No, Dean. One thing I want to ask of you, please don’t change your name. ‘Winchester’ suits you. And I…how do I ask for this?” Cas sat up straight on the couch and pulled away enough that Dean could look him in the eye without going cross-eyed. “Our marriage. I want you for my partner. Equal partners. I’ll still Dom for you as often as you want. We can discuss how we want to apply Pack Discipline in our home, but you and I will be equals. Right now, we’re not. I’m a Dom. You’re a Sub. I don’t have anything I can sacrifice to you in order to even up the power imbalance except my name. I want to give up my name for yours. I want to be Castiel Winchester. Please, Dean?” Castiel was worried. He looked to Dean like he’d rehearsed this part of the speech many times. Pshh, of course he had, he was Cas.

“Aight.” Dean accepted.

Chapter End Notes

Oh hey, by the way, I'll be doing another Convention and/or Seminar scene with questions from the audience. Do you have any questions you'd like to ask the panel? Cas and Bobby like to keep it research-related, but Dean and Benny will literally talk about anything. So go for it.

Spoiler-alert! Go back and read the chapter first: Now that they're back together and Dean's so far off his Dom/sub schedule, we should be in for a pretty steamy scene soon. Right, boys? Pretty please?

Thanks for your continued support. Gotta go radio-silent again for the work week.
Chapter Summary

Dean and Cas have some things to straighten out before they go back home.

Chapter Notes

Happy Cinco de Mayo to all my Mexican and Texican friends. I recommend Negra Modelo.

Please note I added some tags. This chapter goes darker than I've done before, starting with a scene with a young self-harming adolescent and getting later into a dominance display that is purely non-consensual. It's what the wolves do customarily, but it may not be for everyone. As always, if this AU isn't for you, no prob, just close out and find something you like better.

There's some breath-play which, PSA, don't do what Sam does here. Duh.

My timeline got fucked up somewhere. It's now about six weeks since Dean left. The easiest thing to do is just assume that Cas is bad at rounding.

Thanks for the kudos and comments! I love them. They stroke my wolf. Don't worry if you don't agree with where I'm taking this. You won't hurt my feelings as long as you're not rude (no one's been rude, just sayin'), and I really like hearing what you have to say. No promises that I won't go in a direction you don't like, but feel free to tell me what you do and don't like.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“If you are NOT a ticket holder for the one-on-ones, you need to _leave_ the area immediately! The Fire Marshall will begin moving everyone out in five minutes if the walkways aren’t cleared, so if you don’t have a ticket, you need to find somewhere else to be!” The Convention Coordinator had some lungs on her, and she put them to good use, herding the crowds away from the corridor down which The Facility contingent had gone.

Jo slipped her head back into their assigned room; their Command Central. “It’s a total _zoo_ out there. I think we’re getting too big for hotel venues. Maybe next time book a convention center, Dean, or a stadium.”

“I don’t book the venues, Pipsqueak. Not my fault. YO! Charles! What room am I going to, man?” He shouted over Jo’s shoulder, but close enough to her ear that she grimaced and then belted him one upside his head.

“Ow! Dude, that was uncalled for,” he complained.

“Tell that to my eardrum,” Jo shot back. “Oh wait, that’s right, you can’t because _I’m fucking deaf now!_”

“Pipe down, bitches,” mothered Charlie handing them each a room assignment and a client list, “Or I’ll make you two work together today.” Dean elbowed Jo hard in the ribs and shot her a wicked grin before scuttling off to compare assignments with Benny.

Jo sighed and turned to Charlie. “How is he so good at this when he’s still four years old? How fair is that?”

Charlie laughed at her and moved off to continue handing out sheets.

Once settled in the appropriate room up on the top floor, Sam and Dean began moving the furniture as far out of the way as they could. The table and extra chairs got unceremoniously dumped into the hallway. It didn’t leave as much room as they wanted, but it would do. The bed was bolted down, so unless they wanted to pay for the damage (which they didn’t ‘cause Cas would kill them), it wasn’t going anywhere.

They’d booked the top two floors of the upscale hotel. It wasn’t ideal, and it cost a fortune. Letting the hotel fees eat away at their profits hurt, but the threat of noise complaints from the Primate lodgers in the hotel meant they had to create a whole floor-thick buffer between the One-on-One sessions and the apes’ delicate sensibilities. Castiel always insisted though. It was necessary not to burn bridges between the two populations now that relations had finally been showing some signs of improvement over the last few years.

Sam’s phone lit up and chirped with a text. “Meg’s escorting our first victim up the elevator right now.” Dean rolled his eyes at his brother’s pathetic attempt to be funny and turned to studying the client’s registration form.

“ ‘Kay, looks like the mom registered her Omega son. He’s, oh wow, he’s only thirteen. Say’s here he’s never had a release since he Presented over a year ago.” Dean whistled long and low.

“Presented at, like 11, I guess. That sucks. Poor pup. He’s still got three years of unaided Heats to wade through before he can get some help from an alpha.” Dean looked up from the paper and
checked his brother. “You ready?”

“Yep.” Sam was always ready for this.

Meg knocked on the door, but didn’t wait for them to answer. Her key card let her in, and she escorted a haggard middle-aged woman through and closed the door behind the two of them. “Alpha O’Neida, this is Sam Winchester and his brother, Dr. Dean Winchester. Sam, Dean; Rachel O’Neida. She’d like some help with her adolescent son. He’s in the hall, waiting.”

“Don’t call me doctor, Meg,” Dean griped in a tone that made it clear to the client that he’d made the same request many times before.

“Thanks, Meg,” Sam interjected before she could respond. Dean could be a jerk sometimes. “It’s really good to meet you, alpha O’Neida.” Sam extended his hand, and she took it. “Meg, would you mind keeping the young man company? I’m sure he’s nervous and uncomfortable alone in the hallway.”

The nurse smiled warmly at him, nodded, and let herself back out. The door snapped shut as Dean was finishing his greetings with the woman. She had a good firm handshake. Dean thought she might be a Domme.

“Please, call me Rachel,” she told them. “It’s a real honor to meet you. They don’t let us choose who we get to see, but I’m so glad that Steven drew you two. I just know you’ll be able to help him. I hope so, anyway. Someone’s got to.”

“Tell us about your son, Rachel,” Dean prompted, ushering her to sit in the only chair.

“He Presented as an Omega pretty young. He wasn’t quite twelve when he had his first Heat. And it was bad. He got such a high fever that we almost took him to the hospital. It was…” She trailed off and her eyes glazed over in memory. “It was bad.”

“And then?”

“The doctor examined him after his Heat ended, and she told us everything looked normal. Said he’d weathered it just fine, told us he’d Released in full, and that all his Omega organs were perfect, hormone levels in target range, everything. My mate and I, we just took it as natural that we would be able to read his tension and body language for a few months and figure out a good Release schedule for him. That’s always worked with Carlos, my mate. He’s Omega too.”

Sam and Dean sat on the edge of the desk side-by-side and listened intently without interrupting. It was important to allow a client to tell their whole story.

“With Carlos, we never did any formal evaluations or anything, but I always know when he’s ready. I can see it in the way he holds his face and shoulders. Sometimes he brings me the paddle and just asks me to take it out of him. It’s so easy. But Steven. I couldn’t read him at all. He got bad so slowly, we probably missed the window where it’s easy to take care of. I don't know. Now, nothing works. He is miserable. He doesn’t talk anymore. He can’t go to school. He tries to Release himself all the time, but of course, that doesn’t work. He’s covered in bruises, and I can’t make him stop. Can you help him? Please, try.”

“Relax, Rachel. We’re going to do our best to help your son feel much better.” Dean met her eye, but didn’t try to touch the alpha. “Your mate is Omega?” he asked, and she nodded. “Can you tell me which of you is Steven’s mother?”

“I’m his father. Carlos is his mother. Does that make a difference?”
“Maybe,” answered Sam, standing up. “There aren’t always similarities between Omega Release patterns in families, but when there are, they usually pass from father to son and mother to daughter. So, it’s actually YOUR birth family we want to look at. Tell me, if you don’t mind please, alpha, do you know of any Release patterns from the Omegas in your immediate birth Pack that are peculiar in any way? It might help us narrow down what Steven’s body needs.”

“No, not really.” She thought for a moment, fidgeting with her skirt uncomfortably. “I guess I had an uncle who could only Release if the paddle and his ass were wet. My other uncle always spanked him in the shower. That was pretty weird.”

“Not really,” Dean assured her. “A layer of water intensifies the sensation. It’s not uncommon at all. Have you tried that with your son?”

“No. I didn’t think of that.” She looked ashamed, but Sam was quick to jump in.

“Don’t beat yourself up, Rachel. There’s no guarantee that’s what’s going to work, but it just goes to show that sometimes you’ve got to be creative. Shall we invite Steven to join us?”

It was over an hour later that they finally struck gold with the poor pup. He’d taken quite a beating by then; nothing that would harm him long term, but there was just no way to do this except to jump in and do it. Dean kept him calm, took notes, watched for reactions in his face and body, and ran the peliometer. Sam worked the paddle. Water was not the answer, neither was activating a Submissive state through scolding or domination. Different positions made no difference, but Sam wasn’t one to give up. The young boy was utterly distraught. He didn’t say a word and barely even grunted at each strike of the paddle. His eyes though. His eyes said everything. Aged beyond his few years, his eyes spoke of pit-deep torment, and Sam was determined to get him out of that pit if he had to jump in himself and drag him out bodily.

Sam was just about to switch to the strap against Dean’s objections. The kid was just a pup after all. Then he decided to try one more thing. He needed both alphas’ approval, so he left the boy trembling on the bed and gestured them to the corner, speaking softly. “I want to try something risky. Have you noticed he holds his breath at the wrong part of the stroke?” Rachel just looked at him, confused.

Dean chewed the inside of his cheek and glanced at Steven. Sam went on, “Usually when a wolf takes a stroke from a paddle or whatever, they suck in a breath or blow one out when the pain hits. If they’re going to hold their breath, it’s just before the paddle falls. Steven takes a breath at that point, then holds it through the pain.” Sam turned to Steven’s father, “Rachel, will you allow me to try an experiment with Steven? I want to restrict his breathing slightly during the strikes. If this works, he’ll be only the third Omega I’ve ever seen who needs breath-restriction to affect an Omega gland Release, and certainly the youngest. And too, if it works, you will need to take him to trained professionals for his Balance adjustments. This is not something you or your mate can do at home.”

It was a testament to her trust and her desperation that she agreed. Dean grudgingly went along too. It wasn’t right that a boy so young should have to suffer so much just to stay sane. Sam hooked up a heart monitor and oxygen sensor to the restriction belt that he placed around the catatonic Omega’s neck. If Steven even began to approach danger, the belt would release its grip automatically. Dean cinched it in, checked the boy, and nodded to Sam who began methodical strokes against the back of the pup’s upper thighs. Dean increased the belt’s tension slowly while Steven’s face turned red and his mouth opened breathlessly. Sam picked up his pace and power to match. It took only a few more strokes, and then…

The pup’s entire body convulsed suddenly and silently. Sam dropped the paddle and leaned over to hold him securely through the violent tremors while Dean snapped the quick-release on the belt around his throat. The pup sucked in a long rasping breath. Then he screamed in pain and thrashed
wildly for a few moments longer, and his eyes rolled back in his head. And then. Just like that, it was over. Steven pulled in on himself and curled up fetal position, crying softly. Dean reached awkwardly behind himself and over his own head to reach the meter he’d left on the side table. His readings showed a normal, fully-Balanced, recently Released, adolescent wolf-pup. He grinned up at Sam who was heaving deep breaths and sweating, shaking his head in relief.

Rachel swooped in. “Steven? Stevie, baby? Can you hear me?” Sam released him to his father as she cradled the weeping pup in her arms. She rocked him, looking frantically between Dean and Sam, uncertain whether it had worked or made things worse.

“It’s okay, Rachel.” Dean leaned over her and stroked the boy’s hair. “He’s going to be fine now. That worked perfectly. He needs a few minutes to get himself together, but he’s okay now.” Dean met Sam’s wide, scared eyes and mouthed, ‘Wow,’ at him. “That was…whew…that was something else.”

“Thank you!” she wept against her son’s head.

The whole day went like that. Everyone agreed drinks at the bar were in order. Dean wished Castiel had come to this one. He could’ve used his friend’s support tonight. He could use a release of his own.

Castiel’s brother was there though. “I heard about the boy, the Omega kid? You know he would’ve been dead in a month, right? If you and Sam hadn’t figured out his block?” Gabriel came up behind Dean and slung an arm across his shoulder.

“I know,” Dean responded soberly. “I figured two months, but it’s all the same end anyway. Sam’s the one who cracked him. Dude, that scared the shit outta me! And why’d Sammy even have that stuff in his bags, anyway? Who travels to a Con and thinks, ‘Gee, I wonder if I’m going to need some asphyxiation belts?’”

“Scared myself pretty badly, too,” Sam added as he approached his brother and the Omega, sucking expansive draws from his longneck. “Just remember, Dean, next time you wanna give me shit over traveling to Cons with six cases of equipment, now you understand why I do it. You just never know.”

NOW:

“Embouchure, please, Sir! I need some pressure, PLEASE! Just… A little…” Dean was more than frustrated. His Dom was torturing his mouth with pathetically flimsy kisses. Had been doing it for much too long already. Dean couldn’t manage a lip-lock at all, try though he might.

“Hm-mm,” Cas didn’t even try to fix his performance. He continued to tongue at Dean’s open mouth with almost no pressure against his spit-slick lips. “You take what I give you, and you Submit to my will.”

“Arghhh! Sir! Just, FUCKIN’ KISS ME!”

Dean was flipped onto his belly faster than his synapsis registered the shift of light. The middle of his thigh lit with heat and pain as if sparked by a firecracker. “I knew you’d likely formed some bad habits, my bratty Sub, but I expected better than this,” the Dom scolded, his hand falling repeatedly in the same hot place on Dean’s leg.
The spanking didn’t last long. It was a precursor anyway; just an appetizer for what was to come, Dean knew. The Dom began gently stroking his Sub’s round ass thoughtfully. With one hand in constant contact with Dean’s ass, the other pulled one leg out to the edge of the bed, made a deliberation of hooking just his big toe over the edge, pressed enough weight against the back of that heel to clearly communicate, ‘Leave it just like this’, and then repeated the action on the other side of the bed.

Dean was prostrate and spread-eagled. He was still wearing the size six plug that his Dom prescribed for him hours earlier just before taking Dean out for a celebratory steak dinner with a one-beer limit. One thigh already felt sunburned. Dean took quick stock and then nestled in. He relinquished himself to his wolf, and lay back to enjoy the show.

“I wonder if I could perhaps entreat you to tell me, my beautiful Submissive; to whom does this lovely perfect ass belong? Hm?” He ghosted a hand across Dean’s bare backside and watched chill bumps spread from his touch.

“It’s yours, Sir. All yours.”

“Indeed? Well then, my next question should likewise be an easy one for you to answer, obedient Submissive. In the long weeks since I last laid my straps across this delectable flesh – this flesh that we both agree belongs to me – has anyone, anyone at all, laid hand or implement to this ass?”

“Uh…” Dean started sweating. It was too early in the scene for a reaction like that, he knew well. His hesitation earned him a pop right beside the plug in his asshole with Cas’ extremely springy lap cane, and Dean squeaked. He didn’t close his legs though. His Dom had told him to keep each big toe crooked over the side of the bed. No ties were needed to keep Dean where his Dom put him. Ever. Sometimes they tied him for fun, to let him enjoy struggling against the tension, to ramp up the intensity, but they were never needed to keep him in place.

Castiel’s face appeared in Dean’s peripheral vision, his mouth near Dean’s left ear. “I asked you a simple question, Dean Winchester.” The lap cane snapped on either side of his hole again. Goddamn! That stung! The plug didn’t cover nearly enough. “Who.” POP “Touched.” POP “This.” POP “Ass?”

“JESUS!” screamed Dean. “I was working under Alistair and RUBY. I didn’t have a fucking choice!”

“Who touched this ass, Dean Michael Winchester?”

“Now I know why you don’t want me to change my name! You get off on saying it just like th… AHHHHHHH! CHRIST! FUCK!!”

“I advise you to think very carefully about how much you want to brat at me this evening, my Pet. We’ve a very long drive ahead of us to get back to Lawrence.”

“We’re driving home?” Dean asked amid shaking breath and sniffles.

“Oh, yes, unless you would prefer I hire someone to drive your car all the way back to Kansas so you and I can fly.”

“NO! Yes, please. Let’s drive. Please.”
Castiel nodded, “And while you don’t have any power to lessen the soreness of the ass I plan to make you sit upon, you may retain the ability right now to make it oh, so much worse if you continue to brat at me. Make your decision, Dean. It doesn’t matter to me either way. I’m not going to ask you again to answer my question.”

“RUBY, all right! Fucking Ruby and Bela and Alistair all took it out of my ass, but mostly Goddamn-fucking RUBY! I HATE THAT BITCH!”

“I see. Thank you, Dean. So, from what I understand, the marks I left on you last time, that you promised me to hold close to your heart forever, were neatly expunged from your flanks because my SLUT of a Submissive bent over and let THREE wolves strike THIS ass! The one we’ve just confirmed belongs TO ME. Have I missed something?” His voice was carefully controlled except for the micro moments when it wasn’t.

“I’m sorry, Sir! I didn’t want them to. I tried to be good so they wouldn’t have an excuse, but… OW!”

“Dean, Ruby and Bela are both betas, yes?”

Dean sobbed just a bit and nodded into the mattress. He’d not been afforded pillows for this evening, just a flat bed and a fitted sheet over a protective layer of plastic.

“I have no intention of carrying that thought through to its conclusion, Pet. I’m sure you’ve made the logical leap. And so, what shall I do with you now?” The Dom ran his cane painlessly across his Sub’s thighs, ass, and back, letting it drag all about, leaving shivers in its wake.

Dean waited a beat to answer his Dominant. He knew what Castiel wanted him to say. He knew he would say it. He knew that pausing just long enough would pull from his Dom just that little bit more…

Dean listened to Castiel’s tension despite not being able to see him. He could hear and smell him. He could feel the need flowing through him. This was a dance, practiced and performed again and again until they’d perfected it to each wolf’s mutual satisfaction. Just before the cane would’ve been lifted in aggravation, the Sub submitted.

“I need you to punish me, Sir.” Dean pulled the words from deep within his depths.

Truer words had never been spoken.

Castiel took a moment for himself to let those words wash through him, fill him to completion, fulfill his wolf and steel his muscles.

“I can do that for you, Pet.” His voice reached its lowest depth, down where the fires burned hottest.

Something very cold was pressed against Dean’s lips. “Open and receive.” Dean allowed a medium-sized piece of ice to slide into his mouth. “Suck it. Do not chew. Do not choke. Use your tongue to work the sharp edges off, and then give it back to me. Work quickly.”

Castiel moved away toward the foot of the bed. Dean felt the plug pulled out. He felt…wrong without it. Too exposed. Too open.

Castiel’s hand appeared once again in front of his mouth, so Dean spit the rounded ice cube placidly back out. He kept his head facing the headboard, his chin resting on his crossed arms. The Dom had not said Dean couldn’t look, but this way he could just feel. That was better than watching. Castiel spread Dean’s cheeks with one hand and pressed the ice against his anus with the other. He held it
there for a moment, then slipped it inside, pressing it in deeply with two fingers. Dean’s butt and thighs tightened up at the sudden cold within him. He concentrated on breathing evenly and not flinching.

The Dom pumped his fingers in and out of Dean’s hole, lubricated only with melting water and the trace of synthetic slick that remained after the plug was removed. It wasn’t enough, and he felt raw. Dean wanted so badly to shove back against the warm fingers, take them fully inside him and melt the goddamned ice cube, but he refrained. He hadn’t been given permission to participate yet. He hoped very much he would be.

Castiel broke into his thoughts with an indication he was reading Dean’s mind. “By the way, my Sub, I grant you permission to come tonight whenever you like. You needn’t hold your orgasms back whatsoever, but you mustn’t touch yourself or actively chase friction.”

Dean met this news with a sinking feeling. It was code for ‘your dick is not getting any attention from either of us tonight.’

So wrong, Cas. So very wrong.

The fingers withdrew from his ass, leaving the ice pushed far up inside. Dean resisted the impulse to push it out, but he was squirming with discomfort. Meanwhile, his Dom’s permission had reached his cock, and it was hard enough to hurt. Castiel left him just long enough for Dean to consider turning around to look for him. Then his Dom’s warm fingers were pushing something else into his hole. It was moist and firm, neither warm nor cold, and it was smaller than the plug had been. It fitted right in, just far enough to butt barely up against his prostate.

What? Oh. Warm. Quite warm. Oh, shit. Ginger. His Dom gave him ginger. Dean hadn’t had a figging in years. He whimpered and shifted his hips before he processed he needed to move. It tingled and heated him, even as the ice continued to cool him deeper inside. Dean clenched hard, and gasped as his muscles juiced the ginger and left him a panting, sweating, writhing pool of Submissive.

“But now count for me, Dean. I’ll hear you speak every stroke or we’ll start over at one.”

The cane landed across his ass before he was ready, if he was ever going to be ready.

“ONE!” he shouted on the exhale that rushed out of him. He clamped his toes against the sides of the bed like his life depended on it.

“Good boy.” He struck again just a little lower on Dean’s round ass, leaving two distinct marks.

“Two,” breathed Dean, tucking his face in his arms. The ginger was starting to really activate the nerves inside his ass. Dean sent melty thoughts to encourage the ice to release enough water through to wash out the foul root, but it just made him concentrate more on the sensations inside of him. Meanwhile, the outside needed his attention as well:

“THREE!”

“I believe we’ve discussed more than a few times in the past how I feel about you accepting correction from other wolves, my Submissive.”

“FOUR!”

“I’m not at all fond of sharing my pets. Your ass is mine, and mine alone, correct?”
“FIVE! Ahhhhh!”

“CORRECT?”

“SIX! YES, SIR! CORRECT! ANHHHH! SEVEN!”

“And yet, you’ve let those filthy, incompetent, lazy, brutish, thugs tarnish this piece of meat that I so carefully marinated.”

“Eight!”

“In case it’s not been made clear enough to you, let me explain:’”

“Nine! TEN! ELEVEN!!! Shit! Fucking SHIT!”

“You are the custodian of my property, Dean Winchester. You are to keep it healthy, safe, protected, and OUT OF THE GRIMY HANDS OF THOSE MONGREL DOGS!!! DO I MAKE MYSELF CRYSTAL CLEAR?!”

“AHHHHHHH! Tw..TWELVE! CRYSTAL, SIR!” Dean’s ass wasn’t so much ON fire as it WAS fire. The ice and ginger warred with each other on the inside. Every stroke forced Dean to clench and release more of the evil juice to spur his nerves into higher panic. Every blow across his backside left a new angry welt. Soon they crisscrossed a pattern of agony. The Dom continued laying them out until they blended nearly together, and Dean could barely whisper out a count. Sometimes he missed a number or two, but his Dom was enjoying him too much to take him to task. Castiel praised himself for his lenience.

“You don’t seem as eager to brat at me anymore, Pet. Perhaps the lesson is beginning to sink in.”

“Yes, Sir! I’ll be good. I promise!” Dean’s cock was still rock hard and leaking. He managed a bit of unintentional friction against the bed, but it wasn’t enough.

“On your back, Dean.” Dean complied with jelly limbs. It took him a hot second to turn himself. The Dom peered into his eyes, critically. “Color?”

“Yellow, Sir! Hurts…”

“Good boy. I’m going to give you a break from the pain in your ass.” Castiel eased the ginger from Dean’s rectum. It was mostly spent. A dribble of water following spoke for all that was left of the ice. “Pull your knees up. I want you in ‘number twelve’.”

Dean’s muscles were shaky, but he’d never failed to find strength for whatever his Dominant wanted. A flat tongue pulled against his rim, dragging slowly and torturously. It did it again. Again. Dean moaned like a whore and dripped pre-come onto his own belly.

“Mmm, ginger,” enthused Castiel.

“Don’t touch yourself, Dean, but come whenever you like.” Castiel lubed his cock and thrust into Dean’s hole, driving in with one long shove and holding there. He stood up proud on his knees, towering over Dean’s coiled body, his height alone a statement of dominance. Dean panted fast, keeping his eyes on his Dominant as he’d been trained. He could do this. The burn of the ginger had mostly faded, but the Alpha’s cock drove the last of it just a bit further upstream to tug and play at a new set of nerves, ones that had been lulled into complacency by the ice. Castiel lowered himself onto one hand above Dean’s shoulder and fucked him slow and deep. The red Alpha hue of his eyes overtook all but a small center of blue just around his enlarged pupils. He was breathtaking in his
power, his control, and Dean’s wolf rolled over in complete submission and trust, his tongue lolling and a whine emanating from his throat.

Castiel took Dean’s left nipple into his mouth and bit down hard with no preamble, never letting up his rhythmic fucking. He sucked and bit until Dean’s breathing became rough and throaty. “Ahhhh!” the Sub screamed. The pain was intense, so intense he couldn’t distinguish pain from pleasure. It was all one. He was one with his wolf; one with his Dom.

“Good, Dean!” Castiel spoke around the tortured nipple between his teeth. He let go to look Dean in the eye. “Scream for ME and ONLY ME!” He moved his head and worried the other side harshly in the same manner. Dean felt Castiel’s knot pressing against his rim, demanding entrance. Rising up over his Submissive, the Dom took hold of Dean’s hair and jerked his head back, forcing the strained Sub to fight to maintain eye contact, and the knot slammed into place in Dean’s too-tight hole. It was too much. Alphas don’t take knots. They don’t. It’s not…

Castiel pulled harder and fucked that much harder as the knot swelled them into a firm and unnatural tie. Dean’s hands flexed and grasped at nothing as his orgasm drove the last of his voice into a powerful and hoarse scream. He clenched around the knot that did NOT belong inside him and shot a copious stream of alpha come across his belly, up his chest, and onto his own face.

Castiel grunted low and moaned in unguarded lust. He licked a broad tongue across Dean’s chest, taking in Dean’s thick semen and pressing it against Dean’s tongue with his own. He coiled his muscles and stuttered his hips. Then he followed Dean’s orgasm with a powerful one of his own; his seed shooting warm and full inside the alpha-Sub, with his mouth firmly attached to Dean’s in a primal kiss, more bite than kiss, clutching at his Sub’s shoulders and driving his knot that much deeper. Dean was going to ache for days, but it was so, so worth it.

Hours later they were still awake, cuddling, caressing, reconnecting in a way that showed how desperately they’d both missed this. Their voices were soft and skewed in the way that voices become in the middle of the night when inhibitions fall away.

“Tomorrow we’ll sleep late,” Castiel predicted. “Would you make omelets if I asked you nicely?”

“Mm-hm. Anything you want. Missed cooking for you, Cas.” Dean nuzzled his hair against the bottom of Castiel’s chin and reveled, purring softly.

“I missed you cooking for me too,” Cas chuckled. He was thoughtful for a minute or two. “Oh, did you bring your enema bag to Dallas, or is it still at your house?” Dean looked up at him quizzically. Leave it to Castiel to throw a non sequitur like that at him three in the morning. Cas caught his puzzled look and arched an eyebrow. “Last time we knotted, you had a few days of anal incontinence before your muscles tightened back up again. I’m just trying to save you that inconvenience. I don’t want you to be embarrassed.”

Dean rolled his eyes and snuggled back in again. “Too late on the embarrassment front, Cas. Thanks for bringing it up. Really appreciate it.” Sarcasm at three in the morning tends to have bite.

“I’m sorry, Dean. You’re right. We’ll talk about it later.”

“Not going to be better later, man.” The silence lengthened again, each man wondering if the other had fallen asleep. Castiel broke the silence with an observation.

“Your apartment smells like mold. Why’d you move into such a hole, Dean? You can afford better.”

“Um.”
It hadn’t been meant as a trap, but Castiel knew every quirk and tell the Sub tried to hide, and that was not a hesitation borne of sleepiness. There was suddenly tension in Dean’s body that’d not been there moments ago. “Dean?” He moved his fiancé away from his chest so he could look him in the eye.

“I mean…it’s cheap. And it was available. Came fully furnished.” Dean stopped talking and looked away from his intended. The silence stretched uncomfortably long, and he was forced to look up again, meeting Castiel’s eye. Castiel looked confused. The gears were almost visibly shifting in his head as he tried to work out what had Dean so awkward. Dean saw the moment it clicked: from confusion, to a flash of understanding, to a drawn-down brow of fury. Dean scrambled to the end of the bed and began rapid damage control.

“It’s not like that. It was cheap. It was furnished. I needed something fast. Cas, WAIT!”

But Cas didn’t wait. He got up from the bed and stormed into Dean’s bathroom, throwing drawers open and closed with increasing violence when he failed to locate what he wanted.

Castiel and Dean had always had a close relationship, but they’d never needed to bring Pack hierarchy into their association outside of scening except under two circumstances. Dean wasn’t an Omega and only struggled to follow Pack rules when his Submissive wolf hadn’t been stroked recently. Except for when he chose to be bratty, he didn’t require much discipline. Castiel had only two points of contention against Dean’s behavior that ever spurred him to bring Dean to heel from a hierarchical Pack perspective. He hated when Dean put himself down. Cas had been known to reprimand Dean with a few well-directed swats simply for body language that Cas interpreted as stepping over that line. The other action that Castiel could not abide was when his Submissive decided for himself that he deserved punishment and brandished it upon himself.

*THAT* was a Dominant’s job.

Castiel appeared back in the bedroom door. “Where is it, Dean?”

“I threw it away. It’s gone.”

Dean answered without thought and regretted it almost before the words made it out of his mouth.

Castiel did not speak. He stood in the open door and narrowed his eyes at his Sub, his jaw a hard line of steel. After the briefest of minutes, Dean broke like 200-year-old porcelain. “It’s in my underwear drawer, stuffed in a sock in the back.” He sagged onto the bed, boneless and defeated. Castiel crossed to the dresser and rifled through the top drawer, pulling out the offensive item.

Cas settled on the edge of the bed and looked at Dean. He neither spoke nor moved. He simply waited, livid. Dean hesitated. “You’re not supposed to spank me when you’re pissed. I think we should talk it over, wait until you’ve calmed down.” Dean had to try. It wasn’t going to work, but he had to try.

“I appreciate your concern. It’s a valid point. However, you may rest assured that I am in complete control of myself. If you choose, I will honor your use of your safeword should you like to employ it in this moment, and we’ll postpone. If not, then I expect you over my lap immediately. It’s your choice. Your punishment can be delayed until tomorrow if you fear for your safety.” Cas was so mad he was vibrating, but Dean would burn slowly in Hell before he’d use a safeword with Castiel. Cas, for his part was genuine in his offer, but that was not an option Dean allowed himself. Castiel would never harm him.

Hurt him, yes.
Harm, never.

Dean hung his head and moved to place himself over his Dom’s lap, hoping like hell Cas wouldn’t choose to lay that evil implement across his ass, still crisscrossed with cane-marks.

“I thank you for this show of trust.” Cas cinched him close by his waist. “Although you may well come to regret your decision before I’ve finished. I am extremely angry with you right now.” Every muscle of Castiel’s contact with Dean agreed. Dean could feel it. Cas was pissed.

“Answer a question for me Dean. Whose job is it to determine that a Submissive deserves punishment?”

“His Dominant’s.” Dean wisely chose not to mouth off. This wasn’t a Dom/sub spanking, per se. There would be no hot, kinky Alpha-on-alpha sex after this. He was in real trouble, not in some manufactured scene meant to drop him carefully into Sub-space and then retrieve him back again, refreshed. This was Pack discipline.

“Very good. And once his Dom has determined punishment is warranted, who decides what form that punishment takes?” Castiel was holding Dean’s least favorite wooden-handled hairbrush in front of his Sub where he wouldn’t be able to avoid looking at it. He hated that thing. Hated it. Why hadn’t he thrown it out for real?

“His Dom does,” Dean responded miserably. He’d been careless to let Cas sneak up on him with that ‘your apartment smells moldy’ crap in the middle of the night.

So careless.

“Indeed.” Castiel stroked his hand across Dean’s swollen and blistered backside. “His Dom does. Dean, did you select a miserable, moldy, roach-infested slum for your residence to punish yourself for some perceived transgression?”

“yessir.”

“And did you outright lie to me when I asked you to point me to your hairbrush?”

“yessir.”

Dean couldn’t stay still. He’d be damned if he was going to fight the punishment that his wolf felt he fully deserved, but it didn’t stop him squirming like a pup. “Very well, Dean. Do not cover yourself with your hands. Do not move your feet. I do not want you to count. I simply want you to suffer.”

Castiel rained sharp, hard, fast blows upon Dean’s upper thighs, just below the crease of his ass where the sting was the most intense and where his cane hadn’t reached earlier. Dean was howling in no time. Years of training made Sam an expert at this, but no one delivered a spanking like Castiel did; not once he was angry. He covered both thighs until the skin abraded against the wooden brush and deep purple bruises blossomed. Dean moved from howling to bawling to whatever that state is past bawling where he couldn’t breathe nor stop crying and the hiccups came unabated through his tears. He dug his toes into the old, thin carpet and clutched at Cas’ pants leg. Dean screamed until the pain and guilt washed through him, and he couldn’t stand his own skin anymore, wanted it flayed from his bones.

It would not have been a surprise to have the cops come pounding on the door.

Snot and tears mixed together on their trek down to his chin. He was a hiccupping, crying mess when he realized the blows had stopped. “I..I’m sor..ry! (Hiccup) …Fucked…(Hiccup)…everyth…
…thing…u – u – up!” Castiel stayed still with a hand on Dean’s lower back and listened to him, let him hiccup his way through. The process wasn’t finished with just the spanking. Dean needed to break before Cas could rebuild him.

“I…wa - as…so (hiccup)... weak! ... (hiccup)... Thought... ...I...lo – lost you...and I (hiccup) was...too ...wea...weak. I...jus’… broke! Couldn’t (hiccup)...do anyth...anything right... ...Fuc... fucked...up (hiccup)...everything. ‘M not ...Alpha...like you... ...like you are! (hiccup). Cas... I ... couldn’t...an’ I ran! (hiccup) I’m so...sorry!...I’m no...(hiccup)...good! No good...for you! I’m so...Sorry!”

“Oh, Dean! You lovely, sweet, brilliant, perfect, beloved man! You really don’t know how wonderful you are. How can you even think that? If I could just show you the man I know and love. If I could hold up a mirror for you that reflects the real you.” Castiel praised and petted his beloved. “Do you remember, Dean, why Submissives mustn’t ever punish themselves? Do you remember what I’ve told you before?” Professionally, Dean knew it well, but he wasn’t a professional anything at the moment.

Dean’s breathing was calming. “Because they get (hiccup) get it wrong. Feel...guilty over the wrong...thi...(hiccup) things. Punish...for the wrong...things. Don’t...don’t know (hiccup)...when to...stop.”

“Very good. You are so wrong about this, Dean. You aren’t weak. You were mourning, and you did the best you could. I did, too. I hurt you. So very badly. I didn’t realize what I had done until much too late, and by then the damage was done. I am terribly sorry, my love. But you! You are NOT weak! Dean, you are strong, and I love you so much. Baby, I didn’t bear up any better. Half of my work had to be done by Benny these last weeks because I fucked up everything I touched. Do you think I deserve to live in a dank hell hole? Do I?”

Dean shook his head vehemently.

“And neither do you. You are my beloved, cherished, sweetest love. I, alone, will decide when you deserve to be punished. Capiche?”

“yessir. I capiche (hiccup), Alpha.” Castiel hoisted Dean up onto the bed and manhandled him to lay nearly on top of himself, Dean’s chest resting over Castiel’s heartbeat, and Dean’s hip bearing most of his weight beside his Dom’s on the bed.

“I dislike punishing you like that, Dean. But I will do it every time you make that particular error. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Sir.” Dean was coming back to himself slowly. Cas found a box of tissues on Dean’s bedside table and cleaned his face.

“So,” continued Castiel sleepily as if the previous interlude had never happened. “I think we should sleep late tomorrow then have omelets for brunch and pack up your stuff. We’ll stay at a hotel tonight. You’re not sleeping here again, baby. It’s not clean. Oh, and we will need to pay a visit to the ACRI crew here and put the fear of God into Victor Henrickson. Heads are going to roll tomorrow, Dean.”

Dean fell asleep tucked safely in his Dom’s secure hold and letting his soporific voice rock the Sub gently away.
The omelets were perfect. Dean ate his standing up, nervously expecting Cas to tell him to have a seat. He leaned one hip against the kitchen counter and regarded Castiel as he ate. The Alpha, oblivious to Dean’s apprehension, sent a text message to Victor demanding that he assemble an ‘All Hands’ meeting in the cafeteria at two. Dean wasn’t thinking about the screwed up center in Dallas though.

“You know once we announce the engagement, the whole world’s gonna be watching us to see if we fuck it up, right?”

“Well, then we’ll have to be sure we don’t fuck it up, won’t we?” Cas waited for Victor’s acknowledgement to come through, then set his phone on the table, took his last bite, and stood, carrying his plate into the kitchen and dropping it into the dishwasher. “Thanks, baby. That was delicious.”

“I’m serious, Castiel. We need to figure some shit out. How is this even going to work?”

“Dean, relax. We will work it out. We’re going to talk about everything, negotiate everything just like we’ve always done, but we need to involve April. She’s Alpha-mate. That makes her part of the leadership of the Pack. She gets a say, too.” Cas wiped down the stovetop while he spoke. “Please trust me. Trust us – all three of us. I know I’ve been a horrible coward where you’re concerned, but I swear to you…” Cas dropped the cloth in the sink, wiped off his hands, and took Dean by his upper arms, looking him in the eye. “I’m not going to change my mind about this. I told you. This is a done deal for me. Whatever the world throws at us, we’ll handle. You and April and I are going to figure out what works for us and do it. All right?”

“Yeah, Okay. I’m just nervous I guess. Can’t quite visualize it.”

I know, Dean. I’m scared too.” Cas tucked the O.J. back in the fridge then leaned over and kissed his fiancé. “I set out the enema bag in the bathroom. Go take care of yourself. I’ll go out and buy some boxes.”

They packed quickly. Dean had left most of his material possessions at the house he shared with Sam in Kansas. Part of him expected to return some day, no doubt. They talked as they worked.

“What’s it like, Cas? The mate-scent?”

Cas looked up from the book he’d opened and started to peruse instead of packing into the box at his feet. “It’s indescribable. I wish I could be more specific. It was like a direct line that passed straight by my conscious brain and spoke directly to my wolf. It was…indescribable,” he finished lamely.

“Thanks, man. That really clears it up for me. But, like, what does it feel like to be Mated? Can you really feel her through the bond?”

“I can. It’s muted at this distance, but I could feel that she was angry earlier and that she’s in pain right now.”

“Dude! She’s half a continent away. You can feel her pain? You mean right now?”

“Dean,” said Castiel, setting the book into the box and reaching for another, “You already know this. I’m not the first Mated wolf you’ve ever known. Your own research…”
“I know, but it’s so much closer now, with you…” he gestured at Cas. “It feels like I should feel something, too, somehow.” Dean turned to the wall and began pulling out the nails he’d hammered in only a few weeks earlier. “So, aside from being True-Mates, do you like her?”

“Yes, I do. And I really think you will, too. At least I very much hope you do. I suppose that’s one challenge we need to consider: what to do if my mate and my spouse despise one another.”

Dean laughed. “Yeah. I wouldn’t try to put the cart before that horse yet. We probly’ll wind up ganging up on you together.” Cas didn’t think that prospect was very funny, but Dean thought it was hysterical.

“And, she’s what, twenty years younger than you?”

“Eighteen years younger.”

“You’re twice her age. What do you talk about? Have you even heard of any of her favorite groups? Doesn’t it feel like having a pup in your house? Doesn’t it feel a little…awkward?”

“For one,” Cas enumerated with his fingers, “She and I admittedly have a lot of getting to know one another yet to do. I do know that she likes to write and that she plays the piano. Two, no. I don’t know any of the musicians she prefers, but I’m interested in listening to what she likes, at least to give her music a chance. And three. She most definitely does NOT feel like a pup to me. She feels like a luscious, ripe, sensuous Omega whom I enjoy knotting whenever I get the chance.”

“Damn! Down boy!” Dean teased with a laugh, palming his crotch through his pants. He refocused and popped out another nail. “Ripe, huh? Thinking of breeding, Alpha?”

“Constantly.”

Castiel’s casual admission made Dean turn and look at him. Cas was blushing furiously. Cas. Blushing. Furiously.

“Did I touch a nerve? Does my Alpha-Dom fiancé have a breeding kink?”

“Maybe.” Castiel moved from the bookcase to begin working on packing the entertainment center. He acknowledged Dean’s smirk with a sigh. “But it’s too soon for pups. She’s too young. We need to get through the next two projects first. That’s another two, maybe three years on before we’ll really be ready to start a family.”

“We? You mean you and April?” Cas had clearly said, ‘WE need to get through the projects.’ April wasn’t working on Facility projects.

“All three of us. We. Dean, I know we haven’t talked it all through yet, but this is one thing I know I want to ask for. Please consider it. I want you to co-parent any pups April and I have. I want you to be their parent as much as their mother and me.”

Dean stared at Cas and chewed his lower lip. “Does April know that? Would she go for it? You can’t ‘Alpha-Dom’ her into a decision like that, you know. She’s gotta make up her mind for herself.”

“I know. I worry that she might feel pressured, but we’ve got the Mating-bond to help us understand one another. I think…I think I can put it to her straight and get a straight answer and be okay with it either way. I’m certain I should have asked her before you, but I couldn’t wait.”

Dean watched Castiel work through the complicated issue in his head and said, “Everything we do is
going to be like this, isn’t it?” Dean dropped the hammer onto the cheap, beat-up coffee table, not caring if it caused more damage. “It’s hard enough to work through a relationship with just two wolves. We have to balance the needs of three.”

“I promise you both,” swore Castiel with a somber countenance, “…that I’ll endeavor to refrain from any manipulation tactics to get what I want. I’ll talk to you about it, straight out.”

“Manipulation?! You?!”

Cas nodded, and Dean burst out laughing. He doubled over and held his sides, laughing until tears leaked from his eyes.

“I fail to see what’s so funny.”

“Oh, my God. Whew, that’s awesome! No, it’s…it’s just. Baby, you gotta know. I love you so much. I do. It’s nothing against you, man, but you’re not in a good position to be swearing off manipulation. You do it like breathing. And the other way ‘round too, if I have to be honest. It’s, you’re just so predictable. You always go for whatever is best for others and for the most people. Always. Makes you an easy target. I love that you’re worried it’s only you going to be tryin’ to pull the puppet strings. I bet you dollars to donuts that pretty, ripe young thing has already got your number, bigtime. I bet even though she’s known you three months, she’s already weaseled her way through every defense you’ve got. I bet you. I bet you whatever you want.”

“Very funny. I’m glad you’re getting such a kick out of my discomfort,” Cas deadpanned.

“Hey, don’t talk to me about discomfort, Cas. I’m going to walk funny for a week.”

“Good.”

*************

At the stroke of two o’clock, the Alpha-Dominant Castiel Novak entered The Facility’s lunch room like the apocalypse falling upon doomed humanity. He wasted no time and addressed no one, although every eye tracked him as he descended upon Alistair and Ruby who stood side-by-side.

“You two.” He shoved his index finger in their faces. “You’re fired. Get out.”

Castiel didn’t wait to see their reactions. He’d rendered his decision. It was final. He moved on. Turning his back on them told them he didn’t consider them adversaries worthy of his attention.

He advanced upon Victor who stood waiting near the top of the room, surrounded by his staff. The air was electric as the employees picked up the Alpha’s outrage, noticing the crimson of his eyes. Castiel didn’t slow, and he didn’t speak. He grabbed the front of Victor’s shirt, dragging him a few feet and dropping him to his knees. He ignored the alpha-Dom’s squawk of surprise and roared directly into his face. Victor struggled to gain purchase with his feet, attempting fruitlessly to land a punch in his own defense.

Dean snatched an apple from the end of the food line, tucked himself in at the edge of the crowd and awkwardly started up his phone’s camera with one hand, pointing it at the grappling alphas. Gabriel
would kill Dean if he didn’t capture this moment. Gabe would have to put up with the sound of Dean crunching through his fruit though. He was hungry.

“NO! Alpha, listen to me, NO!!” Victor was trying to fight him off, but Castiel wasn’t having it. He flipped the subordinate and threw him to the floor on his belly and his chin. Before he had a chance to get his hands beneath himself to regain some height, Victor felt the enraged Alpha plant one hand between his shoulder blades, pushing him down, and a foot crashing down between his legs, way too close to the merchandise. Victor scrabbled harder, desperately seeking escape. He’d never submitted to a Dominance Fuck, and he didn’t intend to allow that to change. He hadn’t counted on Castiel in the full force of his rage though. His entire staff looked on in awe at the raw brutal canine power.

Dean nudged the beta man next to him and smirked. “That’s my Alpha!” he bragged with a cocky grin.

Castiel shifted his foot back and dropped his hips and legs to cover Victor’s, bracing his weight on his knees. He snarled and growled menacingly into the alpha’s ear and wormed a hand beneath them to work at Victor’s leather belt. Victor roared defiance and redoubled his fight, throwing his head back in attempt to catch the Alpha with a blow to his chin. Cas caught the back of his head with his free hand, forcibly rotated it and slammed Victor’s cheek against the floor. His cheekbone fractured with a sickening crack, and he screamed.

“STAY DOWN!” roared the Alpha.

“LIKE HELL!” Victor shouted back at him, trying to roll.

Castiel succeeded in freeing the belt and whipped it out of Victor’s loops one-handed. He tossed it aside and scooted down Victor’s body, tearing his pants down his hips without unbuttoning or unzipping them. He ignored the scraped flesh as he divested the alpha of his pants and ripped his boxers to shreds.

Victor took that opportunity to work his hands into place and attempt to push himself up, his chin and cheek mottled with blood and bruises, his face grimacing in pain. Castiel worked at his own belt and pants fastenings rapidly, allowing Victor a moment of hope, thinking he’d perhaps fought the threat off. Then he shoved his slacks low enough to free his cock, hooked his feet underneath Victor’s shins and thrust his torso forward again, flattening the alpha back to the ground with a scream as his chin took another hard hit.

They stillled, panting hard, their eyes fully transitioned to alpha red, their chests heaving. Castiel’s nostrils flared. He could see the side of Victor’s face where he lay, beat. Castiel saw him tremble, fighting internally with his own wolf to keep trying. The Alpha moved slowly, sitting up across Victor’s thighs. Victor whined and struggled, but weakly this time. Castiel spread the alpha’s cheeks with each hand and let a long, ropey string of saliva land directly on his asshole. Then he aimed another string at his cock, rubbing it in with one hand.

“STAY DOWN!” he demanded.

“Alpha, NO!! NO!! DON’T!!!” Castiel mounted him, shoving his cock in brutally hard, all the way in until the tight friction of unprepped alpha and too little lubricant ground him to a stop. He pulled back and pounded back in, pressing a hand to the flat of Victor’s back and creating a vicious rhythm. Victor screamed, but the Alpha’s voice drowned him out.

“LOOK AT THEM, VICTOR HENRICKSON!! LOOK AT YOUR STUDENTS! LOOK AT YOUR PEOPLE! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO THEM? IS THIS WHAT I TAUGHT YOU?
“IS IT!?" the great black wolf demanded, thrusting painfully.

“NO, ALPHA! PLEASE!”

“I TRUSTED YOU! You tried to EXTORT me, and then I learn you’ve done THIS!” Cas gestured at the assembled mass of onlookers. “YOU! You just lie there and you TAKE it, alpha!” Castiel thrust into him painfully again and again. Victor screamed and then finally stopped fighting, curling tensely but submitting his body, his wolf, and his will to his Alpha-Dominant. Castiel wasn’t explaining himself to the onlookers, and most of the clients and students didn’t know what he was so pissed about, but the employees understood. Many had spoken to Dean over the weeks of their unease at the treatment of the students and lower staff.

Castiel pulled out before his knot caught and stroked himself quickly to orgasm. His come shot across Victor’s ruined ass, up his back and all over the back of his torn shirt. "Do not change your shirt until you return home tonight. What you’ve allowed to occur here is a travesty, and you WILL correct it! YOU will correct it. DO YOU HEAR ME?! You have two months."

“Yes, Alpha, please.” Victor sobbed into the floor. Castiel left him there as he dismounted and clothed himself gracefully. Several betas moved in to assist him as Castiel collected Dean and departed with a single backward glance. He HATED this part of his Alpha role, but sometimes it was the only thing that worked.

Once in the deserted hallway, Castiel tightened his grip on Dean’s arm. He dragged the alpha-Sub in through the first unlocked door he found, slammed it, and crowded Dean up against the wall. Castiel’s eyes were still red. He made quick work of Dean’s blue jeans, unfastening them and shoving them down with his boxers, stepping on the crotch to force them to Dean’s ankles.

“I’m totally onboard with you here, Alpha, but ‘m not sure I’m entirely open for business right now. How’re you even…? Jesus, Cas, your refractory period is crazy!” Cas had lowered his own pants and freed his cock, which was fully hard and angry red.

Cas mouthed hungrily at Dean’s mouth, still panting from exertion and adrenalin. His words were breathy and desperate. “Just let me. Please, baby. I need to touch you, now. I feel tainted.” Cas pressed his groin up against Dean’s and took both cocks in one large hand, twisting across both heads and smearing pre-come on his downstroke.

Oh, hell yeah! Dean brought a hand up to join the party and drove his hips into motion. He responded to the Alpha’s words and touch with greedy, sloppy kisses, wrapping his free arm around his love’s shoulders and pulling him in close. “You were so HOT in there, my Alpha. Made me hard just watching you; knowing you can do that. So hot, knowing everyone wants you, but you’re mine, and soon everyone’s gonna know it!”

They didn’t last long at all. Frantic desperation drove first Cas, then Dean quickly over the edge, leaving a splatter of come in a thickening puddle on the floor and dripping down their hands as they moaned and huffed against each other’s mouths and ground their hips into their overlapping fists.

Dean kissed Castiel chastely as he pulled away to re-dress and find a tissue or something. He noted that Cas’ eyes were back to blue, his Alpha and his wolf sated and soothed again. Castiel accepted the Kleenex Dean handed him and knelt to clean their mess off the floor.
Dean drove the Impala while Castiel navigated. He didn’t tell Dean where they were headed just yet, but Dean trusted him. He was more interested in the way the sun glinted off of the diamonds in the new ring on his finger. It kept drawing his eye. “You’re awfully thoughtful over there, Dean. Take the next right up ahead. Penny for your thoughts?”

Dean chuckled and took the turn where he’d been directed. “It’s just, we never even dated, man. I mean, sure, we know everything about each other, right? We’ve shared Ruts and stayed over at each other’s houses, and we know we work well together. I love everything about you. But, that doesn’t get us used to making a relationship work. Don’t we need to date for a while before we go out and get married?”

“You want to go on a date?”

“No, Cas. I mean, yes. I’d love to go on a date with you, but that’s not what I mean. Doesn’t it feel like we’re skipping a few steps? Going straight to getting hitched? Should we maybe slow down a little?”

“Turn left, then right into the parking lot ahead. I don’t want to rush you, Dean. Like I said, if we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it together as equals. If we’re not both ready, then we wait until we are. It’s that simple. We can have a long engagement, or just…just date and hold off on getting engaged for the time being. For me, just to be clear, I know what I want. I don’t feel the need to practice managing a relationship with you, and I don’t want to wait. But if it’s what you want, we’ll do it your way. I’ll do anything for you, Dean. Anything. Even let you go if it’s what you want.” Castiel’s wolf paced in alarm. (Please don't let him go. We NEED him. Don’t give him that choice! What’s wrong with you?)

Dean couldn’t take his eyes off the ring. It looked so right on his left hand, like it had always been there and he’d only just now noticed it. He parked in a spot facing a long flat institutional building and squinted to read the lettering above the door. “Cas, what…? The Federal building? You want to get married right now?! What the fuck?”

“No, no, Dean. Civil marriages are performed at County Courthouses, not a Federal Administration building. I didn’t mean to alarm you. I probably shouldn’t have surprised you with this either given the conversation we’re having, but I thought… If you don’t want to do this now we don’t have to.” Cas was at a loss, but Dean couldn’t help him since he still didn’t know the plan. He just arched one eyebrow at his fiancé and waited for an explanation.

“I was going to submit an application to establish our Pack. We don’t have to, not today. I still need to go in because I haven’t filed April’s ‘Change of Custody’ form, but we don’t have to do the other. I can wait until you’re ready, Dean. I mean it.” Castiel watched Dean’s face with concern and understanding.

Dean met his eyes, searching for anything to help ease his unrest. Was he overthinking? That was usually Castiel’s job. Dean wasn’t sure if it was just cold feet or morning-after regret. Didn’t he want this with Castiel? Wasn’t it what he’d ALWAYS wanted? He looked to his wolf, beseeching. If anyone could cut through the cloudy crap in Dean’s head, it was his lean, grey, green-eyed wolf. The wolf, like Castiel, knew what it wanted, and he jumped at the chance to say so. (You don’t think you deserve him, and you’re scared. Cut the shit. Marry the guy, and make yourself happy for once.) The wolf was smug as hell, but he was right.

“Let’s do it,” Dean decided abruptly. “We can talk about naming a wedding date later, but you’re right. I want THIS right now.” He popped open his door and stepped into the humid Texas heat.
Love and wolf kisses. Hug your forever pack, whoever they are.
Chapter Summary

Castiel and Dean actually talk about emotions and stuff. WHAT?

Chapter Notes

Virtually no angst in this chapter except for in the mind of the unrealistic but adorable Alpha who wants to co-Chair a pack. Who does that?

Just a quick clarification for all those in the "Down-with-April" club. This is a Happily-Ever-After Poly(ish) story. It was always going to be thus, and I don't feel like it's really a spoiler to throw it out there. Dislike her if you just can't bring yourself to join Club-April, but I just wanted to let you know that if you're hoping to watch her go down in flames, it's likely to be a long wait. Cas likes her, so she's probably not going anywhere. That's all I wanted to say.

Love to all wolves!

THEN:

The panel table sat upon a raised shaded dais at the front of the open-air auditorium. They were part
of an ‘International Cultures’ festival at the College. Bobby took it in stride, as he did everything, but Castiel was offended at being lumped in as an International Culture, especially right here in Lawrence where the population was 75% Lupin.

“Relax, Cas. All publicity is good publicity,” Bobby soothed. “It’s just another Q&A panel. Don’t really make a difference why we’re invited. Just take advantage of the opportunity.”

The timing wasn’t great, so Dean and Benny had both begged off. Their classes and Keller test schedules gave them a good excuse. Cas brought Pamela and Sam in their places. Everyone took their seats and the moderator began on time. Gratitude for small favors, Castiel reminded himself.

“Thank you all for coming today. This panel is sponsored by the Alumni Committee. I want to thank our panelists for donating their time…” She droned on, enjoying the sound of her own voice. Castiel shot Bobby an accusing look which Bobby pointedly ignored. At last, after an endless drivelling introduction, she opened the lines for questions and the first attendee stepped forward. He was very young, probably still in high school.

“Hello, I’m not a Lupin, but we’ve studied you guys in school, and I have a lot of wolf friends. I want to know the difference between an Omega and a Submissive. Aren’t they kind of the same thing? Thanks.”

The moderator spoke needlessly as Castiel started to respond, “Dr. Singer, would you like to take this question? The difference between an Omega and a Submissive?”

Yep, she was officially on Castiel’s list. He didn’t want to be here and he’d be damned if this useless waste of carbon and water was going to lead this parade. Luckily, Bobby didn’t care either way. He knew Cas’ body language well and sat back in his chair, ignoring the moderator’s prompt, ceding the response to the grumpy Alpha.

“They’re very different aspects of a Lupin’s psyche, actually,” Castiel, The Alpha, intoned. ‘Omega’ is a term that describes a Secondary gender designation. It’s primarily physiological in that there are anatomical structures that make someone an Omega and chemicals produced that are unique to an Omega’s hormone mix.

“The term ‘Submissive’ has little to do with anatomy exactly, although concrete brain wiring plays an important role. It’s a Tertiary psychological base-setting – or set of behavioral and psychological predispositions. However, you may have noticed in your interactions with your friends and their families, that many of the behaviors and reactions to those behaviors stemming from both of these designations seem to overlap quite a bit.”

“What Dr. Novak is saying, in layman’s terms,” Pamela broke in with an eye on the Alpha to watch his response. He found he didn’t mind when Pam spoke up, he just didn’t like the moderator. When he gestured her on, she continued, “Is that although they both come from very different parts of the wolf, a lot of the behaviors look the same. You’ll notice that Subs and Omegas both get spanked a lot, generally. They both have to follow somebody else’s rules. They both have to submit to sexual dominance from those above them in authority or rank. It may seem like they are the same, but they’re not.

“The Omega’s behavior is driven by the hormones being produced by the Omega gland as well as some specific anatomy. In addition to requiring regular Balance adjustments to release the buildup of Omesol, they also need a solid base structure of Pack hierarchy in order to thrive. Omegas cannot live independently. Legally, they are required to maintain a custodial relationship with an alpha for their entire lives. Even if there was a pill they could take to Release them, they still must have a stable Pack or family and know their place in it. An Omega’s place in the pack is always going to be under
the care and authority of everyone else in the pack except the pups. They crave and need that oversight. Their place is well-defined and super supported through Pack discipline and Claiming, and it needs to be reinforced regularly. The way we reinforce that place is through physical contact, regulation and rules, Claim-Fucks, Dominance games, and of course reward and punishment. An Omega who is supported thusly in their home pack can be successful outside the home as a fully functional adult member of society. Without that support, they cannot. It’s that simple.”

Pamela looked to Sam. He was an expert on Submissives, and could fill in the next portion well. “Oh, okay. The Submissives, then. Yeah, a lot of it looks the same on the outside. There’s still some rules and rewards and punishment going on, but it’s not based on their anatomy very much, like we’ve said. For a Shallow Submissive – meaning not very strongly Sub – all of their needs can be met behind the bedroom door. You wouldn’t even be able to tell just by meeting them that they’re Submissive at all. They behave just as assertively as anyone else in public. The more Profound Submissives are going to require more attention, but once their needs are met, they’re just like everyone else. Omegas can’t really do that. Even though Omegas are fully functional, they’re still going to need to be treated like Omegas, in public and private both.

“It’s harder to explain than I realized.” Sam laughed at his own perceived ineptitude, but pressed on. “Wolves just kind of get the differences instinctively, but it’s like describing the difference between the colors red and green to someone who doesn’t see colors. Maybe it’ll make more sense with some examples.

“So, my brother, Dean. He’s a Submissive, but not an Omega. He doesn’t need any Balance adjustments because he’s not producing Omesol. He doesn’t need to be constantly reminded of his proper place in the pack because his psyche isn’t constantly searching for structure and proof of the structure. He could live mostly independently without rules or anyone holding a Claim on him. What makes him a Submissive is a need to have control of some part of his life taken over by someone else at pretty regular intervals, usually his sexual behavior, but also sometimes just his behavior in general. My brother is a brat, meaning he deliberately misbehaves to elicit the controlling behavior that he needs from an appropriate Dominant. His inner psyche craves being taken-in-hand and made to submit to the will of someone whose canine power is greater than his. And it’s not just a craving, it’s a need. These episodes of submission aren’t constant, but if a Sub goes longer than what’s normal for that individual without a scene of some kind, it effects their brain chemistry and makes them miserable. Eventually, it makes everyone around them miserable. We have a saying, ‘If the Sub ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy’. Most unMated non-Omega Subs go out and find themselves a matching Dominant, and they get together regularly as scene partners. We’re in the planning phase of building a wing in the Research Institute on campus to provide matching services and contract sex workers.”

“Here’s the quickest answer I can give to illustrate,” said Bobby. “We train both Omegas and Subs to hold specific sexualized presentation positions. They all learn the same ones. The all get rewarded for holding them well and punished for messing them up.

“The Omegas might be put into those positions regularly: any time, any place, public, private, doesn’t matter, it’s all about what the person needs, but once they’ve held the position long enough and well enough that their rank in the pack is crystal clear and the hormone response we’re looking for has taken place, they get released. They don’t have to do it very long or very well. You put them in their place, fuck ‘em or spank ‘em or whatever, and then you move on. Everyone’s stable, everyone’s happy.

“The Sub uses the same positions as part of their scening. They may need to willingly hold the position well and for a much longer time as a demonstration of their complete submission to the Dom. A Dom is not gonna try to make a Sub drop into one of those positions just anywhere unless
that’s part of an agreement they’ve made together, but neither would an alpha ask an Omega to hold one of these positions with just their willpower for a long time. For an Omega, it’s anywhere, and any time. For a Sub, it’s only during a scene, often in private, and always under the watchful eye of a Dom who has been granted authority by the Sub, himself.”

“Next question!” called the moderator. Castiel enjoyed that she wasn’t going to get much time to speak. His Pack was awesome.

“Yes, hello. I was wondering, what a beta-Neutral is like? Are they even really Lupin at all?”

“Beta-Neutrals are certainly Pack, the same as the rest of us,” answered Castiel before the moderator could speak. “They make up the largest single portion of the Lupin population, at roughly 28%. They get somewhat of a bad rap. They often get overlooked simply because they don’t have the same extreme need for specialized care that wolves at the fringes of the spectrum have. A beta Presentation at puberty displays as several days of intense sexual arousal, severe dehydration, and a pheromone release that is really quite unpleasant to smell. Luckily, the odor is a singular event. This Presentation is often termed a ‘mini-Heat’ or ‘beta-Heat.’

“Interestingly, it’s really only the beta-Neutrals who ever marry Primates successfully, so there is certainly something to be said for their adaptability. Maybe that’s why they have the reputation for being the most apelike of the Lupins.”

NOW:

“What’s taking so long, man? It’s not tax code. Looks like it’s only three pages long.” Dean pocketed his cellphone and stood upright from the leaning stance he had assumed against the wall, approaching Castiel where he stood working to fill out the ‘Pack Establishment’ form. Starting a new Pack was a federal process, so it didn’t matter where they submitted the application from. Dallas would do just as well as Kansas. They would still need to file a ‘Request for Pack Residence’ application with Douglas County when they got back, but that was straightforward enough once this step was completed.

Dean looked past Castiel’s arm and found the form still mostly blank. Cas had filled in the Pack name, application date, and planned location, but that was all. Dean turned baffled eyes on him.

“There’s no way to list both of our names as Alpha, Dean. I had been so sure I could put us both down, but the form is clear.” He pointed to the instruction above the blank space. It said, “List one name only to establish the Pack’s Lead Alpha. Only alpha candidates are eligible.” Cas was crestfallen. Dean shook his head at his oblivious fiancé. He let his head drop to Castiel’s shoulder and laughed at him softly. “This is serious, Dean. Why are you laughing? I promised you an equal partnership, and I meant it.”

“I know you did, baby. I know.” Dean raised his head and looked into Castiel’s eyes. “Cas, look. C’mere and sit down with me for a second.” He tugged Cas to the seats in the corner, and he stifled a grunt as his weight settled stiffly. Cas brought his form and his pen and let them both dangle sadly. Dean couldn’t help but chuckle and hug him. How could one person be both so frighteningly dominant and so endearingly awkward?

“Cas, listen. You’re still letting your mother set the rules about this. She really did a number on you. You’re rebelling against everything Naomi. You still seem to think that equality for wolves is the
same as equality for apes. I know you don’t really want a position above me, above everyone. It’s one of the things I love about you. You know your place, and you play the role we need you to play. And, man, you do it really, really well. I know if you could choose though, you would make us all the same so none of us would have to feel less than anyone else. But do you really want to be one of them? One of the apes? Think about everything you would have to give up in order to be an ape. It’s not worth it. We aren’t them.”

Castiel lowered his eyes in thought, and Dean dropped his head under Cas’ gaze to catch his eyes again. “It’s not like that. The hierarchies work. They really do, and you and I, we spent nearly a decade proving it to ourselves; proving it to the world. You’re such a dork sometimes. It’s like you believe everything you’re selling to the other wolves when you’re selling, but you just won’t buy it for yourself. Let it go, Castiel. I mean, yeah, I want to be your equal, you know? I want to be your husband and have a partnership where I matter as much as you do. But you know I’m not fit to be Alpha, not for more than just me and Sammy. I need you in that chair. I need you to do it for me.

“Think about it. We didn’t make it fifteen minutes after you said ‘equal partners’ before we broke it. You remember? Yesterday before we left for dinner. I said I didn’t believe The Facility back home missed me, that they probably worked better without me. You remember what you did?” Castiel’s eyes grew wide in realization. He’d acted on reflex like always. “We weren’t scening, but you swatted me – whole buncha times it seemed like. You know why? Because I needed you to, so you stepped up. You always step up. It’s Pack Discipline, and we can’t pretend we don’t both need it. I don’t wanna lose that part of our relationship, and we can’t have that if we’re co-chairs.”

Dean ran a hand over Castiel’s clenched fist, enticing him to relax. “We’ve always fit together. I do something stupid and self-destructive, and you set me right. THAT’s what I want from you. I want a Dom, and a Pack Alpha, AND a Husband. Is it too much to ask? Is it, Castiel? Baby, we can be each other’s husbands, and still do THIS.” Dean nodded his head toward the form in Cas’ hand. “Here, give me that.”

Dean grabbed the form and carried it back to the table. He filled in the blank for Pack’s Lead Alpha with, “Castiel James…” then he stopped. He turned and looked at Cas who’d followed him. “Are you keeping your middle AND birth pack names, or one or the other?”

“Novak was my father’s name. My sire was a rich privileged drunk who got himself killed when I was twelve in a pointless duel with another alpha. That name means nothing to me.” Cas wrapped his arms around Dean’s waist from behind and rested his chin on Dean’s shoulder, appraising the papers on the desk before him. “My mother named me James for her Omega brother who died at 22 from Omesol poisoning.”

Dean kissed Castiel’s cheek and turned his pen back to the page. “James it is, then.” He finished writing out, “Castiel James Winchester,” then he looked at his intended. “You good with this? ‘Cause I think it’s perfect.”

“More than good, Dean. You’re right, as always. It’s perfect.” He nuzzled against Dean’s cheek. “What would I do without you?”

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Dean listened through his cellphone as his brother’s phone rang several times before the beta picked up the call. He stood nervously beside the hotel room desk, fidgeting with a pencil on the flat surface, rolling it back and forth anxiously, spinning it, his eyes glazing past the pencil. One foot crossed the other and rested on a toe while he leaned his outer thigh against the wood veneer of the desk and waited impatiently. He’d put this off too long.

“Hey, Dean! I was just about to try calling you. What’s up?” Sam seemed cheerful. Dean imagined he heard a trail of expectation in his voice. Maybe it was real. No doubt Cas had informed the staff as to why he’d taken off to Dallas. That would be just like him. Not that Dean minded. Better they knew through Castiel than make Dean come out with a big announcement.

“Hey, Sammy. It’s good to hear your voice. Uh, yeah. Sorry I didn’t call on Friday, and uh, happy belated birthday, man. Things got kinda busy here.”

“Thanks, but um…” There was definitely an air of expectation this time, but Dean didn’t know how to do this. He wasn’t ashamed or afraid. He knew he’d have Sam’s full support about his engagement, but he was a little embarrassed to have fought his brother so hard over his feelings for Cas for so long only to cave to Castiel’s entreaties by just an instant. He kind of hated when Sam was proven right. “What kind of busy, Dean?”

“I, well, I guess you know that Cas is here with me. He’s…that is, I’m moving back to Lawrence and taking my training job back. We’ll be leaving tomorrow afternoon. Driving up. It’ll take us a couple of days because he wants to stop in OKC, check out Gordon’s new place.”

“Is that all the news you have for me? Did Cas say anything else besides, ‘please come back to Kansas’?”

Dean breathed in and let it out loudly, turning his glance to the ceiling. Here goes. “Yeah, he did. He did, Sammy.” Why was this so hard? Cas stepped out of the bathroom, naked, wet, and rubbing a towel over his hair. Suddenly, Dean found it was indeed hard. His cock thickened at the sight of a wet and heat-reddened Alpha just feet from him.

“Dean?” prompted Sam through the phone.

“Yeah, Sam. Cas proposed to me.” Dean met and held Castiel’s eye, and Cas smiled warmly at him. Dean felt the warmth surge through him, bolstering him “I said yes. We’re getting married, Sammy. I’m coming home, and I’m going to marry Castiel.”

Sam had obviously pulled his phone away from his ear and covered it with his hand. Dean heard his voice shout, little muffled. “He said YES!” followed by a cacophony of cheering from the other end of the line. Dean blanched, his eyes growing wide. He put the phone on speaker and set it on the desk so Cas could hear too. Castiel chuckled and stepped over, kissing Dean on the temple. He grinned like the cat who ate the canary and turned away to get dressed.

Smug bastard.

Finally, Sam’s voice returned through the line, “Sorry about that, man. Everyone was on tenterhooks waiting to find out how it went. April kind of scared us. She said the Mating-bond seemed to flare up like Cas had murdered you late last night, like y’all had had a fight or something? Anyway, I’ll go ahead and cross that off my worry list. You sound like you’re still alive. Whatever it was she felt, please keep it to yourself. I really don’t want to know.”

The noise of the crowd died suddenly, and Dean suspected Sam had entered another room and closed the door. “I’m happy for you guys. I told him before he left that I’d kill him if he screwed this
up, but I don’t think he will. It feels right to me. You know, I’ve always said that.”

Dean looked over and raised an eyebrow at Cas to confirm that Sam had really threatened him. His fiancé just smiled sheepishly and pulled on a pair of boxers.

“Thanks Sammy. That means a lot. You’ve always had my back, and I appreciate it. Don’t worry though. This thing goes south, I’ll kick his ass myself.”

“Sure, you will,” Sam laughed.

“Seriously, Sam. He’s on his best behavior. We’re not going to screw this thing up.”

“I know you’re not,” said Sam in all seriousness. “I’m happy for you both, I really am. So, uh, when you say you’re coming home, are you coming back to the house, or moving straight in with Cas?”

“Funny you should ask. We dropped by the Federal Building this afternoon and applied to establish a formal Pack together. We decided to file as Winchesters. We’re gonna live at the Novak estate and change the name. Cas said April’s still living in The Facility suite. He hasn’t even shown her the house yet, the dork.” Dean smirked when the Alpha growled at his choice of moniker. “So, once we get back we’ll move both her and me in at the same time. That’s the plan.”

The phone was silent as Sam processed the news. Dean waited for him, knowing he’d have questions. “Winchesters, huh? I didn’t see that coming. Is Gabriel going to have to change his name? Dean, are you sure about this? Seems kinda sudden.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I know it’s sudden, but like you said, it feels right. No, Gabriel and Naomi are going to stay Novaks, but they’ll be registered under the new pack, along with cousin Bolivia, whoever that is, some Omega related to Cas who needed a familial Alpha named on his custody papers. Cas talked to Gabe before he left, I gather. Says Gabe’s cool as long as he doesn’t have to move out of the manor. He likes the pool.”

“And what about me?” Sam seemed uncertain.

Castiel rejoined Dean near the phone. His expression told Dean that he’d step in and make the proposal to Sam if Dean wanted him to. Dean shook his head. His brother. His conversation. “Sam, Cas is Pack Alpha. We’d like you to join us, but you’d have to submit to him as Alpha. Not physically, of course, but just an oath transferring your allegiance from me to him. You don’t have to accept. I can stay your familial alpha if you want one, you know, just in title. Or, shit, I guess you’re free to cut ties completely if that’s what you want. You’d be free to do whatever. It’s just. We talked, and we really want you to join us. You don’t even have to move. Our house is close enough to the manor to meet the legal locality requirements for an established active Pack member. And of course, we wouldn’t have to even think about your name, ‘cause, Winchester.”

“Wow, Dean. I’m honored. Seriously did not see this coming. Can I think about it? What… how long can I take to think it over?”

Cas spoke to him. “Take as long as you like, Sam. The invitation will always be there whether you accept today, next year, or never. Whatever you choose, we’d be honored to have you. Either way, you’re family. Nothing’s going to change that.”

“Okay, thanks. I appreciate the offer. I need to get some, um, processing time on this. Damn, you two don’t do half measures do you? Go big or go home, right, Dean?”

“Right, Sammy!”
“Hey, look, I gotta get back to my Ozzies. I left ‘em too long and no doubt I’ve got some paddle-work to do to bring ‘em down off the rafters. Be safe driving home, Dean. Take lots of breaks so the bruises on your ass don’t turn into bursitis. Take care of that Alpha of yours. And congrats! I’m really pleased, guys. This is a very good thing. See you soon.”

“Bye, Sam!” Dean hung up the phone and turned to Cas. “How’d he know about the bruises on my ass?”

Castiel burst out laughing.

“Come on. I’m starving. Let’s get something to eat. What would you like? Steak?”

“How long have you known me, Cas?”

After they’d eaten, it was time for Castiel to call home too. Dean wasn’t sure whether he should give them privacy or not. Cas was dialing right out in the open room, so Dean decided it was a good time for a shower. When he emerged from the bathroom, Castiel was propped against the headboard, bare-chested and wearing sweatpants. His phone lay on the bedside table facedown and plugged in to the charger. Cas was flipping through TV channels with the remote.

“You know you didn’t need to make yourself scarce just then, don’t you?”

“I just figured you might want a private moment with your mate, and I needed a shower, so… You know this is going to be all kinds of awkward right at first.” Dean flopped next to Castiel on his belly, not remotely interested in sleeping on his back yet. Cas shut the TV off and dropped the remote next to his phone.

“We’re going to have to feel each other out and get to know where everybody fits. Even just day-to-day domestic stuff is likely to be difficult until we know each other better.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s true. How are you feeling about it right now? Do you want to talk about it?”

“Just, please believe me when I say I’m committed to making this Pack work, and don’t freak out if we hit some snags at first. You and April have the Mating-bond to help you understand each other. I don’t. The way I figure it, we’ll probably screw everything up on the first try. Please don’t start doubting everybody and everything just because we need some time to adjust.” Dean watched Castiel’s face, looking deeply into his expression.

“That’s fair,” Cas conceded. “I do perhaps jump to conclusions too quickly on occasion. What else? Do you worry about possessiveness or jealousy? Do you worry about apportioning time fairly?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t feel jealous of you two right now. Your relationship with April kinda seems to take a different place in my head than mine with you does, I guess. It’s just a different thing entirely; like how I’m not jealous of your bond with Gabe, or you of me and Sam. But that’s while we’re still 500 miles apart, and plus the sex thing makes this…more vulnerable. I took it pretty hard when I knew you were with her before. I couldn’t even stay in the same town. Now that we’re together, man, and now that we’re real, I feel solid – like nothing could come between our bond, not even a mate. But once we’re all living in the same house? I don’t really know. She got a chance to decide whether she wants me in the picture, but that’s not a choice I get to make. I’m feeling a little bruised about that, Cas, but not broken. I really just don’t know anything for sure.”

“I understand. Lupins are extremely skilled at compartmentalizing. However, I’m clearly asking
much more of you in this relationship than you are of me. I need to be aware of any signs of jealousy from myself as well as you and April. We need to keep talking about everything, even the uncomfortable feelings that we both usually avoid. There will be rules that will help us keep the boundaries where they belong, but I need you to promise to keep the lines of communication open. I need to know if your tenderness at who got choices and who didn’t turns into resentment. I need you to tell me what works for you and what doesn’t. You can’t make me guess what’s in your head, and then blame it on me as Alpha if I fuck it all up. Promise me? Dean, I don’t have any way to create a bond with you like the one that lets me read April. I can’t read your mind.”

“I promise. You know how much I hate talking about feelings, but this pack could go sideways so fast if we don’t all talk to each other. I get it.”

“What else Dean?”

“What’s my role? Where do April and I rank against each other?”

“I would never try to place you below an Omega-Sub. Her Keller chart looks much like yours – very high scores for submissiveness and masochism, only she’s not a brat, like you are.” Cas smirked and cocked an eyebrow at him, popping his ass lightly with his left hand.

“Ow! Bruises and welts and shit! Be careful!”

“Outside of pack dynamics, I think we’ll find our places organically. We just have to move around each other carefully at first and make space for the others, like any new housemates have to do. It’s my fervent hope that the two of you will bond as family without much effort. I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.” Castiel shifted up onto his hip to face Dean more fully. “Within the pack structure and as far as pack discipline goes, you outrank her, so you’ve got authority to correct her as you need to. Anything that comes up that you aren’t comfortable handling or you think might cause friction in your relationship, you can refer to me.

“You need to be aware, April has a Release block, and it’s a doozy. She can’t Release unless she feels she’s being punished justifiably for some transgression. She’s not a brat, so I have to practically manipulate her into breaking rules just to get her into a guilty mindset. I’ve set her about a million rules to follow every day – everything from how far the toes of her shoes need to be from the wall when she lines them up by the door, to how long she’s allowed to stay in the bath, to when she can sit at the table for meals and when she should kneel on the floor and be fed. It’s a shame because with her level of masochism and her affinity for pleasing me, if she didn’t have the block, we might be able to just about dispense with punishments altogether and affect Releases through play. But she’s built a subconscious block against Release if it’s attempted just through impact-play.

“I did manage to Release her a couple of times during sex, but those were both partial. Her Omesol output is through the roof. There’s no way to keep her balanced through sex alone.”

Dean listened carefully. Talk of Omegas and Subs, Balance and Release unlocked his ‘Director of Training’ mode. “Sounds like she takes a lot of work.”

“I know, and it’s not going to be fair to you. You need to tell me if I start neglecting you, Dean. You deserve my full attention too”

“No, Cas. That’s not where I was going. I mean, yes, and thanks for that. I’m sure a brat like me will be able to find some way of getting your attention when I need it.” Castiel shared a smirk and complete agreement with Dean over the image of Dean acting up to spark his Dom’s attention. “No, but are you going to be able to handle her all by yourself? This one might fire up your possessiveness, but if you need help, Sam or I, either one could step up with her Releases. If we’re
going for full pack dynamics, I mean.”

“Thank you, Dean. Maybe someday, once we’ve unearthed all the land mines that are sure to trip us up, I’ll be comfortable allowing you to share that responsibility, but for now, I don’t feel like it’s a fair burden for you to take on. And frankly, I selfishly prefer to keep them to myself for now. Let’s try to keep the lines from crossing so much at first.”

“Got it. Clean boundaries. So, I’m okay to discipline within the pack ranks, but not do Balance adjustments. Sam too?” Cas nodded, and Dean approved. “That sounds good. I agree.”

Dean perked up a little at a sudden epiphany. “Oh, hey, I just thought of something: do I get to discipline your mother? ’Cause I really, really want to do that. Please, Castiel? No one needs a strap across the hips like the Congresswoman from District 3. Oh, and Gabe! What about Gabe?”

Cas laughed and reached for Dean, hugging him across his shoulders in affection. He stayed cuddled in close once the hug ended. “No, you don’t have disciplinary authority over Naomi. She’s grandfathered as a widowed Alpha-Mate and as such, doesn’t fall in a direct ranking line with the rest of us. Gabriel is a different story. He’s active Pack and Omega, so yes, spank him when he needs it.”

“One outta two ain’t bad.”

“Sam’s position relative to yours is trickier. Assuming he accepts our offer, it’s a bit of a judgment call. I’ll most likely leave things the way they are between the two of you because it seems to work so well. As Co-Pack alpha or Vice Pack alpha, or whatever you decide to call yourself, you have the right to ask for redress on the issue if you don’t like it. Doesn’t mean I’ll change my mind, but we can talk about it.”

“Nah, I like what Sam and I have going. I look after him, and he looks after me. Like you said, it works.”

Cas stroked Dean’s back with a featherlight touch. They both turned quiet and contemplative. It had been a long day.

“Hey, Cas.”

“Yes, Dean.”

“Yes, Dean.”

“I don’t wanna fuck her, okay? At least not at first, not recreationally.”

“I know. Will you be all right with the C.F.? She’ll need it from you as an alpha in the Pack. If you want, we can use The Facility’s Processing room to keep things more clinical. It’s purely Hierarchical Claiming, not recreational sex.” Cas searched Dean’s green eyes for signs of discomfort. “You know I would never ask you to sacrifice your sexual orientation for me. I would never do that.”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks for humoring me and just letting me put that out there. I’ll be fine with the Claiming. Done it hundreds of times on chicks. It’s not the same as having private fun sexy times.”

Castiel smiled, his eyes crinkling at how adorable his fiancé’s choice of words were. “No, it’s not. And I’m not humoring you. I want to know everything that concerns you. Even if you think it’s obvious, or understood, or inconsequential. Nothing you want to bring up is out of bounds. Understand?”

“Mm-hm. I hear you. And same goes for you, oh great self-sufficient Alpha.”
“Did you mean what you said at the Federal building? That you really want me to take the lead role? Dean, are you...are you sure?”

“Of course, I’m sure.” Dean pillowed his cheek in his crossed arms and closed his eyes, enjoying the touch on his skin. “I’m not gonna need the kind of structure that April will. But I trust you to take the lead. You go be Alpha, and I’ll back you up. You know my Submissive side, Cas. Sometimes I’m going to need to be told what to do. I’ll deny ever saying that in the morning, but we both know it’s true.”

“In that case, kiss me and go to sleep. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir, Alpha, sir,” Dean sassed, aware that he hadn’t fully convinced his fiancé of anything yet.
Chapter Summary

Sometimes unexpected things happen on a road-trip. Sometimes things just don’t go as planned.

Chapter Notes

I've chewed my finger-nails right to the quick over this chapter. Everything just wants to jump out of me all at once, and I can't make myself go at any kind of reasonable pace. I think our boys are definitely doing that too. It's like the manic is contagious. Anyway, I hope you like it.

BTW: This section of "THEN" is my favorite so far. I love self-righteous, angry Cas. He's beautiful when he's pissed.

Sunday means I have to stop writing for a while again. **She said, while rocking back and forth in anxiety**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN:

“Thank you so much, beta Shurley. The Caniforme Research Project will make very good use of your contribution. Your $5 million is going to save a lot of people. This puts us over the top to begin construction of the first wing of the project and then some. We can’t thank you enough!” Dean gushed, threw himself into an energetic handshake with the beta, and then turned it into an impromptu hug. Chuck Shurley, check still in hand, patted the alpha awkwardly on the back.

“Okay, then. Um, you’re welcome,” the bearded middle-aged alumnus responded uncomfortably. “You write another book like that last one, Dean-o, and I’ll make enough money off publishing you to write another check just like this one.”

“Dean and I need to head out real quick,” Benny broke in. “Sorry to dash outta here, but we’ve got a curriculum meeting that we can’t miss. Thanks again, Chuck. Please enjoy the refreshments, and make yourself at home. You’re welcome here any time.” Benny hustled Dean through the door and exchanged a meaningful look with Bobby before he pulled it closed behind him.

“Let me add my thanks, beta Shurley,” began Bobby. “We’re planning to name a wing of the new space after you. And I know how important this research is to you and your pack; to all of us, really. I don’t know what we would do without donors like you.” Castiel handed the beta a cup of coffee with sugar and cream and nodded his agreement. Bobby continued, “Of course, it may wind up
Chuck nodded, sipping. It would be a disaster for Lupins if it passed. All forms of Claiming and domination sex, including Mating, would be outlawed, listed as rape by law. A wolf could be jailed and convicted for Claiming their own mate. It was a catastrophe that was gaining support quickly and was the talk of the whole Lupin community.

“I heard that Senator Livestone was the best possible swing vote,” Cas piped in. He had been watching closely, and if the wolves could pull in one more swing and force an immediate vote, the bill would be doomed.

“That’s what I heard, too,” said Bobby. “So, I called his office yesterday.”

“You did?!” Cas was surprised. Usually they talked strategy among themselves before stepping into politics directly.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, Boss.” Bobby didn’t look sorry, and Castiel suspected he’d been left out on purpose. He wondered if Dean or Benny knew. Bobby turned to Chuck. “Interesting things you hear when you call up random senators every now and then and just to chat, just doin’ your civic duty and staying informed. Seems like Livestone really wants to support the Lupin cause; wants to very badly. In a completely different and unrelated side note, Senator Livestone is up for re-election this year. Also, on a third completely unrelated vein, Senator Livestone’s campaign believes he would have a very good shot of winning the election if it could raise, oh, maybe about $5 million by the end of the month.”

Bobby stopped talking and stood looking at Chuck expectantly. Castiel was appalled.

“NO.”

He placed himself between the two men. “Robert Singer, we are NOT doing this. It’s corruption, and it’s wrong! I won’t have any part of buying a vote – not even for this!”

“It’s not our money, Alpha. You may have noticed that our kind beta friend here still has the check. A promise to donate is not a donation until the funds are deposited. Until then, well, folks are well within their rights to change their minds – maybe give it to someone else instead.”

“I said NO!” Castiel was livid. Bobby had known Cas was going to be the sticking point, but there was no other way. He and Benny had talked it through. They needed to move strongly right now and make sure the opposition knew how deep their pockets were. They couldn’t afford to keep nickel-and-diming their way through Congress, always playing defense. It was time to go on offense. Chuck Shurley’s money was a godsend at just the right time, and while Dean would be devastated to lose what he’d schmoozed so long to get, it was the right decision.

“Castiel, listen to me. Everything we’re wanting to do here is important. And we’re gonna do it, I swear, just like we said we would. The four of us are gonna take this country by storm… shake it up. We’re gonna break every rule the apes put in front of us, and we’re not gonna stop until we get EVERYTHING we need to be strong and vibrant as the people we know we can be! In twenty years, they’re going to award you the Nobel, and you’re going to learn some Swedish and fly to Stockholm to accept it, and we’re never going to have to look back again. But until then, none of our plans amount to a hill of beans if Congress rips it all away from us before we even get started.

“I know you don’t like it. I know you’re not an ‘Ends justifies the means’ kind of guy, but this is how it’s done, Alpha. You want to lose everything and have nothing at the end of the day but your integrity? Yeah, it’s important. I’m not saying it ain’t, but your integrity ain’t gonna matter worth a
can-to-shit-in to some Omega dying on the streets, sellin’ himself for scraps.”

Castiel’s jaw couldn’t get any tighter. Chuck just stood to the side, still awkwardly holding the check in one hand.

Bobby went on. “Dean couldn’t be a part of this. He can’t make the jump, and I wouldn’t want him to. Benny and I, look, I’m sorry we went behind your back. We both owe you our hides for it, and we’ll pay, but this is worth it.”

“You’re asking me to commit an act of political corruption. Bobby, I can’t do it. I can’t!”

“No, I’m not, Alpha. I’m not. You know what it is. I know what it is. Chuck and Livestone and every asshole in Congress who thinks they can walk all over us know what it is. But the law don’t. And it’s the law that defines corruption. This ain’t illegal, Castiel. It’s politics. Look, you read Doris Kearnes Goodwin, right? Abe Lincoln did this stuff. Abraham Fucking Lincoln! Come on, Alpha! If it’s good enough for the Sixteenth, who are you to…”

“NO! Bobby! ‘Everybody else is doing it’ is never going to be reason enough to throw out our integrity!”

“All we’re doing,” Bobby spoke softly, gently, bringing Chuck into the conversation. “Is turning down a contribution that a good friend of ours offered. Maybe, we just don’t really have a need for it at the moment. So, then, that good friend of ours thinks to himself, ‘Gee, this money’s kinda eating a hole in my pocket right now. I really want to do some good with it, make a difference in the world. I wonder if there’s another good cause out there that could use a check this size?’”

Bobby met Chuck’s eye. Chuck nodded at him, and Bobby nodded back, shook his hand, looked longingly at the check as Chuck tucked it back into his blazer pocket, then escorted him out the conference room door with a pat on the back and a squeeze to his shoulder.

Castiel stood rooted to the floor, looking down. He could’ve stopped them, but he didn’t. He could turn them in, but he wouldn’t. There was no official wrongdoing anyway – no evidence of any laws broken. Castiel had never felt so dirty. Did it really HAVE to be this way? Bobby and Benny sure thought so. They’d told him years ago it would eventually get ugly.

Bobby stood in front of him, and Castiel turned blazing eyes on him. He’d been manipulated, and he felt like a fool. Bobby jumped in. ‘I’m heading out for drinks with Sam, Benny, and Dean to celebrate the defeat of a certain Senate bill. You’d be welcome to join us, but you’ve got some soul searching to do tonight, Alpha. You need to ask yourself how important this vision of yours really is. Maybe re-read ‘Team of Rivals’, maybe spend some quality time with your Omega brother and thank the Universe that he’s still here and sane for you to talk to. Benny and I will present ourselves for reprimand in the morning. After that, we’ll talk.”

Bobby slammed the door on his way out. Castiel flinched. He felt he should’ve responded, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. He was pretty sure he’d just been grounded.

NOW:

Donna perched on her mate’s lap in the lunchroom, snuggling close, enjoying having her beloved
close enough to her that they could share lunch most days. She worked a hand down the front of Jody’s pants and wiggled her fingers into the warm, wet sweet spot that never failed to turn Jody’s cheeks crimson and her eyes dark.

“Now that’s just downright unsanitary,” complained Rufus as he joined the ladies and noticed what they had going on downstairs. Jody laughed but grabbed Donna’s wrist and held her in place when her mate started to slide her hand back out. Her eyes told her Omega that she’d very much appreciate it if she’d please continue. Their entire conversation lasted only a few seconds and was concluded without words, but they both got their points across. Donna resumed her work with her fingertips, and Jody resumed feeding her mate.

“Hey, Rufus. It’s good to see you again. Everything okay?”

“Yeah. It’s hunky-dory. Damn, you work fast, girl. I’ve been trying to get in this Omega’s pants for three months. She won’t give me the time of day!”

“That so? She seemed pretty easy to me;” snarked Jody. She turned her eyes to her mate. “You turned Rufus down? He’s hot. Of course, you know I like them a little seasoned.” Donna threw her head back and laughed.

“You callin’ me old, beta? Besides, you’d kick my ass if I even LOOKED at another wolf, and you know it.”

“That’s true,” Jody admitted and planted a kiss on her mate’s mouth.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” protested the Security Director. “Y’all coulda just told me you were mates. Didn’t have to play your damn games with me. Damn!”

They both broke out laughing. Jody shoulder-checked him and reminded him that if he’d bother scenting either of them it would’ve been perfectly clear. Then she leveled him with a steely eye and told him in all seriousness that she’d personally castrate him if he so much as looked in Donna’s direction again.

“Ma’am, yes ma’am,” shot Rufus digging into his lunch. “Damn.”

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Dean and Cas slept late the next morning and went for a midmorning swim in the hotel pool. They decided to consider this time before they needed to leave for Kansas a mini-vacation, so they lunched on heavy Texas barbeque and traded steamy blowjobs in the shower. In no time, the Impala, packed with the few possessions Dean had bothered to bring south with him, headed north toward Oklahoma with Dean at the wheel and Castiel riding shotgun.

He pulled into a gas station in Richardson to fill the tank and stock up on snacks, taking offense at the judgmental looks he got from Cas at his selection of beef jerky and Big Red. “This is road food, and I don’t want to hear it. Road trip equals road food. Period.”

“Eat whatever you like, Dean, but don’t complain to me when it makes you uncomfortable a hundred miles up the road.” Cas had somehow located the exact brand of protein bars he kept
stashed around The Facility, and he paired it with a Vitamin water.

Dean just shook his head. “This marriage is never going to work, man. It’s like I don’t even know you.”

Castiel grinned at him and slipped back into the car.

“Dork.”

They drove through the suburbs at a good clip. Early afternoon was a good time to get on the road, traffic-wise, so they made good time. Dean kept his box of old tapes handy, but wouldn’t allow Cas to touch them, selecting each new selection according to some pattern only he understood.

“So, I got a question for you,” started Dean, turning Metallica down to allow conversation. Cas looked up from his phone where he’d been reading emails as the hot, dusty, barbed-wire strung plain rolled past. “Would you allow April to marry if she found a guy that she loved and wanted to? Or is this great married-not-mated experiment for Tops and alphas only?”

“I hadn’t thought about it.” Cas turned to look through the windshield. “It wouldn’t be fair to forbid it out of hand. I suppose we’d have to keep the option open, wouldn’t we? Although it would have to be a marriage approved by her familial Alpha, and since that Alpha is also her mate…it’s not especially likely that she’d get an approval.”

“Yeah, maybe for most alphas that’d be hard, but you’re an open minded guy. Don’t you think you could weigh the benefits and give the guy a shot?”

“You’re making fun of me, Dean. I don’t appreciate it. And besides, it’s a valid question. Why should the Tops alone be allowed to define their lifelong relationships outside of the Mating-bond? If we tell April she can never marry even though we’re doing it, doesn’t that make us hypocrites?”

Dean laughed. “Sorry. I’ll stop provoking your predictable sense of justice. No, come on. You can’t make everyone equal, babe. Omegas are always going to need a simple hierarchy. If she tried to add a marriage outside of our Pack, her loyalty would be split in two. It couldn’t work.”

“Well, then we’d just have to insist that she only marry from within the Pack,” concluded Castiel.

“No good. That leaves your mother, perish the thought, or Gabriel and Sammy up for grabs. You wanna share your mate with either of those numbskulls?” Dean changed lanes to pass a heavily loaded eighteen-wheeler and accelerated to move on ahead of the building traffic. It felt good to let his Baby open up and run.

It took him a minute to realize that his fiancé was quiet and tense. Dean looked across at him.

“Something I said? You know I was just teasing.”

“It’s a touchy subject,” the Alpha replied tersely. Dean looked at Cas again, eyebrows raised. Cas sighed. “I’ve already shared my mate with your brother. You weren’t there when we Mated, remember, so Sam performed the second traunch of her Keller test. His Claim should be just about worn off by now, but I didn’t like leaving her in Kansas knowing there was another wolf who had Claim to her.”

Dean didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t been aware that Cas had asked for him to do the test. Would that have changed anything? Probably not, he decided; at least, not for the better. If anything, Cas would have been even more distant and possessive, and Dean would’ve left town even sooner. Then Castiel saved him from his darkening thoughts by quirking a little smile and adding, “You know, she could always marry my cousin in Bolivia. Neither of us has any emotional baggage with
him.”

“One of these days I want to get to the bottom of whatever story is behind Cousin Bolivia. There’s gotta be some family drama there that you’re not sharing.” Dean was relieved to have the conversation turned. There were powerful mines in waters like these, and he didn’t think they were ready for all of them.

“My lips are sealed. Bolivia’s story is his alone to tell.” Castiel was quiet for a few more miles although he didn’t return to his emails. He reached across the bench seat and took Dean’s hand, resting both of theirs together beside Dean’s thigh. “I’m very happy to have you back, Dean. I missed you terribly.”

Dean pulled Cas’ hand to his lips and kissed his fingers. “I love you, too,” he said, and he set their hands back where Castiel had placed them and drove on.

Castiel’s musing broke the silence some time later. “Do you think we need to worry about Alistair and Ruby? I’ve got enough contacts in the industry that I’m sure I’ll know where they both end up.” He met Dean’s eye for a moment. “I don’t know either of them at all really. What do you think, Dean? Are they dangerous?”

“Yes. Both of them are dangerous separately, but if they stick together, they’re bad news times twenty. I wish I knew where they are right now. Tell you the truth, they’re probably heading the same way we are. They’d fit right in with Gordon’s new setup.”

“And isn’t that just what we need?” lamented Cas. “Everyone who’s ever had a grudge against me all holed up in one place. This visit’s going to be just peachy.” Castiel leaned into the window and frowned.

“Hey now, don’t go all Grumpy-Cat on me here. We’re still on vacation until we get home. Road trips are supposed to be fun. And you can’t use ‘peachy.’ That’s my word.”

Dean drove and thought for a bit. “Don’t worry about them, Cas. We don’t know what they’re going to do. We don’t know where they’ll end up. We may never even see them again. Worrying’s not going to do us any good anyway. Just take it as it comes, okay? How’s that for ‘peachy?’”

When Castiel didn’t respond, Dean changed the subject tangentially. “Have you checked in on Victor? How’s he doing?”

Cas stretched in his seat and took a deep breath. “I haven’t spoken to him directly. I want to give him some space to process the D.F. and get his head right. I talked to Bela this morning while you were downstairs hunting for real coffee. She said that physically, he’s going to be fine. The worst damage is his broken cheekbone, which apparently looks god-awful but isn’t too bad. Although there’s also substantial anal tearing he needs to recover from.” Cast shot a sidelong at Dean and added sheepishly, “I probably shouldn’t have broken his face, huh?”

“You did what you had to do, man. You know that a D.F. only works if you let your wolf out. Looks like your wolf was pretty damned pissed off. I think a broken face isn’t too high a price for him to pay for the mess he’s made down here. I was kinda surprised you didn’t fire him on the spot, to be honest.”

Cas shook his head. “He’s a good man. Mostly. Maybe he isn’t right for the Directorship. Maybe he’s in over his head, but you can’t convince me that his intentions aren’t good. I think he got played by Alistair. He put his trust in the wrong wolf and didn’t keep his hands on the reins like he should’ve. I don’t expect he’ll make that same mistake again.”
“Yeah,” laughed Dean. “Prolly not.”

“Of course, he might still quit. I humiliated him badly in front of his entire staff and a lot of the clients. He may not recover his equilibrium. Some wolves aren’t strong enough to make it back from that.”

Dean kissed Cas’ knuckles again. He liked having Castiel’s hand in his. It felt like direct contact with his wolf, right there easy to get to when he wanted to pet its furry head. “Whether Victor pulls himself back up or not isn’t your responsibility, babe. He’s got to make his own way. Though if he does quit, then we have to contend with Bela.” Dean shot a meaningful look across the seat. “Watch out for that one, Castiel. She’s not evil like Alistair, but she’s cold and ambitious. I think she’ll hook her wagon to anyone who’ll help her get ahead. She wants a directorship. Wants it bad. I suspect she’s working with Victor because she thinks he’s weak and won’t last long. I’d advise that you don’t feed that beast unless you know how to put it down if it turns rabid.”

“And by the way,” Dean continued after a minute, “Gabe says your D.F. was all kinds of hot.”

“You filmed it!?”

Yep. It might be making the rounds back home, purely offline of course. That is, offline except for the email I attached it to.” Dean’s proud smirk was too much. Castiel just shook his head.

“I can’t believe you sent it to my brother. I can’t believe he said it’s hot. That’s…That makes me somewhat uncomfortable, Dean.”

Dean laughed. “Yeah, I’ll bet.”

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They made it almost two hours into the trip before Dean needed to pee and walk the stiffness out of his legs and ass. Fucking Doms and their fucking wooden-handled hairbrushes. The brush was worse than the cane, if you asked Dean. It shouldn’t be, but it was.

Just south of the TX/OK border, he spotted a state run rest stop and signaled for the exit, nudging Castiel to let him know he should slip his shoes back on. Dean pulled in behind a line of cars and then found a space near the end of the long line of parked cars next to an old fashioned station wagon. Dean arched his back and stretched his arms over his head when he got out. Castiel did the same.

“You smell that? Somebody’s cooking something delicious. Damn, that smells good! They got picnic tables with grills out here somewhere, I guess?”

“Um, I don’t know. I don’t smell anything,” Castiel replied in a distracted voice. “I see maps. You go on ahead. I want to get a map of Oklahoma if they have one. I’ll catch up.”

Dean went on but turned and walked backward so he could shout a taunt back. “You’ve got maps on your phone, Cas. We don’t use paper anymore, you know?” Cas waved him on and continued searching the racks.
Dean couldn’t get over that smell. It was like every delicious meal he’d ever eaten all rolled together into one. It was getting stronger as he approached the large restroom complex. (We need to crash whatever party’s going on where they’re cooking that,) supplied Dean’s wolf. Dean agreed. He wanted in on it. Bad. But first he needed to empty his bladder. Dean spotted the men’s room, but scanned further to see if there was an alpha/beta room as well. Nope. Of course not. Fucking Texas. Men’s room it is, then.

Dean rounded the corner and stopped abruptly. The odor he’d been drooling over didn’t get weaker as he approached the men’s restroom, it got exponentially stronger. And it wasn’t a food odor at all. It was…indescribable – delicious, sensual, enticing, sumptuous, and indescribable. Dean whined and gripped the wall. His cock hardened in his jeans. He could feel the red spreading in his eyes, and his fingertips went suddenly very cold. His breathing shallowed to a quick panting, and he WANTED.

He took two steps forward into the men’s room, turning right to find a single long room with metal stalls down one side of the grey cinderblock structure and urinals and wash sinks down the other. Three or four men occupied the open space, but none of them… he scanned, none of them…were… where was he? Where was that smell coming…from? He found himself a couple of yards down the walkway when he spotted the black-haired man pressed against the far wall. Dean froze and stared at him. Shocked, wide green eyes looked back into his own. The man’s chest was heaving. He looked young, twenty-two maybe. He was dressed in baggy sweatpants and a hoodie, and he’d plastered himself against the back wall like his life depended on not moving.

Dean heard a strange sound echoing through the long room, a whine that oscillated in pitch and volume. It was a sound of desperation, and he looked to the man’s throat to see if it was coming from him. It wasn’t. His green eyes were turning a bright golden color even as Dean slowly approached, but his throat wasn’t moving. That sound? Dean froze again when he realized it was coming from his own throat.

Somebody near him spoke something in urgency. There was motion all about him that he couldn’t focus on. There was suddenly shouting that he didn’t understand, and the next thing Dean knew amongst the nearly panicked scurrying, he was standing only two feet in front of the black-haired, green/gold ey ed man and breathing hard. His fingers twitched, flexed. Every muscle stood rigid and ready. He was ready. The younger man opened his mouth to speak but Dean didn’t wait to hear his voice. The sight of those lips opening sparked him, and he launched himself at the man and kissed him with teeth and growls and hardened lips, grabbing at the man’s shoulders to pull him in tight, trying to lower him to the ground so they could…

…So they could Mate.

Dean’s brain caught up to him, and he pulled back and growled, slamming a hand down on the back of the Omega’s neck to force him down onto his knees. The Omega had other ideas. He slammed the heel of his hand into Dean’s jaw, splitting Dean’s lip and sending his head flying back. He was thrown off balance and fell back, holding onto the man’s hoodie by the shoulder and catching his descent.

Dean recovered quickly, rearing up and using his grip to gain purchase on his Omega’s shirt and shoulder. He slammed the man into the wall and roared a full-throttled alpha-voiced scream into the Omega’s pale face. He was met with a glancing knee to the groin. Only the movement of Dean’s leg as he shoved himself forward, catching the knee jerk and sending it off center saved him from crumpling to the ground in agony. The glancing blow sent his erection throbbing with want. Pre-come dripped into his pants. He roared again and grabbed a handful of black hair, wrenching it back and down to bare the Omega’s throat, slamming his mate’s head into the wall. WHY? Why was his mate fighting him when they should be knotting already?! Betas fought Mating sometimes, the
Dominant ones did, but this boy was Omega. Everything about the tussle felt wrong. Then a voice he knew well broke through the buzzing in Dean’s head.

“DEAN! KNEES! NOW!”

Dean released his hold and dropped to his knees without a thought.

“STAY DOWN!” Dean crumpled and whined in misery. WHY!?

Castiel took Dean’s place in front of the Omega, and lifted the younger man bodily from the wall. Turning away from Dean, he slammed the man to the ground on his back, knocking the wind out of him. The Omega clenched his eyes in pain and grunted the breath out of his lungs.

Castiel put a knee on the man’s chest, and then looked to Dean. “What’s the meaning of this?! Answer me, Dean! What the hell’s going on here?”

“He’s my mate, Alpha! Don’t hurt him. HE’S MY MATE!” Dean scrabbled to the man’s head, and ran his hand through that soft black hair. He shoved Castiel’s knee, and Cas, staring in shock, removed it.

“Your mate?”

“GET OFF OF HIM!” A rush of motion and another scrabbling body announced the arrival of yet another wolf to interfere, but Dean wasn’t having it. He stood over his mate’s supine form and roared at the newcomer with all his might. The Omega, for his part wasn’t taking it lying down either. He was regaining his breath and attempting to stand, using Dean’s pants leg to crawl his way up.

It was a chaotic mess. Everyone shouting, everyone reaching, punches thrown, kicks landed, hair tangled into someone’s fist. The would-be mates fought desperately to reach each other, but they drew blood every time they got close enough.

“ENOUGH!!!” announced Castiel. The wolves froze. “Dean! KNEES!...and STAY THERE!” Dean dropped again. He was bleeding from several places, but then so was the Omega. There was flesh under Dean’s fingernails.

“Is this your Omega?” Castiel asked the spare wolf. “Answer me!”

“Yes, he’s my son! What the HELL are you doing to him?”

Castiel had the Omega in a headlock. Dean’s wolf didn’t like it at all, and he growled menacingly at his Alpha. He was answered with a roar from his Dom that snapped his jaw shut. “Help me!” Castiel directed at the mate’s father. “They’re mates. We need to get them out of here before they kill each other. Alpha, HELP ME! Take your son! Can you hold him?”

“What? Mates? But they’re fighting! Why would they be fighting?” The Alpha took hold of his growling son with an arm across the chest and began to drag him out of the restroom. Castiel lifted Dean off the floor and carried him bridal-style, pinning his arms to his sides. Dean didn’t fight him. They were moving in the same direction as his mate, so he was good with it for now.

Dean ignored the soothing noises coming from his Alpha and kept his eyes locked on the black head of the Omega in his father’s grasp in front of them. As they exited the restroom, he barely noticed the crowd of people pressing forward and the State Troopers keeping them in check. Dean didn’t care about any wolves but one, and he didn’t care about the Simians at all.

The older Alpha called to Castiel over his shoulder as they struggled down the path toward the
parking lot, “I’m parked at the end. I can get him into the car, but I can’t keep him there!”

“I’ll follow you. We’re parked this way, too,” answered Castiel. “If I can get him inside the car, it should cut enough of the scent that I can talk him down!”

“Bring them over here!” hollered one of the cops, directing the two wolves toward a short line of State Troopers’ cars. Two more cop cars pulled into the lot as the group approached. Cas noticed the cop who was directing them had ears that were slightly pointed. He was Pack. It was an unexpected gift, and Castiel took it.

The father wrestled his son into the back seat of one of the cars and slammed the door, ordering him to STAY PUT with all the Alpha authority that he possessed. Castiel did the same with Dean in the car next to it. The police had followed at a distance, and they approached when both car doors closed. Castiel waved them to keep their distance.

“It’s not safe yet. We don’t know what they’ll do, but we need to get the cars’ engines going so they can have air conditioning. It’s too hot in there without it.” A couple of the Troopers moved forward and got the air going in each car. Dean was sprawled along the back seat with his head pulled up to the window, watching the vehicle beside his closely. He tensed when the engines both roared to life, but Cas spoke firmly through the open driver’s-side door. “We’re not leaving Dean. Your mate is fine. No one’s going to take him from you. You just need to hang on for a while until we figure this out. Can you do that for me, Dean?” Dean’s wolf whuffed at Castiel in response, and he began to kick off his shoes and pull his shirt over his head. Castiel wiped the sweat from his face, checked that Dean was secure, and turned to the other Alpha.

He extended his hand to the Alpha as he rounded the police cruiser’s bumper. “Castiel Novak. I think they’ve chosen a poor place to try to pull off a Mating, but I’ve seen worse.”

“Jerry Lancet. That didn’t look like any Mating I’ve ever seen. Those two were tearing each other apart.” There was a great THUMP from the backseat of the cruiser behind Alpha Lancet. Both Alphas roared at the young man in unison, and he stilled again. “That’s Michael, my son. You’re Dr. Novak? We’re on our way to an appointment with you right now. This is crazy.”

“Yes, Michael Lancet. We’re doing a Keller test and a psych Eval on him. You said Michael was having some unusual issues at college, correct?” The sound of Dean’s whining was getting loud enough to work its way out of the car. Castiel stilled him with a look. “Look, we don’t have much time here, and we can’t keep them in the cars for long. Long story short, I know that Dean is an alpha-Sub, and I suspect Michael may be a Dominant. I believe that what happened in there is that Michael’s Dom was reacting to Dean’s alpha, and the two just got onto the wrong wavelengths – thus the fighting.”

“That actually makes some sense. Michael’s hot-headed, although I’ve never seen anything like that outta him before. But…a Dominant? He’s Omega. There’s no such thing. Is there?”

“Dean called Michael his mate back in the restroom. I think we have to assume that that’s what they are. Do you have any objection to allowing them to Mate, assuming we can make it safer for them both?”

Michael was up against the glass again and beating on it. “OPEN THIS DOOR! THAT’S MY MATE, GODDAMNIT!”

“I don’t know! What if you’re wrong? What if they kill each other?”

“There’s a Lupin Resource center in Oklahoma City. If we keep them in separate cars, but within
sight of each other, we might be able to get them there. Here’s my cell number. We’ll keep a phone line open and on speaker so we can communicate the whole way, and they can both hear what’s going on. It’s the best I’ve got unless you want to just open the doors and let them scamper off into the bushes to knot and tie.”

“We’ll never make it to OKC with them in this condition.”

Castiel sighed. He looked at Dean who was rubbing his forehead back and forth across the glass, keeping his eyes downcast. His lips were moving. If Cas had to guess, he was soothing himself with Metallica. Castiel hated to do this, but he didn’t see any other way. He needed to keep Dean and Michael safe, and he needed resources. Cas waved the cops over. He made short work of explaining his plan and requesting their help. Within ten minutes, two Texas State Troopers were speeding north, their lights and sirens running, carrying four desperate Lupins to see what Oklahoma City had in store.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the cliff-hanger. I'm torn about how to approach OKC. Need to take some time to work it out and get it right.

Thanks for all of your support. Love you guys!

And by the way, I don't hate Texas. It's my home, and all the trashing is well-intentioned. It does get a little closed-minded all down in here sometimes.
Chapter Summary

Michael does things...a little differently.

Chapter Notes

OK, here' the thing about me. I'm a bit obsessive once i get my teeth into something. I've just blown a three-day week-end on nothing but hacking away at my keyboard. I feel I owe y'all an apology for blowing up your notifications, but a) I can't make myself stop, and b) I can't make myself wait & post them all at once.

Note about this chapter: Dean is Out-of-character in terms of SPN standard whenever he's in his submissive state. For him it's a hard regression to a certain level of childishness (not just child-like, but childish) that may be uncomfortable or unrecognizable to some. It's just how it works when I write him in that state.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

NOW:

“Oh, Jesus!” shouted Dean

The sound of Dean’s orgasm, followed by the smell, turned the Trooper’s eyes wide. He kept his car centered on the highway but focused his vision into the rearview mirror and the back seat.

“Oh, Jesus!” the officer mirrored, rolling down his window to capture some fresh air. “Is that really necessary?! What the hell’s wrong with him?” The Winchester Pack had drawn the short straw and ended up with a Primate cop driving them north.

“He’s fine. There’s nothing wrong with him,” Castiel replied calmly glancing back at where Dean was sweating and panting, entirely nude and covered with his own release. “He’s just occupying his Submissive wolf right now. It’s the best place for him to ride this out.” Dean began cleaning his hand with his tongue, his eyes closed.

“What about the smell?! How’m I gonna get that smell out of my car?!”

Cas considered his options. He shouldn’t antagonize the guy. The Troopers were really going out of their way to help. Of course, the argument could be made that as protecting public safety was their job, and Lupins were part of the public, it was their responsibility to assist. But they could’ve just dropped the two wolves off in the closest jail cell and made them face their Mating there. Cas was grateful for the ride to a decent facility, even if it wasn’t one of his.
“Unfortunately, I’ve found the only way to get rid of a smell like that is to cover it with one that’s stronger. Be glad you don’t have a Canid’s sense of smell.”

The officer shot Cas an alarmed look, but Cas calmed him with a gesture. “Relax, I’m joking. The Caniforme Institute will pay the cleaning bill. We can get your car back to normal, I promise.”

Turning his gaze back over the backrest of the cruiser, Castiel addressed Dean loudly. “How are you doing back there, Dean? Do you need some water?”

“Need to pee.” Dean had rolled into a ball on the bench seat, his back toward Castiel, his breathing still too shallow for Cas’ liking.

“Shit, he’s not gonna pee back there is he? That’s not a thing y’all do, right? Marking stuff?”

“Uh, no. We don’t mark territories with urine. You’re thinking of Labrador Retrievers. Look, just pull over. We’ll give him a minute and see if Michael needs one, too. I don’t want them to lose sight of each other.” Cas directed the next into the cell phone on the seat beside him, “Alpha Lancet, did you hear that? We’re going to pull over and let Dean out for a second. You can do the same for Michael, but just don’t let them out at the same time.”

“Gotcha, Alpha. I hear you loud and clear.” Cas could hear the Lupin officer discuss it with Alpha Lancet quietly through the phone. It sounded to Cas like they were all ready for the stop.

“Dean, we’re stopping. I’m going to get out too and make a phone call, so you’ll lose the connection with Michael for a few minutes. But he’s going to be right behind us. You can see him, right there. He’s not going anywhere, okay?”

The Triggered wolves had begun the trip by calling out to each other through the open line, not caring at all that their obscene promises to knot and mate in all kinds of positions were making the Troopers extremely uncomfortable. Cas left them alone. Without face-to-face interaction between them, they abandoned the antagonism, letting the horniness take over. They needed an outlet, and it was a long drive. As the trip stretched on though, they had both retreated into their own heads, frustrated with their inability to find satisfaction with just their voices.

“K.” Dean going monosyllabic wasn’t a good sign. Castiel was worried. The car pulled to a stop, and Cas checked that the other cruiser had matched its pace, pulling onto the wide shoulder well back in case either of them made a break for it. Having them in separate cars helped lengthen the time they could be suspended in this state as it eliminated their access to the Mate-scent, but they couldn’t keep it up forever. The Omega, especially, was vulnerable to permanent psychological scarring if forced to wait too long once Triggered before being bitten.

Cas cracked his door open and stepped out into the crunchy grass and gravel. He picked up his own phone in one hand, still live with the car behind, and carried with him Dean’s phone which he’d been using to text Bobby and Benny in the other. He pressed the Call button as the officer slowly opened Dean’s door and helped him out.

“Who did that to your ass, man!” the cop held Dean by the arm to get a good look at the bruising, but Dean broke his grip with a cranky snarl and hobbled barefooted up to the nearest tree.

“Dean! Shoes would’ve been a good idea!” Cas hollered at him just as he heard Benny answer at the other end of the line. Dean flipped him off as his stream started up loudly.

“You people are crazy!” muttered the cop. “You know public urination is a ticketable offense, right?”
Cas ran a hand down his face and took a deep breath, praying for strength and patience. Benny heard his sigh. “Going that well, is it?”

“Please tell me you’ve worked out where we’re going and what to do next. I can’t get enough of a signal out here for anything but calls and text messages. Did you get hold of Gordon?”

“Hey Cas, it’s Bobby.” The call was clearly set on speaker between the two. “Look, I don’t think you wanna go to Gordon’s. Not for this. I don’t trust the guy farther than Charlie can throw him.”

“Hey!” echoed a protest from some distance away. Cas assumed they’d assembled an emergency team to pull Dean through this with his new mate. It made him feel warm and a little less alone.

“Plus,” Bobby continued as if there’d been no interruption, “I’m looking at some of the audit reports and inspections from down there, and it’s not good. Long term we need to take action against him; looks like he’s running more of a trafficking program than training and support. But for right now, we’re just focused on getting Dean somewhere safe.”

Dean was making his way back to the car slowly. ‘Great’, thought Cas, ‘now he’s limping’. Cas met him halfway and guided him to the open car door, helping him sit and picking up one of his feet to check it. Cas found several sticker burrs that had attached themselves brutally to the bottom of Dean’s foot. He propped the phone between his cheek and shoulder and began to pull them carefully out. Dean lay backward across the seat and passively allowed the attention.

“Where would you suggest then, guys?” he asked the group. “We need somewhere that’s staffed by Lupins so we don’t scare the daylights out of everyone. Is there a Lupin hospital?”

“Keep heading on into OKC, Cas” said Benny. “We’ve got a couple of good contacts there who might have a dungeon we can use. All you need’s a room with a bed and a lock, really. In fact, they probably don’t really need the bed if you think about it.”

“I’m not sending Dean to Mate in somebody’s basement, Benny! This is Dean! Find something suitable!”

“C’mon Alpha,” Benny protested. “Wolves do this all the time. You think every Mating happens with electrodes and heart monitors and Pelio-readings?”

Cas growled through the phone at him, finishing with Dean’s feet, and shoving him rather unceremoniously back into the car and closing the door. “You didn’t see them, Benny! They would’ve torn each other apart if we hadn’t broken them up. We can’t do this without the right support in place. A hospital would be better than a house, but what I wouldn’t give for a fully-equipped Processing room right now!” He sighed heavily again. As Dean’s Dom, it was Castiel’s responsibility to provide for his needs, and his inability to do so was tearing him up.

“Hold on a second, Benny,” said Castiel. He caught the officer’s eye. “Can you get him some water? And keep an eye on him. You don’t have to stay in the car if it makes you uncomfortable, but please don’t let him out.” The Trooper nodded, sensing Castiel’s level of frustration meant he’d have no patience for any push back. Cas picked his way across the space between cars and signaled that Michael could be let out.

The Canid Trooper opened Michael’s door and the wolf shot out, making a beeline toward the car that Dean was in. Cas growled and dropped both phones. He tackled the Omega as he tried to dart past and squashed him facedown into the prickly grass and hard-packed dirt. Lucky for Michael, he hadn’t stripped yet like Dean had done.
“Don’t even think about it,” Cas breathed into his ear as the Omega snarled and bit at his attacker. “I’m going to get back up and hand you to your Alpha. You’re going to walk to that tree right there, do you see it? You’re going to take a leak or jack yourself off or whatever you need to do, and then you’re getting right back into that car.” Cas started pulling him off the ground to hand him over. “You pull another stunt like that, and your wolf is going to get up close and personal with mine. You don’t want that, I promise you, Omega.”

“Sorry, Alpha,” said Michael’s father, taking his son by the arm and leading him away, the Omega whining pathetically.

Cas dusted himself off and picked his phones back up. He’d maintained both connections somehow. “Benny,” he huffed into Dean’s phone. “Just tell me, what the fuck we’re doing. Where am I going?”

“Okay, Alpha,” Ellen’s voice broke through. “I’m texting you the address of the county hospital about thirty miles north of where you are right now. Forget Oklahoma City. There’s nothing worth driving for there. This place has what you need. There’s a Lupin wing that has an H/R room that’s free. I’ve told them to hold it for you and to have some muscle on hand in case things go sideways.”

Cas watched as Michael finished up by the tree and then watched the Alpha place him into a presentation position with his hands braced against the bark and his ass out. Michael took about fifteen stinging swats from his Alpha before being frog-marched back to the car. Jerry’s face was grim and weary. He wasn’t going to be able to do this much longer either. Cas didn’t bother telling him that spanking would have no effect on a True-Mate Triggered Omega. It’d probably made the Alpha feel a little better though. That was something at least.

“All right, Ellen. Let’s do it. And, hey, before I rejoin all those listening ears, did you find any suggestions about how to approach this Mating without either of them losing an eye or a testicle?”

Cas nodded to acknowledge Alpha Lancet as he walked up, still sweating and grim. He put the phone to speaker and held it in his palm.

“Omega-Doms are extremely rare. There’s not much about them in the medical journals or our own research links. From what little I’ve found, it looks like your best bet is to get Dean into a Submissive state and let the Omega direct the Mating. It’ll be a C.F. that’s Topped from the Bottom, but it should still form a viable bond. As long as the more submissive partner submits, it doesn’t matter whose penis is where. Question is, will Dean’s alpha be able to get out of the way?”

“Thanks Ellen. I can’t believe we never thought to prepare for this eventuality. We always knew Dean’s designations. I owe both of them a debt for this mess.”

Bobby’s voice came through the line. “Just bring those boys home safe, Cas. Don’t beat yourself up. None of us saw this coming, including Dean. There’s plenty of blame to go ’round, and none of it’s going to help right now.”

“Thanks, Bobby. Thank you, everyone. We’re heading back out now.” Cas hung up and checked that the address had come through by text. He looked up at Alpha Lancet. “You heard?” The Alpha nodded. “Any reservations? Now’s the time to say so if you have them.”

“I can’t stand in the way of this.” The Alpha looked completely out of his depth. “I had no idea he might be a Dominant. Never even crossed my mind, but it makes sense. Everything. Dr. Novak, do you think they’ll be okay? Can they do this? Not just the Mating and Claiming, but from now on, bonded for life as an Omega-Dom and Alpha-Sub, can they do it?”

“Alpha Lancet, I know Dean very well. He and I are engaged to be married. You and Michael
should both know that before we get to the hospital, although at this point nothing’s going to sway either of them from finishing it up if it kills them both. I have every intention of marrying Dean as planned despite his being Mated to your son. As Dean’s Pack Alpha and husband, I will accept Michael into my Pack, and I’ll be there to look after them both. I know it’s unusual, but I’m convinced it can work. If anything, having a larger support structure may help them build a more stable Mated relationship.

“So you understand, I will not interfere in the Mating-bond between them. The relationship they build is theirs to foster and grow as they see fit. It’s none of my business, and I mean that. Sir, your son could not have been granted a better man as alpha-mate. Dean is a wonderful, caring man, whom I expect will fulfill your son in every way.” Cas looked straight into his eyes to allow him to read Cas’ wolf. “What I’m trying to say is that you should allow this Mating, despite your trepidations and allow Dean and me to take responsibility for your son from here out. I swear to you we’ll take good care of him whatever specialized care he needs as an Omega AND a Dominant.”

The Alpha stared at Castiel as if he’d grown a third head. “Married?! How the FUCK am I going to explain this to Michael while he’s lost in his wolf and jacking off all over a Texas State Trooper’s back seat?!” He looked at Castiel for another moment or two, but Cas had no advice for him. Eventually the Alpha blew out a breath, swore vehemently under his breath and spun on his heel to return to his own car. He twirled his finger in the air over his head in a ‘Move ‘em out’ signal and shouted back, “Let’s get this show on the road! It can’t get any weirder than this!”

Cas realized as he returned to his seat that that’d been the strangest version of Alpha change of custody approval he’d ever witnessed. He wondered if it would stand up in court if the matter were ever pressed. He gave the patient Trooper the new address, and they headed out again. Thirty miles was doable. Thirty miles was nothing. Cas turned around and looked over the backrest.

“DEAN!” Cas called back in the Alpha-Dom voice that Dean responded to unconsciously. “Do NOT touch your cock! The next time you come will be when you Mate your Omega. I need you to wait, Submissive. Michael needs you to wait for him.” Dean groaned and rolled back and forth. He drew his hands up beneath his chin and clutched his fingers into a tight knot. “Very good. Do you need me to bind you? Would it help?”

“No, I can do it. I’ll be good. Just hurry, Alpha. It hurts so bad!”

Castiel turned back to the officer. “Step on it, please.”

The group arrived at the county hospital in twenty minutes. It was a very long twenty minutes. Castiel and the Trooper had listened in agonized silence as Alpha Lancet tried to get through to Michael that his new True-Mate was already engaged to the Alpha from the restroom and had no plans to call off the wedding. Surreal didn’t even touch this experience for Castiel. For the moment at least though, Michael didn’t care.

There was a cluster of white-uniformed employees at the emergency bay, so the officer pulled up there. “Thank you, sir. I will be contacting your department head to commend you for your outstanding public service, but I won’t keep you now. I know you need to get back to Texas.” Cas jumped out and shooed the orderlies out of the way. He was pleased to see mostly Lupin staff on hand. He pulled Dean out by his arm and slung an arm under his to support him on the way in.

“This way, Alpha,” said an assertive beta nurse. Cas appreciated her efficiency. He needed to get
Dean out of the hallway before Michael came through. She led them to a small surgery prep room with a lockable door. Cas deposited Dean on the gurney in the middle of the room and then stooped down to look at his eyes. Dean sat slumped over, too still and too compliant. He didn’t look present at all. Cas snapped his fingers in his face, and Dean’s alpha-red eyes locked on Cas’ blue ones.

“Hang in there, Dean. We’re just about ready. We’re getting your mate all prepped for you. Then you can knot him. Are you ready, my friend?” Dean’s eyes cleared a little more as Castiel spoke to him. The nurse placed electrodes on his chest and took some quick readings.

“Wanted it t’be you, Cas,” slurred Dean, but Cas shushed him. That wasn’t a good place for his mind to go right now.

“Michael is beautiful, Dean. He’s tall and strong, with green eyes, just like yours. You’ll have the most beautiful pups together. Close your eyes, my love. Picture his face. He’s all for you, and he’s perfect for you. He’s going to make you so happy.”

“So happy,” murmured Dean in a drunken whisper. The nurse cleaned Dean’s wounds with antiseptic and bandaged them quickly. She seemed to be stalling, waiting for a signal that Michael was ready. Castiel’s phone buzzed in his pocket. It was Ellen, so he answered and put it to his ear, moving away from Dean.

“I’ve got the hospital tied in on another line. We’re going to do this remotely, okay, Alpha?” Cas hummed an answer. He waited for her to continue. This was Ellen’s specialty, and he knew when to follow her instructions.

“They say Michael’s already prepped. Apparently, he did it himself on the drive up. Cas, I want you to stage Dean as if he were the Bottom, just like we do when Alpha-Subs mate Beta-Doms. It’s no different except I think you should give him a solid spanking first. Mating is a Secondary designation process, but we don’t know enough about Omega-Doms to be sure how to shift Michael into his Omega. He’s a wildcard, and it’s too dangerous to risk it. Dean is easier. He needs to be in his Sub mind when Michael enters the room. Once Michael takes him in hand, we don’t expect there to be any other snags, but we’ve already seen that his alpha wants to jump up and confront the challenge at the very beginning. We can’t let that happen, so we have to get him past that initial point of confrontation. Do you understand? Do you agree?”

“Yes, Ellen. Good idea. Would you suggest I set up a scene, or just take a go at him?” Cas was too nervous to think clearly.

“I have no idea, Alpha. Truth is, you know the answer to that better than anyone. We just need to get him thinking submissively. Okay, we’re into the closed circuit feed now, thanks to Charlie. Whenever you’re ready, go ahead and get him into the H/R room. We’re tied in to the instrument readings, and we’ll be able to see everything and communicate if we need to through the nursing staff there.”

“Thanks, Ellen. We’re moving through now. I’ll talk to you after it’s all done. Wish us luck!” He hung up and put the phone in his pocket. The nurse had Dean on his belly and was spreading an arnica ointment onto Dean’s backside and thighs. “Let’s go, we’re up first,” he told her.

Another nurse was guarding the door, and he fell in with them as they exited, leading the way down the hall to the Heat/Rut room, opening the door and ushering them through. Dean made a beeline for the bed, looking around for his mate and looking very disappointed and confused.

Castiel assumed an Alpha-Dom stance and made his voice very firm. “He’s not here just yet Dean. He’s coming soon, and when he does, you’re to follow his instructions, do you understand me,
“Cas…” Dean whined. Castiel placed his hand on the back of Dean’s neck as he would an Omega and squeezed firmly. He leaned down to hear a nurse’s whispered notification that everything was ready as soon as Dean was. She told him to take his time and then exit through the far door. He nodded and refocused on Dean. His love. His fiancé. Dean trusted him with his Submissive wolf, trusted him with his heart. Dean needed him strong. They could do this. Cas knew all hell was likely to break loose when Michael realized the kind of Pack he was joining, but right now Castiel needed to focus on Dean. His eyes were drawn to the bandages which proved Michael could beat the crap out of an alpha if he felt motivated enough. Cas felt the full weight of responsibility to make sure that didn’t happen again, at least, not until Dean wanted it to. That was for later, though. Focus, Castiel; don’t fuck this up for him.

“I said, do you understand me, Submissive?” Cas used his voice to show no quarter. Dean nodded, his red eyes wet with unshed tears. ‘Good. Now there’s just the matter that’s yet to be settled between you and me, and then your mate will Claim you.” Cas took it as a good sign that Dean didn’t protest who was meant to Claim whom.

“You behaved atrociously at the rest stop, and I won’t HAVE IT, DEAN!” Cas could hear the uncertainty in his own voice. Fighting in public wasn’t something he would normally be expected to call an alpha down for, but it’s all he could come up with on the fly. Focus, CAS! “You’re getting a spanking for this, Submissive, right now!” Cas sat on the edge of the bed and tugged Dean’s wrist, trusting his Sub’s conditioning to kick in and take him there. He didn’t seem to have far to go. His eyes were nearly overflowing, but Cas couldn’t tell if that was just the stress of waiting or not, and he couldn’t take the chance. Dean stumbled toward his Dom’s lap and fell over it clumsily with a pitiful sob.

Dean’s backside was still too swollen and bruised to really spank. Cas wouldn’t have considered it under normal circumstances. He ran his hand over Dean’s abused flesh. “Don’t keep count, Sub. I just want you to feel this spanking and think about how sorry you are for disappointing your Dominant.”

He lifted his hand and brought it down with a SMACK! upon Dean’s purple ass. It wasn’t hard, no harder than he would spank an eight-year-old pup, but Dean flinched and shouted out. He repeated the action at the same strength several more times, listening to Dean’s breathing and the gruffness of his shouts. His Sub wrathed on his lap and too quickly began to cry in earnest; much sooner than he normally would’ve done. Castiel took it as confirmation that the drive up had served Dean well. So much waiting with his consciousness within the realm of his wolf had already done most of Cas’ job for him, and the light spanking took him the rest of the way. Dean cried and apologized, promising his Dom never to let it happen again. He sounded genuine to Cas.

Castiel stood him up and held him by his hips, looking deeply into Dean’s tortured eyes. (Please forgive us, beautiful Sub), sobbed Castiel’s wolf. (Get a grip on yourself!) Cas told him mercilessly. Dean couldn’t be allowed to see a chink in his armor right now. If memory served, from what Cas had experienced, Dean wouldn’t remember this part anyway, not once the Mating-bond formed.

“Dean.” He made his voice cold steel and his Sub responded by sucking in a quick breath and locking his eyes on his Dom as he’d been taught to do. “I expect you to obey your mate, Michael. If you EVER attack him again like that, you’ll get far worse than a spanking; from BOTH of us, do I make myself clear?”

“yessir.”

It was Dean’s small voice, the one he used only after a particularly successful chastisement. Castiel
pronounced him ready. He prayed he was ready.

Castiel wasted no more time. He stood and pointed to the bed. “You wait right there, and don’t you move until Michael tells you to!” Dean scurried into position, lying flat on his back and casting pathetically sad eyes at Castiel as he turned and walked out through the door.

Cas pressed his back against the door of the small Control room, dropped his head into his hands and wept, shaking. That was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do in his life; harder than calling out his own mother on national television, harder than allowing underhanded deals with Congress to lubricate the way through a corrupt system. He loved Dean so much and this, more than anything he’d ever been part of, could cause him to lose Dean forever. Mates had that power, and Michael could turn out to be ruthless in his possession of Dean. Castiel sobbed into his hands, letting his legs give way and settling against the floor. Someone laid a blanket across his shoulders and sat close in beside him, lending the support of a strong body.

“He’s ready. Let the Omega in, now,” one of the attendants said through a microphone. Cas looked up through blurry eyes and watched the closed circuit feed. He couldn’t look away. He needed to know that Dean was safe.

An arm went around his shoulders, and a soft voice murmured in his ear. “We’ve got him, Castiel. He’s going to be fine. We’ve got alphas staged at both doors ready to pull them apart if it gets violent again.” Castiel recognized her voice. He turned and found it was Anna leaning into him, holding him close and speaking comfort.

Anna.

He hadn’t seen her since she’d graduated from the Omega-Sub training program’s very first class and entered nursing school, Cas’ recommendation paving the way despite her gender.

“Anna!” he breathed, hugging her tightly.

“Let’s watch! We haven’t had a Mating here in months. This is exciting. I’ve NEVER seen an AS/OD Mating before. That was brilliant to prep him with punishment. Look!”

But he was already watching mesmerized.

Dean felt horrible. He’d fucked it all up. Again. Like always. All he had to do was obey his Dom, and he couldn’t even do that right. There was a pesky part of his brain that wanted to break in and say he hadn’t been issued an order, and there had been no disobedience, but Dean didn’t give it a chance to voice. There MUST’VE been an order. He’d just forgotten. Maybe a rule that he’d broken. Castiel had never punished him without reason. He wouldn’t, so it had to be Dean’s fault.

Dean’s attention was drawn by movement. He saw the door open, and his mate stepped in.

Michael.

It was a strong name for an angelic visage. He was beautiful. His body was young and sculpted. Dean’s cock, hard and leaking as it had been for hours, twitched. Michael stood at the doorway, his head tucked low, but his eyes hard and cold on Dean’s face. Golden-rimmed eyes.

Omega.
Mate.

Dean was overwhelmed. He wanted to go to his Omega and Claim him. He wanted to drive him into the ground on his knees and mount him fiercely, but Castiel ordered him to stay and wait. Ordered him to obey. Why was Michael waiting? Didn’t he want Dean? He’d fought Dean off in that long concrete room. Maybe he didn’t want Dean for his mate. Maybe Dean had fucked this up too. He writhed in misery and cried out a long, agonized whine of impatience from low in his throat.

Michael’s eyes widened in surprise. At the sound from his mate, he broke away from the door as if it burned him and stepped quickly to where Dean lay moaning. Michael looked alarmed, and he shushed Dean, climbing on the bed and straddling his thighs.

“Shhh-shh. It’s okay, little alpha. I’ve got you. Shhh. Are you going to be good for me this time? I don’t want to have to strike you again. That wasn’t fun for me, either.” Michael’s voice was soft and soothing. Dean nodded rapidly and mumbled promises to behave. “Good, good alpha. My good boy. Are you ready? I’m going to talk you through this real slow. You just listen to my voice and do exactly as I say.”

Michael’s movements were so slow and measured, Castiel was transfixed. Could you actually close a Mating-bond like this? He moved to stand beside Anna behind the Head nurse’s chair. When she noticed him, she stood and directed him to the chair. He accepted it in a trance-like fog, unable to tear his eyes from the screen. Michael was a revelation.

Michael leaned down over Dean’s face and wiped the tears carefully from his face with his thumbs. “Open,” he told Dean in a whisper. Dean took Michael’s thumbs into his mouth and sucked his own sorrow from them, keeping his eyes on his mate’s. Neither man blinked. They both moved in slow-motion, as if underwater. Michael smiled at Dean as he removed his thumbs and stroked them through Dean’s hair. “Keep your incredible red alpha eyes on me, baby. Just listen to my voice. I’ve got you. I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you. Not ever. You can trust me. You’re so beautiful. My Mate, My Mate,” he whispered and ran his hands in a line down Dean’s throat and across his chest. The effort not to buck up into his touch was clear on Dean’s face, but he was conditioned well; a perfectly trained Submissive. “My good boy,” praised Michael letting his hungry eyes and hands explore his new mate.

Michael tweaked a nipple lightly and then slapped Dean hard on the thigh when he closed his eyes in pleasure. Dean’s eyes sprang open again. His cock dripped another drop of pre-come onto his belly. Dean could feel Michael’s slick gathering in the valley where his own thighs were pressed together by Michael’s. “Keep your eyes open and on me. You ready, Dean?”

“Yes, Michael, I’m ready,” Dean whispered, but he made no move. He waited for instruction, for permission. He could be good. Oh, please let him be good enough. His Mate smiled down at him.

“I’m going to ride you now, Baby. I want you to match my pace with your hips. Can you do that?”

Oh, hell yes, he could do that. “Yes, Michael.” Dean spoke louder this time. The waiting and control were killing him. Michael lifted himself and placed his hole directly over Dean’s cock. He paused in place, poised and just barely touching the tip of Dean’s wet cock with his ass, holding Dean’s eye, testing him. A small stream of slick tickled as it ran the length of Dean’s erect cock. Dean didn’t move, didn’t blink, struggled to keep breathing. He could be good. He could. A drop of sweat ran down Dean’s face from his forehead. He was trembling with the effort of waiting.

“Very good, my alpha,” breathed Michael. “You’re being so good for me.” He began lowering himself slowly onto Dean’s cock. It wasn’t a perfect alignment. A lesser Sub would’ve shifted his hips or even reached to correct the angle with his hand, but Dean kept still, kept his eyes on his Dom.
His Dom. ‘My Dom’, he thought. ‘Be good for my Dom, for my Mate. Be good’.

He gasped as his cock caught painfully on the edge of his Mate’s rim, then righted with a twist of Michael’s hips and slipped into his channel. Dean curled his toes, the only outlet he had except for his voice. He moaned obscenely and surrendered, letting the wolf inside him hold the Omega-Dom’s eyes. It was too much for Dean. He was utterly overwhelmed, so he let go; let go of everything, let his wolf own this moment, trusted his wolf to make it right for them both.

Michael knew. Michael knew the instant Dean submitted to him completely and turned himself over to his wolf. Michael knew the wolf. They were True-Mates. Michael felt he knew Dean’s wolf like he knew his own, and he directed the lean grey beast with just his eyes and his hips, riding Dean’s cock in sensual rocking circles. Dean’s hips moved on their own as Michael moved over them – his cock the physical manifestation of the link that was forming between them.

Michael picked up the pace, bracing himself with his arms on Dean’s shoulders and never breaking the eye contact that tied one wolf to the other. Dean groaned in pleasure and torture, picking up the pace of just his hips as his Dom had instructed. Michael smiled.

“So move, baby. I want you to move. I release you. Show me what my alpha can do!” Dean didn’t need to be told twice. The alpha wolf flipped his Omega onto his back and covered him with his body, driving into him again and again with a roar of pent-up passion. He gathered the Dom’s hands in his own and held them fast to the bed over Michael’s head, fucking into him powerfully.

Michael threw his head back and screamed in pleasure and abandon. “FUCK ME! HARDER! C’MON ALPHA! OH, FUCK YEAH! FUCK DEAN!!!” He wrapped his legs around Dean’s waist and tried to hold on as the alpha released the hours and hours of frustration through his pelvis. Michael’s head butted up against the metal bars of the institutional bed as Dean fucked him, but neither of them cared. Michael used Dean’s grip on his hands to transfer them to the bars and they held tight, a tangle of fingers all white-knuckled together.

Dean’s orgasm was building. He wasn’t going to last long after waiting for hours. He drove into his mate brutally hard and forced his knot past Michael’s tight rim again and again, pounding into him. “BITHE ME, ALPHA!” screamed Michael as he came untouched between their stomachs. Dean didn’t even try to aim. His wolf was in charge for the moment, and the wolf didn’t care where the bite-scar landed. He bit down hard into the meaty flesh of Michael’s left shoulder where it flattened out, well clear of his neck. His knot popped past Michael’s rim one last time and stuck fast. Dean’s wolf continued to grind mercilessly away until he came with a moan that he ground out around his teeth. Their Mating-bond pierced through the last of the barriers between the two men as it wrapped them together in a cocoon of tight warmth and burrowed into their bodies. Dean’s hips undulated in time with his voice, using his grip on the bars to rock their two bodies up and back, letting the aftershocks roll through both of them as one.

The alpha and the Omega stilled together. Castiel watched them, wondering if Michael had somehow directed that too. Could he speak to Dean through the Mating-bond? After what he’d just witnessed, Castiel wasn’t sure Michael didn’t possess some kind of angelic power over Dean. He watched through the feed as Dean released his grip on his mate’s shoulder and pass his tongue over it three, four, five times before stilling again and laying his head on his mate’s broad chest.
Castiel sagged in the chair. He felt his perfect life slipping away, and for the first time felt more than just a little empathy for what Dean must’ve gone through when Cas met April. Watching another Dominant take his Sub, his beloved, and knowing things would never be the same had been devastating to watch. Castiel’s wolf was beside himself. Cas didn’t try to soothe him though. Now was not the time for Castiel’s comfort. It was for Dean. Cas excused himself from the room and felt his phone buzz in his pocket before he’d even made it out the door, reminding him that the closed circuit feed had been patched through to Kansas. They’d all seen it.

He let it ring and left the building. It was dark out now. Cas found a bench next to a small pond just outside the main entrance, and he sat, his elbows resting on his knees. He just sat.

Chapter End Notes

Night y'all. I’m done. No really. This time I mean it.
Chapter Summary

“What the FUCK was that?!” Meg threw out. “There’s no way that worked.”

Chapter Notes

Wow, y'all. I'm blown away by the response. I LOVE the feedback. Just a note, if anyone is interested in delving deeper into the world of the wolf-pack, read through the comments section. There's some fascinating questions down there. Some of the answers will pop up in the narrative, but not all. This intro section, for example, I swear I had this written out already when Purrvet asked about wolves as an alternate consciousness within people.

It's been a really, really long week. Had this chapter running in circles in my head, but no opportunity to write it all down, and every time it circled through it was different, and I was all like, "Aaargh! I'm going to forget that phrase!" I've about decided that employment sucks. Although I've been on the other side of that penny, and that sucks worse, so...

Usually I dig back in on Fridays, but migraines don't follow schedules. I'm still hurting, but not enough to lay me out all day.

AND, my schedule at work is changing. I will now have Monday & Tuesday off work, so more writing time maybe. (Maybe.)

And finally, I altered some of the tags. It was mentioned that a traditional polyamory tag doesn't really fit what's going on in Castiel's pack, and I agree. It's more of a U or W shape. I apologize if anyone looking specifically for Poly was misled. Tagging is harder than I thought.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Coming up right after the break: Doctors Castiel Novak and Dean Winchester from the American Caniforme Research Institute are here to discuss the rape and assault charges against Monica Reye. We’ll be right back.” The director motioned that they’d cut the live feed, and the A.D. ushered Dean and Cas into the tall, straight-backed chairs.

“Hey, guys!” Kaitlyn gushed. “I’m glad you could make it. We’re grateful you flew out to speak with us today. I think this is a very important case for our times, and I know you do, too. I expect you’re eager to get your message out to the public.”

Castiel shook her hand and nodded, “Yes, we are. The decision in this case could mark a turning point for the status of Lupins in America – for good or for ill.”

“I’ll be asking you fairly straightforward questions about your views on the case, and if you’re okay with it, we’ll just go from there. I want to warn you I plan to play devil’s advocate, maybe run it a little bit confrontational. I think it would be helpful to give you a chance to address the concerns that we monkeys are apparently having with this case head-on. You know I’m an advocate for your cause, and I always will be, so don’t be thrown if get a little feisty on you here. You understand, it’s only so we can draw you out quickly.”

“Let’s do it,” chimed Dean as a technical assistant fixed his mic.

In no time, they were coming off the commercial break. “Kaitlyn in the Morning” theme music piped in and then faded. “Welcome back! And a warm welcome, as always, to my favorite guests, Dr. Castiel Novak and Dr. Dean Winchester of the American Caniforme Research Institute. Thanks for coming, fellas!” She really was much too chipper for this early in the morning. It was unnatural.

Dean addressed her with a flirty wink, “We’re only your favorite because we always talk about sex when we’re on your show.”

“That’s true!” she laughed. “But today’s topic is pretty serious, and I want to get right to it. There’s a
new amateur video circulating on YouTube and other sites showing California native, alpha Monica Reye of Sacramento. It’s gone viral this week, and it has led to her arrest. She’s being charged with rape and assault of her own mate, Omegas Benjamin Reye. A warning to sensitive viewers, we’re about to show the video in its entirety, and it is extremely graphic, so please use your discretion.” She paused for a polite moment to allow those more sensitive viewers to call their whole families into the room to watch as well. The video feed cued up. “As the video starts, you’re seeing here, apparently, Monica Reye in a foot chase with her mate Benjamin down Beamon avenue. The eyewitness is filming with his cellphone. He follows the pair into Nigel Park where, right here, Monica tackles her mate violently, and forces him to the ground. He appears to be struggling quite strongly, but isn’t able to break away. She’s going to pull – or actually tear – his pants and underwear off of him, and then proceed to have forceful intercourse with him, obviously against his will.

“Gentlemen, I know you’ve seen this video. It’s really quite disturbing to a lot of viewers. Senator Nillson’s office has issued a statement condemning the alpha woman’s actions in the strongest terms. I understand that Mr. and Mrs. Reye are Lupins, and I just have to ask, what do you make of this?” She stopped and looked expectantly at Dean and Castiel.

“Holy **BLEEP** that was HOT!” shot Dean, fanning himself dramatically.

“You can’t be serious!” Kaitlynn was *shocked*. “Hot?! How is this not a clear-cut case of spousal rape?! Look at him struggle!”

Castiel leaned forward and spoke directly to her in his calm, clear, professor’s voice. “Kaitlynn, what Dean is trying to communicate, in his sophomoric way, is that for Lupin mates, this behavior, that Simians find so disturbing, is really a perfectly healthy display of loving spousal affection.” He pressed on, over her obvious attempt to interrupt, “I have to start by mentioning that YouTube is already rife with videos very similar to this one and there appears to be no outcry over those. The only evident difference about this one is that what we have here is an alpha woman apparently assaulting her Omega male mate. I don’t believe it’s unreasonable to suggest that it’s really more an issue of misogynistic bias at play as to why alpha Reye has garnered so much attention, and the hundreds of others where the male wolf plays the aggressor, haven’t.”

“Further,” he continued. “When I watch this video, I’m as aware as you are that it could be an act of illegal, unconscionable assault, and so I’m watching for certain tell-tale signs from both participants to indicate one way or the other. In this case, I can tell that it’s a consensual act in a couple of ways: One, the Omega’s got slick staining the crotch and back of his pants, a stain that is actively growing from the start of the video to the point where he is divested of his clothing. That doesn’t happen if the Omega isn’t aroused. Assault is not arousing to Omegas. Two, in what appears to be a violent and ruthless act of throwing the Omega to the ground, what you’ll notice if you look carefully, is that the alpha’s arm swings up at just the right moment to take the brunt of the impact for her Omega’s fall. She’s protecting him from injury, and you’ll note from the police reports released today, that while alpha Reye’s arm was quite scraped up, Benjamin has no injuries whatsoever.

“And third,” Castiel held up a finger to forestall her, and Kaitlynn snapped her mouth shut as Dean smirked. Everyone responded to Cas like that. “Benjamin may be writhing, but he clearly places his body, voluntarily, into the classic Omega presentation position. His backside is angled outward to provide his alpha full access to his channel, and his back is bowed downward. An Omega who wasn’t receptive would never take such a pose as this. It is catnip to an alpha, clear and unequivocal invitation. And I have to say, I agree with Dean – it is pretty hot.”

Kaitlynn smiled discreetly and nodded toward Dean to prompt a chance to add his two cents. “We don’t encourage pack dominance games – and that’s what this is, just a dominance game between loving mates – we don’t encourage wolves to play these games in public places,” Dean clarified,
unable to tear his eyes away from the screen. “For one, because the Primate population isn’t accustomed to them. Many apes find them disturbing, and we don’t want to see anyone arrested unjustly. But even more so because Primate children can be badly scarred by witnessing this kind of an act. There’s a time and place for everything, and it’s critical that we protect each other’s pups. We’re all one big human pack, after all. I’m really not worried about the Simian adults; they can grow up and get over it. We have sex, they have sex, everyone has sex. Adults have sex. Let’s stop pretending we don’t. But Primate children aren’t wired the same as Lupin pups. This is completely inappropriate and unacceptable behavior to display in a park where children who are not wired for witnessing sex between their Pack adults might be forced to see it. They could charge her with public indecency or lewdness, but not assault, and definitely not rape.”

“So, your only concern about this is that there might be children present? What about Benjamin?”

“Well, it looks to me like Benjamin’s wolf is getting a pretty thorough stroking right there,” Dean responded lustily his eyes on the screen which was playing the video in a loop. “And I’d like to point out that Benjamin is not the one pressing charges. His Omega status makes him a juvenile in the eyes of the law, giving the state the right to act on his behalf. The same state that expects him to behave like an adult, classifies him as a child so they can step in where they aren’t needed.” Dean switched effortlessly into activist mode, his disgust at the way the system’s double standard hit Omegas from two directions driving him to lean in and drive the point home.

Kaitlyn switched topics smoothly. “Okay, just humor me here, I’m changing topics a bit. I want to clarify for myself and my viewers – I have to ask – I’ve heard you say that about wolves several times in the past. Can you help me understand? Benjamin’s wolf; the one that’s ‘getting a stroking’? Is it metaphorical, or is there a substantive other personality within him that you’re referring to when you say that?”

“It’s both,” Dean explained. He slipped unconsciously from his fierce tone and into the persona he’d used in grad school when he taught undergraduate freshmen, how he spoke to his classes at The Facility. “For Canids, unlike Simians, the disparate parts of a person’s psyche are very close to the surface. We can’t just shove our emotions and less-than-conscious selves under wraps. We have to deal with them every day in a very real and present way because all three parts make active decisions for us all the time. Sometimes our higher brain function is in play, and sometimes we have to act from a deeper part of our psyche. It helps us to be conscious of the different aspects of our own selves. One way we’ve found to help us gain access to the instinctive side of ourselves, the ‘ID’, I guess, if you want to think in Freudian terms, is to imagine it as a beast inside us that we can interact with; even speak to and listen to, learn to visualize. That’s the part we call ‘The Wolf’. We now understand it as powerful enough to consider it another aspect of the ‘self’, and we call it the Tertiary Gender. Every Lupin has one.

“We teach pups from a very young age to begin to imagine themselves as some form of quadruped Canid species. We bring in hundreds of pictures of wolves, and foxes, jackals, coyotes, even domestic dogs and dingoes, and get them combing through the images to find just the right one that feels to each child like a visual representation of who that pup is inside.”

Dean paused to see if the talk show host wanted to add a clarifying question, but she signaled for him to continue. “Of course, they all want to be the Big Bad wolf!” He laughed. Castiel chuckled. “Over time though, they hone the image in their heads until it really suits them, and they practice seeing and interacting with just that image. Practice and a good likeness make us really good at it, until over the years, it becomes almost so real we forget it’s not. It’s a way of looking directly into our deepest needs and wants, and can be a very powerful tool. If you’re not honest with yourself about who you are - who your wolf is - the ‘wolf’ won’t be able to speak to you, so it’s important to be realistic.”

Dean nudged Cas hard enough to make him correct his balance on the tall chair. “Not all of us ARE
the Big Bad wolf like Cas here.”

Kaitlynn laughed with him.

“When we talk about getting our wolves stroked, we mean that we are accessing those deep desires and giving in to whatever the desire is. It feels very, very good to be able to partake in whatever pleasures are most instinctive for us, and it’s a necessary part of staying mentally healthy. My wolf, for instance, really loves dominant, well-hung male alphas who **bleep** the **bleep** outta me. It’s a thing with him, and I see no reason to deny him what he wants.” Dean’s flirtatious demeanor was back.

“Well, can you tell me what your wolf looks like then, Dean?” Her face had flushed a bit. The two Lupins looked at each other uneasily, then Castiel explained.

“There’s no way you could know this, but that’s an extraordinarily personal and uncomfortably presumptuous question. A Lupin wouldn’t dream of asking another wolf that.”

Dean broke in to clarify, “It would be like if I asked you what your areolas look like.” She gasped and sat back, crossing her arms over her chest protectively, and Dean grinned. “Exactly! So, we don’t talk about it like that. Casual relations would never ask, and our most intimate relations wouldn’t need to ask because they will have ‘seen’ our wolves for themselves, ya know? Like your husband probably already knows what your…” Dean gestured toward her, and then stopped talking with a fierce blush, pretending not to see the stern look laced with dark promise that Castiel shot him.

Filters, Dean. Get some filters.

“Back to Benjamin Reye. What you’re saying is that being chased and taken forcefully by his mate in public is a need for him, for his wolf? That THIS is a normal interaction between the two Lupins?”

Castiel answered. “Absolutely. And I would go further and say that the alpha’s getting as much out of this experience as the Omega. For a Dominant alpha, the chase and capture of a mate is incredibly satisfying.” Cas eyed the footage still repeating on the screen.

“Pshh!” Dean snorted playfully. “Down boy!”

NOW:

“What the FUCK was that?!” Meg threw out. “There’s no way that worked.”

“They’re gonna have to do it again. That was no Claim-Fuck, it was just a D/s scene. All he did was ‘Dom’ him. They’re gonna have to do it again.” Sam repeated, staring into the screen with a critical eye. Dean looked very relaxed, but there was no way. Mating did NOT work like that. They had the Submissive side of it covered, thanks to Dean, but there’d been no aggression or possessiveness from Michael. Mating did not work like that; it had to be a CLAIM. Always. If the Top didn’t take ownership, the Mating-bond would fail to spark.

“You think maybe Michael did it on purpose to rub Alpha’s nose in it; force him to have to watch it all twice?” Garth asked.

“Guys!” Charlie interrupted, her eyes on Ellen, not the screen. Ellen’s face was inches from her
monitor, her hand was up and out toward them all in a shushing gesture, and her lips were still in an “O” like she’d finished speaking but then got distracted before re-setting her face. Her brow was pulled low in concentration.

“What is it Ellen?” asked Bobby, moving to stand behind her.

“It’s…their eyes. It’s hard to be sure because of the black-and-white feed, but I think their eyes are retracted back to normal. And look, I believe…yes, Dean’s body mirroring. Watch their hands.” She pointed. Bobby checked for himself. The two wolves on the screen talked softly with each other as they worked to find a comfortable post-coital position to wait out Dean’s knot. Michael gestured as he spoke, flexing his left hand expressively, and Bobby saw Dean’s fingers twitch in response. The fingers of his left hand.

“I’ll be damned,” Bobby breathed. “It can’t be.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that. You can’t Mate with a D/s scene,” Benny reaffirmed, meeting Meg’s eye and then Bobby’s. “Can you? Not one like that…” Bobby shrugged and turned back to the screen.

“Kinda looks like you can under the right conditions,” Ellen supplied. “We need readings.”

“Hello? Oklahoma?” Bobby spoke into the conference phone on the table. “Ellen, what’s her name again?”

“Cheryl. Head nurse’s name is Cheryl.”

“How ‘boutcha, Cheryl? You still there?”

“I’m here. Go ahead.”

“You guys planning on getting in there to take some Pelio-readings for us some time this century?”

“You want us to do it now?! We usually wait until the couple falls asleep so no one gets bit. I ain’t putting one of my nurses at risk.”

“No, we’ve only got about fifteen or twenty minutes – tops – before the bond stops effervescing and burrows down deep. After that, all your readings are gonna be muddy. I need you to get them now. Do you have somebody powerful?”

“No, belay that!” Charlie broke in. She looked at Bobby apologetically but didn’t back down. “We tried it your way last time,” she reminded him, then turned and spoke into the phone. “Cheryl, do you have a beta-Sub on staff?”

“We’ve got an Omega-Sub. Will she work? Will she be safe in there?”

“Even better! Yeah, she’ll be fine. An Omega-Sub is no threat at all. They’ll barely notice she’s there, plus they’re still tied. Just tell her not to make eye contact and don’t speak unless she has to. Dean’s familiar with this part. He’s done this hundreds of times during C.F.s”

A familiar voice came through over the speaker, and most of the wolves in the Kansas Control room perked up. “Charlie, it’s Anna. Remember me?”

“ANNA!” It came from all directions in stereo, but only Charlie continued on, “Wow, Omega! Is that really you?”
“Yep. I’m a nurse now. I’m so excited Dean came here for his Mating. That was amazing!”

“I know, right? Anna, we need to get the peliometer readings right away. Can you do that for us? If you don’t have one, just use Castiel’s. He keeps one on him all the time. You there, Cap’n?”

“Uh, no. Alpha stepped out for a minute. I think he needed a few moments to himself,” said Anna.

The Lawrence Kansas group exchanged charged looks. “He’s not answering his cell phone,” Pamela told them all.

“Okay, never mind. Anna, do you have a meter?” Meg asked her, taking over from Charlie.

“Hi, Meg! I thought that was you. Yes, ma’am. I have one. I’ll get the readings right now.”

“No. I’ve got it. Just give me a few…” She trailed off as she pushed through the door. The alpha guard stepped in with her, but Anna shoo’d her back out again.

Anna approached the murmuring couple with her head lowered. She held the meter out and watched its face to make sure it was picking up a solid reading. The naked wolves on the bed ignored her as she made the first pass from their feet toward their groins, still locked tightly together.

“I think that was you. Yes, ma’am. I have one. I’ll get the readings right now.”

“Do you need me to talk you through it?” Meg checked.

“No. I’ve got it. Just give me a few…” She trailed off as she pushed through the door. The alpha guard stepped in with her, but Anna shoo’d her back out again.

Anna approached the murmuring couple with her head lowered. She held the meter out and watched its face to make sure it was picking up a solid reading. The naked wolves on the bed ignored her as she made the first pass from their feet toward their groins, still locked tightly together.

“Anna?!?” Dean exclaimed. “Holy shit! What are you doing here? What, you work here? As a nurse?” She nodded shyly at him and blushed. Anna’s crush on Dean had never abated. She found herself just as thrown by his masculine beauty and presence nearly five years later as she’d always been in class. Sex with Dean during her training class had been the hottest she’d ever experienced, even up to now, years on, and after she’d Mated to a wonderful alpha.

Michael broke in with a growl that pulled Anna back to the present and made her step back. “Michael, shut it!” Dean commanded, all alpha. “She’s a friend and one of my ex-students. She’s not trying to steal me away. Besides, she’s Mated already. Can’t you smell?”

Michael huffed without trying to scent the Omega, but at least he stopped growling. Dean rolled his eyes, but gestured kindly to the nurse to continue her work. She smiled at him and finished the readings quickly, then she prepared a tray for them with washcloths, warm water and soap, bottles of water and cereal bars. She left the tray on the small table beside the bed before exiting back the way she’d come in.

Dean winked at her as she slipped back through the door, and she blushed anew.

***************

Castiel sat still. Occasionally his phone buzzed in his pocket, but he ignored it. A pair of white nurse’s shoes appeared on the ground in front of him, and he looked up. Anna stood before him with two steaming mugs held together in one hand by their handles, and a manila folder in the other. Castiel accepted a mug of tea from her, taking it carefully so he didn’t spill either and helping her recapture just her own cup’s handle. He sat back on the bench, and she joined him.
“I owe you an apology, Alpha,” she told him seriously. “I just found out you and Dean are married, and now he’s Mated that Omega. That had to be difficult to watch. I was insensitive back there. I’m sorry.”

“Engaged, at this point. Not married yet. You don’t owe me an apology, Anna. You were excited. It’s understandable, and you didn’t know.” Cas sipped his tea. “Is that their Mating log?” He indicated the folder with a jut from his chin. She handed it to him, and he flipped it open.

“So, the Mating-bond took?” he asked with his eyes on the printout. Anna nodded, and he continued, perusing. “I wasn’t sure. They looked sated, but I have never seen anything like what Michael just did. It was extraordinary. It was like he could read Dean like a book and pushed every one of his buttons. I’ve known Dean for years, and I can’t read him like…” Cas looked up and caught her eye. No. This wasn’t a burden he should be putting on the young Omega. He closed the folder. “Is this my copy?”

She nodded but qualified, “I thought you were married already. If you’re not Dean’s Alpha yet, maybe I should give it to him.” She didn’t meet his eye, unsure whether her comment might be taken as a challenge by the Alpha, but he shrugged.

“We’re registered Pack, so I’m his legal Alpha even though we haven’t married yet. I’ll take it.” He bent to catch her eye. “Thank you, Anna, for helping Dean and Michael through their Mating. It was a strange affair, and I felt better knowing that there was a caring and highly competent staff present watching over them. You’re important to us. You’ll stay in contact from now on, won’t you?”

She nodded. “You know where to find me, Alpha. I really like it here. It’s small enough that I’m not overwhelmed, and my mate takes good care of me.”

“It was lovely to see you again, Omega. I’m proud of where you’ve taken your life. I know you’re an excellent nurse. You were always so gentle and caring. I’ll be in in a few minutes to help wrap things up and make arrangements to get those two transferred.” Castiel flipped the folder back open. “Have they shown any signs of Triggering a cycle?”

“No yet, Alpha.”

“I see. Then we should probably move them as soon as we can.”

“I was going to tell you,” the Omega stood and faced him. “We’re going to send a couple of guys to pick up Dean’s car and bring it here. They found his keys in the pocket of the jeans that were with the rest of his personals when the Trooper dropped you guys off.”

“Are they heading out soon? You probably want to see if Alpha Lancet wants to ride along too. He’s around here somewhere, I believe, unless he rode back with the police. I haven’t seen him since we arrived.”

“No, he’s here. Somewhere. I saw him earlier. We’ll make the offer if we can find him.”

“Thank you, Anna.” Castiel took a gulp of his cooling tea but didn’t accompany her back inside. He left the folder on the bench next to him and went back to studying the pavement at his feet.

Some time later, as the air was turning cooler and damp, Castiel became aware of a figure leaning against a tree a short distance away. An occasional bright orange spot and the smell of smoke spoke of a cigarette. Cas sighed and stood to make his way to the Alpha, stopping well short of the other’s position.

“I didn’t notice you inside,” Cas commented quietly. “Did you come in and watch?”
“No.”

Cas nodded. For himself, he wouldn’t have forgiven himself if he’d chosen not to witness the act and something awful had happened, but he understood why a father would struggle to watch his son take a mate.

“It went well,” Cas told him. “The Mating. It’s a strong bond. There was no further violence. The bite seems to have taken hold. It went well.” He finished lamely.

“That’s good. I guess.” The Alpha took a drag from his cigarette. In the light, Castiel caught a glimpse of his drawn face. The Alpha leaned against his tree and kept his gaze toward the hospital building where his son’s new bond was pulling him away from his father.

“Knew I’d lose him one day, just as soon as he presented Omega. I knew it was gonna be hard, but this? I don’t even know what to think about this,” Alpha Lancet looked to Castiel. “You watched it?” Cas nodded in the darkness. “You really believe in all this dom-sub hoo-doo? You think that’s what’s eating Michael? So tell me. Is my boy a Dom?”

“I’m sure of it,” Cas answered firmly.

The Alpha just nodded and took another drag. “Explains a hell of a lot. He probably thinks so too. Probably thought so the whole time. Probably tried to tell me, but I was too busy being a hard-ass to try to understand my own son.”

“Alpha, Michael’s not damaged. He’s not broken in any way. He’s fine, and he’s Mated now. We’re going to look after him.”

“Are you?” Alpha Lancet tossed his butt into the dirt and ground it out with the ball of his foot. “Are you going to look after him?” There was anger and challenge in his voice and a clear threat in his eye as he looked up at Castiel, a pair of small red circles pulling in around his irises.

“We are. Both of us.”

“Really?” He was aggressive and posturing. “Tell me, Alpha Novak, you already have what you wanted. Got yourself a little breeding bitch of your own just a few months ago, didn’t you? Got yourself a husband of your own choosing; the love of your life, no doubt. What do you need Michael for, huh? Gonna stick him in the basement and keep him knocked up? Bring him out for whatever rich folk parties you people get up to and pass him around as a party favor?” Jerry Lancet stood up straight from his tree and took several aggressive steps toward Castiel. Castiel didn’t tense or retreat. He just sighed sadly.

“We would never do that, Alpha. It’s not like that at all. I know you have no reason to, but I’m asking you to trust Dean and me, trust the bond your son just created with my fiancé. You were driving all the way from north Texas to Kansas to get your son’s evaluation. Why did you register with us? There are four other testing sites closer to you than Kansas. There must be something that made you believe you could put your faith in us more than the others. I’m asking you to listen to that voice now.”

“Don’t give me that salesman shit. Be straight with me Castiel Novak, am I ever gonna see my son again? ‘Cause if I don’t hear from him regular, or I get one whiff that he’s being abused or neglected by you people, I’m ripping him out of there so fast you’re gonna piss yourself, and taking him straight back home. I don’t give a fuck who gets hurt in the process, long as I get to him. His mate can trail along behind, I don’t care, but I’m not leaving my son where he’s not safe.”
Castiel responded patiently. “You can see him any time you like. You’re welcome to visit us in Lawrence, or Michael can travel back to see you and your family in Texas. We would never keep him isolated from his birth pack. I know this is frightening. We’re all trying to find new footing, but I promise you, there are no evil designs to harm your son. Quite the contrary.”

“I don’t get you.” Jerry scanned Castiel’s face like it was a puzzle he could work out if he tried hard enough. “Do you just NEVER get mad? I’m challenging you, called your mate a bitch, threatened your pack, and you just stand there and take it. That what passes for a Dom in Kansas?”

“You’re a good Alpha to your Pack, Jerry. Raising Michael must’ve been quite a challenge, especially considering you didn’t know his tertiary designation. But it’s obvious that you love him deeply and want what’s best for him.” Cas maintained his control, refusing to be provoked. So many people misunderstood what Profound Dominance meant. Shouting at folks and muscling them around was an affectation, a show that weaker Doms put on to prove their place. Castiel didn’t need the show. He was Alpha because he was Alpha. “It’s going to take some time, but I believe this arrangement is going to be ideal for Michael once he learns to trust the Pack hierarchy. We’ll help him.”

“Right. Help him. Beat him, you mean. Listen, take it from me, I already tried that and it don’t work on Michael. Just pisses him off.” Jerry Lancet’s face showed how difficult the admission was; how hard it was to admit he’d failed his son.

“Yes, I imagine that’s true,” said Cas. “No, I think your son will need a different kind of care. One that lets his Dominance stretch out and strokes his wolf, but gives his Omega enough structure to feel secure. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but Dean and I, we don’t give up easily, and there’s a whole network of people and resources to help.”

The Alpha changed tacks. “He’s not gonna be last, Castiel – in rank, I mean. You try to put him on the bottom of the Pack pile, and you’re going to have to answer to him. He ain’t gonna take it.”

“I agree. He’s Omega, but he certainly ranks higher than my brother. And as much as I’d like to promote my Omega-mate to a loftier position, she really belongs at the bottom, whether I like it or not.”

Alpha Lancet’s chuckle was cynical. “You got no idea what you’re in for, do you? I gotta say, I wish you luck. That boy’s a handful-and-a-half. I think you’re full of it about this Dom shit, but I know he’s got a brat-streak a mile wide. He’s going to push you and challenge you till you wanna strangle him. I kinda expected him to be in jail by now in his life.” The Alpha’s candor helped Castiel to understand his deep worry. That’s all this was. Jerry Lancet had been handling Michael almost singlehandedly his whole life, and now he was being forced to hand over his only son to strangers. He was scared. Michael was a handful, and the Lancets weren’t equipped to help him, but he was deeply loved.

“Jerry, may I have your permission to call on you and your mate for advice about Michael? You know him better than anyone. I want what’s best for him, and I appreciate that you do too. Will you help us?” Castiel had no intention of acting upon any advice from Jerry, but he needed the Alpha to feel involved, at least a little.

Anna approached them trailing two betas. “Alphas, Tom and George are leaving now to get Dean’s car.” She addressed Alpha Lancet. “Would you like a ride back to your car as well? If we need to, I can scrounge up another driver and bring yours here too. Just give them your keys and a description of the car.”

Castiel was still holding Lancet’s eye. Jerry postured a bit longer, testing Castiel’s resolve, but
ultimately conceded to the higher-ranking Alpha, “I’ll help however I can. It’s going to be a roller-coaster, Alpha. He’s a good kid underneath it all. Maybe you and Dean can bring that side out of him. Lord knows, I didn’t see it often.” He turned to Anna. “I’ll go too. I think we’re finished here.”

***************

Dean wasn’t sleepy, and he could remember every moment. Every single one. Weren’t wolves supposed to have memory blackouts of the humiliating behaviors they displayed while under the inebriating effects of a Mate-scent? Still tied chest-to-chest with his Omega, Dean wormed uncomfortably until he pulled first one, then the other of his knees out to either side and under Michael’s legs which were locked around Dean’s waist, hooked at the ankle. Dean sat upright on his sore ass with his legs bent sharply back at the knee, breaking Michael’s foot-lock, and he scowled at his mate. “You could at least TRY to help me maneuver. This is SO not comfortable.”

“How can you be cranky right now? I’m floating on a cloud, and I don’t ever wanna come back down.” Michael stretched his arms lazily over his head and then brought them round to run them firmly down the length of Dean’s chest. “Damn, you’re beautiful,” Michael told him in a drunk whisper, and he followed it up with a touch to Dean’s mind through their new link.

Dean tried to stop the half-smile, but he couldn’t. “At least help me get my feet around. Feels like my knees are gonna break. That’s the absolute last time we knot face-to-face.”

“You could’ve just settled on my chest, alpha, or don’t you think that’s manly enough?” Dean checked Michael’s face, but he knew before he saw the glint in his mate’s eye that he was only teasing. Dean could feel it through their Mating-bond. There was a note of testing about the phrasing.

“Very funny,” grumped Dean. He finally succeeded in working his legs back out straight in front of himself and tucked each one underneath Michael’s shoulders. He leaned back on his hands, braced just behind his bottom. The knot tugged uncomfortably. Dean looked down at his dick where it disappeared inside the tight channel of his mate and felt it surge again with another small release. He couldn’t resist thrusting just a few times, pushing himself forward with his hands against the bed. Michael’s spent dick twitched slightly in response.

Michael closed his eyes and moaned. “Thought you wanted out. We’re never going to untie if you keep on doing that.”

“When did I say I wanted out?” asked Dean thrusting again slowly. “I just don’t want to limp around for a week because my knees got twisted outta socket.”

Michael sat up, reaching to run his fingers through Dean’s brown hair. Dean closed his eyes and ‘Mmmmm’d.’ Then he opened them and looked into Michael’s clear green ones. “You’re incredible. You’re…so…” Dean ran out of words, lost in the green. He settled for trying out his new appendage in the form of a nudge through the bond, blinking owlishly.

“Nnnngh!” Michael responded and wrapped his arms around his mate. They stayed that way for several breaths. Then Dean spoke, his face close to Michael’s bleeding bite and the smell of blood cloying in his nostrils.

“I need to learn everything about you. Tell me something I should know.”

“What do you want to know, Dean? Should we play Twenty Questions?” Michael kissed Dean’s
neck and trailing his lips up behind his ears, straining forward enough to pull uncomfortably on their tie to get his nose nearer to Dean’s scent gland.

“Let’s do it ‘Quid Pro Quo, Clarisse’.” Dean leaned his head enough to allow Michael better access and Michael obliged, huffing a laugh. “I’ll go first. How old are you?”


“Twenty-seven.” Dean pulled back from Michael’s embrace. “You can’t just ask me the question I asked you. You have to come up with a new one.”

“Ah. But I wanted to know your age, too. How about we both answer each question, and then ask a new one on our turn? Good?”

“Mm-Kay,” mumbled Dean, working his lips and tongue over Michael’s bite and holding onto his waist. “Your turn.”

“What’s your favorite group?”

“Nuh-unh. No. I’ll school you on everything Led Zeppelin if you don’t already know, but we are NOT in Junior High school. Ask me something else.” Dean pulled back and fixed a stern alpha eye on his mate. Michael narrowed his eyes slightly then clenched his channel around Dean’s cock, bringing a huff out of Dean’s lungs.

“All right, let’s see. What’s your orientation, alpha?”

Dean raised his eyebrow. “I’m gay,” he told his mate. The assertion felt oddly out of place, the words feeling particularly blunt. It seemed a strange thing to have to tell someone who was already close enough to have a knot tying them together and a bond vibrating between them, but, yeah, Michael needed to know this stuff.

“Hmm. Okay. I’m Bi-. Pretty equally both ways. Your turn.” Michael ran massaging hands across Dean’s shoulders and down his back, kneading the muscles as he went. Dean arched his back.

“Where do you feel it when I do this?” Dean pulsed a long, oscillating wave down the bond and smirked.

“Oh shit, ahhhh! Damn, alpha, we’re never going to come unknotted.” Michael gathered Dean up in his arms, brought him close, and leaned back to lay them both together, helping this to time get Dean’s body situated. He worked them around until he and Dean lay mostly on their sides, Michael’s right hip and thigh taking most of the weight. He looked into Dean’s face and kissed the tip of his nose. Dean smiled a simple, genuine smile with no sarcasm or snark. Michael smiled back and said, whispering again, “I feel it in my O-gland. From there it spreads everywhere, mostly my dick, but also everywhere. Feels very good. Do it again.” Dean repeated the action, and Michael let his eyes close.

“Again.”

“Quid Pro Quo, Clarisse,” Dean reminded him. Michael giggled and returned the favor. Then he did it again, and again. And one more time. Dean panted and thrust his hips into his mate’s channel.

“Yeah. That does feel pretty good.”

They lost themselves in receiving and delivering pleasure. Dean’s cock thickened again, and his grinding circling thrusts picked up speed and intensity until he shoved Michael onto his back and began driving into him with a purpose. He couldn’t get much of a stroke going with the knot still locking them tight, but he ground hard against the Omega’s channel and grunted with effort. Michael wormed a hand between them to stroke himself, and Dean lifted up on his arms to give him room.
With his other hand, Michael pulled Dean to him by the back of his neck and kissed the side of his mouth; the side that wasn’t split from their fight in the restroom.

The strokes between their Mating-bond links continued unabated, growing stronger as their bodies responded to the pleasure of each other and they both came within moments of one another, a hot, sweet, tingling release that left both men oversensitive and breathless.

“You haven’t answered your own question yet, Dean,” the sweaty Omega reminded his mate, panting.

Dean pushed Michael’s damp hair off his forehead, trying to remember what the question had been. Oh, right. “Feel it in my head. Kinda deep behind my sinuses and then also way deep in my prostate. …and everywhere.”

“My turn. My middle name is Quentin. What’s yours?”

“Quentin? Seriously? Yeah, Okay. That’s um… a cool name.” Michael’s face had gone flat like he was 100% done with taking shit over his name. “Uh, my middle name’s Michael.” Dean confessed, and then he smiled impishly.

“Good name.” Michael’s and Dean’s hands traded easy strokes as they rolled back to their sides, both wolves sticky, sweaty, and beginning to grow uncomfortable. Michael kissed Dean again, languidly avoiding putting pressure on Dean’s injured lip.

“You got any siblings?” asked Dean, deliberately avoiding any topic that might ramp their wolves back up.

“A younger sister named Rachel. She’s eighteen. Presented beta. Lives with my folks at our Pack in Grand Prairie.”

“I’ve got a younger brother. Sam. Also beta. He’s awesome. You’ll get to meet him soon. We work together at The Facility, and he lives close to where we’re going to be living...” Dean sensed Michael’s malaise and trailed off. Right. Touchy subject – where they’d be living evoked reminders that there was already a Pack established that included more members close to Dean than a new mate should be expected to be comfortable with. Did Michael remember the information his Alpha shared on the drive from Texas? Dean suspected he did.

“Yes, I know about Sam. You two do those conventions together. I’ve watched some of them on YouTube.”

“Your turn.” Dean hoped to steer the conversation away from their living arrangements until they’d come untied at least. He didn’t think it was a topic best broached while he couldn’t put some distance between them if it turned heated.

“Okay.” Michael graciously chose to table the conversation for the moment, but Dean could feel the tension in his mate, not released, just stored. The discussion was going to have to happen, but not quite yet. Neither wolf was looking forward to it. Dean could feel the dread deep inside his new mate.

“What’s your defining sexual kink?” Michael asked with his eyes closed.

“Defining…? Yeah, okay. Uh, masochism, I guess, which makes you a sadist, I suppose.”

“No, not especially,” Michael shrugged. “I mean, I’ll definitely do that for you. I enjoy pleasing my partner. Always have. But it’s not really my thing, exactly. I get off on dick size. I like ‘em big
enough to really stretch me, make me FEEL it, make me limp a little.”

Dean hesitated for a moment, a little stunned. “That’s your defining kink? Size? Dude, I’m not sure a bisexual Omega can really claim a size kink is defining. That’s like, just how Omegas are, isn’t it? Hey,” Dean propped himself up on his elbow. “Have you had your Keller done yet? That’d tell us some of your kinks.”

“Not yet. We were on our way to Kansas just now for the test when a certain sexy-as-fuck alpha waylaid me.”

“Oh, wow. Really? Well, I’m fairly certain there’s more to you than a size kink.” Dean sensed his knot beginning to slip free. He put a hand on Michael’s hip and eased himself out, careful not to force it. He didn’t want to hurt his mate’s rim. Dean had plans for that part of Michael’s anatomy, and wanted to avoid as much soreness as possible. They separated, each sitting up and easing out of the wettest parts of the bedding. Michael made a pained face, but sent reassuring strokes through the bond. He wasn’t hurt, just stretched, just like he liked to be. They wound up sitting side-by-side against the headboard. Neither spoke for a bit. Michael began wiping down his own belly and groin with the warm, but rapidly cooling water Anna had left for them.

Dean regarded him pensively. “How’d you learn to Dom like that? If you haven’t had a test yet, you probably haven’t been through a training class, right? Michael, what you did just now, that was amazing. Where did you learn to do that?”

Michael smirked a side-eye at him and cocked an eyebrow. He pulled a fresh cloth from the table, wet it, wrung it out and began cleaning his alpha before he spoke. Dean leaned back and straightened, spreading his legs to grant him access. “You probably don’t want to hear the details, but I had a few mentors in college. Girls mostly. They let me try some things, and we played pretty hard sometimes. Most of them didn’t believe I could Dom until I showed them, then all bets were off, and we got into some raunchy shit. Couple of them were masochists. Most of them were brats. I feel confident that I’ve got your number, Dean Winchester.” Michael tossed the cloth over his shoulder and moved his body over Dean’s, enticing him into a kiss. It started out slow and gentle, but when Michael nipped at Dean’s lower lip and demanded entrance to Dean’s mouth with his tongue, Dean melted, scooted his ass to lie back down, and let Michael take the kiss from him.

“You got any more in the tank, alpha?” Michael murmured in a teasing lilt. “I’m young and horny. I think I can go one more round.” Michael ground his hips down against Dean’s flaccid, oversensitive cock. “You wanna see what being dominated by an Omega is like from the other side?”

“I can’t, Michael. I’m done.”

“We don’t really need Little Dean’s participation, sweetheart.” Michael continued the circling motion of his hips, kissing Dean’s throat, ignoring Dean’s protest grunt at being called ‘Little’, and his own cock starting to respond. “I’ve got this. You just lay back and let me.” Dean’s eyes were wide. He’d never been fucked by an Omega. Even in his exhausted state, the offer was a fantasy come true. (Yes, yes, YES!), his wolf commented helpfully. He nodded silently and spread his legs further apart.

“Be careful, Michael,” he whispered. “I’m pretty sore from…recent activities.”

Michael fixed him with an unreadable look. Possessiveness, maybe. Figures. It hadn’t been Michael who put Dean in that state. His eyes narrowed again, and his jaw set. He went to work opening Dean up with extreme care, collecting slick and spent come from his own leaking hole to lubricate Dean. One careful finger thrust deep inside Dean became two, became three. His intense green-eyed gaze betrayed his slow pace. It was a building tease, another test. Michael kept his eyes on Dean’s
Dean panted and writhed, pulling one knee up high to help Michael reach whatever he wanted to. Dean’s cock twitched but stayed frustratingly limp. He slid a hand down to massage his own balls, but Michael nudged it back out of the way, gently. “Not this time, Baby. This time is just for me, understand?”

“I…yessir.”

“Are you ready? You gotta tell me if I’m hurting you, got it? Masochist or not, I need to know what you’re feeling down here.” He pulled his fingers out and swiped a thumb across Dean’s rim.

“I’m ready,” Dean nodded. “Just go slow and be careful.”

“Turn over on your hands and knees. I want to see that ass presented to me.”

Dean maneuvered into position and looked back over his shoulder. Michael met his eye and placed a hand on his back then focused on lining himself up with Dean’s hole. “I don’t like these marks on you, mate,” Michael chastised in a whisper. “These are not my marks, but we’ll discuss it later. Breathe out now and relax.”

He pushed in agonizingly slowly, pausing frequently to assess Dean’s condition and check in. Dean settled his chest on the soiled bed and closed his eyes, taking in the sensations. His anus and rectum were still sore from Castiel’s knotting two nights ago, but not enough to cause real pain when Michael breached him, just enough to awaken every nerve and light him up inside. He felt the welcome familiar stretch of sore muscle give in to Michael’s intruding cock. It was blissful. Dean moaned and pushed back.

“That’s my boy,” Michael praised him, beginning to move rhythmically but slowly in and out of Dean’s hole. He held Dean by the hips and moved the alpha in counterpoint to the motion of his own thrusting. “Just let me…”

Afterward, Dean lay still, resting in his mate’s arms with his head pillow on Michael’s chest and slowly fingering the bite mark on his own shoulder – way up high almost on his neck. Michael wanted his mark clearly visible and unavoidable for everyone, particularly a certain Dominant Pack Alpha. Dean had never heard of a Mating where an alpha received a bite-scar, but it seemed fitting to him, and he felt proud to carry his Omega-mate’s mark. Someday soon he needed to let Michael in on why the location he chose to leave his mark was a good one, and what he was bound to find on Dean’s opposite shoulder from time to time. They had time though. They had a lifetime, and the information would keep. A deep sense of satisfaction settled into the alpha’s wolf and they both fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes
I wanted to put the upcoming fireworks into this chapter, but it seemed a good place to stop for a station-break. I'm excited to get a chance to bring Alpha!Cas and Dom!Michael together.

Love all y'all!
Sunday, May 7, 2017

Chapter Summary

When the mating hormones wear off, things get dicey.

Chapter Notes

Migraines. They suck. 48 hours of the wrong kind of rolling and moaning in bed. But I'm back now. Yea! Sunshine and daisies abound.

Y’all, I tried. I really did. I know where this chapter was supposed to go, but I couldn’t get the character to get there. He’s a stubborn S.O.B.

I have to think it’s coming though.

The dichotomy of personality behaviors while Dean and Michael switch between their various roles may throw some folks. Like I’ve said before, it's a tough balance to make work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN:

“You’re a disgrace, Castiel!” she spat. “You and your disgusting perversions. You make me sick! You make me ashamed to be your mother!” Castiel was angry enough that deep pink spots formed on his upper cheeks, and his teeth ground in his head as he took his mother’s abuse. “You’ve got them all brainwashed somehow into your repulsive, delusional freak-show of a cult. I want you out of this house! I want you out today!”

“No,” he answered stiffly. “I’m Alpha, and that means it’s my house more than it is yours. I’m not leaving Gabriel with the likes of you.” Castiel held on to calm by the barest edge of his fingertips. Another shove would push him over. He was so, so angry. He could handle what she said about him, but when she turned her venom on his grieving brother, Castiel usually lost it.

“Gabriel! Yes, Castiel, let’s talk about Gabriel. You fucked him, didn’t you? Your own brother. Are there any depths that you won’t sink to? I’m so grateful that your father is dead, so he can’t see what you’ve turned into. You’re disgusting!” Her scotch sat abandoned on the desk and a vein stood out prominent in her neck.

Castiel advanced on her dangerously, narrowing his eyes in fury. “I Claimed him, Mother! Because he needed me to. I’m not SLEEPING with my brother! There’s a difference, and YOU KNOW IT! How can you be so fucking delusional? Your own brother is dead. He died in agony, screaming for you to help him. And your son?! You were just going to let Gabriel follow the same path, meet the same end and wash your hands of the whole damned thing, telling yourself that it’s such a shame?!
‘Poor Gabriel, if only there was something that could be done?’ Just so you don’t have to – how did you put it? ‘Sink into the depths of depravity?’ So you can sip tea with the monkeys and wear your stupid derby hats at brunch! Fuck You! Fuck your whole judgmental, kowtowing perversion of who you are! You’re a WOLF, dammit! Stand up and act like one!”

“I am a human, Castiel” she hissed back. “I am a civilized, decent human being, and I am disgusted that you could even THINK that I would partake of this lifestyle of groveling on the floor and rutting like dogs. Do you know what we look like to the rest of the world? We look like animals, thanks to you. We look like bestial animals who crawl in the dirt and tear red meat apart with our teeth and fuck any hole that slinks by us. He’s your brother!” Her lips drew back from her teeth in a rictus of disgust.

“I can promise you one thing,” she spoke low, and her body shook. “When I win this election – and I will win – I’m going to tear down everything you put up. Everything, Castiel. You’re not going to win this one. If I can’t force you to be civilized, at least I can prevent you from spreading your pestilence to the innocents of the world.”

“We’ll see, Mother.” Castiel turned his back on his mother and left the room. He needed to check on Gabriel.

NOW:

Dean woke slowly. He was warm and so, so comfortable with his body curled around his mate’s. The scent from the neck in front of his nose was already shifting, merging with his own into something unique and new. Dean’s was taking on aspects of Michael’s scent too, no doubt, but of course, he couldn’t smell himself.

As he came awake, he realized with dawning awareness: first that he and Michael weren’t in the room where they’d Mated – morning light streamed through the windows – second, that they were both clean and fully dressed in nurse’s scrubs, and third, that the bed clothes keeping him snug were all clean and soft. The bed itself was different. They’d been cleaned up, dressed, and moved during the night without waking up at all. At least Dean hadn’t awoken.

He realized one more thing as he blinked his eyes open and focused on his mate: Michael snored. It was a soft, buzzing snore, and Dean found it immediately endearing. Dean’s right leg was pushed between Michael’s, and his right arm cinched up around Michael’s waist and tucked under his weight. Dean left a soft kiss on the back of his mate’s neck and then settled for breathing his new scent.

The door to their room cracked open and a Simian nurse slipped in, wielding breakfast trays. Dean’s back was to the door, but he turned his head and smiled at her. Everything felt so right to him in this moment, it was nearly painful. His wolf was satisfied, his arms full of contented mate. Then his stomach rumbled when the smell of bacon hit his nose, and he realized how famished he was.

Michael stirred when Dean pulled away and sat up, but he just curled more tightly into the covers and pulled his pillow over his head. Dean’s wolf melted and turned enormous puppy eyes to his mate. Dean himself rolled his eyes and reminded the wolf, (bacon!). The nurse, a young Primate woman with the cheekbones and full lips of a Choctaw Indian, moved efficiently, readying the roll-away table and bringing it up to Dean, so he could reach it.
He whispered to her, “You don’t have to serve us; we’re not sick,” even while he accepted the breakfast and pulled off the plastic cover.

“We’ve been keeping a close eye on you two overnight. Seems like they were pretty surprised you didn’t Trip over into your Rut cycle. There’s an alpha wolf out there pacing the floor. I don’t think he slept at all even though we offered him a bed. He belong to you?”

“Yes, he’s mine,” Dean laughed softly. The back of Dean’s mind pushed at him…was Castiel still his? Would Cas ask for his ring back? Were they still engaged? Dean heard it, but he pretended not to. He remembered everything; remembered telling Cas he wished it’d been him, not Michael. There wasn’t a thing he could do in this moment but cling to Michael and assume he still had Castiel. His ring glinted in the morning light.

“Well, he’s scaring the locals, so we may need you folks to move on once we’re sure you’re in the clear.”

Dean began eating, or rather, stuffing his face would be a better phrase. He was starving, and everything tasted much better than usual. Hospital-style scrambled eggs, bacon, a heavy biscuit and gravy, plus O.J. and coffee. It was maybe the world’s least interesting breakfast, but to Dean, it was ambrosia. The nurse tidied up a bit although nothing was out of place, and Michael continued to snore softly, so Dean engaged her.

“How’d you guys get us cleaned up and moved without waking us up?” She continued to move things pointlessly about, but she smiled wider. Dean had become aware of the phenomenon ever since Sam pointed it out to him at a convention once: people, especially women, seemed very often not to want to leave his presence. He couldn’t account for it, but he’d seen it often enough to know it was real.

She smirked at him, crow’s feet evident at the corners of her eyes. “Nurses and orderlies are ninjas when it comes to that stuff, sir. Ninjas.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. Was she preening? The nurse pushed the door open but paused before stepping out into the hall, hesitant to leave.

“Hey!” Dean called as she lowered her head and stepped out. Michael startled at the noise and hit Dean in the face with a pillow. She turned back and paused again at the door. “I just wanted to say thanks. Would you let the team know? I don’t even know who to thank, but it’s just, yeah, just thanks.” Dean ended with a cheeky grin, and the nurse smiled back at him.

“It’s a good thing you’re pretty, because I don’t see you winning any eloquence awards,” she teased.

“You think I’m pretty?” Dean flirted.

“Jesus Fucking Christ, Dean! Shut the fuck up! Everyone thinks you’re pretty, and you know it! God!” Michael rolled over and kicked him in the shin.

The nurse fled, laughing, and letting the door swing shut behind her.

“Look, Mikey! Breakfast!”

Michael’s hand shot out faster than Dean could think and took a vice-grip on his testicles through the scrubs, squeezing and pulling downward. Dean squeaked and nearly knocked his roll-table over. He breathed swiftly through his nose and sat very, very still as Michael disabused him swiftly of his mistake. “My name is Michael. It’s not Mike, not Mickey, NOT Mikey! Understood?”

“Fine! Understood! Let go of my balls, MICHAEL! You’re not gonna get any pups outta those if you pull them off! Geez, you’re a grouch this morning.”
“I’m just really tired,” Michael complained, letting Dean go and sitting upright next to him.

“Whatever.” Now that his boys were in the clear, Dean was pissed. “Rule One from your alpha is ‘keep your temper in check’. That was out of bounds, Omega. I’m dead serious.” Dean fixed him with a firm alpha countenance and a no-nonsense tone of voice.

Michael looked at him. The warring factions in his head were evident on his face as his jaw clenched and twitched. His wolf didn’t like being spoken to that way. (Rules? We don’t need no stinking rules! We MAKE the rules!), but his Omega response went deeper, pulled from a much more ancient bedrock inside of him, and it purred at the firmness in Dean’s voice. It sensed safety and protection. In Dean, his Omega detected trust, security, structure. Maybe when he was with Dean, the Omega intuited, Michael’s wolf wouldn’t need to fight so damned hard all the time.

Michael wasn’t ready to trust that deeply yet, but he kept the door open. He searched Dean’s face, looking for clues to his intent. His Omega had been wrong before where his Dominant wolf had served him well most of the time. That, and Dean had engaged himself to marry a man Michael didn’t know before he even knew whether Michael could fulfill his alpha’s needs for intimacy and affection. Who does that? But… What would his life be like if he could relax and just be, trusting his alpha to provide him a place in a Pack and hold him safe and cherished forever? What if there was room for all of them? Did he want to live like that?

For his part, Dean had years of experience helping Omegas to adjust to the disappointment of an unwanted designation. No one ever wanted to present Omega. He knew roughly what was going on in his mate’s head. He felt confirmation through the Mating-bond, and he took advantage of the extra resource, sending Michael a sense of stability and support that he couldn’t’ve communicated with just his eyes and voice. Michael let his eyes drop to the bed, a long-suffering look of concentration held in his brow as he struggled to decide how to respond. It was a deep dive into the Omega’s core, and Dean gave him several minutes before prodding him back to the surface.

“Where did you go, Michael? You still with me? C’mon, just talk to me for a second.” Dean eased himself around so that he was sitting facing his mate, his breakfast abandoned. Dean lifted Michael’s chin with his fingertips to try to regain his eyes, and Michael’s eyes hardened. He jerked away and growled softly, not a threat, just stating his position. “All right, then. I get it,” Dean acquiesced. He leaned back a bit, giving his mate some space. “I’m not going anywhere, love. We’ll figure it out. It’s going to take time, but I believe we will learn to trust one another. Someday. For now, breakfast in bed. Don’t get used to it.”

Dean swooped out of bed and retrieved Michael’s tray, arranging it as the nurse had done his and rolled the tray over to his mate, who accepted it as a peace offering. Michael wanted this to work, knew it HAD to work, but it wasn’t going to be easy. He couldn’t account for Dean’s fiancé within the matrix in his head. “I’m sorry, Dean. I don’t like that I get like that sometimes. I don’t want to hurt you, but sometimes I can’t control myself when I get pissed.”

“Just eat. We’ll work on control later. I’ve got lots of ideas, some of them I know you’ll hate, but some are fun. And I’m sorry about the nickname. Won’t happen again.” Dean winked and Michael stared at him, stunned. That wasn’t the reaction he’d expected at all. Where was all the ‘you’re not sorry yet, but you will be’? Where was the ‘Don’t let it happen again’, or ‘I’ll give you something to be sorry about’? “You don’t mind if I call you ‘love’, do you?” Dean asked abruptly. Michael barely responded, but Dean took it as permission and nodded to himself smugly.

Dean chugged his juice and then finished the bacon. The coffee he rejected out of hand. Maybe he could text Cas to make a run for something drinkable.

No. Not yet.
He and Michael needed to get through something together before he let Cas in. Michael used the bed remote to raise his side and was digging in. This double-occupancy hospital bed was a surprising luxury. Dean planned to stay here until they kicked them both out.

“What d’you think, man? Any sign of a Heat coming on?” Dean prompted. He wanted to slide casually, non-confrontationally into the easy dialogue they’d shared last night. This could get hairy if he wasn’t careful. Probably would get hairy anyway.

“No,” Michael answered, his mouth full of eggs. “I just had one about three weeks ago.”

“My Rut’s not due till July. Maybe it’s too far to Trigger. I don’t know. Never been able to call these things. Sometimes they Trigger, and sometimes they don’t.” Dean got up and began searching through the cabinets for their clothes. Should be in here somewhere. Yep, found ‘em. “They’re going to kick us out of here if we’re not sick or in need of any care. We need to figure out what comes next. Of course, we can still take a few weeks to ourselves to get used to each other and the bond, Heat or not. It’s our due, and I plan to take it.”

Dean dumped the contents of the plastic bags onto the bed and began rummaging through them. All of his stuff was there except his car keys. An initial panic gave way to the assumption that Cas had taken them to get his car back. He’d ask before he flipped out. Dean looked up and met Michael’s eye. Michael stopped with his fork halfway into his mouth.

“What?”

“We have to talk some things through before I let Castiel in. I need you to be clear on how things stack up, and where we’re all going.” Den watched his mate’s eyes.

“Going? You mean Bumfuck Oklahoma isn’t our new home?” the Omega spouted with a straight face after swallowing his bite.

“You know, it’s not necessary to turn every conversation into an opportunity to be an asshole, Michael, and Bumfuck Oklahoma took good care of us yesterday. A little gratitude might be in order.” So much for sliding in casually. The Omega’s eyes were flinty green.

Michael dropped his fork back onto the hospital tray and rolled the table out of the way. He sat up straight and turned his body to face Dean. “All right. Let’s do this. You belong to me. I’m not sharing with that dick. He’s gonna get over it, and that’s final.”

“So, you remember about my engagement to Cas.” Dean was trying to be very careful, but he knew that his discomfort was evident through their newly shared bond if Michael figured out how to read it. Cas still wanted him, right?

“I remember everything, Dean. Doesn’t mean it’s going down that way. My Claim is stronger than his, and I’m your Dom.”

“Look, I know you don’t like it. I know it’s not fair to you, and I can’t fix that, but he’s my pack Alpha, I’m in love with him, and I AM going to marry him. That means he’s going to be your pack Alpha too, whether you like it or not. Sometimes shit just doesn’t come out the way you want it to, but that doesn’t mean you’re getting screwed in the deal. This could be the best damn thing that ever happened to you, but you are never gonna know if you don’t give it a chance.” Dean shimmied out of his scrubs and shook out his jeans. His boxers and jeans were both pretty crusty with dried pre-come, so he opted to skip the boxers, go commando, and change as soon as he got his luggage back. Then he rethought it all and decided maybe the scrubs should just stay put.
Michael ogled him as he stood deliberating half naked and slid off the bed and onto his knees. He crawled on all fours toward Dean, his eyes hooded and seductive. Dean went on alert. Michael seemed to be channeling both his Omega and his wolf at once. His eyes took on a ring of gold that glinted faintly. “We should take advantage of the room while we’ve got it, don’t you think, Submissive?” Michael placed his hands on Dean’s hips and maneuvered him back to the edge of the bed, keeping down on his knees and watching his mate’s eyes through his lashes. Dean let the clothing fall from his grip and braced himself on Michael’s well-muscled biceps.

“That’s a good idea. I like this idea,” breathed Dean carefully. Michael shoved his hips so that Dean’s weight was supported by the edge of the bed, and he licked the length of Dean’s cock from his balls to the tip, craning his neck to get underneath. Dean spread his feet apart and moaned. His cock took no time to jump on the train. Michael watched Dean’s face as he took as much of Dean into his throat as he could in one go. Size kink wasn’t going to be a problem for them as mates; Dean was equipped. And Michael loved having a challenge to overcome. He wrapped his hand around the bulge where Dean’s knot would pop and squeezed hard enough to pull another moan out of his mate.

Michael pulled his mouth away, letting a ropey string of saliva break between his lip and Dean’s cock, but he continued massaging the knot. He plunged his voice into its lowest, Dom-register and spoke straight to Dean’s Submissive wolf. “You don’t move, understand? I’m going to make you feel very, very good, but you’re to stay absolutely still for me.”

“Yes, Sir. Can I make noise?”

“I want to hear everything, Dean. Your voice is the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.” Michael licked him like an ice cream cone and then went back to work, his head bobbing smoothly, his tongue a flexible, masterful paintbrush inside his mouth. Dean gripped the edge of the blanket and closed his eyes, groaning his pleasure. Jesus, this guy and his mouth. Dean’s chest and face broke out in a sweat as Michael brought his other hand up to cradle Dean’s balls while massaging his knot and working his lips up and down and twisting off the head only to come right back to lodge Dean deep in his throat again. He hummed a tuneless note around Dean’s cock and Dean’s responding whine was several octaves above where he’d intended.

As Michael pulled back again, his teeth scraped the side of Dean’s dick in a way he couldn’t possibly have known lit Dean up with the perfect ratio of pain/pleasure that Dean had never been able to describe just right for Cas. Teeth employed during a B.J. wasn’t a normal man’s thing, but Dean had never been normal. His hips bucked violently forward, and he had just a moment of heavenly face-fucking before Michael pulled off, letting him go and standing up. Michael wiped his mouth with the back of his arm and turned away from Dean.

“No, no, please! I’m sorry! Come back, I didn’t mean to! Please Sir, you can spank me for it, but please don’t stop! Sir, please! That was so good.”

“I told you to be still.”

“So, you’re just going to leave me like this? Can I at least finish up for myself?” Dean had his hand hovering close to his erection, but he didn’t dare touch without permission.

Michael turned to meet his eye and raised one brow. “What do you think?” He disappeared into the bathroom and Dean heard him start pissing loudly into the bowl.

Damnit! So close. So fucking close. Dean leaned back on his arms and rocked a bit in an attempt to control the urge to take himself in-hand. He turned around to face the bedding and dwucked his head onto his crossed arms, breathing heavily. He could do this. He just needed the Submissive wolf to
take a hike for a bit, get back into his own head again.

Dean was pulling the hospital scrubs over his achingly hard dick when Michael returned to the room with an overly concerned look on his face. “Are you all right, Dean?”

“Yes, Sir,” Dean shot testily. “I’m peachy.”

They still needed to talk. What was supposed to be a relaxing interlude had turned Dean all around in his head, and now the conversation was probably going to come from a completely different place.

(Oh shit!) thought Dean to his wolf in a moment of epiphany. (The rat-bastard planned it that way.) He almost laughed. He almost offered the Omega a high five for guts and ingenuity in a tight situation, but Dean needed to regain the upper hand. He couldn’t let on that he knew what Michael was up to. Letting a manipulator know you were onto them only drove them deeper underground. Dean needed Michael out in the light where he could see him. He crammed his dick and his Submissive both away to handle later. Dean was the king of manipulation tactics, and nobody messes with the king. Dean needed Michael out in the light where he could see him. He had his work cut out.

“All right. Fine. Playtime’s over, then. I get it,” Dean snarked. Michael smirked at him. This was going to be easier when his dick wasn’t tenting his scrubs and leaving a wet smudge on the front. He couldn’t even take himself seriously like this, so he climbed back in the bed and pulled the blanket to his waist.

Outta sight, outta mind, right?

Dean shook himself back into himself, metaphorically, and started over. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Michael, we need to cut the games. Please talk to me. What do you want from this relationship? What do you want from me? No one’s asking you to stop being yourself or to give up all your power.” The conversation’s hard turn clearly threw the Omega. He stood with his back to Dean, his head bowed and his arms bracing against the countertop. Dean could see him taking several deep breaths. “Baby, whatever you need, we can make it happen, but you’ve got to tell me, not throw demands or tests at me and expect we’ll cave to a temper tantrum.”

“We,” Michael breathed, picking up on Dean’s implication. “What I want is YOU, Dean.” Michael turned around, crossing his arms, and leaning his butt against the counter. “I don’t want to share you. I waited for you all my life, and I only just got you, and already I’m not enough for you? How do you even know that yet? You haven’t given me a chance.”

Dean’s feet broke out in a sweat as his mate’s argument hit him square in the insecurities. This was going to be a tough conversation, and Dean needed to try to keep the emotion in check. Going on the defensive wouldn’t help. “I already know that you and I fit together in a way no one else ever could. You are the missing piece of me, man. You’re my home. You get me in a way no one else ever has. I feel like I could say or do anything, and you would understand what it means and where it’s coming from. That doesn’t become a lesser thing when I marry Cas. It isn’t that you’re not enough, but I can’t choose who I love, Michael, and I need him as much as I need you. Just, differently.”

Michael huffed a frustrated, disgusted breath and turned away again. Dean went on, hoping against hope that he could find the right words. “I believe that in time we’ll come to trust and love each other, you and me. There’s no part of my marriage with him that takes away from you. It’s all additive. You still get me. I get you. And we both get to have a big family to watch out for us. I get two Doms, which is probably necessary to keep a Sub as profound as I am balanced out. You get pups, if you want ‘em, and you get a Dominant mentor if you don’t just chuck him out on principle.
“Baby, trust me. Please? I promise he’s not going to try to control our Mated relationship. That’s between you and me. We decide everything. And fuck anyone who tries to tell us how it’s gotta go between us. Just you and me. You see this?” Dean touched the bandage on his shoulder. “He is NOT going to like this, but it’s none of his damn business. This is you and me.”

“And big Daddy watching over everything we do,” spoke Michael with venom. “I don’t need a father, Dean. I have one of those. What do you even see in him? He’s a tool!” Michael spun around and advanced on Dean. “I’ll tell you another thing. I’m not doubling-up with that asshole to Dom you. That’s MY job! I’m your Dominant, alpha. Not him!”

“Michael!” Dean stood up and postured over him, his eyes hard and flinty. “You don’t have to like it. You don’t have to like Castiel. But I’ll be DAMNED if you’re not going to show him the respect he deserves as Pack Alpha! And before you go all ‘Parent-Trap’ on him and leaving lizards on his canteen, let me explain one more thing. You, sir, are an Omega in my household. You belong to me, and we both belong to Castiel. You wrap your head around it quick and it’ll be so much easier. Fight it, and it’s gonna be so much harder on you. You aren’t going to win this. It’s up to you to decide whether you’re miserable with us or not; with me or not. Michael, it doesn’t have to go down like this.”

Dean backed up a step and noted that Michael’s eyes had gone wide. A circle of gold surrounded the irises in response to Dean’s alpha stepping out into the light. Good. An Omega response was what Dean was going for.

“So, with the information you now have about what is and what isn’t on the table for negotiations, do you know what you want from me?”

Michael calmed himself visibly. It was a demonstration of his level of maturity that soothed Dean’s worries a bit. The Omega swallowed as if he was trying to remove a lump in his throat, and he dropped his gaze to the floor. “I don’t know how to accept this, Dean. It feels like a kick in the gut. I can’t trust you…not yet. How do I know it’s even going to work? You know, I’m not a simple man. I’ve got issues underneath issues. I know I do. And I need you.” He looked up, and Dean’s heart broke to see the agony flooding the Mating-bond reflected in the tears streaming from his eyes. He was frightened and hurt. Not even Mated for 24 hours and Dean had already broken his heart. He kicked himself internally and bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood.

Dean took his mate in his arms and held on tightly. They were almost the same height. Dean stood less than an inch taller, and their frames had about the same musculature. They fit perfectly. “Shhh. Baby, we’re gonna be okay. We’ll figure it out. I’m not going to forget about you or stuff you off in a corner somewhere. I swear. You’re not second to him.” Dean felt Michael tuck his head down into his neck and scent the alpha. Dean bared his throat a bit more to give him room. “We’re going to take care of each other, okay?”

Michael clung to him, pulling comfort from him through their bond and he cried, grieving the loss of his short-lived victory, angry that his Omega Presentation had robbed him once again of the power to own or hold anything for himself, blind to the fact that the Alpha at the other corner of the triangle faced the same painful loss. A powerful designation was no protection against this, but all Michael saw was a pack of alphas wrestling his property away and stomping his face in the mud. For every impulse his Omega provided that promised home, or health, or happiness, he faced 20 more that promised grief, or loss, or pain – promised powerlessness. Michael felt shackled, and it tasted bitter in his throat even with his mate’s strong arms around him and the scent of home in his nose.
Michael and Dean wound up curled back in the bed in the same position they’d been in when Dean awoke with the sunrise. They talked about unimportant things and petty matters; favorite cars and sports teams, preferences for different brands of beer. They let the tension fade for a bit. Dean received a text from Cas asking him to check in when the two weren’t ‘indisposed’. Castiel’s word - *indisposed*. Dean ignored it. He considered cuddling with his mate to be a version of indisposed. Cas could wait. If Cas intended to waltz in and utter, ‘Dean, we need to talk…’, then that could wait too. Michael needed his full attention.

“You’re so beautiful, Michael,” Dean whispered into his ear. You’re going to give me the prettiest pups someday. Would you like that, baby? Do you want pups with me?”

“Yeah,” Michael whispered back. “I want a whole litter. They’ll have green eyes like their daddy.”

“Like their mother,” Dean amended.

“I don’t want to wait, alpha.” Michael rolled over and pushed himself up on an elbow. “I wanna try at my next Heat. I’m only a week or two behind your cycle. Maybe we’ll sync up, and we can really go for it. Can you imagine? Can you see her? A dark-haired, green-eyed little girl with freckles and dimples?”

Dean could imagine. She looked just like Michael in his head. The freckles he could live without, but the eyes… “We need to wait a bit,” Dean explained softly. “I’ve got a couple of research projects going that need me around at all kinds of crazy hours. Lemme work through those, and then we’ll do it. I’ve… I’ve always wanted to be a Daddy. Never really expected to get the chance. I never expected to have a mate, Michael.” Dean breathed into a sob, letting it hide in his exhale. Michael heard it anyway and pulled him close.

“Hire an assistant to pull the hours, and do this with me. Please, Dean.”

Dean kept his voice very soft. “Aren’t you jumping the gun just a bit? An hour ago, you were ready to kidnap me and run from the Pack house. Now you’re settling in with a litter? I assume you mean to raise them in Alpha’s home, right? Or are we still on the lam?” Dean pulled back so he could look at his mate.

“Do I have a choice?”

“About where you live and whose Pack you belong to, no. About when we try for pups, yes. I just want to be sure you’re not asking to get knocked up while still thinking you might be anywhere but Kansas in the Winchester Pack house. You seem to have settled a bit fast there.”

Michael confessed, “I’m not sure how this is going to work. I don’t have a job or a degree. I got kicked out of college for being an asshole, and I don’t know what to do next. I’m too tired and wrung out to fight about it. But I know I want your pups. I want anything and everything you’ll give me, Dean.”

The phone on the bedside table rang. Dean picked it up. “I’ve got fresh hot coffee, Dean,” Castiel offered. “Are you ready for me to come in and meet Michael formally? I’ll wait if you’re still tied or in the middle of…anything.”

Dean sighed and looked to Michael. The phone receiver was loud. He knew Michael had heard. He
indicated that it was Michael’s call. He’d tell Cas to head back to Kansas without them if Michael asked him to. It wouldn’t fix anything in the long run, but it’d buy them some time alone together.

Michael shrugged and nodded his head. “Let him in. Let’s get this over with,” he said darkly.

“Door’s unlocked, Cas. You know our room number?”

“I’ll be right there.” Cas hung up, and Dean did as well.

Dean sat up and checked he was dressed. Not a good idea to have both of his Doms distracted by nudity on their first meeting – their first official, formal meeting. He looked at Michael and said, “Whatever you do, I’ll back you up as long as you’re not a dick about it, and it’s not to tell Cas to take a hike. Got it? You know what I mean.” Dean added the last part because Michael looked to be testing the statement for loopholes, and Dean realized there were many.

The knock on the door came as it cracked open. Castiel carried a tray of coffee cups, and Dean couldn’t really stop himself from diving for them. “This one’s yours, Dean.” Cas indicated by tapping his finger against the side of one of the cups. “I didn’t know what Michael might like, so I just got a regular brew and some cream & sugar packets.” Dean saw Cas’ eyes flick quickly away from the square gauze taped to his shoulder.

“Thank you, Sir. I drink mine black,” Michael called politely. Dean worked both cups from the tray and carried them to the bed, handing Michael’s over.

Castiel turned his back on them to set the cup-holder on the counter and pulled his own cup free. “Anna hired some local boys to go fetch your car, Dean. It’s in the parking lot now. Here are the keys.” He tossed them across to Dean, who snatched them out of the air one-handed against his chest. “I expect you’ll want to look it over for damage, but I didn’t find anything amiss.” He took a couple of steps so that he stood in the exact center of the room and looked around. “The hospital told me we have an hour to remove ourselves now that they’re sure you’re both fine and no one’s in cycle.” Dean wasn’t listening. Strangers drove his Baby without his permission. Cas was going to pay for that.

Castiel read Dean’s face and sighed. “It was the best way to get your car here. Now we don’t have to scramble, and we can just go home.” Turning to face Michael, “Your father rode with them. He transferred your luggage to Dean’s car and went on home, but he’ll be calling you in a couple of days to check in. He’s worried about you.” Castiel stepped up and extended his hand. “It’s wonderful to really meet you, Michael. I’m Castiel. You can call me Cas if you like, or Alpha, if you’d rather. I’m flexible.”

Michael hesitated, evidently weighing the outcome of calling the Alpha a name of his own choosing, but he opted to play it safe. “My name’s Michael.” He accepted the hand coldly with an over-firm grip which Cas had been expecting. The Alpha didn’t respond to the blood-draining squeeze. “I remember everything from before Dean and I Mated, so you don’t have to rehash it all over again.”

Michael released his grip and set his coffee down, standing to face the intruder. “My mate, Dean, tells me that you’ve already established a Pack residence in Lawrence, with you at the helm, and that you’re planning to marry him and run the pack from there. That’s what Dean, who is my mate, said.”

Castiel’s lip twitched. Dean couldn’t tell if it was irritation or amusement. He had no real argument with Michael’s tactic so far. It was far too clumsy and obvious to be a real power move. When Michael made a move, probably no one would see it coming. More likely he was just trying to feel out Cas’ impulse control, and that seemed fair to Dean. He sat back, sipped his coffee and watched the show.
“That’s right,” agreed Castiel cheerfully. “Your mate, Dean, will be second-in-command behind his Pack Alpha. That’s me. I’ll be your mate Dean’s husband, and his Alpha, as well as his Dominant from time to time. And that means,” Castiel made sure that his blue eyes bored into Michael’s green ones, “That as Alpha, husband, and Dominant to Dean, who is your mate, I will also be playing the role of Pack Alpha for you personally. Whether or not you require a Dom is yet to be determined, and of course, you will not be asked to participate directly in our marriage, nor I in your Mating with Dean.” Dean turned his face to the floor briefly to hide the relief in his eyes. The wedding was still on, apparently. Castiel paced slowly, like a lecturer before a classroom and continued. “As an Omega, and a mate to my husband, Dean, you will be expected to comport yourself according to the rules of my household and to any rules that your mate, Dean, as your alpha, sees fit to hold you to.”

“I understand, Alpha,” Michael answered stiffly. “And may I ask what these house rules are?” Castiel turned in his slow pacing, shot a quick look at his fiancé, whose head was down, and counted them out on his fingers, checking every now and then that he still had Michael’s full attention. Michael stared at him as if he were an alien. Dean snorted his coffee, his eyes closed to take in the aroma and the steam. His sense of relief that Cas still seemed to be on the marriage train was swiftly being replaced by uneasiness as the tension in the small room elevated between the two rivals. He and Cas had discussed and agreed upon rules over dinner on their very first evening as a couple. It was a fluid and easy conversation, as the two of them had a remarkably similar idea of how domestic pack life should be established and maintained. The five rules that Cas agreed to came straight out of Dean’s graduate thesis on the subject, but the details were particular to the Winchester Pack, and Dean was very proud of what they both wanted to build. He bit his lip. Right here was where the rubber met the road.

“Rule Number One: Like every member of the Winchester Pack, you are required to make a vow of allegiance to the Alpha. That’s me,” he reminded Michael. “…To submit to my authority. In the case of all Omegas, to submit to my Claim physically, and to obey me in all subsequent matters unless commanded to break public law, ethical standards, your personal code of morality, or in protection of the health and safety of yourself or another person.” Cas kept his voice even, nonconfrontational.

“Rule Number Two: To the extent that you can, keep yourself in healthy, hygienic, balanced, and groomed condition. Care for yourself, both your body and your spirit, is your own responsibility. Negligence or deliberately causing harm to yourself will not be tolerated. Any time you need help in this regard, you need only ask. Omegas are not expected to fulfill their Balance or regulatory requirements on their own.

“Rule Number Three: Show respect and obeisance for every wolf who stands above you in rank in the pack, and show consideration and give assistance and protection to every wolf who stands below you in rank. A little respect and a little kindness toward one another go a long way. We are a family, and we put family before all others. Always. Disrespect, bullying, and bratty behavior will lead to a swift punishment every time.” Michael’s face flattened as the Alpha spoke, but he stood statue-still and listened carefully.

“Rule Number Four: Show care for the property of the Pack. Do not behave destructively. Do not cause undue damage where it can be avoided. Keep our home clean, tidy, and well-appointed so that it may be a home to us all.

“Rule Number Five: Do not lie. Do not withhold information. Do not prevaricate or deliberately cause deception of any kind in any way. Do not manipulate. Ask for what you want directly, and your requests will be given full consideration. Your needs are important, because you, Michael, are important to this pack.”

Cas turned back and faced Michael whose face had grown dark. Dean wanted to warn him off, but
he knew better. If Michael was going to throw a tantrum, maybe better to go ahead and draw it out of him.

“Oh, is that all?” the Omega snapped.

“No, Michael. Those are the Pack Winchester standing house rules that every member must adhere to. Dean and I talked them out and enumerated them together. Each Omega and each Submissive can expect to have others set by their Top. You will be expected to follow all of the rules that apply to you, and I trust Dean to communicate the remaining appropriate rules to you at the appropriate time.”

Dean cut in. He felt Cas should know where they stood in reference to his rules. “I’ve given him his first already, Castiel. He’s got a temper on him, and it’s something we’ll have to work on together.”

Cas nodded and addressed Michael again. “The house rules can be simplified to: Be obedient, be safe, be respectful, be neat, and be truthful. They are easy to remember in that light. Have you any questions?”

“Just one. Do you want me to cram them up your ass all at once or one at a time?”

“Damnit, Michael!” Dean placed himself in front of the Omega and held the back of his neck with a firm hand. Michael ignored the stirrings of his Omega deep within him, and he snarled at Dean.

Castiel didn’t look perturbed, but Dean was embarrassed and angry. Cas ignored the Omega and spoke softly to Dean instead. “I’m going to get the luggage from the car so that you can both change before we leave. I’ll wait in the hall until you’ve finished with him. Just poke your head out when you’re ready.” Cas kissed Dean on the cheek and stepped out, letting the door close. Dean turned to face Michael and found him in tears again.

“I thought you were going to back me up?!” He sounded utterly betrayed.

“I said I’d back you up if you didn’t act like a dick! That was a DICK move, Michael.” Dean let go of Michael’s neck and stormed away from him, too pissed to touch him just now. “He’s bending over backward to bring you into the Pack and you tell him to… What the fuck?! Seriously?!”

“Bending over backward?! Fuck it, I’m not an afterthought! Am I? I thought you were different, but you’re just like the rest of them! I mean it, Dean, he can take his vow of obedience and shove it up his ass! I’m not joining this fucking pack!”

Dean watched him storm about, kicking things and swiping items off the counters. It was quite a tantrum. When Michael took a breath, Dean broke in. “What works on you Michael? I can just keep taking swings until I get your Omega where you need it to be, but in the end, he’s Alpha.”

“And what about you? Did he defeat you too ‘because he’s Alpha’? Michael was crying in earnest. He couldn’t stop, and he didn’t know what he was feeling, just that he hated it.
“He didn’t defeat me. He cares for me. He listens to me, just like he’ll listen to you as soon as you start acting like an adult and not a four-year-old. Tantrums are not a good look on you and they never work on Castiel.” Most of the words were drivel, Dean knew, but he needed Michael’s Omega homed in on his alpha’s voice. Michael was in a full Omega freefall, and he needed an alpha to hoist him out again.

“So then, you’re gonna strap me into submission? It won’t work. It never works. Call my Pop and ask.”

“No, this isn’t to get you to comply, not directly at least. That’s your decision. This is just standard consequences. You break a rule, there’s a price. And we’re really consistent, Michael. There’s always going to be a price. What you said to my fiancé just now? That was rude and disrespectful. It embarrassed me, and it should embarrass you, too. You’re better than that. You broke my only rule to you so far by losing your temper and being a jerk in a tense situation where all you had to do was listen. He’s not expecting miracles, man. He knows it’s gonna take time.”

Dean gestured to the side of the bed with the belt. “Bend over. Let’s get this done.”

Michael didn’t move for a moment, so Dean followed up, his eyes red-rimmed and earnest. “You want some trust between us? This will help. I swear. You can trust that I’ll never take a punishment too far. I’ll never harm you, and I will deliver what’s proportional to the misbehavior. You can trust me not to let you get out of control, not to let you get away with bad behavior that will tear you down inside. I’m gonna take good care of you Michael. Right now, you don’t even recognize your own Omega, but you need to. You’ve shut it out, and that’s why you’re miserable. Now, get yourself into position, or I’ll put you there.”

“Why you and not him? I didn’t say it to you.”

Dean side-eyed him for a moment. “Did you want a response from him, Michael?”

“I didn’t say it to you!” Michael insisted petulantly.

“He knows you were trying to provoke him, and I’ll bet that confrontation is coming – soon, no doubt. But for now, your behavior is my responsibility, and because he’s only your Alpha indirectly until you’ve pledged to him he’s giving me the chance to help you before he has to step in.” Dean took hold of Michael’s upper arm and guided him into position bent over the bed. Michael didn’t resist. Maybe he was in shock. Dean wanted to believe that a part of Michael knew he needed this. “That’s not to say that he won’t ever be the one to punish you, but now’s maybe not the time.”

Dean’s mind was aswirl with assessments, skimming rapidly over Michael’s body and through his emotions.

“Drop ‘em, Omega. In this Pack, we don’t ever spank over clothing.”

Michael’s hands slowly took hold of either side of his scrubs and pushed them down his hips. He put his head into his crossed arms and stood still. “Very good. I need you to count them out for me. I’d like to try for a Release, but if it doesn’t happen, we’ll stop when you’re done anyway. I’ll know when it’s enough. Trust me, babe. I’m good at this.”

Dean touched Michael’s lower back to ground him and then brought down the first stroke.

“One,” Michael responded on cue. Dean kept the strikes at a medium strength level. As an Omega, Michael could be expected to take quite a bit, but Dean didn’t know his tolerance yet. They worked their way up to ten without a Release. Michael sobbed out his counts, and his legs trembled with his crying. Dean kept watch over him through their bond. He found Michael’s emotions a whirlwind of
confusion. He was remorseful and scared, angry and penitent. Mostly, he was ashamed, but a wave of pride kept sweeping over and swamping the more vulnerable emotions. Dean kept it up until the waves of shame and pride faded and the remorse and penitence took over. Michael was sobbing an apology over and over, still dutifully counting the strokes. “19!” he cried. “20!” His body Released right at the stroke of 20, and Dean dropped the belt.

“Shhh, baby. We’re all done. You’re all right now. You did great. C’mere.” Dean worked himself and Michael up onto the bed and let Michael lie on top of him and cry. “It’s okay. I’ve got you now. I’m not ever going to let you go, sweet Omega.”

“Why do I feel this way, Dean?” Michael sobbed, clinging to the alpha. “I hate being Omega! It’s not right for me. I can’t…” He couldn’t continue speaking, so he shoved the knot of tangled emotions through the Mating-bond and into Dean’s lap in a twisted pile. The demand was clear, ‘Help me know what this is. Help me, alpha.’

“You’re all right, really.” Dean sifted through the messy pile and found nothing alarming. He pulled at one particular strand and fed it back to Michael. “This is anger. You’re mad about how little control you’ve had over this whole situation, right? Baby, we’re not taking your power away. We’re just giving you the structure you need to thrive. You get a say in this Pack. I swear. Check through the bond if you want. I’m not lying.”

He moved on. “This one is relief. I don’t know. You tell me, maybe relief that your Omega got a steady hand for a change? When’s the last time someone did that for you? Outside of sex, I mean.” Michael just held Dean tighter. “Baby, everything you’re feeling is perfectly normal. You’re scared and ashamed of yourself, and your ass hurts, but all of that will get better with time. I’ve got you now. If you can’t trust Alpha, then at least don’t be a jerk to him, and we’ll work on it. Trust me. Focus on me.”

Dean hugged him tightly and nuzzled the top of his head. “I gotta say, switching between being your alpha and being your Submissive might just give me whiplash, but it’s a trip, you know? I think I’m going to love the unpredictability of you, my friend.” He lifted Michael’s face and kissed his tears away, looking into his clear green eyes. The gold rim was gone. Michael looked very young and sad.

“You ready? It’s not really a long drive from here, not compared with starting from Dallas. We’ll take breaks. You and I both need it to keep our butts from hating us. One rule you haven’t heard yet,” Dean worked them both to sitting and kept his arm around his mate. “More a policy than a rule. When it comes to spanked backsides, the rule is, if you earn it, you gotta sit on it. Trust me. Focus on me.”

Michael chuckled sadly, snuggling his face into Dean’s chest and scenting him. The alpha scent – the Mate scent – helped. “Come on, Michael. Let’s get dressed.”

They hadn’t even made it out of the parking lot when Castiel, in the shotgun position, commented without looking up from his phone. “That bite isn’t going to scar, you know. Alphas don’t take to scarring the way betas and Omegas do.”

“Well then, I’ll just have to keep putting it back every time it heals, won’t I?” Michael snarked from the back seat, fitting his headphones over his ears and squirming in his seat. Dean rolled his eyes and stepped on it. It was going to be a long drive home.

Chapter End Notes
I've got today and tomorrow both off work. I'm pretending there's no laundry or shopping that needs doing.

I hope you liked the flashback with Cas' mother. It's the first one I've done that wasn't nearly as long as the current narrative text it's meant to introduce. Restraint is something I'm working on.
Chapter Summary

Road-trips are supposed to be fun, right? ...And Gabriel.

Chapter Notes

In case you were wondering what Gabriel Novak does for a living.

This one's shortish, but it feels complete to me. There's no smut, but it's got some new meat and opens a new section of the story that I've been sitting on.

Thanks again for all the support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN:

Castiel climbed the stairs to his brother’s old childhood room. He knew Gabriel would be there. His brother hadn’t entered the room he’d shared with his mate since the accident. Cas slipped in quietly and then worked himself gently behind the curled figure that sat rocking back and forth on the mattress. Castiel leaned against the massive headboard and wrapped his legs around his brother’s grief-stricken body, pulling him in to rest against Castiel’s chest; embracing him with as much of himself as he could, including the Claim-bond that still chimed strong and true between the two brothers.
Gabriel allowed himself to be moved however the Alpha liked, nestling his face into his brother’s chest and weeping shamelessly. Castiel let his anger with their mother fade to a slow simmer and focused on holding Gabriel. He needed to get Gabriel through this. The Omega wasn’t going to be able to do it alone. Castiel ran gentle fingers through his blond hair and whispered meaningless nothings at him: “I know, sweet one. I know. I’m here. I’m not going to leave you.” They didn’t mean a goddamned thing. Nothing could fix Gabriel. He was too broken.

Two years. They’d only had two years together. True-Mates had never been so perfect for each other. She was witty and brash, too clever with her tongue even for Gabriel to keep up. She could snap out an insult that left the receiver flummoxed for days trying to work it out. And she was beautiful and sleek. She made Gabriel look like a troll, he’d often lamented with pride in his eyes. Gabriel had worshiped her like she’d built the earth with her bare hands, just for him. Maybe she had.

And they’d waited to start a family – had only recently decided it was time to try for a pup. Gabriel glowed. Marina glowed. Castiel had shamefully burned with envy to see their happiness. That kind of bond, it seemed, wasn’t for the likes of Cas Novak. Now there was nothing. No pup. No mate. No chance ever to mate again, although Gabriel wouldn’t have been one to take a second chance if it was offered. He was done. He’d had his perfect, and now it was gone. All that was left for him was the grieving.

NOW:

“You wanted to see me, alpha?”

“Come on in, Sam. Have a seat,” Bobby stood and gestured Sam into one of the visitor’s chairs in his office. “I want to get your take on the shit-fest in Dallas. You get a chance to read over it all yet?”

“Yes, I did.” Sam sat forward in his chair, attentive, sweeping his hair back from his eyes. “I don’t like how this all went so bad over the last year, and nobody noticed. I have a couple of conclusions where we can go from here.”

Bobby nodded, listening. Sam’s ability to jump straight to the problem, weed through the details, and come up with practical solutions made him just about Bobby’s favorite go-to fix-it guy. “What bothers me most is not that it went screwy, but that no one raised any alarms.” Sam rifled through the pages on his lap.

“Henrickson had to know,” he continued. “He had to be lying to us on the conference calls and all that. Even if he didn’t know why or who was behind the mess, there’s no way he wasn’t aware of it. And he deliberately hid the problems from making it into his reports. Look, see, here’s the status report from last quarter; there are no customer complaints reported at all. That’s just ridiculous. Even the best public service facility gets complaints. But they’re not entering them into their system. That’s on Victor. We had to go digging into the website’s database ourselves to find them. And you know what we found? Hundreds. Hundreds of complaints that were never logged into Dallas’ local system, so they don’t show up on the reports.”

Sam flopped the report onto Bobby’s desk in disgust. “I don’t know if he was worried about his job, or of looking bad, or if somebody was holding something over him. Maybe he’s just that incompetent. Whatever it was, we need to redesign the system so that online complaints come straight to headquarters, not through the local facilities first. And we need better oversight of the
Directorships at all three locations. Anybody checking up on Vegas and Boston yet?” Bobby just grunted. He was working on it.

“Also, you know Charlie’s pretty much our whole IT staff? What with that AND running her coordinator position, it’s too much for one person. We have a robust network, but even a good one requires maintenance. Maybe when we were just one site she could swing it, but not now. She can’t do it all. She’s got all the systems integrated and automated, and they all run through here for control, but it’s too much. Not even Charlie can handle that much.”

“Sam, I want you to go to Dallas. I want you to lead the cleanup crew and organize an audit. We’ve got to fix this mess now. Alpha’s orders. You saw the medical pics of Henrickson after Cas got through with him, right? We can’t let that happen to anyone else. This stops. Right now.”

“Um, I’ll go, alpha, if you need me to, but I was thinking. I’d like to send Cole instead. I think he’s up to it, and I believe it would be really good for him to see that place; work out how to fix it.”

“You wanna send a probational newbie who’s already on your boss’s shitlist to fix this clusterfuck?”

“He’s not a newbie, and he’s not on probation anymore. Bobby, I just think, nothing can demonstrate to him how to perform his job right better than witnessing firsthand how things go when you do it wrong. And I want to give him the opportunity to redeem himself fully. He’ll never get that while he’s here under my wing.”

“I don’t know, Sam. It’s a big risk. You’re putting yourself on the line just going to bat for him.”

“Forget about me. Look, send Pamela Barnes and Rufus Turner with him. Between the three of them, they’ve got the whole gamut of screwed up issues covered, and they’ll watch out for each other. It’s not that I don’t want to go…I mean, I don’t, but that’s just because I like it here. If you tell me I’m going, I’ll pack my bags today. You and Benny know you can count on me, but I think…”

Sam paused and frowned, thinking.

“Spit it out, beta.”

“I’ve been invited to join the new pack, Castiel’s Pack. I think I’m going to accept, and I’d like to be there when they form it, while it’s finding its feet. I kind of want to be in on the ground floor, if you know what I mean.”

Bobby took it in for a minute, then he smiled warmly at Sam. “Of course. I understand. I’ll talk it over with Lafitte, and we’ll figure something out. You mentioned anything to him about Cole yet?”

Sam shook his head.

“Not yet. I wanted to run it by you first. The way I see it, if you say no, it’s no. I didn’t want to waste his time.”

Bobby looked up at Sam from where he’d been scanning through the reports. “You know Benny outranks me, right?” There was a canny, amused light in his eye.

“On paper he does, but I’ve got eyes, alpha. You run this place. Anyone who doesn’t know that is blind.”
Dean checked through the rearview mirror that Michael was distracted inside his headphones. He appeared to be asleep with his head tilted back along the seat. He glanced across the bench at his fiancé and nudged his thigh, getting his attention.

“Have you thought about how to issue an engagement announcement? Or when?” he asked Castiel tentatively.

Castiel took a moment to make the jump in focus from the status report on his cell phone to Dean’s question. When he did, he shut off his phone and set it on the seat beside himself. “What do you think, Dean? You’re the one with all the social media and public relations expertise.”

Dean scoffed. “Expertise? No, no, I’m just naturally charming and charismatic. Don’t confuse being adored by the public with skills at P.R.” Dean expected to be called on his deliberate stifling of everything weighing on him, but Alpha said nothing about it.

The only reaction was a leveled look that clearly said his ‘Bullshit detector’ had been activated, but his eyes swam with pleasure. He leaned far across the bench seat and kissed Dean’s cheek before returning to his own seat. “All right Mr. Adored, what do you suggest in your limited expertise, then?” Cas played in.

Dean grinned. He was beautiful when he smiled, and Castiel realized sadly how much time they’d lost – time that they could have been sharing moments of gentle happiness just like this one. “I say let the real expert do it. Give it to Billie to manage.”

“Done. I’ll send her an email right now; tell her to propose a timeline for release and recommendations for how best to break the story.” He began pecking out a message on his phone. “Will we be a breaking story, Dean? I’m never sure how much anyone cares about our private goings-on, or why.”

“Yes, it’s going to be a big story, my love.” Dean glanced at him, reached for his hand, and pulled it to his lips for a kiss.

“BLECH!! Get a room!”

Cas’ face hardened as he pulled his hand back, but Dean laughed and reached over the back of the seat for a fist bump from his mate.

“It’s probably already out by now anyway.” Dean picked up the thread from before they’d been rudely interrupted. “Everyone at home knows, and we’re not exactly leak-proof. Timing this may be moot, but we need to decide how to respond to the rumors. You ready for the media attention? We could deny and dodge for a while if you want.” Dean kept his eyes on the road, giving Cas space to think.

“I’m ready when you are. I can’t think of any reason to deny it. I’m proud to be your fiancé, Dean.”

“Kill me now. Please, God,” from the backseat at a peevish mumble.

“That’s enough, Michael. You’ve made your point.” Dean met his eye through the mirror, sternly. A little snark could be awesome, but a whole road trip of it would kill them all.

“Yes, Mother,” grumbled Michael. Cas shifted as if he was about to turn and lambaste the Omega in the back, but Dean stilled him with a hand to his thigh and a slight shake of his head. They’d get there.

Patience, Grasshopper.
“Holy shit! Have you two seen what’s on YouTube?!” Michael thrust his phone up to the front seat and sat forward to reach. Dean listened but didn’t try to watch the video. Castiel focused on the screen as Michael hit the play button. It was the rest stop in Texas. The two Alphas could be seen manhandling their charges across the sidewalk and sweating up a storm, shouting to each other. Michael’s and Dean’s injuries made obvious bloodstains on their torn clothing.

“Aww, you carried him out like a sweet little cub…” Michael watched from an angle he hadn’t been privy to before.

“Are there more of these?” asked Castiel.

“Yes, Michael, you’re very beautiful.” Cas deadpanned, then he turned to Dean. “Do you think this should change our plan to announce the engagement. We might just confuse people what with two Matings and a marriage all at once.”

“Nah. They’ll figure it out. Kind of crazy though, isn’t it? I’m nearly thirty and you’re…old.” Cas spluttered in indignation. “What are the chances we all hit dead center at the same time? Have you turned up the prayer circles or something?”

“You know I’m not religious, Dean, and I’ll show you old.” Cas’ Dom voice ended on a throw down at Dean’s Sub and was rewarded with a shiver from the driver.

Michael growled, looking up from his phone. There wasn’t any brat-natured snark in his tone this time. His wolf was responding to Castiel in a very real way. He meant business. No one was allowed to speak to his Sub in that tone; no one, but Michael.

Castiel and Dean both looked around. Michael’s lip was fixed in a snarl, and he was centered on the long bench seat, his eyes golden and staring down the threat before him. Dean shot a glance at Cas to see if he should pull over. If it was going to go down right now, they couldn’t do it in a moving vehicle. But Cas presented his flat palms in a calming gesture. He didn’t defer by dropping his eyes, but neither did he challenge Michael’s Claim, and his eyes stayed blue. “My apologies, Omega,” he soothed. “We haven’t established boundaries yet, and that was premature. You have a Claim on your Submissive. I will respect and honor that Claim until we’ve built a foundational structure of boundaries. Please forgive my trespassing.”

A tense few seconds passed. Dean scanned the shoulder for a clear, grassy space. Then Michael released a long breath and ducked his head into his hands. “Yes. Boundaries would be good. How about we start,” he lifted his head and focused back on Cas but without the golden tone to his irises, “…With you don’t get to talk to him like THAT, and you don’t touch his ass. Ever.”

Cas huffed gently. “I’m afraid that’s an unacceptable restriction. Have you SEEN his ass?

“GUYS! Really?! Right now?! I’m driving. You’re gonna make us crash!”

“We’re just having a calm, adult conversation, Dean. Mind your own business,” Cas shot at him with authority.

“My own…?” Dean stared at him in disbelief long enough that Cas jumped to grab the wheel.

“I’ve got it!” Dean shoved him back to his side.
“I have seen his ass,” Michael picked up boldly. “It’s a beautiful shape; firm and round – so spankable, so fuckable. Thing is, I haven’t seen it any color but purple yet.” Michael continued, utterly affronted while Dean blushed and scrunched down just a little in his seat, “Because of you, Alpha, I had to Claim my mate while he was covered in someone else’s fucking marks. My Mate. MY Submissive. NOT YOURS.” Michael’s voice was controlled, but very firm, assertive, nearly aggressive.

He went on. “What gives you the right to claim anything but his place in the Pack beneath you and the ring on his finger? He steps out of line, you just let me know, and I’ll take care of it. You two can have your stupid domestic marriage: do laundry, make grocery lists, crochet effing curtains together for all I care, but keep your fucking hands off my mate.”

Cas responded in-kind, calm but firm, “The word ‘marriage’ connotes a conjugal relationship, Michael. I will be willing to offer you some allowances as his mate, but I will not cede all sexual and Dominant contact with Dean to you. That is off the table. Period.”

“Oh well, gee, thanks for the scraps.” Then Michael addressed Dean. “You see? I told you it’d be like this. He gets whatever the fuck he wants, and I get whatever dribbles off of you two. This is Bullshit!”

“It’s not scraps!” Dean insisted. “And I’m not a rump roast for the dogs to fight over! Jesus!” Castiel was about to speak up in his own defense, but Dean put a finger in his face and forestalled him. “I want a month with him, just us; just Michael and me – before his Eval., before his training. We need it to establish our footing and get ourselves solid. I can’t believe you would try to start divvying me up like Thanksgiving leftovers on the day after we Mated. What’s wrong with you, man?”

Cas looked down and pulled both lips in between his teeth. He glanced up at Dean without lifting his head. “I’m sorry, Dean. You’re right.” Dean kicked his head back slightly to nudge Cas into offering Michael an apology too. Castiel’s eyes flicked back at his fellow Dominant, and he sighed.

“Michael, I’m sorry. Dean’s right. You two deserve some time alone.” He sat subdued in the tension surrounding him. Michael didn’t respond other than to scoot back over behind Dean and resume watching the landscape fly by with his headphones fixed back in place, shifting occasionally on his sore backside.

Cas offered, “You may use my suite, if you like. I’m moving April to the manor when we get back, so the suite will be empty. It’s much bigger and more comfortable than your own rooms there, Dean. You would also be welcome at home. There’s an H/R suite as well as the guard house, or the guest house… or the pool house.”

“Fuck me,” whispered Michael in a perfect Gordan Ramsay.

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Gabriel was a sneaky bastard when he wanted to be. Dressed innocuously with his ballcap pulled down low, he worked his way down the damp, dark concrete-walled hallway. He kept his flashlight off and darted past the infrequent lightbulbs spaced out along the long corridor, checking every door that he passed and scanning the ceiling for cameras. Most of the doors were locked and still. A few opened to empty, barren, medieval concrete cells with grated drains in the floor and dripping walls. Some had moldy flat mattresses on the floor. Others had nothing.
What a fucking hellhole.

He couldn’t hear anything but dripping water and a buzz from the open bulbs, but he knew there were people here. He’d been following this lead long enough to be sure. Above him, several floors up was a state of the art Lupin Facility, shiny, glossy, and pristine, boasting all the amenities a wolf might need to get their fix and get their head screwed on right. But underneath…

This is where the unclaimed wound up; those who had no pack, who were brought in shivering, starving, lost to their Heat and the buildup of omesol and cortisol; those who were vulnerable and alone; those who wouldn’t be missed. Gabriel had watched Gordon’s men bring them in with promises of food and comfort, support, Balance, and Release only to have them disappear without a trace a few days later.

There was money to be made in the sex-slave trade – lots of money; significantly more than anyone could make by offering training classes and scening. Trembling, frightened, drugged-up Omegas made the perfect slaves. Keep them on the right regimen of drugs and they stayed compliant and wet, ready for anything, in a permanent Heat state. Add in the high tolerance for pain and the fast healing, and it was a gold mine.

Gabriel used his tiny camera to grab an image of an empty cell as he passed it. Empty wouldn’t bring a conviction, though. He needed to find the people. The prisoners. And it wasn’t a conviction by a jury of their peers that Gabriel chased anyway. He pulled up sharply at the sound of approaching feet, tucking himself back into a doorway. The latch didn’t budge, and he had nowhere to go without catching their attention. He prayed his scent-blockers were still strong enough to cover the smell of his adrenalin and cortisol. The door jamb was deep and shaded from light, and Gabriel used every trick he knew to keep himself utterly still and silent.

Three figures, two walking and one being dragged, approached and passed him, looking neither left nor right. They had no reason to believe anyone else was down here with them. “She’ll sleep it off in an hour. Get Gordon. He wanted to take a look at this one.”

They unlocked one of the cell doors and tossed the limp figure inside, then closed and re-locked it before beating a hasty retreat. It seemed as if even the dregs of the earth wanted to spend as little time down here as possible.

Gabriel waited for them to leave and then crept silently to the cell where the small figure had been cast. He ran his hands over it, checking the lock and latch. He risked using his flashlight long enough to work the lock open with his pick, the light held tight in his teeth. The door swung loudly on its hinges, and Gabriel moved fast. He put his flashlight back into his pocket, slipped his arms underneath her tiny frame and lifted her as if she weighed nothing. She practically weighed nothing, but her dead weight made her awkward to carry. Gabriel chose the fireman’s carry so he’d have a hand free and began picking his way back the way he’d come, toward the back of the building, not the front. He and Gordon shouldn’t be running into each other this way. He moved quickly but took a moment to check the girl’s pulse as he went. She had a strong heartbeat. That was good but not unexpected. Sex-slaves didn’t sell for much if they were dead.

Gabriel worked his way methodically back up three floors in the dark. This side was unguarded. Apparently, the security team didn’t think anyone would be hunting for a way INTO the dungeon, and hadn’t thought to secure it; either that or there were hidden cameras that Gabriel’s scoping had missed, in which case he was a dead man. He made it to the garbage chute and moved as fast as he could. He eased the limp form in past the lip and let her go, letting gravity slide her body to his partners waiting at the bottom. He listened for the gentle thump and was just about to step onto the seat himself, when a heavy hand came down upon his shoulder and arrested his motion.
“This area is off-limits to clients, Omega. That was explained to you at orientation. Come with me.”

Gabriel forced himself to breathe normally, or at least, in no more of a panic than an Omega on his way to an ass-beating might be under normal conditions. How much did this guy know? Had he seen Gabriel with the girl? Had he seen Gabriel drop her to his compadres? He tried to figure a way to warn them, but there was no way to get his phone out this close to the alpha guard. He’d have to trust them to figure it out and get her to safety without him. He wished he’d stashed his camera in her pocket before letting her fall. If that was found on him, if they checked the picture files…

“In here,” gestured the guard.

Gabriel was ushered into one of the punishment rooms. This facility had several – more than were warranted by its size. The idea made Gabriel physically ill. At the far end, Gordon stood leaning against a heavy steel spanking bench, inspecting his fingernails. Gabriel adopted his best defense, an obstreperous swagger and smirk. He greeted the alpha as if nothing could possibly be amiss.

“Hey, alpha! Nice digs you got here. I haven’t been in this one yet. Damn! Is that a St. Andrew’s with spikes?” Gabriel affected loud and obnoxious like a cloak and prayed hard to the Universe.

Gordon looked up at him with distaste and scowled. “On your knees, Omega.” The command came from a place that knew its own power and expected to be obeyed. Gabriel dropped where he stood, spreading his knees wide and leaning his head to one side to bare his throat. His gaze dropped to the floor. “You were not in class today. Explain yourself, Maurice.”

“I have no excuse, alpha. I played hooky. My ass was sore from yesterday, and I just couldn’t make myself go through it today.”

“You ass was sore?” Gordon stood and walked slowly toward the Omega. Gabriel kept his eyes trained on the alpha’s feet without moving his head and listened for the sound of the guard by the door. Was he still there? Probably. It would be unlike Gordon to leave himself unguarded. “And you thought racking up more misconduct would help it to recover? I thought you were smarter than that. Hmm, guess not. Peter, I think our Omega miscreant needs a stronger lesson. Take care of that for me, will you please?”

“Of course, alpha,” the guard at the door replied.

Gabriel’s jackal leveled an unimpressed look at the Omega. He’d about had enough of taking punishments that didn’t take him where he needed to go – punishments he hadn’t even had the fun of earning. (Just go along with me here, please Buddy, just one more), Gabriel entreated. He needed to cave fast so he could get through the punishment and get locked back in his room before Gordon and his goons discovered the missing prisoner. Gabe was under no illusions that they’d figure out it was him once they put their heads together.

Gordon strode out and the alpha guard picked Gabriel up by the scruff of his neck and began shackling him face-first to the St. Andrew’s cross that Gabe had spotted when he entered. Crap. This was gonna hurt. The spikes weren’t long, but they were everywhere. There was nowhere to rest his body without a sharp tang of metal digging in and sending a trickle of blood down his skin.

Anyone who thought a device like this belonged anywhere but a dark ages torture chamber was certifiable. Even Castiel would never own something like this. It was evil.

“This is my favorite one, Maurice. I’m glad to know you have such good taste in furniture. You comfy?”

“Let’s do it,” mumbled Gabriel.
He’d not had to fake his submission at all against the onslaught of the whip and that godforsaken cross. Tossed carelessly back into his own well-appointed room, Gabriel cursed the damned thing and pushed himself off his cot with shaking and bleeding arms. They’d eventually get around to sending medical to check him over, but he needed to be gone by then. He needed to disappear, but he was bleeding enough to leave a trail, and that would complicate matters. Gabe began ripping his bedsheets into wide strips.

He didn’t have anything in his room that he couldn’t abandon, having planned not to return to it when he left this morning, so he worked the lock open with his pick and checked carefully for guards. There were none. Gordon needed to keep up appearances with the real “clients” that he was running an above-board training institution, and goons stalking the halls gave off a bad vibe. Bad for business. The cameras were another matter, but Gabe had them wired into his own feed. He hoped he’d jacked all of them. It would only take one. The empty hallway worked for Gabriel who slipped out of his room, straight into the bathroom next door and through his emergency escape route like a black cat at midnight. Or like a jackal.

A really fucking stealthy jackal.

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Castiel’s phone pinged with a text message and then another and another in short succession. He opened the first and sat straight up in his seat in alarm, skimming through the rest of them as fast as he could read. “How close are we to Oklahoma City, Dean!”

“We’re close, Cas. ‘Bout twenty miles south of Norman. OKC is just past there. What’s up?”

“It’s Gabriel. He’s in some kind of trouble. The team says they lost contact with him and they need to take off to make the rescue.” Cas turned wide eyes on Dean. “Did you know he was on a job in Gordon’s place? What rescue? What the hell’s going on?”

“Dunno, man. Are you sure it’s Gordon’s? OKC prolly has more than one hellhole in it. He could be anywhere.”

“No, it’s Gordon’s training school. They’re clear about that. How long until we can get to him?”

Dean called back over his shoulder, “Michael, use your phone to navigate me to the…shit what’d he name it? Fuck, just do a google search on Lupin training facilities in Oklahoma City. I’ll know it when I hear it, and take me there. You got it?”
“I got it, hold on, bad signal. Give me a minute.” Michael held his phone aloft to try to increase its reception. “What’s going on?”

The front seat ignored him as Castiel typed frantically into the phone, then gave up and hit ‘dial’.

“Ash!” he shouted. “What’s going on? Have you got him? Is he safe?”

…

“No, no, we’re on our way, but we can’t get there that fast. It’s what…how much longer Dean?”

“I don’t know! Maybe forty-five minutes? Michael, you got anything?”

Castiel returned to his conversation. “We’re maybe forty-five minutes south of you right now, Ash. What do you need?” Cas listened intently, his hand to the opposite ear to block out the road noise and help him concentrate. “Yes, get her out of there. Take her straight to Lawrence and call for Bobby and Pam. Can you leave someone to rendezvous with us?”

“Dean,” Michael spoke urgently, but softly to keep from drowning out Castiel’s conversation, leaning forward into Dean’s space. “Is it the OLS? What, the Oklahoma Lupin Society?” he said hesitantly, searching the website for the full name.

“Yeah, that’s it. Navigate me to their main campus. How long?”

“Showing almost sixty miles traveling northwest. It’s outside the city on the other side from where we are now.”

“Find me the fastest route and don’t let me miss any turns.”

“You got it.” Michael hunkered back in the seat to work out the route. He was dying with curiosity, but he knew an emergency when he saw one, and this was his Pack; his Pack in trouble. He didn’t even notice the irony.

“C’mon Gabe, dammit! Check in, you stupid son of a bitch.” Cas was beside himself with worry. He checked and rechecked his phone messages, checked and rechecked that Dean and Michael knew where they were going. “I’m going to kill him when I get hold of him. He did this without telling anyone. Even Bobby didn’t know.” Cas was muttering for Dean’s benefit ostensibly, but he wasn’t really speaking loud enough to be heard. He just needed to keep talking himself through this. He couldn’t lose Gabriel. He couldn’t. Not after everything they’d been through.

Then his phone chirped, and he was on it like a duck on a June bug. “It’s Gabe! He’s out! Dean, he’s sending an address. We need to get there fast, though. He says he’s not secure.”

“Here, give it to me, I’ll put it in my Nav.” Michael reached up and took the phone from Cas, who relinquished it so Michael could grab the address.

It didn’t take long from where they’d worked their way around the main freeways and high traffic. Michael’s directions cut more than ten minutes off the map’s estimate and in no time, Dean slid to a stop in a spray of gravel outside a crusty dive-bar. Gabriel appeared from the bushes nearby and dove into the back seat on top of Michael who couldn’t get out of the way. He pulled the door closed, and Dean floored it.

Untangling themselves, the two Omegas ended up side-by-side, both bloody and filthy, Gabriel panting and sweaty, and Michael wide-eyed with shock.
“You do this often?” he asked the blond Omega.

“All the time,” Gabriel huffed. “Who the fuck are you?”

Chapter End Notes

Love to you and your whole pack!
Chapter Summary

Being drunk makes everyone more congenial. Cas is a hypocrite. Michael reveals a defining kink, and what's Sam doing in the kitchen?

Chapter Notes

I don't even know what this chapter is. It's a bridge, I guess, but it got away from me.

There's a Dub-con near the end. Dean is taken by surprise and hasn't had a chance to weigh in on what Michael's got in store for him. For wolves, what happens is not out of bounds, but it's still not kosher.

The new work schedule is on, so I should be able to get some more writing done in the next couple of days. Hopefully, there will be more substance than appears in this one.

More tags added.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THEN:

“Dad,” called Dean coming into the kitchen. John Winchester looked up from his newspaper. “I need my own room. I can’t do the alpha exercises with him in there. It’s embarrassing.”

“I’m not a rich man, Dean. I don’t have another room to give you.” John folded the paper and set it down. “Why is this such a big deal? Explain it to me. You’ve shared a room with Sam his whole life. You’ve been naked together plenty of times, bathed together, had both your bare asses spanked together. I know you both jack off in there. Please explain why this is so different.”

“Come on, Dad. It’s just different. It’s the knot. It’s weird-looking, and having him there creeps me out. It’s like he’s watching me or something. Can you at least tell him to give me some private time to go through all the exercises alone?”

“I’m not going to do that, son. I want you and Sam to figure this out on your own. You need to understand why it bothers you so much, and then talk to your brother. He may very well present as an alpha too, and then it’s going to be even more important that you know how to work your concerns out with him. It might even be important to him, if he is alpha, to have had a role model to look up to. You know someone had to show you the ropes too, Dean. It’s important to learn control. Those exercises are about more than your knot, alphas learn best by watching older alphas maintaining their own control. He’s your brother. He loves and cares about you. Give him a chance, Dean. I know he’s got your back, just like you do his, and I’d bet he doesn’t think your knot is weird-looking. He probably just sees it as part of you. It’s you he cares about, not your dick.”
“I’m only asking for a little privacy, Dad. That’s not too much to ask,” Dean wheedled.

“You don’t need privacy from your own Pack, Dean. You’re not a monkey. Whatever’s got you feeling uncomfortable in your own skin isn’t about Sam. It’s about you. Now, you know I’m always here to talk things out with you. I know growing into yourself as an alpha is no easy task. God knows, Dean. I know. I’ve been there. But you’ve got to stop looking outside yourself for an answer that you’re only going to find inside. Wolves don’t get embarrassed by their own power. If having Sam around embarrasses you, son, you need to figure out why, and doing the exercises I taught you, with or without your brother in the room, is the best way to explore it all.”

NOW:

Michael couldn’t enter through the employee’s turnstile, so they headed for the main entrance when they got back to The Facility. April was vibrating next to Charlie in the foyer, and when she spotted Castiel, she launched herself toward him with a full-on springboard leap, grabbing on with both arms and both legs and an obnoxiously high-pitched squeal. He caught her under her thighs with a grunt and a chuckle, bending his legs for the extra support. “Easy, Kitten,” he admonished playfully. “I’m getting too old for that kind of thing.” Dean just ‘Mm-hm’d’ loudly enough to be heard and guided Michael around the couple and toward the small assembly of well-wishers for the first of the introductions. Gabriel limped along behind unobtrusively, no longer bleeding, but looking somewhat like a slash-horror victim. Cas had lent him a change of clothes that he wasn’t going to ask Gabe to return.

April wasted no time. She kissed her mate’s face and throat, letting go with her arms, leaning back a bit, and beginning to work at his belt buckle, trusting that he’d hold her up like always. He did. He also leaned in and sucked a bruise into her throat, backing her against the wall under the grand foyer sign and pushing the skirt of her tunic up her thighs with both hands.

“Nope!” interrupted Charlie bravely. There was a reason she was staged out here with April. “Alpha, it’s great to have you home, but you gotta go through that door right there, then walk about forty-five more feet and through the door on the left before you do that. “ALPHA! CASTIEL!” she shouted at him to no avail. Gabriel caught Dean’s eye as he was giving Meg a hug in greeting and gestured. Dean rolled his eyes and walked back to collect the horny couple. He and Gabriel each crooked an arm through one of Cas’ elbows and steered him toward the door that Charlie held open for them. They were lucky it was late enough in the day that the entryway was clear of clientele. The Facility didn’t need Castiel’s antics to end up on the internet no matter how many hours he’d spent away from his mate.

Cas gripped his mate’s ass and continued kissing, sucking, and biting wherever he could latch onto. “Jesus, Castiel,” griped Dean grabbing at his fiancé’s belt loop to keep his pants from hitting the floor while he walked, “Act like you’ve been in public before! This is embarrassing.”

“It’s good to have you back, Dean!” shouted Becky from behind the desk as they rounded the door and headed straight for Cas’ suite.

“Hi, Becky! Bye, Becky.” They made a strange entourage stumbling down the hall. Dean with one arm guiding his future husband, the other holding up his trousers, Gabriel limping and still bleeding a bit, Castiel oblivious to everything but his mate and his hormones. Michael trailing behind them all,
shaking his head in wonder and mild disgust.

They got Cas and April squared away in the bedroom of Castiel’s suite with little trouble and left them there. Then they relinquished custody of Gabriel to a very angry-looking Bobby Singer before heading on to the cafeteria to resume introductions. Dean kept an arm around Michael’s waist through all the fanfare, and nuzzled into him every few minutes, checking his scent and their bond for signs he might be overwhelmed by Dean’s enormous Facility family.

“Jody! I heard you made the big switch! Welcome, my dear,” gushed Dean releasing his mate long enough to give her a massive Winchester hug. He was delighted that one of his best advisors from his undergrad days had joined the staff. He’d been pushing to bring her onboard since she and their head accountant, Donna, Mated a couple of years ago.

God, it felt good to be home.

Sam turned up after Dean and Michael had made a full circuit around the room, and he hugged his brother hard, wrapping him up in his vast embrace. Michael stood awkwardly to the side, waiting and feeling unbalanced while they laughed easily with each other until Dean turned back to him and bathed him in his alpha’s glorious smile.

“Sam, this is Michael Lancet, my mate. Well, Michael Winchester now.”

Sam stuck a hand out and shook Michael’s hand firmly, his grip solid and not remotely confrontational or posturing. “Welcome to the Pack, Michael. It’s great to have you both home.” Sam’s face was warm and open. He exuded genuine welcome, and Michael felt, for the first time, a sense of home from this new place that Dean loved. It almost made him falter, but he caught his voice in time as he thanked Sam, side-eyeing his mate to see if he’d noticed. The smirk of victory on Dean’s face said he had. Michael wasn’t normally given to emotional lapses, but finding a friendly face in the middle of an onslaught like this one, well, it might strike anyone misty. Dean squeezed his wrist.

“Where’s Cas?” Sam looked around.

“Fucking,” responded Michael flatly.

“Ah, right,” Sam didn’t seem surprised or put off.

“That normal for him?” Michael asked Sam.

Sam laughed heartily, “Pretty much. Come on, you two, let’s go talk.”

Gabriel sat naked on Bobby’s exam table, swinging his bloodied legs. Castiel had cleaned him up somewhat in the car, switching places with Michael so that he could work on the wounds while Dean drove, but there were so many, and Gabriel insisted they couldn’t afford to stop long enough to really dress the minor ones.

“You get a chance to check over the Omega girl yet? I assume she made it here already. She’s safe, right?” Gabe chirped.
“Shut up,” Bobby said tersely, stitching up the deep lash marks in Gabriel’s back with a hand gentler than the tones coming out of his mouth. “Whatever you have to say, I don’t want to hear it.”

Gabriel sighed and looked around, wincing when Bobby applied more antiseptic. Several tense minutes went by. “Could you at least tell me how she is?” he tried.

Bobby looked at him fiercely out of the corner of his eye. “She’s alive,” he told the Omega.

For all intents and purposes, Gabriel Novak had no occupation. He was a ward of his brother and had no income, produced no product, answered to no employer, but right now, his ‘not-boss’ was more pissed than Gabriel had ever seen him; pissed enough that even Gabe was cowed.

A little.

Once he was stitched up, cleaned off, bandaged within an inch of his life to resemble a Hollywood mummy, started on the good painkillers and some huge antibiotic horse pills, Gabriel was tucked securely into a clinic bed and told in no uncertain terms that if he left that bed for any reason other than urination or defecation, he’d have what remained of the skin on his back flayed off in inch-wide strips.

“Don’t make me handcuff you. I’ll do it in a heartbeat if I even think you’re going anywhere.”

“Yes, Bobby,” Gabriel answered out loud. To his jackal he said, (As if handcuffs could hold us if we wanted to bolt). The jackal giggled maniacally.

Bobby joined the team in the smaller conference room on the first floor. “Where’s Cas?” he asked, taking his seat.

“Probably still tied,” answered Benny. “He’ll be here when he gets here. I don’t doubt he heard the whole story on the way anyhow.”

Bobby turned his attention to Ash, a small beta-Sub who shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He didn’t like coming out of his hole and making any kind of official appearance where cameras might catch an image of him, but he hadn’t been quick enough to slip back out the door after delivering the girl.

“What happened? I need to know everything.” Bobby’s voice was alpha enough to make Ash even more nervous if that was possible.

Ash recounted awkwardly: how Gabriel approached him with an assignment four days ago, asking him to keep it on the D.L.; how he’d only brought in two other conspirators and made sure no one contacted the team leaders or The Facility connections – at that, Ash glanced at Bobby before ducking his head back down – how Gabe said he’d been secretly scoping Gordon’s place for a long time now, making silent midnight outings to stake it out on his own, only bringing in help when he was ready to move.

Gabriel had entered the OLS claiming to be a lone wolf Omega in need of several days of refresher classes and a Release, telling them his custodial alpha lived too far away to see to his needs. At night, he went searching the place, looking for secret doors and backways, hunting for a way to sneak
harvested Omegas back out again. He’d contacted Ash this morning, and texted him the instructions to gain access to the trash chute – told him to be ready for a rescue.

“That’s pretty much it, alpha. Only, we expected Gabe would be with the girl when she came tumbling down the slide, but he wasn’t. We waited as long as we could, but then we had to scoot. He’s okay, right? They didn’t tar and feather him?”

“He’s fine right now, but he might not be after Castiel or I get through with him. Depends on which of us gets to him first. Thanks for the tar and feather idea.”

“Can I go now, Bobby? You know I don’t like being out in the lights like this.”

Bobby nailed him to his chair with his eyes. “He ever pulls a stunt like this again, Ash, and you don’t call me, you’re going to share equal parts in whatever punishment he earns himself. Am I understood, beta?”

“Yes, alpha. Loud and clear, Sir.”

“Go on, get out of here.”

Ash scuttled past Castiel making his way through the door. Cas barely got a “Hey!” out before the beta was gone. He turned his bewildered gaze to the others.

Pam stepped in. “He didn’t know enough to keep him here, Castiel. We’ll get the details from Gabriel, who’s fine, by the way.” She answered the question before Cas could ask it.

“Not after I get finished with him,” Cas responded darkly.

“Yeah, apparently, there’s a line for that,” said Benny, barely raising his gaze from where his cheek rested against his palm.

Cas raised his eyebrows at Benny. “The line starts and ends with me. I’m his Alpha and his brother. Nobody else touches him. And I’ll remind everyone in this room that Gabriel’s presence here and the reasons behind his presence here are confidential as always. I’ve already asked Charlie to erase video evidence of his arrival onsite – all the usual protocols. He is visiting this Facility because his Alpha brother works here and brought him here for medical care, and that is the only reason.” Cas swept his gaze across every pair of eyes to be sure his message sank in sufficiently, pausing with an intimidating presence.

“Have a seat, Alpha.” Bobby gestured Cas to his place at the head of the table opposite Benny. “It’s good to have you back. It’s been a crazy few days, and we need to catch each other up. Congratulations, by the way. We’re – all of us,” Bobby looked around and included the rest of them, “– very happy for you and Dean. And that’s sincere, my friend. You both deserve to be happy.”

“Thank you, Bobby. It’s been a long time coming. Too long, no doubt. But I want to assure you all that Dean and I will do our level best to keep our private lives out of the board room and out of all Facility business affairs. I should tell you that, as Dean is also newly Mated, he’ll be taking a month-long leave of absence. He is, however, officially transferred back to Kansas for good. So, there’s that. I guess, uh, mission accomplished, so to speak.” Castiel blushed as he wound his little speech up, but he couldn’t stop smiling.

“You big sap!” teased Meg happily.
Castiel didn’t stay long in the conference room. They debriefed, briefly, then tabled the rest until tomorrow. It was late, and everyone was a bit overwhelmed. Cas stopped by the clinic to check on Gabriel. He didn’t stay long there either. Gabriel wouldn’t look at him, and Cas wasn’t ready for the discussion they needed to have. He kept his voice low and nonconfrontational, but there remained a pall over the air between them. He let Gabe know that the issue wasn’t closed, but that he was beyond relieved to have his big brother safely home. He kept a hand on Gabriel’s shoulder, touching his flesh where his clinic gown had pulled down. They both needed the touch.

“Just one thing, though. Everyone in this business knows me, which means most of them know you. What if you’d been recognized? What would we have done if they’d really hurt you? God, Gabe. I couldn’t live through that.”

“I’m sorry, little brother. I didn’t mean to scare you. Thanks for coming for me. But can we please do this later? Please, Castiel.”

“Sure, Gabriel. Get some sleep.” Castiel squeezed his shoulder gently then turned the light out as he left, making sure there would be a guard on the door. He wouldn’t put it past Gabe to sneak out before dawn. He was a sneaky bastard when he wanted to be.

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Castiel made a beeline back to his suite. As he’d guessed, they were all there, sitting around the kitchenette table, each with a shot glass in front of them and the bottle already half-empty. They raised a drunken toast to him as he entered, proving right off that they weren’t aiming for moderation, a rousing chorus of, “TO THE ALPHA!” to which he bowed gallantly. Even Michael had raised his glass. He was already inebriated, no doubt, thought Castiel.

April slid off her chair and onto the small pillow that he kept beside his chair to protect her knees, offering the space to her Dom. He walked up behind her and picked her up under her arms and sat in the chair, snuggling her onto his lap, smiling and reaching for a glass.

“Welcome home, Winchesters!” said Sam, a bit too loudly, and someone refilled his glass.

“No, not yet, Sammy. Gonna go back home tomorrow, start grabbing our stuff and moving it into the big house. Then we’ll be home.” Dean was already slurring. Cas found it adorable and kissed his pretty mouth.

Then he checked in with Sam. “You’re moving in with us? I take it that’s a yes from you.” Cas drained his shot glass in one go. He had a bit of catching up to do. Fuck moderation.

“Actually, I plan to stay put. I like my house. It’s been in our family for a long time, and it’s my home. But yeah, if you’ll have me, I want to join you. I want to join your Pack. I accept your offer!” he said enthusiastically, raising his glass in another impromptu toast.

Everyone cheered and upped their glasses to clink loudly against his. A new bottle appeared on the table as if by magic.
“Oh, oh, formal introductions, all around,” Dean insisted. “Castiel, you never introduced me to your mate. That’s not right, man.”

“I’ll do the honors,” said Michael, standing. “Don’t look at me like that, Dean. I’m not always an asshole.” Dean gestured him forward magnanimously.

“Ok, let’s see. Uh, I’m still learning all this shit, so let me know if I fuck it up.”

“Oh, we will!” laughed Sam. Tipsy Sam was really fucking loud, thought Michael.

“Oh-huh. Um, okay, as our illustrious leader,” Michael assumed a haughty announcer’s tone, and if he had to hide a bit of sarcasm inside the tone, that was his own business. “Winchester Pack Alpha, and all-around badass Dominant motherfucker, we have Alpha Doctor Castiel Novak, er Winchester, or whatever the fuck his name is today, PhD, etcetera, etcetera, whatever, whatever.” Everyone cheered. Cas ducked his head in humble acknowledgement of the high praise, and wondered if Michael was up to something, what with his dramatic about-face in attitude. More likely, he was drunk and feeling no pain or inhibitions.

“Next in line, and hot as all kinds of fuck, MY MATE – (and not Castiel’s) – the only alpha I know sporting a genuine Mating-bite, the one who looks so much better naked and sweating than wearing hospital scrubs but who can give me a hard-on even in scrubs, my very own Submissive, Dean Michael Winchester!” This time there was more laughter than cheering. Dean took a half-hearted swing at his mate, but didn’t connect and decided just to go with it and drink.

Sam refilled the glasses while Michael worked out who was next, nodding his head at each in turn. “So then, let’s see, uh Alpha, alpha, beta, O. Yep, next in line is this monstrous dude who I don’t know very well yet, but who is ALSO not Castiel’s mate and certainly not mine, but who keeps giving me more whiskey, so how bad can he be, my Mate-in-Law, Samuel Something Winchester!” Sam slugged his shot, then stood and grabbed Michael in a drunken bear hug, rocking him for a moment just to irritate his brother.

“Dude, paws off the Omega!” shouted Dean. “Stick to doling out the goods.” Sam released Michael with a laugh and sat back down to pour them all fresh drinks.

“Then there’s, fuck I don’t know, I think there’s three of us in the O-pool. Wanna arm-wrestle for the top spot, kid? You look pretty strong to me.” He rested his elbow on the table near where April sat, and she laughed.

“You’re on,” she said and took hold of his hand. Castiel moved out from under her to let her get a solid base beneath her. Dean cleared away the extra glasses to make room for them, and Sam squatted down beside the table, his hand around the two of theirs.

“Don’t embarrass me, baby,” Dean advised.

“No chance,” sasssed April. “He’s got no chance. What I didn’t tell any of you before today is that I hold the weight-lifting record for Lawton High School, and went to Nationals last year. Bring it!” Sam released their hands and shouted, “Go!” simultaneously. Michael was caught off guard, but April was on her game and had his arm nearly at the touch-point before he even engaged. Then he stiffened his arm and pulled. It was over in a heartbeat. April, laughing, took defeat well and admitted that she’d never lifted weights in her life.

“Had you going for just a second there though, didn’t I?” she flirted. Michael winked at her and Castiel somehow magically appeared between the two of them, lifting her back up and pulling her
back down onto his lap.

“So, to continue with the intros,” Dean picked up where Michael had left off. “Because the dude shouldn’t have to introduce himself: newly established at the top of the O-pile – that’s what you called it, right? Oh yeah, pool, the O-pool. What kinda fucked up title is that? Seriously, what does that even mean? – Is MY Mate, and not Castiel’s,” He winked at his fiancé, who grinned back at him happily. "The dude who out-surlys little old blue-haired librarians – don’t fight it baby, you know it’s true – the one Omega who singlehandedly defeated the Grand champion weight-lift title holder of Lawton, Oklahoma in man-to-man combat, or whatever. My Sexy-as-fuck whether he's naked or not – preferably naked – Dominant, Michael Quentin Lancet Winchester!"

“Quentin?” giggled April. “Seriously? Quentin?”

“I totally take back any and all flirting I may have done or thought about aiming your way. Fuck you! Quentin is a perfectly honorable name.” Michael drained his glass with a snap of his head and slammed it back down on the table.

“Flirt with her again, and I’ll rip your balls off and stuff them up your channel,” mentioned Castiel casually in passing as he refilled the glasses and emptied the bottle.

“We can’t forget Gabe,” said Dean. “…who is at this moment suffering grave bodily trauma and who currently has a dark cloud named ‘Castiel’s belt’ hanging over his head. Um, all hail Gabriel Allen Novak!”

“All hail Gabriel!” they shouted.

“Oh, but soft! What fair young maiden comst hither?” Dean crooned, taking April’s hand.

“Not a maiden, Dean,” Sam put in. “Sorry to break it to you, but she’s fucked.” Sam giggled. “Like, literally fucked. You know ‘maiden’ means virgin, right? So, yeah well, Garth took care of that little imperfection. And even if Garth had missed the mark, I picked up where he left off. We popped both cherries in one day. So now she’s definitely not a maiden anymore.” Everybody but Castiel laughed. April laughed loudest and brought Cas’ hands up to her breasts, leaning back to plant a kiss on his cheek. He took it like a good sport, but reminding him that Garth took her maidenhood and Sam held her first Claim was not Sam’s best decision of the night. He was drunk though, so his reflexes toward self-preservation were a bit slow.

“Okay, okay, I got it!” Dean broke through the laughter and good-natured ribbing. “Introducing, in the anchor position, our lovely, beautiful and talented, and most definitely not a maiden, the only one who actually IS Castiel’s mate! And somehow the only girl in the whole fucking mix – seriously guys, how did that happen? - April Anderson Novak Winchester!”

Dean stooped to give her a hug. He liked her. They’d been sitting around drinking and just goofing off for a couple of hours when Castiel showed up, and Dean had been watching the young Omega. She was funny and vivacious. She didn’t take a lot of crap from Michael, and she seemed completely at home in her skin. He held her tight for a moment, and he whispered in her ear before he released her. “If I have to share him, I’m glad it’s with you.” Then he released her and looked meaningfully into her eyes. Hers were wide blue pools of liquid emotion as she looked up at him and nodded. It was a bit unfair since she was clearly soused, but he chucked her on the chin anyway. She slapped at his hand good-naturedly, and Castiel shooed Dean away.

They ordered out for Chinese food and made the mistake of letting Dean choose the movie. Before “Apocalypse Now” ended, Sam disappeared into Dean’s suite across the hall, Cas and April went to bed in the Novak suite’s only bedroom, and Dean and Michael were both fast asleep, tangled
together on the couch. They never got around to pulling out the fold-away bed.

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Dean and Michael were awakened early in the morning to the sounds of a severe spanking coming from Castiel’s bedroom. It went on long enough to break into their dreams and shepherd them to groggy wakefulness. Michael groaned and pressed his face into Dean’s neck. April’s cries echoed across the living room, through the small kitchen and back again. It didn’t help that Dean’s body responded to the familiar sound of a certain Dominant Alpha’s hand landing like iron upon a firm pair of buttocks with a tell-tale tightening in his groin. He moaned and reached for his mate’s morning wood to make sure he wasn’t the only one. Michael battted his hand away and sat up.

He rubbed at his sore neck and turned around to assess his Submissive, quirking an eyebrow at how erect Dean was already. “Because of that?” he queried, gesturing to the bedroom with his head.

“Mm-hm,” Dean murmured. “Please, Michael.”

“Damn, you are a masochist.” Michael dropped his voice to a whisper and reached for Dean’s hips, clad in just boxers. “You like picturing yourself over his legs? His hand coming down hard on your ass again and again until you’re crying out like that? That getting you hot, Dean? Is it?”

“Yeah,” Dean responded again, rolling his hips in Michael’s grip. “Please, Michael.”

Michael sighed, rubbed his aching forehead. He released Dean’s hips and disappeared around the kitchenette wall to look for aspirin. Dean adding a dose of the complicated reality of their pack dynamics to his hangover was not how he’d hoped to spend the morning. Rules of the game: don’t ask the question if you don’t want to hear the answer. Michael reminded himself to remember that one.

He was just finishing off his pills with a tall glass of water, the bottle of Ibuprofen still in his hand when another hand appeared by his, held in space as if requesting a dose for itself. He looked up. It was April. She was nude, her eyes puffy and red; tears and nose still running freely. He dumped a couple of tablets into her hand and handed her the bottle then left her to it.

Castiel was kneeling, fully dressed in front of Dean on the couch, kissing him soundly when Michael returned. He suppressed a growl. He knew that kissing was going to have to stay on the allowable list, but he didn’t like it. He considered turning away but couldn’t make himself leave, so he stood awkwardly next to the kitchen table and waited until Castiel finished murmuring something to his mate and stood back up.

Castiel turned and met Michael’s eye. There was a brief frisson of something confrontational between the two Doms, but they both kept their mouths shut. The Alpha passed Michael and began pulling breakfast ingredients out of the refrigerator. Dean headed to the bathroom, and April started brewing coffee. Everything was so fucking perfectly domestic it creeped Michael out. He didn’t know where to go or what to do. This wasn’t his home, and he didn’t know how to get back to the easy camaraderie of last night. Maybe he should just stay drunk all the time.

“Michael, are you hungover this morning? Would you like anything in particular for breakfast? I’m just toasting bagels, but there are eggs we could scramble if you’d rather. You need to get something in your stomach if you’re queasy.”
“I’m okay, Castiel. Just a headache and a little bit of an upset stomach. It’ll pass. Um, yes. Eggs would be good. I can cook them.” He moved to press in beside the other two, but Cas directed him to the table.

“There’s really not room in this tiny kitchen for more than one cook. And despite Dean’s opinion about me, I really can put a meal together when I have to.” Cas gestured for April to take her place on her pillow and began to crack the eggs. Michael wasn’t disturbed by the Omega-Sub’s position as she knelt easily and rested her hands on her thighs. Overtly submissive behaviors were extremely common in Lupin households, where the Pack was safe to meet the needs and desires of its members without being judged by the standards of “Normal” people like Naomi Novak. Michael’s home was not like this, but he knew how things worked in Traditional packs. He’d stayed with friends who lived this way, and he was used to it. Castiel placed four glasses of O.J. on the table, and then brought over the coffee pot, followed by three mugs. He offered his mate a sip of juice and then resumed cooking. Michael filled a coffee mug for himself and one for his mate.

Dean joined them, collecting the bagels that had been toasted and halved and a couple of different condiments from the fridge before sitting down to Michael’s right. He leaned in for a kiss. Michael planted one firmly on his lips then took hold of his face and moved to scent him, noting the obvious smell of sexual release on the alpha. A glance to Dean’s blue-jeaned crotch showed that his erection was gone. Michael’s wolf bristled. He maintained his grip on Dean’s chin and reached the other to press against his mate’s crotch. “You’ve made a grave error, Submissive. This belongs to me, and you don’t touch it without my permission,” Michael hissed quietly into Dean’s ear.

Dean was torn. His wolf wanted to roll over, plead mea culpa and ask to be punished, but they’d not established roles or rules yet. He was under no one’s thumb, not even his own mate’s, until negotiations were completed – not officially anyway. Any play they engaged in up to that point was purely voluntary on both their parts. Michael seemed not to understand that. Dean let his forehead fall to Michael’s shoulder, and he sighed. “Let’s talk it through today, all right? I want this with you, Michael. You know I do, but we’re not there yet. Soon, baby, but not yet.”

Dean shifted to kiss Michael’s throat and offer him a physical apology in case he needed the reassurance. He could sense Michael’s growing discomfort along with his pounding headache and sensed another tantrum might result if he didn’t move to head it off quickly. Cas set a platter of scrambled eggs on the table and sat down to feed himself and his mate. He watched Dean’s and Michael’s tense interaction but stayed out of their business as he’d promised to do. Eventually, Dean sat back up, leaned down to his right to kiss April on the top of her head, and then started in on breakfast. Michael visibly struggled with having been rebuffed but regrouped and kept his control, eating slowly and without enthusiasm. His eyes never left his plate, but as he ate, his face began to lose its green tinge.

It was Dean who broke the funereal silence. “So, Cas, what was all of that about this morning, with April? I gotta say, that’s a hell of a way to wake up.”

Cas delivered another forkful of eggs to his Omega calmly. “She’s got a few more of those coming to make up for our time apart. It seems that my Omega-Submissive didn’t believe that my rules for her stay in effect whether we’re together or not. It’s been explained to her now in a way that she understands. Right, Kitten?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Good girl.”
The long, awkward breakfast eventually ended, and Cas and April left the suite for the day, leaving Michael and Dean alone with the dishes. “You want a tour of the grounds?” asked Dean, drying his hands.

“I want to know why you keep telling me ‘we’ll get there’, and ‘soon, baby, but not yet’.” Michael tossed his drying cloth to the side and confronted his mate. “Dean, talk to me. We’re mates, and I can feel your Sub respond to my wolf. We’re naturals together. What are you waiting for? Are you worried I’m going to get our roles fucked up? I mean, yeah, we did when we first met, but it’s been copacetic since the Claim took hold. I don’t get it. Why are you holding back? I need you.”

“I know. But this is a big change for both of us, and there are a lot of dangers that’ll mess with our heads if we’re not careful. I’m feeling all right this morning after last night’s party, but you are still miserable and hungover. Are you certain you want to have this talk right now?” Dean moved into Michael’s space and batted his eyes at his Dom. “If you want, I could blow you and put you back to bed until the hangover wears off.”

“I have a better idea,” Michael offered mysteriously then worked his thumbs quickly over the screen of his phone. “You want to wait to talk until my headache is gone, fine. I can do that. Going back to sleep sounds like a fucking great idea, but we are going to hammer this shit out today, Dean.” Michael walked Dean back to the sofa and smirked at him. A ping on his phone sent him glancing at it briefly then casting it on the side table. “I know one sure cure for a hangover headache that works on me every time, and that’s to have a massive cock jammed down my throat. You game? We had some unfinished business from back in Bumfuck.”

“Won’t that make your headache worse?” Dean asked, feeling his cock start to respond to the pictures his wolf supplied him.

“You just let me worry about that.” Michael stripped off the boxers and t-shirt which was all he had on and sat naked on the edge of the sofa, waiting on Dean’s decision.

Dean’s decision was a no-brainer. He dropped trou and pulled his henley over his head. His Submissive had a rule: if the Dom was naked, the Sub should be naked. Anything else felt wrong to him. Michael arranged Dean’s hips and started by running his flattened tongue around and all over Dean’s cock and his balls. Dean gripped Michael’s shoulders. He tested through their bond to make sure Michael was really okay and then gave in to the sensations as Michael took much of Dean’s engorged cock into his mouth, bracing himself with one hand on Dean’s ass, and the other holding the side of his thigh.

He started slowly. He worked Dean’s cock with gentle pressure from his tongue against his hard palette and sucked his cheeks in. Dean moaned and put a hand against the back of his head, gripping the black hair but not guiding or forcing him, just holding on. Michael worked him methodically. He varied the pressure and speed and depth. He sucked and hummed, licked into the slit on the head of his cock, and then plunged back down deep enough to cut off his air supply and make his eyes water. Michael could feel Dean through their Mating-bond. He worked him for a while in studious silence. He could feel every time Dean was close to coming and every time, he backed off, releasing his hold on Dean’s cock and sucking a bruise into his inner thigh or nuzzling his face into the stiff hair at Dean’s pubis.

Dean whined piteously, trying like hell to hold still and not drill his mate’s face like he wanted to. Finally, Michael looked up at him, spit moistening his lips and cheeks, spit and pre-come running
down his chin. “Fuck my face, Dean,” he said sliding off. His lust-filled eyes matched the words from his mouth and the firm certainty Dean felt through the bond. “Come on, baby, do it. I want an alpha cock shove down my throat.” Dean saw that Michael had a firm hand wrapped around himself and was stroking his own cock. When had he let go of Dean’s ass?

The alpha didn’t need to be told twice, he speared Michael’s face and bore into him. Michael relaxed his throat and found Dean’s hands, placing them in his hair, encouraging him to go for it. Dean did go for it. He held back at first just enough to find the point where Michael’s capacity to receive him limited his stroke, and then he fucked hard in between those spit-slick lips.

“Michael, Sir?” Dean worked out his words between thrusts. “Can…can you do that thing you did with your teeth? Ah, fuck! Please, sir?” Michael’s grip on Dean’s thigh tightened and he adjusted his lips to let his teeth drag just right. “Oh, fucking hell! Yeah, baby, just like that!”

Dean didn’t hear the suite door open, but he heard it close, and he heard his brother’s voice call out, “Oh, hey guys. So, I hear you’re making omelets. That’s great, I’m starved.”

Dean snapped his head around, eyes wide, just about to lay into his brother, one, for not knocking, and two, for coming on in and striking up a conversation when neither suite occupant was free for discussion at the moment. It’s not like they weren’t bare-assed naked in full view of the door and clearly indisposed, but he froze at a simultaneous hard swat to his ass and a death-grip on his testicles. He stopped pre-berate and looked back at his mate. Michael still had Dean’s cock in his mouth. His eyes were doing the talking; his eyes and their bond-link. Dean saw lust and certainty. Michael breathed hard through his nose, kept a hard lock on Dean’s eyes and slowly, but deliberately began to work Dean’s hips back into motion.

Behind them, Dean could hear Sam rifling through the refrigerator, could feel the awful juxtaposition of relationships crashing together. He sent confusion and alarm to Michael, unable to speak in words. It’s not that Sam had never seen Dean in the throes of sweaty passion before – he had. Sam had seen Dean moan like a whore while being ruthlessly fucked by alphas during their Keller tests, had seen him shamelessly rim a beta-Dom who had a playful streak and bet Dean he couldn’t make the beta come without penile stimulation in a Dominants class. (Dean won that bet.) But this was different. This was private, not work, not pack hierarchy or domination games. Dean’s mind spun furiously, while his Dom kept his unflagging erection moving steadily in and out of his mouth. A couple of things were clear: Michael wanted to keep going and Michael wasn’t surprised or alarmed at Sam’s presence. His Dom wanted this. Wanted Sam there. Sam had to know what was going on, had to know more than Dean did. Dean questioned with his eyes and through the bond.

Michael’s gaze was sure. His eyes were fierce with command. Dean’s Submissive wolf had no problem understanding the Dom’s instruction, and Dean’s Sub always complied with that particular tone of…eye. Dean wound his fingers hesitantly back into Michael’s hair and made a few strokes with his hips on his own, listening to the sound of Sam chopping omelet ingredients behind him, feeling Sam’s eyes on his ass, never straying from Michael’s eyes which had sprung crow’s feet in the corners. He pulled at the bond, looking for what was driving his mate. He found lust and command, satisfaction and pride – so much pride. Pride in Dean? Pride in himself? Dean couldn’t tell.

Sam began to hum quietly to himself, and Dean closed his eyes. It was too much. He couldn’t do this. His hips stuttered, and he whimpered. What was Michael doing? It was crossing the streams of his designations and the different levels of his psyche. It was overwhelming. Was he trying to find Dean’s limits? Trying to make him fail? And what the fuck was Sam’s role in this? Michael growled in his throat, bringing Dean’s focus back to him, but a part of it never left his brother. Michael’s eyes hardened, and he reinforced Dean’s hands in his hair, pulling himself in for a few strokes.
The order was crystal-clear: ‘Fuck my face, Submissive, as I told you to do!’ Dean clawed his way out of his own mind and practically threw his wolf into the forefront. He was close after being edged for so long before. If the two were conspirators in Dean’s torture, then their timing was impeccable. Any sooner and Dean wouldn’t have been capable. Any sooner and Dean would have called Red and stormed out, pissed and fuming. Giving over to a Dom had never been this hard, but by God, if it’s what his Mate wanted, he was going to fucking give it to him if it killed him. Sam, he would deal with later. His grip in Michael’s hair went white-knuckle tight and he drove in ruthlessly, pumping his hips with no thought to how deep was safe for his mate. He felt it coming, and he tensed, throwing his head back and roaring his release to the ceiling.

Dean narrowed his eyes and poked again at the bond. Michael was panting and obviously spent. He felt so much smugness and pride from his mate. Size kink, my ass, thought Dean – his first coherent thought since Sam walked through the door. The asshole is an exhibitionist.

“I think Cas is out of butter,” said Sam.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will have meat. I swear.
Monday, May 8, 2018

Chapter Summary

Michael has some fallout to face, and then it's time to move out.

Chapter Notes

I hated the last chapter. I may never read it again. I've decided I suck at writing smut. This one's way better, at least to me. I should have one more chapter ready to post before I go back to work on Wednesday. This one has quite a bit of Sam, but the next will be almost exclusively Michael and Dean.

Hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN:

“Come on, Sam! Like you mean it! They’re just going to laugh at you if you do it like that.”

“I know, Benny. I’m trying, but you’re not Omega OR Sub, and I can’t get my mind there. This is just so weird!”

“I can’t judge your practical skills without feeling it for myself, and I’m not putting any E.O.s on the floor who haven’t convinced me they’re ready. So far, you’re not convincing me of crap. You get one more chance, beta. Talk to me. What’ve I done to earn this punishment, and how are you gonna get me through it?”

“Right. Okay.” Sam cleared his throat and closed his eyes, working through the scenario from the practice sheet. Benny was a beta-Sub who’d been caught sucking off his boyfriend in the washroom. It was a level 5-B rule infraction calling for 30 to 50 hard pops with a paddle. Anywhere along the curve of the buttocks or backs of the thighs was the target zone, but not the anus. The inside of the thighs and sit-spots shouldn’t be targeted either, not for this one. Bruising was acceptable. Abrasions were virtually unavoidable, if he maxed out the count. The beta was going to feel it for several days but wouldn’t necessarily have trouble sitting as long as his posture was good.

Sam just had to forget that it was his trainer’s backside bent over the bench. ‘It’s a beta-Sub’, he told himself. His wolf knew better and paced uncomfortably. ‘Just have to jump in and do it’. Sam pulled himself together.

“Do you know why you’re in this position, beta?” Sam ground out. Benny played along.

“There’s a ‘no unauthorized sex’ rule, and I broke it, Sir.”

“That’s right. I’m going to punish you for it, right now, and then afterward, I’ll expect you to
apologize to me and to your alpha. As long as it never happens again, once we’re through here, the matter’s closed. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir. I understand.”

“Very good. All right, take a breath and try to keep your muscles relaxed. I’m going to warm your backside up with my hand, and then I’ll switch to the paddle. Don’t move from this position until I release you.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Fuck! This is Benny. It’s alpha. Fuck! Sam’s wolf was balking again. Beta-Doms in a natural setting did not paddle alpha-Doms, especially not when said alpha-Dominant was the beta’s boss and trainer, all-around nice guy, and hadn’t broken any rules. Sam clenched his jaw and hoped muscle memory would get him through his practical exam since his wolf wasn’t there for him. He stepped up and struck Benny’s ass with his hard palm. Then he did it again. He overcompensated for the fact that his wolf wasn’t guiding his strokes. They were maybe harder than they should’ve been, but Benny had just chastised him for being too soft.

Once Benny’s, uh, the beta’s, ass was a solid shade of pink, Sam pulled the paddle from the pocket of his cargo pants. He didn’t want to jinx it by talking right now. He’d already explained the process, and if he said the wrong thing because he was nervous, it would only make things worse, so he stayed silent. Sam laid down methodical swats with the paddle, letting the muscles in his arm find the right calibration point, counting them out in his head. He’d decided on 35. He was thinking hard, making sure he hadn’t missed anything while he monitored the man’s condition and kept up his routine. This was a punishment on a Sub, and the culprit could be a masochist. Sam realized after reaching 17 that he should have made the beta-Sub count out loud. Vocalization kept the spankee from slipping off into Sub-space and riding it out in the comfort of an altered state of mind. Fuck! He was going to fail.

Sam stopped at 20 and went for damage control. “Very good, beta. I’m proud of you. You’re doing well. He rubbed the sting out just a bit and pretended that he had meant to pause here all along. He swiftly adjusted his plan in his head and barreled bravely on. “You’ve got 20 more swats coming to you. I need you to count them out for me. Out loud. If you miss a number, we’re starting over, so keep up.”

Benny was still doing his part. He was in pain, and he was staunchly suppressing a wave of rage that was nearly visible in its intensity, but he grunted out a “Yes, Sir.” Sam picked back up from One.

“One!” shouted Benny as the paddle fell. “Two!” Sam listened to the tone of his voice. It would sound different in a real-world situation. As tough as alphas were, they weren’t built for this, and Benny was struggling. Sam kept at it though. Benny had prepared him beforehand to make sure he would ignore the ‘alpha-whining’ as Benny put it. “I’m not gonna break, Sam. I may sound like I will, but I won’t. You just do what you gotta do.”

“Nineteen! Fuck!” One more. Jesus, just one more. Sam brought down the paddle squarely in the middle of his boss’ backside. “TWENTY!”

After it was over, after the apology and the aftercare, after all the paperwork, they convened in Benny’s office. The adrenalin was slow to drain from Sam’s muscles, and his eyes were wide.

“You did fine, Sam. You passed the practical and the written. I’ll go over my assessment with you, but I wanted to calm your nerves and get that out of the way. Welcome aboard, beta. We’re lucky to have you.”
“Thank you, alpha. Whew, that was harder than I thought it was going to be. I’ve done that hundreds of times in training, but never on you. Please don’t ever make me do it again.”

Benny laughed. “We’ll see. I have no intention of giving any B.J.s in the bathroom, but what would you do if Castiel called me down for something and assigned you to administer the consequences? Could you do it?”

Sam thought about it seriously. “I believe I could. It would be real that way, not made up. Benny, my wolf just wasn’t having any part of this, and I need him if I’m going to do it right. I funnel everything through him. He directs my arm, and it’s his guidance that helps me keep the spankees safe. Honestly, I didn’t feel like this was a fair assessment of what I would really do because I had to wing it.”

“I know you did, Sam. That’s part of the test. I already know what your wolf can do. I’ve seen it literally hundreds of times. I needed to know what the real Sam would do in that situation. I need to know who you really are under stress. I could feel how difficult it was for you. If it makes you feel any better, it was no picnic for me either.” Benny shifted in his padded office chair.

“I’ve never told you this, beta, but when you applied for the training program, I was against letting you in. As Dean’s brother, I was afraid of how you might be around him and all of his colleagues. Thought you might try to take advantage, and he might let you. Nepotism can turn into something real ugly, real fast. But Bobby and Cas both vouched for you, so I was willing to give you a shot. You may have noticed I was a bit harder on you than the others.”

“Yeah, I wondered about that.”

“But you never brought it up. You never complained where I caught wind of it, not once.” Benny nodded at Sam. “That shows real grit. Sam, you have a core of steel underneath a layer of compassion. You’re perfect for this line of work. Don’t let that go to your head, and if you tell anyone I said it, I’ll deny it and put YOU on that goddamned bench.”

Sam blushed and laughed. “Thanks, alpha. Thanks for giving me a shot. I won’t let you down.”

Benny nodded and pulled his notes in so he could go over his assessment with Sam in detail. An Enforcement Officer was never finished learning, whether he had his certification or not. Continuous growth and improvement would be an ever-present expectation.

NOW:

“Wait. Hold up a second.” Dean stared hard at his brother who was holding a bowl of unbroken eggs he’d pulled from the fridge and appeared much less disturbed about the scene he’d just witnessed than Dean thought he should. “What do you mean, you guys’ idea? This was NOT my idea. I didn’t know anything about it.” Dean was safe again and back in his comfort zone with his henley and Levi’s where they belonged.

“Michael told me last night, well, texted during dinner, that you were wanting to try out a little bit of public scening. I told him maybe you two should ease into it, you know? Maybe start with semi-public, or just trusted friends, see how you both react. I volunteered because you know I’ve got your back and Michael seems to trust me a little. I’m safe. We decided on making the first run-through
pretty nonconfrontational in case it got weird. He just texted me this morning he was gonna pull the trigger, and then you’d be cooking breakfast. It all seemed legit.”

“In case it got weird?! Damnit, Sam! Did it never occur to you to include ME in your text conversation? So, all evening, while my mate was tucked up with me on the couch all snuggly-like, and I thought he was just distracted by some stupid App on his phone, he was really conspiring with my brother? That sound about right?”

Sam’s face paled, and he set down the bowl he was holding. His eyes darted, unfocused, as he worked backward to determine how and when he came to believe that Dean was aware and onboard for the plan. Dean saw the moment he got to the beginning and realized Michael had lied to him about Dean’s involvement. His jaw set and twitched. “He told me you wanted him to work out the details and surprise you. Dean, man, I’m so sorry. That must’ve been awful for you. I had no idea. FUCK!” Sam was livid and pacing in the tiny kitchen. For Sam, pacing only bought him about a step-and-a-half, so he stopped and faced Dean rather than just spin awkwardly in place. “Alpha, may I have permission to discipline your mate, please? He lied to me.”

“He lied to both of us. He’s blowing through Pack rules one by one at a pretty good clip. I thought I was a brat, but Jesus. He busted number three back in Oklahoma and now it’s number five. Look, I’m not really mad at you. You were stupid to assume you had my consent without asking me directly. Don’t ever fucking do that again, you got me?” Sam nodded regretfully. “But you were played. This is on Michael. He’s barreling on through as if we already had all of our negotiations and roles set, when we haven’t even talked about it once. He doesn’t know my limits. He doesn’t know me at all.” Dean scrubbed a hand down his face and met his brother’s eye again. “We have to have that talk today or everything’s gonna go sideways. Yeah, Sammy, go ahead and take the reins. I’m too pissed at him right now anyway. You have no idea what that did to me. I’m…I need a minute.”

“I’m so sorry, Dean. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll be fine. Look, you go do what you do, and I’ll make you an omelet. We’ve already eaten. You okay with eating by yourself?”

“No problem. Thanks, man. After what I did, you don’t have to cook me breakfast.”

“Stop beating yourself up. Cooking is my comfort zone. It’ll help bring me back to myself. Just…go explain Pack justice to my brat of a mate.”

“Will do.” Sam’s eyes hardened again. He could hear the shower running, but Michael had had enough time to get himself clean, so Sam didn’t wait for him to exit on his own. He went on in through Cas’ bedroom door and into the en suite bathroom. Dean began humming to himself as he reviewed the prepped ingredients Sam had selected for his omelet. Ham, tomatoes, mushrooms, cheese, green onions; Dean’s wolf perked right up, thinking Second breakfast sounded like a pretty good idea. (That’s because you’re a glutton,) Dean pointed out. He decided to add bell peppers, but regretfully only prepped enough for one omelet.

Sam stormed straight into the bathroom and pulled the shower door open. Michael had his head back in the stream of heated water and was allowing it to run down his whole body, rinsing away the last of the soap. His eyes were closed, but he startled and squawked at the sound of the stall door being pulled open. He squawked again when Sam’s enormous hand wrapped around his bicep and hauled him out of the shower.

“What the fuck?” Michael protested.
Sam leaned in and turned off the water without releasing the Omega, then he straightened. He fixed his Dominant eyes on Michael and narrowed them menacingly. “Michael Quentin, did you set up a new scene with your mate without his knowledge or consent and then involve me in it as well without telling me he didn’t know a damn thing about it? Did you lie to Dean and me?”

“What? No! I mean, fuck, I didn’t ask him about it first, but he’s my Sub, Sam. I don’t need his permission to add spice to our scenes. Besides, I knew he was gonna love it. I’ve seen enough of you two on the internet to know he’s a show-off.”

Sam’s eyes were cold steel. “You don’t know anything about him. What you saw, what he shows in public, is just a small part of himself. Dean’s actually a very private man where his Sub is concerned, and his trust is very hard to earn once it’s broken. You fucked this up bad, Michael. And what’s even worse is, you brought me into it thinking I was helping my brother take a new step. You fucking lied to me! You broke his trust, and you did the worst thing a Dom can do to a Sub, you put him into an unsafe situation and left him unprotected to fend for himself. And you dragged me into doing it with you.

“Officially, I’m going to spank you for breaking our Pack rule number five – ‘Don’t Lie,’ but what you’ve got to work through with your mate goes way deeper than that. You hurt him, Michael. I hurt him too, just by going along with you. That was stupid of me. I know better. But you need to learn to communicate with him or you’re not ever going to be able to trust each other, True-Mates or not.”

Michael was dripping all over the floor. He looked taken aback, like he’d never considered the idea that his plan was flawed. Hadn’t Dean performed magnificently? Sure, he’d taken a minute to find his footing, but that was just because it was a surprise, wasn’t it? In the end, when it came right down to it, he’d loved it. Hadn’t he? Michael had felt so proud to watch his mate, HIS Mate, perform. Michael probed for Dean with his side of the Mating-bond, but found that he couldn’t quite get to his mate. He was blocked. Dean had shut him out. He went cold. Michael hadn’t known it was possible to do that. How do you close it off? Why would you ever want to? In a flash, the magnitude of what he’d done – his hubris – crashed down on him, and he clutched at Sam’s arm to keep himself upright. Dean was so pissed he didn’t even want Michael’s bond link.

Fuck.

Sam watched him dispassionately, waiting for his mind to process and catch up. He kept his grip on Michael’s arm grounding. When Michael’s eyes suddenly went frightened and wide, Sam simply raised his eyebrows without saying anything. For Sam, this moment was a test of Michael’s mettle. Was this boy just a young, untrained, cocky-but-well-meaning Dom with a good heart who ran his life on gut instinct and brash self-confidence; a boy who made fixable mistakes left and right out of ignorance? Or was there a dark, ugly, manipulative side of Michael that hurt and wanted to make those closest to him hurt too? The former, Sam could work with. We’re all human. Nobody’s perfect. But the latter meant war. Nobody harmed Dean on purpose and got away with it. Nobody. Sam waited for the verdict with a blank face. Michael had to make the next move.

“FUCK, Sam! I didn’t…look, you have to know…I didn’t mean to scare him, or hurt him. I would never! Dean means everything to me!” Michael unleashed a torrent of regret as his eyes filled with tears. “He’s the best thing that ever happened to me. I just wanted to surprise him and challenge his Sub with something exciting, not break him. Now he won’t even let me through the Bond-link. FUCK! What have I done? Sam, did I ruin everything? Did I lose him? Did I hurt him?! FUCK!”

Sam growled at him and tightened his grip. Michael snapped his mouth closed. On paper, in their respective charts, Sam and Michael were doubtless both Dominants, and they were close enough in age that it made no difference, but Sam outranked Michael outright in Secondary gender and also in
Pack hierarchy, training, and experience. Michael’s Dominant wolf lowered his ears and head, averted his eyes, and tucked his tail between his legs. The Omega standing in Sam’s grip, naked, wet, and cold was no match for a pissed-off Sam Winchester.

Sam walked Michael into the bedroom and sat on the edge of Castiel’s bed, pulling Michael over his lap in one movement. Michael whimpered and then tensed when he heard the unintentional sound escape his throat. “You’re not going to be happy with Dean or even in yourself until you learn where you fit in the Pack, Michael, and you learn to embrace it. You’re an Omega before you’re a Dom, and I’m going to start emphasizing that for you right now. When we’re through here, you’re not to make another move as his Dominant until the two of you have talked through your roles and agreed on rules. I’ll expect you to apologize to me and to Dean. Do you understand, Omega?”

“Yes, Sam. I understand. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“I know you are.” Sam didn’t need to say more. He was satisfied that Michael was genuinely remorseful now that he was on the same page as Dean and Sam. Without further pause, Sam cinched Michael in by his waist and spanked him hard on his upturned ass. The layer of moisture on his skin would intensify the pain, helping Sam get his message across. Sam rained his swats down evenly and mercilessly, covering Michael’s backside and the tops of his thighs thoroughly. Sam was a strong man, and his right arm got plenty of practice in his chosen occupation. He didn’t worry about finding Michael’s pain tolerance as Dean had. Sam knew Omegas; knew what they could take and how to listen to their breathing.

The beta-Dom ignored the growing heat and sting in his own hard palm and continued methodically, hard, painful, stinging blows that built on one another until Michael began to kick and squirm. Michael tried to take it with a stiff upper lip, but it hurt, and his body moved without his permission. Soon, Michael was in tears. Ugly, snotty tears ran unchecked down his face as he cried out. Castiel’s lovely white bedspread took on dark spots where Michael’s wet body and his tears marred its perfect sheen.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! Fuck! Please, Sam, I won’t do it again! PLEASE STOP! It HURTS! OW! OW!”

Sam paused with his hand resting on Michael’s hot flesh. “Tell me what you’re sorry for, Omega.”

“I’m sorry I lied to you and Dean! I’m so sorry I took him through a scene he didn’t know about. I should have told him what I wanted, and talked to him about it. I should have given him a chance to say yes or no. I didn’t know it was new for him. Please, Sam, please don’t spank me anymore. I get it! Please! I’m sorry!”

Sam landed another solid round on the Omega’s ass and then paused again.

“I know you’re sorry, Michael. We’re almost finished, but I’m giving you a few more for calling my name during a spanking. You call me Sir, or beta-Dom, whichever you prefer, but you don’t have the standing while you’re over my knee to use my name. Do you understand this rule? Learn it now, because it’s a hard limit everywhere in our Pack and this Facility.”

“Yes, Sir.” Michael was meek. Sam took a moment to take in the difference between meek Omega Michael and his usual Dominant presentation. It was a jarring contradiction. How must it feel to BE Michael and have to navigate the waters of his psyche with top currents pulling one way while the undertow dragged him somewhere else. Sam resolved to try to be an anchor for Michael. They were Pack now, and that meant Michael was his to watch out for.

Sam finished his spanking with a flurry of 10 or 12 more stinging blows. He didn’t allow for any
mercy based on the red glow Michael’s ass was already giving off. Sam knew the quickest way to affect a behavior change in an Omega was to strike hard on the first lesson and then be consistent in reminders when they were needed. Omegas, especially brats, only altered their behavior when the consequences for not doing so outweighed the pull to misbehave.

Sam stopped and smoothed his hand over Michael’s bare, red bottom, easing the sting just a little. He wouldn’t bruise, and the pain wasn’t going to last long enough to make him uncomfortable for more than a few hours. This type of spanking hurt fiercely, but mostly just in the moment and then faded quickly. Sam knew Dean planned to have “The Talk” with his mate today and didn’t want to sabotage Michael’s ability to negotiate fairly for himself by forcing him to remain in his Omega mindset if that wasn’t where he would be spending most of his time.

“All right, Omega. Take a minute to get yourself back together. I’m in no rush.” Michael’s breathing was erratic as he continued to cry harshly into Castiel’s now less-than-pristine bedspread. Sam wrapped his left hand around Michael’s ribs and held him tight. “When you go back out there, just talk to Dean. Apologize for your mistake. Let him know you care about him. You know what to do. He loves you, and he’ll forgive you, but you need to listen to him and include him in your plans.”

“He loves me?” Michael sounded about 13 years old, his voice small and unsure.

“He loves me?” Michael sounded about 13 years old, his voice small and unsure.

“Of course he does. Dean doesn’t do anything halfway. And Michael, once you two get to know each other better, you can throw some challenges at him. You’re right that as his Dom, you have some freedom, and you don’t always have to ask his permission. But that’s later, when you know each other enough to have built up trust. You’ll know what not to do. You’ll be able to hold him safe. You’ve got the idea right, and I’ve seen how he responds to you. Your Mating-scene was fucking amazing. I want to talk to you about that later. Not now. Just, for the love of God and my brother, slow the fuck down. You’re not ready for this kind of thing yet. I don’t even know if he can do it – wants to do it. You have to know that first.” Sam listened to the Omega’s sobs as they slowly dwindled and he stroked over his lower back and down his legs. “You ready?”

Michael nodded, and Sam helped him stand. Standing together shifted their dynamic back to a more equal footing. Sam held Michael’s shoulders and looked into his eyes. “You’re going to be great for my brother. I’m so happy for you both.” Ignoring Michael’s nudity, Sam pulled him into a tight hug, then released him to get dressed and went looking for his breakfast.

Dean plunked a plate of eggs in front of his brother. “Well?” he prompted.

“He did good,” Sam said succinctly, digging into his food. Looks like Dean had scrounged up real butter somewhere. It was delicious, and Sam realized how much he’d missed having Dean close. “He’s just getting dressed now. I’m going to scoot in a second and let you two talk. You gonna be okay with your half of that? You need me to stay?”

“Nah. We’re going to clear out of here and head over to pick up some of my stuff. Hey Sam, I was thinking. Would you mind letting me and Michael have the house for the month? You could stay in my suite here or at Cas’ place. I’m sorry to ask, I’m not trying to kick you out of your own home, but I don’t think Michael’s ready for the whole Winchester Pack experience, and I get the feeling he’s overwhelmed by the number of people here. I want go somewhere quiet where we can be alone for our honeymoon; really alone, you know? We could stay at a hotel…”
“No, no, that’s a great idea, Dean. I don’t mind clearing out. I’ll come by tonight after work, pack up some stuff and bring it here. I’ve stayed here so often, it’s practically both of ours anyway. This is big for you, man. I’ll do whatever you need. You just gotta ask. You know that, right?”

“Thanks, Sammy. Yeah, I know.”

Sam finished his omelet, rinsed his plate off, and disappeared to get to work before Michael surfaced. Dean went looking for him. Michael was dressed and groomed, standing next to Castiel’s huge picture window and looking pensively out at the expansive grounds, one hand rubbing his ass. Dean stopped in the doorway, admiring the lines of his mate’s body. He was breathtaking. He was so perfect. Dean realized he couldn’t feel his mate through the bond and remembered slamming it closed in a fit of pique. He cracked it back open and sent Michael a tentative tendril. Hesitant. Careful. Questioning.

Michael sobbed and hung his head without turning around, and Dean crossed the room and took his mate in his arms, holding him tightly. “It’s okay, baby. I know. I’ve got you, now. Shhh, shhh. You’re okay.”

“I’m so fucking sorry, alpha. I’m so sorry. You don’t even know. I would never hurt you like that, not on purpose. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Shhh, Michael. Of course I can. It was just a mistake, right? Look at me. Right?” Michael struggled to meet his alpha’s eyes, but he nodded. “Hey, I’m okay. I’m not really hurt, just a little freaked out. You didn’t break me. I could’ve stopped you with a Red-light if I needed to. Michael, look at me!” Michael’s green eyes finally made it all the way up, but it was agonizing. Dean held him at arm’s length by his shoulders as Sam had done, so that they could look at each other. “If I’d called out ‘Red’, would you have stopped the scene?”

“Of course I would. I’m not a monster, Dean.”

“Of course you would. That’s what I’m saying, Michael. I’m okay. I didn’t safeword. I’m not hurt. You fucked up. You went somewhere with me before we were ready, and you lied to me and to Sam – to Sam directly, and to me by omission. Michael, lying by omission is just as punishable as any other kind of lying. I hope you understand that. But you took your punishment, and now it’s over. Now we move on. Are you good?” Michael let his eyes drop again. It didn’t feel over.

“I still feel so guilty.” He tucked back into Dean’s embrace, and Dean accepted him.

“Well, there’s a couple of ways we can go with that. I think your Omega is just not accustomed to the process. You’ve been taking punishments through your wolf, and that’s why they just piss you off and don’t work. Am I right? Michael?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. What Sam did, it felt different than when my Pop used to do it.”

“That’s good. Sam’s really good at putting people in the right mindset. Believe me, I know. My ass has been at the wrong end of that paddle plenty of times. It sucks, but it works. For me, it works. I think it’ll work for you too once you get used to it. So, if you don’t feel ready to move on, maybe your Omega still feels like it owes something to me, too. If you ask me to, I’ll spank you as well. I wasn’t going to, but if that’s what you need, I’m here for you.”

“NO! Please, no. I don’t need another spanking. I promise.”

Dean laughed. “That’s what I thought you’d say. Okay, the other approach, since we have this Mating-bond between us, is, I can let you in on what I’m feeling. You go digging around in there
until you see for yourself that I’m really not damaged. You’re going to see that I was scared and disturbed, confused, pissed-off, hurt…really fucking surprised. You’re going to see it all, but you’re not going to see me broken, because I’m not. You want to try that? It might make you feel worse at first, but I think it’ll be good in the long run. It’s your call. I’m willing to let you try.”

Michael hesitated but then nodded. He hated being shut out of Dean’s mind. Hated it. Normally their mutual probing into each other’s minds only skimmed the surface; hit just the top-level immediate emotions. Dean wanted Michael to dig deeper. He frowned in concentration and reached up toward Dean’s head with his bond connection. It was hard to find his way at first. He didn’t know what he was doing, but he closed his eyes and felt around for it like a blind man in a strange house.

Dean’s emotions swirled about him. Everything Dean said was true. It was all here, and Michael sobbed again when he found the bundle of pain that he’d put Dean through. But he really was all right. Dean was not harmed, not really. What made Michael cry out though, was that over all of it, surrounding and embracing everything that Michael saw and touched was a rich expansive ocean of warmth that actively reached out to him. It touched him, held him, rocked him, stroked the part of Michael that explored Dean’s psyche. It was everywhere, and it was beautiful. Like a magnet, wherever he went, the ocean rose to greet him, welcoming – rich and warm like comfort food. It knew Michael, accepted and wanted him – treasured him. Here was evidence that was undeniable. Dean loved him. After all the crap Michael’d pulled, all the bratty demands and breaking Dean’s trust as a Sub and failing him so disastrously in just their first few days Mated, Dean loved him.

Dean loved him.

Michael broke. He cried into Dean’s chest. Dean picked him up and carried him to the bed, whispering to him as he lay beside his mate. “I promised you a nap, remember? Shhh, just go to sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Michael cried himself to sleep.

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Dean stayed with Michael until he was sleeping deeply then went across the hall to organize the crap in his own small suite. He logged onto his work computer and spent a little while scanning through correspondence for the most pressing issues. He set his ‘Out of Office’ email alert to indicate he would be out of touch for the next month and redirected people to Benny, Jo, Jody, and Charlie depending on their issues. He kept a feeler out for Michael. Dean couldn’t see Michael’s dream, but he could tell that his mate was dreaming. There was a vague impression of swirling colors that never coalesced or came into any kind of focus. Once he’d boxed up the few personal possessions that he had any expectation of needing in the next month, he leaned over his laptop for one more thing.

Dean checked Castiel’s work calendar. He found that Cas should be alone in his office right now. The alpha scuttled over unannounced to check, his box of books and stuff weighing him down. Castiel looked up when the door opened and stood, smiling warmly at his fiancé. Dean put the box on his desk and let himself accept Castiel’s embrace, hugging him back. Cas kissed him. It was chaste at first, just a greeting, but Cas soon pressed for more, and Dean opened for him. Dean would always open for him. With his hand on the back of Dean’s head, Castiel took to kissing Dean like a man on a mission, like a man dying of thirst. Dean melted into his body, fitting himself in exactly
Actively kissing Castiel back without asking for permission or receiving instruction was such a new thing for Dean. He checked himself. It was true that he was allowing Cas to control the kiss, but he wasn’t fully submitting to him as he’d always done during their years of scening. It seemed he didn’t need any practice to make the switch from exclusively scening to full fiancé mode. His wolf was happy. His alpha was happy. Dean didn’t NEED anything Lupin-related in this moment. He just really wanted to kiss his Alpha fiancé.

Dean’s throat made a growling noise, and he pressed harder against Cas, forcing him to step back into his own desk. He shifted one hand over Castiel’s ass and clung to it, the other holding him across his shoulders. Dean’s tongue plundered Cas’ mouth as he strove to take the kiss from his Alpha. Castiel laughed through their kiss – a laugh of pleasure and delight, then he accepted the challenge and fought Dean for control. Their brief war ended when Cas reversed their positions and flattened Dean’s back against his desktop. Dean’s eyes rolled back in his head, and he gave way, willingly giving everything his Dom demanded. They stole several minutes from Cas’ busy schedule just making out like teenagers. Cas rutted his boner against Dean’s inner thigh, but made no move to do more. He’d promised Michael he wouldn’t, and Castiel kept his promises.

Eventually, they were simply holding each other and breathing the same air. “It feels like it’s been forever since we’ve done that, Dean. I’ve missed you.” Cas nuzzled Dean’s temple.

“I love you, too, Alpha,” murmured Dean, petting Cas’ dark head. “Let me up. My back’s killing me. I think I’m on your stapler.” Cas hauled him to his feet and pecked his lips for good measure.

“Is everything all right with you and Michael this morning?” Cas straightened his white coat and adjusted himself in his slacks.

“It is now.”

Cas raised his eyebrows as he retook his seat, urging Dean to continue.

Dean leaned his ass against the desk. “We had a bit of a mess this morning right after you left. Michael got his wires crossed and pulled Sam into it with us. It was kind of fucked up, but we’re okay now I think.”

“What happened?”

Dean related the whole sordid mess to his Alpha. He didn’t cover for Michael or try to spin it. It was one thing to know that Cas wouldn’t actively interfere in Dean’s relationship with Michael, and it was a good thing. But as Alpha, he still deserved and needed to know what went on in his Pack, and he wasn’t going to be above stepping in if he felt it was warranted. Dean agreed wholeheartedly, and he gave himself over to Cas’ leadership. If Michael didn’t like that, it would just be too bad.

Castiel was thoughtful when Dean finished relating the events of the morning. “If he’s an exhibitionist and you’re not, it could mean trouble. And I may have a chat with Sam. He knows better. Do you need anything from me?” he asked Dean.

“Well, we’re going to need to have you and Michael negotiate custody of me eventually.” Dean rolled his eyes to show how much he was looking forward to THAT experience. “But I don’t need you to speak to him about this morning. I’m not really opposed to the idea of putting together something more...public. It’s kind of ‘meh’ for me, but if it’s his thing, I think I can swing it. He just took me by surprise, that’s all. We’re going to sneak out of here as soon as he wakes up, head over to Sammy’s house and start packing up some of my crap. I figure we’ll live there for the month, get out
of your hair, keep the distractions to a minimum, and hammer our issues out. That cool with you?”

“Whatever you want, Dean. I’m going to miss you. I just got you back, and you’ll be gone for another month.” Cas watched him with a sharp blue gaze. The Alpha was thinking through something, that much was obvious, but Dean wasn’t ready to discuss it.

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’ll be around. I’m not moving to Zimbabwe. Don’t forget, we’re on for New York in two weeks. I got a note this morning. Billie accepted that Broadway premiere invite from what’s-his-face that you like so much. Be sure to remind her we need four tickets now, not two, and to figure out clothes for April and Michael. I’m not doing the shopping.”

“Right! Nicholas Maraby’s new play! I forgot he’d invited us. Are you sure you still want to go? I don’t mind if you skip out. I know plays are not really your thing, Dean.”

“I’m in, baby.” Dean adopted a cunning, coy look that put Castiel on edge. “You know Billie only accepted to give me a chance to flash my new bling at the TV cameras and start a buzz, right? She hasn’t released anything to the press. I think she’s going the sneaky route and letting the rumors build before we confirm our engagement officially. I bet you 200 bucks she’s scheduled us both for ‘Good Morning America’ on the morning after the premiere. You just wait and see. She loves to make you squirm, Alpha.”

Dean leaned down and kissed Castiel sweetly; more than a peck, but not meant to start anything. Then he whispered, “I’ll see you soon.” He stood and moved away. “Text me all you want. Take care of my Mate-in-Law, Cas. That’s my girl too, now.” He collected his box and headed toward the door at the back of the office that led directly into Castiel’s suite. “And Cas?” Castiel looked up, his eyes warm. “We’ve got this. I’m still yours. I don’t remember telling you that after Michael, but I should’ve. I love you, Alpha. I’m going to fucking marry you. You got that?”

“I hear you, Dean. I love you, too. Ditto and all that.”

“You big sap!” Dean exclaimed unfairly. He’d started it. Why was Cas the sap?

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It was lunchtime by the time they pulled into the driveway not far from campus where Dean and Sam had grown up. “We’re home, Baby! You miss it?”

“I’ve never been here before, Dean. How could I miss it?”

“Not you, Michael, the car. She’s my first love, and she’ll always be my number one Baby.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Michael rolled his eyes as he pulled the handle and grumbled under his breath, “…have to share you with a fuckin’ Pack Alpha, and now I have to share you with a goddamned car? What’s next, a goldfish?” He lifted his head and called to Dean who’d opened the trunk, “Hey Dean, you got any pets?”

“No pets,” stated Dean, slamming the trunk closed and handing Michael his bags. “Unless you count
“Sammy.”

“And you’re not sleeping with the car, right?”

Dean laughed. “It’s really not that kind of a relationship, Michael. Your spot is safe. I promise not to throw you over for a Chevy. Good enough?”

“I suppose.”

“C’mon. Lunch! Let’s see what Sammy’s got in the fridge.”

“Yikes!” said Dean as he found nothing but greens, soy, and other non-food items in Sam’s refrigerator. “Scratch that. We’re going back out. You want a beer? How about a greasy burger joint and a cold brew?”

“Yes, please.”

“Kay, drop your stuff through there, that’s my room – I mean our room – and give me a minute in the can.” Dean kissed Michael’s lips and left him. Michael transferred all the bags into the room indicated. It was the master bedroom. He looked around. There were a few knick-knacks and bits of stuff showing that Dean lived here, but Michael was most interested in the family photos on the walls. In the largest one, clearly a professional portrait, four wolves sat posed together. It could’ve been any family from anywhere, but for the pointed-tipped ears. There was a man and a woman leaning into each other. The man, bearded with salt-and-pepper hair held a blond boy of about seven on his lap. Michael recognized Sam’s dimples and his hazel eyes. The woman’s eyes sparkled just like her son’s. She was blond and pretty, her arm around a ten- or eleven-year-old Dean. Dean’s hair was cropped very short, and his green eyes were entrancing, even as a child.

“What do you think?” Dean’s voice startled Michael.

“You have a beautiful family, Dean.”

“Yes, I do.” Dean snuggled into Michael’s back, wrapping his arms around his mate and placing his chin on Michael’s shoulder. “My mate, in particular, is stunning.”

Michael chuckled. “Flatterer. No but, really. Will I get to meet your folks?”

“Mom died shortly after I turned 14. Sam had just presented as beta. She died in a fire at work. It was on the news. There was supposed to be an emergency exit on the second floor, but there wasn’t, and they couldn’t get out. Six other wolves died that day. It was…awful.”

Michael turned alarmed eyes on his mate. “My God, Dean. I had no idea. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah. Thanks, man. I still miss her a lot. My old man is still around, but he’s so lost in the bottle, he may as well have died when she did. He gave the house to me when I turned 17 and walked away. I haven’t seen him in a couple of years, but we drop a line every now and then. He’s a good man, and I miss him, but I can’t help him. Sam and I both tried, but he doesn’t want any help. He just wants to wallow and wait to join Mom, you know?” Dean paused with his eyes on the portrait. “So anyway, enough about that. Let’s go get lunch and talk. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Okay. Take me somewhere good. I need a cheeseburger, and I need it now.” Michael read Dean’s need to separate himself from the sadness the family portrait evoked and opted to ride his enthusiasm for red meat out of the hole they’d dug with each other. He followed Dean back out the door and hopped into the shiny black muscle car pretending to be a family sedan.
Thanks for telling me what you think. I'm so excited for the next chapter. I've been bridging to Michael's and Dean's big talk for way too long. And after that, Michael and Cas will have to hammer out an agreement. That should be all kinds of interesting.
Monday, May 8, 2017

Chapter Summary

Dean and Michael hammer out a plan for moving forward

Chapter Notes

There's no one in this chapter but Dean and Michael, unless you count the waitress who has one line. It's dialogue-dense, but they had a lot to talk about, so no apologies.

Thanks to everyone who left comments and kudos. I have found my newest addiction. I was seriously NOT fishing for compliments, but the support is appreciated none-the-less.

This is probably it for my Sun - Tue weekend from work, but I've said that before and then had a muse strike. If I don't go nuts and write one more, I'll see you all again next weekend.

Love from Texas.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NOW:

They shared a booth in the back of Dean’s favorite local joint. Every surface was covered in a thin sheen of grease, but the beers were cold and the burgers cheesy. Dean relaxed. He was back in a place where everyone knew him. These were his people, and they understood one another. Dean felt the last of the tension he’d carried for six weeks drain out of his back, only realizing once it faded that it had been there at all. Big cities and Dean Winchester, it seemed, were not a match. He didn’t mind visiting, and there were two decently-sized burgs within driving distance when he wanted them, but Dean found respite in the small and the everyday, in the familiar. He liked his little hometown, even if it was only little by comparison. He liked that he knew that everywhere he went in this town, he and his kind would be welcome.

They sat on opposite sides of the booth. Dean had hesitated, weighing the virtues of sitting side-by-side for canoodling purposes versus across from one another, which allowed for better face-to-face interaction. It was a business lunch though, really, so the canoodling would have to wait. Dean even restrained himself from slipping out of his shoe and molesting his mate with his toes as he was sorely tempted to do.

Michael took a long draught from his bottle, and then set it on the table and regarded Dean. “This where you tell me to knock off all the posturing and stop trying to stake my claim on you? You know, stop trying to get rid of him?”
“Do you need me to?”

Michael looked down at the table and fidgeted with the label on his beer. “Maybe.”

“Hey,” Dean’s voice was gentle. He reached across the table for Michael’s hand. “You know by now that this is how things are. I don’t want you to just roll over and not defend what’s yours, not ask for your place at the table. I expect you to stand up for yourself, man. And I wouldn’t let you get sidelined. But we have a lot of years together on the horizon – if we’re lucky, we do. It’s going to take all of us working together to make it work for everyone.”

“Well, that’s terrific for you and him, but making it work for everyone isn’t exactly my highest priority. Bottom line, Dean, is that if push comes to shove and it doesn’t work like you and Castiel want it to, it’s the marriage that breaks, not our Mating-bond. He needs to know that pushing me around and making demands is not…he’s not really working from a place of strength. That’s all I’m saying. I’ll only be pushed so far. I’m not going to take any crap from that man. I don’t give a shit who he is.”

The Lupin waitress set their burgers down in front of them along with a large basket of hot fries. “Need anything else?” she asked. Dean shook his head impatiently at her, worried the distraction would knock the conversation off the rails.

He sighed. “Michael, I…I hear you. You know what? You’re right. You and me, we’re a lock. We’re Mated, my friend. I’m yours, you’re mine till the end of time, okay? So, why are you so fucking defensive? He couldn’t take me away from you if he tried – and he isn’t trying.”

“Right.”

“Look, forget about Castiel’s side of things and look at me. Sweetheart, I’m as committed to being with Cas as he is with me. Quit thinking this is all him shouldering in on you. I’m NOT giving him up, and I know you don’t understand that. Hell, I don’t really understand it myself. I’m in love with him. I spent nearly a decade in a miserable half-existence. I knew I’d meet you one day, Mate you, love you, pups, white pickets, whole nine, and I knew that when that happened, I’d lose him. How do you build a relationship with someone you know is going to get ripped out of your grasp? No, don’t do that. Don’t tune me out, man, you need to hear this.”

Michael was leaning back in his booth with his eyes closed and his arms crossed. He looked to be moments from bolting. He opened his eyes and refocused on Dean, but there was defiance and hurt in his glare. Dean didn’t back down. “You Mated me, Michael. You Mated me, and this is me. You get nothing more or less than exactly who I am.

“I am a fucking flawed individual with a passion for fixing people and a ramped-up sex drive. I drink too much beer. I don’t go to the gym. I get off on having my ass whipped. I look nerdy in reading glasses. Nothing I do is ever going to be good enough. And I’m in love with Castiel. You got a problem with him and me, you need to bring it to me, and we’ll work on it together. You got it? I’m not giving him up. I paid my dues for years thinking I could never have him, and now I have a second chance. Baby, I love you so much, but I love him, too. I know that hurts you. I don’t see any way that it wouldn’t.”

“I’m not gonna leave you in the cold. Like I said, you get a place at the table, and you get a place in the bed. You get a say. What I’m asking for is for you to take a huge leap of faith with me that what we have between the two of us is strong enough to make it work with all four of us. That starts with you giving up on the fantasy that you’re going to get me all to yourself. I’m sorry, Michael. You have a right to be angry about that, but it’s just how things are. Take me or leave me; this is me.”
Michael picked up a fry and ate it, his eyes focused past Dean’s shoulder. Dean dug into his burger. He wanted to keep the tension level as low as possible, and eating was a good way to bring a sense of normalcy into the mix. His eyes never left his mate though. In the end, Michael was right, it was the marriage that was vulnerable, and Michael’s buy-in was key.

After a moment, Michael brought his focus back to Dean. “What’s it going to look like? You’re asking me to agree to something, and I can’t picture it. The way it looks is you two are setting up as Mom and Pop, and the chick and me, we’re the pups. That’s not sitting well with me. I’m not a pup, Dean. She wants to go along with it, fine. She can do whatever floats her boat – I don’t care – but it’s not for me, and I don’t care if I am an Omega or not. I’m not a pup.”

“Agreed. You’re not a pup. So, let’s not do that Mom and Dad and pups thing. That’s pretty freaking creepy. Let’s start with just you and me, okay? We’ve got a month to work it all into something we’re comfortable with and can build on. Then we add in Cas and April. One step at a time. Can you do that? For now, just focus on us.”

“You don’t feel it, do you? The possessiveness. The jealousy. You’re sharing your husband just the same way I’m sharing my mate, but you and April are BFFs for some reason. What the fuck is that?”

“I just don’t feel possessive. I don’t know why. I don’t see her as an adversary, more like a little sister. I can’t explain it to you. Just be thankful I don’t get possessive, and she seems not to. We don’t need that much more complexity. Just, please, Michael? One thing at a time?”

Michael took a bite from his burger and chewed it slowly, holding Dean’s eye and thinking. “All right. One thing at a time.”

“Thank you.”

“You need me to go along with this though,” Michael inserted after a few bites, with his mouth full. “Let’s just all be real clear. You can say over and over again that it’s a done deal, and I just have to bend over and take it like a good Omega. But truth is, I don’t. If I don’t jump on the bandwagon with you, that wagon’s going nowhere. I hold all the power, and if you two don’t acknowledge that, you might find me a lot less willing to comply. I don’t care how many times you spank me for it.”

“Are you threatening me, Omega?”

“ Aren’t you doing the same?”

It was a tense standoff. What Michael said was only partially true. He held a lot of weight in whether this thing went sideways or not, but ‘all the power’? No way. Not all of it. “Look, I’m not going to take a mouthy Omega and not respond. Once we get past today, I’m going to take a bratty attitude as a request for some disciplinary attention. You’re GOING to learn your place, but we need to finish our negotiations first. We’re still just at step one of that. Finish your lunch, and then let’s pick it back up at home.”

Michael smirked at him. Clearly, he thought he’d won a victory. Dean just wanted him to quit seeing their relationship as adversarial. They should be a team, damnit.

“How’s the bruising on your ass healing, Dean?” Michael changed the subject, again with his mouth full. Dean excused him. He didn’t have the greatest table manners himself, and it wasn’t a high priority for him.

“It’s only been about four days. I think they’ve gone mostly yellow and brown, but they’re still there.”
“Let me see.”

Dean only hesitated long enough to work out in his head if his mate should reasonably have the authority to inspect another Dom’s handiwork. He concluded quickly that yes, Michael should have that right. Dean stood up next to the table and turned outward. He unbuckled his belt and shoved everything down to mid-thigh, holding the back of his shirttail up out of the way and craning his head around to see for himself.

He wouldn’t have done this in Dallas. There were too few wolves and too many misconceptions. Here, no one cared. Michael reached a hand to him and grasped one cheek firmly, working the muscle in a strong massage. “Still sore?”

“Only a little.”

“The marks don’t jibe with each other. These look like switch-marks, and this was something flat.” Michael ran his hand over Dean’s ass and thighs respectively. Dean shivered as chill bumps spread out from Michael’s fingertips.

“Yeah. It was a cane and then a hairbrush. Two separate events.” Dean pulled his boxers and jeans back into place and took his seat again, resuming his meal.

“What for?”

“I don’t know where the boundaries are going to be when they all shake out. It’s probably not my place to say, except I’ll admit that the caning was for fun, and the hairbrush wasn’t.”

“Ahh. Bit of a brat yourself, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.” Dean winked at Michael, who couldn’t help blushing and couldn’t stop the small smile that twitched into place briefly before he suppressed it. How did Dean do that? Michael wanted to be pissy and resentful, but Dean was disarmingly adorable.

“You ready?” asked Michael, upending his beer. “I’d like to get home and get busy ‘Negotiating’ you.”

“Very funny. I think we should stick to talking though. I’m tired of having to say, ‘not yet’. I want to get our cards on the table and then have some fun. You with me?”

“Will that get your knot in my ass sooner?” Dean nodded confidently and dropped some cash on the table. “Then let’s do it. I hope you’re ready for me. I drive a hard bargain.”

“Good.” Dean let Michael guide him out with a hand on his lower back. Some things wouldn’t need to be negotiated. Some things between them just came naturally.

Dean started his car and put it into drive. “Do you own a car, Michael?”

“No, but I have a license. We need to go back down to Grand Prairie for my stuff soon. It’s not a big hurry. I was scheduled to be up here for the testing and the twelve-week Omega training class, so I packed for several weeks.”

“Would it be all right with you if we do that after our month in solitary? I kind of want to stay quarantined with you as much as possible.”

“That would be fine, Dean.”
“And we need to buy you a car. The bus service here doesn’t go everywhere, and there will be times that you’ll need to move around on your own.”

Michael stared at Dean. “You want to buy me a car?”

“Well, yeah. You need one. You said you’ve got a license. We can get that transferred to Kansas any time. I think we have ninety days to switch your custody and your residency. I don’t know. I’ll look it up.” Dean noticed Michael still looked shocked. “What?”

“You plan to just go out and buy me a car. Just like that? Exactly how rich are you, Dean? I mean, I saw your house. It’s nice, but it’s not fancy like the rich folks.”

Dean laughed. “No, the house was my dad’s, remember? Sam and I live there, but now I’m going to give it to him and move in with Cas. I guess it’s not a secret really. I’ve uh, done pretty well for myself. The gig at The Facility doesn’t pay all that much in salary, but I’m part owner, so it brings in a steady stream from distributions. We reinvest most of the profits back into the research and services. The purpose of that place is to make it affordable for most everyone and give scholarships and waivers to the rest. That leaves not a lot of income distribution for the investors and owners, but it’s all in the manifesto so investors know what they’re getting into.

“Actually, most of the money came from the book deals. I’ve done three of them now. Thinking of starting to work on a fourth, but that’ll probably get tabled for a while, now that I’ve got you.”

“Book deals? You wrote books?”

“And you call yourself a YouTube fan,” Dean scoffed. “Dude, I plug the books at every convention, like over and over. Go back and watch one.”

“I guess I didn’t realize they were books you’d written yourself.”

“Hey, I’m a fucking scholar, all right? I’ve got a PhD and shit. Maybe I should make you call me doctor!”

“Maybe you should,” Michael responded seductively, and Dean laughed. He pulled back into the driveway and parked the car.

“Let’s go. And keep your hands to yourself or we won’t be able to get through this today.”

They took up places at the kitchen table opposite one another. Dean brought a couple of pens and some paper so they could take notes. Michael smirked at him. “Laugh it up, fuzzball,” Dean objected. “You’re gonna appreciate my forethought when you have something important to record and hold me to later. You ever done a negotiation like this before? At college?” Dean asked, switching to serious.

“No really. We just always went with our gut and told each other to piss off when things weren’t working.”

“That’s fine for one-night stands and college hookups, I guess, but it doesn’t work well for long term or if you want to go deep. So, here’s how this works: we start by defining the environment and structure. That’s why I wanted to get my upcoming marriage on the table right away. That informs everything we do from here on. It also includes both of our ranks in the Pack and what our responsibilities are there. Next, we define our roles between one another, and when to make each one applicable. I think that will be straightforward. I feel like we work together fairly seamlessly. The Mating-bond helps there. You with me so far?”
Michael nodded and drew spirals on his paper.

“Finally, we’ll get down into the details of our likes and dislikes, our hard and soft limits; our kinks, preferences, and all that jazz. I want to hear what you want from me and how you see us getting there. That part of the discussion is probably going to work better if you take the lead. You good with that?”

“With telling my Sub what his Dom wants from him? Yes, Dean. I’m good with that.”

“Smart-ass,” Dean rebuked. “Don’t forget that the Sub gets to put two cents in as well. I get to set my limits, man.”

“I know Dean. I’m only joking. Go ahead, lay it on me. Give me all the bad news. What’s my curfew?”

“Keep the sass going and I’ll actually give you one.” Dean leveled a look at Michael that reminded him there was a power disparity between them. Michael breathed, worked his jaw, cracked his neck, and nodded at his mate. He could do this. He didn’t have to like it, but he could do it. For Dean.

Dean let Michael find his balance point and then continued. “All right. As a Mated Omega in the Winchester Pack, you’ll be granted full rights and obligations of an active adult pack member. You will take up residence in the Novak manor, soon-to-be-renamed, and will become a ward of the Pack Alpha, Castiel Novak, also soon-to-be-renamed.”

“Can I stop you to ask questions, or do you want me to just write them down?”

“It’s just us Michael. Ask anything you want. If we feel like it’s slowing us down and breaking our train of thought, we might start jotting them down, but let’s try just talking to each other. Did you have a question?”

“Why am I his ward and not yours?”

“Because he’s Alpha. He is nominal custodian of all the Omegas in the Pack. It’s just how it works.” Dean waited until Michael nodded for him to continue.

“You will be required to complete a Keller test, Omega training, and probably Dominant training as well. I think we’ll most likely put you in with a private tutor for the Omega stuff. I may do it myself, but there may also be a benefit to having someone else work with you on that. I don’t see you fitting in well with the Omega-Neutrals. You’re more likely to lead a mutiny in that class and get them all in trouble.”

“Why do I still have to do the test? Don’t we all know I’m a Dom? Is there really any doubt about that now?”

“No, not in my mind. But the test gives us more than just a definition of your gender, and you’re already enough of a puzzle that we need all the help we can get. Just go with it. It’s not optional, so fighting it is pointless.”

“Resistance is futile?”

“Yes it is, you nerd. We’re pushing legislation through that will require it of every wolf as they come of age. That’s gonna be years more in the implementation though.” Dean got up and pulled a couple of beers from the fridge. He handed one to Michael after popping the cap. “Just the one,” he clarified. Negotiating while buzzed would be a bad idea, but he figured they could handle two beers apiece without hitting any danger spots.
“Where were we? Yeah, you get your test and your training. You already know about the house rules. I have a few to add to that in a minute. If you break a house rule, any pack wolf who stands above you in rank has the right to discipline you for it. Usually, they’ll check in with me first, but it’s not really required. You are to obey Cas and Sam like you would me where domestic or public behavior is concerned.” Dean took a drink and paused to see if Michael would protest, but he didn’t.

“You’ll get a lot more information about how it all fits together in your Omega training class. Also, just real quick: Michael, you don’t ever have to obey a wolf who isn’t your authority figure. You answer to me, to Cas and Sam, to your instructors in class, and to the leadership of The Facility whenever you’re on campus. Cas is going to expect you to defer to Benny and Bobby, both. But if some asshole at the grocery store tries to make you kneel, you can tell him to cram it up his ass, and you don’t have to be polite. Don’t get yourself arrested for assault, but you know what I mean.”

“So, what Sam did this morning? He can do that whenever he wants, even if you don’t know about it?”

“If you break a rule like you did this morning, yes. He’s good about communicating, so he’ll probably let me know, or, like this morning, he asked permission, but yeah. That’s how Pack discipline works. Have you never had something like that?”

“No, it was just Mom and Pop and the two of us pups. Pop was in charge. No one else had the right to spank us. We’ve got a big Pack, but it’s kinda split up into families. Like, membership in the Pack is a loose association. Not like this.”

“I think you’ll get used to it pretty quickly. It’s really not as complicated as it sounds. It’s built to follow our instincts, so we’ll tend to fall into these roles even if we don’t remember how the policies are stated. You still with me?”

“Mm-hm. Go on.”

“We have to figure out a Release schedule for you. The Keller test will help with that, too. Do you know your Omesol production rate? How often do you feel you need a Release?”

“Oh, uh. I’m not sure. Pop did it with a paddle every month or so when I lived at home. While I was in college, I had a couple of alpha friends who made sure I got Released. Most of the time, really good sex works well enough that I don’t need the paddle. We had to check in with the campus clinic once a month to get the level checked, and I never tripped the meter, so I think it’s probably about that often, monthly. Maybe less.”

“Did your father ever Claim you? You know what a C.F. is, right?”

“Yes, Dean. I know what a C.F. is. No. He never felt like it would help, and I think he knew I’d fight it. I’m not good at submission, especially where my pop is concerned.”

“I’ve noticed.” Dean stood again and stretched. “Michael, I don’t know how to make it work yet, but we’re going to need to find a way to put alpha Claims on you before you go through training. Your Omega needs one from me and one from Cas. Preferably, you’ll take a Claim from your Omega-class instructor too, but that might be too much to ask. Cas thinks you’re a Central Omega and Profound Dominant. That’s going to be a bitch to navigate in terms of getting the C.F. to stick, but it’s really important for the stability factor that the Omega’s looking for. We just gotta find a way to get you out of your Dominant long enough to let your Omega take the Claim. I’m dizzy just thinking about it.”

Dean sighed and sat back down. “You want to take a break?”
“Will you knot me?”

“Very tempting, but no. Business first.”

“It’s your loss. Missed opportunity. Sam forbid me from any Dominant behavior with you until we hashed out our agreement, so this is a small window that’s closing fast, alpha. You sure you don’t want in?”

“I’m in charge?”

Michael pulled his shirt over his head and licked his lips lasciviously. “Whatever you want, Dean.”

“Yeah, I’m not turning that down. Bedroom. Let’s go.”

They were both naked by the time they got there and met in the middle of the room in a tangle of limbs and lips. Dean squeezed Michael’s firm ass, and Michael ripped the bandage off Dean’s Mating-scar and mouthed over it, sucking painfully. “What do you want, Dean?”

Dean let his head fall to the side to bare his throat and his bite to his mate. “Want you to hit me, baby. I’ll fuck you so good, I promise, but please, just a little. Want to feel what your hand is like. Please, Sir?”

Michael chuckled. Even when he didn’t have to, Dean submitted. It’s just who he was. Michael kissed up his neck and stroked over his ribs possessively. “Not until the bruises are completely gone, my love,” he whispered into Dean’s ear, nibbling. “I don’t want to have to wonder if his are still there under my marks. I want to know they’re mine and only mine. You’re just going to have to wait for it.”

“Nnng, Michael, you said whatever I want. Please.”

“Anything but that. C’mon alpha. Is that all you think about? Give me an order. You want me to stick my tongue in your ass? You like a good, solid rimming?” Michael walked Dean to the bed and pushed him gently onto his back, pulling his legs up and pressing his knees toward his belly to reveal his hole.

“Mm-hmm.” Dean was already lost to Sub-space. If he were in his front-brain, he might marvel at how quickly his wolf rolled for Michael’s voice and touch. Whatever Michael did, Dean was on board. Michael knelt on the carpet and stroked himself slowly while he licked over Dean’s anus. He held Dean’s legs with an arm across the backs of them both, near the knees and began to work his tongue in circles around Dean’s rim, sometimes flattening it and sometimes pointing it and delving right in.

Dean rocked his hips minutely then remembered he was under no instruction to keep still. He flipped himself onto his knees and rudely shoved his ass into his mate’s face.

“Fuck yeah!” said Michael, diving back in and getting to work. His tongue was everywhere. He worked it around and around the tight muscles and pressed it deep inside of Dean’s most intimate place, fucking Dean with its stiffened pointed tip. Dean moaned and rocked against him, impaling himself. Michael kept one hand on Dean’s thigh to stabilize him and kept the other busy with his own erection.

“Are your nipples sensitive, alpha? Would you pinch them for me?”

Dean whined and lowered his face and chest to the bed to free his arms. He had to bow his back just a little, but he managed to work his fingers in and pinch both nipples hard. It was better when a Dom
did it, but it still felt pretty fucking awesome, and he groaned again, pushing back into Michael’s face.

“Can you come like this?” Michael asked him, resting his cheek against Dean’s bruised thigh and giving his tongue a break. He rubbed over Dean’s hole with his thumb and then shoved it in as far as it would go.

“Fuck! Michael! Fuck, yeah! Just like that!”

“Is that a yes, Dean?”

“Uh-huh. If you keep doing that. Fingers, Michael. Use your fingers.” Dean was still working away at his nipples, pinching, rolling, pressing, and he was panting hard. Michael spit on his fingers and pressed two carefully inside his mate. He pumped them in and out for a minute or two and took it all in. His mate, the need, the raw shameless desire. He felt around for Dean’s prostate and rubbed against it on the up-thrust, curling his fingers down toward Dean’s belly.

“Don’t let me hurt you, baby. If you need me to get the lube out, I will. Do you like it like this?”

“Yeah. Like it to burn a little,” panted Dean. “Just like that. Oh, Fuck!”

“Oh, holy fuck, look at you! Get up. I need you to knot me, and I can’t wait any longer.” Michael slapped Dean’s rump lightly as he pulled out his fingers. Dean whined for the loss of Michael’s fingers and the tease of a spanking that wasn’t, but he rolled over and let Michael pull him to standing.

Michael took Dean’s place, bent over the bed with one knee up on the mattress and the other braced on the floor. He had slick rolling from his channel and smeared on both thighs. He reached back wordlessly and spread his cheeks apart with both hands, a clear invitation and instruction that spoke to Dean’s alpha and his Sub alike. Dean didn’t need to hear any words. He lined himself up and pressed in. He let himself sink in as he covered Michael’s body with his own, wrapping the Omega in skin-to-skin contact from their thighs to their shoulders and kissing the Mating-scar on Michael’s shoulder as he folded over.

Dean wrapped his arms around his mate’s chest and pressed his forehead to the back of Michael’s neck as he thrust into the tight, warm, slick channel. Michael propped himself on one hand, reaching the other to stroke his own cock. He rocked back to meet Dean’s hips and deepen the reach of his cock inside Michael’s channel. They both moaned when Dean’s cock struck Michael’s prostate, and the Mating-bond rang with electricity.

Dean picked up the pace, teething along Michael’s neck and kissing his shoulder. He sucked tiny bruises as he went and groaned into the bites and kisses. Then he quickened again, standing upright, and taking hold of Michael’s hips, pulling him backward against the motion of his driving hips. Dean’s knot was starting to swell and catch as it was forced in and pulled back out again and again. Michael whined and grunted at the delicious catch, feeling full and complete. Almost complete.

“Come on, alpha! Knot me, damn you!”

“Fuck! Michael! Oh, fucking God, yes!” Dean sped up again, fucking ruthlessly, growling deep in his throat. He let his head fall to his chest as he grunted into his work and felt his thighs start to burn. The Mating-bond warned Dean that Michael was close. Michael’s fist flew over his cock, stripping it with blinding speed. He threw his head back and screamed as he came, his channel clenching around the alpha’s knot and securing it in place. The knot held and Dean too, came with a shout. He pumped against Michael’s ass and ground his knot in his mate’s channel as far as it would go,
sending come shooting warm and filling deep into Michael. Dean continued to grind against Michael’s ass through his release. Then he stood panting, massaging Michael’s hips with his hands, eyes closed, head thrown back to catch his breath. Dean moved through a couple of aftershocks before folding himself back down over his mate.

“Jesus, Dean.”

“Yeah.”

They stayed like that for a few minutes, breathing and swirling emotions to each other through their bond. “Start working your way up the bed, and I’ll follow you,” Dean instructed Michael.

“I don’t think you have a choice there, buddy,” Michael teased back. “If I’m moving, you’re moving. You’re the one hanging by his dick.”

“Nice. Just, move slowly and be careful.” They eased forward, careful to keep the knot from pulling and worked themselves into a spoon position at the head of the bed. Dean wrapped his arms around his mate and snuggled into him. Michael’s Mating-bite was on the wrong shoulder for Dean to reach with his mouth, so he settled for rubbing a thumb over the scar. It was mostly healed already, and he liked the way it felt under his thumb. Sensitive nerves were growing up into it, too. Dean could feel Michael react to his touch, and they shared a smile that neither could see but both knew was there.

Dean dozed for a bit while Michael stroked his arm with a light touch.

When the knot slipped free, they reluctantly got up, rinsed off, dressed, and got back to work. Michael found grapes and cheese in the fridge and crackers in the pantry. He put together an impromptu snack plate and filled a couple of glasses with water.

Dean thanked him. “We can’t resist our roles, can we?” He felt very relaxed.

Michael scrubbed a hand through his Sub’s hair, and then sat back down across from him. “Where were we when you distracted me?” Michael asked.

Dean ignored the dig. They really did have a lot of ground to cover.

“All we have left of section one is ranks and responsibilities. We already know our ranks. Any questions there?”

“Yes. You said Sam’s paddled you before, but you rank higher than him. Does that mean he’s not going to be doing that anymore? Just Castiel and me, now?”

“Um, Sam and I are a bit of a special case. We’ve always been close. He knows me really well; knows how to work me through when I’m on a bratty streak; knows how to bust me out of it. If I were any way but how I am, I would outrank him free and clear, and there wouldn’t be any overlap. But he’s profoundly Dominant, plus trained as a paddle-man, and I’m such a freaking submissive brat, that we just about level out when you add it all together. It’s always worked for us for me to be his big brother in every realm of our lives except inside our wolves where behavior is concerned. In there, he Tops me. I’ve taken ass-beatings from him since before he Presented. He’s a natural, and it works for us. Frankly, Michael, if you told us both today we had to stop, I don’t think we’d be capable. It’s how we work. It’s just how we roll together. Is that going to be a problem?”

“I, uh, I don’t think so. It’s not the same as Castiel. Sam’s not fucking you, too.”

“God no! And he’s not Domming for me either. It’s only punishment when I need to have my head screwed back on through my backside. I can get kind of out of control sometimes. Maybe it won’t be
an issue anymore what with having two full time Doms watching over me, but I suspect he and I will always need to connect that way."

“I understand. I’d like to request that Sam run it by me first when he wants to punish you. Would that be reasonable?”

“Yes, since the arrangement I have with Sam falls counter to the rankings of the pack, that’s reasonable.” Dean wrote it down as a stipulation of Michael’s on his paper.

“As far as responsibilities go, that’s also pretty straightforward. Everyone does housework. Everyone cleans up after themselves. You meet any professional and institutional obligations you make. You don’t break any laws. Communicate everything to whoever sits above you; that’s me. Don’t hide anything. By the way, I already filled Cas in on what happened this morning. He’s going to follow up with Sam, but he’s not planning to talk to you about it. I told him you’ve already had your discussion, and he’s good with it. He trusts me. And Michael, I’m not going to give him any reason to stop trusting me. We’re not playing games in this pack; none of the ‘two-sides-against-the-middle’ crap that would divide us and breed disharmony just for the sake of stirring the pot.

“So, yeah, communicate everything. At first, I want you to overcommunicate. I want to hear everything that bugs you, everything you like, every time you get a hangnail.”

Michael nodded solemnly. Dean felt nothing disturbing through the bond. Michael was either learning to guard his emotions or he was genuinely invested in the conversation.

“Follow all the Pack rules to the letter. I already said that. Be good to Gabe and April. Don’t be an ass to Sam. That just leaves my rules, and those are few and simple so far. Number one, you’ve heard. Keep hold of your temper. That includes sarcasm and tantrums. I don’t want to see you roll your eyes or sigh dramatically at anyone in this Pack. It’s disrespectful, and I will spank you for it. When you’re upset, you need to talk to me.”

“Right, because I’m always so rational when I’m pissed off. Like you are.” Disdain dripped messily off Michael’s tongue.

“There. Like that. Find another way to say that without the attitude. Try again. I’m giving you a second chance for practice.”

Michael heaved a heavy sigh and lowered his eyes. He gave it a go in halting words. “Dean, I am fairly certain that when I’m angry or exceptionally irritated, I will lose the ability to control my behavior in a rational way.” Michael popped a grape into his mouth.

“Better. And I’ll work on that with you. You CAN control yourself even when you’re angry. You just need practice and motivation. Fair warning, I’ll motivate through your butt, and not in the happy way.”

“Yes, alpha.”

“Next rule: I expect to know your schedule on a weekly basis. I’m not setting a curfew, and I’m not going to make you check in everywhere you go, but you will report to me once a week where you plan to be and when anything changes.”

Michael nodded and began finally to write on his paper.

“Third rule: You will work with me to keep yourself Balanced. No one but me or Cas will be permitted to Release you unless it happens during class incidentally. If you need one, you let me know. Don’t wait for me to come to you.
“Fourth rule: You are expected to take an active part in your own wellbeing. This one overlaps with house rule Number Two, but it goes deeper. Only you know what you need and what it’s going to take to get you there. Don’t neglect yourself, don’t harm yourself, be gentle and easy with yourself, and communicate your needs. That includes figuring out what you want to do with your life from here. If you want to go back to school or find a job, then let’s figure out how to make that happen.” Dean’s eyes took on an intense light, red-ringed and powerful.

“Fifth rule: This is the last of them for now. We’ll add more as needed later. Fifth rule is, buy-in to the wellbeing of this pack. You are expected to put the needs of the pack as a high priority. You will work sincerely with your fellow Doms and you will negotiate with Castiel in good faith. I expect you to consider that you and he both have needs that need fulfilling and strive to make a space for him while taking care to protect your own needs. You are also expected to keep watch over all of the Neutrals and Submissives. Our pack will grow over the years if the Universe grants us that blessing, and as a Dominant, you bear responsibility to hold a protective wing over those beneath you. Questions?”

“Where do I sleep?”

“Oh. Um. I don’t know. That one hasn’t come up yet. Let’s see, Cas has the Master Suite. I know he wants to share that with me. How about this; you and I stake claim to whichever room you want, just for the two of us, and when I’m with Cas, I’ll sleep in the Master with him. You and he stay put, and I travel.”

“What about nights when he’s with his mate? Could you and I take the Master bed on those nights?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. Let’s bring it up when we work out the details all together at the end of the month. That’s an important part of this. It defines space and boundaries. It tells us where Home is.”

“Let’s move on to our roles and how that all works,” prompted Michael.

“All right. You and me. The way I see it, everything sexual or scene-related is your domain. Everything domestic or public is mine. We can talk about scenes beforehand and set some guidelines, but once we know each other better, I’m good with following your lead.” Dean paused and rubbed a hand across his mouth, searching for the right words to proceed.

“I’ll be honest with you Michael, I don’t safeword. It’s wrong. It’s unsafe. I train Subs all the time to use those safewords, but when I’m deep under, I can’t do it. I’m going to need you to know that and watch out for me. If you take me deep enough, sometimes I go completely nonverbal and won’t even be able to answer you. I’m trusting that you won’t hurt me. Can you help me with that? It’s really fucking scary to think about it when I’m out here in my front-brain, knowing that once I’m under, I’m completely at your mercy.”

“Jesus, Dean. I’m…I’ll need to be way more careful. Holy shit. Really?”

Dean nodded. “It’s one of Castiel’s biggest worries. He knows me. He worries that you might get carried away and not notice if I get into trouble. That almost happened this morning. To be totally frank, Michael, it did happen this morning. We’re lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“Okay. I get it. I wasn’t listening to you through the bond at all this morning. That can’t happen again. Ever.”

“Don’t stress out about it. This morning was a learning moment. Let’s take it slow and work our way up. I really need to go deep sometimes. I’m not giving that up. We just have to get there slowly.
You’re going to hate this, but working with Cas as a mentor would help you.”

Michael nodded somberly. He was beginning to get an idea of how things were going to be in Pack Winchester. He just didn’t know yet if he could live with it. “You hated what I did this morning with Sam. I’m sorry about that Dean. I really am. But it felt so good to show you off. I want so badly to have people watch you be good for me. What do we do about that? What if our kinks don’t align?”

“I didn’t hate having an audience exactly. I hated not knowing why. It was like two totally different parts of myself were trying to be in front at the same time, and it was overwhelming. Michael, I can do public. I fuck people in front of seminar and workshop audiences, in class and in the Processing room. I do that all the time. I can do that for you any time you want, you just gotta give me some idea it’s coming.”

“No, Dean. You don’t understand what I want. I want the private Dean, the one you only show to me and Castiel; I want that Dean on display. I want people – select people under controlled circumstances – to watch you at your most vulnerable give yourself to me. Fuck, now I’ve got a boner.” Michael pressed the heel of his hand to his crotch.

Dean’s stared at him with eyes wide and jaw slack. “I don’t know how to do that,” he admitted.

“If we go slowly, would you be willing to try? If I guided you through it and kept you safe and cherished, would you try?” Michael watched Dean’s reaction for signs he was slipping under. He looked to be on the edge. “Alpha!” he snapped. “Stay with me. I need you out front right now.”

Dean shook his head to clear it. “Promise me to take it slow, and don’t hit me with any surprises, and I’ll try. Sam had the right idea to start off with close friends or Pack. I’m not letting strangers in yet, man. Shit, I can’t believe I’m doing this, but whatever. Let’s try.”

“God, you’re incredible,” breathed Michael.

“That’s all I have right now. I’m done. The rest is all you, Sir.” Dean leaned back in his chair and blew the tension of the moment out. Letting Michael take the reins was easy; too easy. Dean had skipped everything to do with their Secondaries as if he’d merely forgotten. He hadn’t forgotten. He ruthlessly stuffed that irritating nudge back under the rug at his feet and nodded assertively for Michael to take the lead over.

“Well, then, let’s see. I like most of what I’ve seen from you so far as a Sub. Someone trained you very well.” Michael quirked a brow at Dean, and Dean smiled back sheepishly. “Of course, I will be applying some training of my own. The simple rules of scene conduct are: You stay naked unless instructed otherwise. Your starting position when asked to assume it is kneeling back on your heels, knees apart, hands on your thighs, and head comfortably down. Eyes on the floor in front of you. I want you relaxed.”

Dean got up and walked into the living room, stripping as he went. “We’re not in a scene right now, Michael, but do you mind if I work through it as you talk?”

“Go ahead.” Michael followed him and sat on the ancient couch to remind himself not to hover and instruct, but just to inform. Dean took the position described and adjusted his shoulders, settling comfortably into a modified Position Number 1.

“Toes flat, or up on my toes?” Dean asked. “I don’t have any joint problems yet, so I can do either.”

“Toes flat. I want you at rest.”

“Yes, Sir.”
“You’re not to meet my eyes unless I tell you to. You’re to keep a bend of deference in your neck unless positioned in such a way that you can’t.” Dean nodded in understanding.

“When given an instruction, you have four options immediately available to you: One. Comply in full at once. Two. Ask a clarifying question if you don’t understand the instruction. You will not be punished for asking questions as long as you do so respectfully, and you don’t use this option to stall or negotiate. Three. Safeword – either Yellow to pause, Red to stop, or give me your unique word that halts everything. I assume you don’t have one of your own yet, or you would have told me already?” Michael paused for Dean’s subtle head shake before nodding and continuing on. “Again, you will never be punished for calling out a safeword. I know what you told me, but just know, whether you ever choose to exercise that safety net or not, it’s always there. And four. Fail to comply with the instruction and accept whatever punishment you’re due. Any questions?”

“No, Sir.”

“What are your limits, Dean?” Michael went back for his paper and pen and returned to the couch.

Dean relaxed back onto his butt but made no move to get dressed. “I don’t like scat or urine. I don’t want to be pierced, tattooed, or scarred, except I really like this one.” He touched the bite-mark that was still raw and broken. Michael smiled without looking up from the notes he was taking. “Please don’t do anything permanent to my face. That’s not just vanity, it would be detrimental to my career. I don’t like to be slapped. That’s really about it.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. Well, I like to hurt, you know that. It mixes with my pleasure receptors and makes everything better, but I’m not all that crazy about humiliation. That’s a soft limit, though. If you want to go there, I’m game.”

“What do I need to watch out for with you, Dean? What are your insecurities? You know what I mean?”

“I uh,” Dean took a deep breath and let it out. “Full communication, right? I owe you honesty. Okay. Shit. I have really low self-esteem sometimes. I’m in trouble a lot for talking bad about myself. I don’t know, I just never can quite feel like it’s enough, or whatever. Sam and Cas both whip my ass for that all the time. And I, uh…I punish myself when I feel like I did something bad. Usually it’s something simple like biting the inside of my cheek or making myself sit on a sore bum even if I’m not required to. That kind of stuff.” Dean let his gaze rest on the floor at his feet.

“All right. Thanks for telling me. Is that all?”

“Well, I can be a smart-ass and a brat, but you knew that already.”

“Dean, your rules as a Sub are simple. No one touches you sexually except me or Castiel, and I’ll get some clarification on what he’s allowed later. When it comes to your classes, I want you to pull back and let someone else do the fucking. Again, let’s work that out together over the next few weeks. Clear so far?”

“What about Keller testing? I’m a rare designation, and that makes me valuable as a testing resource. Could you make an exception for testing if I stop fucking and touching in class and stuff?”

“I can accept that Keller testing is a special case. I’ll allow it on a limited basis. Is that acceptable to you?”

Dean nodded. He wasn’t too surprised. He’d been thinking that cutting back at work was coming
soon anyway, and he thought he could manage it. “What about reiterating hierarchies in my department?” Dean asked carefully. “I’m head of the department. It doesn’t happen often, but there have been a few confrontations I had to respond to.”

Michael thought about it. It took him a couple of minutes to work through his objection. “Is a D.F. your only recourse in a challenge?” he asked at last.

Dean looked up at him, taking in his discomfort. It didn’t take a genius to see how far Michael’s forbearance was stretching. “It’s not the only option, no. It works fastest, most clearly, most definitively. It’s hard to keep the throw-down going with your ass Claimed by your superior in front of the whole team. Babe, the truth is, I’ve only had to turn to that a handful of times in my career, maybe not even that. It’s not really my go-to, what with my weird mix and all. Folks who work for me generally do their jobs without needing the constant reminders.” Dean left it there. The air between them grew heavy. Without the option to claim his status as nature intended, Dean’s alpha was facing a veritable castration socially. It was a troubling question, but his instinct wanted him to give something sacrificial as a show of good faith, and his wolf wanted him to show his belly. Dean felt the beginnings of the tingle that always came with being good for his Dominants.

Michael took several more minutes to think. He played with his thumbnail with a frown on his face. He knew what the limitation would mean. “I… I don’t want you touching anyone you don’t have to touch. You’re mine, and I want you to act like it.” His hesitance bespoke uncertainty in how far his bar could be pushed, not how badly he wanted this concession. He wanted this concession very badly.

Dean’s gaze remained steadfast, direct. “Is that a rule, Sir?”

“Can you do this?”

“I can do it,” Dean said with no hint at what he thought of the idea. “Is it a rule…Sir?”

They regarded each other for moments stretching into uncomfortable tension. “Dean,” said Michael firmly, going way out on a limb for an Omega no matter what type of pack he might be joining, “I forbid you from touching anyone but Castiel or me in any sexual manner whatsoever except for scheduled vetted Keller tests as part of a three-person panel. Is that completely clear to you?”

“Very clear, Sir. I understand.” It was as if Michael’s possessive hand had taken hold of the back of Dean’s neck and tightened. It was everything Dean looked for from submission, and he felt valued, wanted, cherished. What good were alpha Claiming rights anyway? Giving himself to a worthwhile Dom was better than any power rush from a Dominance Fuck.

“You agree to accept the limitations of this rule?”

Dean held his eye. “I accept the rule. I’m cut off except for the Kellers.” He watched the green eyes shift from cautious disbelief to awe-filled victory, and he could sense the ‘Good boy’ on Michael’s lips. The air pressure dissipated, and Dean grinned cheekily at him. “I guess I have to get creative next time one of those bastards pushes me. I can probably think of something. Worse comes to worst, I can sic my fiancé on their ass. Nobody wants that.”

“All right,” Michael breathed. He let the moment go with a soft smile that didn’t last long. It was enough for Dean though. Whether Michael had really won what he thought he’d won would become clear soon enough. “Also, no one has permission to discipline you except me, Castiel, and Sam. If you earn yourself a punishment by anyone else, you’ll answer to me, and it’s not going to be pretty.”

“Wait. Hold up. Cas already said he was going to double-up on spankings I get outside the pack.”
“Well then, I suggest you behave yourself when you’re in public or at work so your ass doesn’t get blistered clean off.”

“Shit. Yes, Sir.”

“Third rule: You do NOT punish you. Doms punish you. I imagine you’re familiar with that one already?”

“Yes, Sir. I am.” Dean crossed his legs Omega-style in front of him and leaned back on his hands.

“Next. Please me, and you’ll be rewarded. Displease me, and you’ll be punished. I don’t tolerate brats any more than you do, and the outcome will be the same. I expect the time is close at hand when we’ll both be sitting tender due to each other’s displeasure, but I’m okay with that. You?”

“Yes. I’m good.”

“Dean, I want more than just a Dom/sub relationship with you. I want everything. If you just want to take a walk and hold hands, let’s do that. If you want to fuck me into the mattress just for fun, we’ll do that. It doesn’t have to follow strict rules all the time. I didn’t hear you say anything earlier that made it sound like I’m only here to keep you sane and make your babies. I love you. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted. I want to have your pups and grow old with you, and by God, if I have to do it with a dangler following us everywhere we go, I’ll do that. I’ll do anything for you.”

Dean laughed. “He’s gonna love being called a dangler.”

Michael chuckled too and then sat next to Dean on the carpet and pulled him close. His face sobered. He kissed Dean’s nose. “I want pups with you Dean. I want to start a family as soon as possible. I wasn’t kidding about that.”

“We should run that by the Alpha. It’s a big change that affects everyone in the Pack, and he gets a say, but I’m okay with it, Michael. If you’re sure, and he says yes, I’ll go off my birth control, let it work its way out of my system, and then wait for your next Heat. You need to be through with your training I guess, so we might have to hold off for just a bit…maybe your second Heat.” Dean was trying to think it through. What if Cas said no? How would Michael take that? Where should Dean’s loyalty lie?

With Michael, he decided. Where pups were concerned, Michael deserved his support.

“Michael,” Dean whispered. “I want pups with you. I want that so bad. You need to know, Cas and I, we talked about it. We want to have a co-parental structure. We haven’t spoken to April yet, and this is obviously the first time you’re hearing about it. No, just listen. I know you don’t trust in the Pack yet, but by the time any pups come along, you might. Just keep an open mind about it. All of our pups could have four parents, not just two. Just think about it.”

“I’m not giving my pups away, and that’s final.”

“I know. I’m not asking you to. Just consider sharing the workload with all of us. I know what you’re thinking. You think Cas wants to be Dad, set me up as Mom and just raise whatever babies come along as if they’re ours, as if they weren’t yours. That right?”

“That’s exactly right, and it’s a hard no, Dean. Our pups are our pups.”

“All right. I hear you. No one’s going to force you into this one, baby.” Dean got up and stretched again. He was wearing out. This shit was exhausting. He leaned over his seated mate and kissed the top of his head. “You got any hard limits, Michael, sexually, I mean, not about giving up your
babies. That one I got.”

“If I’m running the show, do you need to know them? When would they ever come up? If you get permission from me to do something, you can assume it’s not a hard limit, right? I guess the only thing I really don’t like is submitting. As long as I’m calling the shots, I’m golden.’

“Can I bite you?” Dean teased.

“On occasion, if I tell you to.”

“Oh.” Dean deflated. Michael was annoyed by the suggestion that he offer his pups up to be co-parented and the idea that he might not be granted agency by the pack Alpha to decide when to start a family. Dean wasn’t going to be able to just cajole him out of that. “Let’s watch a movie. I need a good long break.”

“Fine. But I pick it this time. You have a service or a DVD stash?”

“Both. The DVDs are in that cabinet, and I’ve got Netflix, HULU, and Amazon Prime.” Michael dug and selected ‘The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly’, and Dean settled in with his Omega, massaging his shoulders to help release the tension. That had been long and difficult, and Michael had weathered it like a trooper. Dean sent pride and satisfaction to him through the bond, and Michael hummed and let his head drop backward onto Dean’s shoulder as the movie cued up. Dean was still naked, so he worked Michael’s shirt off too and let their skin connect, chest to back, and they relaxed in each other’s space like they’d done it a thousand times.

Everything they hadn’t discussed wasn’t going to go away, but Dean was uncomfortable trying to slam it all in one go. Michael wasn’t ready to face the stark realities of being an Omega, and Dean felt comfortable waiting. He pretended calmly that he felt comfortable waiting. How much damage could they do by holding off until Michael felt more stable in his skin? How bad could it really be to wait? Dean wasn’t going to stop being alpha. It would keep.

Right?

Chapter End Notes

Didja make it all the way through? Kudos to you for wading through that much dialogue.

Hugs to your pups and stuff.
Chapter Summary

April's out of sorts. Bobby and Zeke offer some sage advice to a struggling Alpha. Dean explains Gabriel to Michael. ...and there's a bit of Sam, 'cause Sam.

Chapter Notes

Y’all, please be careful on this one. Gabe's story is dark and ugly. Warnings for self-harm and depressive episodes. Check the end for a spoilerish warning.

Also, I have the complete Keller Index built and postable to accompany Jo's lecture, but I'm old and technologically mal-adapted to these new-fangled URL-thingies, and I don't know how to put images into the story. I hope the words alone are enough.

If you don't care about the charts and how the scoring works, skip that part. There's not enough plot going on that you'd miss anything important. I'm a lab-nerd, and I like data.

Typos are apparently a thing I can't prevent. Somehow I don't see them until after I post. I will eventually go back and edit them out, but whatever... You know what I meant, and you're generous enough to look past my failures. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

NOW:
April was feeling pissy. Her butt hurt, and all of her arguing had been for naught. Alpha wasn’t giving in on the question of a daily enema. She didn’t like it. It was uncomfortable, pointless, and she hated having to wake up that much earlier every morning just to make sure she had time to get through the intricate morning routine he’d designed for her. She had crafted her excuse for skipping the routine during his absence very carefully and felt sure he’d go along with just a good-natured shake of his head, only he hadn’t. Now she was looking at morning and evening spankings for a week, plus the additional indignity of having him administer the enema for her every morning during the week, and in her least favorite position to boot.

April stormed through the open classroom door and flung her bag into her wall slot. Jo didn’t look up from where she was clacking away at her laptop near the front of the room, but she spoke sternly.

“Pick it up, go back outside, and try entering the room again correctly. You know better than that, Omega.” April closed her eyes and took a deep breath before following the alpha-Neutral’s instruction, reminding herself to act like an adult even though the class was designed to make her feel like a pup. She stopped just outside the door, turned and paused, took a breath, and then walked back in with deliberate steps at a measured pace. Her mood wasn’t alpha Jo’s fault, and dragging her irritation at her mate into the classroom would only result in an even more painful backside.

Once in place at her assigned desk, leaning forward on her thighs, and keeping her head down, she tried to regain her composure. The room wasn’t yet half full since the class wasn’t scheduled to begin for another ten minutes. Jo closed her laptop and looked up. She obviously read April’s tension and decided to jump right in.

“Okay, spill April. What’s got you in such a twist this morning?”

April looked up at her and debated how much to say. She liked and trusted Jo. They had grown close over the few days that Castiel was gone wooing Dean. She decided to be straight with her instructor. Maybe Jo could help her convince Castiel to change his mind. “I’m in trouble at home for breaking a rule that I shouldn’t have to follow. It’s a stupid rule, but he won’t listen. He always says he wants to hear from me, but when I tell him how much I hate it, he just…he won’t change his mind. It’s not fair.”

“Not fair. I see.” Jo stood up and approached April slowly, her brow knit in thought. “April, are you clear on the concept of alphas and Omegas? Have I somehow misled you in this class about who makes the rules, and who follows them?”

“I know he makes the rules, but there’s no point to this one!” April wailed. “It doesn’t make me safer or better behaved. It doesn’t help me stay Balanced or anything. Shouldn’t the rules make sense somehow? Shouldn’t there be a point? He just makes me do it because…because he says so.”

Jo looked around at the Omegas who were already present. Everyone was listening in. “Does anyone have any advice for April? What do you all think about this?”

A smallish, dark-haired young man at the back spoke quietly in answer, disdain heavy in his response. “Americans are spoiled brats. I’ve only been in this country for a few years, but I see it all the time.” April growled at him, and Jo put a firm hand on the back of her neck in warning. He continued undeterred. “Back home, Omegas wouldn’t dream of whining about a rule they didn’t like. Omegas know their place; especially the Ozzies. If I acted like that to my Alpha, she would blister my ass for a month, and I’d probably be sleeping on the floor, too.”

“Go on, Saleem,” Jo encouraged. More students were taking their places and trying to catch up on
the discussion. “What do you think an Ozzie should do about a rule they don’t agree with?”

“You don’t have to agree with it. That’s the whole point. It’s about trust, isn’t it?” he went on rhetorically. “You have to trust that your Alpha is looking out for you even if you don’t understand how. Not wanting to do something doesn’t make it okay to argue about it – that’s what submission is all about. Maybe your Alpha knows you hate it, and he makes you do it to train you to comply even when you don’t want to. Maybe you not liking to do it is all there is to it. Stop being such a baby, and do what you’re told.”

“Fuck you! You don’t know anything about it! I’m not a baby!” It was out of her mouth before she realized it was coming. Jo’s hand tightened painfully on her neck and pushed her over to lay across her own desk. She pulled the skirt of April’s orange tunic up to bare her ass and swiftly delivered ten swats with her hand to the already reddened flesh. Releasing the Omega, Jo stepped into her field of vision.

“I don’t care how upset or cranky you are. When you walk into my classroom, you’re to behave according to my rules. Apologize to Saleem.”

“He called me a baby. Why doesn’t he get swats, too?”

“I’ll decide when a student’s comments step over the line, not you. I believe he was trying to help you. Now apologize, Omega.”

“I’m sorry.” She wasn’t sorry.

“And go hang your uniform on your hook. As I warned you all last week, and I’m reminding you right now…” Jo strolled toward the front of the class and addressed all of them. “We’ve reached the second half of your training, and that means that many of the comforts you’ve taken for granted, such as clothing, are now privileges that can be lost for the day if you don’t behave. April, you will spend today in the buff. Perhaps that will help you remember to guard your tongue. There’s good advice available to you in this class if you’re willing to hear it.” Jo turned in front of her own desk to begin the class.

This day just wasn’t getting any better. April let a few tears run down her cheeks as she stripped and got up to hang the tunic next to her bag. She knew her ass was a fiery, blazing red, and now everyone who saw it would know just how much trouble she was in at home. She added embarrassment to the list of emotions trying to pull her under this morning, and she sniffled miserably. There was a grimness to the Mating-bond too. April could tell that Castiel was reading her well enough to know she’d just been spanked and that she was in a defiant mood.

He wasn’t impressed.

Fuck.

Jo started the class with her usual demos and exercises. April was distracted with trying to understand why her Omega and her wolf hadn’t been soothed by the strict treatment over the course of the morning. She normally felt much calmer after a spanking than she did before it, more in control. She shifted in her chair and had to be reminded to sit straight on her pained ass more than once. She complied as well as she was able, but couldn’t completely stop the squirming.

It didn’t hit her until she was running the timer for Alice and Simone – Alpha spanked her this morning and then shooed her out the door with no aftercare. He didn’t pet her or wash her face. He didn’t bring her a glass of water. He didn’t kiss her forehead. He didn’t remind her that he loved her, and he didn’t walk her to class. He hadn’t softened at all.
April lost her internal battle to stifle her emotion. It overflowed on her. She wept silently while the exercise continued, the tears running unheeded down her cheeks. It was evident that her mate was exceedingly angry and disappointed in her, and she started craving absolution in a way that just his hard hand hadn’t pulled from her yet. April was by no means stupid. She was aware that the vast majority of rules in her home were manufactured to create opportunities for fictional crimes just to give her a way through her Release block.

Today was different. Alpha wasn’t scening, she realized. He could roleplay with the best of them, but this was different. She’d hurt him by choosing to ignore his instruction while he was gone, and he was truly angry with her. He’d left her to face the day without the closure of his aftercare to make absolutely sure she knew this one was for real. She was in TROUBLE, not just, ‘trouble’. He was disappointed, and it was her first experience digesting that from him. It made her feel supremely guilty, and she found the sensation intolerable.

Fuck.

The other realization hit her as she switched places with Simone, taking up a presentation position on the mat and handing the timer over. April wouldn’t be getting out of the enemas. She’d be lucky if they remained at just one per day. One thing she was sure of now, Alpha would always win when his mind was made up.

Fuck.

She settled as the day wore on and the pain faded to a dull ache. She was still naked. Lunch in the cafeteria meant that staff, clients, and students alike got a good look at Castiel’s handiwork. She found she didn’t mind the eyes on her as much as she wanted to get a chance to see her mate. He wasn’t in the lunch room today. Sometimes they had a chance to eat together, and sometimes their schedules just didn’t jibe. She wished she knew if it was intentional on his part today in particular. He was present in her mind, but she hesitated to poke at him. His mood remained severe and focused. Distracting him from his work wasn’t going to earn her any points. He’d had his business face on all morning, and she felt very young in comparison.

The afternoon lecture took her out of her worries for several hours. Jo was presenting a talk on Keller charting and April was riveted. She loved numbers and statistics, and she’d been looking forward to this lecture for weeks.

“Does everyone know their Keller test results?” Jo asked the class as she drew a large cross, an X/Y graph, on the whiteboard. “Let me ask that another way. Is there anyone who doesn’t know their test results?”

Three tentative hands went up. “Alpha said it wasn’t for me to know or worry about,” said Joseph.

Jo scoffed. “That’s ridiculous. Of course, I don’t have the authority to release that information to you directly, but I have the numbers here in my file, and we’re going to be plotting all of your actual data on this graph. If I just happen to drop a few guiding hints to assist you in figuring out where your data point lies, then that’s not breaking any rules outright. No one should be denied their own test results. I’m just sayin’.”

Jo turned back to the whiteboard and labeled the horizontal line, “A, β, Ω” and marked the range from negative thirty through the Y axis at zero, and all the way to positive thirty on the other side.
“About fifteen years ago,” she continued. “This chart only went to twenty-five. Who can tell me why it now goes to thirty? Anyone? April, do you know?”

“Um, is it because of Alpha Novak?” April knew the answer but was uncomfortable with how closely this topic touched upon her private life. There were parts of being Mated to the great Alpha that she liked, but the public aspect was disquieting.

“That’s correct. Castiel Novak’s Keller test broke the chart fifteen years ago. He remains, to this day, the only wolf worldwide ever to test higher than twenty-five, whether as an alpha or an Omega, although we have an extremely rare Omega twenty-three here in class with us. Castiel Novak’s Keller rating is 28, by the way, if any of you didn’t know. The chart has been permanently expanded on both sides under the assumption that if it can happen once, it could happen again. And if it can strike an alpha, the same can happen to an Omega.

“So, it’s pretty straightforward. Omegas are on the negative side, betas on the zero in the middle, and alphas on the right. Notice guys, all betas register at zero. There is no range to the beta designation. Leonard Keller and Alfonse Pelios didn’t know that when they designed the chart back in 1914, so they gave betas a range from negative ten to positive ten. Today, we skip over those twenty numbers in the middle. It’s easier than redrawing the whole chart and trying to explain to Omegas and alphas why their chart numbers have to change. Any questions yet?”

Not everyone in the class really cared, but the numbers that their tests revealed had such a personal impact on their daily lives, that most of the class was paying close attention. “Okay, we’re going to focus on the Omega side. Remember that in terms of the numbers and titles, everything that I teach you about Omegas also goes for alphas, but in reverse. Understand?” They nodded, and she returned to the board.

“Right here on the left side and moving toward the right, from the end, from -30 to -20 are the Deep Omegas. These guys are the high Omesol-producers and the exceptionally fertile Omegas. These Omegas crave and demand a massive amount of structure, discipline, and support. There’s also a correlation between Deep Omegas and Submissives. Not all Ozzies are Deep O’s, but they tend that way. In this class, for instance, 68% of you are Deep O’s, but they tend that way.

“From -19.9 to -15 (remember we’re counting backward because we’re moving toward zero), are the Standard Omegas. These guys don’t actually get a descriptive prefix. They’re just Omegas. They show all of the stereotypical, iconic Omega behaviors and usually don’t develop Release blocks or require more than general, reliable Pack structure. Not hard to figure out, right? You know who you are if you’re a standard O.

“Finally, from -14.9 to -10 are the Central Omegas – Central, meaning closer to the midline at zero. Some of these guys behave almost like betas. Anatomically, you’re all Omega, but behaviorally and psychologically, the Centrals don’t act very Omega-like. Here in our class, we’ve only got one Central. Usually, they don’t need Balance adjustments but once a month or sometimes even longer. I know, I know. It’s totally unfair.” The Deep Omegas in the class protested loudly at hearing that some Omegas didn’t need to be spanked into Release every few days. April tried to imagine what that would be like and wondered if Dean’s new mate would turn out to be a Central. He certainly didn’t seem very Omega-like to her.

Jo continued. “Your place on the chart is determined by your physical reactions, measurable behaviors, and chemical responses during the Keller evaluation. Everything on the X-axis comes from empirical numbers – measurable data, not subjective observation. However, when you do the Keller test, we’re also looking for another set of responses. The results of those responses are plotted along the Y-axis.” Jo labeled the vertical axis “Dom/sub,” and numbered it from +20 at the top, back
through zero across the X-axis, and ending at the bottom with -20.

“You guys are all Ozzies, Omega-Subs. That means every last one of you takes a position somewhere in this quadrant.” She circled the lower left section. “For Subs, like Doms, we break the chart down further. The Profound, between -15 and -20 are the truly submissive wolves. We have a few in here with us who fall into that category. In the middle are the Classic Subs, ranging from -10 to -15. Again, all of this applies to Doms as well, but in reverse. And the Shallow Subs test between -5 and -10. Anyone testing within 5 points from zero is a Neutral.

“We determine your Y-scale placement from a combination of measurable readings and subjective observation, so it’s less concrete than the X-axis results are. However, a Keller test that’s performed correctly will yield reproducible results despite there being a subjective portion to it. If you don’t like your rating, retaking the test isn’t going to change it much. You might gain a number or two, but you’re not going to stop being an Ozzie just because you re-do your test seven times.

“I’ve got stickers here with your names on them, and when I call your name, I want you to place your sticker on the whiteboard where you think your test scores put you. For those of you who weren’t given that information, I can possibly provide a little guidance without revealing what I’m legally not allowed to reveal. For you three, I’m curious to find out what you think your ratings are. Let’s see what our class range is. I’ll go first.” Jo picked up a little blue circle from the desk and hovered over the board. “I’m a standard alpha with a Keller score of 15, so I’m to the right of the midline. I’m also a Neutral with a score of 2. That puts me right here.” Jo stuck her dot just above the midline and halfway between zero and thirty to the right.

“Simone, your turn.” Jo held out an orange sticker and Simone took it from her, studying the graph. She placed it, and Jo nodded, smiling. She proceeded to the next student, and soon, brightly colored stickers dotted the lower left quadrant. April blushed when she saw just how far to the left of the rest of her classmates her red sticker was. At least hers wasn’t the farthest toward the bottom. That was Joseph. And two other stickers were about even with hers for Submissiveness. Three stickers had to be placed one on top of the other because three students shared the same numbers. Jo assured them that was perfectly normal.

She played ‘Hot and Cold’ with the three students who hadn’t been given their results by their Pack Alphas. She followed up with a quick discussion of the confusing Z-axis that added a wolf’s Kink Index, but she didn’t try to draw it, and she didn’t reveal any of the class members’ Z-Ratings. Those were private. Soon, the afternoon wore to an end.

April gathered her belongings from her spot on the wall, only remembering that she was nude when she saw her tunic hanging there. She’d been so engaged in the lesson, she forgot. “Alpha Jo?” she called. “Should I dress or go home like this?”

“You may get dressed now, April.” Jo was handing out punishment report slips to the Omegas who had taken any kind of correction that day. There were always several spankings meted out; sometimes many. Sometimes Sam joined the class to lend a hand when he wasn’t busy with his own class. Jo handed April hers last. “Do you understand now why you were punished this morning?”

“Yes, alpha. I brought my bad attitude to class and made everyone else deal with it. And I was rude to Saleem. But I still think he deserved to be spanked too.”

“Go on, Omega. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Jo kissed April on the forehead and nudged her out the door. April slipped the tunic back on in the hallway and stared glumly at the report slip in her hand. She knew it would add to her total tonight, and she was dreading it already.

Fuck.
“That’s enough!” shouted the Alpha testily. “If we’re going to do this, we’re doing it right, not half-assing our way through like we don’t give a damn! Is that the best you’ve come up with? This is bullshit!”

“Let’s call it a day here folks…pick it back up tomorrow when we’ve all had a chance to sleep on it.” Benny interrupted his Alpha, sitting upright and stretching his arms over his head. The beta at the front of the room stood frozen and shell-shocked. His mouth stood open in a motionless gape. Benny doubted he was breathing.

Great. Thanks, Cas.

Castiel struggled visibly to get hold of himself. He clenched a fist that rested on the table and bit his lip, looking unfocused into space and breathing through his nose.

“Benedict, he’s my brother. If you think…”

“I’m under no illusions that you’re gonna let Gordon or any of his cronies outta the line of fire, but we aren’t going to solve this today, and you, my Alpha, are currently too distraught to continue.” Benny met his boss’ eye levelly without blinking or flinching. It took a brave man to do that, and it’s what finally got through to Castiel. Cas blew out a shaky breath.

“You’re right. I apologize everyone. Marcus, I’m sorry. You’re doing the best you can. We’ll…we’ll go at it again tomorrow.” Cas rubbed a hand over his face and around to the back of his neck like Dean sometimes did when he felt in the wrong. “You’re all excused.”

Bobby put a hand on his shoulder as they filed out of the room. “Come with me, Cas. We’re going for a walk.”

“Why does it feel like I’m being led to my execution?” asked Cas flatly.

“Because you feel guilty. C’mon, you just need some air. And a drink.”

“Bobby, it’s two-thirty in the afternoon on a weekday.”

“Yeah, well…it’s five o’clock somewhere. Come on.” Bobby led Cas out through the turnstile and onto the campus sidewalk, heading toward Zeke’s. They talked as they walked, about nothing pressing at first, just idle conversation between friends and some random workplace gossip. “And how’s the new boy fitting in? I haven’t seen or heard much about him, but that Mating video is the talk of the whole community. What’s an Omega who fucks like that in real life?”

“He’s a challenge, Bobby. Dean seems suited to understand him, and they communicate remarkably well.” Bobby held the door to Zeke’s open for the Alpha, and they took stools at the bar. “I may kill him before we manage to settle though. He’s got a smartass reply to everything.”

“No offense, Alpha, but it’s not like you to let an Omega run the show. Why haven’t you just explained the facts of life to the boy and ripped him a new one? Sounds like it’d do him a world of good.”

Cas held up two fingers to Zeke. The gesture wasn’t necessary. The bartender had two beers already
in hand and was on his way over to deliver them. He nodded solemnly at the alphas and then left them to talk. Castiel took a good long drink from his pint before he answered Bobby.

“It’s complicated, Singer. I can’t screw this up. He’s not mine yet, he’s Dean’s. And I promised Dean he’d have a free hand. I promised Dean we’d be as close to equals in this marriage as I could make it. If I go in there like a locomotive and blast Michael out of his shoes, he’s going to resent me forever, and we’re going to have to contend with that from the very start of our marriage. This balance is…I can’t screw it up, and I only get one shot.”

“What’s the kid like?”

“He’s full of piss and vinegar. Probably got a raw deal his whole life, trapped in a body that wants to roll over and hand the wheel to someone else, while his wolf is trying to abscond with the whole truck and drive everyone over a cliff. And he’s been stuck with a family who can’t give him what he needs.”

“Sounds a little like someone else I know…except for the rolling part.” Bobby met Castiel’s eye through the backplate mirror behind the bar and took a drink of his beer.

“Yes, it does,” Cas conceded. “And he’s trying, Bobby. He’s not a bad kid when he’s not posturing and trying to stake a claim on his mate,” Cas chuckled. “That Omega has no idea what he’s in for once he gets to know Dean. He’s taking a huge bite outta something he’s not even a little bit ready to handle. Talk about grabbing a tiger by its tail…”

“I don’t know. I watched the two of them on that video over and over trying to figure out how the fuck Michael pulled that off. It looks to me like he’s got Dean dead to rights. If you ask me, they’re peas in a pod, and the rest of us oughtta be taking notes.”

Cas sighed heavily. “I can’t let it go too long. Michael needs the stability of the Pack. He’s scratching at the walls and begging for a firm hand. He needs to be Claimed. I don’t think he’s really a brat at all. I think it’s just the desperate cry of a terrified Omega who thinks no one sees him. And I think his wolf has run the show for so long, his Omega’s just gotten lost really deep in there somewhere. Being a brat is a last-ditch effort, not an inborn preset. I suspect he’ll be a completely different man once he gets introduced to his Omega again.”

“There’s the Alpha I know,” nodded Bobby. “I don’t know if he’s a brat or not, but I know he needs you to step up and take him by the scruff. Waiting until he’s decided to jump on board the Cas-and-Dean train is only going to make it harder to adjust later, my friend. You wait much longer and you may lose his respect altogether. Sounds to me like he’s begging you to just do it.”

“Like I said, I only get one shot at this.”

“What does your wolf want to do?”

Cas laughed humorlessly. “He’s wanted to rip Michael’s balls out through his throat since we met, but he doesn’t get to run this show any more than the Omega does. You know that’s not an option.”

“Well, maybe meet him halfway, Alpha.”

“I promised Dean a month.” Cas took another drink.

“Did you, now? What exactly did you promise him?”

Cas raised an eyebrow at his friend. “Dean wants a month before Michael does any testing or training; a month just to themselves to get settled after the Mating. Considering I took six weeks with
April, I think I owe him that.”

“Did he say he wanted no contact with you or The Facility? Or the rest of the Pack?”

“No. He said I could text him all I wanted, and that he and Michael would be around. It didn’t sound like he was taking them to ground, exactly.”

“Hmm. So, is there any reason to put off the loyalty oaths and the formal establishment of your Pack? Could you do that without breaking faith with Dean and Michael? That way, the two of them get the rest of their month already Claimed and established. They have a chance to get settled in the full framework of their Pack ranks. Right now, Cas, that boy’s in no man’s land. He’s not his father’s anymore, but he’s not yours yet. He’s gonna drown if you wait a month to give him that lifeline. Dean can’t hold him afloat by his onesie.”

“It’s just so hard to know, Bobby. Am I trying to force a bunch or square pegs into round holes? I’ve got a fiancé who’s Deep alpha, like me. We aren’t meant to fit. I’ve got an Omega mate whose body will break if I let my wolf fully off-leash on her, and I’ve got a Dominant rival that I’m willingly bringing into my home who has the power to destroy everything if he wants to. What are we doing? How can this possibly work out? It’s just a dream that’s doomed from the start, isn’t it? Maybe the Universe just doesn’t want me happy.”

“Begging you pardon, Alpha.” Zeke was in front of him. “The thing about tending bar in a place this size is I’m kinda forced to eavesdrop whether I mean to or not. You mind if I offer my two cents? It doesn’t mean anything, and I could be way off base here. You’re under no obligation to hear me out, but I’ve known you and Dean a long time.”

Castiel nodded for him to continue. Zeke was a trusted friend and longtime confidant. He’d proven on numerous occasions that he had a knack for breaking down the complicated issues of life into simple, actionable steps, and Cas valued his insight. Also, Dean trusted him. Dean’s ability to read people at their core and judge the character beneath the surface was unrivaled. If Dean trusted Zeke, then Zeke was good people.

“If I hear you right, and from what I already know about you all, you’ve got the perfect Omega mate for your Alpha. She’s compliant and soothing for the Alpha who feels like it has to fight for consensus everywhere else. The Alpha can spend the day battling it out in a world that just won’t give it what it wants, and then come home to a perfect, willing mate to soothe off the edges and make everything better.

“Then, you’ve got that alpha brat that you’re engaged to marry who challenges your Dominant wolf. The big guy wants someone who won’t break every time he snaps his jaws. Wants someone who gives him something to snap against, someone who makes his hackles rise in anticipation of a good ass beating.

“And finally, as if that wasn’t perfect enough, the Universe grants you a raw diamond-in-the-rough Dominant right there in your own household to mold and train and guide; someone for your front brain to take under its wing and turn into something glorious. You’re a teacher, Alpha, and the Universe has given you someone who needs desperately to be taught.

“You, Alpha, have three distinct personalities you’ve been trying to balance your whole adult life: you’re a professor and mentor, a powerful Dominant wolf who needs a challenge, and a confident, assertive Alpha who demands order and compliance. Now, correct me if I’m way off base here, but it looks to me like everything you’ve ever wanted has just landed in your lap.”

Castiel stared at him slack jawed.
“And too, before you go worrying about being selfish and taking everything just for you, look at it from Dean’s perspective. He’s got three defining characteristics too, doesn’t he? He’s a brat Sub, an alpha teacher, and a big, protective brother. Might not be such a raw deal for him either once you line folks up and put them where they fit. I don’t know much about the two Omegas yet, but I have some suspicions that they might be getting something out of this arrangement too…this arrangement that you say means the Universe has it out for you. Think about it, Castiel. Do you boys want another?”

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“Thanks Meg. Yeah, I sure will.” Dean hung up the phone and returned to the kitchen where his mate was digging through the pantry again looking for something to turn into dinner.

“I texted Sam to stop off for some chicken cutlets on his way over. He’s going to pack up tonight and give us the space to ourselves for the whole month. Least I can do is cook him dinner before we kick him out. But I told him we’re not eating tofu.” Dean pulled fresh vegetables from the fridge and began to put a salad together.

Michael washed a head of broccoli in the sink. “Would you ‘play’ with me tonight, Dean? I’d like to do some experimenting on your stamina; find out where your limits are and what you respond to.”

“Hell, yes.”

“Do you need any assurances from me? I promise to keep it simple for now. I want to push you right up to the edge of coming, and then back off again. I wanna see how many times you can do that before you crack, but I’m not planning on any pain play this time, and I’m not tying it to a punishment if you fail. Unless you turn into a complete brat on me, I promise to let you come at the end. One thing at a time, like we said. And I’ll check in with you more than I would normally do, so I can get used to how you respond and what it feels like through our bond.”

“That sounds perfect, man. I’m a little…here, see for yourself.” Dean shoved the sense of his arousal through his bond-link and took hold of Michael’s damp hand, placing it over his crotch, so he could feel the physical effect his words had on his mate. Michael kissed him sweetly and then rested their foreheads together.

“I fucked up so bad, Dean, and I’m really very sorry. I see now how stupid I was. Please say you still have some faith in me. I won’t ever make that mistake again.”

Dean took hold of Michael’s shoulders and pressed his body against his mate’s. He didn’t answer in words. He let his bond-connection speak for him as they stood together in the kitchen holding tightly to each other.

Dean broke away and went back to the salad, making the switch back into his alpha appear effortless, although it wasn’t. “I just checked up on Gabriel. They took him home today to finish recovering in his own space. It’ll be easier for him there. I’m sure they know he won’t stay long, but maybe it’ll do him some good to spend some time with his brother.”

“What’s his story, Dean? I never got an explanation as to why we picked him up bleeding and broken on the side of the road. Something about a rescue?”

“It’s all confidential, so what I’m about to tell you is not something you can share with anyone else. Seriously.”
“Who am I going to tell?”

“No, but I mean it. It could mean his life. Your sister can’t hear any of this. No one can.” Dean held Michael’s eye until the Omega nodded, intrigued.

“Okay. Gabriel works as an inside man in trafficking recovery. He poses as an Omega student, or whore, or whatever, and he gets inside the real hellholes to scope them out and rescue the slaves inside. He’s got a whole team working with him, and they all report to Bobby. Only the top staff of The Facility even know we’re involved in a rescue program. That’s to keep the agents safe as long as we can. It won’t work like this forever. One day, he’s going to get recognized, or the info will leak out because one of us in the know was stupid and talked to the wrong person in the wrong place, or waltzed right in the front door of The Facility with a bloodied-up Gabriel, or whatever, and then all hell’s gonna break loose. But he and Cas work very hard to keep his face out of the limelight and the tabloids. I don’t know how he gets Gabe in and out up at the ACRI without getting spotted, but I’m certain he has his ways of hiding it. Castiel hates what Gabe does, but he can’t stop his brother from doing it. All he can do is try to help control how he does it.”

Michael was speechless, but Dean pressed on. “I don’t know what the hell he thought he was doing going it alone like that in Oklahoma. Bobby didn’t authorize a strike against Gordon. Gabe did that on his own, and now he’s got Bobby and his little brother to face with an explanation.”

“Little brother? I thought Castiel was older.”

“No, Gabe’s older, but Cas is…well, he’s Alpha.” Dean put the salad in the refrigerator and turned to chopping broccoli. The front door opened, and Sam walked in carrying a couple of grocery bags and a six pack of brown longnecks. “Hey, Sam! Oh, good, you brought beer.”

“Here, Michael. Grab this one.” Sam handed Michael the bag with chicken in it, and Michael took it from him and set it in the sink. He moved to the side as Dean took over the prep. Dean was so at home in this kitchen, he seemed to just flow – like a liquid.

“Go on about Gabriel, Dean,” prompted Michael. “If you can, I mean. Is Sam…?”

“Yeah, Sam knows. He’s top-level staff. Sam’s Benny’s number one. Plus, he was right there at ground zero when…well, I’m getting ahead of myself.” Dean started the oven pre-heating and seasoned the chicken. “Grab me a beer, please, somebody.” A beer bottle appeared next to the sink, its cap already removed.

“Thanks.”

Dean took a deep gulp. “So, yeah. Gabe did that whole thing on his own and nearly got busted doing it, but he pulled a girl out. I guess Gordon’s got a respectable front going on through the front door and a pile of sleaze leaking out the back. We didn’t know that.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” Sam put in. “Gordon’s always given me the heebie-jeebs. He’s just a creepy, disturbing asshole. There’s not much I wouldn’t put past him to do.”

“Why would an Omega like Gabriel put himself at such a risk for strangers? I mean, I get wanting to help, but Jesus, to actually go in there like that and risk getting caught? Is he insane?”

“Yeah, he is a little,” said Sam with gravity.

Dean explained, “Michael, Gabe’s had a shit-ton of crap dumped on him in his life. Not only a delusional controlling bitch of a mother who nearly let him die because she doesn’t want to believe in Omesol poisoning, but, well… He could respond by curling up and going fetal position forever, or
he could fight like an Omega. He’s not the giving up kind of guy.”

“What kind of other crap?”

“Just a year or two before I met Cas, Gabriel’s True-Mate died in a car crash. He was devastated, naturally. He was really fucked up over it for years. Deep depression, suicidal thoughts, the whole nine yards. Cas didn’t even let me meet him for over a year. Finally, maybe four years after she died, Cas convinced Gabe to start trying to get healthy again, try to see if he could feel human, at least. Cas helped him find an alpha to help him through his Heats. He’d just been suffering through them alone since he lost Marina, and Cas didn’t think he’d live much longer if he didn’t get some help.

“The thing is, back then, and we’re not talking a long time ago, but back then, the regulations on sex workers were crap. The chick he contracted with was a professional, and she was sweet to him and all, but she’d let her birth control lapse. There was no law then that sex workers keep a meds log or pass any physical tests before they fuck their seed into unsuspecting clients. Gabe got knocked up on the first Heat after he went mainstream again. It was bad. He was so fucking broken…”

Sam picked up where Dean went silent. “To make things even worse, he miscarried the pup after two months. He’d just about reconciled himself to being a mom and getting some psychiatric care so he could be a good parent, and then he lost the baby, and he just… I can’t even imagine. He got a coat hanger out of his closet and dug around up inside himself until he destroyed everything. Castiel found him passed out and hemorrhaging. They saved his life, but they couldn’t repair the damage to his uterus.”

“He’s come a long way since then,” said Dean. “This is all private, of course, but you’re pack now, and you need to know. Sometimes, he still has moments where he just needs to be alone. Cas keeps a close eye on him; keeps a Claim on him so he can feel Gabe’s state of mind for himself. Sometimes the rat-bastard hides it when he starts to sink back under. He’s not ever going to completely heal emotionally, but he tries. Like I said, he fights like an Omega.”

Sam picked it up again. “The work he does helps him as much as it does the Omegas he pulls out. His Mated scent is so faint now, most wolves can’t detect it. Plus, he’s not in any danger of blowing his cover by coming across a True-Mate unexpectedly,” Sam followed his words with a long drink from his bottle. “He told me once that he couldn’t protect his own pup or mate, but maybe he can make up for it by saving someone else’s.”

“Jesus,” was all Michael could say to that. Dean agreed.

They settled the tension left from the horrible conversation by turning on a mindless sit-com and letting dinner cook. No one had much to say, so Michael brought around more beer bottles and snuggled in to his mate on the couch, letting the alpha-scent speak to him and bring him solace. What must that have been like for Gabriel? He couldn’t imagine the depth of Gabriel’s pain. He didn’t want to.

Dean’s phone pinged with a text message. Michael could tell by Dean’s emotional response that it was from Cas. He found, for the first time, that he really didn’t mind. Dean chuckled softly to himself as he traded texts with his fiancé a few times, keeping one hand petting easily through Michael’s hair and leaving an occasional kiss against the side of his neck. Could it really be this simple? Was there enough of Dean to go around without having to fight for it?

Finally, Dean put his phone on the side table. “Cas wants us up at The Facility at ten tomorrow morning to discuss making formal Pack oaths and planning when and where to do the C.F.s. I told him I’d have to ask my Dom. What say you, Michael? Got a problem with it? It’s just discussions tomorrow, no actual oaths or fucking yet.”
“It’s fine with me, Dean. Ten o’clock.” He nuzzled Dean’s throat, scenting his mate.

“Okeydokey. I’ll let him know. Thanks, man.” Dean wanted Michael to know that he realized how hard this was for the Omega, but his wolf told him to shut it for now. Dean listened to the wolf and stopped at a simple thank you.

“We were supposed to do some packing today, but I’m really not feeling it. Maybe next week,” Dean told no one in particular. The timer buzzed on the oven, and they all heaved one another to their feet for dinner, carrying their drinks to the table.

Dinner was delicious. Michael chalked up Dean’s cooking skills in his growing column titled: ‘How fucking lucky I am’ and dug in. The complaint column wasn’t short, but the pros outnumbered the cons, and Michael wasn’t stupid. He wasn’t giving Dean up no matter what.

“I’ve been wanting to ask you, Michael,” started Sam after washing down a mouthful of chicken with a pull from his beer. “Did you know what you were doing when you Mated my brother? I mean, with what you actually did to get the Mate-Claim to stick? Do you remember any of it?”

“I sure do. I remember everything. What do you mean, did I know what I was doing? I just did it, I guess. I didn’t do it by myself, you know. Dean was there too.”

“No, I know, but what you did was way off the charts. From everything we’ve learned in the last ten years about Claim-fucks, I mean, there has to be a Claim, you know? It only works when there’s an act of sexually aggressive domination. Just stroking your partner’s wolf doesn’t produce a Claim. At least, no one I know has ever seen that happen before. But that’s what you did. We all saw it, and we’ve got it on video for posterity to study. You did a little bit of shouting when you were close, but you never showed any possessiveness or aggression. Michael, you did something no one’s ever seen before, and we can’t figure out how you did it.” Sam turned to his brother. Dean had stopped eating and was staring at his brother with his fork halfway to his mouth. “Do you know Dean?”

“Shit, Sammy. I hadn’t even thought about it. I have no idea.”

“Dean, he Topped you from the bottom, that much is clear. And it was a really sweet D/s scene. I’m glad to know you two work so well together right off the bat, but it shouldn’t have created a Mating-bond, not even with you biting him. A Claim needs more than lust to spark it. We’ve seen couples try that so many times, and it always fails. Then we have to re-set and have them try it again. Can you ever remember anything like that in your research? Anything that worked?” Sam raised his eyebrows at his brother.

Dean took a bite and thought about it while he chewed. He looked at his mate. Michael seemed interested for the sake of being part of something unusual, but he didn’t look rattled. Dean was rattled. He knew Sam was right. He shouldn’t, by all rights, be Mated to Michael right now. Claims just didn’t work that way. He ran back over what he remembered from that day and couldn’t find enough aggression anywhere in the act to account for the bond. The most aggressive part was when Michael spanked Dean’s thigh. He shook his head at his brother. “No. Never.”

“Well, there’s going to be a full inquiry, of course. If you two are onto something new, we need to know what it is, especially if it means there’s a more civilized way to put a Claim down. The good thing is that the Mating-Claim did take. It’s strong, and clean, and permanent. There’s nothing unstable about it. It’s just a normal, healthy bond. I can’t make heads or tails outta how it worked.”

“Probably because I’m just that awesome,” said Michael with his mouth full.
Warning for reference to mpreg miscarriage and resulting emotional backlash. Warning for reference to death of a backstage character.

My bi-weekly Migraine is upon me again. I'm in for another 24-hours minimum. They're hormonally-triggered and really not treatable, but they aren't life-threatening, so it could be worse. I only bring it up, because I like to put out a chapter a day while I'm home on Sun - Tue. I hope to do at least one more chapter before Wednesday, but no promises.

I hope you enjoy this one. My boy is starting to come around just a little, and everyone's favorite O.C. got a little less one-dimensional, so I'm happy with how it turned out.
Tuesday, May 9, 2017

Chapter Summary

That run-in between the two Doms? Yeah, that happens here. ...And some other stuff.

Chapter Notes

Chapter warning for violent intent and a frightening physical assault. No physical harm, but real intent.

Thank you all (in Texas we say y'all), for the well-wishes. This cycle's headache was both shorter and less severe than usual, so I'm good. I only got one chapter done, but it's longer than usual, so total word-count is probably about the same.

I've been looking forward to writing this one for a very, very...very long time. I had so much more planned for this chapter, but the rest will all have to wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NOW:

The bacon was almost ready. Sunlight coming through the kitchen window made the O.J. glasses sparkle like a Mr. Clean commercial, and Dean was in a frickin’ awesome mood. Conventional wisdom said that a Lupin couldn’t expect to maintain an erection and functional arousal for more than three hours outside of H/R cycles or Mate response, but Michael had stretched him through more than four. Four hours of agonizing just-almost-close-enough-to...but then, no, followed by an orgasm so epic at the end, Dean’s dick was still feeling aftershocks this morning.

And also, nothing but his cock hurt right now. Usually after a night that intense, his nipples, or his ass-cheeks, or the muscles deep inside him, would be sore and delicate. Not today, buddy. While he appreciated a little afterburn as much as the next guy, its absence this morning felt like the arrival of spring. He was a little sore where too many hours of stimulation wore at his dick, left it tender and tingly, but Dean owed Michael a massive thank you breakfast. He’d done everything he said he would and nothing he said he wouldn’t. He talked to Dean the whole time, watching him from inside and outside, checking in constantly. He even let Dean get up and pace miserably around the house for a few minutes when he couldn’t come down from the precipice on his own and feared he might fall before they were ready.

The bruising on Dean’s ass was fading quickly now. In the past, he always hated how quickly his body erased Castiel’s marks, but right now he couldn’t get rid of them fast enough. He wanted a Michael-spanking, and he was fucking tired of waiting for it. Dean hummed as he cooked. He mixed up a perfect ratio of milk and egg batter to use for French toast and put a pan of real maple syrup on a back burner to warm, not turning the fire on yet – just getting it ready for whenever Michael emerged.
Michael was evidently not a morning person, and Dean let him sleep in. His imagination took a flight while he cooked, and he could see himself standing over Castiel’s kitchen range just like this, with deeper lines in his face, shouting at the pups to stop running and set the table. He pictured kissing each of his Pack as they made their way in for breakfast: April would be clean and chipper, letting him peck her on the cheek, Cas would be all motion and efficient energy, his ever-present tan trench folded over his arm as he accepted a plate of sausages and a real good morning kiss from his husband then turned calmly to shepherd two or three rowdy pups to their places at the table. And Michael. Michael would trudge in with his hair askew and a bathrobe thrown loosely over a t-shirt and boxers, grunt at Dean and take the platter of eggs without speaking. Dean would have to drag him back in by his wrist to get a kiss from his mate, but he would do it. He might also press Michael up against the counter for a minute and grind their hips together while sucking on his throat.

Dean’s fantasy was having a real life effect. He removed the last of the bacon and turned the burner under the empty pan off to let it cool then leaned on one arm over the kitchen counter, sliding his right hand down his sweatpants and taking a firm grasp of himself. He stroked slowly while the image in his mind turned into a vision of his mate flipping around, leaning his belly over the countertop and ordering his Sub to get to work waking him up properly. Dean imagined the family at the table rolling their eyes collectively and Cas sending a couple of the pups to gather the remaining food platters since their dads were obviously not planning to feed anyone but their own wolves. The image was utterly domestic and happy while also being hot as fuck, and Dean was lost in his own mind.

“Just what do you think you’re doing? Get your hand off my property, Submissive. Right now!”

Dean jumped and pulled his hand out, turning to face Michael, whose appearance matched the image from his imagination almost line-for-line. “What? You never said I couldn’t…”

“Oh, yes, I did. I said no one touches you sexually but me and Castiel. Are you Castiel? Are you me? Also, why are you dressed? I told you I expect you naked.” Michael waited impatiently for a response, tapping his foot like a blue-haired librarian.

“I’m sorry, Michael. I mistook your meaning on the first rule. I thought you meant no one else. Wait. Do you mean I don’t get to touch myself, ever? What about when I’m with Cas? Not even in the shower? Dude, that’s an Omega rule! You can’t…what about if I ask for permission? What about when I have to travel for a week or more alone? You don’t expect me to…”

“Stop looking for loopholes, Dean. It’s a rule. You said you were fine with it yesterday, and nothing’s changed. You will be informed about how your rules while you’re with him might be different once we have a chance to talk about it and reach an agreement. For now, just assume that my rules apply at all times. And why are you still dressed?” Michael advanced right up into Dean’s space so that his scent filled Dean’s wolf’s nose.

It was difficult, but he battled to stay present. “Nah, Michael. That’s not right. I didn’t agree to staying naked and in-scene all the time. That’s not going to work for me at all. I need it when I need it, but outside of our playtime, I’m just me, and I’m wearing clothes. Trust me, man. It wouldn’t work.” Dean took a step away from his mate to start heating a pan for the French toast and to clear his head of Michael’s overwhelming scent. “I’m sorry about the touching. I misunderstood, and I owe you one for that, but I’m not doing the other side of our scenes. Besides, I can’t cook naked.”

Michael regarded him, and then he noticed the food. Dean heard his stomach rumble. Michael bit his lower lip, clearly trying to decide if he would look weak for walking a rule back on the second day. “All right. I can be reasonable. When you’re in-scene, you’re naked, and otherwise you have leave to dress as you like. But you are not to touch yourself for any reason except hygiene or health.
concerns. Your cock and your ass belong to your Doms. Am I understood?"

“Yes, Michael.” Dean left off the ‘Sir’ with great effort. Negotiating was tricky, and sometimes points were made through little tricks and subtle power interplay. Michael had not confirmed whether Dean had a punishment coming, and Dean wasn’t going to bring it up again. He loved a good spanking, but not when he’d broken a rule for real. It was just different, and he didn’t want his first real experience with Michael’s Dominant hand to be over a fuck-up.

Dean finished cooking and served Michael a steaming plate. He kissed the side of Michael’s head as he brought coffee for him, then he seated himself. They both mulled things while they ate. Both felt unsettled. One important reason that couples like Dean and Michael used spanking in their relationships was that it allowed for closure when something was off between them. But they’d promised to go slowly, and they hadn’t communicated well enough to make the next steps clear. If the rule wasn’t clear, had a rule been broken? Or not?

“Thanks for last night, Michael. That was incredible. And I feel really good this morning. The big breakfast is your thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Dean. And, uh, thanks to you for being so willing to try for as long as you did. That was all you, not me. Breakfast is delicious.”

They were back. One quick meeting of their eyes broke the tension. Easy and light and effortless. Just like that. They gobbled through breakfast and traded forkfuls of food. No relationship Dean had ever had before felt this easy – not even with his brother, and he told Michael that. Michael nodded and leaned across to kiss Dean’s sticky lips. “I’m glad, Dean, me too. But you’re still getting punished for touching without permission.” He stood and cleared both their plates.

Dean felt a spark of energy run down his body and into his dick at the tone of Michael’s voice, and he pulled a long breath in through his nose. Even if his Sub hadn’t been craving a correction, Dean wanted to give this one to Michael. “Yes, Sir.” He took another breath and tried to convince his cock not to harden. He didn’t want to face his first punishment like that, like an out-of-control teenager, but Michael’s stern voice took him there anyway.

“I’m still not going to spank you until your bruises are gone, so instead, you’ve earned yourself three days of chastity. Today’s Tuesday. You can expect to have no direct physical sexual stimulation until this time on Friday, assuming you don’t earn an extension by breaking more of my rules.”

“Oh, come on! Three days? We only get a month without the rest of the Pack. Seriously? Just fucking spank me already.”

“No. And arguing has bought you another two days. Care to keep going? I know our time is limited, but don’t forget, one thing this month is for is to solidify our roles and how we interact. It’s not just about fucking each other’s brains out.” Michael was clearly wearing his big-boy pants. He was full Dominant, take-no-prisoners, accept no back-talk Big Dog, and while Dean’s wolf whined and groveled, Dean himself couldn’t control his mouth. This wasn’t what he thought he’d been agreeing to.

“I didn’t understand the rule, Michael! It’s not fair to hold me to something I didn’t understand. I’m not gonna do it again, but you gotta give me a pass on the first one. Come on, man!”

“One week, then. I can keep going, Dean. I’m not the one in chastity.”

“Shit!” Dean slammed his mouth closed right on top of all the things he wanted to say to his Dom. He appeared to have just negotiated his way out of a week of sex. He placed a palm over his mouth
to keep it lidded.

“I’ll potentially make one exception this week, Dean. You know what we talked about trying? Seeing if you could bring your private self into a space where others can see you? I’d be willing to allow one episode this week, let you come and everything, if you’ll agree to try it with a small audience for me.”

Dean was torn. He thought he could get there eventually. Hell, his own fantasy not forty-five minutes ago was in front of people. They were all Pack, yeah, but he was in his private wolf in the vision, not doing a public show. Why would he fantasize about it if it wasn’t a thing he wanted at all?

“You’ve already done it for me once, you know – when we Mated. There were a buttload of people watching us. They even filmed it, and from what Sam said last night, who knows how many people are watching it over and over as we speak. You can do this, Dean. I think you’ll like it once you learn to let go. And hey, if you don’t, we’ll stop. No pressure. I’m just asking.”

“It’s extortion to take everything away and leave that as my only option all week. I’m onto you, Michael Winchester. I see what you did there,” Dean stated. “But I want to try anyway. You keep it small and just with someone I already trust, and I’ll try. Don’t expect it to be like our Mating though. I wasn’t myself that day.”

“Good enough. Thank you for trying. That’s all I ask.”

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April was an early riser, so she used the quiet moments just before the sun rose to explore the massive house. It was still dark out, but strategically placed lamps and runners lit enough of the hallways that she didn’t trip over anything. Everything felt surreal. She’d been Mated to Castiel for almost three months now, and she had had no idea he lived like this. To be truthful, he confessed that he only used a small portion of the enormous space available with any regularity, but even that was massive in scale.

It felt homey though. It was big and tasteful, but not pretentious. The lines were clean. The woodwork was exceptional. April ran a hand over a cabinet door that fit snug and flush into a perfect alignment with the support. Master carpenters, artisans, put this home together, and it was warm. It was also empty. It was a house craving a family of youngsters to ride down the bannister and shoot nerf-guns around corners. It was a house waiting to be a home. April could feel the anticipation. It had been waiting a long time.

They drove over yesterday evening and encountered a delivery truck leaving the driveway, rumbling out from the big house and passing Castiel’s car by the two-story guard house which Cas said the security team used as a base office, but where no one had lived for years. The delivery truck was painted with a bigger-than-life image of a grand piano. April turned and watched it leave and then met Castiel’s eye. He looked very smug.

Cas parked in the gravel before the huge front door instead of pulling into the garage. He wanted April to enter her house for the first time through the main entrance. She might never do so again. God knows, Cas hadn’t come in this way for years. It was too grandiose for every day.
Sam met them at the door, handing a set of papers to Cas and rapping him firmly on the back. “Everything’s just how you wanted it, Alpha. The, uh, the tuner comes tomorrow at three.” Sam looked unsure whether he was supposed to say that in April’s hearing. He didn’t know if it was still a surprise or not.

“Thanks Sam. Will you stay for dinner with us?”

“No, thank you, Alpha. I’m having dinner with Dean and Michael. I told them I’d pack up tonight and clear out to give them space, but apparently, my food doesn’t meet with their approval. Dean’s sending me to the store for ‘edible’ food. I need to get going so he’ll have time to turn it into a meal before it gets late.” Cas thanked Sam and nodded, and April grinned at him. Sam kissed her cheek and left the two in the grand foyer.

“Alpha?”

“Yes, my dear?” Cas was smirking.

“Why is a tuner coming tomorrow at three?”

He held his hand out to her, and she took it. “Let’s go and find out. And welcome home.”

The new piano was beautiful. Enormous, shining black mahogany, it looked like it had always been the centerpiece of the conservatory at the back of the house. April hovered a hand over the sleek wood and tried not to breathe too close, not daring to touch it. “Welcome home, April. I hope you like your homecoming gift. This is all for you. In fact, the whole room is yours. No one else in the house plays, so if you want it, it’s all yours. There’s also a desk over by the window where you can do some writing in peace.”

She turned overwhelmed, tear-filled eyes on him. “I don’t know what to say, Alpha. I can’t accept this. It’s too much. I didn’t get you anything. I…Sir, please don’t laugh at me.”

He continued chuckling happily. “You can accept it, and you will, because I’m your Alpha, and I’m giving it to you.” Cas took her in his arms, hunching his shoulders protectively and folding her into his embrace. He let his laughter die away and spoke to her seriously. “Don’t you know what you’ve given me, April? You gave me so much more than a piano. Love, you gave me everything. You made it possible for us to build a life I’d never believed I could have. Because of you, we can fill this house with the laughter and love and life that it’s never known. You mean everything to me, and I love you with all my heart.”

“I love you, too, Alpha.” She breathed him in and stood nestled in his protective arms. Then she tried meekly, “Does this mean we can skip the evening spanking? It would be a shame to break such a lovely mood tonight.”

“Nice try,” he deadpanned. “In fact, it’s time to get started cooking dinner, so let’s get that out of the way.” Castiel took a seat on the piano bench. “Then we can go check on Gabriel.”

“Right here?! I haven’t even played it yet.”

“It seems an appropriate way to break it in to me. Come on, over you go.”

Once she was bare and over his lap, April couldn’t stop herself from asking. “Are you still angry with me, Sir? Today was hard because it really hit me just how disappointed you were. I’m sorry I disobeyed you and argued about your rules. I’m very sorry, Alpha.”

“I was angry, Kitten, but I’m not anymore.” Cas made sure his emotions shone true through their
link. He wanted her to learn to read him without feeling the need to ask, but she’d been shy and resisted prodding him without his permission. Cas wanted her to feel as safe and welcome in his mind as she was in her own. That would take time though. “I forgive you. Of course, that doesn’t mean we’re not still going to go through with the consequences for the week, but no, April, I’m not mad. Are you ready?”

“Yes, Sir.”

The high ceiling of the conservatory, built to reverberate music acoustically, magnified other sounds as well. Both the smack of Cas’ hand on his mate’s flesh and her responding yelps and groans echoed loudly through the space and down the hall outside. And he didn’t forget the extras for her misbehavior in class.

April rubbed her backside in memory as she crept into her conservatory just as the sun peeked over the horizon and bathed her piano in soft morning light. The dark wood glowed. Her piano. She’d never imagined owning something so beautiful. There was also an upright upstairs in the game room by the poker table, but this... This was concert grade. Professional musicians performed on pianos like this one. She seated herself and adjusted her spacing. The height was good already. That had to be coincidence. Castiel couldn’t possibly have known the precise height to set the bench to. Her fingers trembled over the keys.

She hesitated only a moment before bringing them down onto the keys and running a couple of scales and an arpeggio. The tuning wasn’t bad. April hadn’t played in months, and she was rusty. She told Castiel that she played piano, but she’d neglected to detail just how important the instrument was to her. Running her fingers up and down the board felt like coming home from an extended vacation. She looked around the room while she played, slipping easily into her warmup exercises. The acoustics were wonderful; the view unbelievable. From her seat, she looked out the massive panel windows, across the back lawn and down to the pond where ducks paddled with their ducklings amongst tangled cattails. She felt Victorian although the architecture was all Arts and Crafts Americana.

April shifted into Sonata No. 14, the Moonlight Sonata. Its slow pace allowed the echo to chorus back to her and fill the room without creating a cacophony of notes bouncing back and forth. She dug into it and forced the pace to a deliberate metronome. April sensed Gabriel slip in. She didn’t look up, but she was aware when he settled onto a long sofa beneath one of the windows, watching the sun rise over the lake. The peace of the moment touched her deeply, and she broke out in chill bumps as she played.

April knew this piece well. She concentrated enough to keep it whole and alive but let her mind whirl wherever it wanted as the meditative throb worked into the deepest part of her psyche. One tear broke over her lid and cascaded to her chin. This was what she’d wanted, what she’d always wanted – not the space or the piano or the wealth, but to be cherished in a home full of life, full of love – a home where everyone mattered. Somewhere safe.

Somewhere safe.

Her fingers picked up to a slightly quicker pace and danced a bit as she shifted movements. It was still deliberate and measured, but much more lighthearted. What she wanted. April had always
known she was different, more extreme even than her mother who was also an Ozzie. Now there was proof. She thought back to the chart from yesterday’s class. Such cold, arbitrary numbers on a graph meant the difference between safety, personal agency, and self-sufficiency versus a vulnerable need and lifelong dependence. Omegas were so very vulnerable to the whims of circumstance. Only pure, dumb luck had placed her here, and it scared her enough that she wrapped her whole being into keeping it close and whole.

She would do anything to make this pack a success.

She played in the gathering dawn. Alone but for Gabriel.

Her fingers changed rhythm again for the third movement, this time flying over the board in a panicky whirl of anxiety. Couldn’t she have survived with just her mate for a pack? Probably. Especially if that mate was Castiel, but that wasn’t what she wanted. When she saw her chance to gather more alphas, more Doms, more Pack close around her, she’d jumped at it. She wanted a puppy-pile of protectors bolstered all around. She wanted to be safe forever, no matter what. She wanted a cushion on all sides. *On all sides.* She wanted a huge family and enough eyes watching over her that she could never get lost or forgotten. All the long nights she’d lain awake as a child worrying about how to protect herself. Omegas went missing all the time. She’d Presented so young, and the idea that she might need to fend for herself someday had terrified her in the dark of her bedroom.

She let Beethoven be the voice of her anxiety, and she let him wash it through her. Alpha couldn’t be allowed to see this. Not this. Here, she would be safe. He would see to that; so would Dean, and Sam. Even Gabriel. She didn’t know Michael yet, but surely even Michael would come around eventually. Cas thought he was a Dom. She could have *three* Dominants in her house above her in rank. Three dominants and two alphas, plus a Sub big brother…and Gabriel was just Gabriel. It was more than she’d ever imagined, and it was real. The last two chords punched out, and she let her hands hover for just a second before placing them back in her lap.

“Does Alpha know you play like that?” Gabriel asked.

“Not yet. I’ll show him soon.”

“You’ve got real chops, kid. Got any plans to do anything with it?”

“I want to go to college and study music. My father told me no. Said there’d be no point, but Alpha told me he wanted me to do whatever would make me happy. Do you think he would be willing to send me to school? I’m probably not good enough yet to earn a scholarship. College is expensive.”

“Sounded pretty damned good to me.” Gabriel stood up and meandered toward her. “You tell Cas you want to go to school, and next thing you know you’ll be enrolled at Julliard.”

“No, I don’t want to leave. If I have to choose, I’m staying here, but KU has a music school, and there’s a Conservatory only about twenty miles north of Topeka, too.”

Gabriel sat next to her on the bench and she scooted to make room, wincing at what it did to the flesh on her butt. Gabriel noticed. “What’d you do to earn that one?”

“I stopped doing my enema when Alpha went out of town. I thought he wouldn’t really care, but he was pissed.”

“Ouch. You’ll learn he doesn’t do well with direct disobedience. How long are you on the strap?”

“A week. Morning and evening both. In fact, I need to get back. He gets up soon. Will you be at
“Breakfast?”

“Not if I don’t have to be. I’m playing at being injured to buy as much time as I can get.”

“Gabriel, you *are* injured, and he’s not going to punish you until you’re healed. You’ve got a little time.”

“Well, the thing is, and you’ll learn this too: If you break a rule, you want him to go ahead and lay you out right then and there. If he does it while his wolf is worked up, he spends a lot of his attention holding back the wolf, and it’s not quite as bad for your ass. If you give him time to calm down and think about it, you’re just letting him make plans and weigh the consequences and go over it all again and again – way worse in the end…on your end. That’s where I am right now. He wasn’t going to strike while I was bloody, and now I’m just figuring out how to stall as long as I can.”

April laughed at him. “Thanks for the advice. Do you have any more for me?”

“Oh, we’ll talk plenty. I’ve got your back, kid, as long as you’ve got mine. We O’s have to stick together. There’s wolves out there who can eat us, you know. Uh, right now, I think you’d better go.” He gestured with his chin toward the door where a dark figure stood. Gabriel picked *Chopsticks* out clumsily on the professional-level piano as April got up to meet her mate and start her day.

“Hey!” he called to her. She turned. “It’s really good to have a musician back in this room. Marina used to play, but her piano didn’t survive when I was … you know.”

“Thanks Gabriel.”

Castiel cinched an arm around her waist and smiled warmly as he led her down the long hall.

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Dean and Michael slipped into The Facility’s front door without much ceremony. There were several clusters of wolves waiting to be called through to start their processing. Some would be here for tests, and some just for initial interviews and evaluations. It was a lengthy process. Once scheduled for a test, the wait was six to eight weeks to allow for STD screenings and to allow the mandatory birth control a chance to stabilize. Then, follow-ups before the big day kept everyone on the up and up.

Dean was recognized as he strolled in with his mate. Eyes and cell phones followed him as he made his way to the front desk, but no one approached.

“Morning, Becky,” he said cheerfully, leaning against the desk. “Cas wanted us here at ten. Do you know where I can find him?”

“He left instructions to send you two to his suite. He’ll meet you there.”

“Kay. This way, Michael.”

Castiel was already in the suite when they arrived at five ‘till ten. So were Sam, April, and Gabe.

Dean jumped right in. “Ah. Gang’s all here, I see. Good. Let’s get this party started.”

“Yes, let’s,” said Castiel while Dean rummaged through his fridge for some juice. Cas waited until they all found seats in the small living room. April took a spot on the floor with her back against
Sam’s long legs. Michael sat across Dean’s lap in Castiel’s favorite spanking chair.

“I’ve asked everyone here today because I want to set a date to finalize the formation of our Pack. Four of us are flying to New York for a Broadway premiere in a couple of weeks, and we need to have it all done by then.” Michael caught Dean’s eye with a question. What was that about New York? Which four? He didn’t like not knowing. Dean answered back with a grimace and a sheepish shrug. He forgot to tell his mate about the upcoming trip that fell right square in the middle of their month of relative isolation. But Cas was right. They couldn’t take the two Omegas if their C.F.s weren’t in place yet. It was too dangerous.

“Also, April, your midseason Heat is due in a couple of days. That reduces the timeline even more because you and I will be out of reach for three or four days.” April hunkered down and blushed. Going into Heat was always embarrassing, but Castiel had a way of throwing it out there like he was talking about being hungry or tired or any other bodily need. Heats were different.

“Therefore, I propose that if everyone is free, we meet at the house tomorrow evening for the formal oath ceremony and to validate the rankings. Dean, you have three C.F.s to place, and I have two. If we each do one tomorrow evening, then…”

“Wait,” Gabe interrupted. “Why does Dean still have three? There’s just April and me. Who am I missing?”

Sam answered for them. “My brother’s Mating was a bit unconventional. Even though he placed the bite, according to the readings, the Mating sparked from Michael. Michael Claimed Dean, not the other way ‘round. Which means Dean hasn’t actually Claimed his Omega yet, unless…” Sam looked at Dean who was distracted by the tiny hairs on the back of Michael’s neck and wasn’t listening.

“Dean! Pay attention!” commanded Castiel. “Have you Claimed Michael yet?”

“Um, no. I’m gonna need some help with that. We kinda have this thing where even when we try to stay outta scene, my wolf rolls. Can we talk to Ellen and get a game plan? When do you want to do it?”

“It would help if you paid attention the first time. We want to get all the C.F.s done ASAP. We can save yours with Michael until last and talk it through with Ellen, Bobby, and Benny. Michael, you can help too by working to occupy your Omega when Dean’s…there.”

Dean and Michael grinned at each other. They really weren’t worried or feeling especially rushed. When it happened, it happened. Surely, it would take care of itself within the two week limit. Then Michael spoke up without taking his eyes off his mate. “Actually, there’s a problem with your schedule, Alpha. Dean’s in chastity for the week.”

Dean crowed in victory, and Michael scowled. So much for the Alpha not getting involved. “Dean, I want you to Claim Gabriel tomorrow after the oaths, and then April just as her Heat starts up before we lock ourselves in a day or two after that. All right?”

“Uh, sure Alpha. Is Gabe up to it?”

“Keep him up on his knees and off his back, and he should be fine.”

“And Michael?” A spontaneous Claim was looking less likely if Dean only had a week to make it happen.

“We can schedule time in the Processing room for Michael’s Claim. It may take some careful staging
and a professional manager.”

Dean nodded. Alpha had spoken. C.F.s weren’t a new thing. Despite the fact that the culture was being actively rebuilt from the ground up over no more than the last twenty years, Claim-Fucks were such an instinctive hardwired drive that they’d never disappeared entirely from pack life. Only wolves who had completely forsaken the pack identity, usually beta-Neutrals like Naomi who were unable to feel the instinctive pull, had abandoned Claim-Fucking. It was part of being Pack, and they all accepted it as a matter of course. Although many alpha parents balked at Claiming their Omega offspring even when grown children remained linked to the Pack. Biologically, it was best for the Omega and the Pack, but culturally, enough disquiet about incest had leaked through from the ape lifestyle, that some Lupin parents found it distasteful.

Cas continued. “Michael, I will speak with you alone when we’ve finished with our discussion here today, and you need to be prepared for me to place my Claim on you tomorrow evening.”

“Yes, Sir.” Michael looked a little alarmed. What did Alpha want to talk with him alone about? Were they having that discussion today?

“Now. We have the whole Pack gathered, so I’ll open the floor to any concerns or questions that anyone would like to have addressed. Anyone?”

“We, um, wanted to know how the sleeping arrangements are going to work at the house,” started Dean.

“You and I take joint ownership of the Master Suite, and everyone else may select whichever room they like best. That includes you Sam. You will no doubt be staying over from time to time per Pack business and your responsibilities, so you need a room of your own. Gabriel and I will give you and Michael tours. Selections are to be made according to Pack rank, so, Sam, you choose first.”

Michael sat up, and Dean resumed nibbling on his earlobes and the back of his neck. “So, if Dean gets joint ownership of the Master Suite, does that mean that I can sleep with him in there if you’re elsewhere? On a trip or off with your mate or something?”

“Yes, I suppose so. You’re expected to clean up after yourselves, but it’s Dean’s room, too. And Dean, as Second-rank, I would appreciate you paying attention and giving this meeting, informal though it is, your full attention.”

“Sorry, Cas.” He patted Michael’s thigh and whispered, “Lemme up,” to him. Michael slid to the side. Dean joined Castiel in front of the four others and put an arm around his waist. “I’m here, boss. What’s next?”

“Questions, Dean. We’re taking questions.” Cas was irritated, but April giggled.

“I have another one,” piped Michael, sitting forward again. “So, yesterday at lunch, I asked Dean to tell me what he did to get those bruises on his rear end. He said he wasn’t at liberty to say. Would you explain to me how you have any standing to make my mate and my Sub withhold information about the wellbeing of his body OR his wolf from me? And, hold on, before you swat me down for being a prick, I’m not being a prick. I want to understand. I feel like I deserve to know what’s what with Dean. I’m responsible for him, for his Submissive anyway. We’re supposed to be all about communication and shit; ‘don’t hide anything’, and all that. So, what gives?”

Cas turned to Dean, perplexed. “I never asked you to keep that information confidential. Why would you not answer your Dom’s question?”
“I didn’t know how things were gonna settle between you two. It wouldn’t be unreasonable to assume y’all would wind up with a ‘Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas’ rule.

Cas shook his head and paced. “Dean, you’re not responsible for following rules that might be enacted at some point in the future. You are responsible for following the ones you’ve been given at the time. Now I see how postponing this conversation as long as I have has created instability for all of you. That stops today.” He stopped in front of Dean and faced him. “What’s ‘Rule One’ in this pack?”

“I owe you my allegiance and my obedience.”

“Good. Dean, you disobeyed my direction to you to follow your Dominant’s instructions by withholding information from him. And Rule Number Three?”

“Um, be obedient to the wolves above me in rank and protective of the ones below me.”

“Dean, in terms of your Tertiary genders, Michael outranks you, does he not?”

Dean shook his head. “No, where we sit in regard to our wolves – that’s a private matter between mates. It’s not part of the Pack rankings except between Secondaries that align.”

“All right, I’ll concede that there is need for clarification of that rule. I’ll not hold you to disobedience with Michael at this time because ‘Rule Three’ doesn’t make that Pack business. Yet. But you should know that if Michael chooses to hold you to account for keeping information from him, he is perfectly free to do so. That leads us into the issue of ‘Rule Five’…” Cas let his sentence lead Dean into responding.

“Don’t lie.”

“You and I discussed this one at length. We were both concerned that we not allow for any variations or versions of prevarication, and we both agreed that withholding information from someone who has the right to know be classified as a form of lying.”

“Yes, we did. But we also allowed that we wouldn’t consider it lying if someone didn’t understand something and needed to get clarification, or misunderstood something and acted on that misconception. I didn’t lie to him, Cas! I told him straight-up that I didn’t know if I had the authority to share that information! You can’t punish me for this. I know you want to. It’s holding me to rules you’re changing after the fact. You just told me we don’t do that! I acted in good faith, Castiel – good faith to protect you, I might add.”

The rest of the pack was riveted. If popcorn had been available, April and Gabriel would be munching away while they took in the show. April had never witnessed an alpha called to account in front of her, and she loved it. She especially loved that Dean was defending himself.

Castiel changed tacks. “Michael, thank you for bringing this matter forward. That is precisely the kind of communication I want to see from all of you in these meetings. We’ll hold them frequently at first because it looks as if a number of our rules need to be adjusted. Talking through what happens is the only way we’re all going to understand where those weaknesses are.”

He began pacing again, crossing in front of Dean where his fiancé stood with his arms crossed defensively. “Going forward, let it be perfectly clear, whether you have given me your formal oath or not, each of you belongs to me in terms of the Winchester Pack. I make the final call in this Pack. Input from everyone is encouraged, and special allowance for mutual participation is granted to my spouse-to-be, but at the end of the day, I make the rules, and I will hold each of you to follow them.
“Am I understood?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Dean?”

“You have to be fair about it, Alpha. None of us deserve to be held accountable for what you MEANT to put into a rule but never did. Not everyone here is going to feel empowered to stand up for themselves, so that’s got to come from us, from you and me.”

“You’re right, but I’m not going to be stymied by technicalities either. If I feel that someone reasonably understood the spirit of a rule, but managed to squeak through on the letter, then I reserve the right to take their intentions into account.”

“You think that’s what I did? Do you think I refused to answer Michael’s question because I didn’t want to, and I used the fact that our pack rules don’t make me obey him as an easy out?” Dean was obviously angry. “Why would I care if he knows why you blistered my ass? I did that for you!”

Cas remained calm under Dean’s fire. He shook his head in concession. “I think you were being cautious while caught between two posturing Doms.”

“Damn straight! This isn’t easy for me, you know. I feel like any minute you’re both gonna start peeing on me. YOU try to navigate all the growling and snarling when two Doms have claim on you without getting your ass whooped all the time. Jesus!”

“Dean, relax. I’ve conceded your point already. There’s no need for a tirade.”

“Alpha, at what point do I have the right to step in and have a say?” Michael looked genuinely intrigued. “I mean, it’s a matter that relates to me personally and to my bond with Dean, so can I get involved here, or do I just have to watch you two go at it and see where the dust settles?”

“Of course you may step into the discussion. As you say, it relates to you as well. What do you want to add, Michael?” Castiel pulled his eyes away from Dean’s with reluctance. Dean was beautiful when he was righteously incensed.

“Well, it looks to me like nobody should be trying to enforce any rules yet; not until we’ve all pledged and you’ve fucked all us O’s into submission or whatever, not until everyone gets a chance to talk about it and understand it all. Otherwise there’s just gonna be a big fucking mess.”

Cas nodded in agreement. He actually fucking nodded in agreement with Michael, and Dean rolled his eyes. “This is an unstable situation, and that’s evident in the number of issues that are already popping up. Today’s meeting hasn’t gone exactly the way I pictured it, but I still feel it’s been a success because we’re talking to each other. Tomorrow’s dinner will mark the point at which all rules and all of our roles become incontrovertible. Until then, I’m afraid we must continue to wing it a bit. Sam, do you have anything to bring up?”

“Well, yeah. I wanted to make real clear, while we’re on the subject of getting rules and roles settled, that I didn’t join the pack to be y’all’s official pack E.O. I do that enough at work. I mean, I’ll take whatever action that I need to as third-ranking wolf, but I want to make it clear that I don’t expect everyone to just send their problems through me.”

Dean smirked at his brother. “You mean like, ‘Wait till Sam gets home, and you’re really gonna get it’?”

“Yes, exactly. Please don’t do that.”
“Agreed,” said Cas. “Each Top is responsible for the behavior he witnesses and has authority to reprimand for. That said, you may each refer punishment of another wolf’s mate directly to that wolf if you prefer. Other than that, if you see it, you own it.” Sam nodded firmly.

“That’s all I wanted to clear up. I’m good.” Sam leaned back and looked around.

“All right. Michael? Do you have anything else?”

“Um, yeah. Yes, Dean and I have something else, but if it would be okay, we’d rather talk about it in private with just you.”

“Okay. Gabriel?”

“What? Oh. Yeah. Can you tell me how long I’ve gotta live with this cloud over my head?”

“Until your stitches come out. And you are grounded until further notice as well. Do not leave Pack grounds without me or Dean as an escort.”

“Well, shit. ‘Cause I had this…”

“Save it Gabriel,” Cas interrupted him. “You and I will speak later. I’m not going to spank you until you’re healed, but if you goad me into it, I’ll be happy to talk your ear off about respect and safety and not sneaking off where you’re not supposed to be and risking getting yourself killed.”

Gabriel deflated, sinking into his chair, all of his normal lighthearted humor well and truly absent.

“April? Do you have anything you’d like to ask or bring up?”

“No, Alpha.”

“All right, then. Everyone please be at the house tomorrow by 6:30. We’ll start with the oaths then have dinner. Michael and Gabriel, your Claims will take place after we eat. Meeting adjourned.”

“Don’t we have to wait half-an-hour after we eat before we Claim-Fuck?” Michael snarked.

Dean hauled him to his feet and wrapped an arm around his neck.

“Just wait. He’s restraining the shit out of himself right now. This isn’t how he always is.” Dean confided into Michael’s ear. “Don’t provoke him on purpose just to see him lose it. It’s not pretty.”

Dean closed the office door behind him and addressed his mate. “Are you sure about this?”

“I’m sure. Are you?”

“I’m going wherever you go. If you want to jump off this cliff, I’m jumping with you. Let’s do it.”

They faced Castiel standing imperiously behind his desk chair, and Dean took the lead. “Alpha, we want to start a family. Michael and I, we’d like your blessing to try for a pup at Michael’s next Heat.”

Castiel blinked. “Already? Did you tell him about the co-parenting plan and the research projects on the docket? What about his Omega training?”
Dean looked at Michael but his answer was for Cas. “Yeah, we talked about all that. We can wait until he’s nearly through with the training.” He turned to face Castiel who stood behind his desk while Dean and Michael had taken places in front of it. “Also, I’m going to be cutting back at work. My department can afford to hire a research assistant to fill in the gaps. The projects mostly only need me for design and planning and coordination anyway. The actual implementation can be assigned to someone else. We have lots of good people on staff. I only do it myself because I like the work. I enjoy it.” Dean moved to stand halfway between the two Doms where he could see them both. “It'll be good for everyone in the end – give the rookie researchers a chance to grow and shine. I’m thinking of moving Kevin into my spot to run the projects. He can do it. That little dude’s brilliant.”

“And the co-parenting?” Cas was staring at his hands clenching the leather of his office chair.

“I’m not surrendering my pups to you, Alpha.”

Dean laid a restraining hand on Michael’s arm and shook his head slightly. “We’re not ready to make a decision about that yet, Castiel. Michael’s against it because he thinks it’s a surrender of his maternal rights. I think once we explain how we see it working, he may change his mind.”

“And Michael, are you not planning to return to school and finish your degree? It’s much harder to do that once you’ve got a little one.”

“I have no plans to return to school, Alpha. It won’t be an issue.”

Castiel drummed his fingers against the chairback, thinking. “From the standpoint of a Mated couple, I have no authority to forbid you to have a baby whenever you decide it’s the right time for you, but I am extremely concerned that this Pack and your union are both too young and unstable. Bringing a pup into the mix right now would undoubtedly cause more confusion. I ask that you agree to hold off for at least a year to allow us to get comfortable in our roles. Please, understand. I have to keep the health and wellbeing of the whole Pack in mind, and I don’t think we’re ready for pups.”

Michael’s abrupt intake of breath and stiffening spine was all the tell Dean needed to know his mate was about to lose it. He didn’t need the rush of outrage pouring through the Mating-bond. Dean stepped in front of his mate, took firm hold of his shoulders and looked right into his eyes. “Don’t say something that’s going to get you knocked into your Omega right now. Michael, listen to me. You and Cas need to talk about how you’re going to share me. If you earn yourself a spanking right now by saying something stupid, then you go into that conversation with a glowing ass and an Omega’s perspective. Just wait. Michael, please?” Michael blinked at him then nodded reluctantly.

Dean turned and faced Castiel. “I get it, Alpha. I see where you’re coming from with this, but we’re going to want to talk about it again before we concede anything. Please don’t say the matter’s closed just yet. Let’s table it, sleep on it, and bring it up again in a few days – maybe after you come out of lockdown with April. Okay, Cas?”

Castiel sighed. They all understood that it was an Alpha’s prerogative to close an item of discussion for good. If Cas called the issue closed, then the discussion was over. Period. “All right. We’ll look at it again after we return from New York. I’m unlikely to change my answer though.” Closing the discussion wouldn’t be a no. He didn’t have the right to forbid them from trying, but the ramifications of going against their Alpha’s explicit wishes were murky. And Dean was trying like hell to marry the guy. What would it tell Cas if Dean…?

“Thanks, Cas,” said Dean. He guided Michael out of the office. Sam was gone, but Gabe and April sat chatting on the sofa with their heads together.
Dean wrapped himself around his mate, calming him and whispering. “Hang in there, man. It’s not a no. Not yet. Don’t go running your canoe off the waterfall just yet.”

“What does that even mean?” asked Michael, matching Dean’s whisper. Dean snickered, but Michael wasn’t joking. “No, Dean. He doesn’t get to decide this for us. He said so himself. He has to ask us to agree to wait, not just tell us we can’t go for it. What would he do if I suddenly popped up pregnant? He’s not going to throw the pup out of the pack.”

“I know, baby. We’ll talk about it later. Right now, you need to focus or he’s going to clean the floor with you in there, and you’re going to walk away lucky to get conjugal visiting rights with me. I don’t get a say in how you two divvy me up. I was hoping to postpone that, but it looks like we’re doing it now. You ready?”

“Absolutely,” affirmed the Dom.

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But it didn’t happen right away. April mentioned being hungry, so Cas herded them all to an early lunch in the cafeteria. He filled Gabriel in on how the young Omega he’d pulled from Gordon’s place was doing. She was recovering rapidly physically, but had a great deal of emotional trauma to overcome, and that was going to take some time. Bobby planned to keep her as a ward of the Medical Department until she was fully healed and in complete physical health before relinquishing custody to Benny and the Behavioral Department for evaluation of her mental and emotional state. After that, they didn’t have a plan yet, but Cas assured Gabe that she would be protected. April reacted to that with surprising vehemence, looking for surety that the girl would be cared for.

After lunch, Cas asked Dean and Michael to wait for him for a few minutes. They settled in to watch TV. Michael wondered if Cas was playing power games with him by making him wait. It’s what Michael would’ve done, but in truth, Cas was just trying to fit it all in. He returned to his office and called Sam back in. Sam was just finishing his workout at the gym. Today was mostly free for him except for meetings, so he appeared quickly but still sweaty at the Alpha’s summons. His class had special seminars all day with older Omega mentors. It was a Q&A session for Ozzies-only, so they could speak freely.

“Come in, Samuel. Have a seat.” Cas had a habit of using Sam’s full name when he was displeased. It put Sam on alert.

“What’s up, Alpha? Have I done something wrong?”

“I spoke to Dean yesterday about an incident that happened with his mate with which you were involved. Do you know anything about that?”

“Oh. I…um. Yes, Sir. I made a mistake concerning Dean’s consent to a scene, and I, uh, I participated in a way he didn’t agree to. We’ve talked about it, and I think it’s all settled now.” Sam squirmed in his chair as he realized he should have brought his error to the Alpha. Or to Benny. Even with the new Pack still in limbo, he’d fucked up on Facility grounds. The case could be made that it had standing within his professional capacity as a Dom-employee.

“Tell me what happened.”

Sam went through it all, from the texting and planning the previous evening, to the implementation
yesterday morning, to Sam’s shock when he found out Dean hadn’t been on board, and the punishment he gave to Michael.

“It was completely my fault that it happened. I mean, Michael pulled me in, but I know better than to step into a scene without getting explicit consent from all parties involved. What’s even worse is that Dean’s my brother. He should be able to trust me, and I let him down. Cas, I’m so sorry.”

“I believe you, Sam, but I can’t let this go. I’m not going to spank you for it. Instead, you’re going to stand in the corner during today’s Top-staff meeting. Give whatever reports you have to present to someone else and be sure to select someone who can speak well on your behalf. You will listen but not participate. Any decisions that are made will be decided without your input today. I will not announce the reason for your punishment to the staff as it touches on Dean’s and Michael’s private affairs, but you will remain on display for the entire meeting. Do you have any questions?”

“No, Alpha.”

“Thank you, Sam. You’re dismissed.”

Cas called home quickly as Sam left to make sure the staff knew about the piano tuner coming at three and to have him check both pianos while he was there. Then he took a deep breath and went to collect Michael.

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“Come with me please, Michael.” Cas held the main suite door into the hallway open for the Omega. “Dean, please wait here with April for our return. Also, you’re invited to attend today’s staff meeting at two. We’ll be discussing Keller tests for the next two months, and Michael’s been scheduled, so you will probably want to attend.” He didn’t wait for Dean’s response before following Michael into the hall and leading the way to the H/R room he’d reserved in the west wing. H/R rooms were soundproof and monitored. Whatever was about to happen could get heated, and Cas wanted some discretion and safety for Michael.

“Wow, really?” said Michael as Castiel showed him in. The bed in the middle of the far wall was huge. Classic bondage and discipline equipment lined the walls. There was a full-sized refrigerator and a hot-plate. There was ample clear floor space between the bed and the door, and rings dotted the ceiling at regular intervals.

“We’re not here for that, obviously.” Cas responded. “But I wanted to speak with you somewhere safe, and I don’t want to hobble you with my home-field advantage by making you do this at my house. It will soon be your house as well, but that’s not happened yet.”

“What happened to giving us a month to gel first?”

“All indications seem to be pointing out that the longer we wait to get ourselves ranked and stable, the more trouble we’ll all be in. Do you have any real problem with doing this here and now?”

“Absolutely none. Let’s do it, Alpha.”

“Good. That’s my feeling as well. There should be very little need for this to take much time. The Pack hierarchies are already established. All we need to settle is how you and I share our mutual Submissive. Would you like to begin? I expect we both have some items of particular importance to
“All right.” Michael used every last inch of his height and breadth. He was taller by just a bit and carried a bit more weight than Castiel as well. For an Omega, he was enormous. If his pheromones weren’t always giving him away, Michael could easily pass for a beta, and sometimes even an alpha under the right circumstances. His Dominant gave him the swagger. All he lacked was the ineffable certainty that all alphas carried unconsciously – the certainty that their place in the world was secure. No Omega could swing that.

“He’s what I want. I want Dean to defer primarily to me in private, even in domestic concerns, not to you. I’m asking you to take a half-step back on Submissive and sexual matters with him. I know he’s yours, too. I get that. I’m not asking for full custody, just that half-step.”

“I see. What would that look like in daily life?” Cas sat on the end of the bed allowing Michael to claim the advantage of height completely.

“I get free rein to scene with him at will, and you need to schedule your sessions through me. I promise to work with you in good faith, Castiel, but if I’ve got something planned, you need to wait,” Castiel didn’t answer. He could tell that Michael had more. “Also, if he misbehaves outside of his Submissive wolf, then you can punish him as you see fit, but if his misbehavior occurs through the Submissive, then I take first crack at him, assuming I’m available. I wouldn’t ask the whole Pack to put up with a brat for hours if I can’t be there. If you or Sam need to do it, I expect to get a call or text and a polite request for permission. But his Submissive primarily belongs to me. I’m his mate.”

Castiel laughed calmly. “Michael, Dean only ever misbehaves through his Submissive. Seriously. He’s the most careful man I know, and he literally wrote the book on balancing modern Domestic Discipline with instinctive Pack discipline. You’re never going to see him break a rule from his front brain or his alpha. You saw him today. He defended himself with logic and certainty. He knows when he’s right.”

Michael frowned in thought. Was that true? Cas continued, “He’s a true brat, though. He’ll push every button you have to get a Dom response from you when he wants one. You’ll see it soon if you haven’t already. Have you spanked him yet?”

“No.” Michael didn’t elaborate, but Cas sensed something under the surface. He didn’t pursue it, instead he shifted direction just a bit.

“But you put him into a week of chastity?”

“He earned it. He broke one of my rules less than a day after I put it to him.”

Cas laughed outright at that. “I’ll bet he did. If you remember, you did the same to him, and to me. What’d you say to me? ‘How do you want me to shove all those rules…?’ That was pretty ballsy, Michael, even for a Profound Dominant – which your Keller test will reveal that you are. I have to give you credit, though. Choosing chastity instead of paddling his ass is going to make him crazy. Whatever he did was probably meant to provoke your hand, not tie him up in a cock-cage for a week. I applaud you for a masterful first stroke.”

Cas got up and started a cup of coffee brewing through the in-room Keurig. He sighed as it brewed. “What else?”

“Are you agreeing to everything so far?”

“No, not yet. I want to hear it all first.”
“He defaults to sleeping in my bed. If you want him in yours, I get to say yes or no. After that I just have one more stipulation.”

Cas turned with his cup and leaned against the counter, sipping. “And what’s that?”

“Everyone but me, and that includes both you and Dean, is forbidden from touching his cock or scrotum. They’re mine. I’m making an exception to allow him to continue to participate in Keller testing because it’s his job, but that’s all. He doesn’t fuck in class or demonstrations. He doesn’t fuck in the one-on-ones at conventions. He doesn’t masturbate in the shower. I have no idea if you ever do the catching in bed, but if so, then that stops, too. His penis is mine. He can come without penile stimulation, I’ve seen him do it, so that’s what you can have. Feel free to do whatever you want to his ass, but don’t touch his dick.”

Castiel looked surprised at that request, but not unhappy. He looked almost pleased and shocked at the same time, like the idea hadn’t occurred to him or that he was surprised to hear it from Michael. He schooled his face and addressed Michael who hadn’t moved from his position in the center of the room.

“Let me enumerate your demands. You just have those four?” Michael nodded. In the short time he had known that he would need to state his case to the Alpha, he’d thought hard about this.

“All scening requires your permission and scheduling. You want to take care of his punishments as long as the misbehaviors originate from his bratty wolf. He sleeps with you most of the time, and we need permission to alter that, and his penis and scrotum are off-limits to everyone but you. Is that it?”

“That’s all I ask. Plus, the right to decide for ourselves when to knock me up.”

Cas nodded upward. He knew he’d hear that one again. “Before I answer or counteroffer, let me put my cards on the table as well. I believe you’ll find me a benevolent tyrant. As long as my Pack runs smoothly and the wolves under my care are in balance, I will have very little argument with anything you do with your mate. Where you and I will cross purposes is if you decide to push me about the rules or challenge my wolf for leadership of the Pack. Also, don’t think you can use Dean to manipulate me. He’s not a ramming device you’re going to use to get special privileges above your station.

“As long as you behave yourself, Michael, you and I should have no problems getting along and sharing joint custody. I’m proud of the progress you’ve made in accepting that your mate will be shared with another Dom. I know that’s hard for you. It’s hard for me, too. Believe me. But everything we agree to here today becomes moot if you’re not behaving yourself within the guidelines of the Pack. Whatever rules Dean sets for you as your alpha are between you and him, but I’m not about to ask you for permission to do anything with him if you don’t behave yourself and work with me. Is that clear?”

“No, it’s not. Does that mean that as soon as I forget myself and break one of your fucking rules, that I lose all claim to my own mate? Fuck that, Castiel. You just try to take him away from me and see where that lands you. I’ll rip your goddamned throat out, I swear!”

“Michael! Calm yourself. We’re just having a conversation. I’m not suggesting anything of the kind. Please stop assuming that everyone’s working to take something away from you. What I mean is, your special privileges and negotiated demands with Dean are contingent upon your good behavior. No – one broken rule doesn’t get him taken away from you. I couldn’t do that if I tried. But if you’re always in trouble and causing mayhem in my Pack, we’re going to renegotiate everything, and you’re going to find the tables flipped. You want to call the shots with Dean? I’m game to let you, but you only get to keep that privilege as long as you behave yourself. As a Dominant, you need to
be a role model and a part of the Pack support structure. If I have to step in, you’re not going to like the outcome.”

“Right. There it is again. The Big-Bad-Wolf, Castiel. You know, you and Dean keep bringing that up, but I’m not seeing it. All you do is talk. It seems to me that I could take you down in a man-to-man. If it wouldn’t crush Dean, I probably would’ve gone for your jugular already. So, explain it to me, Big Bad, why is everyone so fucking afraid of you?”

“What does your Omega think?” asked Castiel, cryptically.

Michael took his question at face value, and he was man enough to admit the truth. “My Omega basically shits himself every time you walk into the room.”

“Does that not tell you something?”

“No. I don’t listen much to him. He’s a fucking coward. He’s the weak link I was saddled with.”

Castiel chuckled. “Therein lies the key to all your problems, Michael. Your Omega is not the weakest part of you. He’s strong, and he’s perceptive.”

“Oh, really? So, you really are some kind of master Ninja beat-down king? I don’t believe it. Come on, Castiel, let’s finish this. You gonna accept my demands, or do we fight for Dean here and now?”

Michael’s posture showed he didn’t expect to be leaving the room before someone’s blood had been spilled.

“Those aren’t the only two options, Michael. But, for the most part, yes. I accept. I’ll need you to prove that you can act in good faith concerning the scheduling. Dean will be my husband. I expect to be granted full conjugal rights to him and not just D/s scening. Sometimes I’m just going to want to make love to my husband. I want at least two nights per week guaranteed. I prefer three, but I can ease into it considering I have an Omega mate to balance as well.”

Michael nodded. “All right. Two nights guaranteed, but I confirm which two.”

Cas nodded in return. “I’m very pleasantly surprised at your suggestion that you claim exclusive rights to his penis. It’s simple and elegant. It’s a perfect solution to the need to keep something sacred within the realm of the Mating-bond. I accept that demand wholeheartedly, and I promise to help you enforce it. I will miss it though. He makes the prettiest faces when his knot takes just the right amount of pressure. Thank you for allowing me continued access to his ass. And as I said, I know this is hard for you, Michael, but please refrain from snarling at me when I touch him. I’ll do the same for you.”

Castiel was pacing again. “No, the only thing I can’t concede is giving all of his punishments to you. I’m not going to do that. I need it just as much as he does – just as much as you do – and it’s a very important way that we connect with each other. If I always have to call you in when he challenges my authority, his wolf is going to lose all respect for me. It’s not sustainable. You and I need to work out a system where we each know what the other has done to or for him regarding his punishments. The chastity punishment, for example; I needed to know about that or I might just break it without realizing it. He’s brat enough, too, to play us against each other if we let him. Work with me, please. I’ll back you up, and you back me up.”

“Like you backed me up this morning? When you overrode my chastity verdict in front of everyone?”
“That was necessary. It’s a one-time Pack establishment issue. I should’ve run it by you in private, but I didn’t know about it beforehand.”

“No, Castiel. Not acceptable. I want everything I asked for. I want his punishments. I think I’ve made a reasonable allowance in saying you and Sam can take care of him if I’m not there, but I’m not gonna watch you spank my mate in front of me.”

“I’m not giving you that. Take what you’ve got and walk away, Michael.”

“No fucking way, Alpha. He’s MY mate. I don’t give a shit if you saw him first. You didn’t Mate him. You’re lucky I don’t take you to court for Mating-bond infringement.” Michael’s eyes were going golden, and his blood pressure rose noticeably. He knew where this was going, but it had been heading that way from the moment he first saw Dean’s face in a filthy bathroom in Texas.

“Walk away, Michael,” the Alpha warned.

“Or what? You gonna talk to me some more? You gonna spank my ass? I’m not afraid of you. You know what I think? I think you put your bluff in on these people years ago, and they all like you too much to call you on your bullshit. Well, I’m calling you out, Alpha. You got nothing, and you can’t make me do shit.” Michael’s Dominant wolf was literally cowering on its side in the dirt, whining and writhing, flashing its belly, pawing out at Michael to shut the fuck up. Castiel’s eyes turned red, his jaw tightened, and the breathing through his nose deepened.

“Is this the only way to get to the other side of this conversation with you, Michael? Do you need to see him?”

“See who? Your wolf? Yeah, Cas. Trot the little fucker on out here. Let’s see what’s got everyone so fucking terrified they piss themselves to make you happy.”

Castiel leapt forward and had Michael prostrate on the ground before he could blink. Michael caught up in time to struggle at least a little bit, but it wasn’t Michael’s doing that had him flipped onto his back. Castiel’s eyes were solid red and he only held Michael down with a hand splayed across the Omega’s chest. Michael flailed to gain purchase with his feet and hands, and he began to push up. One hand wasn’t going to hold him, but then his eyes locked onto the wolf’s. The Alpha knelt on one knee and leaned over the Omega.

One look into the depths of the beast inside Castiel Novak though, and Michael’s Dominant wolf fled, outmatched and wanting nothing to do with this fight. His Omega whined, whimpered, and caved to the drooling beast above him. It wasn’t the Alpha’s actions that toppled Michael so quickly, it was his eyes. With nothing more than a hand across Michael’s chest, those eyes spoke promise and threat backed up by millions of years of evolution. Every potential that canine power could perceive or promise coalesced in the wolf above Michael, and Michael couldn’t look away. He was sucked into the red depths, and he pulled in the first of the few ragged breaths he had left before his throat was inevitably ripped out.

The beast was raw, uncontrollable rage and lust, and Michael was its enemy. He’d never imagined a power like this. It spoke to him through the beginnings of time and space and into a world they only reached through dreaming anymore, but where wolves once ran free and unfettered. And the beast was real, and angry, and drooling onto Michael’s face. Castiel wasn’t a wolf. He was a Hellhound, and he was going to kill Michael. It took only a few seconds for Michael to come to terms with the fact that he was never going to see Dean again. He hadn’t had enough time. His bladder and his anal sphincter both spasmed, and he soiled himself, but he still couldn’t look away or fight back. All he could do was submit to death. The Hellhound had the inexorable right to destroy the pathetically outclassed likes of Michael Lancet, and he raised his chin and bared his throat in acknowledgement.
and submission without ever looking away, hoping it would be quick.

Slowly, so very slowly, the red in those bestial eyes faded. Michael could feel a great struggle taking place within the Alpha above him. The hand on his chest trembled, and he grasped at it, lent it all of his strength. Moment by moment, the blue of Castiel’s eyes began to return and his breathing grew deeper until he was panting with the effort. Michael began to shake uncontrollably, the adrenalin kicking in, and he took a great gasp, not realizing until then that he’d been holding his breath.

Castiel gave out all at once. He slumped to the ground and sat heavily on his ass, freeing Michael from the hand splayed across his chest. “Do you understand now, Michael?” Castiel’s voice was glass scraped over gravel like he’d traveled eight years in the desert with no water.

Michael sat up slowly, keeping his eyes on Castiel. “You control him?” he asked in a very small voice.

Castiel nodded. “Most of the time. Sometimes he breaks through and I have to work him back down. If I feed him enough, and keep him satisfied, I can control him, but he’s always going to be dangerous.”

“How Dean seen him?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what to say, Alpha.” Michael’s face was still bloodless. Castiel worked himself to standing and began to pull the Omega to his feet.

“I know I come across as awfully deliberate, Michael, but I don’t have the luxury of working through my wolf. He’s uncontrollable if I let him out. Please understand and allow me my own methods. They work, and I can keep all of you safe. You don’t have to be afraid. He would never hurt Dean or April. Or Gabriel. I just need some time, and he’ll come to accept you and Sam as Pack, but please don’t push me.”

Castiel walked Michael into the bathroom and stripped him. He cleaned up where the Omega had soiled himself and ran him a bath.

“Alpha, I swear. I don’t ever want to see that again. Whatever you want from me. We don’t need to wait until tomorrow night. Claim me now. I want it. What you did…He was going to kill me, wasn’t he?”

Castiel nodded. “But I’m not going to let that happen, Michael. You’re my Pack. You’re my Omega, and I’ll protect you with my life.”

“But, Alpha.” The adrenalin hit Michael upside the head, and he began to shiver. “He’s…he’s massive. I’ve never seen power like that, but you…you’re even stronger. You beat him. I don’t understand. Why do you hide all of that?”

Castiel helped Michael step into the bath and began to wash him tenderly. “Because I am first and foremost, a civilized man. Everything else is secondary. Do we have an agreement, Michael? About Dean?”

“Whatever you say, Sir.” Michael wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to call Castiel by his name again. Castiel stripped off and stepped into the large tub behind the Omega and settled, pulling Michael into his chest and holding him there until his shivering abated, letting the skin-to-skin contact soften away the fear. Maybe there was hope.
Just in case anyone wondered why Castiel is so patient and hard to ruffle. This is why. And if you're wondering, I suspect things aren't completely settled between the two Doms. Let's just wait and see how it goes once they're all sharing a house together.

Several readers asked for Dean's Keller scores after the last chapter, so I'm taking a poll: should I embed that information in the narrative, or include it in notes like an appendix?

Best to you all, and for everyone who shared that they struggle with migraines too. I feel ya. They suck.
Tuesday, May 9, 2017

Chapter Summary

Has it been a while since Dean's brat slipped out? Hmm, maybe a little too long.

Chapter Notes

I'm completely blown away by the unbelievable kindnesses in response to the last couple of chapters. This story is a labor of love for me. I write it for myself, because it wanted out. To hear from all of you that you find it evocative or moving, even just interesting. I don't know if I can express how deeply that touches me.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

I'm working some Keller scores in soon. Probably in the next chapter. Here's a teaser for you right here, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THEN:

Dean knew he was inside his wolf. He could always tell, but he couldn’t find his way out. They’d thrown an Omega-Submissive at him in the first round of testing, and he had mounted the woman uncertainly. He wasn’t attracted to her, and he wondered if that would throw the readings off for his test. The technicians assured him beforehand that his sexual orientation had no bearing on the outcome of the Keller test. He knew it was going to be a girl, but his reticence to Claim her had nothing to do with his failure to find her sexually appealing. They told him to take each round as it
came at him. Be flexible. Listen to his wolf. They told him it didn’t make any difference what he did, what the tester did, who fucked into whom, or if a Claim-bond formed or not. The only thing that mattered is that someone was mounted and someone submitted. They told him not to fight against anything his wolf or his alpha or his body wanted him to do. They told him some wolves found it easier to close their eyes and just let go.

They’d prepped him thoroughly for more than an hour before the first round, saying he needed to be ready for anything, even as an alpha, even when matched with an Omega-Sub. His backdoor had been washed out and then fucked relentlessly with about a gallon of synthetic slick and the biggest dildo Dean had ever seen. His ass was ready to take anything. He’d also had a series of several beautiful beta boys fluff and suck his cock, driving his alpha into a frenzy of lust. Every time he approached orgasm, they stopped all of it, leaving him a heaving, panting, wanting, slobbering mess. Then they opened the door to where an Omega-Submissive girl lay naked on the bed.

Dean’s alpha responded. He could mount her as an alpha, take her fast and be done with her. If he was careful, he could avoid letting his knot lock, and then it would be over faster. Dean approached her slowly – too slowly for his own pride. Why was he hesitating? She was an Omega, and his pack assignment was to put her in her place. He could do that. “Turn over,” he suggested gently. Gently? What the fuck? This was supposed to be a Claim-Fuck. He tried again, more firmly. “Go on, Omega, turn over on your belly. Stick your ass up for me.” Better. Still too weak, but better.

Dean got through the first round with no issues after that. He was so well-prepped that his body jumped into action once he sank his cock into her tight, wet channel. He pumped into her forcefully, and she responded as only an Omega could. It was…much more satisfying than he’d expected it to be, and he knotted her before he realized it was happening. He didn’t mind, and she didn’t seem to either. He’d felt his Claim fall over her shoulders and sink into her head and her heart. The Claim made all the difference in the world. His alpha could really see her now. The Bridging round threw him though. He lay face down and breathless at the end of it, the beta-Dom’s large cock still rocking into him. Dean’s semen growing cold beneath his belly mocked the fact that the man hadn’t even touched his cock. He’d rolled like a month-old puppy when the beta told him to. Dean couldn’t remember much. It happened so fast. Or not. He didn’t know. All he knew was that he’d entered the room at the same time as the beta from opposite sides, and he hadn’t managed a single word or action of his own choosing except walking across the threshold. Now he was stuck fast inside his wolf, breathing hard, the side of his face still pressed into the pillow where the Dom’s hand put it. He whined, but it wasn’t a sound of distress.

Dean was confused. He knew he was alpha, and a strong one. Other alphas deferred to him all the time. Why was he trapped in his wolf and rolling over for a beta? What did it mean for his test score? And how long would he be allowed the luxury of wallowing in the bed in his own come with a strange beta’s body covering his and forcing him to breathe pillow dust? He didn’t want to move. He didn’t want the beta’s cock to soften and slip out of his ass. He whined again, louder, longer.

“I know, little alpha. I’ve got you.” Little alpha? What the fuck?!? Dean wanted out of his wolf. He scratched at the walls of his prison, but the wolf just flopped on its side and pushed its nose into the beta’s throat. Dean wasn’t sure if he’d been Claimed or not. He couldn’t feel anything other than the desire to stay here with this man until the end of time. Fuck. That meant he was Claimed, didn’t it?

He opted to doze off. Sleep would satisfy both his wolf’s need to nest with the beta and his alpha’s desire to escape this embarrassing situation. When he awoke, the man was gone, and he was getting a sponge bath from a pretty, dark-haired beta girl. “Welcome back, alpha,” she said.
That had been two hours ago. Dean paced in the prep room. He’d eaten and been bathed thoroughly. They told him he didn’t need prepping for the Anchor round except to refresh the synthetic slick in his ass. He couldn’t hold in the deep moan as the same pretty beta shot slick up high into his ass with a blunt syringe. She dealt his prostate a glancing blow by accident. His ass would still be open, and reading between the lines, Dean assumed they didn’t expect his cock would play much of an active, penetrative role in this one. Dean thought about what he knew of Dr. Novak. He reminded himself he’d asked for this. What had he been thinking?

Castiel Novak was a nerd and a boring, bookish professor who hadn’t spoken to Dean directly since their strange meeting at Zeke’s pub other than to confirm that he had signed on as Dean’s Anchor tester in his upcoming test when they ran across each other at the grocery store. That had been weeks ago. Dean’s semester was long over, and summer waned. He’d skipped the graduation ceremonies, to his brother’s annoyance. Dean couldn’t face graduating again without his mother or father. That had been hard enough when high school ended. The bottom line was, Dean had barely seen or heard from Dr. Novak since accepting his proposal to work together and to scene together.

Castiel had kept his distance, waiting until Dean’s Keller test was completed. He’d sent Dean a job offer letter by mail with instructions on how to apply and register as a grad student, assuring him the application process was a formality. He’d already been accepted by the Sociology Department, and his stipend had already been approved. All that was left was to accept, move into his new apartment, and take residence in his tiny office on the edge of campus.

Another envelope arrived a few days later. It contained an application to register for Keller testing with a small private community services outreach program that was run jointly by the college medical school, Castiel’s Lupin studies department, and county social services. There was a handwritten note in Dr. Novak’s scratchy penmanship requesting that Dean email Cas when he had his date scheduled so Castiel could follow up and sign on as his Anchor.

Dean followed the instructions immediately, afraid he’d change his mind if he waited too long. As soon as his hand released the envelope into the mailbox, he started having second thoughts. Lots of Lupins never bothered with the test. It wasn’t new, and the feedback Dean had heard was all positive. He hadn’t ever heard of anyone who took the test regretting their decision to do so, but what would happen when Dean was naked in a room with doctors and technicians watching, and Dr. Novak came in? Dean’s palms began to sweat back then, the first time it crossed his mind, and they were sweating now too, while he paced in the prep room.

“They’re ready for you, sweet cheeks,” the beta girl chirped, Meg, she’d called herself. “Just follow me. We’re going to a different room this time. We like to keep the scents separate, so we can be sure what you’re reacting to.” She led him down a hall, chatting happily. He wore the thin, scratchy bathrobe they’d provided, and he could feel the lube slipping out of him and running down his legs as he walked. “Don’t be nervous, alpha. Lots of folks get nervous on the last round. You’ll do fine. Dr. Novak doesn’t do this very often, but it always goes extra smooth when he’s here. Everybody loves Castiel. You’re gonna be just fine. Just go with whatever your body wants you to do, okay? There’s no wrong response. Even if you get off into your front brain for some reason, your body chemistry will still tell us everything we need to know. You can’t mess this up. Just be yourself and don’t worry. Here we are.” She ushered him into a stark brightly lit room. It looked more like a hospital room than the one before. That one had resembled a dilapidated motel room with a long mirror down one side. This one appeared to be all business. Two walls were mirrored here, not just one, and there was some kind of high tech equipment along the other two walls.

The room was quite warm, but not stuffy. “Here, I’ll take your robe.” She held her hand out, and he relinquished it to her, acutely aware that there were people on the other side of those mirrors. Maybe Cas was there now. “You can go ahead and head to the bed if you want, but it doesn’t really matter.
He’ll be in just a sec, soon as I leave, and you two just figure it out between you, just like we talked about. Do you have any questions before I go, Dean?”

“Uh, no. No questions.” Dean felt his heart rate increase. He knew the sensors spaced here and there on his bare skin were picking it all up, but he couldn’t control his body. He was still trapped inside his wolf, and it wasn’t letting him control anything.

“Okay, then. Good luck. I’ll see you after.” She slipped gracefully through one of several doors into the room, leaving Dean standing awkwardly where she’d left him. He was seconds away from a full panic attack, then the door opened with a powerful force. His knees nearly buckled.

“Get on the bed, Dean. Put your face into the pillow. If you can breathe, you’re not deep enough.” Castiel’s voice. Holy fucking shit. How did he do that? Dean was breathing feathers before he consciously considered the option of moving, and Castiel’s very naked, very aroused, very Alpha body was shamelessly covering his. Castiel flattened his entire body to the bed. Dean couldn’t see anything, and he could barely breathe at all. He was completely restrained from the tight grip around each wrist where the Alpha pulled his arms above his head and pinned them, to the backs of his ankles where Castiel’s shins crossed over, holding his feet in place. There was an immediacy to the Alpha’s presence, to the pressure along the entire line of Dean’s body, a gritty realness that pulled all of his senses to paying it the utmost attention. He couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see, couldn’t speak. The panic that was seconds from overflowing before Castiel entered the room should be sparking into fireworks right now. Dean’s alpha should be struggling for all he was worth. Dean hated to be restrained. He’d played before, but he never allowed himself to be tied or held.

Instead of panicking though, Dean relaxed. His body let go of every trace of tension and stress, every misgiving, every second thought, every doubt. He closed his eyes into the darkness and let go. He’d never known trust could feel like this. He trusted his very life to the man above him, and he did it instantly, without thought or reservation. If the Alpha decided to let him suffocate, Dean would let him. Dean would allow him anything.

“Good boy,” the Alpha crooned at him in his deep, gravel-strewn voice. “Turn your head now, and take a deep breath for me, Dean.”

Dean didn’t open his eyes; he liked the darkness, but he moved his head enough to get a lungful of air. “That’s it. What would you let me do to you, alpha?” Castiel growled seductively at him. Dean mumbled something incoherent and then screamed when the Alpha bit him hard on the bicep.

“Answer me so that I can hear you when I ask you a question.”

“I said, you can do anything you want to me, Alpha!” Dean almost shouted.

“Very good. That’s what I thought. Get up, Dean. Present yourself over the side of the bed.” Dean scrambled off the bed when Castiel released him, letting the Alpha bend him over the side of the bed with his feet flat on the floor. Castiel inspected him thoroughly, letting the clock tick by. He appeared to be in no hurry at all. Dean, had he bothered to think, would’ve been surprised. Usually Keller tests were straightforward: two wolves interact, one submits, the other dominates, sex happens, sometimes there’s a Claim, sometimes there’s a knot, then readings are collected, and they go on their respective ways. Castiel had shifted down from running his hands over Dean’s shoulders and back and was working two thumbs into Dean’s ass, pulling his rim open, inspecting deep inside him and humming at the fluid leaking out. He ran his hands up and down both of Dean’s legs, one at a time, slapping his rump firmly when he’d finished like Dean was a prized racehorse.

Dean’s breathing slowed to a relaxed, calm and even pace, his eyes stayed closed, and every muscle relaxed. “Very good, Dean. You’re going to be perfect for me. I just need to do one more thing.” Castiel spanked Dean’s ass hard – very, very hard – and the alpha’s eyes flew open. He reached out
instinctively and grasped the other side of the bed, howling in pain. His cock hardened instantly, and his hips thrust against the side of the mattress. Castiel was suddenly force and momentum. He grabbed Dean’s hips, stilling their forward motion, dragging them backward and impaling him on the Alpha’s cock in one hard press. Dr. Novak drove so hard into him that he forced Dean’s feet off the floor and launched him bodily onto the bed on his belly. Dean had no hand hold. They were crosswise on the narrowish bed. Dean’s head hung precariously off the far side, but the Alpha held him firmly by the hips. He perched upright on his knees, with Dean’s thighs splayed gracelessly to either side, thrusting powerfully into him.

“You belong to me, don’t you, Dean Winchester?” Castiel’s voice. How? Where was that even coming from?

“Yes, Alpha!”

“I can do anything I like to you, can’t I?” Castiel’s thrusts intensified and he let his body fall forward, onto one hand, moving the other across Dean’s chest under his arm, holding him firmly.

“Yes, Sir!” Dean’s voice shook and pulsed with the power of Castiel’s punches.

“Do you want me to hurt you, Submissive?”

No one had ever called Dean that before, but it sounded so natural coming from the Alpha’s mouth, that Dean barely noticed it. And that question, no one had ever asked him that either. “Please, Sir! Hit me! Need to feel it. Please!” Dean fantasized about being spanked all the time. He wanted it so badly, but he’d never been brave enough to ask anyone for it. He was alpha. Alphas did the spanking. They only received it when they’d fucked up egregiously and needed a real and lasting punishment. Dean hadn’t been really spanked since he was a pup. Sam took him over a knee every now and then, but that was different. It was.

Castiel wrenched him around on the bed, forcing his face into the pillow again but arranging him so that he could breathe. He never stopped fucking brutally into the alpha, and he growled at Dean with menace when Dean tried to look at him. The Alpha reared back up onto his knees, dragging Dean’s hips with him and continuing his relentless pumping. He struck Dean’s prostate about every third thrust, and Dean began moaning with the pleasure and rocking his hips minutely.

Then, without losing rhythm, Castiel brought his hand down on Dean’s ass again just as he pulled his cock out for the next inward thrust. The heat and sting sang along every nerve fiber in Dean’s body, and somehow, every nerve ended at his dick. He screamed, throwing his head back. Castiel gripped him harder across the hips, regaining lost purchase, and struck him again, harder. Dean couldn’t see it, but Castiel’s handprints stood out stark and red on his pale round flesh. He could feel it though. He craned his head around again, wanting to get at least a little bit of a glance at the frenzied motion behind him. Castiel spanked him three times hard in quick succession then he stopped everything, his cock poised at the edge of Dean’s swollen rim, nearly pulling free, and holding static.

“If you move your head again, I’ll give you the spanking of your life, you won’t be allowed to come, and I’ll stop the test right here and now, Submissive. Put your head back down, and stay there!”

Dean cried out piteously at the threat. He had no doubt that the Alpha meant every word. He corrected his head position, back to a neutral neck and his head just enough to one side to be able to breathe – and cry, or scream, moan, pant, whatever Castiel wanted – right back where the Alpha had put him to start with. Castiel spanked him hard several more times, pulling his cock clear and aiming his hand lower on the meat of Dean’s ass where he couldn’t reach while actively fucking him.
“Tell me whose slut you are, Submissive.”

Dean had always been a sucker for dirty talk. The degradation was a new thrill for him, but he went with it. Castiel wanted a slut? Then Dean was a slut. Cas’ slut.

“I’m yours, Sir! All yours. Your slut! Please, fuck me!”

Cas’ hand rained down seven or eight more times. Dean’s cock was so hard, it throbbed. It would be dripping but for the constant pressure from behind which kept it rubbing the bedding and cleaning it off. They were going to have one hell of a wet spot to try to avoid later. He howled out again in pain and lust. “Sir, PLEASE!”

Castiel lined back up and drove in. He doubled his previous pace, abandoning the spanking, abandoning the goading words. He went raw and bestial. His eyes submerged into Alpha red, and Dean’s, hidden behind his clenched eyelids, matched as his own alpha caught up to the wolf, and added its two cents. Dean’s alpha jumped on board and came along for the ride. He wasn’t about to miss this.

Dean couldn’t see. His eyes were squeezed shut as his body took the pounding of his life, but he could sense the massive beast that had taken the reins above him. It was untamed like nothing Dean had seen or heard of before. He lived only in this moment, and the moment was instinct. If he could’ve seen it, he would have seen a great canine beast, with the body of a quadruped mongrel dog, not a bipedal man working him over. There was nothing left in that moment of anything resembling a human in either of them. Dean, a lean grey, strong, supple, beautifully submissive wolf relinquishing control utterly to the powerfully massive and Dominant Mastiff above him. There was nothing domesticated or domesticable about Castiel. He was eternity. He was every canid who had ever lived, every individual Caniforme’s power added up ad infinitum. He pistonned into Dean until Dean’s alpha hole grew raw and painful, the synthetic slick insufficient to its task.

Dean needed nothing but this. If he died in this coupling, he would die happy. If his asshole took the next three years to recover, it would have been worth it. He barely processed the heat building low in his gut until he spilled onto the bed with a deep guttural groan. Castiel snarled at him, and quickened impossibly again, his knot beginning to tear its way in and out of the submissive’s unaccustomed body. He bit Dean again, hard on the shoulder, breaking the skin. Had they not both been alpha, it would have struck a Mating-bond. As it was, Dean felt the Claim slam into place, and he screamed again, his voice giving out at the last. Castiel’s knot locked into place, filling his Submissive up with his come, pumping raw emotion up Dean’s ass and into his body, warm and filling. Tears fell unheeded from Dean’s eyes, and he clung to Castiel’s arms which had snaked around him, holding him close. His ass throbbed as it tried to accommodate the knot.

Soon enough, and much too soon, they stilled together. Cas panted into Dean’s ear. He heaved them to their sides so he could rest without crushing his new Claim.

Inside the Control room, no one moved. Dear God in heaven and the Universe in its infinite wisdom – what the fuck was that?

NOW:

Michael was still pale and shaking when Castiel returned him to Dean – more pale than usual. Dean was pacing in agitation over the narrow space by the door. He took one look and pressed his lips
together in silent judgement as he supported Michael to the sofa.

“You provoked him, didn’t you?”

“Dean, he…why didn’t you tell me?”

“I did tell you. I told you he always wins because he’s Alpha. I told you not to go poking at him. I told you it wasn’t pretty.” Dean noted the Facility bathrobe and the absence of Michael’s clothes. He questioned Cas with his eyes.

“His clothing was sent to the laundry.”

“Ah, right. Blood or shit?” Dean asked his mate, attempting to keep calm for Michael’s sake. “Are you hurt?”

“Hurt?! He almost killed me.”

Gabriel spoke up without looking away from the television, “Bullshit. If he had any intention of killing you, you’d be dead.” He picked up the remote and turned up the volume.

Castiel grunted and snatched the remote from his brother and turned it off. “Gabriel, please. An Omega in our pack is traumatized. The least you could do is try to be supportive.”

“Me?! YOU’RE the one who traumatized him. You be supportive.”

“Shut up, both of you!” shouted Dean. “Michael, Baby, are you hurt? Open the damn bond! Answer me! Did he hurt you?”

“No, Dean. I’m just embarrassed.” Michael peeked sheepishly at Cas over Dean’s shoulder as he melted into his mate.

“Good. I can live with that. We’ve all been there. Dude, I tried to warn you.” He lay down on the sofa and pulled Michael with him, wrapping a leg around him and embracing him with as much of his body as he could.

“How’d the talk go? Do you at least still get to sleep in the big house?”

“Very funny.” Michael rolled his eyes a little. Dean reasoned that if Michael could pull off that deadpan voice, he would be fine. “I’ll tell you later, or you can get it from Alpha. It’s pretty much all settled. It’s good, I think. I just need some time to be still and quiet. Will you stay with me for a while?”

“You bet. Relax, babe. We’re watching some ridiculous celebrity news-rag of Gabe’s. I don’t know where he gets this shit, but it’ll take your mind off everything. Maybe. Shh. You’re okay, I swear.”

Gabriel snicked the remote back from his brother and turned the TV back on. Castiel sighed and placed a hand under Michael’s chin, lifting his gaze to meet the Alpha’s. “Will you be all right?”

“Yes, Sir. I just need a few minutes, if that’s okay.” Gabriel increased the volume again, and Cas leaned over to smack him upside his head with no real heat.

Cas told them, “Of course. I’m going back to my office. Dean, I’ll come fetch you for the meeting at ten ‘till. You’re always welcome to attend these, even while you’re on leave, but you don’t have to. I just thought that since you’re here, and this one is particularly relevant, you would probably want to be there.”
“I do. Thanks, Cas.” Dean pulled Michael in tighter and shoved at Gabe’s hip with his foot until he moved onto the floor near the end of the couch. He maneuvered Michael’s face so that he could scent Dean’s throat without straining. Michael ignored the television, burrowing deep into his mate, breathing deeply.

Then the TV program broke through their interplay. “And another spoke on the rumor mill just now. We’ve got an exclusive to show you; this picture just surfaced of Lupin hottie, Dean Winchester, sporting some new bling!”

“What the…?” Dean sat up a little and nearly dislodged Michael. He looked quickly behind him to check for Cas but found he’d already disappeared behind his office door. Gabe shifted from where he was slouched on the floor against the sofa and increased the volume again. April emerged from the bedroom, drying her hands on a small towel. Michael craned his head around just enough to see, his chest going flat to Dean’s belly.

The TV showed an enlarged image of Dean and Michael, hand-in-hand in the front foyer of The Facility. Dean had pulled their joined hands up toward his chest to guide Michael forward, and his left ring finger was clearly visible with Castiel’s ring on it.

“E! News has just obtained this image, and we haven’t been able to reach the Lupin activist for comment, but speculation says that canine heartthrob, Dean Winchester, is off the market for good. Sorry, fellas! His companion in the photo, still unnamed unfortunately, is presumed to be Winchester’s new mate. If so, then well done, alpha Winchester. You won yourself quite the looker.” The amateur video from their ill-timed introduction ran behind the host. “Video surfaced a few days ago that shows what appears to be a Mating response gone awry in a Texas road stop involving the tempestuous couple, and now Dean’s got a ring on his finger and a bite-scar on his neck.” The still image replaced the video and zoomed in to where the inflamed wound high on Dean’s shoulder was barely visible. “Does this mean that the couple, in addition to tying the “knot” doggie-style are also engaged to be married? Does their relationship have deeper roots than just this past week, or do they just move things along that fast in the Wolf Pack? We’re going to find out and bring you those answers. Up next, Gwyneth Paltrow, looking old.” The show cut to commercial, and Dean scrabbled in his pocket for his phone. No texts, no missed calls.

‘Tried to reach me, my ass’, he thought.


“Yeah, I get that,” said Dean, shifting Michael and sitting up. Michael had gone boneless and let Dean move him wherever he wanted. He sighed, heavy and put upon. Dean called Billie on his cell, keeping Michael close. “Gabe, turn that shit off, would ya?”

“Hey, Billie. Did you happen to catch E! News just now? … No, I know you’re working, but don’t you monitor that crap?” He paused. “Okay, well, apparently the cat’s only half out of the bag. They spotted my ring and the wound on my shoulder. Looks like a picture from this morning. Somebody moves fast with this shit. They know it’s an engagement ring, but they think I’m engaged to Michael. What should we do?”

Billie’s voice didn’t carry through the line, but Dean responded, “I thought that’s what the New York trip was all about. If the story breaks before that, do I still have to go to New York?” Another pause. “Okay, okay, Jeez! I’ll go. Whatever you say. Did anyone call you to ask about the picture? … No, me either. All right.”

Dean paused to listen to her and glanced down at Michael who looked back. “Okay. I’ll ask him. Just let me know what else you need from us, okay? And thanks, Billie. You’re the best.” He ended
the call but didn’t move or speak. He was thinking. One thumb ran in an arc across Michael’s back until Michael shifted himself up to sitting next to his mate, still letting Dean’s legs wrap mostly around him.

“Tell me about New York, Dean.” Michael’s voice was flat and a wee bit accusatory.

“Oh yeah, baby, I’m sorry. I only found out about it yesterday, and I forgot to tell you with all the other shit we had to talk about. We’re going up in a couple of weeks to attend some fancy Broadway premiere for a playwright friend of Cas’.”

“I have to go, too?”

“Yep. All four of us. We’ll get you fitted for a tux. I bet you clean up something fierce. I can’t wait to see you in a tuxedo.” Dean leaned over and kissed him soundly.

“And this premiere? This is where you and Castiel are going to announce your engagement? Subtle, Dean.”

“Hey, don’t blame me. It’s all Billie’s idea. She runs PR and does all kinds of celebrity management crap for us. She’s sort of our agent on the side. Don’t worry, Michael. She’ll take care of everything. She’s really good. We just have to go where she tells us, wear what she tells us, and smile and nod when she tells us to. It’s painless.” Dean knew it wasn’t going to be that simple.

Michael wasn’t convinced. Dean could feel dread coming from his mate, and his heart went out to him. He hadn’t asked to be Mated to a celebrity, and now he was being pulled into the media circus and would have to endure not only having the world mistakenly believe for a while that he was Dean’s intended fiancé, but then would also have to stand by and watch as Dean and Alpha corrected that misperception. It was going to be a bitter, bitter ride for Michael, and Dean wasn’t going to be able to stop it.

Dean redirected a bit, to ease him into it. “I need you to help me put together a simple bio that we can release in a press statement announcing that we’ve Mated. It’s pretty straightforward. April’s already been announced, and that went off without a hitch. You don’t have to do any interviews unless you want to.” Michael leaned into Dean again and let his body fall heavily against his alpha’s strong presence. His forehead thumped onto Dean’s chest. He hated the words he was hearing from his mate, but he needed Dean’s scent and strength.

April approached slowly from behind the sofa and gingerly lay a comforting hand to the back of Michael’s head. She snatched it back when he stiffened and grunted without turning his head. She looked concerned, but not offended. Dean caught her eye and sent her a grateful look, but shook his head softly, so she retreated to the kitchen to give them space.

“What’s eating him?” asked Gabe.

“Don’t be a dick, Gabe. Just. Give us a little space, please.” Dean requested.

“Can’t. Grounded.”

“Gabriel.”

“Fine.” Gabe hauled himself to his feet and joined April at the table.

Dean whispered to his mate. “Baby, I’m so sorry. I’ll protect you from it as much as I can, but there’s not going to be much I can do. The media…they have a life of their own.” Michael eased himself to the side so his back was to the sofa cushions and his face lay flat against Dean’s chest. He stretched
his legs back out, laying on one hip between Dean’s legs. His face showed no emotion, but Dean could feel the roiling inside him. Michael didn’t seem inclined to speak, so Dean continued, keeping him well wrapped in the embrace of all the alpha’s limbs.

“We play them for our own ends, you see; Cas, Sam, and I. We decided years ago to see if we could really help the cause by using the media as an outlet, so we get up in front of the cameras and play our roles. We’ve always just let them make us into whatever they wanted as long as it was working to bring a spotlight to how screwed wolves were in mainstream America. It worked better than we dreamed, so we kept at it. Sam and me, we play the rockstar sex gods. Cas is the hot professor. Everybody has a role to play, and it never hurt anyone until now. Baby, we never meant for you or April to get caught up in any of the frenzy bullshit, but I don’t think we can stop it now. I know you never asked for this. Michael, I don’t know what to say to make you feel better. You don’t have to do anything you can’t or be anybody you’re not. You don’t have to be in the spotlight much, but they’re going to want to meet you. There will be cameras at the Broadway premiere.”

“Are they going to ask me questions?”

“If you don’t want to talk to the media, Cas and I will protect you. You don’t have to talk to them at all. Do you think you can just walk with me? Just walk the red carpet and stand beside me?”

Michael rubbed his nose over Dean’s chest as if scratching an itch. He’d grown quieter and more contemplative. Dean wondered where his thoughts had taken him. His emotions were a confusing mix. Finally, he spoke quietly. “I used to fantasize about you. Did you know that?” Dean shook his head. It was too tight a position for them to meet each other’s eyes, but Dean knew Michael could see his movement peripherally.

“I used to watch the convention videos and jerk off to the really sexy parts, imagining it was me you had up there with you. I wanted you so bad. I wanted to be inside your circle, be a part of the crazy spotlight you walk around in.” Michael shifted as if uncomfortable but ended up just snuggling in tighter. “Actually being with you is better than I ever imagined…but also worse. It’s not what I thought it would be. You, you’re great. I don’t mean anything like…that. But to get to have you for myself, but then have to share you. It’s not what I wanted. Not like that. This feels like having to share you with the entire world, Dean. It was hard enough to swallow when it was only him. Now…”

Michael sat up again and looked to the kitchen where two Omegas were studiously not looking toward him, and he scowled. He stood, slowly extricating himself from his mate, and held his hand out to help Dean up. “Where can we talk?”

Dean led him to the bedroom and closed the door. “I don’t have very long before the staff meeting, and we don’t have to finish this right now.” Dean sat on the open arm chair, leaving Michael to decide how much space he needed. “But you’re important to me, and I want to hear everything you have to say.”

Michael nodded and sank to the ground between Dean’s knees. “You taught me something yesterday morning, Dean, right when we were waking up. I think I understand now, what you’ve been saying all along, and it’s both hopeful and heartbreaking.” Dean stroked his mate’s hair and listened. He just listened. “You were hard as a rock when you woke up, hard from hearing your boyfriend spank his mate, and when I asked you about it, you told me the truth – straight out. You said that to your own mate - that another wolf was turning you on, like, right then and there. I couldn’t believe you admitted that to me and that you didn’t hide it at all or try to make it look like it was because of me. People don’t do that, alpha. It hurt so bad. I had to get away from you for a minute and breathe through it. I thought I was going to die. How could you do that to me? I thought I
had lost you. I thought you had chosen him, and I was hurt and pissed.” Michael paused. He didn’t want Dean to misunderstand, so he thought carefully how to explain.

“But I didn’t die, and when I came back to you, you were still mine – still mine and still his, and still turned on. I’m hurt, Dean, and I’m angry that being with you isn’t ever going to mean I get to be your only one. It’s not what I wanted. It’s not what anyone wants, but what I learned from you when you did that, when you said that…I learned…well, I guess, that you have only ever been honest with me. I couldn’t understand why you didn’t try to hide that it was Alpha your cock was responding to and not me, when I was right there. I felt like your telling me like you did would rip us apart, but it didn’t.”

Dean continued to stroke Michael’s hair. His own emotions stirred, and his face twitched in a scowling grimace of sorrow at his mate’s words, but he let Michael speak. “I told myself you must not really care much about me if you could hurt me like that so soon after you bit me. I was awake most of last night watching you sleep and thinking. But I think I’ve figured it out now. I think it took being with you and what happened with Alpha just now, but I think I’ve figured it out. I didn’t think I was safe to have these scary feelings; feelings like fear and anger. I thought you and Alpha were trying to make me pretend they weren’t there or trying to make them go away, so I was pushing back. I thought that if I kept feeling like that, it would tear you away from me. Dean, I can’t live without you. Please, God, don’t ever leave me. I’ll do anything, live anywhere. I’ll even share you. It’s not what I want, and I may always be angry about it, but I can do it.

“What I’m trying to say is, when you showed me how honest and straight you can be with what you’re feeling, when you had to know it would hurt me, it taught me that maybe I can be the same way. I haven’t ever been honest about my feelings with anyone before. I always felt like I had to hide them, because they destroy things. I’m ashamed of how I feel. I always have been. If I tell you that I’m angry and hurt that you already chose someone over me before you even met me, will that destroy us Dean? Is it okay if I tell you that – if I tell you the truth, knowing it’s going to hurt you? I know you know it, but what if I say I may always feel like that, but I’m willing to try to live with it? Do I need to pretend I can get over it? Do I have to pretend, Dean? I’m so tired of pretending.”

Dean’s tears overflowed silently. “It’s okay, my sweet Omega.” Dean kissed Michael’s hair, and wrapped his arms around him. “You couldn’t destroy us if you tried. I’m so proud of you. And I’m so, so sorry. Please, tell me what you’re really feeling. Always.” He chuckled through his sorrow. “You can’t hide it from me anyway, you know. I’ve got an inside track. We’re bonded.” Dean tickled Michael gently through the bond.

“Michael, I’ve only ever told you the truth, even when I knew it was a punch to your gut. We have to do the hard work up front, if we want anything to be real between us. When I said you Mated nothing more or less than exactly who I am, I meant it. I’m not going to try to rub your nose in my feelings for him, but I’m not going to hide them either, especially if you ask me a direct question. You can trust me, man. I can’t promise I won’t ever hurt you, but I promise you I’ll never hide what I’m feeling. I don’t ever want you to have to wonder if I’m telling you everything. I love you so much, and I can’t live without you, either. You don’t have to fight for me, man. I’m yours. Forever. And you don’t have to pretend you’re not mad about having to share with him. I know you are, and it’s not going to tear us apart. Those are scary feelings, but we can handle them. I promise. Even if they never go away, we can deal with them.”

“Dean, I’m so fucked up. You have no idea. I’m scared, and I’m angry, and I feel like I’ve been in freefall most of my life. I…I need help.”

“Shh, sweet boy. I know. We’re going to help you. You couldn’t have landed in a better place. Cas and Sam and I, we’re going to help you. I’m going to catch you before you hit the ground. C’mere,
baby. Shhh.” Dean helped Michael slide into his lap, and he rocked his mate like a pup. Michael’s crying was soft and silent.

Dean could feel Michael begin shifting on the inside to realign, and it was a painful shift. This was what doing the hard work up front was going to look like for Michael. Dean quickly suppressed the thought that he still didn’t know what it would look like for him. Inside, where even Michael couldn’t see, Dean was reeling.

Castiel poked his head in the door and raised his eyebrows when he saw Dean rocking a weeping Michael. “You ready, Dean? Do you still want to go, or do you need to stay here?”

Dean looked down at his mate. “Will you be okay if I leave you for a while? I’ll stay if you want. It’s up to you.”

Michael sniffled and wiped at his eyes. “I’m all right. I’ll meet you back here when you’re done?”

“Sure. I’ll come get you. I’ve got my phone if you change your mind. Just send me a text, okay?”

They left Michael in Castiel’s bedroom. He wanted a few minutes alone to pull himself back together, and Dean saw determination and pride slip back into place in his emotions. He felt comfortable leaving him in the state of mind he’d reached. It felt like a breakthrough, and Dean thought a little space and some processing time would do them both good. It didn’t stop him from wishing he had enough time to finish comforting his Omega thoroughly. A good knotting would’ve helped show Michael how solid his position as Dean’s mate was, but Dean really needed to attend this meeting, and he could finish up with Michael tonight.

Oh, wait. Fuck. Chastity.

Maybe Michael would accept a blowjob.

“Was that about me?” Cas asked Dean as they walked.

“Indirectly,” said Dean cryptically. “It wasn’t about what you did to him during your negotiations over me though.” Dean stopped walking and turned to his fiancé. “Was that really necessary, Cas? Tell me you didn’t have a choice, man. You scared the shit out of him. Was it worth it?”

“I didn’t have a choice, Dean. He needed to see. I wasn’t going to let him get hurt, but he was never going to accept his place in the pack without knowing who I am. I swear I didn’t use it just to intimidate him. I swear to you, love.”

Dean sighed and continued down the hall. “Yeah, I know. I believe you. I just wish there was another way.”

“There’s not.” Cas caught up with him and laced their fingers together as they walked.

Dean nodded. “When do I get to find out what you agreed to about me?”

“I’ll let Michael give it to you. You’re still his for the month, so if you need me, you know where I am, but you should talk to your mate.” Cas pushed the conference room door open, leveled Dean with a pointed look, and ushered him in.

Dean entered the room without really paying any attention to it. He spoke to Cas with his eyes on the table before him. “Oh, by the way, someone spotted my ring and sold a picture to the media. They think I’m engaged to Michael. Billie’s going to leak some redirect, and we need to issue a press statement about our Mating. She still wants to hold off an official reveal until New York if we can.”
Dean shrugged at Cas’ surprise. “She’s apparently a drama queen at heart. Who knew?”

“Is that what upset Michael? This can’t be fun for him.”

“Well, that’s what started it.” Dean didn’t say any more. His mate’s deepest insecurities were private unless they touched on Pack life. Cas would hear what he needed to know, but he didn’t need to know everything right now.

Sam stood up from the chair he’d been sitting in, drawing his brother’s eye. He looked stiff and uncomfortable.

“Alpha,” he said.

“Yes. Sam. Please take your position. That corner will do.” Castiel pointed to the corner to the left of the projector screen. Dean watched in interest as Sam placed himself facing the corner, pushed his trousers and underwear to his knees, spread his feet wide enough to hold his clothes in place, and then laced his fingers behind his head. One elbow rested on each wall from the corner. His shirttail covered a good deal of the top of his ass, but it was still a humiliating position to be in. It was a common pose for unruly pups in Lupin schools, and Dean knew Sam’s Dominant wolf would cringe at the evocative reminder.

“That about what happened with me yesterday?” Dean asked Castiel.

“Yes.”

Sam’s backside was a little pink right at the roundest part of each cheek. His ears had gone bright red too. “Did you spank him?”

“No. I suspect that was from Benny.”

Dean looked back to Sam. He sighed and nodded, accepting. It was a fitting punishment for the beta, and both the alpha and teacher in Dean knew it. The big brother in him didn’t like seeing his baby brother in trouble, but Dean wouldn’t be doing Sam any favors by trying to protect him from paying for his own mistakes, so he took his usual seat, and tried to ignore his brother’s embarrassment.

Benny entered in a flurry of movement. He carried the orange folder that was normally in Sam’s possession. He took in the beta in the corner, set his burdens on the table where he would sit, and walked over to Sam. Benny’s face was set firm, grim. Evidently, he took Sam’s mistake very seriously. Benny pulled the tail of Sam’s shirt up and arranged it with folds and rolls to sit just above his hips so that his entire backside was fully displayed. He gave Sam two more stark swats to his ass and then took his own seat as his handprints pinkened Sam’s flesh further and the back of Sam’s neck darkened in mortification.

The table filled quickly. Punctuality was a control thing with Castiel, and his staff was never late without reason. Everyone looked at Sam as they entered, but no one asked. If his crime was something they were meant to know about, they would be told.

Just at two o’clock, Castiel opened the meeting. They discussed standard Facility business. Billie mentioned her plan to work an announcement of Dean’s Mating with Michael into that of Dean’s engagement to Cas. This was an area where private and business dealings crossed over. The nature of their relationship with the media made Dean and Cas’ engagement into direct Facility business, and the Board had long ago approved allocation of company resources to manage their publicity.

They worked their way through Sales and Marketing, Resource Management, Human Resources, and Quality Control. Bobby announced that he’d decided to send Pam, Rufus, and Cole to Dallas to
untangle Victor’s mess. Since Castiel’s visit, Victor had done an admirable one-eighty. Several more members of the training staff had been fired, and an old and trusted colleague, Caleb, took Alistair’s place as Director of Training. There was much left to do though. The whole culture down there needed to be eviscerated and rebuilt.

“I never agreed on Cole,” Benny protested. “He’s not suitable. If nothing else, he’s too young and inexperienced.” Sam’s shoulders tightened almost imperceptibly. This was not an argument he could afford to sit out on. Dean saw the side of his jaw flex in frustration. “I know Sam doesn’t want the job, but I still say he’s the only appropriate person. It’s not forever. His new Pack will still be there when he gets back.” Sam’s head dropped when he heard his boss’ words.

Cas saw that too. “Get your head off the wall, beta,” Cas reminded him. Sam straightened. Castiel turned to Benny. “I understand your misgivings about Cole. We’ve discussed his attitude and his approach, but I agree with Bobby on this. We can keep a close eye on his progress down there. I’m not going to take my eye off the ball again, but we need to give the boy a chance. I’ve put a lot of thought into why this fiasco happened in the first place, and I think it’s because we hold too much of the power and the learning opportunities to just the wolves in this room. If we don’t start spreading it around and allowing more of the younger staff into the inner workings, we’re not giving our colleagues at our satellite facilities enough of a chance to learn what they need to know. None of us will be here forever, and we’ve been hoarding it mostly to ourselves.”

He turned to Pamela. “Pam, I’m putting you in charge. Rufus will second, and you’re both to watch over and guide Cole when he needs you to. I trust you both, and I expect regular reports on the progress you’re making. Let us know what resources you need. We’ll find the funds if we have to hold a bake sale to pay for what you need. Fixing Dallas is our highest priority.”

“Yes, Alpha,” she answered.

“You are granted hiring and firing authority for every position except Victor’s Directorship. I’ll let him know that when you act, it’s with the authority of my voice. But, Pam, no one loses their job without the three of you reaching consensus. Even Cole has to agree before you axe anyone. Understand?”

“Yes, Alpha. I understand.”

“Rufus?”

“Yes, Sir. We’re gonna clean that shit up for you. You can count on us.”

“Thank you, Rufus. Next item on the agenda, Keller test schedules for the next eight weeks. Ellen?”

Ellen picked up the remote to the overhead projector that was mounted to the ceiling. Dean took in his brother’s posture as the lights dimmed and found him less tense – uncomfortable still, no doubt, but not quite as uptight. Clearly, Sam was relieved that he didn’t have to go to Dallas.

“Here’s the Keller schedule for the next eight weeks. We’ve got eighteen wolves to test, and we’ve spread them out evenly. A few of our staff are going to be taxed heavily to cover the ranges needed completely. Also, since our resident alpha-Sub is still on leave, it’s a little harder to get full coverage where we suspect outlying Tertiary designations. But we’ll manage.”

Dean scanned the list for Michael’s name. He was near the end, scheduled for six weeks from now. Tracking across to the matrices next to his name where Ellen had assigned the optimal tester’s designations, he frowned. That couldn’t be right. Ellen had assigned Michael a full standard spread. His Lead-off was to be an Omega-Sub male, and the box was greyed-in to show the assignment had
been made, communicated, and accepted by the tester in question. The Bridge position was also grey, and displayed $\beta$-N(F). Beta-Neutral? What?! Who?!? The Anchor position, likewise greyed, was A-D(M), for male alpha-Dom. If Dean guessed right, it would be an Alpha, not just an alpha. Ellen’s voice continued as she worked her way through the highlights of the schedule, where there might be scheduling conflicts and where testers might struggle at the quick turnaround requested of them, but Dean wasn’t listening.

He knew he couldn’t Anchor. As a Submissive, Dean never anchored, but he should be the Bridge. He’d assumed that he would Bridge for his mate. This was utter bullshit.

“Pardon me, Ellen, but this is bullshit,” Dean exclaimed, interrupting her.

“Winchester,” Castiel’s voice brooked no argument, but Dean barreled past him.

“No, Alpha. I’m Michael’s mate. I’m his Bridge. That’s all there is to it. I can’t do the whole test by myself, I get that. I know there’s gotta be two others, but you’re not cutting me out of his test completely. There’s no way I’m agreeing to this.” He flung a hand toward the screen dramatically. Dean ignored the internal ping from his rational mind that thumped him in the back of the head, trying to remind him of something he knew but stubbornly insisted upon not acknowledging.

“You are,” Castiel told him sternly. “The test will proceed as scheduled and assigned. We worked very hard on getting the right wolves involved, and it’s not going to change. Please apologize to Ellen for your rude interruption, and then kindly shut up so she can finish her report.” Castiel had his boss face on, but Dean wasn’t cowed by it at all.

“Fuck that. I’m not signing off on this. Who the fuck do you have Bridging? Beta-Neutral female? Why would you try to put anyone in that spot but me?” Dean’s head swung back and forth, trying to determine who was most responsible, Ellen or Cas.

Ellen defended her decision without rising to his anger. “Dean, you’re compromised. You’ve already got a bond with him. By the time he does the test, you will have two of them, one going both ways. We can’t use your data for the test. It has to be a clean Claim-fuck without any prior claims getting in the way. Honey, you know this. No one’s trying to usurp your position with your mate. We already have the readings from your Mating, and those will be factored in as well. In a sense, you’ve already Bridged for his test. I just can’t use you here. Not for this.”

“That’s ridiculous. That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. No way!” He shifted his rolling chair away from the table so he could emote with his whole body.

“Dean, stand down,” Castiel raised his voice over Dean’s continued protests. “We’ll continue this discussion at home if you need me to explain it further, but Ellen’s decision has been validated by Benny, Bobby, and me. It stands. You will apologize, drop the matter, and let us resume the meeting, or you will be excused from these proceedings and asked to wait for me in my office.”

Dean worked his jaw. Castiel saw the proud, determined brat look out from deep in his fiancé’s eyes. Stubborn. So stubborn.

‘Don’t do it, Dean’, thought Cas.

“Ellen, I’m sorry, I respect you and your work,” said Dean with his eyes still boring into Castiel’s. “But this is bullshit. No. No way. Fuck that. I’m the Bridge, or he doesn’t fucking take the test!”

Castiel sucked in a breath through his nose to calm himself, but his grinding teeth only served to counteract that effort. “Dean, you’re dismissed. Please wait in my office. Do not go anywhere else.
Do not speak with anyone. I will see you in a few minutes."

Dean waited long enough to add insubordination to his list of misbehaviors, then he shoved his chair back violently and stood. Ellen wouldn’t meet his eyes. Later, after his anger abated, he would regret the words he’d thrown at her, but right now he was too pissed to care. He threw the door open, and it slammed heavily into the doorstop. Dean stormed his way back down the hallway, mumbling under his breath the whole way. He pulled his phone out and texted his mate:


Dean’s phone pinged as he pushed Castiel’s office door open and threw himself into Cas’ desk chair:

“WTF? Already? Jesus Dean!”

“Don’t be mad at me baby. Please?” Dean texted back, taking on faith that he had grounds to hold Castiel to a literal meaning of the word, ‘speak’. He wasn’t speaking to Michael. He was texting.

He was still pissed, but dread was starting to leak into his nerves. He wanted to tell Michael where he was, but he knew better. This close, his mate might be able to tell he was just next door, but Dean didn’t invite him in. Cas had sent him to his room to await punishment. That was meant to be a time of isolation and anticipation. Dean hated this part almost more than the stinging blows he was about to receive.

“Not mad. I don’t even know what happened. You gonna tell me right?” Michael replied.

“I will tell you. Promise.”

“I just hope U don’t get any more bruises. Your last ones were almost gone.”

“I know Sir - Sorry.”

“We’ll talk about it later. R U OK?”

“Yes”

“K. C U soon.”

Dean waited for what seemed like forever. He spun in the chair, fidgeted with Cas’ desk supplies, rifled through the desk drawers. He could tell he was in the middle of a bratty episode, but he didn’t have the means to break himself back out. He’d learned to just go with it. Someone would come soon to help him. When the door finally opened, Cas ushered Sam in with him.

“Stand up, Dean,” Alpha instructed, and Dean popped to his feet, frowning. “Look at me.” Castiel held Dean by his upper arms and waited until the frown passed into a pout and then a stubborn scowl. Finally, Dean met the Alpha’s eye. He struggled to hold it, but he had years of training under his belt to help him along. “Do you understand why you’re in trouble?”

“No.”

“Dean.” Cas’ voice was a warning. Dean knew why, but he doubled down.

“No! I don’t understand. I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“You were rude and irrational. You continued to protest when you were instructed to drop the matter. I don’t care what your reasons are. You don’t get to make this call. I’m Pack Alpha, and it’s my decision when and how Michael’s test proceeds, not yours. You are wrong about this, and I’ll
explain in full later, but right now, you’re going to be paddled for your terrible behavior during the meeting. Afterward, you will apologize in person to Dr. Harvelle, and you will write an apology and send it to everyone in attendance who had to witness your temper tantrum.” Cas turned to where Sam stood waiting by the door. “Sam?”

“Yes, Alpha.” Fucking traitor went from standing bare-assed in the corner to wielding a paddle for the Alpha too quickly for Dean’s liking. Where was his loyalty to his brother?

“Don’t you fucking touch me with that thing, Sam!”

Sam advanced toward him. “That’s not your decision to make, Dean. You threw a temper tantrum, and you ignored Alpha’s warnings to stop.” Cas backed off and let the E.O. take over. Dean’s behavior was an H.R. issue, and it was appropriate to put him under an E.O.’s hand for the consequences. Cas let Sam do his job. It wasn’t the first time. It wouldn’t be the last.

“I want you to look inside for your wolf right now, Dean.” Sam stepped even closer, and the back of Dean’s thighs struck the desk as he backed up too. “Do you see him around anywhere?” It was a common exercise to get the spankee to acknowledge their state of mind before the paddling began, but it always took Dean by surprise.

“What?”

“Your wolf, Dean. Can you see him?” Sam took gentle hold of Dean’s upper arm and guided him to face the desk.

“No. He’s not…anywhere.” Dean’s child-like eyes flitted around the physical space of the office as if looking for an actual wolf. A simple disagreement had spun him off into a freefall that he couldn’t control, and the depth, the velocity, the severity of the descent, concerned Castiel deeply. He watched Dean’s eyes. Dean had no access to his rational brain right now. Sam reached around his brother’s waist and unfastened his belt and his blue jeans. Unzipping him, Sam pushed his clothes to the floor and leaned him over the desk with a palm to his back while he spoke. Dean didn’t resist. He was lost inside his Sub.

“That’s because you’re looking through his eyes right now, Submissive. You are the wolf. Your temper tantrum got you stuck inside your wolf, and you need help getting back out again. I’m going to spank you to punish you for acting out, and I’m going to keep going until you are ready to stop throwing fits and join the grownups like the alpha that you are. Are you ready?”

It was only a little disingenuous. Not all Subs really regressed to a childish state when they entered their wolves, and there was nothing inherently non-grownup about being a Submissive. But Dean was a little boy when he went under for behavior reasons. Sam and Cas both knew him well. Michael would need to be counseled. Dean needed to be treated like a pup to run his wolf full circle and get him back out again. He needed his regression acknowledged by his Tops and by himself.

“NO!” Dean put his palms flat on the desk and tried to push up. Sam’s hand kept him in place.

“Stay where I put you, Dean!” he growled at his brother. Dean whined and collapsed, crossing his arms and burying his face in his hands. Sam shot a worried look at Castiel.

“Cas, should we bring Michael in? Should he see this?”

“Michael bit his lip and nodded, looking
at Dean instead of Castiel. He stayed by the door.

“Michael!” Dean called to him, but Sam blocked his rise again.

“Your mate’s not here to rescue you, little pup,” Sam told him. “He’s just going to witness. Your bad behavior reflects on him too, and I’m sure he’ll want to speak to you about that later.”

“Don’t bruise him, Sam.”

Michael’s instruction to Sam was all the confirmation Dean needed that he wasn’t about to be whisked away and coddled by his mate. He whimpered and tucked his face back into his arms. Michael breathed out a worried sigh, but he steeled himself visibly. Seeing Dean’s body language, he bit his lip and admitted starkly to himself that he was out of his league. This wasn’t scene-play. This appeared to be a far deeper dive into Dean’s emotional health than Michael was ready to own just yet.

“I hear you, Michael. I can do that.”

Sam produced his paddle, met first Michael’s eye, and then Castiel’s for final permission then started swinging. Dean was a hard case. He could take a great deal of pain, and he was pretty deep inside his wolf. Sam set his jaw. Keeping in mind how much force he could use to turn Dean’s ass bright red without adding any bruises, he let his wolf funnel all of the frustration from his own humiliating punishment at the meeting into working his brother over. He landed swat after swat. Dean went up onto his tiptoes, and his cheeks clenched just before each blow landed. His hands reached across the desk and clutched the far side, holding himself steady. His forehead pressed into the wooden surface of the desk.

Cas watched Michael surreptitiously. The young Omega’s eyes grew hooded and dark, and the crotch of his jeans bulged. He was breathing heavily through his nose. The Keller test in a few weeks would clarify just what about the situation Michael was responding so strongly to. It could be seeing an alpha in a vulnerable position. It could be a sadistic lean. It could be having Sam and Cas sharing the experience with him. Getting those readings was going to be vital in learning how to satisfy the Dominant wolf inside Michael, allowing his Omega a safe passage to the front where he belonged. Dean would need to be kept at arm’s length on the day of Michael’s test. Cas had known Dean wouldn’t like it, but he’d been shocked at his vehemence. Nothing about their choices for assignments in Michael’s test should have surprised him. Mates never played a role in the test. Cas had only been granted that honor with April because he wasn’t yet connected to his Omega. Dean’s upset was concerning.

Dean had begun to cry and beg. He apologized. He swore. He held his position like the veteran that he was, but he was hurting. Sam covered his ass and thighs, keeping his paddle at a stinging force with very little follow through, turning his skin bright red, and hurting like a burn, but not going deep enough to bruise him. Michael’s mouth went slack, and his eyes glazed over. Cas smelled slick and nodded to himself discreetly.

“I’m sorry! OW! I’m sorry, please! SAM! Please! Ow, fuck!”

Sam finished off with a whirl of ten fast pops that sucked Dean’s breath away, then he pocketed the paddle and ran his hand lightly over his brother’s abused skin. “Okay, Dean. I know you’re sorry. Are you ready to come back to us now? You’re okay. Take a minute. I’m right here.”

Sam continued to stroke Dean until he was sure his brother was on his way back. Dean stayed folded over the desk, letting his sobs abate slowly. Sam punched the punishment code into his phone and handed it to Cas to sign with his finger. They spoke softly, and Michael went toward Dean, his hand
already down the back of his pants.

“Michael…” Cas warned, glancing up and guessing correctly that Michael was gathering slick to use in fucking his mate. “You put him in chastity. You need to be consistent and wait until that punishment is over. And until we all discuss it, you can’t fuck him in front of anyone, not even us.”

“We talked about an exception, Alpha.” Michael spoke from his trance, continuing toward his mate. Dean stayed put but looked around at Michael, moving just his head. His eyes were wet and red. “He agreed to try an episode with witnesses that he trusts.” Dean was in the perfect state of mind. He was open and vulnerable, still so submissive. “He gave me permission to do this.”

Sam broke in. “No, Michael. You have to stop. He may have given his consent to you, but he didn’t say it to me. I can’t be here for this. I’m not making that mistake twice.”

Michael looked at Dean who looked back at him. If he asked his mate, Dean would say yes. Right now, before he’d clawed his way all the way back from deep inside his wolf, Dean couldn’t say no, not to Michael, not to Cas, probably not to Sam. Dean just looked at him – trusting and vulnerable – and suddenly Michael got it. The epiphanies were coming fast now, like dominoes. He couldn’t touch Dean right now. His mate’s touch would send Dean spiraling back into his Submissive where he was defenseless. It was Michael’s job to protect him, even from himself. That duty had to take precedence over Michael’s lust and over Michael’s Dominant hunger.

He withdrew his hand and wiped it on the leg of his jeans. Michael stooped and helped Dean to pull his clothing back into place. His own horniness would keep until he could put Dean on his knees at home.

“I would’ve said yes, Michael,” Dean told him with a sniffle.

“I know you would, Dean. Thank you for trusting me. We’ll talk about it all later. Let’s grab a snack and go home.” Dean nodded and leaned into his mate.

“Thank you, Sam.” Michael was sheepish as he met his brother-in-law at the door. “Thanks for stopping me. I get it now. I promise you I’ll keep him safe, even when it means denying myself.”

Sam clapped him on the shoulder.

Michael turned to Castiel. “I’ve learned a lot from you today, Sir. I’m sorry I almost messed up again. I won’t do it again.”

Cas regarded him. Dean was tucked beneath his arm, still quite small. He would take a while to emerge again, but the grace period was normal for Dean after a dive that deep. “Take him home and relax, Michael. Talk to him if you want to, but don’t push him to respond until he’s come all the way back to you and you can speak to his alpha. I owe him a spanking of my own for what he did today, but that’ll keep until tomorrow when you come for dinner.” Michael was about to leave when Cas stopped him again.

“Incidentally, I should’ve asked. Have you given him a rule that he answers to you for any punishments he gets elsewhere?”

Michael smirked just a little. “Yes, I did. He said you did the same. Are we going to stick to that? Sam is Pack. Does his paddle count as outside punishment?”

“It does to me,” answered Castiel firmly. “Dean earned this paddling because he misbehaved at work. Sam spanked him in a professional capacity. It could’ve been any E.O. onsite who delivered it. I only chose Sam because he was close at hand when I headed back this way.” Sam looked at the
floor and blushed. Michael wondered if he was embarrassed to have paddled his brother. He hadn’t seemed so at the time, but he was clearly sheepish now.

Cas continued, with no intention to explain to Michael that Sam was ashamed of just why he was so close at hand when Cas headed back this way. “And my rule stands independent of yours. He needs the structure and the consistency. If Dean has to take multiple punishments for misbehavior, then maybe he’ll eventually learn to control his bratty episodes. Who knows? It might be good for him. I take it your request to avoid bruising him goes for me too?”

“Please, Sir. I want his first real spanking from me to be one to remember, and I don’t want it laid on top of someone else’s marks. I hope you understand.” Michael’s hold tightened on his mate almost imperceptibly.

“I do, Michael. I consider your request reasonable in this instance, as long as it’s not a standing requirement. I can’t promise never to mark him again.”

“Yes, Sir. Just this once, please.” Castiel nodded acquiescence. Michael was coming along nicely, and Dean stood nearly catatonic in a contented daze under his Dom’s wing. Cas couldn’t blame Michael. In different circumstances, he would’ve mounted the Sub himself while he lay prostrate over the desk with his ass on fire and his pants at his ankles. If it had been possible, Cas might have produced slick himself at the deliciously tempting sight.

Cas put a firm hand on the back of Michael’s neck, Alpha-to-Omega, Pack leader-to-underling, and he used his leverage on Michael to pull them both closer so he could kiss Dean’s lips. Dean smirked at him, the first sign from the alpha that he might be on his way back. “I’ll speak to you later, Dean,” he told the Sub. “We haven’t finished our discussion. You still need to understand Ellen’s decision, and you still owe me…” he didn’t need to finish talking.

Dean’s smirk deepened, and crow’s feet lined his eyes. He stretched forward and kissed first his fiancé, then his mate. “Let’s go home, Sir,” he mumbled to Michael. “Alpha needs to get back to work.”

Chapter End Notes

May the Universe, in its infinite wisdom, watch over you and your Pack, and may the moonlight always guide your steps. - Old Lupin proverb that I just made up.
Chapter Summary

"Holy shit!" thought an exhausted Sam, "What a day!" or How to initiate a pack in one really long take.

Chapter Notes

Guys! Finally! After twenty-something chapters, we finally have a Pack! I'm shouting aren't I? Sorry. Bit excited.

This one's long, but there was a lot to do. Skip the first part if you don't like April. It's just there because I need to show a bit of the Training process every now and then.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NOW:

“Lay out on your back, Omega. Pull your knees up high. Come on now, you know this position, it’s just a number twelve.” She was aching and out of sorts. Cas took a gentle hand this morning to test its effect. His instincts told him to be harsh and structured, but he didn’t want to overdo where it wasn’t needed. Yesterday’s punitive response had yielded quite the positive outcome, but today he wanted to try a different route.

April whined like a child and rocked in position. She hated the ritual, and she hated this position. The cramps were always worse when she was on her back. “Can’t you please let me just do it myself, Alpha? It hurts so bad like this.”

“Don’t be dramatic. It’s a mild discomfort at worst. Don’t forget, April, I can always tell what you’re feeling. Now put yourself into position and stay there. Hold still.” He didn’t touch her until she stopped rocking and still. She needed to come to it through obedience, not force.

Cas knelt at the end of the bed and carefully maneuvered the lubricated tip of the nozzle into her rectum. It was tricky because her channel always responded to his presence and effectively pinched the rectal opening closed, but Castiel had the skills of a practiced physician, and he slipped the nozzle into place with no issue. It didn’t hurt her, but it wasn’t the most comfortable feeling in the world either. He released the valve and slowly filled her gut with warm cleansing solution.

Cas massaged her belly gently as the first wave of cramps passed through her. She pouted and moaned, but held position. “Please, Sir. I’m not arguing, but can you tell me again why I have to do this? I don’t understand. It doesn’t do anything for me.”

“Stop whining. I’ve answered that question numerous times already. You will administer an enema every day, or have one administered for you, for no reason except that I’ve told you to. That’s all the
reason you need. You are my Submissive and my Omega, and you obey me. If I hear another word of protest about it, you’ll be punished severely. This topic is closed for good.”

The bag drained its last into his Sub, and Castiel slipped the nozzle free. He wouldn’t need to plug her since her channel was effectively doing that for him, so he placed the equipment into the bathroom sink, picked up April’s slipper at the entrance to the bathroom, and returned to where his Omega was struggling not to cry out of frustration and anger.

“Keep your feet out of the way. I have no intention of striking any part of you except your bottom, so don’t break position.”

Castiel spanked her swiftly and soundly. She had minor bruises from her previous run-in with his hand from the day before, but she was strong and young. She could take much more than this, and Castiel meant to drive his point home. April was too spoiled. She had wrapped her father around her little finger and manipulated her way out of doing anything she didn’t want to do.

That was not the kind of Submissive Cas wanted in a mate. He had been Mated to her long enough to be ready to get serious about her training. She’d proven she could learn quickly, too. She was smart and willing when she applied herself. This one point turned out to be exactly what he’d been looking for – a point of stubbornness that would stick in her craw enough to make her dig her heels in and resist. It allowed him to hunker down and get busy training her to be exactly what he wanted.

Castiel was in his element as he finished her spanking. She didn’t have much to give, but her Omega-gland Released a bit, and she finally relaxed into the strokes before he laid down the last stroke. He pulled her to her feet and helped her to the toilet to finish up. Without his presence, the muscles holding the fluids inside would relax and let her release. He dropped the equipment from the sink into the waiting bin for the staff to clean and sterilize, then he waited for her in their enormous bedroom, removing the toweling from the end of the bed and straightening the bedspread.

He took her into his arms when she waddled uncomfortably out of the restroom and kissed her head. “I love you dearly,” he said simply. “Please be good for me, April.”

“I’m sorry I argued, Sir.” She didn’t really seem sorry, but she would get there. Eventually. There wasn’t much more to say, so he held her for a moment, kissed her chastely, and then fed her breakfast and sent her off to get ready to go to class. He subdued his desire to cradle her after her punishment, drawing back carefully to test how she responded. He added another tally mark to her counting board in the kitchen for the whininess, and then collected his mate for the drive back to The Facility. Castiel hummed happily the whole way. April sulked.

“Okay, so let me get this straight,” Dean protested again. “Not only am I forbidden from touching my own dick, but you’ve locked Cas out from it too? And he agreed to that?”

“He did. He even volunteered to help me enforce it.” Michael calmly spread cream cheese out on a toasted bagel and then held it out so his mate could take a bite. Dean wrenched the whole bagel away from Michael with his teeth and then carried it across the room to eat it. Michael laughed at him happily. He pulled the next one out of the toaster, doctored it up, and joined his mate on the couch in the living room. “So that’s what we agreed to. It may change, and he says it’s contingent upon me following the Pack rules. Basically, I’m happy with the way things turned out.” Michael and Dean
“Now it’s your turn, Dean. I gave you some time yesterday, but you promised you’d tell me why you were in trouble with Alpha, and what you were so angry about.”

Dean shoved the last of the bagel into his mouth and used his time chewing to put his thoughts in order. They seemed to whirl through his mind in a dizzying vortex that made them hard to pin down. It didn’t bode well if he wanted to keep himself together. “They scheduled your Keller test for about six weeks from now. I assumed they’d schedule me in as the second-round tester - the Bridge - but Ellen put someone else in instead. I don’t know for sure who it is, but I have my suspicions. I don’t get to participate at all. It’s bullshit, man. I lost my temper and threw a little bit of a fit. It was barely even a tantrum, and Cas threw me out of the meeting and sent Sam to paddle my ass. Sam – who just got outta the corner himself – standing there with his pink cheeks hanging out the whole meeting, and he just gets to pull up his pants and act like nothing’s weird about that.” Dean huffed and pouted, sinking mentally into an alternate state of mind.

Michael was confused. Dean had been fully alpha-rational only a moment ago, but now he sounded like a petulant teenager. “So that was what had him blushing. Why was Sam in the corner?”

“Oh. Well, uh…that was Cas’ punishment for when he helped you blindside me with a surprise round of ‘let’s show off my Sub to random strangers walking by’.”

Was Dean pouting? He was. He was pouting.

“Dean, what’s going on with you this morning?” Michael moved to squat in front of his mate. He rested his hands on Dean’s thighs and searched his eyes. Dean’s mouth pulled down into a scowl, and he shifted away. Michael let him go but stayed close. “I thought you and I were past what happened with Sam. Are you still mad about that?”

Dean’s internal struggle to stay rational burst out in a huff of frustrated body language, like an overwrought adolescent. He stood rapidly, and he paced then turned on his mate. “Fuck, Michael. I don’t know. No, man, we’re square. It just pisses me off that I don’t get a say or a chance to help in your test. And it’s so massively unfair that Sam gets out of a major fuck-up like he did with just some fucking corner time and a couple of swats. I lose it just a tiny bit over something completely legit and I gotta face the fucking paddle three fucking times. How is that right?”

Michael blinked at him. “Alpha said he’s holding you to that rule – so, tonight, I guess. And he always doubles the count?”

Dean nodded, still pouting.

“Yeah, that’s what he said. Look, I know I’m a Sub. I know all about how getting out of balance makes me act like a prick and feel outta control. But swats to my ass over and over aren’t going to knock me out of it. I need a full-on scene, Michael. I need it bad, but I’m in fucking chastity for a fucking week – over a rule I didn’t even know I was breaking, and to top it all off, now you tell me I can only get my cock stroked by you. It’s too fucking much all at once, man!”

Michael bit his lip. Dean’s prickly emotions pouring through the bond told him his mate wouldn’t appreciate being held right now. He needed space. He needed some answers.

“Dean, I got a notification by text yesterday from the Institute. It was a statement that you’d received a punishment. It listed the count and the severity. Listed Sam as the guy who administered it and Alpha as the Top who assigned it. Someone put my name and number in the registry as your mate and Dominant. Looks like I’m always going to know when you’ve had your backside paddled
whether you tell me or not.”

Dean collapsed back onto the couch and let his head fall back to rest horizontally on the back, scrubbing his hands down his face. “Yeah, we do that so brats can’t hide shit from their Tops.”

“What do you need from me, Dean? Hey, listen to me. If I’m fucking this all up, and it’s not what you need, we’ll just sweep it all aside and start over from scratch. I mean it.”

“I need you to be Omega more often than you’re my Dom, but I can’t rush that. You aren’t ready yet. God, Michael, you don’t talk like an Omega at all. It’s so fucking hard to stay out of my Sub when I’m around you. But I’m getting it double-force from Cas too, and it’s exhausting. I’m not used to this.” Dean sat upright, then stood and headed to the kitchen to clean it up after breakfast, shaking his head and muttering.

Michael followed and wordlessly assisted. They were both deep in thought. Dean paused with a damp cloth in his hands. “I’m proud of how you handled the negotiations. You did good. Kinda wish you’d asked to keep my punishments just for you and not my cock, but other than that…you did good.”

“I tried, Dean. That one wasn’t going to fly. He’s not giving up any part of your ass. He made that abundantly clear.”

“Yeah. Are you going to tell me what happened in there? Why he showed you the big guy and literally scared the shit out of you?”

“No. I’m not. I don’t ever want to talk about that.” Michael avoided Dean’s eye, tucking the bagels away, and opening the dishwasher.

“So, what do we do now, Michael?” Dean stood in the middle of the kitchen looking genuinely at a loss. “Am I just whining ’cause I know I’ve got a punishment coming, and I want to get out of it? Sometimes I can’t tell until afterward when I’m for real and when it’s just the brat.”

“Do you trust me, Dean?”

“Yeah,” Dean conceded, looking uncomfortable. “My head says I shouldn’t yet. You’re too green and you could swing wide and hurt me, but my wolf trusts you completely. My wolf is never wrong, man. I trust you.”

Michael was taken aback. He huffed a laugh through his nose. “That’s funny. I don’t trust my wolf at all. Maybe that’s why we’re mates. We’re perfect opposites. C’mere, Dean.” Michael embraced his mate, but only to give him a short hug. It dawned on him that Dean was right. They fell too often into this role; with Michael on top and Dean tucked in underneath him. It was backward, but it was all Michael knew.

He took Dean by the shoulders and moved him to arms’ length, looking sternly at him. “I’m going to follow through with the punishment I promised you for what you did at work, and we’re finishing our week of chastity. When that’s over, if you want, we can talk about it all again. I’m not doubling up the swats. It’s just going to be an over-the-knee hand spanking. I saw your bruises, baby. I know one spanking isn’t going to break you. And I’m not fooled into thinking you’d be game to hand all of the punishments he hands out to me, either. That is your brat talking. I may not have everything figured, but I know that much. Whatever you owe to your Alpha is between you and him. The notification said forty-five. Is he really going to double that, all in one go?”

Dean nodded, frowning. Oh, yes. Castiel could count pretty high, and he knew Dean’s ass could
take it. Was Michael right? Dean knew he didn’t want to give up the sweet agony of laying out for the Alpha’s hot hand, but he was sure Cas had meant their marriage to step upward into an even level for them both. Didn’t that mean handing punishing Dean off to Michael? It did, didn’t it?

Dean was befuddled, but Castiel would have to wait. Michael needed to be his priority for now.

Michael touched his cheek, and Dean closed his eyes. “I don’t know how to be an Omega, Dean. I always get hurt when that bastard leaks out. Always. Will you help me?”

“Mm-hm. If I can stay alpha for five minutes.” Dean leaned his face into Michael’s hand and Michael chuckled.

“Let me see your ass. I want to check on the bruises again.” Michael might not trust his wolf further than he could throw him, but he trusted the beast a hell of a lot more than he did his puny, stunted Omega.

The bruises needed only another day or so to fade away completely. Michael hoped desperately that Castiel could refrain from adding more. Dean assured him that Cas had complete control, and if he promised no bruises, there would be no bruises.

Michael decided to break his previous declaration that he wouldn’t deliver any punishments before he could do so on a clean palette, and he laid down a firm but simple spanking over his knee. It was enough to fulfill his promised follow-up, but not enough for either of them to feel like they’d explored the depths of their potential connection through impact play. Michael justified it by saying that delaying a punishment that was earned and promised longer than strictly necessary was counterproductive. He told his Sub that when he brought his hand down next, he planned to make it memorable, but that a mild bratting at work wasn’t good enough cause. It felt like a compromise more than a capitulation, and they both relaxed into the fact that their decisions between themselves were nobody’s business but their own.

Michael checked in with his mate afterward to be clear that he’d not overstepped anything. The conversation had started, after all, with Dean explaining how frustrated he was to be facing triple-jeopardy, and in a sense, Michael had responded by fulfilling that dreaded outcome.

“I’m fine, sir. I’m going to run out for some groceries and get some distance. I need to get back to my front-brain and see if I can stay there for a while. Do you need anything?”

***************

Sam changed clothes at Dean’s facility suite after work. He was nervous about tonight. So much was planned for a single evening. So much could go wrong. As an unmated man, Sam wondered if he was doing the right thing in joining his brother’s Pack. Sam was prime age to come across a mate. Betas often Mated in their early to mid-twenties. He was committed to wait for his True-Mate, but he wondered how she would feel about Castiel’s Pack. Sam knew he was making the decision for both of them without giving the nameless Sub a chance to vote. As the Bottom in their relationship, she would be given no choice but to switch allegiance from her home pack to his. In the end, it came down to his trust and respect for Cas and Dean. If they could hold their marriage together, the Winchester Pack was going to be strong, stable, self-sufficient, and enduring. It could be home. Sam longed for a family. He loved the image of letting his
wolf run the Packlands with its nose to the snow and feel the camaraderie of being surrounded on all sides by pack wolves, running with him. He wanted to belong to something bigger than himself. He wanted the pride that comes with introducing himself as a member of a prestigious Pack. Castiel could give him that.

Or it could all crash and burn into chaos.

Sam grabbed the bottle of wine from the counter of the tiny kitchen and headed out to his car. For better or for worse, he was ready to make the jump from virtual lone wolf to full-fledged Pack muscle. Sam knew where he was going to fit within the structure. He could protest all he wanted, but he was the fulcrum of this strangely balanced assemblage, and he was naturally inclined to play counselor and peacemaker. Maybe it wouldn’t fall too heavily on his shoulders. Cas liked to get his own hands dirty when he could, and Sam suspected Michael was the same way.

It was a short drive to the big manor house but just long enough to ruminate on his new Pack members themselves. Dean, of course, was Dean. If his brother hadn’t been part of the Pack that invited him, Sam would never have considered joining. In the end, Sam went where Dean was. He always would. He worked easily with Castiel. The two respected each other, and Sam never felt the need to challenge Cas’ authority. He knew Cas to be judicious and fair. Sam had always felt free to voice his opposition, even passionately when he felt the Alpha-Dom was wrong, and Cas had never used his higher standing as a hammer to get his way. Well, not with Sam anyway. They didn’t work like that.

Sam smiled to himself when he thought of little April. She was endearingly sweet. The two of them bonded as intimates immediately. Even though the Claim wore off weeks ago, she and Sam remained close enough that outsiders might assume his Claim had been renewed. He felt a little bad for testing Castiel over the last few days. He’d deliberately flaunted his close friendship with April in the Dom’s face to see if he would get a rise. It was a risky move, and one that would be more likely to bring consequences down on April than on himself, but he needed to know Castiel’s real mind where she was concerned. It was one thing to say you wanted your Omega to form lasting relationships and have friends, but watching her do it might be more than he could stand, especially if one of those friends was male, especially if one of those friends was a powerful Dominant.

She’d spent time talking with Sam over the long weekend that Castiel was absent. It was April who’d finally convinced Sam to throw his lot in with the pack. How strange it must seem to onlookers that Castiel’s mate was as committed as she was to sending her own Alpha off into marriage with another wolf, but she had spoken passionately, and Sam believed her. Maybe it was a holdover from his Claim on her body, but he felt fiercely protective of the young Omega.

Then there was Michael – all sour comments and standoffish glares. Michael’s brief, drunken performance on the night of his introduction notwithstanding, Michael kept himself aloof from everyone else. He made it crystal clear to all of them: Michael was here for Dean and no one else. Considering the little that Sam knew about Michael’s past and his connection with Dean, Sam would give him the benefit of the doubt. For a while. Eventually, he would need to join the larger pack like the rest of them.

Sam pulled into the long drive and approached the house. Summer was upon them and the sun was still high enough to cast a soft light across the lawn. Sam sighed as he parked. He needed to remember to be fair to Michael. It hadn’t even been a full week yet since Michael laid his Claim on Sam’s brother in the strangest way. His head had to be spinning still. All of his moorings had been ripped up, and he was clinging tightly to Dean as his only support. Sam wanted to try to provide Michael with another hold, but the Omega seemed determined not to need anyone but Dean.
The butler admitted Sam through the front door and gestured him through to the large parlor to the left. April and Gabriel were already there, giggling together on the couch. When she spotted Sam, she ran to him for a tight hug. He smiled at her and kissed her head.

“You ready for this?” he asked her.

“Mm-hm.” April looked genuinely happy. Sam pinched her cheek playfully.

“You’re a little schemer, kiddo. I know what you’ve been up to to pull all of this off. I just hope you don’t regret it when your backside has to answer to three or four of us.” She giggled in response and lifted up on tiptoes to kiss him chastely on the lips. He swatted her as she returned to Gabe, and she flinched and squeaked. Sam shook his head in affection. He needed to remember that he could expect the Omega-Sub’s backside to be tender most of the time for one reason or another.

Ellen, Jo, Bobby, and Benny all came in together as Sam was fixing a drink for himself. He offered to pour some for the new arrivals, and everyone accepted a glass and settled to wait for the others, chatting easily.

“Where’s Andrea?” he asked Benny.

“Bit under the weather. She sends her love,” Benny replied smoothly.

Dean and Michael beat Castiel to the parlor. Dean was his usual bigger-than-life public self, all swagger and energy. He dragged Michael through the door by their linked hands and deposited him on a cushy chair where Michael could have some space around him without having to share. Then he rummaged two beer bottles from the mini-fridge behind the bar and handed one to his mate, perching himself on the chair’s arm and focusing seriously on April.

“We need to talk, you and me,” Dean told her sternly. April’s eyes widened in alarm, and she sat up straight. “We haven’t discussed yet how we’re going to split up our mutual relations with your mate – my fiancé – and I wanna hash this shit out right now. You game?”

She blanched. She had no idea what to say. Negotiate Castiel? What was there to negotiate? She had no power. “Uh, I guess so.”

“Okay, here’s what I want: I get to kiss him and fondle him whenever I want without you getting catty on me. If you walk into a room and he’s got me bent over and ass-up for…whatever, you just keep on walking, sister. When it’s my night to sleep with him, I sleep with him however he wants me, and you don’t get all pouty about it, capiche?”

“Dean, I…” she spluttered. “I would never. I like you here. I want you to have time with him, and I promise I won’t get in your way.” Then she noticed the twinkle in his eye. He was teasing her. She huffed at him and threw a pillow at his head. They were called ‘throw pillows’ were they not?

“You’re a jerk, Dean!” Sam declared definitively.

“And you’re a bitch, but that’s beside the point.” Dean kept his eye on April’s, and he winked, making her blush. “Nah, I know we don’t need any of that crap.” Then he turned serious to talk to her. “I got your back, April. You need anything from me, I’m there. You need more time with Cas, you just let me know, and I’ll make space for you. We’re a team, right?”

She nodded, tearing up just a little. “Right.” Michael bapped Dean gently upside the head and scowled at him for scaring the Omega, but Dean just grinned at his Submissive little sister. She smiled shyly back.
Sam latched on to one of Dean’s statements and followed up. “Let’s get this exhibitionist thing cleared up right now, Dean. Do you mean to move your fucking out to the main rooms? Are you really okay with having witnesses now? ‘Cause you never wanted to do that before. I need to hear it from you if it’s true.”

Dean met Michael’s eye, and Michael smiled at him, not prompting an answer, just a sweet, affectionate smile. It was Dean’s choice. “I want to try it, Sammy. Are you okay with being a witness?”

“It’s fine with me, man. I don’t care either way as long as it’s what you want. I worry because it’s always been something that made you uncomfortable before. I just want to look out for my big brother. You sure you’re not just getting carried away because your mate’s into it?”

“Are you certain about this, Dean?” Castiel asked, entering the parlor and mirroring Sam’s question. He had obviously overheard enough of the conversation to know what they were discussing. Dean suppressed the desire to roll his eyes.

“Yes, Alpha. I want to do it. I think a part of me has always wanted to, but it just never felt safe before.” Dean shifted a little bit, aware that Cas might be hurt by the implication but needing to bring it out anyway. “Michael’s going to help me see if it’s really something I want. I want to let all of you know, all of you here, that I’m okay with whatever Michael does in front of you. That’s new for me, so I feel like it’s important for me to say it out loud. You don’t have to participate if you don’t want to. I’m not trying to force anybody into voyeurism if that’s not your thing, but just so you all know, I’m onboard, and it’s not something Michael’s trying to make me do. This is me in my front-brain saying I’m in to try.”

Castiel nodded. He didn’t appear injured that none of Dean’s new efforts seemed to include him. “Michael?” he prompted. Dean bit his lip, watching the Alpha carefully.

“What?”

“Do you have anything to add? This is a big step for your mate.”

“Um…” Michael looked up at Dean who took a drink from his bottle and looked back. “Thanks, I guess? I mean, it’s his choice, really, so I’m not sure what you want me to say about it. I’ll take good care of him while he’s under like that. I’ve got the Mating-bond to tell me how he’s really feeling, even if he can’t say it, and I’m not going to lose focus on keeping him safe. Not again.”

Dean ran a hand through Michael’s hair and smiled down at him, mouthing, “Thank you.”

“Just don’t get all drippy on the furniture and wipe up your messes. That’s all I ask,” Gabriel put in, and everyone laughed. “We’ve got it all scotch-guarded, but that only goes so far.”

Castiel took the conversation in hand in a professional manner. “All right. There’s one more point of business I need to attend to before we move to the formal portion of the evening. Thank you to Ellen, Jo, Benny, and Bobby for serving as witnesses. You have been the closest of friends to Dean and me over the years, and I appreciate your support. I want you to know that my invitations to all three of you remain open, but I understand why you’ve selected not to accept them. Does anyone else have anything they need to say?”

Dean blinked. Cas had invited Benny, Bobby, and the Harvelles to join the pack too? What happened to their awesome lines of communication? Not that he minded – exactly. All of them were close friends, but still. Cas had thought to add three more alphas to the pack without consulting Dean? Cas had asked Bobby? Bobby?!? How did he imagine that would work? Jo met his eye, and
he read in her expression a promise to speak more fully about it later. He vowed to sit by her at dinner and make her spill.

“No one?” said Castiel. “All right, then. Dean, I owe you a punishment, and I see no reason to make you wait any longer. Michael, would you mind relinquishing your chair? This won’t take long. Everyone, please refresh your drinks as you need to.” Cas pulled Michael to his feet and took his spot in the wide, soft chair. He pulled Dean unceremoniously over his lap and rested a hand on his ass.

“What, here!? Dude, you’ve got a study, and a play room, a bedroom! We’re doing this here?!”

“Yes, Dean, right here. And I’ll thank you not to call me ‘Dude’ while you’re over my lap.” Castiel thumped Dean’s thigh to prompt him to lift his hips and then made short work of the fastenings to his slacks. In no time, Dean’s ass, still a little pink from Michael’s hand on top of Sam’s paddle, was bare to the room. The alphas and Sam ignored the show. They chatted comfortably as Castiel began to spank his fiancé. Gabriel didn’t care. He went to the bar to mix another martini. Michael stayed where Cas had stood him up, close enough to the action that he could feel the whoosh of air as Cas’ hand landed again and again on his mate’s reddening bottom that was swiftly turning to match his bright red face and ears. Dean was mortified, but Michael was transfixed and salivating. He moaned quietly, feeling a series of pings in his groin in answer to every strike as he felt Dean’s pain echo at him through the bond.

April stared too. Alphas spanking alphas. If April had been allowed to touch herself and ever needed spank-bank material, this would do it. It was hot. So, fucking hot. Dean kicked out and squirmed, grimacing in pain and protest. He wasn’t crying, but he was clearly hurting. As one who knew intimately what that hand felt like when it rained down like that, April should have had more sympathy for Dean than she did. Instead, she let it send her whirling into erotic Sub-space. She rocked subtly in her place on the couch and felt her channel respond. She was aware that she smelled like slick, but she didn’t care. Castiel worked quickly and efficiently. He spanked fast and kept the count in his head. He didn’t pause or vary the speed at all. Ninety swats may seem like a lot, but when delivered in a fast staccato, the way Cas did it, they went very quickly. He covered every part of Dean’s butt and thighs that could be considered target zones, all the way down to near the backs of his knees and up at his sit-spots, ensuring that Dean would be uncomfortable all through dinner, but he made sure not to bruise him. Bruising was a matter of follow through on the strikes, and Cas was an expert.

It was over quickly. Cas rested a hand on Dean’s back, letting the sting sink in on its own, letting Dean find the meaning behind the action from within himself, letting him pull himself together with his face turned to the floor. Once Castiel felt a shift in his Sub, a feeling he wouldn’t have been able to describe if asked, he stood Dean back up and helped him to dress, standing before him. He kissed his love where the tears had just fallen over the edge then held his gaze. They didn’t need a Mating-bond to understand the emotions between them. Cas and Dean had perfected the art of nonverbal communication through years of scening.

What began for Dean as a humiliating display of submission, transformed as he stood before his Top in throbbing pain and penitence into absolution. Cas checked up on his Sub with just his eyes, and Dean confirmed he was all right the same way. It was a somber – but not a sad – moment for them both, and they held it for a few moments longer, reconnecting on an instinctive level.

Dean was always going to need to have this from his Alpha. He shifted forward and leaned his forehead against Castiel’s. Protest as he might, Dean needed this – exactly this – from Castiel; maybe not from Michael, at least not in the same way, but always from Castiel. It was such a confusing mix,
and much of it was still so new. This part? He knew he would always need this part. His wolf and his alpha and his front-brain knew this part so well. He’d just been brought home, and it felt like the ground had just risen up to meet him. He breathed in his Alpha’s scent and closed his eyes, letting his feet and his touchpoints with Cas ground him. Castiel’s hand rested on the back of his neck.

“I’ll always take care of you, my love,” Cas said simply, not bothering to lower his voice. Most of the guests ignored the intensely emotional moment between the two alphas, but Michael startled as April brushed past him, approached her Alpha, and calmly insinuated herself under his arm, wrapping her arms around him without disturbing his connection with Dean. The alphas both chuckled warmly at her, and Cas dropped an arm around her shoulders to welcome her home as well. He rested his chin on top of her head but kept his eyes serenely on Dean. “We can do this, Dean. Please do this with me.” This time, his voice was quiet. It didn’t matter that Michael and April were both close enough to hear. They were to be part of ‘This,’ and Cas wanted them both.

Michael bit his lower lip and hesitated, torn. His wolf’s stubbornness held his feet, but he could feel his Omega reaching for the comfort of the alphas’ embrace. He wanted to trust it. He wanted to be under that umbrella too, but his pride reminded him how cheesy they looked in a picture-perfect group hug. Dean glanced at him, his eyes still serious, and quirked his head to summon his mate to join them. Michael waited only another moment before the Omega in him finally grew the balls to assert himself and nudge him into motion. He found his place at Dean’s side, opposite of April and tucked his face into Dean’s shoulder. It was scary; so scary to be this vulnerable in a huge, stately house full of wolves, but Dean held onto him, so he just breathed.

“All right! Jesus! Enough of that. What’s next? I’m starving,” Gabe broke the peace and the atmosphere like a pin popping a balloon.

“You’re such an asshole, Gabriel,” Jo chastised him. He stuck his tongue out at her like a five-year-old, but Castiel simply laughed, pulling away from his family and giving Michael a surreptitious squeeze on the shoulder.

“Next come the formal oaths, then we eat and celebrate,” the Alpha enumerated. “After tonight, we’re a pack in truth, not just on paper. I received notification by email today that our application for Pack status has been filed and accepted. The timing is excellent, but we already have a couple more names to add to the original filing. We can do that at the Federal building in Topeka next week after April’s Heat ends. Dean, will you take care of filing for Douglas County Residency for us? I don’t have to be present for that, my signature on the form will suffice.”

“Sure thing, Cas. Michael and I can make a day trip of it go tooling around like tourists. We’re on our honeymoon, after all.”

“Day trip?” said Bobby. “The county courthouse is four blocks to the north of us. You can walk from here.”

“Walk!? When I still haven’t shown him what my Baby can do? No, no, Bobby. I’m taking him for a ride in the flat Kansas prairie; really open her up out there and let her run like the wolf she is.”

“Don’t get arrested, Winchester,” Benny advised. “You’re about to have a shitload of media attention rain down on you. You don’t want to add a mugshot to that, do you?”

“I’ve got it under control, Ben. I know where all the traps and cop hangouts are. No problem.”

“Sounds like famous last words, if you ask me,” mothered Ellen.

“Oaths!” shouted Gabriel. “C’mon, focus people. Dinner’s getting cold.”
Castiel was in a good mood, and he let his brother be a jackass. For Gabe, unlike Dean, the bratting was a sign of Balance and good mental health. It was only when Gabe grew somber or very quiet that Cas needed to worry about him.

“Right,” said Sam. “Let’s do this.”

Castiel nodded firmly. “Dean, you’re first. Are you ready?”

“Yes, Sir, Alpha. I was born ready.” Cas centered himself in the middle of the room, and the witnesses gathered around behind him.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” confessed Michael in Dean’s ear.

Dean whispered bracingly back, “Don’t worry about it. It’s not really formal, and Cas will help you if you need it. Just do what I do when it’s your turn. The big Claim won’t happen until after dinner. This is just the oath.”

Dean approached Castiel and quickly stripped, dropping his clothing into a pile behind him. He moved up into the Alpha’s space with his eyes averted and his head cocked to one side to bare his neck. Castiel took in his naked body then placed two fingers of his right hand directly over Dean’s pulse and pressed gently. It was a holdover from a time when Alphas took the pulsing life-vein of their subjects’ throats between their teeth and decided on the spot whether to accept them as Pack or kill them then and there.

Castiel intoned so that it echoed through the high-ceilinged parlor, “Do you, Dean Michael Winchester, pledge to me your allegiance, loyalty, obedience, and faith in all that I may demand of you from this day until the end of time?”

“I do, Alpha.”

“Will you uphold the sanctity of Pack Winchester against all threats internal or external, maintaining its welfare, protecting it steadfastly, defending its members even to the detriment of your own health?” Castiel spoke in such a way that it was clear he meant every word of the formulaic questions, enunciating carefully, and emphasizing key words.

“I will, Alpha.”

“May I call upon your faithful service in times of crisis or threat at any hour for any reason I deem worthy?”

“You may, Alpha.”

“Can you, in good faith, offer me and your Packmates your love, support, guidance, and discipline so that we may build a stable firmament together that will endure for as long as the Universe sees fit to grant us that mercy?”

“I can, Alpha, and I always will.”

“Dean Michael Winchester,” Cas said with a smirk. “I accept your pledge of fealty, and I name you Second-in-Rank of Pack Winchester. You will hold that status for as long as you remain worthy of it. Welcome home, my love.”

Castiel kissed him hard, wrapping himself around Dean’s naked form. Dean was surprised. This was not a wedding, and kissing had no place in the formal ceremony, but he didn’t care, and once his mind caught up, he responded in kind. The witnesses cheered behind them. Cas dipped Dean into a
back-breaking low lunge as his tongue plundered Dean’s mouth. Both wolves were laughing by
the time he set Dean back upright and released him. Dean collected his clothes with a chuckle that
turned into a yelp when Cas smacked his fiery red backside just because it was there.

“Samuel. Please approach, if you are willing.”

“Yes, Alpha,” said Sam beginning to pull his clothes off. “But if it’s all the same, I’d like to skip the
kiss at the end.” Everyone but Michael laughed.

Sam took his place in front of Castiel, and Cas repeated the motions, laying his fingers with a firm
touch upon Sam’s pulse point. The Dominant in Sam reacted to the physical threat, and he had to
draw in a breath to resist pulling back and snarling. Castiel waited without judgement for Sam to put
a leash on his wolf. Cas had seen Sam’s wolf, and he was extremely glad to have the beast on his
team. Sam pulled it together and craned his head to the side just a bit further than necessary to
indicate he was in full agreement with the words of the oath, despite his wolf’s reticence.

“Do you, Samuel Luke Winchester, pledge to me your allegiance, loyalty, obedience, and faith in all
that I may demand of you from this day until the end of time?”

“I do, Alpha.”

“Will you uphold the sanctity of Pack Winchester against all threats internal or external, maintaining
its welfare, protecting it steadfastly, defending its members even to the detriment of your own
health?”

“I will, Alpha.”

“May I call upon your faithful service in times of crisis or threat at any hour for any reason I deem
worthy?”

“You may, Alpha.”

“Have you the strength of mind, character, and body to uphold the rules of my household and to
provide swift, fair, and decisive discipline where it is warranted in respectful administration toward
the maintenance of a balanced home?”

“I have, Alpha.”

“Can you, in good faith, offer me and your Packmates your love, support, guidance, and discipline
so that we may build a stable firmament together that will endure for as long as the Universe sees fit
to grant us that mercy?”

“I can, Alpha.”

“Samuel Luke Winchester, I accept your pledge of fealty, and I name you Third-in-Rank of Pack
Winchester. You will hold that status for as long as you remain worthy of it. I thank you for your
trust, and on behalf of the Pack, I bid you welcome.”

Castiel reached out and took Sam’s hand in a firm handshake. Sam smiled dopily at him and then
turned his happy smile on the others. Everyone cheered.

“Doesn’t seem quite fair that he has an extra oath that you didn’t get,” Michael whispered to Dean.

Dean leaned over and responded quietly, still clapping for Sam. “Subs don’t pledge to discipline
other pack members. Even if they are expected to do it, the door’s always open to have that part
removed from their responsibilities. It’s just never part of their oath.”

“Michael. Are you ready, Omega?” Castiel called to him.

Michael took a deep breath and started to step forward but was stopped when Dean took hold of his arm and whispered to him. “Omegas kneel, baby. I’ll get you a pillow for your knees.” Michael nodded at his mate’s words and stepped up to face Castiel. Their eyes flashed the same challenge that seemed always to be there just for a moment, but Michael’s wolf deferred immediately as Castiel wisely allowed just a glimpse of his wolf to show through before bottling him back under. Michael wasn’t supposed to be meeting the Alpha’s eyes at all for this ceremony, and Cas’ wolf let him know it. He looked quickly to the floor as he undressed.

Dean slipped a knee pillow in front of Michael as he finished baring himself to the room. Being the only one naked and on his knees in a room full of powerful wolves would be extremely uncomfortable for Michael’s wolf. Like Sam, he needed a moment to get himself under control. He found it easier than usual to slip into his Omega at this close distance to the Alpha, and he breathed into it. Michael sank down onto both knees, his head to the side and his eyes downcast. He panted as his heart rate kicked up.

“Relax Michael,” said Castiel. “You’re safe with us. You will always be safe here with us. No one here is your enemy, and we will fight for you whenever you need us to do so.” Castiel placed two fingers on Michael’s pulse point and his left hand atop the Omega’s head. Michael whined quietly. “Shhh. It’s okay Omega. I’ve got you. Just let me know when you’re ready. Take your time.”

Michael closed his eyes to help him drive back the rising sense of panic. He didn’t know why he’d suddenly become suffused with fear. He didn’t know what he was feeling except that he wanted to launch himself into the care of the Alpha and his enormous wolf. Tears sprang up behind Michael’s clenched eyelids, and he hyperventilated. Suddenly Dean was crouched behind him, holding him across the chest. Michael reached out blindly and found the Alpha’s legs before him, pulling himself tightly in and clutching Castiel for all he was worth. Castiel knelt down to place himself at Michael’s level, and he and Dean sandwiched the Omega between them, stroking him through his panic, and reassuring him he was fine.

Michael put one arm around his mate, but the other clutched tightly to Castiel while he tried to dig his way back out. Dean moved to his side so Michael could reach him better, and he rubbed the Omega’s back in soothing, gentle circles. “We’ve got you, Michael. It’s okay. What you’re feeling is normal. You’re going to be just fine. It’s okay. I love you.”

Some time later, Michael found himself lying on his side across Dean’s lap, his hand still clutching at Castiel’s shirt and tears staining his own face. Dean rocked him and continued to whisper gentle words and stroke his back, his arm, his hair. Slowly, the panic subsided, and his breathing calmed. Castiel squatted before him, looking concerned, both hands on Michael helping to support and calm him.

“Are you back with us, now?” he said very softly. Michael nodded, not looking around. He knew he had a wall of embarrassment to face later, but right now, he zeroed in on the alphas who both held him close. “We don’t have to do this right now, if you can’t do it. I’m leaving it up to you, Michael. No judgement or repercussions. I can wait until you’re ready.”

Michael wiped the tears from his face and started to sit up, but Dean held him firmly. “Dean, I can do it. I’m ready to do it.”

“Then just do it from here, baby. Stay right here. It means the same, and I don’t want you upright right now.” Michael blinked up at Dean and then turned to where Castiel remained crouched on the
balls of his feet with his knees wide. He saw Cas nod at Dean and then set his face, placing his fingers and hand as he had done before. The angle was awkward, but he managed. He smiled kindly at Michael.

“Do you, Michael Quentin Winchester, pledge to me your allegiance, loyalty, obedience, and faith in all that I may demand of you from this day until the end of time?”

“I do, Alpha.” Michael’s voice was a whisper, but there was determination in it. He meant his vow with all his heart, never realizing until just now, as he lay naked, humiliated, and brokenly vulnerable in his mate’s arms how desperately he wanted to belong to a Pack like Castiel’s. He’d been so angry, so filled with rage for so long because deep in his wolf, he’d always assumed there was no place for him. Who would want a Dominant Omega? What possible service could someone so split in his own head ever be to anyone else?

Castiel stayed low for the entire series of promises. He included the extra one that he’d asked of Sam, about applying discipline to the Pack. Michael felt Dean’s huff of protest more than he heard it. Dean and Michael both knew that oath was specific to Michael’s relationship with Dean. He didn’t expect to have the authority to discipline anyone else. Was Castiel turning April over to him? Gabriel? Michael, though, realized in a quick flash, that this oath granted him disciplinary authority over any pups that came along. He could maybe be a primary caregiver in the raising of their pups, his and Dean’s. Omega’s didn’t always get that right. They were expected to provide care and nurturing, but rarely direction. He wondered briefly if Castiel had already thought of that caveat when he included that part of the oath for Michael to accept.

“Michael Quentin Winchester, I accept your pledge of fealty, and I name you First Omega of Pack Winchester. You will hold that status for as long as you remain worthy of it. Be blessed, sweet Omega, and I wish you warmth and welcome in your new home. I further grant you explicit authority over the wellbeing and maintenance of your mate’s Submissive wolf, and I offer you my assistance and mentorship as you learn to guide him.”

Dean hugged him close as Michael tried in vain to hide that his tears had started up again. Castiel kissed both of his wet cheeks and then helped both him and Dean to rise. Michael got a chance to look around at the assembled Pack and witnesses as he shakily collected his clothes and realized to his horror that almost all of them had teared up. Even Bobby was blowing his nose. He didn’t manage to get more than his boxer briefs on before the entire assemblage lined up for hugs. Old Michael would have growled them off, but his Omega accepted all of them tentatively, even one from April.

“Gabriel, you’re up next. I know you’re not pledging anew. I hold your past pledge still active, but I ask that, in the spirit of our new Pack, you renew your vows as a transferal from Novak to Winchester. I will not ask you to change your name.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes at his little brother’s formality. “Fine. If I have to…” he grumbled as he stripped. Michael found a quiet place alone to the side to dress and regroup. Dean kept an eye on him but allowed him the space. He could sense the turmoil in Michael’s emotions. Dean knew he would want some space if he was in that much chaos inside his own head.

Gabriel kicked the pillow back over from where it had been shuffled aside, and he knelt on both knees with a dramatic groan as if aging knees or arthritis pained him. He had no such affliction. It was just Gabriel. The stitches on his back and the multiple puncture wounds, bandaged and slowly healing, stood out starkly, defying his attitude of levity. Gabriel was much harder and stronger than he liked most people to be aware of. He liked to be underestimated as a matter of course. It helped him to hide in a crowd. He hid the discomfort of being so open to scrutiny and visible though.
Gabriel, at his deepest, knew who his allies were. He, his wolf, and his Omega knew he was safe here with these people. It didn’t mean it was easy to display his wounds.

In a rare display of real submission, Gabriel rested his hands on his thighs, lowered his eyes, and bared his throat. Castiel took pity on him and made his oaths quick and succinct, letting his questions come on top of each answer without pause. He maintained a Claim over Gabriel, one that would need to be renewed soon, and he could feel his brother’s discomfort.

“Gabriel Allen Novak, I accept your pledge of fealty, and I name you Second Omega of Pack Winchester. I thank you for your years of dedicated loyalty, and I pledge as your Alpha and brother always to hold you safe between my paws. I vow to let no harm come to you. Be cherished in this household, Omega, and know you are home.”

Gabriel caught Castiel’s hand just before he pulled it away from Gabe’s throat, and he kissed his brother’s palm, meeting the Alpha’s eyes. Castiel gasped softly in surprise and knelt to return the blessing with a kiss to Gabriel’s cheek. The brothers often bickered, and they snarked. Barely a day went by when they were in each other’s presence that they didn’t squabble over some bit of family baggage, but they’d been forged as a family in fire and pain, and they had saved each other. Gabriel owed Castiel his life and his sanity. Castiel owed Gabriel the passion of his life’s work and everything that went with it.

They almost never spoke of it; moments like this few and far between. But every now and then, Gabriel let Castiel see him, really see him. It meant the world to Castiel, who didn’t exactly doubt his brother’s regard, but sometimes longed for the easy affection that his big brother once lavished upon him so many years ago. Their roles had reversed, but their brotherhood hadn’t flagged, and Cas couldn’t suppress the quiet sob as he hugged his brother, carefully minding the stitches crossing his back.

“If this gets any heavier, we’re going to run out of tissues,” said Bobby, his voice sounding stuffy, the big softie.

“We’re all right,” said Cas, helping Gabriel to rise, and tapping his bare ass to send him toward his piled clothing. “April, love, that just leaves you. Come and kneel, little Omega.”

“Yes, Alpha,” she replied quietly. April was nervous. Everyone had finished except for her, and she was going to have to get used to being last. It didn’t bother her most of the time, but for ceremonies like this, it was a bit on-the-nose. Being last wasn’t just a title or a nominal ranking. The last-ranked wolf had the least say, was allowed the fewest freedoms, waited until everyone else was served, and answered to everyone. She was about to take her place at the bottom of a pile. It was what she wanted, but it still scared her to think of how vulnerable she’d be down there. She kept her eyes no higher than Alpha’s chest as she stripped, her bruised ass displayed for the assembled witnesses to view at will. She knelt, foregoing the pillow to communicate her acknowledgement of her abject submission. ‘Know thy place, Omega’, was a common refrain in the world April grew up in. Castiel grunted and apparently gestured, although she couldn’t see it. She felt Dean lift her by her arms from behind, while Sam slid the pillow under her knees.

“We are not that kind of a Pack, Kitten, and we never we be. I ask for your submission, not your subjugation. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Are you ready, my sweet?”

She nodded and took a deep breath.
“Do you, April Renée Winchester, pledge to me your allegiance, loyalty, obedience, and faith in all that I may demand of you from this day until the end of time?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Can you, in good faith, offer me and your Packmates your love, support, and obedience, so that we may build a stable firmament together that will endure for as long as the Universe sees fit to grant us that mercy?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Will you promise to remain faithful through all that may come to pass, to represent this pack with honor and discipline, to be fruitful and loving, and never to forsake the members of Pack Winchester under any circumstances?”

“Yes, Alpha. I promise.”

“April Renée Winchester, I accept your pledge of fealty, and I name you Ultimate Omega of Pack Winchester. I pledge to hold you safe as my beloved mate through all of our long years together and to fulfill your needs in love and strength, offering you my hand, my heart, my seed, and myself. Be welcome here, sweet one, and find respite from the dangerous world outside our doorstep. Here you will always be protected.”

He raised her up and encircled her in his arms. She clung to him and melted into his chest. They stood together, letting their Mating-bond speak all the words they couldn’t say out loud, swaying just slightly. Finally, Castiel let his arm slide downward to support her backside, and he lifted her easily. She wrapped her bare legs around him without emerging from where she was breathing in his scent, and he carried her, naked, to the dining room. Dean swept up her clothes and followed, setting them under Castiel’s chair at the head of the table. Cas set April down in a cushioned chair next to his own, but he didn’t give her permission to dress.

The others filed in and took their places as the meal, hot and fragrant, was wheeled in. The wine flowed, and the atmosphere lightened appreciably. Dinner tonight was to be a celebration, so celebrate they did.

Jo raised her glass. “A toast, if you please. A toast to Pack Winchester. Y’all! Shut up a second! I’m making a toast! Damn! Okay.” She cleared her throat and began haughtily. “Never before have the finest and rarest of wolves joined together in joy as they do here today. I am honored to have been invited to witness this moment. May this Pack flourish and grow, and may you all get busy squirting out pups, so I can finally be an aunt! May the Universe in its infinite wisdom, bless this household and all who reside here. May you be a beacon of light to those who are still lost in darkness.” She raised her glass and drank deeply, and the rest of the table joined her. Then she sat back down, blushing.

Dean elbowed her in the ribs with a wicked grin and teased, “Beacon of light, Joanna Beth? Seriously?”

“Shut up,” she clarified, her cheeks pinking that much more.

Conversations sprang up around the table. Ellen was seated next to April and engaged her in a discussion about her plans for the future. Castiel listened, rapt, as his mate revealed that she hoped to be allowed to apply to study music nearby. He assured her that she had his full support, and they could look into enrolling for the fall semester wherever she wanted. April glowed under his fond gaze, completely nonplussed at being the only one at the table in her birthday suit. She was,
however, extra careful to avoid spilling her soup.

Ellen approved of the way April and Cas worked together. She understood that an Omega as deeply submissive as April needed the extra attention and structure from moment to moment in a way that most wolves could never really fathom. But she also knew that as long as April got that structure at home, she could successfully venture outside and make whatever she wanted of herself. Ellen knew because she had done it. Ellen wasn’t as submissive as April, but she’d also had to do it with infinitely less support. She had her mate, for a while, until she lost him, and that had made all the difference. But she wondered how much easier her road might have been if she’d had a full formal Pack behind her like April had.

At the far end of the table, Gabriel was drilling Michael on the terms he and Castiel had come to over Dean. “So, can Alpha kiss and manhandle Dean in front of us, or is that only when you give him leave to scene?” He popped a large chunk of roasted potato in his mouth and chewed noisily.

“He’s, um, okay to do stuff in front of everyone. We didn’t really talk about that, I guess, but I’m okay with kissing.”

“What about groping?” asked Gabe.

“Yeah, I guess.” Michael glanced wide-eyed at Dean.

“Fucking? Can my brother fuck Dean whenever he wants as long as it’s not a scene?” Dean reached across Michael and smacked Gabriel upside the head.

“Knock it off, Gabe.”

Michael looked back and forth between them, sandwiched uncomfortably and sort of wishing he could disappear. He took a bite of his potatoes and tried to let the conversation die away.

“Hey, I’m just trying to get the rules down. I live here too, you know?” Gabriel pointed out.

Dean fixed Gabe with a rare alpha countenance that held none of the humor that usually marked their interactions, and he raised an eyebrow as he leaned across Michael’s plate. “Cas may have promised to delay spanking you until your stitches are out, but I’ve made no such promise. Besides, you still have my alpha to contend with later tonight. You really want to provoke me right now?”

Gabriel lifted both hands, palms outward. “My bad. Sorry, fellas. Nothing to see here. Move along citizens. These aren’t the droids you’re looking for…” Gabriel’s voice faded as he petered out and turned to speak with Sam on his other side.

“Yes, well, with a Keller score like Dean’s, I think we can all predict what Michael’s will look like, can’t we?” Benny answered Jo. The brief lull in the conversation made his voice audible to the whole table and sparked Michael’s interest.

“Pardon me, alpha, but what score did Dean get? What does it mean for me? If you don’t mind.”

Benny and Michael sat across the table from one another. Michael’s question immediately put a halt to all the other conversations. Every eye turned to Benny who set down his glass. “Do you know much about the Keller scoring matrix, Michael?”

“No, Sir. I’ve forgotten most of what they taught me in school. I didn’t think it mattered.”

“Well, it does. Your mate is extremely rare; not in being an alpha-Submissive, those are actually fairly common. But usually Submissive alphas are either only mildly submissive, or only barely
inside the alpha range. Our friend Dean is both Deeply alpha, with a rating of, hold on Dean, don’t tell me, uh, 21, right?” Dean nodded. The Deep alpha ratings started at 20, but they were logarithmic, so 21 was well inside the Deep alpha section of the chart. “And he’s also Profoundly Submissive. His Sub rating is negative 18. Means the two sides almost always need opposite kinds of care, and makes him a challenge to manage. Plus, he’s a masochist and a brat, so good luck to you, Michael.” Benny raised his wine glass in an impromptu toast, adding a wink.

“Hey, now, I’m not that hard to manage,” Dean protested. Castiel spluttered and coughed into his wine glass, and Bobby whacked him on the back. “Fine, thanks for the help from the peanut gallery. All right, Benny, what do you reckon for Michael, then?”

Benny put down his glass as a plate of warm pie was placed in front of him. He thought a minute. “Are we guessing? All right. Cas is the expert, so he doesn’t get to say anything until the rest of us put in our two cents. I predict Michael tests at a negative 16 Omega, and positive 14 Dominant, putting him as a Standard O and a Classic Dominant.” Cas shared a smirk across the length of the table with Dean which they both hid in their wine. They knew better.

“What about you, Bobby? Do you have a prediction about Michael?” Castiel asked him.

“Nope. I gave up trying to call it after you beat me more than ten wagers in a row. I’m good to just wait and see.”

“He’s gotta be a Central O,” said Jo. “Michael, what’s your Release schedule like?” she asked the Omega.

“Um. It’s…is this really appropriate dinner conversation? Do I have to answer?” He addressed the last question to Dean. Keller scores were one thing. That was nothing but a number system that made the nerds around him happy, but Release schedules touched on things like spanking and Bottoming and Heats – Omega things. Michael didn’t like the knowing looks from around the table.

“No. You don’t. That’s actually none of their fucking business.” Dean shot him an apologetic look for having instigated this line of talk in the first place. Michael was clearly miserable under the spotlight. The dinner table grumbled at being squashed by the protective alpha, but he refused to let them discuss Michael’s Releases any further in his or Michael’s presence. It put a stop to the guessing as well.

“Looks like that’s the end of dinner,” said Gabriel as the empty pie plates were whisked away. “Dean, how do you want me, buddy? Should I just bend over the table here?” He unbuttoned three buttons of his shirt before hearing a throat-clearing from the head of the table that snapped his eyes front.

Castiel stilled him with a look, and he turned penitent fast. “You are all welcome to stay for the rest of the proceedings,” Cas said to the four guests. “But I know you’re working tomorrow, and I’ll understand if you need to go. If I know this crowd, there will probably be drinking and carousing late into the night.”

Jo looked at her mother hopefully, but the Omega shook her head. Both of them had to get up early, and all four had shared one car. They took their leave swiftly as the rest moved out of the dining room, Ellen and Jo shuffling about to hand out hugs as they walked. Once they were alone as a Pack, Castiel led them all to the play room, or dungeon, as some packs liked to call it. Castiel’s was clean and bright. It held all the play equipment a Dom or Sub could want. Michael wandered, transfixed, around the benches and swings; the massive padded surface in the middle that could be lowered flush with the ground or raised to any height with the push of a button.
While Sam and Michael explored the unfamiliar space, Castiel summoned April to him and whispered to her. She blushed and pouted briefly, but obeyed. She had half hoped he’d just forget tonight’s spanking, or maybe give her the night off. Instead, he laid her over the closest bench and worked her over as efficiently as he had done Dean earlier in the evening.

Dean placed a firm hand on the back of Gabriel’s neck and leaned into him while the smacks from Castiel’s hand echoed in the bright space. “You nervous, Gabe?”

“Nah. It’s not my favorite thing, but…it’s just a thing, you know. I’ve seen the numbers. I know it’s necessary. Just, watch out for my stitches, would you? They’re really tender, and they itch like the devil.”

“Will do,” said Dean, helping Gabe out of his shirt to inspect what he had to work around.

Castiel was already finished with April. He brought her down from the bench and carried her to a wide chair in the corner where he sat with her and snuggled her close, using his thumbs to dry her eyes. Dean could smell contented Alpha in the air around the couple.

“How do you want to do this, Alpha? Do we need any formalities?”

“I don’t think so. I’d rather go one at a time though.” Cas stroked April’s hair while he talked and let her scent his throat.

Sam approached them. “If you don’t mind, alphas, I’d like to stand as witness and spotter over the Claiming. I’ve got no Claims coming, so I can be independent. I’ll make sure no one gets hurt.”

“Thanks, Sammy,” said Dean. “That’s perfect.” He looked across at where Gabe had kicked off his shoes and was testing his weight on one of the swings. “I’ll go first. I plan to knot him, so that puts me out of the game for the next round, but as long as you think you can handle your Claim with just Sam as spotter, I figure it’ll be better for Michael if I’m already tied when you take him.”

“Agreed,” said Castiel. “I can handle Michael.” Michael wasn’t listening. He was stooped down to check the support structure of Castiel’s binding cross, his hands running carefully over the smooth varnished wood in appreciation. Castiel stood and set April on the chair. “Stay here, April. Don’t leave the chair. I don’t want to have to worry about you getting in the way.”

“Yes, Alpha,” she said meekly.

“Go ahead, Dean. We’ll both spot you. Gabe’s not going to be a challenge to your Sub, so you shouldn’t have any trouble.” Dean nodded. He closed his eyes and focused on what he needed to do. Claim-Fucking needed to be aggressive and powerful. It established a chemical structure within both wolves that crystallized their places in the Pack. The bond formed would be temporary, lasting anywhere from three weeks to several months, although close family members stayed bonded much longer. Filial bonds were nearly as permanent as Mating-bonds, and Castiel often waited nearly a year before renewing his Claim over Gabriel.

As long as the bond was in place, the deepest part of the wolves’ psyches would know and trust one another intrinsically, instinctively. Omegas felt loved and cared for from the inside out. Alphas felt protective of every Omega under their Claim in a way that allowed them to respond to the Omegas’ needs without thought. Within a Pack, Claiming made all the difference in the success or failure of the relationships.

Dean growled softly to himself, readying his alpha. He stripped again, wondering if he should even have bothered to put clothes on at all this evening. Once naked, he focused on his target, stroking his
cock to hardness, and letting his alpha feel free to open up its desire to own. Gabriel heard the growl from across the play room and pulled his hands out of the webbing of the chair. Dean saw his eyes go golden in an instant as he squatted down defensively. Gabriel was no longer acting with conscious intent. He was an older, experienced Omega, and he knew when to let that side of himself have full control.

Dean stalked quickly toward him with menace in his red eyes. In just a handful of strides, he was on top of the Omega. Dean tossed him carelessly onto his belly and attacked the back of his slacks with his teeth, melodramatically ripping an enormous hole in the fabric and taking in the musky odor of his slick as it began to issue copiously from the Omega’s channel. He used his hands to tear out the back of Gabriel’s underwear and then pulled him up by his hips to rest on his knees with his chest still on the padded floor.

The whole room was useable surface, but Dean’s alpha didn’t give a shit if it was easy or hard to clean. The Omega was going to be taken, appropriate time and place or not. He wasn’t aware of Sam and Castiel spreading out near enough to help if Gabriel was distressed but distanced enough to be out of the way. He wasn’t aware of Michael watching from a much greater distance with his own hand on his cock, stroking slowly. Dean’s alpha fixated on one thing: there was an open, leaking, presented Omega channel before him, and the alpha meant to own it.

He roared loudly, not like a wolf, more like a lion, and he bit Gabriel’s shoulder well above where the stitches started. Gabriel cried out and angled his ass outward in complete submission. The Omega knew what the alpha wanted, and it resolved to give it to him. Dean’s alpha took over every part of his body, rutting at the Omega’s channel until his cock sank in, and then growling with intent as he plunged into his body hard and fast.

“Take it, damn you!” his alpha breathed into the Omega’s ear, and Gabriel whimpered, bowing his back further.

It was animalistic, a frenzy of grunts and coarse odors that rose off the couple. Dean bared his teeth and breathed through them, slinging spittle as he hissed. Had any witness doubted the depth of Dean’s alpha designation beforehand, they would doubt no longer. Dean was alpha atop his prey. His hips worked furiously. His muscles strained and plundered. He forgot all about the stitches in Gabriel’s back as he let himself fall heavy over the Omega to cover his body completely, shielding his prize from the eyes and clutches of any other claimant. Gabriel’s Omega cried out a long keening wail of pain. Sam looked to Cas, but Cas held his hand up to stop him from interfering yet. A little pressure wouldn’t tear the stitches. As long as Dean didn’t do any real harm, Cas wanted to let the two finish.

Michael moaned loud and deep as he spilled over his own hand, falling to his knees, but the others ignored him.

Dean wrapped a hand around Gabriel’s hips and pulled the Omega in as tightly as he could, screaming and rutting faster, deeper, harder. Gabriel joined his screams as his wails increased in volume and intensity both. Dean’s knot began to bulge, ripping brutally into and out of the Omega. Dean locked back onto the Omega’s shoulder with his teeth, holding tight, but not breaking the skin. His thighs burned. His shoulders burned. Sweat poured off of them both. And at last, his knot popped past the muscle of Gabriel’s asshole and locked tightly into place. Dean was reduced to tight, quick jabs and grinding against the Omega’s ass. He grunted loud and deep, his voice going hoarse, his eyes rolling back. The image he presented, his own ass still bright red and glowing after the abuse it had taken in fewer than 24 hours belying to aggression emanating from his groin, made stark contrast, and if the wolves in attendance were less distracted by their responsibility to keep watch over Gabriel, they might’ve found the incongruity of the picture amusing.
As it was, only Michael noticed, and he had found the image highly arousing, not funny.

With a last guttural yell, Dean ground out his climax and spilled deep into the Omega. The Claim concussed them both and left them breathless and disoriented. Dean’s hips slowed as he came back to himself. He realized with a start that he was hurting Gabriel’s wounded back, and he pulled up quickly enough to pull at their tie. Both of them hissed.

“Stop. Just stop fucking moving for a goddamn second!” shouted Gabriel. Dean froze. Gabriel lowered his hips slowly to the ground, taking Dean with him, and then they carefully, mutually rolled to the side.

“I thought you were supposed to be more compliant after I Claimed you,” said Dean sleepily.

“WhatEVER. YOU try to be compliant when every one of your stitches has alpha sweat in it. Jesus, Dean, you said you were gonna be careful. That fucking stings, you asshole!”

Dean kissed the reddened spot on Gabe’s shoulder where he’d worried it with his teeth. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

Sam slipped pillows under their heads and threw a blanket over their joined bodies. “Are you both okay?” he asked.

“Fine, Sam,” Gabe answered crankily, unbuckling his belt and pulling it loose from its loops awkwardly. He could grouch all he wanted, but Dean could feel how contented his Omega was. He wrapped his arms around Gabe and pulled him in tight, adjusting their torsos so that they could watch the show that was just about to start.

Sam took in a deep breath through his nose, then he looked at Castiel and nodded. Cas nodded back and looked to where Michael sat on the floor, his eyes still glued to his mate’s red ass.

“Come here, Omega!” Castiel said in a loud, stern voice. Michael startled out of his trance. He stood and walked to the Alpha without hesitation or fear. He was submission. He was obedience. Michael was Omega, possibly more deeply than he’d ever been in his life.

“Undress yourself.”

Michael stripped with haste and efficiency. His shoes and socks slipped off as his pants fell and bared his legs. His shirt disappeared as fast. He stood before the Alpha unashamed and beautiful. Sam backed off, and Dean whimpered. Castiel stood completely still and regarded him for a full minute in severe silence, then two. Michael bit his lower lip and lowered his eyes even more. He dared not speak, but the waiting was so hard. Castiel undressed in no hurry, but he kept his eyes locked on Michael, and he forced him to wait for several more minutes once he was bare.

At last, the Alpha took two steps toward and around him and guided his body to the ground, like a puppet master molding a figure into place. Michael was placed flat on his back. His eyes turned golden as the Alpha lifted the Omega’s legs slowly into place over his shoulders. He was exposed and indefensible, and he shivered.

“I own you, Omega,” Castiel told him in a whisper. “I own you, body and spirit. Hold on tightly to my shoulders, and keep your eyes on mine. I require nothing else from you. Just relax and hold on.”

Michael’s golden eyes almost vibrated as he tried to lock them onto Castiel’s. He knew what he was going to see there, and his trust began to stretch thin, but a long stroke down his body grounded him, and he pulled his eyes up, and they locked. Michael’s thin black scrapper of a wolf panted and rocked as it beheld the behemoth within those red eyes. But the threat that it had seen last time – the
danger – was just a memory. This time, huge and powerful, the great beast poised grand and strong, offering shade, offering shelter, and Michael’s skinny wolf pup scuttled between its huge paws without hesitation.

Outside, in the physical world, Castiel lined his cock up carefully and pressed inside. His was an aggression borne of anticipation and control. It was the relentless, unstoppable tide climbing slowly to its peak. He didn’t growl or snarl at Michael. He didn’t need the frenzied rutting that he sometimes used. Castiel’s Alpha was in control at the moment, but his monstrous wolf honored the Dominance of the smaller wolf and allowed him the respect of beginning with a measured, deliberate pace, never taking its eyes off its prey. For, respected or not, honored or otherwise, Michael was prey, and like the falling of the night that takes light from the sky, Castiel would subsume him.

The wolf would get his turn.

Castiel began a powerful, almost thrumming pace. It was slow, like the rhythms of old when their forefathers still lived in caves and beat out the echoes of their hearts on crude drums with gnawed-bone beaters. It was deliberate and evocative. It matched Castiel’s breathing at the start and forced Michael’s to keep pace. Slowly, so very slowly, keeping their eyes locked, Castiel increased his pace, switching from a matching of his breath to matching the pumping of his heart. Michael’s heartbeat responded.

Michael couldn’t hear anything. He couldn’t have said how much time passed. He didn’t know where he was or why. His vision tunneled down to nothing but staunch red irises surrounding the endless, endless night.

Michael’s body matched Castiel’s. The Alpha and the Omega, as was always meant to be in endless cycle. Forever. The Alpha sweated as he picked up his pace, setting his jaw. His face twitched in effort. He began to move with intent, holding onto the outside of Michael’s thigh in a powerful, painful vice-grip. The purposefulness of the Alpha’s movements was deceptive. Castiel kept himself in his front-brain most of the time, and moved with just such deliberate purpose, but this…

As Castiel allowed his wolf space in the front, allowed it to power his movement, the Dominant wolf began a mimic of the droll professor in a mockery of his careful resolution. His motions became robotic and stiff. The wolf was mocking Castiel, and soon it sparked his Alpha’s temper, throwing him over the edge and into a frenzy. Cas shouted in rage, not at the compliant Omega before him, but at his defiant beast of a wolf, whose respect was obviously waning. He wrenched control back from the huge wolf and took it for himself, sending the wolf panting back into the shadows in surprise.

Castiel gave up all pretense of a measured pace and began to tear into the Omega with speed and force, pumping himself deep and hard. Michael, for his part, continued to do exactly as instructed. He clutched the Alpha’s shoulders, kept his eyes on the deep recesses of the eyes above him, and submitted his body wholeheartedly. He wasn’t afraid, exactly, but the Omega knew he had a wolf by the ears. One wrong move, one wrong thought, and he would be snuffed from existence. He could feel the turmoil inside his partner, and he couldn’t quite tell who was at the other end of his submission, but he wasn’t about to stop and ask.

Castiel’s knot began to pop, and as with Dean’s, it tore its way into and back out of the Omega’s channel with brutal indifference. Sam was alone, and worried. They looked so feral. Castiel had claw marks down his back, and Michael’s channel had to be stinging with the intensity of the friction. Dean couldn’t have helped if he’d needed to, and the only other wolf present was April. Sam circled the rutting, grunting, moaning couple, wishing like hell that he’d asked Bobby or Benny to stay. Sam pulled his phone from his pocket to call them back, and then suddenly, Castiel rammed his knot into place, threw his head back, shutting his eyes and breaking the visual connection between the two.
wolves. He came with a powerful scream, and Sam felt the percussion of the Claim forming through his feet as it rocked both wolves.

In utter exhaustion, they crumpled into a tangled pile of moist flesh. Michael’s belly was fluid with his own drying semen. Sam approached cautiously and helped them roll to the side to rest on Michael’s right thigh and hip. Michael was whimpering like a wounded puppy, but he didn’t really appear to be injured. Castiel panted with his eyes closed. He showed no signs of aggression. Sam inspected Michael’s channel where Cas’ knot disappeared into the Omega’s body briefly but closely enough to be sure the Omega wasn’t injured, then he pulled more pillows out of the chest along with a blanket. He attended the locked couple, checked on Dean and Gabriel who hadn’t yet untied, collected April to him, fell into the chair where she’d been sitting, biting her nails to the quick, and closed his eyes.

Holy shit! What a day.

Chapter End Notes

*Sniff* My poor, sweet, sweaty, exhausted babies.
Chapter Summary

Once the oaths are done, it's time for a party, Winchester-style.

Chapter Notes

There's a new kind of scene in this chapter, but the tags have been there all along, so I hope we're all copacetic. It's not going to be a common occurrence, but living in close proximity might mean more of this kinda thing than I originally intended. I dunno. I just work here.

Filler chapter, but quite satisfying to write. Also trying to keep all my loose ends in play. Hopefully it makes sense.

Also, I think this is the first time one of our "THEN" sections falls within the time-span of the narrative itself. I'm catching up with myself a bit.

BTW: The after-Claiming party scene works best if you put on some slow, sultry bluesy piano stuff while you read it. I'm too lazy to provide a link, but I have faith in your googling abilities.

Please enjoy and comment. Love y'all.

THEN:
“Claire, slow down! What do you mean Gabriel’s busted it open? What’s he even doing there? Gabriel is in Lawrence. I saw him here this morning!”

“He’s right here, Bobby!” she shouted back. “I just got a ping from Ash that…that he and a small team, with Gabe on the inside, just heisted an Omega straight out of the basement and booked it. Ash snatched the girl, but Gabriel is M.I.A. now.” Claire mopped the sweat off her brow and cast another furtive look around. She was alone with a lot of greenery for cover and a good view of her surroundings, but she needed to lower her voice and get control anyway.

They were fucked.

They were so very fucked.

“I’ll kill him. I’m gonna kill him and Ash both! So, how many does that leave stuck in there?”

“Fourteen more Omegas, not counting the one Gabe grabbed. Bobby, we can’t do it. We have to pull out.”

“Hold on, Claire. Just tell me what you need. I can bump the timeline. We can still do this. We have to make it happen. We’ve invested too much to just walk away. They’ll scatter if we wait.”

“No, alpha. We can’t do it. It’s a kicked anthill in there. Gordon himself is onsite, and he’s raving! There’s no way to get to the basement, and they never pull all of them out at once. Plus, my team is at risk every second we delay. We have to abort. I don’t want to any more than you do, but there’s no way to get the vans in place in time, and I can’t make it happen. God! I’m so sorry!” Her voice broke on a sob as the full weight of what was going to happen to the fourteen souls she couldn’t save hit her in the solar plexus. “I’m so sorry, Bobby! I can’t! We have to abort.”

“Shhh. Breathe for me, Omega. I know. It’s not your failure, it’s mine. Get your people out of there. Get them all safe. We’re busted anyway, so if you spot any of the fourteen on your way out, and you can do it safely, you grab them and run. I’ll take anything you can give me, but don’t put any of our people at risk. Head for Vegas. Get to Christian and go to ground. Where’s Ash now?”

Claire took in a massive breath and leaned back on one hand. “He’s taking the Omega straight to you. Apparently, Cas and Dean are already in the area and getting closer, so he’s sent Cas an S.O.S. on Gabriel.”

“Well, fuck. That’s just great. Now Castiel’s going to know everything too. And he’s going to be pissed…no, not pissed, that’s too weak. He’s going to be livid when he gets the full skinny on everything. I left him out of this on purpose, Claire. He hates it when I do that. Shit! Okay. Look, you just take care of your team, get anybody else out that you can, and don’t sweat it. We can’t win them all. You let me worry about Gabriel. I’m going to skin that little mongrel alive when I get hold of him. If he’d just stayed where I put him. Damnit!”

“Bobby, I’m really sorry, but you can’t put this all on Gabe. You left him out of it too. You know he never stays where you put him for long, and he was bound to dig this one up on his own eventually. If you had just let him know we were here… Remember, I said it was a bad idea to keep him in the dark.”

“Did you just, ‘I-told-you-so’ me, Omega?” Bobby imbued his words with an alpha warning. He was in no mood for attitude.

“Sir, listen. You can’t let him think it’s all his fault. Once he finds out that his little caper cost us fourteen others, he’s gonna shit himself. If you add another layer on top of that and make him think
it’s his fault, it will break him again. Please, be careful, alpha. Please. I know you’re mad, but this is on us more than it is Gabe. We should have predicted he’d pull a stunt like this sooner or later, and he didn’t know.”

“You mean ‘I should’ve predicted’.” Bobby sighed. “Okay, Claire. Call me when you’re clear and get your asses to Nevada, pronto.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Claire sent the ABORT signal to the team inside and out, called off the van drivers, and sneaked carefully to her spot near the back tunnel. She never caught sight of Gabriel, but she hadn’t expected to. Gabe was invisible when he wanted to be. She broke cover just in time to provide the assistance Alex needed to forcefully neutralize three thugs who were trying to load two Omegas into waiting black armored transport vans. They made a run for it and were joined by the other four team members. Claire wiped the blood off her knife with a quick sweep along the inside of her jacket then threw the jacket into the trunk. Alpha had told her to try to save any that she could, and she felt no remorse for how she’d had to accomplish that.

All eight of them packed into the tiny Volvo and disappeared down the side streets. Claire was certain they’d been spotted. Their faces had been covered, and the three transport guards weren’t going to be telling anyone anything ever again, but eyes were everywhere in a place like that, and she wasn’t stupid. They were made, no doubt about it, and all hell would be breaking loose back in Kansas over the next few days. Claire checked on everyone, helped quiet the terrified Omegas, and tried to get her own breathing under control.

Two Omegas. After two months of detailed planning and practice, they only walked away with two Omegas. That meant twelve more were being drugged and moved right at that moment, to disappear into abject slavery or worse, never to be seen again. Twelve souls just like Claire’s. ‘There but for the grace of…’ Claire sobbed in her seat and clutched the warm body on her lap who was clutching her right back, grateful to be safe. Claire took the comfort of knowing she’d at least pulled out two, and Gabriel had one as well. It would have to do.

Bobby texted Cas to check on their status, find out whether they had reached Gabriel yet, and assure his boss that he knew nothing about Gabriel’s actions beforehand. That part wasn’t a lie, but the omission weighed heavily on Bobby. There was going to be hell to pay very soon.

Castiel lived by a moral code that appeared starched white and unbreakable on the surface, except that his right to operate above board was purchased on the black market by letting Bobby do his dirty work. It had not always been thus, and there were still things Cas had a hand in that even Bobby didn’t know about, things Cas barely accepted about himself. Sometimes he acknowledged the contradiction, and sometimes he fought it. Many times Bobby allowed him his luxury of ignorance by not telling Cas what he was up to. In those cases, all went well as long as Castiel remained in the dark. This was about to become one of the rarest and most painful moments where the full depth of Bobby’s willingness to break all the rules was dragged into the light unless he could find a way to stop it, and he’d have to face a great reckoning with the Alpha soon. Bobby spared only a moment to consider whether his boss would be more outraged by the loss of life or the fact that the plan had all fallen disastrously apart, leaving the rescue team vulnerable.

Damnit all, Gabriel! Damn it all!
Bobby prayed for the Omega’s safe deliverance if only so he could break a cane over his unruly ass.

NOW:

Sam kept watch over the five wolves in Castiel’s play room. April snuggled in tightly on his lap, her eyes on her mate where he was tied to the other Omega, but her mind at peace. She had no argument with hierarchical sex. Claiming and pack fucking occupied a different place in a wolf’s psyche than intimacy did, and she had no problem with the distinction. Castiel was still her mate and no one else’s. He always would be, so she felt no threat from Michael.

Dean and Gabriel pulled themselves apart after about fifteen minutes. Both wolves were very familiar with the protocol of Castiel’s play room: Dean, having been here many, many times over the years with Castiel, and Gabriel having spent numerous hours under the whip and power of whoever Castiel rented for him for the moment to keep him balanced. They headed together to the back of the space, cracked open the upper windows and turned on the vent fans above the open shower. Dean washed Gabriel and then himself efficiently, carefully minding Gabriel’s stitches and looking them over to see if he’d done his brother-in-law-to-be any damage in his carelessness. Gabe put up with the inspection impatiently then threw a towel over Dean’s head, grabbed one for himself, and limped back to his clothes to get dressed.

Gabriel scowled when he found his shredded clothing. “Really, alpha? Was that necessary? I liked those slacks.” Gabe snatched up Dean’s pants before the alpha could get to them and used his teeth and hands to rip the pants in half while Dean gaped at him.

“Oh, come on! At least I did it in the throes of passion. You’re just being a dick!” Dean protested loudly as Gabe pitched the ruined fabric at his chest.

The two bickering wolves were interrupted by the sound of a ring tone coming from Michael’s pocket. Michael stirred from his drowse and tried to grapple for his pants but couldn’t get there. He was still tied tightly. Dean scooped the phone from his mate’s pants and held the screen so that Michael could see it. It read, ‘POP’.

“It’s my father,” said Michael, reaching for the phone. Dean handed it to him, and he answered it as Castiel, much more gracefully than Dean had done at their Mating, righted them and worked his knees under Michael’s thighs, sitting upright carefully in a kneeling position.

“Hello, Pop,” said Michael bringing one arm up to rest his hand under his head. He set his feet wide and flat to the ground on either side of the Alpha’s body, still spreading his bent knees obscenely.

“Yes, Sir. I’m fine. I’m good. Look, Sir? It’s not really a great time right now. Can I call you back in a few minutes? I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

Castiel thrust his knot in a dirty grind against Michael’s channel and took hold of his flaccid cock, stroking him firmly. Cas kept his eyes on his work, ignoring Michael’s conversation with his father, or seeming to, but his actions were classic Alpha posturing. They said, ‘don’t pay attention to another alpha while you’re on my knot’. Michael’s breath caught, and he wasn’t able to hide it from his father on the other end of the line. “No, no. No, Sir. I’m fine,” Michael’s voice caught and pulsed, his breath repeatedly punched out of him as Castiel got to work with intention. “Alpha, please! Sir!”
Michael was caught between the two of them, both demanding his attention, and he had to choose. “Pop, it’s not a good time. I’ll call you right back!”

He hung up the phone and dropped it. Michael let himself enjoy the sensations. Castiel’s hand on his cock increased speed and pressure, bringing him back to full arousal. Michael let his chin point at the ceiling in a posture of complete submission and took the reward from his Alpha. Everything felt so good – the strokes to his cock, the meaty grinding thrusts into his ass where the huge knot had not diminished since it locked into place. Castiel grinned at him in approval and redoubled his efforts. Good Omegas got rewarded in Castiel’s pack.

The phone rang again, so Dean picked it up and took the call. He had scrounged bath robes for himself and Gabe. Sam and April were up and straightening the room. Everyone ignored the grunting, moaning coupling that Cas and Michael were up to. Michael’s reward was for Michael alone.

“Hello, Dean Winchester.” Dean moved slowly away from the noisy pair. “Yes, Alpha. It’s good to hear from you. I’ve been meaning to call to introduce myself.” He paused to listen. “Michael? Yes, he is. We’re doing really well, working things out. He’s a great guy, Alpha. Thank you for trusting me with him. I know it was sudden.” Dean paused again and turned to look across the room where his mate was losing himself to the pleasure. He was beautiful when he let go. Dean watched Cas pull an orgasm out of Michael’s cock while grunting his way through another one himself. There was no Claim or aggression in this one, just pleasure for them both.

“Oh, that would be great, Alpha Lancet. Does he have very much that you need to bring? We’ll pay for a rented trailer if you need one. Only thing is the timing. We’re all going to be out of town that weekend, and Michael and I were planning on a full month of isolation. Can you put it off for about five more weeks? Would that be okay?” Michael lay still other than his breathing. He still had his neck fully bared and he’d let his knees and feet sprawl grotesquely wide.

“No, Alpha. He’s here. I’ll have him call you back in just a few minutes. It’s just, we had our Pack Establishment ceremony tonight, and Michael’s still tied on Alpha’s knot after the Claiming. He just needs a few minutes to separate and clean up.” Dean pulled the phone away from his ear, grimacing at the sudden volume from the Alpha on the other end of the line. “Jerry! Jerry Lancet, hold on a minute! It’s not what you think. We’re not hurting him. He’s just fine. This is going to be good for his Omega. Can you please just wait until you get a chance to talk to him?” Dean rolled his eyes at Michael’s alarmed expression. ‘Alphas!’ thought Dean for the thousandth time.

He sent Michael a calming, soothing caress through the Mating-bond. “Yes, of course you’re welcome to visit. If you want to fly up tomorrow morning, we’ll have someone pick you up from the airport, man. We’re not the monsters you’re making us out to be, and Michael’s just fine. It’s just a Claim-Fuck, and I was only putting you off bringing him his stuff because we are literally not going to be here that weekend. Calm down, Alpha.”

Michael threw an arm across his face in embarrassment, but Cas just chuckled at his discomfort and kissed his throat. April brought a warm wash cloth over and knelt to wipe them both off. Michael allowed the contact, suffering her touch with more acceptance than he had been capable of prior to the Claim. It felt nice – not sexual, but nice.

Dean ended the call and tossed the phone back on top of Michael’s wadded clothing. “I’m going to find something to wear and get something to drink. We done here, Boss?”
“Is Alpha Lancet dropping by for an impromptu visit tomorrow, Dean?” Cas asked him, stretching his arms over his own head, still kneeling on his ass.

“No, but he’s expecting a call from his son within the hour.”

“All right. Um, yes, we’re through here. Everyone is dismissed. If you want drinks, how about gathering in the conservatory. I still haven’t had a chance to hear April play. Gabriel says you’re very good, and I wanted to ask if you might play something for us.” He addressed his mate, who blushed and smiled.

“Of course, Alpha. Do you want me to stay while you’re knotted in case you need anything?”

“No, April. We’ll be along in a bit. You go on. Get dressed if you want.”

She didn’t want. April enjoyed the feeling that she was at home here and free to remain naked whenever she wanted. It made her feel accepted. Omegas in some packs were punished for allowing their nudity to be viewed by the wrong people, so the freedom to walk naked through her house sent a message that there was no chance of encountering anyone here who didn’t belong. It made her feel safe.

The others assembled in the huge high-ceilinged conservatory. Sam dug out a cart of drinks while Gabriel dressed and ran by the kitchen for some ice. The staff was gone for the day. Cas only kept enough people on the cleaning and maintenance staff to keep the place running. He cleaned up after himself, but the house was too much for him to care for alone. Security was an unfortunate necessity too, but he had no permanent kitchen workers or chauffeur. He catered when he needed a formal meal, and he always drove himself. Castiel had been born into wealth and status, but he shrugged off many of the trappings like an ill-fitting coat. As Alpha, he had the luxury of being free to make his own choices, so he did.

Everyone served themselves. Sam brought his drink to where Dean was admiring the new piano. “I heard you asking Jo about her invite to join the pack, but I didn’t hear what she said.”

Dean turned to meet him. “Yeah, apparently, Cas invited all of them. You’d think he would have let me in on that, but he didn’t. He made that offer without telling me.”

Sam defended the Alpha. “I’m sure he didn’t mean to hide it, Dean. He probably just assumed you would agree and went with his gut. You’ve all been close forever, and you can’t tell me you don’t consider all of them Pack in a way. Besides, none of them were gonna accept anyway. The invitations were a courtesy. Bobby’s never going to submit to Cas to that degree. Benny’s planning to establish his own Pack once Andrea is ready, and Jo and Ellen are happy just as they are. Once Jo Mates, they’ll be set.”

“Yeah, maybe. I just wish he’d told me before the ceremony so I didn’t have to stand there looking stupid.” Dean fetched a hand towel from the bathroom just outside the conservatory and spread it on the leather bench of the beautiful piano so April could sit to play without having to dress. “Jo said just about the same thing. She didn’t think Cas expected any of them to accept the invite either.”

“Tell him you didn’t like being left out, man, but don’t rag on him about it. Pretty sure it was an honest mistake, not a deliberate cut, and you two are under enough stress as it is without making a big deal out of everything.”

“Thanks, Dr. Phil. I’ll think about it.”
April sat down and ran her fingers over the board to get the feel for the volume in the space. She wanted to be able to play in the background of any conversations that were happening without drowning them out. She started up a frisky ragtime jaunt, and Dean leaned over her shoulder and tapped out a spontaneous beat on the bass end. She turned to look up at him without pausing. “I didn’t know you played, Dean.” She was very surprised. He was extemporizing a harmony on the fly. Few amateur musicians knew how to do that without some training and years of practice.

He winked at her, flourished an ending and pulled his hand away from the keyboard. Sam leaned over the bend of the grand piano and grinned at the two of them. “Why don’t you sit down and play with her Dean? I’ll bet the two of you could put something good together.”

“Thanks, Sam. I’m through with sitting for a while. Dinner was hard enough, but I knew I wasn’t getting out of sitting there. At least now I’m on my own time. Think I’ll stay on my feet for the time being.” He ran a hand along April’s hip and flank, admiring her bruises. “How about you, kid? Aren’t you too sore to sit?”

She laughed and switched tunes to a sexy blues piece that she made up as she went along. “Nope. I like the way it feels. Not always crazy about how it feels when it’s happening, but I like the soreness when it’s over. Don’t you? I thought you were a masochist like me.”

He admitted, “Sometimes I like to be sore, but sore from being punished is different from sore after a good scene, you know?” Sam rolled his eyes and left them to compare Sub experiences and tones of flesh when bruised. Must be a Sub thing.

The drinks flowed. The tunes kept them lighthearted, and Castiel joined them after about half an hour, freshly showered and dressed. He looked good. He was king of his domain, lord of the castle, and he knew it. Dean put a drink in his hand, kissed him deeply, then asked about Michael.

“He’s calling his father. He’ll be with us after that. He’s fine, Dean. We had a little bit of a chat, and I think we’re in a good place right now.”

Dean indicated April’s performance with his head. “Did you know she played like that?” Castiel shook his head, intrigued, and moved across the room where he could watch and listen. April grinned at him and drove the blues ramble into a dirty grind that made him narrow his eyes at her. Cas straddled her hips and shoved his groin into the crack of her ass from behind, taking a seat on the bench behind his mate, holding her hips, and mouthing at her neck. She laughed happily, ending on a squeal and a disharmonious note.

“What shall I play for you, Alpha?” she prompted.

“Can you play Tchaikovsky?” he asked, rutting his hips easily. The Alpha was insatiable tonight, but of course, it was really *his* night after all.

She started up a bit from 'Romeo and Juliet' with a side-eye at her mate, and he chuckled and bit down on her Mating-scar. She gasped, overcome at the powerful sensation. He noticed, and pulling her hips in tighter. He re-framed the grip with his teeth and bit harder, grinding his jaw into her flesh and furrowing his brow in concentration. April continued to play, but she cried out as a sudden orgasm overtook her with no lead in or warmup. He rutted harder, letting his slacks create friction for his cock against the cleft of her ass and taking hold of the front edge of the bench for support.

“All right, you two. I thought Dean was the one who wanted to get into displaying himself. You gotta give me more notice if you expect to put on a show every damn minute.” Gabriel was only pretending to be perturbed. He didn’t care, but he liked to tweak his brother whenever the chance presented itself. “And you,” he said to April. “This is a party. If you’re gonna play, play something
fun, not whatever the hell that crap is.”

“That crap, Gabriel, is Tchaikovsky. It’s wonderful, and he’s a countryman of yours, so show some fucking respect.” Cas admonished him, but he stopped grinding into his mate and stood back up to refresh his drink with a wink at her. She blushed and switched to something playful and modern she’d picked up from the radio.

Michael entered the room looking sheepish. He headed straight for Dean and put his arms around him. “No wonder I’m fucked up, baby,” he moaned pathetically. “Now that I’ve seen another way, I can’t believe I ever thought that was normal.”

Dean hugged him back and then kissed his lips gently, happy to find himself still alpha, even this close. “You don’t ever have to go back, Michael. We’re going to keep you here and give you whatever you need. Don’t cut your father out though, okay? Just give it some time. You’ll get to a place where you can have a relationship with him without fearing him. It’s just going to take you some time and training. I’ve got you now, baby. I’m never going to send you back there.” April’s playing went back to slow and sexy blues. Dean wrapped his arms around Michael’s hips and swayed with him to the slow rhythm, whispering, “Dance with me…”

Michael melted into his mate and moved his body in a slow sway with the music, resting his forehead on Dean’s shoulder and closing his eyes. They danced slowly, rotated and ground their hips together, kissed softly, and rocked as if alone and naked.

“Dean, baby, I want to ask you if you’ll let me do you here with the Pack around,” Michael whispered. Dean whined at him. He felt his Sub wolf ready to slide into place, and he was horny enough to go with it. The music was helping to take him into a deep, sexy place where he could be vulnerable no matter who else was watching. Then Michael turned it up. He whispered, “I asked Alpha if he would help us get you there, and he said yes. Do you want to see if you can let us both touch you together? It’s not the slow pace we said, Dean. If you don’t want to, just let me know, and I’ll call it off. We’re not going to let you get hurt, I promise. You still with me, alpha?”

“Yeah, Michael. I’m still alpha. Barely.” Dean bit down on Michael’s Mating-scar to prove it. That wasn’t a move a Sub would dare try without a command. It didn’t have the effect on Michael that it did on April when Cas did it. Sensitivity inside the scar that was strong enough to elicit a spontaneous orgasm was a rare development anyway. Plus, Michael’s and Dean’s bonding went backward. But Michael moaned and gripped Dean tightly. It still felt really fucking good. The nerves were forming a link from his scar that went straight to his Omega gland, and it sent sparkles of sensation through his whole body. He panted and ground his hips in harder.

“Well? You wanna?” he asked Dean again in a breathy exhale.

“Hell, yeah, I wanna. Can I just go under now? Are we through talking about it?”

Michael gripped Dean’s swollen, sore ass and mm-hm’d at him, biting Dean’s Mating-wound in retaliation, and Dean slipped away into Sub-space, letting his wolf take him home. Michael gestured to Castiel. Cas whispered to his mate, and she smirked and accepted a dirty kiss from him, followed by a sip from his glass while he tipped it carefully for her to keep her from needing to take her hands off the piano.

Cas stripped off and dropped his clothes over the back of one of the couches. Sam kept up his conversation with Gabriel, but their eyes were drawn inevitably to the dancers before April’s piano. Castiel approached Dean from behind, fitted his own hips into motion with the other two, and ran his hands over Dean’s hips. He latched on to Dean’s opposite shoulder, sucking and nibbling until he brought up a purple bruise. Dean’s cock was hard and aching. He knew that his brother, Castiel’s
brother, and his de facto little sister were all watching him, and he fought the desire to put on a performance or turn it into something outside of himself as he had always done before.

The music helped. April kept it slow and sensuous. Dean closed his eyes. It didn’t alter his knowledge that he wasn’t alone with his lovers, but it allowed him to focus on the bodies pressed to his and the sultry piano. His hips never stopped moving as someone’s hands worked at the fastenings holding up his jeans. He kept a stash of clothes at Castiel’s house, had done so for years, but they hadn’t been on him long enough to make dressing worthwhile. His mind supplied that maybe April had the right idea to just stay nude and save everyone the trouble until the feel of four hands working the fabrics off his body sent tremors down his limbs.

No, he wouldn’t want to skip this part.

The young Omega at the piano began to hum in a low, sweet voice along with her playing, bringing in a counterpoint to the keystrokes and adding a breath of human emotion that went straight to Dean’s cock. Michael – he could tell it was Michael, even with his eyes closed – helped him step out of his pants and shoes, while Cas worked his shirt over his head, following the movements of his hands with kisses along his spine.

“Gabriel, toss me that bottle right there,” Castiel called to his brother, and then he caught the bottle of lube easily with one hand.

“Dean, my love,” Cas whispered to him from behind, keeping as much contact with his Sub as he could along the lines of their bodies as they swayed. “This is Michael’s dance. I’m here to help him with you, so I want you to listen to him, now. Obey him, Pet.” Dean groaned again. Castiel, the great and powerful, stepping in to assist in someone else’s scene took Dean that much further into a deep and sacred place. That they thought he was worth this much effort, this much work, was a heady feeling. And Dean was under no illusions, their hands might be gentle and sultry, but this was a scene. He was being worked into a Submissive place, and he reveled in the luxury of letting his own will go.

Dean didn’t startle when Castiel’s fingers nudged his hole. He worked two lubed digits into Dean while they danced, thrusting them, scissoring them, stroking Dean’s hip with his other hand, and pulling him into the swivels that Castiel wanted from him. Dean let his head drop onto Michael’s shoulder, in a reflection of the position Michael had found when he entered in frustration with his Alpha father. Michael didn’t strip, but he let Dean’s cock work against the front panel of his dress slacks, soiling them with pre-come until they shone. Michael’s hand ran under Dean’s balls and worked them, tugged them, squeezed them while Castiel added a third finger. Michael kissed his compliant Sub while they danced. They rocked together for a while, listening to April’s fingers torture a slow grind out of the ivory keys and starting to sweat together. Sam refilled his glass with ice and whiskey. He’d stopped talking to Gabriel.

Dean quit fighting against his need to perform. He stopped thinking at all and became an extension of his Doms’ will. They were still dancing in a sense – in the sense that dances mimic sexual motions – but they’d slipped from mimicking to sex in truth. Michael leaned in close to Dean’s ear and growled, “I’m going to swallow your huge cock straight down, Dean. Your Alpha is going to fuck you from behind and drive your cock into my throat. You just stay right here between us and take it. Sam is watching you. His hand is on his own cock now. Let’s see if he comes before you do, my baby. God, you’re sexy!”

Michael fell to his knees slowly. He licked Dean’s cock with a flat tongue, a ritual by this point. Dean nearly fell forward with his support gone, but Castiel’s arm came around his chest and gripped him tightly, holding him upright. Michael found the lube bottle on the ground where Cas had
dropped it and reached around Dean’s hips as he swallowed down his cock, using both hands to coat the Alpha’s. Then Michael wiped his hands off down the length of Dean’s thighs and took hold of Castiel’s hips, letting his reach force his face even further along Dean’s length. He pulled Cas right up tight against Dean.

Dean whimpered when he felt Cas’ cock push up along the crest of his ass just as Michael hummed onto his own dick. Castiel kissed Dean right on top of his bruised shoulder, keeping his face on the opposite side from where Michael’s mark was still healing. Cas took the flesh of Dean’s shoulder between his teeth and lined himself up with his hole. He took a firm hold of Dean’s hip, while still holding him upright across the chest and began to let Michael’s hands pull him in, sinking very slowly into Dean’s body.

The music continued to lay out the rhythm of their bodies. It was a dance, just as before, except that now the three of them were joined as one in motion. Michael held his head motionless, using his hands to work all three through one another. Cas let him do as he would. Castiel considered himself a mere prop in Michael’s tableau, but he kept his lips in motion on his beloved Dean and took the pleasure offered to him. Dean’s body was relaxed. He began to moan and whimper in a constant unintentional harmony with April’s voice. He still swayed as he could, his wolf lost in the music and the sensations.

Cas angled his head to check on their brothers and almost laughed out loud. Both men had freed their own cocks and were stroking themselves slowly. Somehow, in the thick pheromones that were swamping good sense, the fact that each was engrossed in watching his own brother get off no longer mattered. It really didn’t matter. At heart, they were dogs, and dogs just didn’t care about DNA when it came to being aroused. He checked the other direction to make sure April still had both hands on the keyboard. She did. Good girl. Cas could feel how much she wanted to work herself over, but she wasn’t allowed. He sent her pride and satisfaction. Her blush told him she’d received the message.

She changed pieces to one with a slightly quicker tempo, and Michael responded with a grunt. He worked Dean’s cock a little faster, a little deeper, letting go of one of Cas’ hips so he could wrap a hand around Dean’s knot and apply the pressure that would make him crazy. Cas knew Dean’s knees were about to buckle, so he lowered the arm supporting him to hold him at his center of gravity. It allowed him to force Dean’s hips into a better angle for fucking as well, and Cas threw off Michael’s slow pace and started taking his own. He growled and snarled into Dean’s ear as the music swelled around them.

Michael moved both hands to Dean’s hips and tried to hold on and match the Alpha’s harder pace without having the back of his throat punched out. He opened his jaw just right and pulled his lips out of the way so that his teeth just barely brushed Dean’s cock as Castiel drove it deep into Michael’s mouth. It was more tease than contact. Dean leaned over at the waist, unable to hold himself upright any longer, and he put his hands on Michael’s back with a lewd moan. “Michael, I’m gonna come! Baby, can I? Oh, Fuck!”

Michael didn’t pull off. He nodded subtly. Cas picked up for him and fucked Dean hard, shoving Dean’s dick that much deeper and faster between Michael’s jaw. “Your mate wants you to come down his throat, alpha,” Castiel told him in a sensual growl. Dean didn’t need to be told twice, but neither did Sam. The Winchester brothers spilled simultaneously with nearly identical groans of pleasure. April let the music crescendo into a climax as Dean’s eyes rolled back in his head.

Cas pulled out, stroked himself two, three, four more times and then painted Dean’s back with his come.
“Jesus Fuck!” whimpered Gabriel, spilling over his own hand as well.

Michael let Dean’s cock slide out of his mouth and allowed the exhausted man to collapse to the floor and rest his head in his Dom’s lap. Their Mating-bond was alive with emotion: satisfaction and trust, love and pride. Dean knew something new about his mate now, something that Michael had never told him. He suspected Cas knew it too, and he wondered if Michael was aware. They regrouped, cleaned up, snuggled, and kissed. More drinks were poured. April was laid out and petted by everyone while her Dom and mate brought her to a screaming climax with his tongue in thanks for her delicious accompaniment and her self-control.

They stayed up late, all of them, but the mood became relaxed and easy in a post-coital way. Everyone lay out upon everyone else, puppy-piling amid the endorphins. Sometimes April tickled the ivories again, and sometimes they just let Castiel’s complicated sound system stream whatever music tickled their fancy.

“Do you and Michael want pups, Dean?” April asked him in a somewhat drunken slur.

“Oh yeah. Lots.” He petted her hair as it cascaded over his lap. “Will you help us? Will you be Mom for them? I want you to be their Mom, and Cas to be their father, too. They can have four of us. I want that. I want… all of us.” His eyes weren’t focusing quite right, but she took him seriously.

“Dean, you know Alpha won’t go for that. Does that mean he would share our pups with you and Michael, too?”

“He didn’t tell you? It’s all his idea. I’ve even got all our names picked out. I’m Dad, no matter whose pups they are biologically. I’m Dad to all of them, or Daddy maybe. Cas is Papa. I can’t picture Cas as anything but Papa, and you’re Mom. Michael isn’t going to want a girly title, so I worked one out for him, too.” Michael was close enough to overhear, so he raised a droopy eyebrow at his mate.

“And what’s my title, alpha?” he asked.

“You’re O-Pop. You like it? You call your own father, Pop, and it just came to me. ‘Pop’ is too close to ‘Papa’, so it has to be different enough to tell them apart when someone’s bellowing from three rooms away.’”

Michael chewed on the word for a few moments. Dean was right that he wouldn’t appreciate being called ‘Mother’ or any derivative of a feminine name. O-Pop. It was masculine enough, but it kept his Omega status right out front and seemed so permanent. His mind swirled with images of young, happy faces running toward him, their arms outstretched to be lifted into the air and calling out to him, “O-Pop! Did you see me?!”

Damned drunken emotional tear ducts; damned Claiming hormones; damned post-coital endorphins. Dean’s eyes crinkled as he caught the emotional reverie in Michael’s mind. Smugly, Dean said, “O-Pop it is, then.”

“Alpha!” April called to him where he lounged on the opposite couch with Sam and Gabriel, her voice pitched to travel much further than it needed to go. He winced and looked up. “Are we all going to share pups? I get to be Mommy to all of them, even Dean’s and Michael’s?”

Cas sat up and was immediately more sober. He needed to be cautious of how this conversation went, especially if they were soused. “I meant to talk to you about it alone later, not when you’re drunk. But what do you think of the idea? Dean’s on board, but Michael hasn’t agreed to it. He has some significant concerns, I believe.” Castiel’s drunk voice wasn’t far from his normal one.
“I LIKE it!” she enthused. “My pups, Michael’s pups, they’ll all be siblings. It’s perfect! What don’t you like about it?” She had turned to Michael whose eyes widened at being put suddenly on the spot.

“I don’t know. I just need to think about it a little longer, I guess.”

“Don’t pressure him, April.” Castiel struggled to his feet and knelt beside her. “Right now is not the time to be making life-altering decisions.” She giggled and Cas patted her cheek sloppily.

“I’m going to bed,” announced Gabriel. “Good night, Winchester Pack.” He hauled himself to his feet and made his way out of the room to the happy goodnight wishes from his new family members.

“I need to go, too,” said Sam. He stood and swayed just a bit.

“Hey, hey!” Dean stopped him. “You’re not going anywhere like that. You’re staying here tonight. We’ve got extra toothbrushes and shit. Here, I’ll take you to a room you can have for the night.” Dean slipped out from under April’s head and helped his brother to the grand staircase leading up to the bedrooms on the second floor. Michael followed them, hoping to find one for himself as well. His eyes were struggling to stay open, and a deep, soft bed sounded like the perfect solution. He caught up to Dean, who slipped an arm over his shoulders in welcome.

Cas and April found themselves alone in the conservatory, so Cas put his arms under his mate’s knees and behind her shoulders and lifted her effortlessly. He kissed her as he carried her to bed, immensely satisfied with the evening and filled with hope for the future.

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Naomi adjusted the microphone and tapped it to make sure it was on, then she focused out into the audience. They were her constituents, but Naomi had a steep hill to climb before the next election. Her approval rating with Lupins in her district was at an all-time low of 12%, and her approval among Primates wasn’t good enough yet to make up the difference. She represented a district in Kansas that was overwhelmingly Primate, so that’s where she focused her efforts. Besides, her opponent wasn’t a Lupin, so it didn’t really matter. She could write their vote off as a loss and not lose much overall.

“Good afternoon, Kansas,” she called cheerfully. “I appreciate all of you who have made our state’s governance a priority by coming out today, and I appreciate your support. Together, we can bring Kansas to a whole new level.” The applause was too sparse for her liking, but she pressed forward with her speech. Her real audience was the television camera. News outlets would be picking and choosing the sound bites that best fit the story they wanted to tell, so she needed to craft her words to make the best impression in 13-second sound bites.

“We have a grave threat upon us in this country, and as you know, it’s centered right here in the heartland of this great nation, right here in Kansas. The Modern Lupine movement that seeks to turn impressionable, innocent young people into drooling slaves to their basest animalistic impulses has run amuck in Kansas for too long. The leaders of this disgusting campaign would have you believe that Lupin-Americans are incapable of living outside of their instinct, that they cannot survive without debasing themselves in sex and violence of the grossest nature. They are, as we speak, brainwashing an entire generation of defenseless Canids into a life of open marriage, sodomy, perversion, prostitution, and pornography.
“Let me state right here and now, so there can be no misunderstanding: Wolves do NOT need this unholy lifestyle to flourish, and anyone who tells you differently is selling wholesale and dangerous lies. I AM a wolf. I know of which I speak. There is no inherent requirement that any of us must live in a den of depravity merely to survive. In that vein, and in yet another commitment in my lifelong fight against the wickedness that threatens to sweep our beautiful state and our great nation under a shadow of Satan’s lies, I have just offered a bill to Congress which would remove all sources of funding for Lupin-related houses of depravity.” A few of her constituents clapped with enthusiasm, but boos sounded from even more places, and she noticed a couple of fists thrown violently into the air.

“Hedonism has NO PLACE under the support structure that holds our great country together!” She raised her voice above the increasing volume of the protests. “Lupins may do whatever they like in the privacy of their own homes – may God forgive them – but there is no justifiable excuse for us, the God-fearing American workers, to support or fund their immorality.” Naomi struggled to remember that the cameras were her target. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise, and her wolf wanted her to snarl at the perceived attack from in front of the dais. The boos were getting louder.

She stuffed the wolf in her chest ruthlessly back down where it belonged, deep into her subconscious where it could do no harm. Fucking wolf. She resented having been born with such a defect in her soul, and she scourged it regularly with the flames of hellfire to route it from her mind. The bitch was relentless though. It had become an incessant fight of late, and Naomi’s back and thighs were scarred with the marks where the nettles had pulled at her flesh over and over again through the years.

“Stand with me, Kansas! Heart of the American prairie, bread basket to millions, where the people are tried and true, the descendants of the brave pioneers who crossed the grasslands in prairie schooners and built this state out of the base dirt with their bare hands. Stand with me and take Kansas back from the Hedonists! Tell Congress to send your money to build up our state and defend our country. Tell them to stop feeding pornography and depravity! Thank you!”

She nearly fled the podium at the end, keeping her even pace with the strongest self-control as the jeers followed her off the stage. She slipped into her limo along with her Lupin guard and they made a quick escape. Naomi was at a loss. Her campaign manager sat ashen-faced across from her with nothing to say. Naomi’s face darkened.

“You promised me a friendly crowd, you bitch! What the fuck was that?! Who were all those people? I thought you vetted the crowd before you let anyone in!”

“We did, Mrs. Novak. I don’t understand. Sometimes, there are a couple of plants that slip in, but I can’t see how the whole crowd could’ve been planted.” She steeled her nerves and set her jaw. “It won’t happen again Ma’am. I’ll see to it.”

“It won’t happen again. You’ve got that right,” snapped Naomi brutally. “You’re fired!”
Thursday, May 11, 2017

Chapter Summary

The morning after, some more bonding. Bobby faces up to his fuck-up.

Chapter Notes

I hope y'all like to drag shit out. I had no idea this was just going to go on forever. It may actually just go on forever. :)

All right, stop your squawking. Keller scores are listed in this chapter finally. Everybody break out Excel and make a scatter-chart.

We're going to get some motion going again soon. I think. Sometimes they fight it, so we'll see who wins.

*Edited to include the awesome Melodina's awesome graph. If the link's not active, just copy/paste. It's also linked at the bottom. Either should work, but I kinda like having it in the test too. Thanks, my friend. Did I mention you're awesome?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN:

Sam kicked the door again, bruising his toe.

Again.

Furious, he paced the small space and growled under his breath.

“Knock it off, Samuel, or I’ll increase it to a full week. Right now, you’re only looking at two days suspension.”

“I DIDN’T DO ANYTHING!” the wolf pup yelled at his administrator.

The Vice-Principal kept his cool despite the Lupin child’s temper. The man’s unflappability was part of the reason Sam was so pissed off. Couldn’t he see that Sam was innocent? He wasn’t even listening. He didn’t care one way or the other.

“Sit down and behave yourself. Act your age. Your father is on his way.”

A cold chill ran down Sam’s spine. He had no way to predict whether his alpha would see reason and take up for Sam or belt him right there in the office. Either way, sitting down wasn’t an option. He wanted to run; needed to run. Sam HATED this fucking school. He continued pacing but managed to refrain from kicking the door again.
Mr. Jansen went back to his paperwork and ignored the boy. Sam growled even louder and struggled to control his breathing. (That fucking desk looks like particle board), he thought through his wolf. (I bet I could rip it to pieces with my bare hands if I tried. Bet THAT would get his fucking attention.)

Sam fumed and paced for what seemed like forever. At last, a knock sounded firmly on the door, and his father was ushered in. Dad looked tired and pale, but he didn’t look like he’d been drinking today. The alpha put a firm hand on Sam’s shoulder, grounding him, but holding him tightly, and he faced the VP, who had stood to greet him.

“Mr. Winchester. Thank you for coming. There’s been an incident involving your son, and we need to discuss it.”

Sam’s dad met the administrator’s eye coldly and shook his hand, but his first words bolstered his son a little.

“It’s alpha Winchester, Mr. Jansen, not mister. I’m no ape. You’re surrounded by wolves in this town, sir. Might be about time you learned a little bit about your community before you find yourself being misunderstood.”

Jansen’s face paled, but he rallied and nodded. “My apologies, alpha. Will you please sit?” He gestured to the visitor’s chairs in his office, and alpha Winchester guided his antsy son into one then took the other.

“Tell me what happened,” the alpha directed, assuming control.

“Your son instigated a fight in his math class, and he injured two students – with his teeth.”

Sam shrank in his chair when his alpha turned to look at him, but his face remained defiant.

“He’s being suspended for the next two days, starting tomorrow, so we’ll expect him to return to school on Monday, and he will be expected to complete his coursework at home on schedule, handing it in upon his return.”

“Whoa, hold on a minute. You’re not suspending him. Sam’s a good kid, and I don’t know what he did with his teeth, but this is not how it’s going down. He needs to be in school. You can’t tell me that kicking him out of class is the best way to handle this. Just, give me a second to find out what the boy has to say.”

Mr. Jansen gestured at him with a ‘Go ahead’ wave of his hand, and John Winchester turned the full power of his alpha designation on his beta son.

“Sam? Explain.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Sam found himself incoherent. He knew he needed to make his father understand, but he couldn’t get the words out. He worked his jaw in frustration and looked helplessly into the alpha’s eyes.

“Did you bite anyone?” John wasn’t caving to the sad hazel eyes of his son. He had years of practice against puppy eyes.

“Did you bite anyone?” John wasn’t caving to the sad hazel eyes of his son. He had years of practice against puppy eyes.

“Yes, sir. But they started it. They said I was cheating, and they grabbed my paper. They were about to rip it up! I worked for two hours on that homework! I didn’t plan to bite either of them, but when I tried to get it back it was two against one, and I just…they were throwing punches, and all I did was defend myself! It’s not my fault! I didn’t instigate ANYTHING! I didn’t FUCKING DO ANYTHING WRONG!” Sam was on his feet again, his fists clenched.
“Where was your teacher during all of this?” alpha Winchester asked calmly. He put his hand back on Sam’s shoulder. Somehow, when faced with the calm of an alpha, Sam could breathe. The same reaction from everyone else only made him angrier.

Sam looked down into his father’s stern eyes and felt stronger. “Mr. Rose was at the front. He didn’t do anything or say anything until they started hollering I’d bit them. It barely even broke the skin, the big babies.”

“Samuel,” Mr. Jansen broke in, “your language in my office is unacceptable, and your lack of control speaks poorly of your species.”

John turned on him in fury. “You shut your mouth! You and this travesty of a school have done all the damage to my son I’m going to take. He’s not suspended, you ass, he’s leaving! I’m pulling him out today, and I’m filing charges of discrimination against you and this jackass of a teacher who lets monkey children gang up on other students with impunity!”

Sam stood gaping at his father. He’d never seen the alpha behave like that before. After Mom died, he thought he’d never see much of any kind of life signs again. His father wandered from day to day now in a fog. Yet here he was, taking Sam’s account at face value and needing no further confirmation. He trusted Sam far more than he trusted the adults running the school, and it made Sam’s blood warm in his veins.

He was jolted from his trance when his father turned his eyes back to Sam. “And you! How long have you been waiting for someone to notice you’re out of Balance?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t look at me like that, son. You’re swimming in it right now. Fighting over someone calling you a cheater? Are you a cheater, Sam?”

“Of course not!”

“Of course you’re not, so why would you give those assholes the time of day? This is not you, Samuel. How’d they even get the jump on you? You’re a fucking Winchester. They took your homework paper from you? Seriously? Nuh-uh. I’m not buying it. Kid, you may have Presented beta, but your body knows you’re still a pup. What have I always said to you and Dean when you were little, huh? You start to feel like you got ants inside your skin and everybody’s out to get you, it’s not outside, it’s inside, and you come tell me. I’ll take care of you, right? Son, that doesn’t change just because you’ve Presented – not until you’re full grown. If I forgot to make that clear, then that’s on me, but you’ve been through this many times before, and I know you knew what it was; knew what it was and said nothing.”

Sam shuffled his feet and looked down. He was busted. He had prayed his Presentation as a beta was going to mean he didn’t need any more Rebalancing. He had genuinely thought he had left that shit behind and stepped bravely into adulthood. When the fog started to invade his thoughts and actions a few weeks ago, he knew it was the Cortisol, or whatever they called the stuff, but he thought he could hide it. It only got worse as each day went by, and he got angrier and angrier.

His father’s eyes were brutal.

“Right, Samuel?!”

“Yes, Sir.”

John looked from his sheepish son back to the Vice-Principal. “Do you have ANY Lupin teachers
here? Do any of them know how to handle wolf pups, or are all our kids just running around on their own in the dark?” He put his finger in the administrator’s face. “You can’t treat these kids like they’re gonna break if you look at ‘em sideways. These are wolves, goddamnit! Sometimes they need to be pulled up hard by the scruff of their necks and dealt a coupla hard blows. Jesus, man! These are YOUR students, and more than half of them are wolf pups! You got a whole staff of teachers who didn’t even NOTICE this boy is out of Balance? Do you even know what it means for him to be out of Balance? Just assumed he’s a troublemaker and thought kicking him out would fix everything? Don’t they teach you this shit in your teacher school? I’ll tell you what I think. I think you got no business around children; not wolves anyway.”

Jansen didn’t answer him at all. There was no point, and Winchester had told him he was pulling Sam. He stood with his jaw set and waited for the alpha to make his exit. Why was it always the school’s fault when parents didn’t parent their own children?

Back home, John laid in to the thirteen-year-old pup with feeling. It was a lesson in responsibility that Sam remembered into his adult life; the kind of lesson that sinks into your soul and makes you who you are forever. His backside recovered eventually, but even years later, when John Winchester had lost the struggle against his own demons and succumbed to grief and loss, Sam remembered that lesson. He remembered his father’s outrage at how the system had overlooked him in his need. He remembered his father explaining to him during the long, dreadful car ride home that even in the pain over the loss of Sam’s mother, they had to struggle to stay true to who they were and be upright and proud. They had to remember who she had wanted her sons to be.

Dean was pulled too, from the high school that the city ran theoretically for both species, but really not accommodating to the wolf population at all. They enrolled in a Lupin-run private school in Kansas City, instead. The drive was monstrous every day, but Dean had a license, and they managed, finding the adjustment much easier than they expected. The difference struck Sam like a kick in the gut. He had all the support he needed at the new school, and everyone understood him there. His fish-outta-water sensation faded, and he found himself valued. The downside that he couldn’t get away with anything anymore seemed a problem at first, but he quickly began to appreciate how much easier the strict structure made it for him to focus and learn. Both of them blossomed, and both of them found the next step into college after high school was a thing that didn’t intimidate them.

It was arguably the last successful parental decision that John Winchester ever managed before he fell into the abyss of grief and alcohol, but it was enough.

NOW:

They assembled for breakfast slowly over the course of the morning. Each wolf stumbled in and joined those already at the table in the kitchen, pouring their own coffee. No one left the table, even after they’d finished eating. Sam swept in first, showered, shaved, fully dressed and feeling perky. Sam’s constitution somehow protected him from hangovers. He’d never had one, and it made him a bit reckless where drinking was concerned, even when his companions started eyeing their next drinks with trepidation, knowing what could be coming with the rising of the sun.

Sam looked around the kitchen in surprise at being alone. He should’ve known better. He sighed and started the coffee brewing. He dug through the fridge and settled on eggs and sausage and a fruit salad. He was craving biscuits, but Sam was no baker. Dean would cave, he knew, if he threw some puppy eyes at his brother once he emerged, so he started working some fruit from the basket onto a
cutting board. Keep it simple. He put the salad in the fridge and staged the rest near the stovetop to wait for the others. No use cooking a hot meal that would be cold by the time everyone appeared to eat it.

Gabe was next. Sam was scrolling through the morning news on his phone and sipping his coffee when Gabriel wandered in looking lost, completely naked.

“Really, Gabe? Not even a robe?”

Gabriel grunted at him and scratched his ass while he poured himself some joe. Sam considered sending him back to his room to dress. If it had been his own home, he wouldn’t hesitate. No one wanted to see Gabe’s short-and-curlies first thing in the morning. But Cas seemed to encourage nudity in the house, so Sam let him be. Once Gabe was seated opposite Sam, it wasn’t so bad.

“Food’s not gonna cook itself, you know.” Gabe was staring morosely into his coffee cup, obviously queasy.

“Be my guest,” said Sam with indifference. And now they were in a standoff, neither willing to give in and serve the other. Sam took another sip and went back to the news. Naomi’s catastrophic speech caught his eye, and he wanted to laugh. She’d obviously miscalculated badly, and it should have been funny, but she was also cunning and scrappy, and she got more dangerous as she got desperate. It could mean bad news for them soon. He’d have to help keep an eye on her and her whole movement. They’d come too far to be stymied now by one of their own. A cornered wolf was a dangerous animal.

Dean and Michael slipped in next, rumpled and limping, both of them. The catch in Dean’s gait was expected. Cas hadn’t gone easy on him last night, and alphas weren’t really built for that kind of abuse, but seeing the same funny walk from Michael this morning brought Sam a strange sense of satisfaction. He caught Dean’s eye and saw him smirk. He smirked back at his brother. There was the alpha Sam knew. He hadn’t really realized until now how much it bothered him to think that Dean might be trapped inside his Sub wolf with no outlet to be the alpha he was at heart. Maybe his worry was premature if Michael’s gingerly careful seated posture was anything to go by.

Michael looked happy as he accepted a cup of O.J. from his mate. Sam hadn’t ever seen him happy before. Michael and Dean both had dark circles under their eyes and a green tinge around their mouths, but a hangover wouldn’t last long once they got some breakfast in them. Michael caught his mate looking at him with a wistful smile, and he blushed and looked down, a smile of his own slipping discreetly onto his face. Dean hummed as he gathered supplies to put a pan of biscuits together and started the oven heating. Obviously at home in this kitchen, Dean moved like he knew everything about it, like it was his and had been for years.

Sam liked what he saw. He liked seeing the easy intimacy between his brother and his new mate, and he liked seeing his brother happy. Sam knew that more must have occurred between the two than he’d witnessed last night.

He didn’t know that Michael had awoken quite early to find his mate sitting up in bed with a laptop across his legs and a pair of glasses perched on his nose, balancing his checkbook. Michael remembered Dean telling him that he thought he looked nerdy in glasses, but that wasn’t the word that crossed the Omega’s mind when he took in the concentration evident in Dean’s furrowed brow and focused green eyes. The image made Michael whisper a gasp and wake up that much faster. His arousal leaked through the Mating-bond, catching Dean’s attention. Before he had a chance to slip into his wolf and take control, Michael found himself on his back with an alpha covering him, entering him, pounding him, and kissing the daylights out of him. Blame it on slow reflexes from the hangover, but for once, Michael didn’t fight it.
Dean’s knot locked fast as he panted and collapsed on top of his Omega, and he giggled, giddy. “I’m still alpha!” he enthused. Michael kissed the side of Dean’s throat and rubbed his hands along his mate’s back.

“Congratulations, alpha. Now roll off, or I’m going to puke.”

“Is that the way an Omega speaks to his alpha?” Dean had teased him, rolling them to an angle so his weight didn’t fall entirely on his queasy mate.

“I wouldn’t know,” Michael cheeked, “I haven’t been trained yet.”

Dean took full advantage of the freedom afforded him by his access to his alpha, and he pumped his knot into Michael over and over again, keeping them locked much longer than strictly necessary, and leaving Michael’s rim and channel swollen and sore. They made quite the pair as they hobbled down the stairs together, both sore and still reeking of sex.

The biscuits were in the oven faster than Sam could have dug up a recipe and found measuring cups, and Dean moved on to heating a flat griddle for the sausage links. He found Sam’s fruit salad in the fridge as he scrounged for milk and butter. Dean put Gabe to work setting the table, or he tried to anyway. As soon as he saw Gabriel’s state of undress, he sent him straight back out to find something to wear.

“Not fair!” Gabe protested. “April gets to be naked whenever she wants!”

“April’s hot and eighteen years old!” Dean shouted back at him as he slouched out of the kitchen. Dean pretended not to see the middle finger he got in answer. ‘You see it, you own it’ only held if you admitted to seeing it, and Dean really didn’t want to be that guy this morning.

April and Castiel entered just as Gabriel was returning with a pair of sweats and a t-shirt on. April was naked again. (Naked still?) Gabe shot Dean an indignant look and gestured at her as if to say, ‘There! You see?’ Dean ignored him and wrapped his fiancé up in a tight hug. The good morning kiss they shared nearly caused the sausages to burn, but Dean saved them.

April’s eyes were bloodshot and puffy. She didn’t look sick, so Sam guessed her bright red backside and her impending Heat to be the cause of this morning’s misery. She folded herself onto her knee pillow next to Castiel’s chair silently, and she didn’t meet anyone else’s eyes. There was a somberness to her this morning Sam found out of character. He tried to meet her eye, but she kept her gaze downcast.

Castiel collected drinks for himself and his mate, then thought better of it and brought the whole coffee carafe to the table. Dean had efficiently refilled it. He sat down at the head of the table, placed a hand in his mate’s hair, gripped it painfully enough that she winced for just a moment, then stroked it lightly and offered her a drink of juice.

“Good morning everyone,” said Cas a little pompously. Dean snickered while he scrambled the eggs, thinking to himself that he was engaged to the world’s biggest dork.

“Good morning, Alpha,” Michael answered with equal gravity, and Dean snorted out loud. He tried to cover by turning it into a cough, but the flat stares they both gave him told him he didn’t cover well enough, and he gave it up and giggled quietly. He put Gabriel back to work getting all the necessary accoutrements on the table and checking everyone’s drink choices. Gabe grumbled but did as he was told. Gone were the days of a quiet, secluded bachelor’s life for one where he could slip unnoticed in and out of his suite in the back and not need to interact with anyone.
Breakfast delivered, plates served, hangovers abated, and coffee continuing to flow freely, they relaxed and chatted. No one had anywhere they needed to be this morning, for once, so they stayed. Eventually April found herself pulled up into Castiel’s lap, but she remained quiet.

“Did you see the press release Billie put out yesterday afternoon on Michael?” Castiel asked Dean, holding a forkful of eggs out for April.

“No, not yet. Did she change it any from what we gave her?” Dean answered with his mouth full.

“I didn’t see what you gave her, so I don’t know. Take a look. It’s on The Facility website now, on the Home page.” Cas took a bite for himself.

Dean got up and took a tablet off its charger near the kitchen entrance and brought it to the table, starting it up as he moved. “I thought she was planning to make both announcements at once.”

Michael asked Castiel, “Will there be very much media attention, do you think, Alpha?”

“Dean thinks there will. We’ll keep an eye on it. Hopefully, no one will think it important enough to fly reporters all the way out to the middle of nowhere to cover it. We’ve let our trip to New York leak out, so if we’re lucky, they’ll settle for waiting until they have easy access to us there. Don’t worry, Michael. We will protect you from unwanted spotlights. You don’t have to make any appearances you don’t want to make.”

“What if I want to?” he asked. “Maybe not just yet or maybe not to talk to them, but would you let me go with Dean sometimes when he does appearances? Eventually?”

Dean answered him. “Yeah, Michael. Man, it’s gonna be up to you in the end. If they ask for you, and it’s something we’re doing as a Pack, you can decide for yourself. I’m notstuffing you in a closet, man. I’m pretty sure I already told you that. You gotta believe me and stop listening to your Pop.”

Michael wasn’t convinced. Omegas didn’t get that kind of opportunity for deciding their own fate. And Michael couldn’t help measuring Dean’s assertion against the backdrop of his own terribly unrealistic ambitions. Dean had said, ‘as a Pack’, and there was a limit embedded within that statement that Michael felt obliged to press against. He kept it to himself for the time being. He still needed to feel his mate out a bit, feel the Alpha out.

“We’re appearing on GMA the morning after the premiere,” Cas said. “I had expected to leave you and April at the hotel for that but only because I assumed you wouldn’t want the media attention. However,” Cas laid his fork down and looked at Michael. “If you want to go too, I’m sure they would be thrilled to have you. Just be sure before you commit. The purpose of this appearance is to announce our engagement. If that’s going to be an uncomfortable conversation for you to participate in on television, you would be welcome to excuse yourself. As you know, you and Dean are already making the gossip columns now that someone has spotted Dean’s ring. I don’t like the way it’s going, and my preference would be to keep you shielded from the cameras.”

Michael opened and closed his mouth like a fish two or three times. Alpha’s preference was to keep him safe, but he still had the freedom to choose for himself? The world had flipped topsy-turvy.

Dean put a warm hand over Michael’s. “You don’t have to decide right now, man. Wait until we get there and walk the red carpet. You’ll know then if it’s something you want to do. No pressure either way.” Dean scraped the last of the eggs from their wide platter onto his plate. Sam took another biscuit.
“Change of subject,” started Sam. “So, Jody and Donna are moving into the dorm today. Anyone who is free should help out. Jody said they don’t have that much stuff to move, but they could still use a bunch of hands getting it all up the stairs and unpacked. They said sometime after 1:00.”

“Where’s Jo moving to, then?” asked Dean. He needed to spend some time with his friend to catch up. He was woefully behind, but he loved the idea of the Mills mates serving together as Dorm Moms. They were going to be perfect. If nothing else good came from his sojourn to Dallas, at least it had sparked a better situation for the boarders in the dorms and a promotion for Jo. She deserved it.

Castiel answered. “She’s moved back in with her mother. They are thinking of getting a larger house in Jo’s name, but right now they’re working to save enough for a down payment. Jo’s promotion brought a big raise with it, so she’s excited about finding a home of her own. I know she’ll feel more steady once she’s able to provide a home for her Omega on her own dime. It’s the alpha in her getting unsettled and feeling the need to nest, no doubt, but she’s maturing, and it’s time.”

“I can’t picture Jo Mating anyone,” Dean mused out loud. “But then, I never pictured it for myself either.” He smiled at his mate and kissed him chastely to assure Michael that there were no regrets.

The conversation had drifted into a dull suburb of Snoozeville in the opinion of the elder Omega, and that didn’t sit well with Gabriel, apparently. He did what Gabriel does, and he stirred things a little bit. “When are you two getting married, anyway? Set the date yet?”

Michael choked on his eggs.

“Not yet,” Dean said as he whacked his mate on the back and looked at Castiel.

“Maybe at the end of the summer?” Cas suggested. “Before October at the latest, I think.”

April perked in his lap. “That doesn’t give you much time. It’s four months at the most. Weddings take a lot of planning.”

“Nonsense,” Michael interjected. “It’s just a party, really. People plan parties in less time than that every day.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” April huffed at him. “It’s not the same thing at all.”

They argued back and forth for a while about the relative complexity and planning requirements of celebrity weddings. Dean and Cas stared at each other across the table without interrupting while their mates bickered like siblings. A bubble of mirth broke from Dean’s lips. Then another. Soon the argument between the two grew heated. Inappropriate names were flung across the table, and Dean was laughing openly.

Castiel tried to hold it in, but in the end, he broke too. It was too preposterous, especially considering where they’d come from. Four months ago, he’d had no hope of claiming the right to call Dean his, and neither of them were Mated. This morning, their mates were fighting bitterly over how to plan their wedding. The alphas lost all control and laughed with abandon. The Omegas, for their part, broke off the fight and stared at their mates, both of them incensed. Tears ran down Dean’s cheeks as he tried unsuccessfully to get himself under control. Sam kicked him under the table, and Gabriel just shook his head.

Finally, to break it up and relieve the two annoyed Omegas, Sam pulled the calendar up on his phone.

“September 9th is a Saturday.”
The statement hung there in the air above the table. Dean stopped laughing and bit his lower lip. His green eyes bore into Cas’ blue ones. Somehow, this felt like a test. All the blood left his face. They’d talked about it, agreed to it. Castiel had proposed. Dean had said yes. Dean was wearing Castiel’s ring. They were committed. Somehow, though, it felt like this was the real moment of truth, like everything leading up to this right here had been mere overture to the idea of building a Pack around their marriage. It wasn’t real, was it? Not really. If Cas hadn’t really meant it, Dean was about to find out. The sausage and biscuits were lead in his gut. His vision swam. Castiel was silent on the other end of the table, and Dean dropped his eyes as the bottom fell out beneath him. Michael put a hand on Dean’s thigh under the table, his irritation forgotten as he sensed Dean’s turmoil. It was all a charade. How stupid Dean had been to allow himself to entertain the idea that Cas loved him that deeply. It had been a surreal dream, a fantasy. Dean was not worth loving that much. He wasn’t worth it, and Castiel was about to reveal that he knew the truth. He would say it kindly, letting Dean down easy. Cas had never in his life been unkind, but there was a limit to the reach of his charity.

Dean risked a peek upward. Cas’ eyes stared without blinking. His face held the same beautiful strength Dean had always seen there. He swallowed. The table became still and silent. Dean wanted to flee. Had it not been for Michael’s grounding touch, he would’ve done. At last, Castiel broke the silence.

“September 9th is perfect.”

Dean let out a rush of air that he didn’t know he’d been holding. “Dean, will you marry me on September the 9th?”

Dean couldn’t make his voice work, so he just nodded and leaned against his mate’s chest, keeping his eyes on Cas. Castiel smiled sheepishly at him, realizing only now how his delayed response had been interpreted on the other end of the table. Cas stood, setting his mate back on her pillow and went to hold and kiss his fiancé. He squatted between Dean’s chair and Michael’s with a hand on each of their shoulders and his forehead resting against Dean’s.

“We’re gonna have to figure out how to bottle up all this sap and sell it,” Gabe sassed. “I hear they make bank off maple syrup in Vermont. This stuff’s gotta be worth at least that much.” Sam slapped him upside the back of his head, Gibbs-style, and poured himself more coffee.

Michael took a breath and pulled away from the two alphas. “I have a question about the Keller test.”

“Good change of subject,” Gabe approved. “It’s getting a little thick in here right now.”

“Go ahead, babe, shoot,” said Dean, pulling himself together, wiping his eyes subtly, and casually adding ‘Marry Cas’ to his phone’s calendar at Sep 9 under the table. Cas patted him on the shoulder and resumed his seat, bringing April back up with him again.

“I don’t know how it works. Can you guys give me the run-down without turning it into a PhD lecture?”

They all laughed. This was the wrong crowd to be asking a question like that. Sam took pity on him, and explained the readings, the test, and the chart as well as the range limits with all three axes, keeping it in layman’s terms and skipping a lot of the chemistry. He and Dean both taught classes enough to have the presentation down to a quick explanation. They just needed to keep Castiel’s lips buttoned so Michael didn’t get overwhelmed with unnecessary detail.

“And everyone but me has their scores already?” Michael prompted.

Dean pulled up an App on the tablet he’d brought over earlier, abandoning the press release. Billie
had sent it out exactly as Dean and Michael wrote it. That pleased him. He opened a blank graph that was formatted for Keller charting. He pointed as he spoke. “Except for right near the X-axis, the lower left is for the Ozzies. Upper left is for the Dominant Omegas. That section is just about always empty no matter how many wolves you throw into the graph. The lower right is my home, the Submissive alphas, and the upper right is for Castiel. Everything near an axis is for Neutrals and betas. The further you get from an axis, the weirder people tend to be, like the four of us.” Dean circled his finger in a gesture that included Cas, April, Michael, and himself, but not Gabe or Sam.

“This is me.” Dean entered his ratings into the App at the top where it asked for user inputs. “I’m like this:” He entered, \([A/\beta/\Omega: 21], [D/N/s: -18], [Z-\text{Scale}: -42]\). His dot appeared on the graph quite low in the lower right section and set back in the shadowed section of the 3D graph. “Good?” he asked Michael.

Michael nodded. So far, so good. Dean egged him into a guess, “Okay, and where would you guess April is?”

“I don’t know, she’s a Sub, right?” Dean nodded, fully alpha, fully engaged in teaching. “So then, she should be down here somewhere.” He scrolled his finger near the bottom and to the left of the y-axis.

“Good. That’s right. April’s numbers look like this.” April quietly prodded her mate for permission, and Cas let her rise to join the other side of the table on Dean’s other shoulder. Her training covered this material, but she’d never seen this App, and she’d never seen her own pack graphed out together before. Dean finished labeling his own dot, saved it, and then erased the entries and added the new ones.

\([A/\beta/\Omega: -23], [D/N/s: -17], [Z-\text{Scale}: -35]\)” April’s dot appeared, and Dean labeled it and hit save. Michael studied the graph for a minute.

“You’re more Submissive than she is?” he asked in wonder.

“Yes,” Dean confirmed. “A little. The ABO scale is logarithmic, but the DNS scale isn’t. My eighteen is only a little more profound than her seventeen, but whatever. We’re nearly a matched set.” Dean smiled at her in solidarity, and she glowed back at him, thrilled to find she wasn’t the bottom of the pile in every way.

“And this ‘Z-\text{Scale},’ that’s…?” Michael asked.

“Basically,” answered Sam, “That’s relative kinkiness. The closer your rating is to zero, the more vanilla you are in your preferences. Negative numbers tend toward the Bottoming, or receiving side where kinks are concerned. The Z-scale goes to 50.”

“Dude!” Michael exclaimed. “Dean, you’re a 42 out of 50? I had no idea. There’s no way I’m going to be able to keep up with that.” Dean could feel that Michael was genuinely anxious about it, and he smiled reassuringly at his mate.

“Don’t sweat it, baby. You just be yourself. We wouldn’t be True-Mates if we didn’t fit. Besides, I think you’ve got more under the hood than you’ve shown us yet.” Dean’s eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Do Cas next,” said Sam enthusiastically. He was geeking out as usual, but Dean always got a little nerdy himself with this shit, so he humored Sam, wiped the numbers out of the entry box, verified that the first two dots were still showing, and typed in Castiel’s ratings.
Michael read them, pulling the tablet closer to study the graph and then relinquishing it back to Dean when April squawked a protest. Castiel’s dot was nearly off the chart on the upper right-hand side, and it sat very far forward in the 3rd dimension along the Z-axis. April scrunched her face while she studied it, and the teachers at the table gave both Omegas time to take it in.

“No,” she finally declared. “This is wrong.”

Dean’s eyes crinkled with amusement. He was proud to see she caught the discrepancy so fast. “What’s wrong with it?” he asked her. Michael looked confused too.

“You said that DNS isn’t a log-scale, but Cas is the most Dominant Dom ever, and he just gets a twenty? That’s barely higher than me and you. That can’t be right.” Dean could feel Castiel wanting to break in and explain it himself, so he shot the Alpha-Dom a look to ask him to stay out of it.

“You’re right.” Dean turned his attention back to the Omegas. “They re-drew the chart for his Alpha rating. ABO is based on empirical data. It is objective and indisputable. It’s based entirely on numbers. If the numbers go off the chart, then the chart itself has to change. You with me?”

They nodded.

“But DNS has a big subjective portion. It’s derived from some readings, like hormone responses and temperature fluctuations and shit, but a lot of it is based on observed behavior.” He tapped Cas’ dot on the screen. “When Castiel took the test, the poor testers were outside of their own abilities to rate him. There wasn’t any reference point higher than eighteen to base his rating off of. They knew he was higher than 19, and the scale stopped at 20…so…”

Michael finished for him, “They just gave him a 20 because they didn’t know what else to do?”

“Essentially, yes.” Dean smirked at his Alpha and shook his head. Cas’ eyes smiled back at him as he rested his chin in his steepled fingers. It was an old argument in the community: shouldn’t both scales be extended to accommodate Castiel? Cas himself stayed out of it. As the subject himself, he felt he should stay neutral.

Sam added, “They knew that in comparison, Cas’ Alpha is stronger than his wolf, and like Dean said, the ABO scale is data-driven, so they had no choice but to record his 28 and raise the scale, but they just went lazy after that. They were satisfied that the 28 was higher than his Dom’s 20 and left it alone, published it like that. It’s been fifteen or so years now, and we’re still arguing the point.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Michael huffed. “I thought this was science.”

“It gets really heated when the purists and the progressives go at it,” Dean told his mate. “You’d think the conferences would be incredibly dull, but I’ve seen literal fist fights break out over all this.”

Gabriel spoke up again for the first time in a while. “I know a certain Alpha-Dominant who could settle the matter once and for all if he just stood up and told them all to get bent.”

“Gabriel, what are your ratings?” April asked him.

“Oh, well. I’m just a boring ol’ O-Neutral, not some exotic outlier like you people. I’ll be surprised if you don’t burn the frikken’ house down within a year between the four of you.”

“Here.” Dean drew the tablet back and started typing. He knew these people well. They were family, even if the gilding was still settling around the Pack itself, and he knew all of their ratings like the
back of his own hand. “Here’s Gabe:”

He typed in, \([A/\beta/\Omega: -17], [D/N/s: 3], [Z\text{-}Scale: 15]\).

“I would’ve figured you for way kinkier, Gabe,” Michael opined.

“Fuck you,” Gabriel responded. “I’m plenty kinky.”

“And Sam?” from April.

“Yeah, here’s Sam:"

\([A/\beta/\Omega: 0], [D/N/s: 15], [Z\text{-}Scale: 6]\).

“Right at zero? Exactly at zero?” Michael queried.

“All betas are rated at zero,” Dean reminded him. “But he’s Profound Dom, and about as vanilla as a wolf can get. Although…” he looked at Sam. “That was pretty fucking kinky of you last night, getting off watching your own brother. Damn, Sammy, I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“I wasn’t focused on you, Dean.” Sam protested, and Dean pounced.

“Oh, really? So, were you hot and bothered for Castiel? You like ‘em all Alpha and huge, or were you drooling over my Dominant Omega mate? It’s his control, isn’t it? You’re into some Dom-on-Dom shit. Fuck, Sam, that IS kinky.”

“Shut up, Dean.” Sam was blushing and decided it was time to clean up after breakfast. He nudged April and Gabe into helping him. Dean sent Michael along as well with a twitch of his head. The Omegas both reluctantly abandoned the tablet.

“No, but here, I’ve got lots of entries saved of some of the people we know. Just click this file.”

Dean showed Michael before he collected the remaining plates.

Keller Scores @ User: Dean Winchester

“Can you send that file to me?” Michael asked him.

“Sure. It’ll probly force you to download the App, but it’s free, so whatever.”

Michael scraped plates into the garbage, but he was clearly still deep in thought. “What happens to Doms and Subs who test between nineteen and twenty?” he mused. “If nineteen is part of the old range on the scale, and twenty is Alpha’s new expanded number, how do they rate people who are past nineteen but not all the way to Alpha’s equal? Do they break out the fractions?”

Castiel rose and carried the juice and coffee carafes back to the kitchen. “It’s a problem that will eventually have to be resolved, but so far, there have been no nineteens, so we haven’t confronted it yet. I suspect that finding a Dom or Sub who reaches that mark is what will someday force the community’s hand. Until then, we can keep arguing about it.”

“Wait,” Michael stopped scraping. “Does that mean Dean is the most Submissive Sub ever?”

“Not exactly,” explained Sam. “There are a lot of others who equal him at eighteen on both the Dom and Sub side. It seems like eighteen is about the natural limit though. No one except Cas has ever tested \textit{HIGHER}.”

“Holy fuck,” breathed Michael.
Without warning, Castiel’s hand swatted his Omega mate’s ass violently with a loud pop, and she yelped. “Go wash your hands, put another tally mark on your board, and don’t ever let me see you do that again.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said meekly, rubbing her backside where his handprint stood out angry red even over the bright pink that was there already.

“What’d she do?” Gabriel mouthed at Sam.

“No idea,” Sam mouthed back.

***************

Sam checked with Dean a little later about helping out with Jody’s move, but Dean begged off. Much as he would love to spend some time with Jody, his priority needed to be his commitment to spend a month isolated with Michael. They weren’t in seclusion exactly, but the cause needed to be dire to pull them away from each other. New York rated and so did establishing their pack, but carrying boxes up four flights of stairs, not so much.

He and Michael slipped out after breakfast although the day was half gone by then.

Their departure meant they missed seeing Bobby pull up in his ancient pickup truck. Bobby didn’t look happy as Fred, the butler, let him in. Fred had been with the Novaks forever, as had his father before him, as Regency as that sounded. April got her butt was singed when Cas overheard her making fun of his name. ‘What kind of a Butler name is Fred?’ He was people, that’s what he was, the Alpha clarified. Not Pack, but human and family, and he deserved respect. People’s names were their dignity.

Bobby found Cas in the play room, doing a quick inventory and trying to decide if the changes to the Pack meant changing its functions.

“I need to speak with you, Alpha,” said Bobby grimly.

Cas led him to his office and closed the door. When he emerged thirty minutes later, he sent April to fetch Gabriel. Bobby’s face was dreadfully pale, and he looked worn in a way that wasn’t…normal. Bobby wasn’t a young man, but he’d always seemed hale to April. She wondered what could possibly have happened behind that door to break the unshakable older alpha. Castiel’s face was forbidding. April prayed she never saw that look directed at her. She ran to find Gabe but had to wheedle to convince him to come with her. He sensed bad news, and his jackal wanted him to bolt.

Castiel ushered Gabriel into his office and closed the door. Bobby leaned against the wall, studying his feet. That didn’t bode well.

“I thought you were going to wait until the stitches were out,” Gabe tried.

“Bobby’s got something to tell you, Gabriel, and you need to hear it,” said his brother with no other introduction.

Gabe switched his gaze to the alpha, and Bobby cleared his throat. “Gabriel, what I have to tell you…I didn’t want to. I was hoping you’d never need to find out, but things are moving now, and the time for keeping shit under the hat is past.”
“Okay…”

“When you broke out that Omega girl from Gordon’s place…that was monumentally stupid. You could’ve been killed. You could’ve been made. You stupid, stupid, fucking lucky son of a bitch…”

“Bobby.” Cas didn’t raise his eyes off his desk, but Bobby stopped and regrupoed.

“What you didn’t know, because I didn’t want you to know, is that we were running an operation in OKC. We had all fifteen of the Omegas that that asshole was ready to transfer already lined out, scoped, and ready to pull. Claire was on it, pup. We were ready to move all of them as soon as Cas and Dean got there for their ‘tour’. I had it under control until you decided to go rogue and break into it yourself.”

Gabriel’s heart stopped beating. He felt faint. Fifteen Omegas? He had found only one. Where were the rest of them now? He sat down hard on the floor, right where he stood, and put his face in his hands.

“You didn’t know,” Bobby continued. “Hell, even Cas didn’t know until just now. Claire pulled off a miracle and grabbed two more in the chaos after you skedaddled; a guy and a girl. They’re safe in Las Vegas. The others. Jesus, Gabe. Shit. Fucking SHIT!” Bobby huffed hard through his nose, struggling to say it. “The other twelve are gone. The basement is empty now.” Bobby was still talking, but Gabriel’s mind had stopped on ‘twelve are gone’.

“Gordon’s already signed a contract to turn the basement cells into dorm space for real. He’s turning the whole building legit and moving the trafficking elsewhere. I don’t have any idea where he’s taking them now. We have to start over.”

Gabriel’s voice shook. ‘I’ll kill him. He was right there in front of me. The guard was all the way across the FUCKING ROOM! I could have ripped his goddamned throat out!’ Gabriel was shaking. Cas went to him and held him from behind, like he’d done ten years ago.

“You would have been killed, Gabe,” he reasoned.

“It would have been worth it, damnit! What good am I…is my life if I can’t save ANYBODY!?!?” Gabriel broke into heart wrenching sobs.

Bobby knelt in front of him, ignoring the daggers stabbing him from Castiel’s eyes. They were broken after this, Bobby knew. It would take ages to recover the Alpha’s trust again, if he ever managed it. But right now his focus had to be on Gabriel.

“You were never supposed to be there, Gabriel. Why were you even there? God. It’s not your fault, kid. I ain’t saying it is, but what we do…it’s so delicate. You can’t just go mindlessly crashing off wherever the fuck you want, doing whatever you want, and think it’s all gonna be fine.” Bobby took a deep breath.

“Gabriel, listen to me. You did not do this. This is not on you. It’s on me, right square on me. I got a lot to own to over this, and I ain’t gonna sleep good at night ever again. I shoulda told you, and I shoulda told Castiel. I kept you in the dark, and I used him. I fucked up bad. This is not on you, but damnit, son! When I tell you to go somewhere and do something, you have to do it. When I tell you to sit tight, I need to know you’re gonna stay where I put you. I needed those assants to fix their eyes on you putting around in Lawrence and miss the operatives on their doorstep. Instead, the whole team was blown before they could make a move. Gabriel, I’m moving pieces around a fucking chess board so carefully, and you’re a chess piece that just randomly wanders wherever it sees an empty space.”
Bobby took another deep breath. How to hold Gabriel accountable for his bad decisions without breaking him was beyond him. “Tell me how you fooled me into thinking you were in Lawrence when you weren’t. Tell me that.”

Gabriel sighed. “Body double.”

“A body double? You paid a guy?”

“Yep. He just had to wander around and be seen every now and then. I slipped him in through the turnstile one night while the guard wasn’t paying attention. He’s been in there ever since.”

Bobby was dumbfounded. The lengths Gabriel had gone to… “How did the security system not register that there were two of you when you came back?”

Cas answered for him, dawning realization making him wonder if he had any control at all, over anything. “We came in through the front door, through the clients’ entrance.”

Bobby nodded. “We got a long road to go to fix this, Gabriel. They know it was you in there. That’s why I had to break cover myself. Alpha and me, we’re gonna protect you, but you HAVE to stay put, do you hear me, Omega? Do not leave this house – no matter what you set your mind to doing. Do I have to put a Claim on you myself to get you to obey me?”

Gabriel mumbled a quiet, “No, alpha. I’ll stay. What do you want me doing?”

“You stay right here, and you leave Gordon and his men alone.” Bobby didn’t believe the Omega was planning to obey a stand down order. Gabriel was capable of appearing meek whenever it suited him. Didn’t mean he was. On the other hand, he was truly shaken at the news. Gabriel was many very frustrating things, but his commitment to saving Omegas from the darkest, basest side of what humanity was capable of doing to one another had never been fake.

Bobby fixed him with his eye. “You stay away from all of it for a while, do you hear me?” Gabriel nodded and searched Bobby’s face. There was a message between the lines. Gabe knew Bobby better than to think there wasn’t. “If anything I don’t plan myself happens to Gordon or anyone at that site, if he gets a fucking cold or a hangnail, your ass is on the line, Omega.”

“Yes, alpha.” Gabriel laid his head back against his brother’s chest and closed his eyes. Heads were going to roll for this. His jackal was low and already creeping stealthily forward. Bobby had told him to stay put and leave Gordon alone. Fine. Gabriel had twelve Omegas to name, locate, and rescue. He could do that from here.

Bobby stood to leave but paused in the doorway. He kept his gaze straight ahead at the doorframe opposite as he stopped and leaned against the jamb. Bobby was part owner, but his employment was contingent upon Castiel’s approval. Always had been.

“Am I fired?”

“No. Fix this, Singer.”

Bobby nodded his head and left.
I hate doing this to Gabriel. Really I do. He doesn't deserve it.
Thursday, May 11, 2017

Chapter Summary

A little mistake turns into a big one, and Michael takes a mentor. Also, there's a C.F. that almost goes wrong.

Chapter Notes

There's a true Dub-Con in this chapter, so bail if that's a bad thing for you. From the perspective of the story, it's still within bounds. Some of you will think Cas is a dick after this one. I still maintain he's the master trainer at work, but we can agree to disagree.

Lots of people wanted to know what April did to earn Castiel's ire in the last chapter. Truth is, I have no idea, but she's always in jeopardy of going out of balance in one way or another, and remember, masochist, loves pain, so don't worry, she's fine. Hormones and behavior get extra weird as Heats approach.

What'd she do at the end? Again, IDK. I'm guessing her fingers went somewhere gross when she thought no one was looking. It's the best guess I've got. Only Castiel saw it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kevin Tran
beta-Neutral [A/-]/D: 0, [D/N/st: -3], [Z-Scale: -17], Pack Rank: 10
cis-Male, Heterosexual, b. 1992
unMated

Wolf Avatar: Domesticated Dog, Breed - Jindo

THEN:

They gathered around the conference room table for the last time to review and finalize the research findings they’d all worked so hard on. It was a beautiful, glossy report, well-researched and carefully
reviewed, worthy of any reputable science publication. This one was headed for the front cover of \textit{NATURE}, a major step up into the popular main stream of science.

Benny finalized the meeting. “Congratulations, team. I feel really good about the work you’ve all done here. This is the first study in the last two decades on the Mating-bond that doesn’t completely contradict itself. Well done!”

Everyone laughed and applauded. The sense of accomplishment was palpable. They’d be changing everything with this study.

The problem all the other studies had faced, and why there was so much contradiction, was the assumption that all Mating-bonds were equal. Once they decided to consider all of the variables involved: in demographic, True-Mating versus decisional, age and gender, they learned how much variation there actually could be to the bonds themselves; variations that produced differences in behavior no one had been able to ascribe a cause to before today.

That opened up a whole new level of research opportunities, not just in whether bonds could be equally valid but different, but in \textit{how} they could differ, and what might be done about those differences in the future.

Their research showed conclusively that True-Mate bonds were the cleanest and the strongest. Some True-Mates could almost read each other’s minds. Also, the right age mix among the mates made a difference. Young Omegas Mating with middle-prime alphas were also relatively strong and clean. The betas didn’t seem to enjoy much of a strength change no matter when they Mated.

Decisional mates – those who Mated by choice and not through a TM mandate – had real and permanent bonds, but they tested quite muddy and couldn’t be used as quite the line of direct contact that the True-Mates enjoyed. Also, pups born to strongly bonded parents were statistically larger and healthier than those whose parents had a muddier bond. Still, some wolves would always opt to choose to Mate for love and not just biology.

And, too, they’d proven definitively what wolf culture already knew to be true, that Mating-bonds were singular events. One person, one mate, no matter what. If a wolf’s mate died two days after they took the plunge and bit someone, they could never Mate again. If two wolves Triggered with a third at the same time, a vicious fight was a certainty. Only one winner would walk away with a mate. The rival limped away to lick their wounds and nurse their pride, hoping to be one of the lucky ones who hadn’t Triggered deeply enough to be locked out from any other forever.

True-Mates themselves intrigued Benny. Bobby had shared statistics with him that a standard alpha-Omega couple might actually have roughly 30,000 True-Mate options running around worldwide at the same time. Whoever they ran across first was their Trigger, and the rest went dark forever thereafter. Benny argued that the Universe intended True-Mates to be once-in-a-lifetime singularities, but Bobby reasoned that sometimes American visitors to China came home with a Chinese True-Mate, or never came home at all if their True-Mate was the Top. If TMs were singularities, the Universe had to have made its task unimaginably complicated to produce TMs a globe apart at birth that required gymnastic logistics to bring together at their maturity. It defied logic.

All evidence to the contrary, Benny steadfastly held to his idealized belief. Other options might be close enough to Trigger a response, but there was one person meant for each person, and the Universe could be relied upon to find a way to make sure the right pair joined at the right time.

If True-Mates could Trigger for almost all wolves eventually except utter recluses, then they \textit{couldn’t} be singularities. It had to be a matter of statistical chance, Bobby argued. The more middle-of-the-road designated wolves had a higher chance of meeting their TM, but everyone had to have literally
thousands worldwide, or the chances of meeting one would be too minimal for it ever to happen. It happened all the time, even in small towns and Pack communes.

Maybe Benny was right, and the all-wise Universe was guiding people to where they needed to be at just the right time, but Bobby was no mystic. Bobby was a scientist.

The team compared notes, reviewed the list of credits to make sure everyone got fair credit for their contributions, and signed off on the report. Then they cracked open the champagne.

“This study is going to make a difference, Alpha.” Kevin told Castiel, proud of his contribution. “First, we have to understand the chemistry, physics, and biology of the bond, and then we can apply it to people’s lives.”

“I’m happy to hear you say that, Kevin,” Castiel responded. “That’s exactly what we intend to do. Cheers!” Cas clapped the beta on the shoulder and clinked his glass against Kevin’s.

NOW:

As soon as the door closed behind them, Michael slipped into Dom-mode. “Go to the bedroom and position yourself for me, Dean. We have something to discuss.”

The switch in the alpha-Sub’s mind was instantaneous, and Dean finally understood what prompted it. It shouldn’t have taken him as long as it did, but it had been a whirlwind week or so, and he was thinking a little slowly on the backwash. His Sub wolf was always ready to take its place at the front, right between Dean’s eyes, and all it took to grant him permission to shove the alpha and frontal lobe out of the way was to be within four feet of Michael once he’d slipped the cowl of Dominance over his own head. Since Michael usually avoided his Omega like the plague, Dean’s wolf had been responding at a near constant rate. It was only while the pair were near Castiel, and Michael’s Omega felt safe enough to surface, that Dean was able to catch a break and just be himself.

So, Dean was incapable of maintaining an alpha’s perspective if Michael was occupying his own wolf. It wasn’t fair. The Mating-bond was supposed to work the other way, granting authoritative power of the alpha over his Omega. Even as his Sub took over for him and bent Dean’s neck in submission, the last vestige of his alpha vowed to find a way to reclaim its authority over his Omega.

Michael had too much power, and they both knew it. And he was using it. It wasn’t sustainable or healthy, but until Dean could fight his way back into the alpha, there wasn’t anything he could do about it.

Dean slipped easily into his Submissive and made his way, baffled, to the bedroom, pulling off his shirt as he went. ’Something to discuss’ was code that every Sub knew. It meant pain was coming. The Sub was ready. The Sub had been ready for days now. He wanted to feel Michael’s hand and walk proudly about displaying his marks. But he didn’t know what the offense was. Had he displeased Michael? Dean bit his lower lip as he knelt, naked in the middle of the room, and bowed his head.

He waited for several minutes in silence. Well-trained, Dean waited without fidgeting. He was capable of holding his position for hours if he was told to. It gave him time to think. Hadn’t he been good for Michael? Hadn’t he been good TO Michael? Surely, he wasn’t in trouble for letting Alpha take him last night. That had been under Michael’s instruction.
Michael appeared at last and stopped just inside the door, taking in his Submissive. Dean’s body was a beautiful sculpture, folded perfectly in place just for him, glowing in the afternoon sunlight that painted the lines of his body perfectly. The Sub didn’t raise his head or even flick his eyes toward his Dom. He was relaxed and at rest, deferential, just as Michael had asked him to be.

Michael took a deep breath and stepped a little closer. “I’m going to ask you some questions, and I expect simple, straightforward answers. Please speak clearly, but do not look at me.”

“Yes, Sir.”

There was no edge to Michael’s voice. He didn’t sound angry. Perhaps he just wanted to play with his toy. Dean could be down with that.

“Do we have a rule regarding the handling of any particular part of your anatomy?” Michael asked, beginning slowly to circle Dean.

“Yes, Sir,” Dean answered him, leaving the details out. He’d been instructed to keep his answers simple.

“Very good. Please tell me that rule, or rules, so that we can both be sure we’re speaking of the same thing.”

“No one but you has permission to touch my penis except for hygiene or health purposes, or to piss I suppose.”

“That’s correct. That’s the very rule I’m thinking of myself.” Michael ran his hand through Dean’s hair gently. It felt nice, and Dean fought to keep his eyes from closing in pleasure. The penis in question responded to the touch and the words with a twitch and a thickening in girth.

“And since that rule was delivered to you and received your acceptance, have you broken it, Dean?”

Dean paused. He hadn’t broken it on purpose, but yeah. He’d been caught with his hand down his pants and been put into chastity for a week. Surely Michael wasn’t going to punish him twice for the same thing. Where was Michael going with this? Dean thought for a beat too long, trying to work out what Michael was looking for rather than simply answering the question. “Ah, SHIT!” Michael gripped Dean’s hair and pulled him up onto his knees by the roots.

“I asked you a simple question.”

“YES, SIR! I touched myself in the kitchen before breakfast the day after you said not to! That’s the only time! I SWEAR!” (Jesus, stop THINKING! You’re gonna get us both punished!), his wolf shot at him. (Let me handle it, you moron.)

Michael released him and rubbed the spot to soothe it. “Very good, Dean. I believe you. And I’ve already set you a consequence for that, haven’t I?”

“Yes, Sir.” Dean got his breathing back under control and let the pain settle in. He’d long since stopped trying to comprehend the simultaneous and conflicting desires to avoid punishment while deliberately seeking it. What happened would happen. His job right now, if the Dom was worthy, was simply to submit. Sometimes it was necessary to make the Dom prove he was worthy, but right now, Dean was more curious than rebellious, so he went along with the questions.

“What was that consequence?”

“You put me in chastity, Sir.”
“For how long?”

“A week.”

“And what is the extent of the chastity, Dean? What are you allowed?”

“Um, I can give you whatever pleasure you demand, but I can’t receive any myself except for the exception of one scene involving witnesses as long as I try to keep myself authentic as I would when we’re alone.”

Michael petted his hair again and ran the back of his hand over Dean’s cheek. “Very well put, my love. That’s it just exactly.” He circled around Dean again and then squatted in front of his Sub. Dean was able to see that he was still fully dressed, and the knowledge drove his cock further toward fully erect. Dean’s Sub loved to be naked when the Dom wasn’t. It felt…debasing somehow, in the best way. He didn’t raise his eyes from the floor, but he shivered in anticipation. Something was coming. A shoe was about to drop. He could feel it, and it felt like he should already have figured it out, but he hadn’t.

Michael reached around Dean’s kneeling body, bracing himself with his other hand on Dean’s thigh, and he ran a thumbnail along the crack of his ass to his rim, which was still sore and swollen from last night. Their chests and faces were very close together now, and the proximity made Dean break out in a sweat. “You’re sore today, Dean. Tell me why that is.”

“Sir, I scened with you last night – with you and with Castiel. You asked him to fuck me while you sucked me off to fulfill the promised exhibitionist scene we talked about. I’m sore because he fucked me, and his dick is huge.”

“I see. Yes. That makes sense to me. That doesn’t break any rules then, does it?”

“No, Sir.” Dean almost looked up at Michael but stopped himself at the last minute. Michael stood up and undressed quickly, dropping his clothes on the bed.

“Dean, I want you to take a look at me. Go ahead and look up at me, but don’t meet my eyes. Just look at my body. Do you notice anything notable?” Dean glanced up and found Michael standing bare before him. He took in the view, and he hardened all the way. His breathing caught again at Michael’s beauty.

“You’re beautiful, Sir.”

“Thank you, Dean. Is that all? What about if I turn around?”

Michael turned and squatted back down, presenting himself to Dean obscenely on all fours, his hole loose and raw, leaking slick down both thighs. He looked over his shoulder and caught Dean licking his lips. Michael’s rim was red and swollen from the pounding he’d received this morning and the multiple regroups before Dean’s knot untied.

Dean’s heart stopped completely and picked up at the same time.

Oh, shit.

Oh, fucking holy shit.

How had he missed it? How could he have been so stupid and careless?

“What do you see, Dean? Does anything seem off to you?”
“Sir, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I forgot about the chastity this morning. I fucked you, knotted you, and I’m not supposed to… I’m sorry.” Dean babbled at him as Michael turned back around. “But…you didn’t say anything. You didn’t stop me. Why didn’t you stop me?”

Michael tssk’ed at him and swayed his head in disappointment, turning as he sat down in front of his Sub. “I’m no Sub trainer myself, like you are, so maybe you can clarify for us both: If a Sub breaks a rule, does the Sub get to avoid punishment if no one stops him from breaking it?”

Dean’s fingers went cold, and his cock throbbed. He hesitated to answer the question, but in the end, he had no real choice. “No, Sir. There is no excuse.”

“Where is your hairbrush, Dean? The one that made those purple bruises on your thighs that I had to wait for days to fade.” Michael’s voice was a barely decipherable whisper.

“Sir, it’s Alpha’s brush.” The lie sent another shiver down Dean’s spine and made beads of sweat run down his temples. (WHY DID YOU JUST SAY THAT!? HE’S GONNA FIND OUT! FUCK!) This time the thought flew from Dean’s alpha mind to the brat who wasn’t even trying to temper its mouth.

“All right. No matter. I have a good strong lap cane of my own to get us started, and I’ll just phone our Alpha and have him send the brush over. I think I can manage to wait a few minutes. I’m sure he won’t mind. It’s not far.”

Dean panted in panic. What to do now? Michael was going to call Castiel? FUCK! They’d both be pissed at him for lying, and he’d get it from both sides again. SHIT! What to do? Should he fess up before Michael hit ‘Call’ on his phone? He should. He needed to say something. Michael was digging in his suitcase and producing an evil-looking cane about two feet long. Dean couldn’t make his mouth work. What the fuck was wrong with him?

Michael moved to the side where Dean couldn’t see him, even with his peripheral vision, and dialed the manor house. He could still salvage this. All he had to do was fess up to Michael that the hairbrush was in his bathroom drawer where he’d put it when he unpacked, and although he’d still get it from Michael, Cas never needed to find out. But he couldn’t speak.

An image of Michael in the Oklahoma hospital, defiantly raging that he would never double up with “that man” to Dominate in scenes with Dean flashed through Dean’s mind, but it seemed ages ago.

“Yes, hello. This is Michael Winchester. Is the Alpha at home, please? Thank you.”

Dean felt faint. He wanted this. He truly did. He wanted to know what Michael was like when Dean pushed him. He’d been begging Michael for a strap since they got home, and he’d been so frustrated that Michael’d made him wait. And now. Now that the waiting was obviously over, Dean wasn’t ready anymore. He sucked in shallow breaths and tried not to pass out. (Focus, Winchester! Don’t be a baby.)

“Yes, hello Alpha. Sorry to bother you. No, sir, we didn’t forget anything, exactly. I was wondering if I might borrow something of yours for Dean?” He paused briefly, and Dean forgot himself and closed his eyes.

“Our mutual Submissive has unfortunately earned himself another round over my lap, and I would very much like to use an implement that I know will make an impression on him. Would you be willing to lend me the hairbrush that you use on him in times like this?”

Dean’s breathing was a quick shallow pant that barely supplied him any oxygen at all, and his eyes
clenched shut as if he could transport himself away by willpower alone.

“Oh, it is? No, Sir. He told me that it belonged to you. So, then it should already be here somewhere in the house.” Michael’s body began to give off a tension that had not been present before. “Yes, he definitely did, Sir. I don’t think it could have been a mistake. It’s been his all along? I see. Thank you. I’ll get to the bottom of this. I appreciate your help.” Michael ended the call and put the phone down on the bedside table slowly.

He walked back around in front of Dean who was trembling and sweating. “Where is it?” he asked Dean very simply. Dean rocked in place and tried to answer but nothing came out.

“Go fetch it for me, then.”

Dean struggled to his feet and kept his head bowed. He trudged unhappily to the bathroom and pulled the brush out of his drawer before skulking back and laying it wordlessly in Michael’s hand.

Michael wrapped his fingers around the handle of the brush and stood silent and still, letting Dean’s guilt fill the Submissive. He took stock of his Sub through their bond and reeled. There was nothing left in Dean’s mind of the alpha, nothing present of the brilliant researcher, teacher, friend, brother, or quirky goofball. Dean’s whole presence was consumed by his Submissive, and it felt like looking into the eyes of a needful child, begging for someone to notice him. The remorse shaded everything, but off to the edges, almost unnoticeable, there was a titillating anticipation that vibrated to a different frequency.

It was Michael’s first full direct view of Dean’s wolf, his Tertiary gender. The brat stood front and center, cowed for now in penitence and shame, but Michael could tell that given the right circumstances, it would be capable of all kinds of mayhem. The brat was a street urchin, skinny, filthy, mischievous. Off to the side, prepared to revel in the beautiful pain, lurked the masochist. They were separate entities entirely, and they were nearly opposites. The brat liked to stoke the flames but then regretted his actions when they inevitably brought the hammer down. Dean’s brat didn’t like the hammer. He’d finagle his way back out of trouble again if he could. His masochist didn’t care what brought it about, but he was always on board for some rough stuff, and there was no threshold too high. If an arm could swing harder, the masochist could take it and want more.

The masochist egged the brat on, goading and prodding, tripping him up until the Sub pushed his Dom over whatever edge he had been standing on and delivered Dean what he needed. Michael felt humbled by the view, inadequate to the great task before him. How had he ever thought he could handle Dean’s needs on his own? Then his own wolf growled at him, and he hardened his features.

“You lied to me.”

“Yessir.” Michael manhandled Dean’s large, squishy armchair around backward so that it faced the wall.

“I have nothing more to say to you right now. Bend yourself over the back of the chair and put your palms flat on the seat.”

Dean scrambled to comply.

Michael laid the hairbrush and the lap cane on the seat beside his hands. The stretch forced Dean onto his tiptoes and pressed his erection uncomfortably against the wooden frame beneath the upholstery.

“Don’t count. I don’t care what the count is.” Michael’s words drew a whimper out of Dean. He
only had himself to blame. His simple forgetfulness this morning should have meant a quick and memorable punishment; painful, but easy to move on from afterward. Michael hadn’t even seemed angry. It was just consequences, follow through on a broken rule. Standard Dom/sub stuff. But then Dean went and lied to his Dom’s face and got busted. Now Michael felt betrayed and hurt on top of angry, and Dean had done it on purpose to provoke him. Well, mission accomplished. Michael was provoked now.

His hand fell sharply. Then it fell again, and again. Michael spanked Dean until tingles of pins and needles ran up the Dom’s fingers and his own palm was bright red and painful. Dean held position, but he let himself feel the spreading heat, and he cried, his head draping upside down, and his nose running miserably. The cane and hairbrush never moved, a reminder that however long Michael drew this first part out, there was more to come.

He didn’t lecture his Sub. He didn’t say anything at all, and the emotions streaming through the Mating-bond were all grim ones without waver. It went on and on, much longer than Dean would have anticipated for a first run. Dean’s ass usually didn’t bruise from a hand-spanking, but he knew this one was turning his flesh multiple hues besides just pink and red.

At last, Michael stopped, shaking his hand out to relieve the tingles. He didn’t soothe the heat from Dean’s flesh though, and he still didn’t say anything. Dean sobbed against his stretched arms. His erection had long since flagged.

Michael picked up the lap cane and inspected its integrity. He flexed it a couple of times and stretched his arms over his head. Without warning, he whacked Dean across the crease of his thighs. Dean cried out and struggled to pull in a breath. Goddamn it all to hell! That fucking hurt! Dean kicked up a foot and reached a hand around behind him to ward off the next blow. Michael caught it wordlessly and placed it back on the seat of the chair. Dean struggled to find the control he counted on when he scened with Castiel. It wasn’t the same. Somehow, it wasn’t the same at all. Cas could do anything, and Dean would hold still and let him. Surely his True-Mate deserved the same respect, but it felt so different.

Dean couldn’t see through the tears in his eyes. The cane SWAPPED down again onto a new spot, a spot already swollen and bruised, and it hurt so badly that Dean went dizzy for a couple of moments. The third strike forced a scream out of his mouth and he began to ugly cry, sucking in breaths around his hiccups.

Michael finished the caning with three rapid-fire strokes that sent Dean so far onto his toes that he almost tumbled over the back of the chair, and his hands both swung round to hide his butt, a move he wouldn’t dream of when Cas took a cane to Dean’s swollen backside.

(What’s wrong with you?) the wolf wondered, baffled at his own response.

Michael huffed and dropped the cane onto the bed behind him. He stood breathing for a minute, listening to Dean through the bond and regaining his equilibrium. Was it too much? He searched inside his mate for any sign that he was in there and lucid. He found the roles to Dean’s wolf reversed from their initial position. The brat hunkered on the periphery, completely ashamed, penitent, remorseful, chastised, punished. He was done. The brat needed no more thrashing. In the middle though, glowing like an angel, angry, defiant, and glorious in its power, the masochist celebrated the pain. For all his outward protest, the flinching, the crying, the shielding himself with his hands, a part Dean was in his element, and he was loving every minute of it.

Michael had never imagined anything like this before. How could he…? He was insufficient. He couldn’t give the masochist who trembled before him, bruised and broken, but standing proud, anything nearing what it needed. Michael picked up the hairbrush with trembling fingers. Could he
do this? He checked on the little pup inside Dean’s mind, the brat who had let the pain-lover manipulate him into stoking Michael’s fires. How does Castiel do this, he wondered. How do you feed one without denying or overwhelming the other? (I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing), he confessed to his wolf. And the wolf took control.

Michael put a hand on Dean’s back and felt him trembling in pain. “Shh. You’re doing well, baby. Just a little more to go, then we’re finished and it’ll all be over.” Michael’s wolf knew what to do: comfort the child and hold him tight through the last and then push through with a mighty unleashing of lightning to give the masochist a full meal.

Michael swung the brush so fast that it blurred. He covered every part of Dean’s ass and thighs that had previously been bruised purple by the Alpha’s blows. Michael’s wolf wanted to leave a lasting impression that made a bold statement. No matter how much progress they’d made with Michael’s Omega and both alphas, the Dominant wolf still wanted his say too. Woe be to anyone who tried to sideline the Dom.

Dean screamed out long and shrill. His back bowed up, pulling his hands off the seat and flinging his head back. Michael kept it up as he watched the masochist inside Dean’s wolf. The moment the light blazed hot as the sun in an explosion of light, Michael stopped. He dropped the brush behind him and pulled Dean up, carrying him to the bed. Dean was so lost in Sub-space that he showed no sign he knew the punishment had ceased. His screams continued, undimmed. Michael held him tight, fearing he’d pushed too far, fearing he’d scarred his mate. He searched inside Dean desperately while stroking his back with gentle hands.

The screams faded to sobs and painful writhing. Dean lay prostrate on the bed, squirming in agony, and Michael lay out beside him, beating himself up for breaking his mate.

It was too much.

God, all Dean had done was break a simple rule by mistake and tell a single, forgivable lie. (What was I thinking?)

So, it took Michael by surprise and shocked him to his core when Dean’s voice croaked a request through his tears. “Bite me again, Michael. Please, baby? It’s healing up. God, please put it back. I need it. Bite me again.”

Dean was still writhing, but he was back inside the bond where Michael could see him and touch him. The pain was exquisite, but Dean wasn’t broken. He wasn’t broken, rather, he was reveling. Michael leaned over Dean’s shoulder without touching his ass and fixed his teeth back around the same spot he bit last time. It wasn’t healed yet, but it was close. Wolves heal quickly, and alphas don’t scar. Michael wanted to see if he could alter that through repetition. Michael bit down hard, breaking the skin again. Dean flung his head wide and howled at the pain, his voice giving way to a gruff rasp.

They lay still for a few minutes, still not capable of talking in words. Michael lapped at the wound gently, to clean it.

Finally, Dean said, his voice almost gone from the screaming, “Now’s the time I’d normally want you to fuck me from back there and drive the pain home, but my Dom’s put me in chastity, and I don’t think I’m gonna convince him to make another exception. Maybe next time?”

“Maybe,” Michael answered, kissing Dean’s neck. “Not likely, but maybe.”
The rest of the day was Michael taking care of his mate. If there hadn’t been a cloud over his head in the knowledge that Cas knew he’d lied to his mate, Dean would’ve been nothing but a sated pool of Jell-O.

“You know, I think it’s funny.” Dean mumbled through sleepy lips.

“What’s funny, Dean?” Michael continued spreading the arnica ointment very carefully across Dean’s flesh. It was the third application this afternoon, and he would follow it up again with more ice.

“When Cas first gave you rules you offered to shove them up his ass, but when Sam forbid you to play Dom for me until we’d hashed out our own rules, you followed his instruction without any complaints. What gives with that?” Dean had his head and shoulders craned around so he could look at Michael from where he lay draped over his mate’s lap, naked on the couch.

“Well, I guess it has to do with the fact that Sam’s just watching over you like a brother should. I’m a brother myself. I know what it’s like to watch people who can hurt your sibling get in there and… maybe mess it all up. Plus, Sam isn’t sleeping with you the way Alpha is.”

Dean turned back around and lay his chin on his crossed arms, hissing when the icepack went back on. “You don’t say his name anymore. You know you can, right? I mean, yeah, he’s Alpha and Sir and shit, but he’s also just Cas. You can call him ‘Cas’, Michael.”

“Maybe you can. I’m not ready to yet.”

“How’s it look back there?”

Michael lifted the icepack and evaluated the damage. He smiled. “It looks beautiful, Dean.”

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April went into Heat the next day. Castiel called Dean at the house to let him know and to ask that he and Michael come by so Dean could do the C.F. while she was ramping up. Dean agreed with some trepidation. A part of him didn’t want to get within arm’s reach of his fiancé at the moment, but there was nothing for it. The C.F. needed to be placed before their trip, and now was a perfect time.

Dean pulled the Impala into the long drive and parked in the garage in his usual place. He groaned as he worked his way to standing, using the car’s frame to help him to his feet. They entered through the kitchen just as if they lived here. Dean scrounged up two beers from the beer fridge in the butler’s pantry and handed one to Michael. Michael accepted it, and used the proximity to catch Dean by the shoulder. He passed his thumb over Dean’s newly refreshed Mating-wound and checked his eyes. “You’ll be fine, Dean. You’ve had worse, you said so yourself.”

“I know. Thanks. I just hate disappointing either of you. It’s not the punishment that’s got me on edge, it’s seeing how he’s gonna look at me when he knows I lied to you.”
“Be honest with us from here on out, and you’ll never have to feel like this again,” Michael snarked, heading into the living room.

“Yeah, thanks for that,” Dean called after him.

Castiel found them in the living room a few minutes later. He was already dressed in a bathrobe. He looked freshly showered and ready to go. Michael lounged on the sofa with his feet on the coffee table, but Dean was on his feet.

“Feet off the table, please, Omega.” Cas told him, and Michael jumped, almost spilling his beer in his haste to put them back on the floor, but Alpha had already moved on.

“Are you ready, Dean?”

“I’m ready. She in the H/R room?”

“No, she’s in the master bedroom. There’s no one here but us, so I’m just keeping us there. I’ll lock the door so the maids don’t come in.”

“You want me to just…?” Dean gestured himself heading in that direction, up the stairs and straight through to the Omega.

“I want to discuss what happened between you and Michael before you leave today. Your lie to your mate affected me directly. You owe me for putting me in the middle of whatever you did to rile Michael. We’re going to get your debt to me squared away too, but go take care of April first, please.”

“Oh, come on, Cas! You can’t throw that out there and then expect me to just go dominate an Omega. You know what that kind of talk does to me.” Dean’s eyes flashed. He was no longer worried about having disappointed Cas, he was worried about where his mind was heading.

“That’s a personal problem, Dean. You’re still an alpha, and you still have a job to do for this Pack. I’ll see you afterward. Meanwhile, Michael and I are going to make plans for updating the playroom. Michael? Would you please come with me?”

“No, hold on, Michael.” Michael froze halfway between standing and sitting, his eyes wide at the palm Dean extended in his face.

“I’m still an alpha? Seriously? What the fuck is that? I screwed up, Cas. I get it, but you’re not only gonna screw me if you kick me into Submissive right now. It’s gonna hurt April too. She deserves better than to be sabotaged by her own mate. You’re doing this on purpose.”

Castiel didn’t respond other than to pause in the doorway, meet Dean’s eyes coldly, then turn back to Michael and gesture again. “Coming?”

“Uh, yes, Alpha.” Michael hurried after him.

“Yes, Alpha,” Dean mimicked rudely after them then began to mutter under his breath into the empty room as he paced. ‘Dick. He fuckin’ knows what that does to me. God, what a dick!’ Dean paced into a circle. “Alpha-thoughts, alpha-thoughts, c’mon Winchester, pull yourself together.” He downed his beer and set it on the coffee table without a coaster, hoping childishly it’d leave a permanent water mark.

Dean’s mind was whirling as he mounted the stairs. What the actual fuck? Cas never did anything without a reason, and he’d never intentionally sabotage his own mate. Even if he was really, really
pissed at Dean, he wouldn’t do this to April. He wouldn’t. Dean couldn’t work it out. It made no sense.

He shoved the door to the master bedroom open and let it slam against the doorstop on the wall. He took distracted notice of the Omega waiting naked on the bed as he worked it over and over in his mind. His Sub was right there on the edge, wanting to jump in front, take over his feet, and run to find his Alpha. He wanted to beg for forgiveness, to sink into the depth of those icy blue eyes until they warmed toward him again. But he couldn’t be Sub for this. It would defeat the whole purpose. His dominant would have to wait.

Dean snarled and shoved his wolf ruthlessly aside, and it yelped shrilly as it dodged. He didn’t speak to his little Mate-in-Law, too pissed at Castiel and his own tendency to roll at the drop of a hat. Dean turned his snarl on her and advanced on the bed, unbuckling his belt. He unzipped as he put a knee on the bed, and pushed his pants down just far enough to free the organ he needed. This sweet girl whom he loved dearly was miserably in need, burning up with desperation, but Dean didn’t even glance at her face. To him, she was a task to be completed while his mind was occupied with Cas. He straddled her hips, shoving her thighs together forcefully and stroking himself to hardness. Fucking Alphas! Fucking Dominants! Fuck them and their fucking big-dog-Tops’-Club!

Dean leaned over April, ignoring her squeak of alarm, ignoring her wide eyes, and he scanned her body almost sightlessly. Then he growled and lifted back up. He angled up onto one knee and flipped her over roughly, shoving her back into the mattress, and falling back into place with her thighs between his knees and her red ass presented.

Dean was not really present for any of this, and in any other circumstances the situation was rife to get out of control, but Castiel knew both wolves better than Dean knew he did. His alpha body responded on instinct to the scents in the air. Omega-in-Heat burned his nostrils and made his eyes water and his stomach tighten. Dean took hold of her hips and lifted her up at the same time he drove down, impaling her channel on his cock and grunting like an animal. Accustomed to being the Claimee most of the time, Dean was clumsy in his role, so he fell back on bestial instinct, and he rutted ruthlessly into her channel, leaving bruises at each gripping finger point.

April wasn’t really present either. She was floating in Sub-space where the sensation of being no more than a hole to fuck sent delicious shivers up and down her body, emanating from her Omega gland and going electrically to every nerve ending. She let go and let her wolf make her decisions. The bitch was just about to roll her own eyes back in her head and submit to the will of the alpha covering her, but then, just as she was letting go, she sensed a strange chink in the bigger wolf’s armor. Dean’s alpha might be driving the train, but his wolf was perched on the periphery, so close to jumping in. So close. She cocked her head to one side and watched him, curious.

Dean let her body flatten against the bed, held himself up on his arms and pistoned his hips into the tight space between her reddened cheeks. The spread of his knees kept his jeans from working their way down his legs, and the fastenings scraped at her skin as he pumped into her. Her hands shot out and took hold of the bedframe, and he growled at her and slapped them loose. She cried out at the sharp sting and began to scramble for purchase with her feet, seeking a better angle and a deeper reach, seeking pleasure for herself, a cooling of her Heat, seeking a modicum of control of her own for once. Dean growled again at her daring and pushed up onto his knees, laying out strike after strike against her already red backside while he held her hip with his other hand and continued to pound in.

Omega-Submissives didn’t behave this way to a Claiming by a Deep alpha.

The little Sub continued to push against him, ignoring his spanks, ignoring his aggression. She saw a
break in his strong presentation, and she wondered if once, just this once she had a shot at owning something for herself. She would never know if she didn’t try. She took hold of the headboard again and thrust her ass back hard against him, impaling herself on his cock. The outcome might be the same, but the method was different enough that it registered as a shift in control to both wolves.

“Stop it!” he shouted at her. “Stop fucking fighting me! Submit, damn you!” He spanked her again…

…And she giggled.

Oh no, she didn’t. Dean’s alpha was furious. It pushed its sleeves up and leaned over the Omega-Sub, taking her shoulder between its teeth and biting down hard. She screamed and went still. Dean wrapped his hands hard and tight around hers on the wrought iron headboard, fucked into her with abandon, and growled around the hold of his teeth. He tasted blood in his mouth and let go to whisper into her ear as his hips worked her channel, and his body weight flattened her. His fingers crushed hers into the iron bars.

“Still think it’s funny? Still want to fight me? I’ll fucking tear you apart. Submit to me, damn you! FUCKING SUBMIT!” Dean screamed it into her ear, and she tucked her head under and let go of her fight. The wolf tucked tail and rolled onto its back to display her belly to the angry alpha.

Dean’s sense of satisfaction made him redouble his efforts, and he released her hands, taking hold of her by the hip and the shoulder. He drove her body onto his cock as much as he drove his cock into her body. He knew he was hurting her, and it gave him a grim satisfaction. His knot bulged and swelled, pulling at her rim, and in no time, it locked tightly inside her. Dean shouted as he came deep inside her, and she screamed as his hand tightened on the fresh wound on her shoulder. She didn’t Release, and she didn’t come, but the Claim snapped into place like a rifle report, and they both gasped in a breath as it sent a shockwave through their bodies.

Dean came to himself, finding himself tied in her channel, holding his chest up by a single locked and trembling arm braced against the bed beside her ribs, panting above her with her blood on his lips. The Omega wept quietly.

Jesus. What had he just done?

He lowered himself gently to the side and pulled her over with him. She went willingly, and curled up with her knees both pulled high, not touching any part of him except where his knot held them fast together.

“April? Are you all right? Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head but didn’t speak and didn’t try to look at him. He realized he’d asked conflicting questions, and he didn’t know which one she was attempting to answer, so he started over.

“Sweetie, are you hurt?”

She sniffled and reached a hand back to his hip and held on. He hissed at the pressure to his own new bruises but didn’t protest. “I’m…I’m okay, Dean.”

“Baby, did I scare you?”

“A little. I’m okay. You’re not still mad at me, are you?” She sniffled again and cocked her head toward him. He reached for her and wrapped her up in his arms. The Claim-bond gave him a vague sense of what she was feeling, but it was nothing like the clarity and reach of his Mating-bond with Michael. She seemed to be in shock, but not damaged.
“I’m not mad at you at all. I wasn’t mad at you the whole time. God, I’m so embarrassed. April, that wasn’t me. I don’t know what the fuck that was. Jesus, you didn’t deserve that. I was mad at Cas, and I think my alpha took it out on you. I’m so sorry. Fuck, I seem to be saying that a lot lately.”

“It’s not your fault, Dean.” She uncurled and turned her upper torso so that she could see him. It strained their tie a little, but they both ignored the pull. “I don’t know why my wolf challenged you. She doesn’t usually do that.”

Dean huffed at her. “Yeah, mine either. Guess your wolf noticed she had an advantage over mine and decided to make a play. I’m sorry I bit you. Does it hurt?”

“Not much. Guess it’s good I’m already Mated, though, huh? Otherwise, you’d be stuck with me forever now.”

He laughed and kissed her lips sweetly. “We’re stuck with each other forever anyway, sweet girl. Hope you don’t mind sharing a household with a dick like me.”

“You’re not a dick, Dean. You’re too hard on yourself. I’m okay now. You’re okay. We’re okay, right?”

He laughed again and shook his head in disbelief. This girl. This girl could make him feel better in no time, even though he knew he’d just practically assaulted her. I mean, yeah, it was a Claim-Fuck and they were meant to be rough, but there was no call to make it rougher than it had to be. “We’re okay,” he whispered back to her.

He went quiet and listened to the Claim vibrating in his head wondering what it must’ve felt like for April’s wolf to have had a glimpse only for a moment of another wolf even more Submissive than she, and get the shortest-lived hope that she might be able to win in a straight-out battle, only to be subsumed in the end because that Submissive wolf was attached to an alpha who wasn’t about to let it happen. He worked his blue jeans all the way off and tossed them over the side of the bed. He pulled her in tightly and used his stumpy toes to grab hold of the blanket at his feet and work it over them both. She felt hot against his body, but she was also sweating, and he didn’t want her chilled.

“Hang in there, April. I’ll untie soon, and then Alpha will be here for you.”

She mumbled drowsily and fell asleep in his arms. Dean sighed and ran a hand across his face. God, what a fuck-up.

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Michael followed Castiel to the play room. “Why did you do that to him? I don’t understand. Was it really on purpose, like he said?”

“Yes, it was. Look, I know you don’t understand, Michael, and I don’t expect you to.” Cas turned just inside the room and faced the Omega. “I’m not trying to patronize you, but you’re new to this. Dean is in a very vulnerable position right now. His alpha is at risk of getting swamped by the Sub that you and I keep pulling out of him. He needs to find his alpha again and teach it to fight its way back to the front.”
“Then why bring the Sub up intentionally when he’s got an alpha role to play?”

Cas looked tired as he shrugged his shoulders. “He needs a chance to fight for it. That’s the best I can give you. I…can’t explain how I know it’s what Dean needs, I just do. I need you to trust me on this.”

“And what if his alpha can’t do it, and April’s less Submissive wolf takes it from him. How would that help?”

“It wouldn’t, but we also have to trust Dean. He’s a strong alpha. He can do this. And April is tougher than she looks. I’m not worried about my mate. Besides, I’m keeping an eye on her.” Castiel tapped the bridge of his nose, close to where Dean had said he could feel the Mating-bond connect.

Michael shook his head. “I hope you’re right.”

“Come here, Michael. I want to show you Dean’s toybox.” Cas led him to the far wall near the showers and pulled the drawers open one by one. “All of these belong to him, not me. There’s a little bit of everything. It’s all sterilized after every use, and it’s never been used on anyone but Dean, so please feel free to make liberal use of whatever the two of you want. Add to the collection whenever you like.”

Michael pawed through the collection of dildos, vibrators, beads, clamps, rings, ropes, cuffs, gags, floggers, plugs, and more. “Holy fuck,” he whistled lowly.

“Exactly. Michael, you saw Dean’s Z-Rating. You need to know that’s not just a number. He’s pretty far out there in terms of what he likes and needs. Did he give you his hard limit list?” Michael nodded absently as he pulled out a dildo bigger than his fist. “It’s very short, isn’t it?” Cas made certain Michael knew he wasn’t talking about the dildo.

“Yes, it is. I thought he was just leaving some stuff out.”

“No, that’s all there is. You can do almost anything you want to do to Dean when he’s in Sub-space, and he’ll be fine with it. In fact, I’d be willing to bet you couldn’t bring yourself to go far enough for him.” Cas took a deep breath and leaned against the spanking bench. “He especially likes the pain of impact-play, but he also likes wax and clips. If you rip a clothespin off just the right spot at just the right time, he’ll come so hard it’ll shoot over his head and paint the wall.”

Michael didn’t know what to say. He found the candles, all of them at least partially spent.

“What you have to understand about him, though, is that all that toughness is on a different level than his vulnerability is. Dean may seem unbreakable, and physically, he pretty much is, but emotionally, he’s extremely fragile. He’s the strongest man I’ve ever met. He’s stronger than I am by a mile, but it would take no effort at all to destroy him completely if you’re not careful with him.”

Michael was transfixed by the items in the box. He couldn’t keep his hands off them, passing curious fingers over all the different textures and surfaces, imagining Dean’s face as it would look while he pressed each one into his mate. “I saw his wolf when I was punishing him yesterday.” Michael said it in a distracted, trancelike voice. “It was so much more than I’m ready for, Alpha. I don’t think I can be who he needs me to be. I don’t know how to do this,” he indicated the toy chest, “and hold him safe at the same time. How do I do that?”

Michael looked away from the toys and across to where the Alpha stood watching him.

“Do you love him?”
“Of course, I do.”

“Then hold him safe. That has to come first. It will always be the top priority. You just do it, Michael. Take it slowly at first, and learn who he is. Watch over him while you scene with him. Trust that wolf of his. It’s crazy what his wolf wants sometimes, but it will tell you when he’s in danger. I don’t understand it, and I should, because he and I are so perfectly offset from each other, but I don’t. All I know is that if Dean’s wolf needs something, you give it to him. Whatever it is, you give it to him. And you watch out for him while he’s in there. It’s that simple.”

“But that’s not simple at all, Sir. There’s not just one wolf in there. I saw at least two, and I get the feeling there may be more of them. What do I do when they all need different things?”

“No, there’s only one wolf with different aspects. Welcome to the high Z-Rated wolf, Michael. We’re very complicated.”

“But there was a little boy in there, and a crazy, glowing masochist, and they wanted such different things. Don’t tell me I didn’t see that, Sir.”

“Michael, you don’t have to call me ‘Sir’ all the time. My name is Cas.”

“No, Sir. Not yet, it’s not, and don’t change the subject. Please.”

Castiel pushed himself off the bench and took Michael by the shoulders. “All right, listen. It’s simpler than you realize. You’re True-Mates. All you need to give him is what your wolf wants to give him. You have the advantage of being free to trust your wolf’s instinct. That’s it. Don’t try to be me or any other Dom. Don’t try to fake your way through this. It’s not Calculus, it’s instinct. Don’t be afraid of it. You can’t harm him physically as long as you trust your wolf and his. Just don’t break his spirit. Don’t tear him down, and Michael, you have to bite at his heels every time you hear him do it to himself. Dean’s his own worst enemy. If he goes to a destructive place in his head during a punishment, that’s a perfect time to build him up again. That’s when he’ll really listen to you. Use your Mating-bond to let him see what you really feel.”

Michael nodded and let himself release the tension in a big exhale. “Oh, and don’t cut him any slack when he acts like a brat, even if it’s just a little. That’s his wolf asking for something, and it’ll just keep getting worse until you deal with it. Right now, if I go out there where we left him, I guarantee he’s left us some kind of bratty editorial comment behind. You wanna go look with me?” Castiel’s eye twinkled in anticipation.

“But he’s not really spankable right now, Sir.” Michael followed Castiel back to the living room where they found Dean’s beer bottle sweating on the wooden table, leaving a damaging ring. Dean was a fastidious man. This was intentional, and slight as it was, it broke one of Cas’ five Pack rules. Cas raised his eyebrow at Michael and indicated the bottle. It was such a minor thing, but the message was clear. Dean’s brat was sending his Doms a message.

“He’s swollen and bruised. I don’t want him hurt on top of that. And Sir, that’s not just me being possessive.”

“Okay.” Cas smacked his lips in thought. “Have you ever caned someone’s feet before? Would you like to watch me do it?”

Michael’s pupils dilated envisioning Dean’s face as Cas laid the cane across the bottoms of his feet. “Um, I…yes, Sir, that would be…But I thought you said he needs to spend more time as an alpha.”

“He’s got to fight for that himself, Michael. We can’t just hand it to him. And besides, he lied to you.
I know you punished him for it already, and I might've let it go on your say-so, but this,” he indicated the bottle still covered in condensation. “This tells me he’s not through with it yet. Remember, Michael, trust Dean’s wolf to tell us what it needs. All we have to do is listen closely and give it to him.”

Dean let Michael drive them home. Dean let Michael carry him into the house, too.

***************

Castiel locked himself away with his mate for the next four days. His Pack took turns checking on them, providing food, water, and clean linens.

Michael was fitted for a tux that fit so well, Dean peeled him right back out of it. His week had finally passed, and he made a mess of the tailor’s back room, but neither of them cared. They were celebrating.

Alpha Lancet mailed Michael’s signed custody release, and he and Dean celebrated that too with a trip to Topeka to file the Change of Custody form making him legally Dean’s property – well, Castiel’s property, but whatever. He was listed on the form as Dean’s mate. They also stopped by the Douglas County Courthouse in Lawrence as Castiel asked them to and filed a petition for Pack Residence. Then they made out on the Courthouse steps and had to be shooed away by the local beat cop. The cop called them back after a moment, having just recognized Dean, and asked for a picture and an autograph with him for his daughter. Dean grinned like a moron in the photo.

In no time, they were four wolves in the airport lounge, and Dean had his head between his knees.

“Just breathe, Dean. You’re going to be fine. Do you want me to give you a sedative?”

“I don’t want a fucking pill, Cas! I want to fucking drive there!”

“We’re not driving to New York. You can choose between the sedative that will help you sleep through the flight, or you can have three drinks onboard instead.”

“I’m gonna throw up.”

“Throw up before you board if you’re going to, please. The smell always leaks out of the lavatory.”

Michael watched them bicker in mute wonder. Everyone but him in this family was crazy.

Chapter End Notes

That's all I have until next weekend. I hope posting an hour earlier helps Melodina get to
sleep on time. Night y'all.
Chapter Summary

Dean's alpha steps up, plus there's a food-fight and other explosive events.

****MASSIVE**** Thanks to Purrvet for the astounding artwork for this chapter. He's gorgeous, and I love him! You're a frikken genius!

Chapter Notes

Welcome back!

Happy Juneteenth, Texas!

I'll probably get two chapters out by Wednesday. That's my hope anyway.

For those who are interested and missed my edited comment from the last chapter, I've nestled a full character list of Keller scores deep inside the comments in Chapter 26. Thanks again for the interest, and thanks to everyone who asked for it. I don't have any plans to embed the info in the story in graph form myself, but am not opposed to having some assistance if someone wants to do that.

Here's a whole chapter of flashback. The THEN is only about six days in the past, and the NOW is 90% flashback from three days ago.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THEN:
Dean and Michael walked through the car lot, but neither was looking very hard. They had already decided what they wanted, and Dean had already decided what he would pay. He wasn’t buying from this lot anyway. He just wanted to be seen here perusing the choices with his mate. They discussed the merits of a couple of different muscle cars with the dealer, pretending to need some time to consider their options.

Dean could feel when he’d been spotted by his target, and he winked at Michael as the car peeled out on the street across the way. Michael shook his head at his mate. “Trust me,” was all Dean told him before they’d started this charade, and Michael was a quick study. They thanked the dealer and Michael took Dean’s hand as they made their way back to the shiny Impala that had drawn the dealer’s eyes like a moth to a flame when they pulled in. He knew his job, and he recognized good horseflesh when he saw it. He’d offered Dean a substantial price before they’d even been introduced. It wasn’t what Baby was worth, but to Dean she was priceless, so it didn’t matter either way. He wasn’t selling her. She’d always been family.

Dean made a single phone call after that which ended with the firm word, “Deal.”

He and Michael met the guy, handed over the cash, and Michael drove back home in a shiny, sleek, bright red 1969 Chevelle. It was mint, and expensive, but it was beautiful, and it looked like a perfect mate parked next to Dean’s Baby in the modest garage.

“He knew you were just playing with him at the car lot, Dean.”

“No, he didn’t. I know Paul well. He’s not as bright as he looks, but he knows how to take care of a car like this. She’s gonna be good to you, Michael, if you treat her right. Sweetheart like that hasn’t even needed refurbishing except to renew the leather and update the wearable parts. She’s in terrific shape, and we’re gonna keep her that way.”

“You gonna teach me, grease-monkey? I can’t wait to see you all covered in motor oil and road grime. I’m getting hard just thinking about it.” Michael pressed Dean’s belly against the red paint of his new driver’s-side door with his body and sucked on his neck while he ground his hips into Dean’s ass.

“Too bad I still have a couple days left of my chastity sentence, babe.” Dean shoved his ass backward in a dirty tease and received a hard swat for it, but they both walked away laughing and happy.

NOW:

Michael watched them bicker in mute wonder. Everyone but him in this family was crazy. That was the greatest Alpha in the world, coldly ignoring the rising panic emanating from the man he purported to love and placidly turning pages of a magazine that was at least six months old. And the other, with his head tucked between his own knees, hyperventilating at the thought of entering an airplane – a task he’d managed to do hundreds of times already. That was the Rockstar sex-god from YouTube.

“Does he always panic like this?” Michael asked. No one had warned him this was coming, and it seemed like something he should’ve known. “Dean. Sweetheart, just try to breathe.”
Michael moved to kneel before Dean, laying his head upon Dean’s knee. Castiel had advised him to watch over Dean’s wolf and give it whatever it needed. Michael guessed that Dean’s wolf needed to be eclipsed within the alpha’s mind by Dean’s Secondary gender. Dean’s Sub needed to take a hike. Michael struggled to make it happen. He slowly worked his Omega to the forefront of his brain and gave it to the alpha to cling to. It wasn’t nearly the struggle it had once been, although in truth, he’d never really tried before.

Dean’s hands worked through Michael’s hair, scrunching and scratching his nerves into the Omega’s scalp, but he didn’t lift his head. Michael whined softly into his alpha’s touch, letting Dean’s nails dig into his head painfully.

Cas kept an eye on them but didn’t lower his magazine. They still had almost forty-five minutes to wait. The security team insisted they arrive early to the airport, and the waiting was always the hardest part.

Billie was already in New York, preparing to meet them.

April lay across several seats with her head in her Alpha’s lap. She watched with large eyes as Michael tried awkwardly and ineffectively to soothe his mate. To anyone watching, his struggle to be the Omega his alpha needed was evident. He looked supremely uncomfortable in his own skin, but he was trying, and he had resources now that he hadn’t had before.

April’s voice was meek and quiet when she spoke. “Tell me again, how you two Mated the other day – how you Mated again.” She looked sleepy as she lay on her side watching Dean and Michael, but she wasn’t sleepy at all.

Michael rolled his eyes and sighed. He’d recounted the story twice already, and he knew Dean had told her at least three times himself. Then Michael caught a change in the whirl of emotion from Dean. He was rallying and rising to the request. Dean lifted his head a bit and rested his cheek on Michael’s head.

“You really want to hear it again?” he asked April. His voice was pathetically weak and uncertain.

The security guard at the tall table across the lounge looked up. “I do. I haven’t heard it yet.” April nodded as well. The huge bodyguard collected his coffee and made his way over, keeping enough distance from them to be capable of watching for threats from every direction while he focused on the narrative.

Michael was seconds away from extreme irritation until he realized that the ploy was working. Dean was less focused on his fear of flying. Michael could almost see the greenery of the woods flashing through Dean’s mind as he recalled the unlikely events of a few days ago. Michael caught Castiel’s small smile and decided to play along too. The wound on his palm itched as it healed beneath its bandage.

Dean sat up slowly and looked down at his mate with a smile that lived in his eyes although he still held tension in the muscles of his jaw. His panic receded as he ran a hand over Michael’s cheek and whispered, “Thank you,” to him. The alpha knew what this position cost his Dom. Then Dean patted the seat beside him and draped an arm across Michael’s shoulders once he’d taken it. Michael tucked himself into Dean’s body, letting the alpha lead the narrative. Again.

“I took Michael on a picnic back beyond the border of the grounds of The Facility; you know, back off to the East where it grows wild? There’s a clearing I found years ago; nothing but soft grass surrounded on all sides by trees, so it’s private. Cas, you know the one.”
Castiel smirked and raised an eyebrow without looking up. Michael imagined the shenanigans that must have occurred to make the Alpha look like that at the memories, and he let his own memory take him as Dean told the story.

They’d taken a picnic lunch out into the woods just after Castiel had presided over the Certification ceremony for Jeremy Lister’s Omega class. Alpha had almost missed that due to his mate’s Heat but emerged from their bedroom in the nick of time, looking tired and wan, with dark circles under his eyes that the staff chose not to remark upon.

No one paid any attention as Dean and Michael shook only three or four hands each and then slipped quietly out the back door. They weren’t really required to be in attendance anyway. It was only an excuse for Dean to take Michael ‘behind the stadium’ as it were. Dean showed Michael his favorite spot, spreading a large heavy blanket out on the grass and unveiling a picnic lunch that he’d prepared himself. Michael swooned, allowed Dean to feed him until he could barely move, and talked happily for the next couple of hours. Neither suggested sex even though the awful chastity sentence officially ended today. Neither brought up any of the stressors that had dominated their waking lives for the last two weeks.

“How many times have you brought someone here, Dean?” Michael was sleepy, his head resting in Dean’s lap.

“I’ve been here with Cas before, but no one else. You want some more pie?”

“One more bite.” Michael opened his mouth for the final bite hoping it would prove one fewer than it would take to make him actually explode.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Creosote, it’s just a wafer-thin mint.” Dean was reading his mind, apparently.

Michael laughed before the morsel made it into his mouth, and it landed messily on his chin instead, dripping down the side of his neck. “Oh, now you’re in for it, Winchester!” he threatened as he sat up and looked around for a weapon. “You did that on purpose.” Michael picked up a dish with their leftover potato salad and scooped all four fingers through the messy dregs.

Dean was on his feet and laughing in no time. “Ah, hell no! Don’t go blaming me because you haven’t figured out how forks work yet.” He dodged, but Michael caught him in a half-Nelson and ran his goopy fingers through Dean’s hair, spiking it up oddly with potatoes and mustard.

“Fuck! I can’t believe you just did that, Michael. Game on, man!” Dean grabbed the soda bottle and shook it, aiming it toward his mate who dove behind a tree. It got sillier after that. They wrestled and smeared food on each other, laughing and throwing taunts without either of them gaining a clear upper hand; that is until Michael scooped the last of Dean’s homemade peach ice cream out of the ice-pack that cradled it and managed to slip it down the back of Dean’s shirt.

The look on Dean’s face registered instantly with the Omega, and he ran for it, disappearing with a shout of laughter between the trees. As the Omega dashed away, the alpha responded instinctively and gave chase. Suddenly, what WAS one thing became something else entirely. Dean’s pupils enlarged, and his eyes reddened. His heart began to pump the alpha’s life-force at greater capacity, as he zeroed in on his target. Every movement became instinct, and Dean thrived on instinct.

Dean sometimes took his Omega classes to the gym for chasing games, and he knew he was good. John Winchester hadn’t waited for his sons’ Presentations to train them to pursue and defeat in a chase, and Dean had always been a natural. But this was no game. Sticky with the residue of their food fight, the alpha emerged from the shadows of Dean’s psyche with a powerful roar of determination and pumped Dean’s legs quickly and powerfully along the uneven ground.
Michael heard his alpha’s pursuit, and his body reacted instinctively as well. The laughter died in his throat, and he went light and fleet on his feet, ducking swiftly beneath the low branches. His golden eyes focused on the path ahead, looking for escape. He had the advantage of his head start, and he was nearly Dean’s equal for speed, plus he could choose the route, zig-zagging unpredictably through the trees.

Dean followed relentlessly, his vision zeroed into a tunnel that ignored everything he didn’t need to take in. His breathing was deep and paced to match his legs. The alpha wasn’t panicked or overwrought. He was focused, resolute. The alpha had had enough. He’d had enough of getting shoved rudely aside by his Dominant mate’s selfishness and his own needy Submissive. He’d had enough of waiting to take possession of his Omega. HIS fucking Omega.

Dean snarled and growled as he ran, meeting every turn of Michael’s increasingly desperate zig-zags with a turn of his own and advancing relentlessly closer. They were fast through the forest but weren’t covering much ground as Michael’s constant turns took them in a wide circle. Michael let the adrenalin spur his pace as his Omega fed off the instinctive chase response and fled for all it was worth.

Michael ducked and dodged, trying desperately to keep just ahead of the snarls behind him, and the closing gap sent him deeper into his terrified Omega. The picnic and the food fight and the laughter forgotten, he regressed to pure instinctive self-preservation, so he ran as if his life depended upon it, gasping desperately in his panic.

For the alpha, the sight of any Omega in flight would always be enough to trigger a chase, but the sight of his own mate in frantic flight drove him insane with the need to pursue and capture. Dean lost himself in the chase, ignoring the burning of his lungs and his thighs to the sole objective of capturing and defeating the Omega who dared run from him.

No one had yet explained why an Omega fled his own mate once a chase was triggered. They all did it. They all ran with terrified determination. Instinct made them run, but what sense did an instinct to run away from the security of one’s own mate make in perspective of the survival of the species? It was a baffling but ubiquitous behavior.

Michael wasn’t thinking about why. Michael wasn’t thinking about anything except the placement of his next steps as his breath turned ragged. He wasn’t making headway, but he was able to maintain a pace to hold his own and try to tire the older wolf out. If he could just hold out for a few more minutes, he might yet escape. He might have made it too, if he hadn’t tripped hard on a loose root beneath a carpet of leaves and gone tumbling gracelessly to the ground. The alpha snarled fiercely as he fell upon his mate, on him in an instant, grappling him to the ground, tearing at his clothing, and biting at his flesh.

Michael fought ferociously like the Omega that he was. He kicked and bit at his attacker savagely. Both wolves sprouted bloody scratches along their necks and arms. Unlike the fight at their ill-timed introduction though, this time wolf evolution worked with them both. Michael was lost inside his Omega, an unfamiliar and uncomfortable place for him to be when his conscious brain was in full control, but the best place for him to face a challenge like this. Sparked by the instincts of the chase, Michael was robbed of his usual defenses and thrown into a world where he was out of his depth. The Omega was on its own, but the Omega was formidable in its own right, as long as Michael let him work through instinct.

They reached a stalemate as Dean let his weight fall heavy upon his mate, pressing Michael’s face into the leaf litter. Dean snarled at him and held the large Omega down in the leaves and dust with his body, drooling into Michael’s hair in his effort, but unable to let any part of the Omega go in
order to free him of his clothing. They lay still for a few moments, panting, trembling, stuck at the impasse. Dean could hold Michael in place, but he couldn’t Claim him though the layers of thick material covering his mate’s channel, and he couldn’t let go to work Michael’s pants down. Michael had no intention of helping in any way.

They panted in the dirt. Michael swirled into movement with a burst of effort to free himself, but Dean pressed him flat again and managed to grab both of Michael’s wrists. Their eyes glowed in the late afternoon sunshine, and sweat poured off them. Dean rutted his hips aggressively against Michael’s blue jean-covered backside in frustration. Michael whimpered. That was all the alpha needed to spur it back into action.

Dean’s jaw took hold of the Mating-scar that lay on the flat of Michael’s shoulder through his shirt and bit down hard enough to make Michael scream. While he was lost in the sensation that was only half pain, Dean released his wrists and heaved him to his knees with a grip at his hips. He used the residue of his own conscious mind to quickly work Michael’s belt and jeans open. Secondary and Tertiary wolves don’t pay much attention to the complicated workings of human clothing, so many a spontaneous Claim-Fuck has been stymied by Levi Strauss and his goddamned button-fly, but Dean managed to get the job done before Michael could respond and kick out with his feet. The Omega’s scrabbling feet found purchase against the ground again, and he made a break for freedom now that his wrists and hips were loose. But the alpha had worked his pants and underwear low enough on his thighs that they tripped him up in his escape, sending him tumbling back down into last year’s crumbling leaves.

Michael’s palm caught a sharp rock buried in the leaves, and the cut went deep into the flesh of his hand. He didn’t notice, and neither did Dean. The alpha threw himself forward to arrest his mate’s flight, straddling the backs of his legs and grabbing at Michael’s jeans to pull them further down, revealing his mate’s perfect ass and sopping wet channel. He kept his weight heavy on Michael’s knees and leaned into his hand on Michael’s back as he worked his own pants open and shimmied to get them down low enough. There. That’s all he needed. Dean’s cock was purple and leaking with need.

He didn’t bother stroking himself or coating his cock with slick. He didn’t try to dominate his mate with words. He didn’t demand submission from his Omega verbally. The alpha owned the moment, and it TOOK everything it wanted from Michael. Dean mounted his mate hard and feral as it had wanted to do from the beginning; from the very first moment he smelled and saw Michael. All the days of frustration showed on Dean’s face as he snarled into his work, thrusting violently into the Omega’s dripping hole, careless of the Omega below him. The alpha was angry and taking it out on the recalcitrant Omega.

Michael writhed beneath Dean, refusing to take the onslaught with the grace of its inevitability. He had no intention of submitting unless Dean’s alpha made him submit. He was going to have to prove he deserved Michael’s submission, just as Castiel had done. He growled and struggled beneath his mate, unable to free himself from the pounding in his ass, but unwilling to accept that just because Dean had mounted him, that he must give in and take it. Michael was no Submissive. Dean had to earn it. But Dean; Dean’s Deep alpha wasn’t messing around.

The power in evidence from the strong alpha gave silent gravity to the depth of his Submission when he gave it. Any time he wanted, this alpha could turn the Omega into a bloody pulp, but instead he knelt and offered up everything he was to Michael. What he gave when he gave it was breathtaking. But that was not for right now. Right now they were both someone far more ancient; far more elemental.

Dean dropped his chest onto Michael’s back, crushing him into the leafy forest floor, and he worked
his arms beneath Michael’s squirming shoulders and brought his hands up onto the top of Michael’s head, linking his fingers together to hold them there, continuing to thrust into Michael’s ass through it all. Michael’s face was forced into the scratchy forest litter. Dean grunted and snapped at the side of Michael’s face as he drove in brutally with his hips, kicking up leaves with his violence and growling loudly. Michael cried out in frustration. He couldn’t move. He wasn’t getting out of this. The alpha was going to knot him and own him. Forever. Michael rallied in desperation, using his feet more than his torso to attempt to roll the alpha into imbalance, but Dean spread his knees for stability and kept the same pace, breathing harshly in Michael’s ear and growling in fury. The rough zipper of Dean’s jeans tore at Michael’s perineum, rubbing him raw.

“I OWN YOU, OMEGA!” Spittle flew from Dean’s mouth into Michael’s face, and the Omega flinched. “SAY IT, MICHAEL! FUCKING SAY IT!”

“AAAAH! FUCK YOU!” Michael sucked in a leaf and coughed it back out, struggling against the alpha’s hold over his body and his mind. The Omega needed the alpha to force him. He wouldn’t roll for anyone who couldn’t prove he was worthy, alpha or not; True-Mate or not. Dean had to earn it. 

Merit was the sole basis of the transaction underway, and each was committed to playing his part to the utmost.

Dean’s knot bulged and butted against Michael’s wet rim, but Dean didn’t drive it into him yet. He wanted submission, and if he could gain it before he forced Michael’s hand, all the better. Dean increased the pressure against Michael’s head and locked on to the meat of his shoulder with his teeth, growling belligerently at his mate. The alpha ignored the Mating-scar that his Submissive wolf had placed upon Michael’s left shoulder when the Dom instructed it to, instead locking onto his right, high up near his neck and well forward by the clavicle, identical placement to the mark Michael left on Dean. It was an awkward stretch, and he whuffed through his nose to breathe.

Dean kept his jaw clamped tight, not breaking the skin, but threatening. The moment of precarious balance upon the pinnacle of decision lasted no time at all, but it was an eternity to both wolves. Michael lay crushed in the dirt, defenseless, defeated, and furious – but defeat wasn’t submission. Dean’s alpha held every muscle taut, waiting for his mate to tumble over the edge of the cliff into submission, and he wasn’t going to give an inch until that happened. It wasn’t an impasse anymore, it was an inevitability, but Michael was just that stubborn, and he held out as long as he possibly could. Anything less would rankle and chafe forever. Michael owed it to himself to put up the best fight he had in him.

Dean lisped through clenched teeth, grinding them harder into Michael’s flesh, “THUBMIT, DAMN YOU! THAY IT!” He pumped his hips ferociously and the knot popped past the ring of muscle and locked tight. He’d meant to wait, but he let the chips fall. Dean wasn’t about to retract it now. He was done waiting.

Michael screamed. The couple fell over the edge of the cliff together in slow motion. All of Michael’s muscles went lax in his defeat except the powerful muscles holding Dean’s bulging knot in place, and he slumped into the dirt, utterly conquered. “ALL RIGHT! FUCK! I GIVE! GOD, PLEASE DEAN!” Michael had no idea what he was begging for, but Dean accepted it, scuffling in the moist forest litter, sticky with sweat and food. He redoubled his pace to make up for the limit to his strokes, and he clamped his teeth tighter into his hold on Michael’s shoulder, breaking the skin in a deep and powerful wound and bringing another scream out of his mate.

Several events happened all at once: Michael’s Omega-gland Released. He came hard, spurting into the dusty earth beneath him, grinding his cock repeatedly through the mess. And a Claim-bond exploded from his mate’s body to concuss his own and bind him in a skin-tightening grip that covered him from head to foot. The pain from his shoulder, his palm, his ass, and every point of
contact where blood oozed into the leafy mold, overwhelmed the Omega. His eyes rolled back in his head. His vision whitened out, and then everything went black, and he knew nothing else as his body collapsed onto the ground in unconsciousness.

“Michael? Baby, you okay? Michael!”

When Michael came to, the world wasn’t as he knew it to be. All the colors were muted and yellowed. He lay on his side and lifted just his head a fraction of an inch off the ground, aware of a strange sensation below his tail and a million scents in his sensitive nose.

A wide, flat tongue was at work, cleaning his channel noisily. It felt...nice, but not normal. Michael whined and thumped his black tail against the ground, straining to look over his own bloodied shoulder at the grey wolf behind him. Dean stopped licking him and lifted his head, his triangular ears pricked forward. Tension fell away from the lean grey wolf’s anxious body, and he slumped heavily to the ground beside his mate in relief, perhaps a little more dramatically than strictly necessary.

Michael shifted up to rest his torso on the elbows of his front legs. His hips stayed flat to the ground in exhaustion, and his vision swam for a moment. He felt the watery semen Dean had deposited deep within him dribble out messily and run down his fur. Dean responded to Michael’s movement, struggling tiredly back to his feet and sniffing Michael’s face, licking across his snout and biting affectionately at his ears. Michael shook his head to ward off the kisses but went right back in to lick at the underside of Dean’s muzzle, whining in recognition, affection, and acceptance.

Dean stood over his mate’s exhausted body and scanned the forest for threats. Finding none, and following a final inspection of his mate’s face and ears, he slumped back to the ground and began to clean himself. The alpha’s enormous cock was still shiny and inflamed, still hanging lewdly out of its sheath in all its glory. Dean licked it in long slow strokes to collect all the combined flavors of his own release and his mate’s sticky slick. When he finished, he sat back upright and licked his lips, restless.

Michael’s small penis had already re-sheathed, but Dean gave it a few licks anyway, shoving his furry head beneath Michael’s leg. Then he whoomfed down beside his mate and rolled onto his back, pawing at the black wolf who blinked at him in surprise. Michael huffed, and Dean thumped his tail, feeling playful now that his mate was awake and out of danger. Michael was too tired and dizzy to play, but he opened his jaw and placed his teeth gently upon Dean’s throat, mouthing him lovingly and growling in adoration. He pulled himself to standing but stumbled as he went to take a step on his injured front paw.

Dean went immediately on alert when he saw Michael limp, shouldering him back to the ground and sniffing at his feet urgently until he found the bleeding wound. Dean whined high in his throat and began to clean it with his tongue. He growled when Michael flinched away and nipped his partner in warning, then resumed licking the wounded paw until he’d cleaned the dirt out and brought out clean blood again. Dean watched over it, licking at it occasionally as it gelled and stopped bleeding. Michael relaxed into the touch and slipped back into a doze. The last thing he saw before he fell back to sleep was his beautiful grey mate sitting tall and proud beside him, licking his ears and keeping
This time, when Michael awoke, he found himself wrapped tightly in the picnic blanket, his head cradled in Dean’s lap while Dean rocked nervously above him. His mate was distracted and keeping watch all around, watching for someone, humming to himself what sounded to Michael like a badly rendered version of Metallica’s “Sad But True”. Dean’s voice warbled, but he stopped humming when Michael shifted. Dean looked down and let out an explosive breath of relief. “Oh, thank the entire fuckin Universe! Michael, I thought I’d killed you. Don’t ever fucking do that again, man.”

Tears wetted Michael’s hair as Dean pulled him in tightly and wept into his mate’s head. Michael struggled to free a hand from the tightly wrapped blanket and wrapped his arm around his mate. “I’m okay, Dean. Little weirded out, but okay. Help me sit up.”

“Nope. You just stay where you are. The team’s coming to collect us and look you over. We’ll let them decide if you’re all right to stand. You were out cold for almost forty-five minutes, baby.” Michael took it in wonder. Forty-five minutes? He rubbed at his eyes with his free hand and found it wrapped in a strip torn from his own t-shirt, a stain of blood leaking through.

Voices called through the trees, and Dean responded to them, beckoning them toward the clearing. Soon three medics carrying supply cases and a litter emerged. They went to work on Michael efficiently, unwrapping him gently, and looking him over from top to bottom. Dean growled at them when they tried to take Michael off his lap, so they just worked around the alpha. Soon all the minor cuts and scratches were cleaned and bandaged. Dean received a few bandages himself, but he recounted what had happened and how long Michael had been unconscious, and the team focused in on checking Michael more in-depth than Dean.

They looked into his eyes, took his blood pressure and temperature, asked him pertinent questions to assess his brain function, quickly determining he was not in any danger. He’d just collapsed from the overwhelming experience, not from a stroke or heart attack or anything else truly scary. The Omega was fine, they assured both wolves, and Dean breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“Get him up and walking soon, but hang close. Just hang around here for another half-hour or so, and don’t try to go anywhere until you’re sure he’s good. Let him lean on you if he needs to and watch out for spells of vertigo. They shouldn’t last long, but sometimes, in cases like this, they can keep going with the aftershocks for a day or two. Don’t let him do anything strenuous for a couple of days unless, you know, you just Triggered a Heat. I don’t smell Heat, but I recommend you let Bobby check him over before you go home just to be sure. His hand will probably heal just fine, but Bobby may want to put a couple of stitches in. Call us back if you need to. I believe he’s gonna be just fine.”

Dean thanked the medics as they repacked their cases and readied to trudge back to The Facility. Michael sat naked on the blanket, leaning forward, his knees spread wide and his feet pulled close together. He wasn’t listening. Michael was deep in thought.

“Oh, and congratulations, both of you. That’s a good, strong Mating-bond you just laid down, alpha!” The medic tucked his peliomometer back into his hip holster and caught up to the other two.

Dean turned back to his mate. “The fuck?” He squatted down by Michael. “Do you think he’s right?
Did I just Mate you again?”

Michael looked up at him and giggled. “I think you did. Can’t you feel it? It’s different now. Here, take this…” Michael pushed his wonder through the new bond-link and his puzzlement through the old one. The pathways were different. The colors and the flavors of the emotions changed subtly as they passed through from one wolf to the other, while retaining their essence.

Dean’s eyes went wide as he received Michael’s feelings from two directions at once. It made the feeling rich and stereoscopic – like taking off an eyepatch and finding your vision three-dimensional. He responded by sending his happiness back to Michael and the two laughed in giddiness, rolling together off the blanket and into the soft grass where wolves belong.

After a while, the sun sank low, and the two mates quieted again to a somber, comfortable silence. They were both tired. Dean held his mate to his chest. “I don’t know if this is going to make things easier for us or harder,” he mused. “I like that I get to see and feel your Omega now. He’s a really chill guy, and I like him, but Jesus, Michael, your wolf is always going to want to be out front. How do we balance that?”

Michael rolled up to lean back onto his arms and looked into Dean’s green eyes. “I trust you, Dean. You’ve got the same kind of spread I do, and you learned to balance them both, right?” Dean nodded uncertainly. It wasn’t a perfect balance and finding it hadn’t been easy, but most of the time he knew who to be when, and it worked. “I just need to learn from you. Help me figure it out. You know I hate being Omega, but this right here, right now, this isn’t so bad.” Michael laid his head back on Dean’s chest, and Dean kissed his hair, tasting sticky soda.

“Dean, can I ask you something personal?”

Dean laughed at his mate while picking a leaf stem out of his mouth that kissing Michael’s hair had deposited there. “I can’t imagine what you could possibly ask me that would be too personal after all the shit that just happened today.”

“Your wolf. Not the actual wolf-psychic-response-deep-in-your-mind-Tertiary wolf, but the imaginary one you talk with when you need to envision it…” Dean nodded for Michael to continue. He could share anything with his mate, even this. If Michael knew what questions to ask, Dean would spill everything right in this moment. All of Dean’s walls were down right now where Michael was concerned, so Michael pressed on. “Does he have grey fur, a white streak running between his ears, and two white socks on his front paws?”

Dean sat up in alarm and held Michael by his biceps. “How do you know that?” Dean’s eyes were wide and scared. He’d never told anyone. He’d never described his metaphorical wolf to anyone but Jo. Ever. But white streaks running between a wolf’s ears – that wasn’t a marking ever seen in actual wolves. That was a dog marking. There’s no way Michael would have guessed that.

Michael’s eyes went wide in response, but he lowered his head and met his alpha’s eye in meek bravery. “I saw him. When I was passed out. Dean, I saw him. It felt like I woke up as…as a wolf. We were both wolves – really wolves. I was my own black wolf, and I couldn’t see my own face, but the rest of me was right. You were…you were medium-sized and lean. You were dark grey with a pointed muzzle and large darker grey ears. Your tail is almost black, and it’s full and flagged down the whole length, thicker than any wolf I’ve ever seen – like it has a strain of domesticated dog, maybe. Dean, your wolf is beautiful and strong. I don’t know how I saw it, but it wasn’t a dream. It wasn’t. It was real, and you and I were both there. You took care of me. You cleaned the blood off my…my hand, but it was a paw, and you licked it clean, and you watched over me while I slept.”

The Mating-bonds were alive with both of them sending back and forth instinctively: questioning,
confirming, illustrating, and clarifying. They could almost paint pictures in each other’s minds now. They could smell the other’s emotions. They could nearly speak words to each other within their own minds. Everything that Michael said went through Dean’s ears but also entered his brain through their dual bonds.

“I don’t know, man,” Dean admitted. “It was real. I can see that, and you’ve got me pegged. That was me you saw, no doubt about it, but I never went under like you did. I’ve been awake the whole time, taking care of you, watching over you. When you didn’t wake up, I carried you back here and called for help, but I was tied to you for almost twenty minutes, and you didn’t fucking move the whole time. That was some scary, scary shit, Michael. I didn’t have my phone, and we’re too far out to yell and be heard.”

“The images, the vision started after we’d untied. Just after, I think. I woke up in the dirt, and you were…cleaning me with your tongue. You were cleaning my ass.”

“Well, I didn’t do it like that out here in people-land, but I did clean us both up. Sorry about your shirt.”

“And then you found the cut on my palm, right? After you wiped my ass down? Not before.” Michael was still testing the truth of his vision by checking the chronology of events against what he’d seen. His instinct knew that what he’d seen and where he’d been was real, but his head didn’t want to believe it.

“That’s right. I used a strip of cleanish t-shirt to clean your palm and wrap it. I noticed it just after I got you back here.”

“Let’s go home, Dean. I’m tired, and I don’t want to think anymore.” Dean nodded in agreement and helped his mate to his feet, letting Michael lean on him when he began to sway precariously. Dean abandoned their gear. He could come back to collect it all tomorrow while Michael slept in, and he didn’t want to try to carry a buttload of stuff at the expense of his mate’s need for support.

“Congratulations, alpha,” Michael teased. “Looks like you finally got your Claim in. I wonder if the new bite will scar too.”

“Not a chance,” Dean scoffed. Double Claims might have occurred before, Dean didn’t know, but no wolf ever got two functional Mating-scars. It had never happened.

“Wanna bet?” Michael prompted. “I bet mine’s the outlier, not yours. I bet you forty bucks that when the dust clears, both scars stick around for good, but the first one fades out a bit.”

Dean scoffed again. “Based on what? You’re just guessing.”

“Maybe. But I can feel them both, and my intuition tells me your Claim is going to take precedence even though mine was there first. I can feel it.”

“You know, Michael…” Dean’s alpha was still firmly in place as they moved slowly toward the Impala in the parking lot. “Your Omega is a pretty smart guy. I like to see you putting some faith in him. That’s where intuition comes from, you know.”

“We’ll see. If he dumps me on my ass again, I’m done. I mean it.”

“Baby, it was never your Omega failing you in the past. It was all those assholes you were trusting to keep him safe who let you down over and over.” Dean opened Michael’s door and sat him down, squatting down outside the car beside him and looking into his hard, green eyes. “I’m not going to let that happen to you again. Not ever. Trust me.”
That was three days ago. Bobby and Castiel, Benny, Pam, and Ellen had all checked over Michael and Dean and made them talk through what happened again and again. April was fascinated; fascinated by the contradictory Claim-bond that was supposed to be impossible, by the vivid imagery of Michael’s wolf-dream, by the erotic visual of the two of them racing through the trees. The meter readings were clear. The couple now shared a double-bond – one in each direction. The strength of Dean’s Claim didn’t surprise anyone as Dean was a Deep alpha, and he was powerfully in his prime. But the meter readings also seemed to be showing that Dean hadn’t simply Claim-Fucked his mate, he’d Mated him. Capital “M.” Two Mating-bonds seemed to exist simultaneously within a single Mated couple.

Everyone agreed that Dean’s alpha Claim should take precedence, but they still couldn’t account for how Michael had slipped one in in the first place, or how Dean’s alpha had the wherewithal to ignore it.

Since that fated picnic chase, Dean and Michael were inseparable. Michael handed over his first weekly schedule to his mate as Dean’s rules required, but he did it with a smirk and a dry sense of humor. The schedule just said, “Week of May Fourteenth: I’ll be wherever you are (unless you leave me somewhere and tell me to stay).”

Dean crumpled it up and threw it into the trash. “I’m not leaving you anywhere this week, my love. For now, you go where I go.”

Dean hadn’t forgotten Castiel. His fiancé’s place in Dean’s heart wasn’t negotiable, and it wasn’t weak enough to be pushed out by his mate. They were just different, and each relationship would have its time and place. This time and this place was Michael’s.

Dean cleared his throat as he finished telling April and Chris-the-bodyguard the story of his Claiming again. The bodyguard snapped back to focus with a startled look around the room. He’d neglected his job while the story unfolded, transfixed and resting his ass against the top of one of the chairs in the lounge, and now he was embarrassed. He went back to his table and stood stiffly at attention next to it glancing around the mostly empty room as if dangerous predators were going to leak through the A/C vents like smoke.

April snuggled back into Castiel’s lap, content. She hoped that the Claim would mean Michael would be less standoffish with the rest of the Pack. As Omegas, they could expect to spend a great deal of their time alone together in the house, and she had noticed a certain amount of ‘sibling-rivalry’ coming off Dean’s mate. Now that the other shoe had dropped, maybe he would settle.

Dean was feeling better, but the announcement that their flight was starting to board stiffened him back up. Cas offered him two pills silently, and Dean downed them with a swig from his water bottle. Michael sent him stark disapproval about the drugs, but Dean’s responding sense of panic and
helplessness thawed Michael. He helped Dean out of his seat and through the door to the gate.

“How do you fly so often if you have to go through this every time? Doesn’t it ever get easier?”

Dean just shrugged miserably.

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The feeds were all in place, running through the tunnels to a carefully hidden trigger beside the closed circuit monitor, and they were waiting on the all clear, waiting on just the right moment. Claire sighed while Ash dozed. Getting everyone out of the building who wasn’t a target had been a master stroke in itself. Carefully laid tips and hints to just the right cronies in just the right way and at just the right time made it clear that incriminating evidence would soon come to light if the wrong person stumbled upon it first. Critical secrets would be unearthed by the wrong wolves at any moment, and it sent Gordon into a frenzy. He cleared the campus of all students, innocent staff and clients, and set only his most trusted employees tearing the place apart for whatever those carefully laid tips and hints were meant to lead them to. He thought he was protecting his interests against someone who had carelessly left evidence where it didn’t belong. When Gordon himself uncovered the bombs deep in the belly of the basement, it was too late.

The building went up in a flash that sent a shockwave across the Oklahoma landscape where residents of the nearby suburbs felt it shake them in their beds. They thought it was an earthquake at first.

Castiel and three of his housemates were in the air on their way to New York. Benny was knotted to his beta mate, sweaty and spent and happy. Bobby was house sitting at the big manor with Sam and Gabriel, playing another round of poker and getting his ass handed to him by the Omega and the beta both.

At 9:54, he and Gabriel both subtly checked the time without meeting each other’s eyes. Sam didn’t notice, as he was up refilling his glass at the bar and looking for more peanuts. The explosion wasn’t meant to look like an accident. But the trails had been immaculately laid, and they led to a goldmine of real incriminating evidence against Gordon and his team, and then it spun off into a spider’s web of possible suspects who ranged from honest-to-God lowlifes, to up-and-coming politicians, to the patently innocent, to Castiel’s mother, to their own Facility (just to make it believable, but not enough so that anything could stick). The investigators were in for about twenty years of digging before they even got close to the truth. It would go on forever if they didn’t just walk away from it, chalking the explosion up to the frontier justice that it was. After they’d finished uncovering everything that Gordon had been up to, no one would have any sympathy for his fate.

Bobby was a genius at chess, but he couldn’t play poker for shit.

Phase one was complete, and the clean-up would need all hands on deck, but for Gabriel, phase two was the real work. He had some leads, but he still had twelve Omegas yet to find and rescue, and he wasn’t going to sleep more than three hours in a night until he had them all. He laid his straight-flush out and collected his winnings with a cheeky grin.
Bye Gordon. Good riddance. I kinda hope Alistair and Ruby joined up with him after Cas fired them. That would be awesome. Unfortunately, they haven't recovered many bodies from the rubble yet.

BTW: If I don't get another chapter posted before Wednesday, it'll be because I'm going back and cleaning out the Typos that drive me crazy. I hate stupid word usage errors like there/they're/their and your/you're. I promise you all that I know the difference, but my typing sucks when my brain's feeding dialogue faster than I can take dictation. I find the mistakes supremely distracting when I read my own work, so I'mma fix them soon. Maybe this week, maybe next.
Chapter Summary

Has it been too long without anyone getting strapped? Thought so. Also, there's angst coming, totally preventable angst.

Chapter Notes

Here's the promised chapter. You know how I told some of you I didn't think things were all the way settled between Cas and Michael? Yeah, well, here's Michael's idea for a solution.

Also, the brave and wonderful Melodina (I don't know how to link to her name) has built us a Keller chart to reference. Link here:

If the link doesn't activate, you can find a live version near the top of the comments in Chapter 28. Yeah, I know, I'm incompetent, but at least I'm cute.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NOW:

“I've got an idea for getting you through this, Dean.” Michael whispered into his mate’s ear. Dean’s white-knuckled grip tightened on the arm of his first class seat at the front of the plane. Even simply trying to process Michael’s voice through the buzzing anxiety in his head made him clench up tighter. It was too much input, and he was spinning.

“Mm-mm,” Dean shook his head vehemently.

“Shh, just listen to me. We’re not even moving yet. You’re safe on the ground right now. Hang on a second.” Michael leaned in intimately close. “Baby, if you can get through takeoff and keep it together, we’ll wait until the flight attendant passes us with her cart and blocks everyone else from coming up here…” Dean leaned his head toward his mate. Michael had wormed his way through the buzzing, and he had Dean’s attention now.

Castiel sat across the aisle and a full two rows back with April. He allowed Michael to sit with Dean against his better judgement. He knew Dean. He’d been helping Dean through his phobia for literally years, and a huge part of Castiel’s Dominant wolf demanded that the thin grey wolf stay parked directly between his large paws where he always sat, where he belonged. But Castiel suppressed the wolf and allowed Michael’s Mating-bond connection a chance. Maybe he could affect a better solution through his direct link straight to Dean’s mind.
Michael chose a different route. “…Once she’s blocking out for us, we’ll slide your pants down real slow – no one will know – and you just slip right into my lap and mount up. I’ll pull a blanket over to hide it. I want you to ride me.”

“Michael…” Dean whined, the pills beginning to slow his responses. “The blanket won’t do any good. There’s no reason I’d be sitting in your lap. They’re gonna know.”

Michael kissed Dean’s cheek and positioned his lips close to Dean’s ear. “No one’s going to be passing us. We’ll be quick and sneaky. I can be quiet. The engine makes enough noise to cover, and the seatbacks are high enough. Come on, haven’t you ever?”

“No, I haven’t. Cas won’t take the risk. I almost…with Balthazar once, but I chickened out.” Dean closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was intrigued enough to think about it, but he didn’t know if he dared. His head spun with anxiety, making deciding all the harder. He swung his head around to look back at Castiel. Cas was deep in conversation with April. He wasn’t paying attention to Dean and Michael.

He let the images run through his mind. It took on a fuzzy quality as he fell a little further under the influence of Castiel’s sedative. “If we got caught, man…there would be hell to pay. They ban people from flying for shit like that.”

“You don’t have to say yes, Dean.” Michael was whispering into Dean’s ear and his breath tickled. “I just thought it might help you get your mind off what you’re feeling. I’m not in charge of you right now. It’s your call. Hey, are you still with me, or are we off the clock ’cause you swallowed those pills? Dean?”

“I’m still good for now. Gettin’ a little relaxed, though.”

“Maybe next time, then. I always wanted to join the mile-high club. Think about it for our flight home, yeah?” Michael sat back in his seat and closed his eyes for a second, his fingers still blue where Dean was cutting off the blood flow.

“Oh, hey, Dean. We’re in the air already. You didn’t even notice, did you?”

“Nice try, but yeah. I, uh, I noticed. Nearly pissed myself.” Dean’s eyes were closed tightly, and his jaw was set, but he had himself relatively together. Michael fed him a constant stream of calm reassurance. What helped the most though, was that Michael left himself completely open, and Dean could see that Michael wasn’t just putting on a brave face as Dean had always suspected about people who claimed not to fear flying. Michael was not afraid. He was concerned for Dean, but he took all the turbulence and discomfort as the cabin tilted with a level of equanimity that wasn’t faked.

Dean snuggled against his mate and tried to sleep, but he felt twitchy, so he quickly gave up. The flight attendant served them and then moved on with his cart. Dean sipped his ginger ale with a pout on his face. Michael had flatly refused to allow him any alcohol on top of the pills and threatened him with stiff punishment if he pressed the issue. Michael was incensed that Dean even asked. The medication helped Dean stay calm, but it also regressed him and pushed him eventually into his Submissive brat, and he wasn’t good at making wise choices once he slipped under.

Dean peeked at his fiancé again and found him reading on his tablet. He pulled the blanket out from its pouch and spread it over his lap and across to Michael’s as well, working it underneath their lowered trays. Michael side-eyed him with a quirk to his mouth.

“Can I help you, Dean? Are you cold?”
Dean leaned in wordlessly and slipped a hand down Michael’s pants with no preamble, took a strained, cramped hold of Michael’s dick and began a rhythmic pressure. He avoided Michael’s eye. He didn’t have enough room to work up a stroke yet. Once Michael was hard, he’d have more play. Michael chuckled, and closed his eyes just long enough to sigh and take breath in. He opened his eyes to give Dean the bad news that they needed to stop and take hold of his wrist to pull his hand back out, but he jumped when he found Castiel standing over them with an annoyed expression on his face and a stiff posture.

“Get up, Dean. You’re switching places with April. Michael, I’m disappointed that you would take advantage of him while he’s under the influence. We’ll discuss this in full later.”

Dean slipped his hand out and didn’t protest. He unbuckled his belt, grabbed his drink, and slipped guiltily past Cas, nudging April out of her seat with a whisper.

“Sir, I didn’t. He did that himself. I was just about to stop it, I swear! You have to believe me.”

The Alpha raised his eyebrows. April slipped into Dean’s empty seat with a puzzled look from Cas to Michael and back again. Castiel’s voice went low and charged, “You have until we arrive in Newark to decide how you want to explain yourself to me, Omega. Use that time wisely.” And just like that, he was gone.

Shit. Shit. Fucking SHIT.

“What happened?” April asked him.

“Mind your own fucking business,” he snapped, leaning his seat back, pulling up the blanket that Dean had left spread over his lap, and turning to face the window.

Two rows back, Dean slumped in his seat, pouting. “It was just a handy, Cas. I didn’t even unzip him. We weren’t going to get caught. You’re so uptight when you travel.”

“Save it, Dean. I’m not going to discuss this with you until the medication wears off. Go to sleep.”

The flight sucked for all four of them, and they were still cranky as Billie met them and herded them to the penthouse suite. Cas hated the frivolity of luxuries like first class seats and penthouse suites, but Billie convinced him that at times like this, when media attention was on high, appearances mattered. He was unbalanced and risked taking it out on his pack.

He stalked past the bellman once the door to the suite opened for him and threw his jacket and tie on the bed. “I’m taking a shower,” he grumbled over his shoulder as he disappeared into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Michael grimaced. Dean tipped the bellman and sent him away. Billie turned on all of them.

“What did you numskulls do now?”

“He’s fine, Billie. You know he hates traveling. Give him twenty and he’ll be right as rain.”

“Twenty. Yeah, I’ll bet. Twenty each, maybe,” she muttered, picking up one of the suitcases. “Who’s sleeping where?” She paused, unable to deliver Dean’s luggage without knowing which of the two rooms he’d be crashing in on this trip.

April hadn’t moved from her spot in the middle of the room. She was pensive, and Dean guessed she was reading Cas’ emotions. She took four steps toward the bedroom Cas had claimed for his own and began to strip, folding her clothes neatly and laying them beside her on the floor.
Dean was just about to respond to Billie, but he diverted to intercept April. “Hold up there, sweetie. You don’t have to do that. He sees you, he’s gonna take you first, and you didn’t do anything wrong. Let him take it out on me, and then you can have the lee-side of Hurricane Cas afterward.”

“Yeah,” said Michael, building himself a sandwich from the groceries in the fridge and not really giving a damn, “Dean gets the Hulk, and you can have Bruce Banner.”

“Michael, quit being such a dick. Seriously.”

Michael ignored him and started on his sandwich.

April ignored them both. She wordlessly folded her naked body into her Submissive default starting pose and waited for her Dom.

“Well, shit,” Dean muttered.

“C’mon, April,” Michael called over to her with his mouth full. “Dean’s right. This isn’t your problem.”

“She won’t talk to you now. You know that. Once a Sub’s in place, only the Dom or a natural disaster can move them.”

“You just gonna let her take the first swings, then? I figure your Sub might take exception to that. I’ve seen your wolf, man.” Michael took another bite. “You need to get in there too.”

Dean looked from April to Michael and back again. Then he looked over at Billie. She had set down his suitcase and simply waited with raised brows.

“Billie, I don’t know where the fuck I’m sleeping. Ask Michael. Or Cas.” Dean slowly pulled off his own travel suit and draped all his clothes over the back of one of the chairs. When he was naked, he stepped up to his mate and kissed him, smearing mayonnaise over his own lips. Then he whispered to him, “You too, big man. If I’m gonna do this, you’re doing it with me. Or are you willing to let that tiny woman take it for you?”

Michael gulped and his eyes went wide. “Me?!”

“He got on to both of us, dude. There’s no way this is just on me. He’ll be easier on you if you’re waiting like the good Omega boy you are than if he has to drag you to it.”

Michael wilted. Dean felt fear course through his mate, but Dean firmed his jaw without sympathy and took the plate out of Michael’s hand, setting it on the counter. “Dean, I didn’t do anything. Why would I be in trouble? Is he going to spank me?”

“I don’t know the pose. I haven’t ever done this before.”

“Bullshit. You Dom all the time. Just pretend you’re showing a new Sub what you want. Cas won’t care if your pose isn’t exactly like April’s. No more excuses.” He walked back across the room and stroked April’s hair. It’s taboo, of course, in most circumstances, to touch another’s Sub once in
pose, but Dean was making no challenge, and he really didn’t care about that rule.

Without another word or glance at Michael, Dean folded himself next to April with his knees set about six inches closer to the door than hers. He exhaled a long, relaxing, releasing breath, and then he settled.

Michael stood frozen. He could feel the shift of Dean’s state of mind. Dean wasn’t reachable to him anymore. Not really. Michael’s eyes cut over to Billie, who had settled on the long sectional under the plate-glass windows and pulled out her phone and a stylus.

She gestured wordlessly to the pair before Cas’ door with her chin and then turned to her device.

Michael hesitated only another moment. He needed to pee, but he decided to wait. How much worse would it look if Alpha emerged to find his two Subs in position and ready for him, but his last wayward Omega missing entirely? He made quick work of his clothes, hanging them next to Dean’s, and then he regarded the kneeling pair. Symmetrically, he belonged on April’s other side, but did appearances matter? Should he kneel closer to the door or flush with his mate?

He thought about why Castiel was out of sorts and where he fit in the puzzle. Unless something had happened between April and Castiel that he hadn’t seen, she was completely innocent, and she was falling on her own sword to soothe her mate, to buffer her packmates from Alpha’s bad mood, or to feed her masochist while he was riled and ready.

No matter which it was, she didn’t deserve the first strokes.

Dean had been participatory, but he’d also been drugged and potentially more open to suggestion, where he might not have been if he’d been in his right mind. The pills seemed to have worn off now. Dean’s presence through the bond with Michael cleared up rapidly over the last legs of their trip.

Michael sighed and closed his eyes. He rubbed his palms nervously over his thighs to wipe off the sweat, and the bandages caught and pulled on his leg hair uncomfortably. He checked April’s and Dean’s positioning, and he copied it, placing himself beside his mate and two inches closer to the door than Dean. He tried to catch Dean’s eye on the way down, but even though Dean had his eyes open and looking directly forward, he didn’t move or register that he knew Michael was there. Even Dean’s Bond-link didn’t waver.

Michael put his palms on his thighs and exhaled. He was tense and a little scared, but it was the best he could do.

The waiting seemed to take forever. Michael used anticipatory waiting on his own Subs all the time. They always responded better when he made them wait alone for a time before he addressed them, but he’d never wondered what it felt like in this position; knowing something’s coming, but not knowing what or when, and utterly powerless to change any of it. His mind raced through why he was here over and over and jumped with no notice to dread at what might be coming. Several times he had to stop and remind himself to breathe. Michael could hear Dean’s even, smooth inhales and exhales beside him, and he tried to copy the pace and depth, but then his mind would whirl away and take his breathing with it.

The bathroom door opened at last in a swirl of steam. Alpha emerged with a towel wrapped around his waist and rubbing another through his hair. The bedroom door was open, and he caught sight immediately of his three waifs-in-waiting. He pursed his lips and breathed out heavily through his nose.

Michael trembled.
Castiel cracked open his suitcase and dressed in no hurry. He chose a pair of tan slacks and a white dress shirt, rolling up the sleeves of the shirt. As he emerged from the bedroom, he stepped around the three waiting wolves and spoke to Billie.

“What does tomorrow look like?” It was quite late already, and they’d eaten on the plane.

“You’ve got the day to yourselves until two. I need to get everyone to the stylist by two-thirty, and after that it’s all full until after the cast party ends. Maybe try to sleep in in the morning. The party will go until three or four in the morning, and you’ve got GMA right after. You probably shouldn’t try to sleep in between the party and the interview. Makeup can only do so much for your face if you sleep a couple of hours and get yourself all puffy.”

“Thanks Billie. You’ve done a great job as usual.”

“Are you dismissing me, sir?”

“You can stay as long as you like, but you must be tired as well. It’s late, and tomorrow’s going to be busy. You have everything you need from me concerning the explosion? I don’t know what else I can do from here. I’m still a bit in shock, I think.”

“Yeah. Just let me finish up a couple more emails, and I’ll let myself out.”

“Sounds good. Thanks again, Billie.” He patted her thigh as he stood back up and turned to look at his pack. The sadist in him suggested leaving them like that for another hour or two, but he reminded himself how much would be demanded of them soon.

“All right, you three…” he approached, but stayed behind them where they couldn’t see him. “Simple answers, please. April, what is pack rule one?”

“Be obedient, Sir.”

“Dean, what’s number two?”

“Be safe, hygienic, and care for yourself and others?”

“Is that a question, Submissive?”

“No, Sir.”

“Michael, what is pack rule number three?”

“Um, I…Sir, I’m not sure which one’s which. Is it, uh, the one about respect?”

“Describe to me the one about respect.” Cas began to circle them slowly. Michael trembled again. Castiel seemed cold and emotionless, but there was an undercurrent of power restrained. Michael feared being the one to cause the dam to break, and his mind went blank.

“Sir. Alpha, um…it says, like…I think it says something about not being dicks to each other.” Michael squeezed his eyes shut and cringing. So stupid. That was just stupid!

“Very eloquently put, Michael. Thank you for simplifying rule three perfectly. All right, April, you get the next one. Rule four…” Michael nearly fainted as the Alpha moved on.

“Rule four says to keep our home and spaces neat and well-ordered, and in good repair, Sir.”

“Mm-hm. And Dean? Please finish up for us.”
“Don’t lie... ... ...Sir.”

He almost omitted the ‘Sir’, and Michael knew Castiel heard the pause. He didn’t know Dean was intentionally trying to draw Alpha’s ire to himself to protect his mate.

“Very good. I’m pleased.” He really did sound pleased. His upset from before his shower was gone. He seemed strict and stern but no longer angry. Michael understood. The willing submission by a good Bottom was often enough to bring balance to an overwrought Top. Of course, keeping the Top in that balanced state was predicated on fulfilling the promise of a message wholly delivered.

“Please answer my next questions with as much clarity, all of you.” Michael was struck by how similar their styles were. He too, liked to talk through an issue with a series of leading questions, and he too, liked to keep his Sub in position through the discussion. Michael began to relax just a little. He knew this process. It was a process, and all he had to do was get through each step.

“April, have you broken any of those five rules in the last twelve hours?”

“I disobeyed your rule about how much water I need to drink while we travel. Sir, I only drank half as much as you said to. That was disobedient of me.”

“All right. Noted. Kitten, did you believe that I was upset with you when we arrived here in the suite?”

“No, Sir, but I knew you were upset and needed an outlet. I am here and willing if you choose to use me to balance yourself.”

“Thank you, love. I accept your generous offer.” Castiel ran a gentle hand over her hair and down the side of her face. “I’ll come back for you in a bit.”

He moved on, aware of the spacing they’d placed themselves in. It spoke to their perceived relative guilt, and Castiel agreed with them.

“You two. Up. Into the bedroom and stand at the end of the bed facing the headboard.”

They scrambled to obey and set themselves shoulder-to-shoulder. Castiel left April where she was and closed the door behind him. April would be fine. She’d slept on the plane, and he knew she had it in her to hold position for hours. Her training was in full swing, and he was very pleased thus far with her effort and progress.

“Sir, I’m sorry. Can I please use the restroom before we get started?” Michael was dancing like a pup where he stood, and Cas gestured toward the bathroom, suppressing his need to shake his head. For all his dominant bravado, Michael was still such a pup at heart. Soon he was back in place beside his cohort.

Castiel stood behind them and took them both in. No bruises marred either of their bodies except where their Mating had gotten rough. Both had managed to go days without a punishment, and Cas wondered if maybe that was the reason they’d made the attempt they did. Travel was stressful for them both. He probably should have eased that strain before leaving for the airport.

“Dean, we’ve discussed airplane etiquette before. We decided, mutually, that the legal and publicity risks of getting caught with our pants down on an airplane outweighed the satisfaction promised by the Mile-High Club sales brochure. It isn’t worth it. You said you agreed with me on that. What’s changed?”

“I was really anxious, Sir, and it seemed like a good way to distract myself from my nerves. I’m
“Okay. I’ll concede that, and I’m going to alter our pack rules. I’m adding a sixth that requires all Winchester pack wolves to adhere to applicable laws. You shouldn’t have to be told that, but it looks like you were planning to use its omission as a loophole to get out of trouble. What about rule five?”

“You and I agreed to avoid sex on airplanes, Dean. That’s an agreement between us. By engaging in sex after making that agreement, you broke your word to me. I consider that a lie.”

“Oh. Yes, Sir, I guess… I agree.” Dean was busted. He hadn’t considered it from that point. It was like sentencing Al Capone on tax evasion. He had known Cas was going to spank him, but he hadn’t worked out just how his crime would be filed in the register. His fiancé was always deliberately methodical.

Castiel turned to Dean’s mate, who startled at the attention. “You, Michael. What rule did you break? Did you break a rule at all?”

“Yes, Alpha. Um.” Michael stumbled. It wasn’t the question he was expecting to be asked. He had his story about what happened all laid out in his mind, but he hadn’t tried to link it to any particular rule.

“Take your time,” Cas soothed. Michael didn’t find it soothing.

Rule one was about obeying the Alpha. Cas hadn’t ever told him not to elicit sex from his mate on a plane. Dean had shared that information after Michael asked, and Michael had called a halt. Cas’ clear displeasure had been one of the deciding factors, so Michael felt he hadn’t broken that one, exactly. He had been instructed to watch over Dean when he was vulnerable and to keep him safe, but Michael didn’t quite feel the situation pulled against rule one. Rule two would only have applied if their activities mussed them up or harmed one of them. Even drugged, Michael didn’t think a quickie with his mate would injure Dean, physically, psychologically, or otherwise, as long as no one saw them, and Michael felt certain they could have pulled it off in secret. That one shouldn’t apply either.

Rule three. That one was about respect. The one about respect…what else did it say? Obey the wolves above you and protect the ones below you in the pack. Michael stuck on rule three. Sam and Cas had spoken to Michael over the last couple of weeks about how his rank was separate from his role as a Top over his mate. Castiel had made it clear on several occasions that he considered Michael to be a Top and to bear all of the responsibilities of that station, regardless of his Pack rank. A tryst in confined spaces on a plane wouldn’t hurt Dean, of that Michael was sure, but planting the idea in the head of a compromised Sub set him up for trouble when his poor judgment grabbed the idea like a brass ring.
“Sir.” His voice cracked as he shoved the unhappy words through unwilling pipes, and he cleared his throat. “Sir, I broke rule number three. I suggested Dean try to relax through the flight by riding me when the flight attendant had passed. I knew he was drugged, and I suggested it anyway. As soon as he told me you didn’t like him doing it, and as soon as I realized how much of an effect the pills were having on him, I called it off, but the idea was already planted. I did that. I apologize, Sir. I should have protected my mate from himself. Instead, I planted a bad idea in his head, and I hesitated to stop him when he put his hand on my dick because it felt too good. I really was about to stop him, Sir, but that’s no excuse.”

Michael’s confidence grew as he spoke. He was seeing the issue from a Top’s perspective, so he managed to touch on all the points Castiel had been hoping to hear. The problem was that he couldn’t be punished as a Top. He was in the wrong headspace. Castiel wanted him Omega, so he turned the matter over to his leashed wolf.

Dean felt the change immediately, and his cock hardened where he stood. He struggled to stand still, wanting desperately to drop to his knees and swallow his fiancé’s cock in long strokes. Cas picked up on some tell or other from Dean and he growled a menacing whisper, “Wait your turn.”

Dean whimpered, and his cock hardened further.

Castiel turned back to Michael. “No. It’s no excuse.” His voice had lowered and become a gravel-scratch. Castiel saw Michael wilt like a tulip in hot weather. A golden rim appeared around Michael’s eyes. Cas pressed him. “This is not the first time you’ve failed as a Top where Dean’s consent was concerned. I’m extremely disappointed that the issue has come up after you promised me it would never happen again.”

Michael whimpered and looked down at the floor, unable to meet the Alpha’s eyes. “Consent is not this difficult, Michael. You don’t initiate activities with another wolf unless you can do so with their enthusiastic explicit consent, given to you while they are in full use of their competent adult faculties. It’s that easy.”

Castiel took hold of the back of Michael’s neck and squeezed it. Michael swayed. “Your Submissive mate grants you authority to take liberties with explicit consent only while he’s not under the influence of drugs and only within the confines of your agreement with him. Is any of this confusing to you?”

Michael shook his head miserably, his eyes welling dangerously. “What got into you, Michael?”

“I…I…wanted to help him get through it – through the flight. He was so scared.”

“I don’t like having to see Dean that way either, but he’ll live. He’s working on it, and we are going to keep helping him, but not by breaking the law and not by taking advantage of him when he can’t make appropriate decisions for himself.”

“Alpha?” Michael’s voice was small. He didn’t know where this need he felt was coming from, but he hoped the Alpha would help him with it.

“Yes, Michael?”

“Will you please punish me?” The Dom in Michael rolled his eyes and threw his hands up in the air. What the fuck? But the trembling Omega stood his ground.

“I will. Thank you for taking this seriously.” Castiel’s Alpha calmly slipped the wolf back under now that it had achieved Cas’ goal and Michael stood ready. In time, Cas knew he would have to practice
taking Michael there without leaning on the wolf to do it for him, but he allowed himself a learning
curve. Michael’s designations were a challenge to untangle, and Cas had no illusions that he would
always get it right. After years of taking punishments through his Dominant, Michael needed a break.

“Place yourselves over the bed. I want each of you on a different side.” Cas gestured Dean around
the bed to the left and Michael around to the right. They positioned themselves so that their heads
were both in the middle near one another. Dean took Michael’s hand and held it, but he closed his
eyes.

Castiel dug his belt from where he had dropped his clothes when he took a shower, and Michael
decided that was a good time to close his own eyes. A shiver went up Michael’s legs, and he felt an
answering one from Dean, but he didn’t think the shivers were all about the same thing exactly.

“Dean, you’ll go first. Don’t get up until I release you both.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Dean mumbled.

Castiel smacked his fiancé’s ass hard with his hand. He did it again. And again. He set up a quick
and steady rhythm, pinking Dean’s backside soundly. Dean squeezed Michael’s hand and kept his
Mating-link wide open. He didn’t tear up, but he grunted when Cas’ strikes landed on the crease
below his ass. After several minutes, Castiel paused, and Dean let out an explosive exhale followed
by a deep breath in. Cas wasn’t through yet.

The Alpha used his own feet to nudge Dean’s further apart, quite far in fact, opening up his stance
and giving access to his inner thighs and sit spots. Cas went back to work, bringing color to Dean’s
thighs, and the Sub whined. It was a simple correction spanking, not a deep punishment. Dean
needed the consistency of straightforward consequences, but his Alpha wasn’t angry with him. After
a final round, Cas picked up his belt and applied seven lines across Dean’s ass; enough for him to
feel it in his sleep, and then he laid the belt down.

Cas ran a loving hand over Dean’s back as he crossed to the other side of the bed, ending with a
caress through his hair.

“Can you feel your mate, Michael? Do you see how this works to bring him peace?” Castiel stroked
Michael’s back in the same way he had Dean’s.

“Yes, Alpha. I can feel him.”

“Are you ready, Omega? You can expect to find a similar peace when we’re finished if you look for
it. I know you feel awful right now, and I can help you let it go, but it will only work if you’re honest
with yourself about your actions and you don’t fight me.”

Dean shifted his head and opened his eyes so he could keep watch over his frightened mate. He
dared not speak, but he squeezed Michael’s hand again. His ass burned. He wanted to rub the sting
out, but he knew he couldn’t do that either. Dean was just glad Alpha had allowed him to stay for
Michael rather than stand him on display in the corner.

Cas slapped Michael’s ass twice with little strength, getting a feel for his swing and placement, and
then he went to work. Michael’s spanking was both longer and more intense. Even with just his
hand, Castiel had Michael up on his toes in no time, gritting his teeth and clenching his eyes through
the pain. Michael’s grip on Dean’s hand returned the favor from Dean’s fear on the airplane, and
Dean’s fingers took a turn at going blue.

After several minutes of ceaseless swats, Michael broke and sobbed. He resisted kicking out with
great effort and used his Mating-bond to pull self-restraint from his mate who sent him strength in constant waves. Castiel repeated the same pattern he’d applied to Dean. He shifted to Michael’s inner thighs and sit spots after a good five minutes working over the meat of his backside. Michael wasn’t accustomed to being struck there, whether in his Omega or his Dom, and his eyes flew wide as the sting heated his thighs. He cried out with increasing volume and fervor, but he managed to hold position like a strong Omega.

Castiel slowed to a stop and wiped the sweat from his brow, exhaling deeply. “You’re doing well, Michael. Just one more phase to go, and then you’ll be through.” Cas retrieved the belt again. He took a moment to gather himself and check the Omega’s trembling form. Michael’s breathing through his sobs was steady and unpanicked. He was in pain, full of dread for the last part, but he wasn’t unduly anxious anymore.

Castiel had never laid his hand across Michael before, and he wanted this first time to set a precedent that Michael could turn back to any time he felt frightened of Cas’ wolf. Castiel needed the punishment to be fittingly severe, but not harsh or scary. He also wanted Michael to stop putting Dean into inappropriate situations that might result in a Submissive fall.

Castiel took another deep breath and then swung hard. The SWAP echoed in the large bedroom and sent Michael lurching forward with a scream. A line appeared across his butt deeper and redder than the ones on Dean’s ass. Michael fought internally as his Dom tried to take back over and get them both the hell out of that room, but Michael’s Omega fought back harder and refused to yield the playing field. They snarled at each other until the next stroke knocked them both off their feet with another yelp of pain. The Dom fled, and the Omega breathed and centered himself with conviction. The third stroke fell, and the radiating heat made him reconsider. He wondered why he had fought for this as his eyes teared back up painfully and he lost his breath for a minute.

Fifteen strokes. Castiel kept it up at just that intensity for fifteen strokes. Michael was a snotty, sobbing, trembling mess at the end, but his Omega nodded his head in grim, firm satisfaction, and let the guilt go. Michael’s wolf sat far away and watched the Omega with wide, impressed eyes as the Omega dusted himself off and strode away at a stately, dignified pace, limping only a little.

That little dude could take a lot.

Cas kissed him on his brow, leaning over the Omega, and stroking his back. “I love you both, and I want you to get to sleep right away. No sex and no talking, understand?”

“We’re staying in here? Just Michael and me?” asked Dean, stamping his foot which had fallen asleep.

“Yes. Our travelling doesn’t change my commitment to give you and Michael a full Mating-moon to yourselves. Crawl up in the bed. We’ll sort luggage in the morning.” Cas helped them both work their way onto the bed and under the covers. He kissed Michael’s forehead, and he kissed Dean’s lips, then he turned the light off and opened the door. “Thank you – both of you. I’m very proud of you both. Good night.”

“Night, Alpha,” they chorused, leaning in and clinging to each other.

The suite doors were heavy, and they didn’t hear the Alpha collect his mate and take her to bed. They whispered quietly together for a few minutes and let their bonds say everything they couldn’t put into words, as usual. Michael had never known the solidarity of sharing a punishment with someone else, someone loved and trusted, and he found great comfort in having Dean beside him, both of them still hurting.
“Hey, Dean?” he whispered into the darkness.

“Mm-hm?”

“How long does it take for our birth control to work its way out and for us to be fertile again?”

“I don’t know for sure. Doctors usually tell you to wait a couple of months at least, but I don’t know what the actual timeline is.”

“Aren’t you a doctor?”

“Not a medical one. Got my PhD in Comparative Behavioral Development. Cas is the one with both medical doctorate and a PhD. He’s the overachiever, not me.”

“You go into Rut in July?”

“Yeah, second week. Usually hits me on the seventh or eighth. January and July. It’s too soon, baby. I know where you’re going with this. Even if we stopped the birth control tomorrow morning, it’s less than two months. It’s too soon. Plus, your Keller test is between now and then. It’s too big a risk.”

“My Keller is in exactly one month. I’d still be safe then, wouldn’t I? Besides, I plan to do all the Topping. I can’t get pregnant if I don’t take the Bottom position.”

“Shh, baby. Whisper, remember? I don’t want another spanking tonight.”

“Sorry, Dean.” Michael lowered his voice again and nuzzled into his mate.

Dean took the discussion back up. “I know you want this. Baby, I know you do. I’m right there with you, but it’s just… Your last round is going to be with an alpha-Dom. Even if your Dom outscores his, whoever he is, he’s an alpha, and he’ll probably take you. It’s not worth the risk.”

“It’s not Castiel?”

“No. If they won’t let me do it because of my bond with you, …my bondsss, I mean,” Dean smirked in the dark, “they’re not going to let him do it either. He Claimed you. Besides, there are two sides to fertility for you. Your first round is with an Omega. If you’re not on the pill, and you Top…Michael, you run the risk of paternal conception.”

“What if we could get the test moved up? I’ve already passed the minimum wait time. I was originally scheduled to be tested over a week ago. Is there anyone we can conspire with? Can we come up with a reason to move it up? Maybe say our pack dynamics are all fucked because we don’t know for sure where I fall.”

Dean chewed his lip and let his hand run tenderly across Michael’s hips and ass. It was risky even to consider playing this game, but Dean could read what was driving Michael’s impatience, and he had powerful reasons of his own to drive the same road. Dean prayed silently that Michael didn’t catch on to any of those reasons. There would be awful hell to pay when it all shook out, but by then it would be too late to change course. Time was running out though. If they were going to do it, it needed to be now.

“I can’t get through the turnstiles at work if I’m off my BC. I’d need an inside helper to change the codes, and that would get someone fired.”

“No, we can’t get anyone fired. What if I put a Mate-restriction on you that you can’t fuck at work at
all? Would they care if you’re on birth control if you aren’t allowed to fuck?”

Dean pinched his lips between his teeth and thought about it. “If you and I both stop taking birth control starting tomorrow, and I tell Cas that you forbid me to fuck anyone at work, it might work. But what about if you don’t wind up Topping during your Keller?”

“Whoever Tops me, IF they Top me, they’d be on the pill too, right?”

“Jesus, Michael. Cas is going to kill us when he finds out we did this without talking to him. This is my marriage we’re talking about, man. I don’t know if I can do it. You saw how he feels about lying.” Dean crossed metaphysical fingers that Michael bit the hook and ran with it. He couldn’t do this one by himself.

The Universe forgive him, he needed Michael to run the gauntlet with him.

“Dean, I know I have been anything BUT supportive of your marriage, but I’m ready to change that. I see what he gives you and how much he cares about you, and I can see this too…” Michael massaged the ocean of love within Dean’s core that covered every aspect of his regard for Michael and the Pack, including Castiel. It tickled a little. “We’re still going to talk to him about it, and if he comes around and gives us his blessing, a couple of days off our meds isn’t going to make a difference. He’ll never even know. But if he doesn’t agree…”

Michael took a deep breath and shifted up onto his hip from where he’d settled on his belly. “Alpha’s all about balance. He wants his Pack balanced; he wants his relationships balanced. He gave his name away for yours to even out the imbalance.”

Dean nodded in the darkness. Their eyes had adjusted. Enough light leaked past the heavy curtains from the sleepless city that they could both see. “Dean, he and I are not balanced. No matter how much I’ve come to accept how it’s going to be, he still stole from me. I should have had you to myself, but I didn’t. I don’t. I never will. He owes me. It’s a simple matter of pack justice.”

Dean thought about it, and he could see it from Michael’s perspective. It was a brat’s view, and Castiel was sure to object. Dean had a hell of a choice in front of him.

And Michael only knew part of it.

“What I’m asking you to do is huge. I know that. I’m asking you to go behind your fiancé’s back before you even tie the knot and give me a puppy whether he says it’s okay or not. I want the firstborn pup in this Pack. That’s what will balance things between us, between him and me. I don’t see another way, and I’ll take it happily with his blessing, but I’ll steal it from him like he stole from me if I have to.”

“Jesus, Michael…” Dean breathed softly. Dean explored Michael’s emotions and found him standing resolute. Michael’s wolf and his Omega were in full agreement with each other for once, but Dean sensed it wasn’t for the same reason. The Dominant wolf wanted a reckoning, but the Omega wanted… Dean’s heart went out to the young man who’d never yet in his life been allowed to have anything he really wanted in its entirety. There were always caveats or outright denial.

Dean followed up. “I never meant to ask his permission anyway. We were asking for his blessing and asking for help shifting resources around to accommodate the change to the Pack. Baby, he doesn’t get to say yes or no on this. I mean it.”

“He thinks he does, Dean,” Michael whispered fiercely. “I’m asking you to stand up to him if he tries to shut us down, and if you can’t get him to budge…just to go ahead with it anyway. Take whatever
ramifications he throws at us afterward if we have to, beg forgiveness if we can’t get permission.”

“I’m not ASKING permission! Damnit!”

“Shhh!”

“Michael. What you’re asking me to do…it could destroy his trust in me. It could destroy our marriage. I don’t see why we’d need to go behind his back.”

“It’s your decision, Dean. If he sees it as a matter that requires his permission, and then he closes the topic for good… But he won’t do that, will he? It probably won’t be necessary anyway. We’ll keep thinking of another way, and I don’t want to drive a wedge between you. I know that goes against everything I’ve said before, but see for yourself. I’m wide open. Dean, I want a pup. I want to be a mother. I’m going to make a good one, I can feel it. This is what I want, and I think no matter how it happens, in the end, we’ll be a stronger Pack… and more balanced.”

“And what about the pup? You don’t use an innocent baby to throw javelins at your rival.”

“The pup will be fine. The pup gets a strong, loving Pack where it is so wanted that we stood up and fought just to give it the right to exist. It’s more love than I ever got as a pup.”

“Let me sleep on it. I don’t know. It’s a lot to take in. I love you.” Dean didn’t try to hide the squiggle of guilt in his gut. Michael would feel it. But he wouldn’t have any way of tracing it to its source. Dean could feel something big coming. His backside throbbed.

“I love you, too. And Dean? I’m not evil to want this. Sometimes you know something’s right for you even when every logical argument says it’s not. This is right for me. I need you to see that.”

“Good night, Michael.”

“Night, Dean.”

***************

In the morning, late in the morning, Dean stood fresh from the shower. He’d brushed his teeth, and he’d cleaned himself inside and out. He stood naked before the bathroom mirror, dewy from the humidity, holding a small green pill in his palm.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he tipped his hand over and let the pill fall into the running water in the sink and down the drain. Dean blinked rapidly at the flush of adrenalin he felt as he watched that tiny pill disappear. His backside twitched, and he rubbed a hand over the welts remaining from last night. They weren’t bad.

Dean exited the bathroom and met Michael’s eye. Michael was pulling a sock up over his heel. He knew Dean was conflicted, and he knew Dean had reached a decision, but he couldn’t tell which one. Dean said, “I’m actually putting more trust in Castiel here than I am in you and me put together, but I’m in. Let’s make a baby.”

Michael’s smile took up his entire face, and his eyes glistened with triumph. He swept Dean up in a
hug and spun him off his feet.

“Whoa! Dude! Put me down! Hey,” Dean caught the floor with his feet and stumbled to a stop, clutching his mate. “We’re doing this my way, and that means we go full disclosure unless he slams a door on us. You got it? No posturing, no deception (except, no, I’m not telling him where my pills are going to), and no pretending to ask for permission. We straight-up tell Cas that we’ve decided it’s time for us, and we go from there. Let me do the talking.”

“Wait until we get home, Dean. A couple more days won’t matter, and that’s the timeline he already set.”

“Okay, but the longer we wait, the longer the strapping when he finds out we lied to him.”

Michael’s hand rubbed over his butt and his face paled a little, but he nodded, still resolute.

Chapter End Notes

It just might get a little angsty after this. I can't help it, I love it when they fight.
Chapter Summary

I'm trying to think of something pithy, quirky, or witty to say about their visit to New York, but I got nothin'. Four Lupins visit New York City and see a show.

Chapter Notes

Hey all. My work schedule is changing again. I'm moving from Wednesday - Saturday to Sunday - Wednesday. That means that this week I wasn't supposed to get a day off at all, but they took pity on me and gave me today. You won't get your usual 2 - 3 chapters, just this one. I'll be back on Thursday with the same Bat-stuff on the same Bat-channel.

I loved the feedback from the last chapter. Looks like it's almost unanimous that Dean and Michael are on a deadly and ill-advised course. Time will tell how it plays out.

Please note that Melodina's wonderful graph is now linked to the fic. Check it out. We will add Michael when it's time.

Also, if you haven't read the1Nblack's "Two World's Collide," go read it here in AO3. I'm still incompetent, so I don't know how to link you there directly, but you're all smarter than I am, so I'm sure you can get there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Just tell me straight out, Billie,” Cas whispered in the quiet of the morning light, seated in his bathrobe at the suite’s kitchen table. “Did we do this?” Billie just looked at him. He didn’t need to ask. Castiel knew. Bobby, for once, had done the right thing and run it through the Alpha before he moved. But Cas didn’t know who else might be involved, and asking Billie served a dual purpose. If she was already in the know, he’d have a confidant to help him funnel instructions and communications through to Bobby. If she wasn’t, then she could face the upcoming press and investigators’ questions with a clear conscience in a way that was not necessary to fake, and he could use her ignorance of his involvement as a smokescreen. Genuine regret over the senseless loss of life in Oklahoma would come across better without the need to hide guilt behind her eyes. “I have to know what’s coming down the pike for us. I have to know how to respond.” He narrowed his eyes and held hers. “Have we become murderers?”

Billie’s pause while she studied him was all the answer he needed, so he nodded and sat up straight. “What does Bobby need from me now?” Cas ran a hand down his face. He was tired and strung-out. He hadn’t slept at all through the long dark night hours in the strange hotel.

Billie sighed. “I issued your statement to the press. This morning’s paper is full coverage of the explosion, and they’re already drawing correlations between yesterday’s bombing and back to Timothy McVeigh. Most every significant leader in the Lupin community has a quote in there somewhere, denouncing the violence and loss of life.”

“What conclusions are being drawn? Are there suspects yet?”

Billie scoffed a humorless chuckle. “Everything from Muslim terrorists to Russian mafia. Your mother’s name comes up a lot. Her newest tirades seem badly timed, and I suspect she could get way more than her fair share of the fallout.”

Cas peeked out at her through the fingers scrubbing his eyes. He didn’t know how to feel about that revelation. A hit at Naomi was usually a good thing, but she didn’t deserve to be blamed for this, and deep down, she was still Pack. Cas felt a wave of protectiveness pass through him. He sighed heavily. Billie refilled his coffee cup.

“You’ve done all you need to for now. Bobby wants you out of the loop. Can you try to get some sleep?”

Cas felt…twitchy. His face tic’ed occasionally, and he couldn’t stop rolling his shoulders, readjusting his arms on the table, and generally fidgeting restlessly. “I hated the bastard so much for what he did, and I’m glad he went up in a billion bloody pieces of meat. I should feel something like regret over this.” He let his head fall to the table in a rare sign of emotional weakness. She waited while he regrouped and sat up again. “But I don’t. I don’t regret a single damn part of it, and if I had the decision to make all over again, I’d still say yes.”

Billie studied her lap and worked her lips and her jaw, thinking. “Cas…”

“I know. I need not to say anything more. I know. But I want you to know that you don’t have to protect me. I’ll play whatever part Singer tells me to.” Cas stood up and carried his empty cup to the sink. “Tell him he’s still on my shit-list. Tell him if he drags Gabriel into this and my brother gets hurt, there’s no fixing anything.”

“Cas,” she was still whispering, but she grew even quieter. “Gabe’s already in it up to his eyeballs. He needs to be. He needs this, don’t you see? Please don’t try to wrap him in bubble wrap. You know he doesn’t work that way.”

He turned alarmed eyes on her, and she was quick to respond. “He didn’t take part in the bombing.
Bobby’s got him on lockdown in the manor, but he’s got Gabe squirreling information to dig up the whereabouts of the twelve missing Omegas. He’s making some progress, too. He’s following up on a couple of leads, and it looks promising. With Gordon dead, his whole operation’s in chaos, and Gabe’s right there to pick up the dribbling pieces. Please don’t try to stop him, Alpha. Gabe’s good at this. Let him try.”

“What’s Benny’s role?”

“Benny’s not in it. Neither is Dean. Bobby wants it kept clean and simple. It’s just you, me, and Bobby from The Facility. Everyone else is off-campus and unconnected.”

“Ash and Gabe were at The Facility two weeks ago. That’s not ‘unconnected’.”

“It’s a loose end that we’re aware of. It’s manageable. We’re on it.”

Castiel approached the beta. He touched her head where she sat and pulled her to lean into his side, stroking her hair. “Just take care of yourself, beta. And take care of my brother.”

“I will, Cas. And I’m going to take care of you, too – just like always. Trust me.”

“I do, Billie. I always do.”

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April woke slowly to an empty bed. Every muscle group was sore. She stretched her arms over her head and grimaced at the pull of inflamed skin across her shoulders. She let herself slump lazily back into the pillow with satisfaction. She was sore in all the right ways; in all the right places.

Alpha had been on fire last night. Revved up over his too frequent run-ins with his two delinquents, Cas’ face had held cold fury and tension that he unleashed upon her tiny body with abandon. April had once spent many an hour secreted away in her home as an adolescent, hands on her own body, fantasizing about a faceless, nameless Dominant wolf who wouldn’t flinch at using her like the whipping-boy she was. The reality of what it felt like to be at his mercy in real life, and to be nothing but a fuckhole and a firm piece of meat for him to strike again and again overwhelmed her in the best possible way. Her pulse raced as she relived the moment late in the night when the buckle-end of his belt tore a gash across her outer thigh, and she’d thought for a moment that the pain would make her pass out.

Biting her lower lip, she slipped a hand down that thigh and fingered the bandage that he must have placed on her while she slept. Did this count as unacceptable touching? Is wasn’t overtly sexual, but it was definitely erotic. April took the chance and let her fingers trace the edges of the bandage that she’d earned fair and square, humming contentedly to herself.

She sent Alpha a stroke to let him know she was awake and got one back in return. He was close – still in the suite, probably in the kitchen, but April wasn’t ready to face the day. She rolled over and grunted at the pain in her backside and hip as she put pressure on those muscles in their turn, but she liked it. She let herself doze off again. She could tell that her Alpha wasn’t as settled as she wanted him, not as settled as she was herself, but he’d told her not to worry about it, and she trusted him to know what was best. He had…other outlets he could turn to, if he would just do it already.
They only had a couple of days in New York City. Michael had never visited before, and he would have liked a chance to scout around a bit. He and Dean had slept late though. There wasn’t time; not today anyway. Saturday would be filled to the brink with Broadway premiere ‘stuff’, and Sunday morning was “Good Morning America, Weekend Edition.” If they weren’t too exhausted from the overnight, he wondered if he could talk Dean into exploring with him Sunday after a nap. Monday, they would grab a rental car and drive to Boston to tour the ACRI Facility there. Cas wanted to check in on it firsthand, and Dean wanted to show it off to his new mate and mate-in-law like a proud Papa.

Billie was gone by the time Michael and Dean emerged, washed and fully dressed late in the morning. Dean made a beeline to straddle his fiancé’s lap while Michael went right for the food – room service laid out as a buffet on the kitchen counter.

“What are we doing this morning, Alpha?” Michael asked over his shoulder as he filled a plate. He didn’t get an answer, and he understood why once he turned. Answers are difficult to enunciate when someone else’s tongue is occupying your throat. Dean’s hips, canted back to keep his cock clear of contact, ground his ass shamelessly into Castiel’s lap, and Dean’s fingers clutched at Castiel’s skin. The Alpha’s bathrobe slipped off one shoulder, and the lead dog was giving as good as he got with wet suctioning noises, and bruising handholds of his own.

“I’ve missed you, Dean,” Cas whispered into Dean’s ear. Michael sighed, then he cracked his neck to the side and pulled out a chair opposite the grinding, groping couple and sat down to eat.

“You okay, Cas?” Dean whispered back. “You seem off. I can still smell stress on you.” Dean leaned in to scent Castiel’s throat and his hands massaged his Alpha’s shoulders. “You need me, I’m there.” Dean pulled back to catch Cas’ eyes.

“I’ll be fine, Dean. I’m just tired. I didn’t sleep. This thing in Oklahoma’s got me upset, and I just couldn’t settle.” Cas’ words were dismissive, but his hands stayed tightly clutching the wolf on his lap.

Dean took him in for a moment, then he pivoted to speak to Michael. Most of what he said wasn’t verbal, and Michael knew what he wanted before he even opened his mouth.

“Come on, man. He needs it. We’ve gone three months now without regular scenes.”

Michael wanted to protest. Castiel had April. They’d played just last night. He knew they had. Why should Cas still be off balance? Why couldn’t Dean just be his for one month? But Dean’s pleas through their bond were based off true concern, and Michael could see the state Cas was in. He’d committed to working things out with Cas with reason and practicality. It looked like one month was going to be too much to ask. Dean didn’t need it. His wolf was in good shape after the corrections it had taken over the last few weeks, but Cas wasn’t getting the same payout.

“There’s not time.” It was a weak protest, and Michael didn’t really expect it to fly. They had four hours before Billie needed to collect them to pretty them all up.

Dean sent him a bitchface through the bond and doubled up with his physical face. “Michael, you promised.”

Neither of you touches your dick, Dean.”

Dean rolled his eyes, but he slid off Cas’ lap and pulled Castiel to his feet. The Alpha had allowed Dean to make the deal for him. He’d committed to giving them a full month, and he meant to honor that, but he really couldn’t continue for another two weeks without a fix. Cas was addicted to Dean, despite being Mated, and no one else would do. “Come on, Alpha. You know you wanna,” Dean teased him as he led him to the room he’d shared with Michael and closed the soundproof door.

Dean loved this hotel chain for far more than its soundproofing. The Facility promoted the hotel in its literature and kept a contract up to support each other mutually because each site was constructed with Lupins in mind. Each hotel had a number of soundproof rooms stocked with sturdier-than-standard furniture and a fridge full of nutritious food and drinks. Laundry services on premises replace soiled linens and clothing on a faster schedule than normal hotels, and the workers all knew how to remove stains involving every bodily fluid. They also kept a list of local support resources close at hand for emergencies that came up regularly where wolves were involved.

Cas had laughed at April’s concern that he might need to return the sex toys the concierge sent up to them overnight. The hotel kept a varied supply. She wanted to keep them all. “They’re single-use, Kitten. I’ll buy you good ones when we get home if you like these, but no, we don’t have to return them. No one wants to use toys that have been up someone else’s channel.” He thought her blush was adorable, and he kissed her pinkened cheeks, all four of them.

Dean stripped. Again.

Seriously. Again.

He settled back into his pose, keeping his eyes on his Dom and wondering if Cas knew what he needed yet. Dean’s ass wasn’t even pink anymore, although he had seven tightly spaced red lines across it, barely there, just a hint. Castiel stood by the door, his eyes unfixed, chewing on his lip. He closed his eyes, breaking all contact with his Sub, and centering himself.

“Are you sure, Dean? I don’t need this. I can get through the month like I promised.”

Dean smirked. “Right. Of course, you can.” He threw enough attitude in his tone to irritate Castiel’s wolf, and the Alpha’s eyes opened and hardened. “Just don’t touch my dick. Michael might have to spank you for that…”

Dean’s brat was playing with him, teasing him, provoking him, and Cas stepped away from the door and gripped his neck in a tight hold. Dean turned it up. “How’s your mate this morning, Alpha? She a little hard-worn? Bruised? You ride her hard and put her away wet? You didn’t break her, did you? Little thing like that could snap in half if you’re not careful.”

Castiel didn’t exactly rise to the challenge. He tightened his grip but simply raised one brow and smirked back at his Sub, looking down into Dean’s beautiful green eyes. He wanted to take the Sub apart slowly. He wanted Dean’s cries, screams, and his pleading wails to echo from the high ceiling, but he needed to stay in control. He needed to keep his promise to Michael as closely as he could. He just needed a fix, not a full scene, and he enjoyed Dean’s taunts. April, much as he adored her, much as she met every desire of his Alpha, never taunted him.

“She’s fine, Pet. Don’t worry your pretty head about her. I suggest you worry about your own skin instead.” Cas lifted Dean’s chin. “Did you and Michael follow my instructions last night and go straight to sleep?”

“No, Sir.” Dean wasn’t ashamed of his answer. He didn’t blink or dodge. He simply answered and
waited for the next question.

Cas’ eyebrows went up again, in surprise this time. He thought he’d left them both spent and punished enough that they would fall asleep immediately, cradled in each other’s arms. Obviously, he’d miscalculated.

“Did you have sex?”

“No, Sir.”

“Did you stay up, talking?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I see. How late?”

“I dunno. Couple of hours, maybe.”

Castiel chuckled and patted his brat’s cheek. “I wonder if you’re capable of behaving yourself for ten minutes straight sometimes, my love.”

“I will if you make me,” Dean snarked. He hid his worry that Cas might ask what he and Michael had talked about. It wasn’t time yet. He wanted to hold on to his illusions for as long as he could. Sue him, he’d always been selfish that way.

“Would you like to have something to think about while you’re sitting through tonight’s long performance, Pet? I can make you sting all evening if you ask me to.”

Dean couldn’t hide the want in his eyes, nor the whine in his throat. Cas was holding himself back with the leash tightly coiled around his fist. His wolf, straining at the lead, whined back in answer, and drooled a little into the grass.

“Yes, please…” Dean answered as softly as he could say it and still be heard.

“On the bed, then. All fours.” Dean popped up and nearly took his Dom out in his hurry, and Cas had to close his eyes again and grit his teeth to keep himself from laughing outright at the puppylike enthusiasm. It never got old. Cas took a deep breath and then slowly unwound the leash from his tight grip, letting his wolf bound forward to tackle Dean’s in playful mirth. They’d obviously missed each other. Cas sucked at Dean’s shoulders and ran his hands all over the man’s body. Everywhere except where he’d promised not to.

“Whatever you need, Alpha,” Dean told him over his shoulder, a tremble of anticipation rolling across his shoulders.

“I need you screaming, Dean. Will you scream for me?”

“Make me.”

The large wolf growled at him and bit his shoulder hard enough to hurt. Challenge accepted. Dean flinched but didn’t cry out. Castiel disappeared from above him and another shudder went through the Sub at the loss of his warmth.

Alpha dug through Dean’s luggage until he found a bottle of lube in an outside pocket. He stripped out of his bathrobe slowly, letting it fall carelessly to the floor, taking a moment to watch his twitching Sub whose eyes never left the Dom as long as their positions allowed him to see. Cas
knew many Doms found having a Sub’s eyes meet their own to be an unacceptable challenge, but he liked the feeling it elicited. Cas wanted into the secret world of the wolf, and the most direct path was always through eye contact, so he insisted his Subs keep their eyes trained on his unless he moved where they couldn’t do it. Dean, well-trained after all these years, rarely even blinked.

Cas nodded in approval and walked back around behind his boy, letting their gazes break. Dean lowered his head between his arms and relaxed. “Down on your elbows, Pet.” Dean didn’t move until Cas struck his outer thigh and forced him down with a forearm across his back, snarling and digging an elbow in painfully. Dean huffed as he lowered.

“Don’t move until you’re told to.” Cas gripped the back of Dean’s thigh and thrust two slick fingers into his hole, sinking them deep in one firm push and bottoming all the way out. Dean gasped and bowed his back. The pain outweighed the pleasure at this early stage, and he took a minute to brace himself and relax into it. Castiel growled again. “Don’t. Move."

The Sub breathed fast through his nose, clenched his eyes closed, and tried to stay still, tried to relax. He was teetering between rolling into full submission and sticking his brat’s nose in again to see how much he could pull from his Dom. What did Cas need from him in this moment – a struggle or compliance? Dean took a deep breath, relaxed his ass, and shoved himself backward onto Castiel’s slick hand in a move that couldn’t be interpreted as anything but intentional. He rocked there for three or four pulses before the Alpha stripped his fingers out painfully, manhandled Dean back to the floor on his knees, and thrust his cock deep into Dean’s throat. He held Dean on his cock, buried up to the bulge where his knot would pop. Dean couldn’t breathe. His eyes watered, and his gag-reflex churmed his throat around the Alpha’s dick. He struggled against Cas’ hold, lips stretched wide, beating at his legs with clenched fists, and trying to rise. Cas had a firm, solid grip of his head, and a good many hairs at the sensitive nape of his neck. Dean was nailed fast in place.

“Let me know when you’re ready to try again, Pet. I’ve got a great deal of patience, and I’m not the one robbed of oxygen.” Cas thrust his hips minutely, not enough to pull free and allow Dean a breath, but enough to keep him gagging uncomfortably. Dean fought the urge to vomit. Throwing up was essentially the same as calling a safeword. It meant full stop until the Dom knew he was all right, and Dean did NOT want to stop. He moaned pitifully, struggling to keep his defiance, but even bratty wolves need to inhale. In very little time, Dean gave in, tapping Cas’ thigh three times in their agreed upon version of ‘Uncle’, and letting his muscles go slack.

Cas pulled out slowly. Dean gasped in a breath, coughing on the exhale, crumpling to the floor.

“Shall we try it again?”

Dean nodded and pulled himself back onto the bed, going down onto his elbows and rocking his ass up to angle his hole in presentation. “Mmm, very nice, Submissive. Much better.” Cas re-slicked his fingers and went right back to work opening his Sub up. He massaged Dean’s prostate and added a third finger soon enough that Dean had to breathe through the stretch again. Both of them were hard and panting as Cas worked him open deliberately. He licked, nuzzled, and nipped Dean’s back as he moved his fingers in and out, leaving red or purple marks across the freckled expanse. Michael had not forbidden him from marking Dean, and he intended to leave ‘Castiel was here’ across the Sub’s entire back.

“Don’t come while I’m fucking you, Pet. But if you want to when I strike you, go right ahead. Understand?” Cas removed his fingers and pressed his cock to Dean’s swollen, slick entrance.

“Sir.” It was all Dean could manage. His wolf was in front, and the wolf often preferred not to speak in human words when the physical sensations took him to a deep place. Cas lined up, pressed in, and bottomed out. Dean groaned and pressed back, presenting fully. Cas left bruises from his tight grip
on Dean’s hip, clenching with his fingernails to remind him to stay still, turning Dean’s groan, mid-breath into a high whimper. The Sub stilled. Three of Castiel’s thick fingers hardly approached the full girth of his penis, so Dean was still insufficiently prepared. It was a new stretch. It hurt. Alphas are not built to be fucked. Dean’s cock drooled and twitched. He wanted badly to touch it.

Dean was so aroused he nearly forgot who and where he was. He nearly forgot who owned him. With his eyes squeezed shut, only his years of conditioning kept his hand off his dick, kept his hips still as his Alpha fucked him. Dean had never figured out which of his many aspects kept track of all the rules in play during each session, but he rarely forgot one long enough to break it accidentally, even while he floated free of his own sentience. Cas took his time, making each pass as dirty as he could, bottoming out and grinding himself against Dean’s prostate, before pulling slowly out with a squelch and turning to rock back into him. He continued to snarl into it, his face tics becoming a steady stream of grunts and moans as his lips worked into some strange unintentional shapes, feeding the wolf inside him. His teeth marks littered Dean’s back.

Cas leaned over his Sub and wrapped a hand around to pinch and pull at Dean’s left nipple, and finally, his Sub cried out, caught off guard as Cas rolled a thumbnail into the sensitive edge of his nipple. He picked up his pace and fucked the Sub faster, letting all pretense of control fade away. Dean struggled to keep his ass off the mattress at the powerful pounding, but he squirmed a bit, got his knees re-situated beneath his weight, and gritted his teeth. His hole was going to hurt afterward. He’d been prepped enough to prevent tearing, but not enough to prevent pain.

Cas pistoned into him until his knot began to pull brutally at Dean’s rim, and then he pulled out, stroked himself, aimed at Dean’s asshole, and came across his swollen rim with a shout. The Alpha breathed hard, running a thumb over Dean’s abused flesh and took in the line of tension across the Sub’s shoulders. He was hurting already. Time to make him scream.

“Stay there, Pet. Stay right where you are. If you want to come. Now’s the time to go for it. I’m going to get the switch out of your bag, and I’m going to abuse your pretty, pretty hole. God, you look beautiful for me right now.” Cas couldn’t stop babbling as he removed himself from the end of the bed. “Just stay right there and scream for me, Dean. Yeah, stay there and tremble just like that.”

Dean’s eyes picked up his Dom as he circled the bed and back into his Sub’s line of vision. They locked eyes and both stopped breathing for a moment at the startling rawness of the connection. Dean saw the change that had come over Castiel’s body. All of the strain he’d been carrying for weeks had fallen away, and it took Dean’s tension with it. Their pupils were still wide with lust, despite the release that dribbled off Dean’s ass. Cas wasn’t finished with the scene, but he knew he had what he’d been missing, and the wolf was relaxing into it.

Cas pulled the hickory switch out of Dean’s bag without having to dig for it. He’d packed it there himself, so he knew which pocket it was in. Cas never travelled anywhere with Dean without making him carry instruments of impact in his bags, even if they never used them before returning back home. Dean knew they were there, and he had to carry them himself.

Cas swished the pliant switch through the air with a high pitched ‘Swoosh’. Dean shut his eyes again and shivered. This was going to hurt like hell. His asshole was already sore, red, swollen, and wet.

“Hold yourself open to me, Dean. Don’t move, or I might injure you in error.”

Cas gave Dean time to muster his courage and snake his shaking hands around to pull his cheeks apart. His reticence this time, borne of trepidation not defiance, earned him his Dom’s patience.

“Scoot back to the end of the bed for me, Pet. Good. Right there.”
Cas went down on one knee behind the Sub. He braced his hand, the one holding the end of the switch against the bed so that the thin, springy end sat between Dean’s cheeks, ending just above his swollen hole. Dean cried out in worried anticipation, and his hands trembled. “Color, Pet?”

“Mm-mm.” Dean rubbed his face back and forth characteristically across the bedding.

“Dean? I need you to talk to me.” Cas put a grounding hand on his Sub’s back. “We don’t have to go through with this.”

Dean rocked back against the switch poised and ready on his flesh. He struggled to make words work, but he knew Cas would stop if he couldn’t say the words. “Want it. Bad. Please.”

“Color, Dean.” Cas wasn’t taking the wolf’s word. He needed to hear from Dean.

“Please, Alpha…green.” It was a monumental effort, but Dean forced the code word out that would let them move forward.

“Good boy. Now. Scream for me, baby.” Cas took his free hand off Dean’s back, and used it to pull the switch back against the tension of his braced hand, and let it go to snap with a Zing and a Pop against Dean’s sensitive hole. Dean complied. He screamed and bucked, the pain ferocious. Dean’s breath left him in one long shriek. It took several beats before he caught it again, and found himself humping his hips convulsively. Cas slipped a hand beneath his Sub’s thigh to prevent his cock from riding to completion in friction against the bed. That part was going to be harder than he thought with Dean in this state.

“Get back into position, Submissive. You forget yourself.” Cas’ voice brooked no dispute, but Dean hadn’t actually slipped out of position. His hands were still in place, his weight still upon his knees and elbows, and his hips cleared the mattress. It was a close thing. Dean stilled with a sob.

Cas put the switch against his anus once more, just holding it there in line with the red welt that was now forming, angrily perpendicular to those placed last night that had faded nearly to nothing. “Color, Dean?”

“YELLOW!”

“Do you want another one?”

“YES! FUCK! GOD, YES!”

“Can you come like this?”

“Wanna come, Alpha!”

“Good boy. Let’s see if you can do it. Stay in place, don’t flatten. You can’t rut against the bed. Michael’s orders.”

“Nnngh!”

Cas took another breath. He felt centered for the first time in weeks. He felt solid, in control, fed. He pulled the switch back once more and let it go again to snap across Dean’s ass, then before Dean could move, he did it again.

Dean lost it.

He screamed until his voice went raw, coming in spasms into the bedding, and letting his Dom roll
him to his side while his hips jerked of their own recognizance. He went so deeply into his wolf, that he floated in inhuman space for time immeasurable, held tightly by his beloved, unable to think or know or speak. Pain was pleasure. Up was down. Aftershocks clenched his jaw and his asshole alike and sent more fluid jerking through his cock to ruin the bedding.

***************

April limped out for breakfast just after ten a.m. She had showered and dressed. As she began to fill a plate, she suddenly paled and looked toward the closed bedroom door across the vast space. She trembled, clung to the counter, and nearly rutted her own hips against the cabinetry in response to the waves coming through the bond from her mate, so powerful was the sensation. He was obviously… indisposed. The last time she’d felt that from him had been from hundreds of miles away, and it had been muted. Castiel’s Claiming of Michael hadn’t felt anything like this. This was very, very present through the bond she shared with her mate.

Cheeks flushed, she gasped and turned to look at Michael. He lay long across the couch with his arm thrown over his eyes, his breathing heavy, and his cheeks flushed as well. His slacks tented rudely, but he didn’t move to adjust or alter the situation.

“What should we do?” she called to him, looking for a Dominant to guide her. Michael peeked from beneath his arm.

“Eat something,” he said, and then he disappeared again.

She carried her plate to the couch and wormed her way beneath his feet, setting her plate on his shins. He didn’t acknowledge her presence. April took his lack of reaction as permission. They stayed like that, not speaking or daring to move until the erotic sensations peaked in an almost nauseating wave of borrowed pain and lust.

Michael went up on his elbows in alarm, and both of them stared at the closed door through which they could hear nothing. April’s mostly full plate crashed to the ground and shattered.

Michael blinked, turning to the Omega-Sub with frightened eyes. Dean. His mate was wide open through their bond, and the pain he was in was devastating. Yet Dean loved it. He was lapping it up like ambrosia, feeding off the waves of agony. April mirrored Michael, her mouth hanging open. She wouldn’t be able to feel Dean, but what must the Alpha feel like to her, his wolf tearing off huge chunks of meat and devouring his kill in great, gluttonous bites?

April was the first to come down from the adrenalin rush. “That’s why they need each other even though they have us,” she breathed to Michael. Her voice didn’t sound certain.

“Shut up.” He closed her out of his mind. He knew it was the truth. He couldn’t give Dean that, but he didn’t want to hear it from this weak, subservient child. He pulled himself up, told her not to move, and went digging in the kitchen for tools to clean up the broken ceramic and food so her bare feet wouldn’t be at risk of getting cut. He carried her to the kitchen table, served her a new plate of food, and petted her head before he could stop himself.

Damnit.

Stupid pack instincts.
Billie arrived at two-fifteen that afternoon. The small pack hadn’t even made it out of their suite, much less explored New York. She herded them into a waiting limo, ignoring the limping from three of them, some worse than others. Billie was pleased to see that Castiel, at least, finally looked like himself. He was still tired, but his presence and carriage were his own once more.

They spent several hours at the stylist’s storefront, turning from everyday handsome but carefree wolves, into deadly gorgeous, over-prepped, over-gelled caricatures of themselves. April glowed in a strapless, knee length peach confection of lace that showed off the spot-bruises and hickey’s on her neck and shoulders but hid the bandage on her thigh. Her Mating-scar was contoured carefully to stand out dark against her pale skin, and her hair was swept up to curl in tendrils around her pretty young face.

Michael’s thick black hair got a trim and a dose of color to add texture. Then it was styled within an inch of each and every separate strand’s life to look like he’d just been fucked six ways from Sunday and rolled straight out of bed. Once fitted into his tuxedo, Michael was sex on legs. He pouted into the mirror at Dean who sat mesmerized behind him. Dean salivated and checked his watch to determine if he had time to blow his mate in the back room. Michael picked up on Dean’s intentions and shook his head. There wasn’t time, but a saucy wink made the rejection sting a little less. There was already plenty of sting.

Cas had instructed Dean to stay seated as much as possible. If there was a chair, and it wouldn’t be socially awkward, he expected Dean to occupy the chair. Dean’s ass burned with a constant thrum that sent a stream of arousal through his body. A fucking would hurt too much to attempt, but he wanted to… He just wanted.

Cas was an asshole.

Dean thought he, himself, looked fine – not especially sexier than usual – but he cleaned up okay all things considered. Castiel, on the other hand, looked edible. Dean wanted to lick the man from the middle of his back, around and underneath, and all the way to his navel. Oh, right, but Cas was an asshole. Maybe, he’d change the licking to biting. Yeah, that would do it. Dean squirmed on his chair and waited for the expensive stylists to put the finishing touches on the rest of them. He wanted to misbehave in the limo.

They were fed a light snack and bullied into drinking some water. The premiere was a big deal in New York. Nicholas Maraby was a brilliant Lupin up-and-comer-turned-arrived who’d already had two huge award-winning hits on Broadway. The new one was his first attempt at a musical dealing directly with the life circumstances of being Omega, and he’d confided in Castiel, his old college roommate, that he was nervous as hell. The red carpet rollout would spotlight a who’s who of Broadway’s elite and celebrities from across the world, Primate and Canid alike.

Billie rode in the limo with them, but she had her own plans once they’d disembarked. Billie knew a girl in New York, and she wasn’t about to miss a chance at spending time with her while she was here. Her tastes varied from the typical appetites for her kind, but she had kinks of her own, in her own way, and she needed a good scratching every now and then.

Billie made short shrift of any plans Dean might or might not have had of sinking into the wheel well and putting his lips to work. She had instructions to deliver, and her expression put him on his ass on
the seat between Castiel and Michael. Somehow, she knew what he was thinking before he ever made a twitch out of line. Once she was sure he was planted, she cleared her throat and checked her notes. Most of her instructions were mundane. He’d heard the same before every public appearance. He already knew most of them. But as the limo neared its destination, she smiled and gave them both what they’d been waiting to hear: the teaser.

“Go ahead and let the ring show, Dean. Hold Castiel’s hand. Let the cameras catch you kissing, but try not to answer any direct questions about your relationship with a direct answer. I’ve promised ABC a scoop tomorrow morning.” She looked over her shoulder and realized they were pulling up for their turn to jettison. “Call me if you need me. The limo can pick you up whenever you want. Just buzz Jose, and he’ll be there. Enjoy yourselves, all right?”

“Thanks Billie,” said Cas, kissing her cheek.

The limo pulled up another car length and stopped. The door swung open from outside, and Castiel emerged first. He reached in and helped Dean step out. They both sparkled as they paused side-by-side in the camera flashes, both holding the other by the waist. Dean’s public persona snapped into place, and he became the extroverted, cocky, fun-loving showoff that his fans adored. Cas left him standing for just a moment, leaning back into the limo for April, and the crowds went wild at their first live look at the Alpha’s new mate. Her delicate shyness and the blush on her cheek as she clung to her mate’s arm won the public over in an instant. Cas kissed her lips and whispered something the crowds couldn’t hear, and she blushed crimson.

Dean waved at a reporter down the line, and then he stepped around his Alpha with a word into his ear to retrieve Michael, who had waited in the car as they’d discussed. Dean held a hand out in a gesture but let Michael emerge without offering him help. He was Omega, but he didn’t deserve to be emasculated in front of cameras. At Michael’s appearance, his tall stature and his unbelievable good looks, the volume of the crowd and the press of bodies against the ropes stepped up another notch. Michael flinched at the first camera flashes, but he quickly recovered, smiled confidently at Dean, took his mate’s offered hand and stepped forward to take his place within the foursome. Dean kissed him, and the cameras whirred all around them.

Dean kept Michael on his right so he could take Castiel’s hand with his left, allowing the deliberate photo-op when Castiel slowly, intentionally lifted Dean’s ringed hand into full view of the crowd and cameras, kept his eyes locked on Dean’s, and kissed the side of Dean’s knuckles so that the cameras could get a clear shot of both of their faces and Dean’s engagement ring in the same frame. Dean grinned at him, his eyes alight. Castiel sparkled back. It was a magical moment. Bulbs popped all around.

In slow motion, they started down the red carpet between the velvet ropes toward the first reporter. It would be a gauntlet run, but they’d talked it through and prepared the Omegas. They could do this. They had each other.

“Alpha Novak! Dean! Can you answer some questions?”

“Of course, Jamie. Any time. We’ve always got time for you.”

The questions varied, from thoughts about the show they were about to see, to requests for insights into Congresswoman Novak’s latest move, to the tragedy in OKC, but every last one of them asked about Dean’s ring with knowing looks cast toward Michael. Most of the reporters hadn’t been positioned to see Castiel’s staged kiss, and they weren’t watching closely enough to notice that Cas and Dean were still holding hands. Many apes would have chalked their handholding up as just
another quirk of how strange wolves could be without realizing it was just as intimate a gesture among Lupins as it was among apes.

“No,” Dean laughed as he was given the gift of a badly worded leading question. Those were easy to sidestep. “I’m not engaged to marry Michael. He’s my mate, and I’m lucky to have found him.” Dean kissed Michael again and scurried away before the reporter could follow up with another question that might hit closer to the mark. Cas stumbled as he was dragged in Dean’s wake, and the four of them tumbled at last through the theater door and into the relative quiet of the lobby where reporters weren’t allowed.

They took a minute to catch their breath and check on one another. The Omegas seemed fine; and more than fine. Both of them appeared to have found the entire experience to be great fun. April giggled to herself and patted her dress back in place. Cas stopped her from trying to straighten her hair. It was fine, and the less it was touched, the longer the upsweep would last. Michael’s upper cheeks were still red with enthusiasm. He had crow’s feet crinkling his eyes, and he couldn’t resist sweeping Dean into a deeply bent dizzy-inducing kiss.

“Can we do it again?” asked April.

“Come on, let’s go see who’s here. We should network before we take our seats.” Dean took her hand and led her into the crowd. Michael and Castiel followed.

They found Nicholas with little trouble, and amazingly, even surrounded by big name celebrities, the crowds parted for Dean and Castiel. Nicholas shouted in greeting. He had obviously begun celebrating early, and he embraced all four of them as if he’d known them all his life. They congratulated him on his premiere, and wished him luck and a broken leg. April shyly admitted to being a musician when Cas prompted her, and Nicholas stopped everything to grill her about her plans for the future. The conversation left her breathless, especially when he reached into the passersby and pulled Lin-Manuel Miranda in to ask his opinion about how to get her where she wanted to be.

Dean felt a rush of secondhand arousal and looked up to find his mate’s eyes locked on to Channing Tatum’s ass.

“Really, Michael? I’m standing right here.”

“I’m not touching, Dean. I’m just looking.” Michael gestured to the beautiful sight before him. Channing’s hands were deep in his pockets while he talked animatedly with a friend, and it served the dual purpose of pulling his tuxedo jacket away from his ass, and pulling his pants tight over the round, firm swell. Dean had to admit that it was a thing of beauty like a Michelangelo sculpture, and they both glazed over until the figure under review turned and caught them staring. All three of them blushed and then laughed uncomfortably before moving apart without comment.

The lights dimmed three times, so Castiel herded the party to their seats in the orchestra. He set Michael on the inside, then placed April next to Michael, then Dean, and then Cas took the aisle seat. Castiel took Dean’s hand again as the light dimmed and the music swelled and brought it to his lap to hold, Dean’s ring still glinting slightly in the stage lights.

The musical was wonderful and tragically heartbreaking. At the intermission, they sipped white wine and discussed with some old friends Cas ran into that while the story seemed rocky at the moment, the expectation was that the Omega would triumph in the end. They all agreed that the young Primate ingénue cast to play the Omega’s wolf was a genius and a star-in-the-making. Her voice was breathtaking in its power and clarity. April begged permission to speak to the orchestra conductor, and Castiel let her go alone. He kept an eye on her though. She smelled Mated and Claimed, so she
should be all right in a place as public as this, but the Alpha twitched the whole time.

The end of the show broke Castiel’s heart. Abandoned by everyone, even her own Alpha, and destroyed in body and spirit, the Omega died in agony on stage with no musical accompaniment, and the starkness of its realism brought the depth of the tragedy that much closer to home. Cas felt his face drain of blood and his fingertips grow cold. He looked across Dean’s grim face to his mate. He could feel her devastation in his mind. She had tears streaming down her face and looked close to a panic attack as all her fears appeared in cold, vibrant, live color in front of her eyes. Cas nudged Dean and then nodded at April. Dean wrapped her up with an arm over her shoulder and bumped into Michael who was doing the same from the other side. Michael’s eyes had overflowed as well. (Omegas should be warned about the ending before they come to see this), Dean’s wolf shot out viciously. He didn’t like seeing his pack this disturbed over a fucking musical. It was supposed to be fun.

The limo picked them up and took them to dinner at a swanky late-night New York restaurant, the kind that was impossible to get into without reservations months in advance, even for celebrities. The wine and the music from the back helped wash away the lingering sorrow from the play. Dean ordered steak for everyone and drank himself silly before Michael put a hand over his glass and refused him more.

After a long dinner and into the late night, the limo delivered the quartet to Maraby’s penthouse premiere cast party which was in full swing. Only the thirteen-year-old star of the show was missing, and Nicholas explained that her mother didn’t allow her out after eleven, even for a premiere. They stayed through to the end, enjoying the easy atmosphere. Nicholas served another meal at 1:00 am on the twinkle-lit rooftop on round white clothed tables. Cas settled into a chair, fairly drunk by that point, and unzipped his fly. Most of Nicholas Maraby’s friends were Lupins like him, and the rest were comfortable around wolves, so no one was disturbed when the Alpha stroked himself hard, then worked his mate’s dress over her hips and seated her on his lap to warm his cock through the meal. He didn’t eat much, and he couldn’t settle for a simple cock-warming. Soon, he had her by the hips as he drove upward into her, and shortly after that he’d swept the plates, glasses, and silver service aside to fuck her hard on the table in front of everyone. A chorus of cheers went up as he ground out his climax and knotted his mate.

Michael and Dean barely even looked up. They were deep in discussion with an arrogant, pretentious Gender Studies major from Brown who thought he knew everything there was to know about Omegas because he’d read some stuff in a book once (not one of Dean’s), despite having never met an Omega in his life before he moved to Providence where Lupins outnumbered Primates. Dean let Michael set the ape straight on a few things, only getting involved when Michael’s contempt leaked through more than was socially acceptable. Winning converts and establishing allies meant not pissing people off more than necessary. Michael would learn. Dean couldn’t fault him really. Sometimes an asshole was an asshole was an asshole, and it didn’t matter whose side they supported.

Dean kept his sore ass seated as he he’d been told to do, and let his raw voice heal by listening more than he talked.

They didn’t leave until almost 5:30 in the morning. Castiel followed Michael’s example and cut himself and Dean off several hours before they were to make an appearance on the morning show. Everyone else from the party slipped away or passed out in compromising positions. A number of other Lupin couplings left bare asses and breasts displayed lewdly around Nicholas Maraby’s exclusive penthouse party.
At least three wolves earned themselves physical reprimand during the night of revelry, and Dean enjoyed watching their asses turn shiny and red, laid out over their Tops’ laps, Dean’s eyes hooded and his mate shaking a head at him.

“What?” Dean protested. “It’s hot.”

“Time to go,” Cas said, startling Dean out of his sleepy trance. Apparently, Cas had already said their goodbyes. Cas had spent the last couple of hours flipping through the early morning editions on Nicholas’ tablet, checking the first reviews. They were all resoundingly positive, and Cas rapped his longtime friend firmly on the back with a hearty congratulations. Nicholas turned the gesture into a hug. Cas had always been there for the Omega and believed in him when no one else did. Nicholas was thrilled to learn of Cas’ engagement to Dean and his Mating to April, but he wasn’t happy to have been kept in the dark like the rest of the world. Cas apologized sincerely and accepted another tipsy hug.

The four drooping wolves made their way down to the waiting limo, each leaning against a wall of the elevator. Cas reached out and took Dean’s hand as the bell dinged and the doors opened. He tugged to get Dean moving. April had her shoes in her hand, and she and Michael trudged to keep up.

Billie met them at the limo, fresh-faced and happy. “Had a good evening, I see,” she sauced at Castiel.

“Likewise,” he muttered back. He liked seeing her happy. Billie had a hard time finding scening partners who wanted the power-exchange play that she liked without the sex. She rarely got to visit Helene, but when she did, it was magical. She’d debated proposing a Mating with the Submissive but hadn’t worked up the nerve yet. She didn’t think Helene would be willing to give up her journalism job in New York to move to the Styx of Kansas, and Billie, of course, wasn’t about to leave the Alpha for New York.

“You’ve got about twenty-five minutes in the hotel suite to shower and change before we absolutely have to leave for the studio.” Billie was all business again. “I’ve been monitoring the websites, and it looks like the photo-op did the trick. Most of the supposition has switched targets to you and Cas now,” she told Dean. “Remember to try to keep it all lighthearted. I can’t stop them from asking you about Naomi or Oklahoma. Both of those subjects might come up, so think about how you want to answer those questions before you get there. Oh, and who’s going? I need to text ahead, so they’re ready for you.”

Castiel answered. “Dean and me. April and Michael will be staying at the hotel to get some sleep.”

Michael let out a sound of protest. Castiel looked at him, and Michael realized he really didn’t want to go. He would look like an awkward third wheel, and he didn’t have anything relevant to say on the subject of his mate’s engagement that America needed to hear. Plus, he was wiped. Going to bed sounded like an excellent idea, outweighed only by the suggestion his wolf made of sweeping Dean into bed with him. Michael nodded at Cas’ questioning expression, and Cas nodded back firmly.

Twenty-seven minutes later, Dean Winchester and Castiel Novak pulled away from the curb by the hotel en route to the New York studio where ‘Good Morning America’ was broadcast live.

“Are you ready for this, Alpha?” There was an edge to Dean’s scream-gruffed voice that made Castiel’s heart wrench. No matter how many assurances Cas gave the man that his love was unconditional and his commitment unwavering, Dean always seemed to be bracing himself for a surprise rescinding of Castiel’s proposal.
“Absolutely, my love. I’ve never been more ready for anything.”

The routine was familiar to both of them. They’d been here many times before. In no time, they were spruced up and ushered into place on the couch across from Robin. She greeted them as warmly as always, but she made a special point to take hold of Dean’s left arm in the middle of their hug and examine his ring for herself. He winked at her playfully, letting her turn his hand to catch the light.

Soon they were on the air and introductions had been made. Neither Dean nor Cas were surprised when she led with the explosion in Oklahoma that destroyed Gordon’s shiny new building and killed four people. “Did you know any of them?” she asked.

Castiel answered somberly. “We knew all of them. I had never worked directly with Gordon Walker, and neither, I believe, has Dean, but he was a colleague of ours, and we had a professional relationship through our work and having a great deal of overlap in our networks. The other three I knew as acquaintances through Gordon. We weren’t close, but we were colleagues. We’re devastated for their packs.”

“I knew Peter Holstings,” Dean added hoarsely. “He and I hosted a seminar together several years ago on Submissive training. He was a passionate man, and his death is a tragic loss. All of them…it’s tragic. I don’t know what to say. At a time like this, we really feel the pull of the Pack holding us all together, and we feed off each other’s strength.”

Robin nodded gravely, let the moment stand dramatically, and then segued smoothly. “Your Pack’s growing, I hear. And congratulations are due. Sources tell me that you have just established a brand-new Pack, in fact, and you’ve added new members.”

Castiel nodded, smiling.

“Yet, you still named your mother as a member of the new Pack, is that correct? …Even though she’s turned some amazingly vicious turns of phrase your way in the last few weeks?”

Cas wasn’t perturbed by the question. “It’s no secret that my mother and I are estranged. She and I don’t see eye-to-eye on much of anything. She can be delusional and destructive, and I believe her to be motivated by political advancement more than she is by the welfare of her own species. Again, this is no secret. But she’s still my mother, and she’s still Pack. I would never cut her off, despite how she chooses to live her life. Pack is forever, and it’s unconditional, right Dean?”

“If you say so, Alpha.” Dean let his eyes sparkle to lighten his judgmental words, but he wasn’t about to stick up for anything Naomi-related. She’d never said a word to him that wasn’t laced with contempt.

“So, then…” Robin paused. “Will she be invited to the wedding?”

Castiel sat up and back, his eyes widening. He’d known this was coming, but he hadn’t expected it to come out like that. “Wedding?” he tried lamely.

Robin and Dean both laughed at his pathetic attempt. “Alpha, the world has known that Dean Winchester is engaged to be married for almost two weeks now, and up until last night, we all assumed he was engaged to his amazingly hot young mate, Michael. Congratulations on landing Michael, Dean,” she asided. “He’s, mm-mm, he’s some kind of…I don’t think I should say any more on live television, but just…wow.”

“Thanks,” Dean laughed, blushing in spite of himself. “I’m fond of him myself.”

“But then, it was pointed out that the video from the Texas rest stop where Dean and Michael
evidently met and Triggered,” she was back to addressing Castiel. “…shows that Dean’s already wearing that ring right there.” She pointed with her pen. “Hold up the ring, Dean. Can you show the camera? Yep, just hold your hand right there.” Dean put his left hand on display and one of the three cameras focused in tightly. His diamonds sparkled in their platinum base, and another wave of warmth washed over him. Castiel took Dean’s left hand in his own to stop it from trembling.

“And then last night, the two of you along with your new mates took Broadway by storm, and next thing we know, this picture is everywhere. Can we put that shot on the monitor?” Robin indicated the monitor behind them, and Dean and Cas both turned to see how their posed picture turned out. It was perfect. Cas vowed to get a copy from the photographer to use as the front face of their wedding album. His own face, happy and relaxed, paled next to Dean’s glow. The ring shone. Cas’ lips were barely visible as he placed them against Dean’s knuckle, but the light in the picture was the spark between their eyes as they looked at each other. There was no faking a feeling like this. It was a picture of two men deeply in love with each other.

Dean turned back to face Castiel, his face alight once more, and he leaned over beneath the hot lights and under the examination of Robin Roberts, the cameras, and who-knew-how-many viewers and he planted a deep wet one on Cas.

“Can I take it from that exchange that it’s not Michael who gave you that ring, Dean Winchester?”

“Mm-hm,” he answered, pulling back and swiping a thumb across Cas’ lower lip to dry it. “I’mma marry Cas.” He paused for just a moment and then added, “And I don’t give a **Bleep** if Naomi’s invited or not.”

Chapter End Notes

Aw, I love it when they get sappy almost as much as I love it when they fight. I’m just proud of them both for managing to stay awake that long as old-ass fogeys and shit.

Love to your Pack!
Chapter Summary

The pack finishes up their trip to New York and Boston. Something's brewing behind those pretty green eyes and freckles, and also, Sam forgot to buy cream.

Chapter Notes

Kind of a bridge chapter again. I've got such plans brewing...such evil, dastardly plans, but I have to be patient. If I had a pencil-thin mustache, it would be waxed by now. Too much spoiling? Kay. That's all.

Um, nothing in this chapter was pre-planned. It just kinda happened on the way to somewhere else.

I seem to be running out of background material. I've skipped a number of opportunities to put in new "THEN" sections. If there's anything y'all wanna hear more about, let me know. I can write anything up in that section and explain anything that's not clear through plot device exposition.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NOW:

Dean and Castiel were still asleep at two o'clock that afternoon. Michael and April were watching television on the couch in their underwear when someone knocked on the suite door. They played a quick and dirty game of 'Not it!' which Michael lost.
He checked the peephole and was surprised to find Nicholas Maraby outside the suite with his hand raised to knock again. Michael slipped the door open and let the Omega in.

“What the fuck are you people doing sitting on your asses in a hotel room when you’ve come all the way from fucking Kansas to the Big Apple? Get dressed, both of you, we’re going out. I’m gonna show you MY town. Where’s the old man?” Nicholas swung in a wide circle as if Castiel was suddenly going to appear in view.

“Um, they’re both asleep,” April offered from the couch.

“Well wake their old asses up! Cas said you’re going from here to Boston. Fucking sleep when you get to Boston!”

“I…I’m not sure that’s a good idea. They’re cranky when they’re tired,” she tried again.

“Fine. I’ll do it. Which room?”

Michael pointed. When Cas and Dean had returned from the studio, April was still asleep where she’d spent the previous night, and Michael was dozing on the couch. Cas took Dean with him into the room Michael had shared with Dean overnight.

Michael followed the loud Omega through the door. The alphas were fast asleep, naked as fuck and spooning. Dean’s left leg was pulled up high across the bed where he lay mostly on his belly, and Castiel’s left knee was almost but not quite pulled up tight enough between Dean’s legs to touch Dean’s balls. Almost touching. But not quite.

They hadn’t had sex. Michael would’ve known despite the soundproof door, but he ground his teeth in frustration anyway. It dawned on him that where he’d assumed he retained all rights to Dean that hadn’t been deliberately granted to their mutual Alpha, in reality the opposite was true. Michael only held control of what he’d asked for — that and nothing else. He had never told the couple they couldn’t nap naked together. His jaw tensed and then released. There would be no fixing the mistake now.

Cas’ hand stroked idly up and down Dean’s belly in his sleep.

“Wake the fuck up! Both of you!”

They startled, growling and snarling as Nicholas’ words pierced their dreams. Identical scowls met Castiel’s undergrad dorm mate, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Get dressed. We’re going out.”

April was already dressed by the time Nicholas re-entered the main room. “Are we really going out?”

“Tell me what kind of music you play, and I’ll take you somewhere good,” Nicholas responded cryptically.

“I’ve trained classically since I was four, but I like all kinds of piano music. Blues is the most fun. I like to make people…feel things when I play.”

“Blues piano? I know just the place. You like fiddle music too?”

“Do you mean like Appalachian or that kind of thing?”
Yeah. Old fashioned reels and shit.”

“If I can play along, I like it, but I don’t really listen to it much.”

“Does he let you drink?” Nicholas indicated the bedroom and Cas by inference with a cock of his head. “Oh yeah, right. You were drinking last night. Yep, I know just the place.”

“I’m eighteen. That’s too young for the clubs here, isn’t it?”

“Uh,” he snorted. “Trust me. You’re good.”

“Dean plays, too. Do you already know Dean from before?”

“Yeah, I know Dean. He and Cas have been thick as thieves for…forever, I guess. Didn’t know he played though.”

“I don’t,” Dean clarified, buckling his belt as he stepped into the big room. “I know three guitar chords, and I can fake a blues riff on a piano. They’re all based on the same four notes, so if you can keep the beat, and you know how the structure goes, anyone can do it.” Dean’s voice was still a bit gruffer than usual. It made him sound like a blues man from Memphis to April. April didn’t believe him, but she didn’t contradict the alpha either. He sighed and fessed up when he noticed the look on her face. “My dad used to spend time in a particular piano bar back at home after my mom died. He let me tag along on occasion ’cause I told him I was interested in the music. The piano man, a guy named Roger, Rog actually, took me under his wing and taught me some basic stuff. Of course, I was really there to watch over my dad, but whatever. I can’t play Mozart like you can, but I can hold a tune together while somebody else runs it.”

“You never told me that, Dean,” said Castiel emerging with his wallet in his hand.

“Never came up, Alpha. See what you miss when you decide to skip straight from scening to marriage?”

“Are we ready?” Castiel asked the group in general.

In the cab, April grilled Nicholas. “Do you have your next project lined up yet?”

“Yeah, I do,” he admitted. “I’m basking in the glow of “Omega, ReClaimed,” but I can’t sit still that long. You wanna hear about it? It’s the reason I asked you about fiddle music.”

“I really do,” she enthused.

“Kay, well, it’s set in sixteenth-century Scotland, and it’s an intrigue piece with dark magic, witches, and shit.”

Dean rolled his eyes and took Michael’s hand. Five wolves sharing one cab was a tight squeeze, so he easily reached Castiel’s, too.

They bar-hopped for several hours. It wasn’t quite the tour of New York that Michael had anticipated, but at least it was authentic, and they were out of the hotel. Everyone knew Nicholas here; knew him personally, as opposed to simply recognizing him as a celebrity as with Castiel and Dean. Catcalls followed them down the sidewalk and many, many drunk partyers demanded photos with them all. Their respect for Nicholas kept the worst of the pushy drunks at bay, as the hometown folks diligently protected their Omega hero.
They began to slow down at about one-thirty in the morning. Squished into a too-tight booth, they all leaned on each other. April and Nicholas were arguing the merits of classical musical training versus street cred where ‘real music’ was concerned.

“’Nope,’ he stood firm. ‘Give me a street musician in my shows any day over one of those fucking automatons they wheel out of the classical conservatories these days. I can spot them from a mile away. They have no soul, and they don’t know what music is despite spending their entire lives pounding out notes on a piano.’

“Oh really? You think they would let me play that one?’ April pointed to the small stage which was empty while the band took a break. “I can show you how we automatons can have soul, too.”

“Oh, hell, yeah. I thought you’d never ask.” Nicholas grabbed her by the hand, not giving the Omega-Sub the chance to ask her mate’s permission, and he hauled her to the piano and sat her down hard enough to make her grimace.

“She’s okay, Cas.” Dean put a hand on Castiel’s arm to stop him from protesting. Soon Nicholas and April were working together at the keyboard to make something strange and wonderful together. It had a weird bluesy-Scottish tilt, and Cas wondered if it was something from Nick’s new show.

“Can I ask you something, Alpha?” Dean was in a weird mood. The drinking left him open and sleepy, and the blues helped run the rest of his inhibitions away.

“Of course,” Cas replied.

“Were you ever gonna tell me you invited Bobby, and Ellen, and Jo, and Benny…and I guess Andrea to join our pack?”

Castiel blinked, taken aback. “I did tell you. I told you before I ever put it to them – on the drive up from Dallas.”

“No, you didn’t. I would’ve remembered a conversation like that. I promise.”

Michael was turned sideways in the booth with his back against the wall. He looked back and forth between the alphas and wondered if was time for a bathroom break.

“Yes, I did. We talked about it. I know we did…didn’t we?”

“Nope.” Dean popped the “P” like he always did when irritated and correct. “I would remember because I wouldn’t have agreed. Cas, I never wanted Bobby to join up, or any of the rest of ‘em really, but especially not Bobby. You know I have my reasons.” Cas frowned in confusion. He thought he remembered getting Dean’s go-ahead, and he was surprised at Dean’s vehemence.

Dean leaned forward onto his crossed arms to address his fiancé. “I love the guy. I love all of them. You know that, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to slide lower down the pack ladder just so we can make everyone family. Besides, none of them needs a pack like ours. You wanna talk about adding extra, unnecessary complications – starting a new pack with that many alphas is nuts. It’s a really bad idea, Cas, and you should’ve let me weigh in on it before you talked to them.”

Castiel was remembering the rehearsals, not an actual live conversation. He’d never brought it up, and in the aftermath of Dean’s Mating, his memory had become whirled.
“Dean, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to leave you out. I was just about to bring it up when you Triggered with Michael, and I got turned around. It was my mistake. I guess, no harm done though. None of them said yes. Besides,” Cas took one of Dean’s hands across the table. “You would still outrank them all in the pack just by being my husband. It would be my call, and I would put you right under me where you belong.”

Dean smirked at the double-entendre. “It’s not that simple, Alpha. It’s just like at work. Pack ranks have to be set according to our designations, or they don’t work. It’s not really up to us. No matter what you might set as Pack Alpha, we will always behave according to our nature.” Dean sat back up and turned to look out toward the piano.

He’d made his point and stood up for himself. He believed that Cas hadn’t excluded him on purpose, and he wasn’t resentful. It felt like closure to Dean, and he was ready to let it go. Besides, none of it would matter in the end. Once Castiel discovered what Dean and Michael were up to behind his back, he would cast both of them out. Castiel Novak put all of his faith in trust and honesty. Dean had a firm hold of that vulnerable young sapling in his teeth, and he was fixing to snap it in half.

Michael’s knees were crooked up at a steep angle, and his feet rested flat beneath Dean’s butt. He twitched them to get Dean’s eyes on him, a questioning look on his face. Michael could feel the resignation and sadness in his mate, and it didn’t fit Dean’s words. There seemed to be a lot of meaning to Dean buried inside the phrase, “according to our nature,” and Michael was uneasy with an unsettling premonition. Dean was hiding more than his flushed birth-control pills from Cas, from Michael too.

Dean bit his lower lip and turned away from his mate without speaking, his eyes on April and Nicholas.

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“Why did you have to kill the Omega at the end?” she asked him with her hands in constant motion on the higher end of the keyboard keeping up with his lead.

“You wanted a happy ending – just like all the sappy, crappy, love story bullshit they always put on Broadway?” Nicholas put so much contempt into his words that April looked into his face in shock.

“Well, yeah, kinda, although I wouldn’t have put it like that. Hey, do that part again. I didn’t catch it. How did you make that bagpipe ‘turn’?”

Nicholas stopped playing and reset his hands. “It’s just a regular turn, just a note, and then down one half-step, up another half-step, and then the note again, except you double-down on the upper one.” He demonstrated again. It was a piano, mimicking a fiddle, mimicking a bagpipe. Classical music didn’t work like this, and April was hungry to learn. She copied him, nailed it, then nodded, and they played on.

“I know not all stories have a happy ending, but when you’re Omega, and you worry every moment of every day that something like that can happen to you no matter how much protection you seem to have at any given time…I just wasn’t expecting to have it thrown in my face like that during a night on the town. That’s all.” She couldn’t help her tone of resentment.

Nicholas stopped playing and turned on the bench to look at the side of her face. April kept her eyes
down and continued to play but moved into a more familiar realm, switching to a slow, sad piece that she knew well.

“The ending isn’t in the show for the Omegas like us, April. You and I know what it feels like. It’s part of who we are, and if I could shout the message I need to send without having it land square in your lap or slap you upside the face, I would do it in a heartbeat, but I can’t. Your mate and I, we’re on the same mission, but we go about it in different ways. All I know how to do is tell stories. For some reason, people come to see my stories. I have a megaphone that reaches all kinds of people. I don’t deserve it. I didn’t do anything special to get it, but I have it, and I’ve got a responsibility to Omegas like you and Michael, and to myself, to use the megaphone to the greatest effect.

“Everyone thinks they know what it’s like to be Omega, but unless you are Omega, you can’t understand. No one can, not even Castiel. He’s spent his whole life studying Omegas and what they need, and he still doesn’t really know the first thing about us. You want a happy ending? Yeah, don’t we all, but we don’t all get one. Which ending seems more real to you, April? The Omega loses everything, or the Omega becomes a towered, petted, protected princess?”

April let the sad music answer for her. Nicholas joined in and played down two octaves in tandem. He let her lead, and she accepted the role smoothly.

“Don’t you have a Top? Why were you alone at the premiere last night? And today?” April changed the subject.

“I have an alpha who takes care of me when I need her to, but we’re not together. And the neighborhood watches out for me, too.”

“I noticed.” She smiled at him kindly. “You’ve got a good thing going here. I’m happy for you and happy I met you. Your musical is wonderful…until the ending.”

Nicholas snickered. “Thanks.” He developed an alarming twinkle in his eye. “You wanna see how my ‘good thing’ works?” She looked at him in confusion. He leaned in close to whisper to her conspiratorially. “I was supposed to text a check-in half-an-hour ago, so she’s probably already got feelers out for my whereabouts. Are you a brat, April?”

“No, I’m not.” April’s eyes were wide, and they searched out her Alpha in the dark. She could see his head come up and turn her direction at the swell of apprehension in her head, but she couldn’t really see his face.

“Well, I am. You want to help me get a little bit of a reaction from my alpha?” Nicholas played a mischievous trill up near her end of the piano, leaning in close.

“No, I really don’t.” She scooted back to the edge of the bench.

“I’m not hitting on you, I just need it to look like I am. All you have to do is give me one kiss, and ta-da! I get pulled up tight and given a fast ride to blissville. C’mon, you’re not going to get in trouble. Cas knows me.”

She laughed at him but shook her head in disbelief. “Not a chance. Why don’t you ask Dean? He’d probably jump at the chance. Of course, then you’d have to face Michael, and I don’t think you want that.”

Nicholas didn’t back away, but he didn’t touch the other Omega either. “I’ve considered it over the years. If I was gay, he would be my type to a ‘T’.” Castiel stood up and walked calmly to the piano. He didn’t increase his pace as a huge female alpha appeared from nowhere and encircled the gifted
Broadway superstar in her arms, pulling him roughly off the piano bench in one motion. She met Alpha’s eye as he reached April and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Castiel,” the large woman nodded at him.

“Hello, Jenn,” he answered her back with respect.

Each alpha collected their Omega and led them in opposite directions, one pulling the girl in close with affection, and the other leading the brat out with a firm grip on his earlobe. Both Omegas smiled a goodbye at the other. Nicholas winked.

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The drive to Boston was uneventful. Dean drove, grumbling the whole way about the Expedition Billie rented for them, cranky at not having his Baby beneath his hands and at the sting that remained from his scene with Castiel.

“You’re free to make the trip by air, Dean,” Billie reminded him on multiple occasions. It didn’t stop the griping, but it turned his volume down.

Jim Murphy met them all at The Facility entrance, his hand extended in warm greeting. He fed them lunch in the cafeteria and then took them on a tour.

Michael ogled the sophistication of the technology involved and the comfortable styling built into every room and corridor. “This has to have cost a fortune. Where do the funds come from?”

Castiel answered. “We use Federal funds for the community outreach programs. Every dime we get from the government is funneled straight into education, medical care, counseling services, and Keller testing. The rest of what we do is expensive, but we’ve been blessed with a corps of donors who have been remarkably loyal and generous over the years. Contract fees and tuition from the classes we teach help as well.”

“Well, it also helps that your mate,” Jim indicated Dean, who blushed, “is a gifted and persuasive fundraiser. People always seem to fall over each other to say yes to him.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. Just one. “You better not be selling sexual favors for donations, Dean.”

Dean scoffed. “Don’t give me that stink-eye. You’d be all for it as long as you were allowed to watch.”

Michael froze, paled, and sputtered.

“Besides, I don’t need to open my pants or my…you know. People like me. They like to write checks for me. I’m just naturally charming and charismatic. Right, April?” Dean put his arm around her shoulders and led her down the hall, leaving Michael gaping like a fish. She looked back at Michael and winked cheekily.

“We charge fees for the services, of course,” Jim continued, shaking his head. “And the proceeds from various public appearances and speaking engagements are split between all of our sites, but
you’re right, it’s an expensive endeavor. We only move into new territory once we’ve secured the funding and support to do it right.” He gestured them into an empty conference room to talk, and Michael preceded their host through the door.

They were on the second floor where the far wall was made of plate glass and overlooked the gym below. Dean still had April with him. He was pointing something out to her at the far side. Faint, excited shouts drifted up to them, and there was movement everywhere beneath them.

“The place looks good, Jim.” Castiel addressed the other alpha-Dom from near the head of the table. “I’m relieved to see that whatever happened in Dallas hasn’t infected you here.”

Pastor Jim, still so-named from a previous stint as a Universist clergyman, a profession that had led him into a more and more progressively active role in aiding his fellow Lupins through the injustices of life, nodded his appreciation at his boss’s words. The Universist Church, not to be confused with the Universalists of Thomas Jefferson fame, supported his work despite their not-so-friendly parting. Pastor Jim couldn’t stand by with his hands tied by their wishy-washy well-meaning fence sitting, so he’d left to join Castiel’s war. At heart, Jim Murphy was a warrior, and he needed to go to battle, not just clean up the damage afterward.

“I just got back from Dallas, Alpha. It’s looking up. I have to say, you sent a strange mix from your team in Lawrence to take the reins down there, but maybe you’re more a genius than I give you credit for, because it’s working. Victor’s back in the saddle full time, and the place has turned the corner rapidly. Caleb was the right choice for Training Director, as I believe I advised you and Victor years ago.”

Dean left April and took a chair at the table. “What else do we need to be doing, Jim?” he asked, skating over the brazen I-told-you-so and cutting Castiel’s blustering off before it began.

“Keep an eye on them and give them time.” Jim sat down as well, and his face grew serious. “You know, what happened in Dallas can happen anywhere. We’re always vulnerable to slipping into an ugly, dangerous monstrosity any time a good leader retires or moves on. Any time one of the good guys takes their hands off the wheel long enough, the sharks are always circling and looking for a way in to take control. We’ve got what they want: a steady supply of fresh, trusting, compliant meat, ready to be trussed up and sold on the black market.” Michael paled and sank into a chair at the far end of the table. April leaned her head against the pane of glass and hoped it could support her weight, closing her eyes. “If we can’t find a way to make it impossible for us to become Gordon Walker, we shouldn’t be in business at all. It’s too risky.” Jim was serious, and the topic scared all of them.

“I don’t know how to protect us long term. All I know to do is to keep trying to reach people, strengthen our cause from the inside and the outside both. I need ideas, Jim.” Castiel’s eyes were wide, searching.

“Hell if I know,” he admitted. “People either get it, or they don’t. Those that don’t aren’t usually open to being taught.”

“We need to stop acting like we’re the weird ones.” Michael’s face was determined. What he lacked in education and research experience, he made up for in real life street experience. “We still act like we’re the species that needs to hide and grovel. I say, get rid of the dog-parks and let Lupins do whatever they need to do right out on the main streets and in public – like they do in the aboriginal villages. The apes will get used to us eventually, and they won’t shout ‘pornography’ all the time once they get bored from seeing it every day.”

“We’re not ready for that yet, Michael.” Dean shook his head. “One step at a time. The dog-parks
serve an important function still. At least cities that have a dog-park have a place where Lupins can go and be free to be themselves without getting arrested. Don’t forget, our movement is still very young, and we’re still dependent on the goodwill and support of lots of people in high places in the government. We’ve promised them certain things, and we need to stick to those promises or risk losing their support. Those people still have to be re-electable, so it’s a balancing game.”

“Do you ever just stop and think what a weird life we live?” April spoke into the glass, fogging it up where she still leaned into it. “I mean, we’re just animals really, right? – like ducks, or pigs, or salmon? But we spend all of our time and energy in figuring out how to live through each day without falling apart at the edges, and it turns out that we need massive amounts of sex and violence just to stay sane and functional. Maybe our species wasn’t supposed to make it. Maybe we’re supposed to be extinct. Why would any species evolve to need this much…special care? One wrong move and we lose our sanity – how is that…natural?”

“Salmon spend a lot of time and energy on sex, too,” Jim reminded her. “Well, on reproduction anyway. April, you’re young. Maybe you haven’t had a chance to look back at what we used to be, back before we decided to go modern. There are still small Lupin communities sprinkled here and there in the wilderness who follow the old ways. They don’t have cellphones or sleek spanking benches, and they spend far less time than we do thinking about their own balance. They don’t have charts and graphs and rating scores. They do it all by instinct. Somehow, they listen to each other, scent each other, and get it right. Everyone has a place. Everyone gets fed. It’s not unnatural until you try to put it pants and a tie.”

April turned and regarded him. His comment about her age might have sounded patronizing from anyone else, but from him, it seemed kind.

He went on. “I spent a couple of years in my youth with a Pack north of Vancouver. A big part of me wanted to stay. They were a genuinely peaceful lot. Sex was out in the open. It could get fierce. Any time someone sparked a challenge, there would inevitably be bloodshed, but there was no resentment afterward no matter who won and who lost. Both parties walked on once it was over, and the pack settled back into a natural fit again. Sometimes the Claiming led to real injuries, but those times were rare. The key was that everyone understood that the health of the Pack trumped everyone’s personal needs, but that it depended on everyone’s needs being met. It’s circular. No one hid their desires. No one felt ashamed of their needs. Red bottoms were as common as sunburned faces, and spankings were as frequent as meals. It’s all the same to them, and they don’t give any of it a second thought. If a Top desires a mounting, it happens, and it’s accepted. Meanwhile, the hunting and fishing still get done. New clothes are crafted when they need them. Huts are repaired when they deteriorate. They’re happy with their lives, even the Omegas, because everyone knows their place and what’s expected of them, and everyone knows they are valued and safe.”

Castiel wished he wasn’t feeling a trace of longing from his mate. He wished she lived in a world where she could have that kind of peace without needing to fight for it so hard. He locked eyes with his mate. “The Omegas are revered in the wild packs. They’re protected and honored, but they aren’t really considered fully competent pack members. They don’t get a say in much of anything about their own lives. It’s not a perfect world, April. They seem to have chosen stability over personal agency. Maybe they do the instinctive balancing better than we do, but I don’t think they have all the answers either. I, for one, would rather know you as a partner and a person despite our power difference, than bind you to my home, naked and silent, awaiting my will and prepared for my knot. You could stay balanced that way, and if it’s all you ever knew, maybe you would be happy like they seem to be. But we know that you’re capable of more, and I’m not willing to give that up on a false ideal of security now that we know better. We have to find a middle ground between treating Omegas like child-bearing pups and leaving them to waste away in agony. I’m sorry that we’re not there yet. I want so much better for you and Michael.”
Dean looked between the two mates, overwhelmed with how beautifully righteous his lover was. The talk of what wolves need and how to give it to them reminded Dean that he needed to coach April on how to brat for Cas on occasion. Otherwise, the Alpha would suffer needlessly once Dean was gone. When she learned how to stroke Castiel’s wolf with a challenge once in a while, Dean knew, the Alpha could learn to live without him. It was going to hurt like hell for them both, but Dean was a true masochist after all, and he’d recover eventually. If he could do it, Castiel could too.

“Pssst!” Michael’s stern face caught Dean’s attention again. They communicated wordlessly while the discussion continued between Pastor Jim, April, and Cas. Michael wanted to know why Dean’s thoughts kept turning so dark. Dean shrugged. The conversation was dark, so he didn’t think his emotions were out of line.

Michael’s eyes narrowed. He wasn’t buying it. Dean had been feeling fear and regret and longing, all emotions that fit with the topic at hand, but Dean’s seemed to spike at the wrong times, in the wrong ways, and they seemed too personal to allow to pass. Dean was hiding something. Michael was sure of it.

“What happened in Oklahoma, Alpha?” Jim asked out of the blue, grabbing Michael’s attention back from his mate. “Don’t tell me Singer doesn’t know. Bobby’s got a finger on every pulse-line in this country.”

“I haven’t talked to Bobby since we left Kansas. I asked Billie to check in with him when we got here. She should have something for us soon.” The lie, well, the omission, rolled off Cas’ tongue easily, much as it pissed him off that Bobby and his own brother had put him into the position where lying was the only safe course. When had his life become this complicated, and how did he still believe he had any moral credibility left? He was complicit in the murder of four wolves, and that fact was a secret from his own closest packmates. Cas rubbed his face with his hands. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately.

April removed herself from her spot by the window and knelt at his feet, sensing his disquiet. He petted her head and pulled her in to lean against his thigh, letting her suckle on his thumb. Jim Murphy smiled at him and changed the subject again.

“Congratulations on finally Mating, Alpha. I approve. She’s spunky, smart, and sweet, not to mention quite the loveliest Sub I’ve seen in some time.”

“Hey!” Dean protested. “What about me? I’m a loveliest…uh…I’m pretty too.” Everyone laughed at his awkwardness, and Jim rolled his eyes.

“All right, ‘Me Too’, you’re quite lovely as well, but the difference between you and April is, if your backside isn’t as red as our marquee six days out of the week, I’ll eat my own shoes. You’re trouble from the jump, and it’s nice to see a Sub who doesn’t always have to brat back at her Dom. You, Dean Winchester, deserve every swipe your ass takes. That one doesn’t. She’s just on the far end of the spectrum, that’s all.”

“Fuck you.”

Dean’s mouth. It was a death trap built right into his face, and it hated him. April grimaced in sympathy as Dean’s Omega mate hauled him unceremoniously onto the conference table, stripped him, wailed on him while Dean’s eyes clenched closed at the sudden heat and spiking pain, and then held him in place so Castiel could double the count, all in one go. Dean protested loudly, but he didn’t struggle against Cas’ palm. Double-jeopardy was supposed to apply when someone outside the Pack disciplined him, not his own mate. Jim just chuckled and deferred when Cas offered him, as the ‘injured party,’ a chance to take a few swings himself.
It was over as fast as it started. Michael pulled Dean onto his lap, Dean’s jeans still wrinkled around his own knees, ignoring Dean’s grumbles that a double-whammy had never been part of their deal. The alpha-Sub’s eyes were a little red, but he wasn’t upset. He met Jim’s gaze and smirked at him, leaning in to absorb the comfort and warmth his Dom offered. Dean needed the touch, having let himself get too emotional over the impending deadline of his time with the man he would love until he died. At least he didn’t have to give up Michael. He might be an anchor and a burden to Castiel Novak, but Michael he got to keep.

“What’d I miss?” Billie asked, pushing the door open and reading the electricity in the air.

“The usual,” said Michael, kissing Dean’s cheek.

“Okay, whatever. Jesus, Dean.” Billie slid into an empty chair and dismissed the subject. “I talked to Bobby. His network doesn’t have any solid info yet, but they have some leads. The common assumption among those who might know something is that Gordon got on the wrong side of the syndicates with his trafficking business. They don’t like anyone starting up a new storefront without going through them, and they’re not subtle in conveying their displeasure. It may even have been a coalition of rivals that joined forces and pulled it off.

“The investigators found some interesting and incriminating evidence at the blast site. That’s not public knowledge yet, of course, but Bobby has an inside guy, so he gets the inside scoop. Apparently, Gordon and Peter were both dicks-deep in all kinds of shady shit.”

Michael ran a hand over Dean’s ass to feel the heat from his mate’s skin physically while he let the soreness in through his bond. He might be turning into a sadist. Feeling Dean react to pain was becoming as enjoyable as feeling him react to pleasure.

“On the plus side, Claire ran a rescue run early this morning based on Gabriel’s info and pulled three more Omegas out. They were part of the original fifteen that Gordon had, and they are all in relatively good shape, so it’s a solid win. No one was hurt. Claire, Ash, Krissy, and Alex split up to get them to safety. That leaves nine more, and Gabe’s homing in on two others. It looks like Gordon ordered them pulled off into small groups. Gabe thinks none of them are being kept in groups larger than three. That’s going to make them harder to find but maybe easier to rescue. He just wants to get to them before they get sold. Everyone seems to have gone to ground though, so that’s on our side too. If they’re too scared to make a sale or transfer, that means they stay traceable longer.”

Billie stopped and sucked in a deep breath. “Wow, Billie. I think you said that all in one breath,” Dean commented, impressed. “You’re turning into Charlie a little more every day.”

“Fuck you, Winchester.”

No one scolded or spanked Billie, which Dean thought was unfair. To Billie. He nuzzled in close enough to scent Michael’s throat.

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Sam entered the store through sliding glass doors, annoyed at himself. He was halfway through the recipe before he realized he’d forgotten to buy heavy cream. It wasn’t Alfredo without cream. If he’d stayed at The Facility he could have raided the kitchen there, but instead he’d gone home over the
weekend while Dean was in New York.

He was muttering to himself in aggravation, heading through the freezer section toward dairy when his mind went completely offline. Instead of continuing on past frozen entrees, Sam calmly put his huge paws on the shoulders of a surprised young woman, pressed her back into the glass freezer case door and lifted her skirt while unbuckling his belt and shoving down his own pants.

Sam was still sentient, and he knew he’d just run into his Mate; his True-Mate. He knew he wasn’t supposed to Mate her right here in frozen foods. He knew the police would come. He’d be cited. He could cause property damage. He should wait, hole up somewhere safe and call Benny to come help. There was a protocol. They should do this right, safely. He didn’t know anything about this girl except that she was exactly his type physically; tall and blond, with striking eyes which were now hooded with lust. Her eyes sparked something deep inside Sam’s unconscious mind.

All the logical thoughts ran through his mind the way thoughts do, on top of each other and in multiple layers of consciousness, but Sam was in a different place, and he passively watched them float by, unconcerned. He felt calm. He felt oddly, utterly, decisively calm.

The girl’s panties came off with a swipe of one of Sam’s hands. She breathed out through her nose in anticipation, helped him to lower his briefs, and lifted one leg to wrap around his thigh. He caught it and held it in place. His eyes and hers were locked as if tied by an intangible link.

“What the hell are you doing?!?”

“Oh, shit! They’re gonna fuck right here! Hey! Hey, you two! Get a room! You can’t do that here! Hey!”

“Oh God, they’re Mating!”

A radio crackled. Someone mentioned a store manager. Someone mentioned the police. Sam heard it all, but he was large and confident and committed. It would take an army to stop him now, so he smirked. One dimple crested as his eyes sparkled into hers. He would pay the citation. Only one thing could stay his plan at this point, and that was…

“Yeah?” he asked her.

“Hell, yeah,” she responded, holding her skirt up and out of his way. Neither of them blinked. Sam needed no further encouragement.

Sam drove into her wet body and bottomed out in one smooth drive of his hips. Her head cracked back against the glass in response, so he decided to move her. He didn’t want to break the glass door and have her cut by broken glass. Sam pulled her up onto his hands and cock, and she wordlessly wrapped her long legs around his hips, her skirt draping loose in the back keeping her mostly covered.

“Mine!” he gritted between his teeth, noting they had an audience. No one tried to stop him, so he sank carefully to his knees with a strong arm supporting her lower back, and he settled the woman out on the floor without losing his connection with her.

“Sam!” she shouted as his hips began a deep, powerful, demanding rhythm. Her eyes had slipped closed as her chin raised to bare her tender throat. It was a cry of wanting, of longing, of fulfillment. She knew him. He startled and looked at her closely again. Really looked at her face. Sam growled and whined in one strange vocalization, his fucking never slowing down. He knew her, too. He knew her well. He hadn’t seen her since they were young together, but he could only blame his
initial failure to recognize his first girlfriend on sight on the altered state of mind brought on by the rush of Mating-hormones and the changes her facial features had undergone as she matured.

“God, Sam!” Her voice had taken on a desperate quality. Her face had slimmed and lengthened, all the baby fat melting off in the intervening years.

Sam still held her virginity sacred within a lockbox in his heart. It wasn’t a very masculine thing to prize. He’d never boasted about it when he was an adolescent, but it had long been the most meaningful possession he owned. They’d popped each other’s cherries. She held his too, and to Sam it was a hallowed thing. That had been years ago. Years too long. How had he not known her on sight?

“Jess! Fucking finally! Oh God, Jessica!” Sam let the years fall away. He’d been lost without her since her family moved her away at fifteen. He kept himself balanced using the contract services at work, but he’d never seriously dated anyone else. Sam began to sob as he took her for his own. She couldn’t be comfortable against the cold, dirty tiles of the grocery store. His own knees where he used them for leverage were growing red and sore, but he’d make it up to her later. Right now, he needed her right where she was before she took off on him again. No one had believed him back then, but Sam had always known he was meant for this woman and she for him.

Sam sobbed as he worked his cock deep into her slick wetness, and she clenched around him with every muscle she had.

“MINE!” he grunted again, meaning it with all his heart and forcing her body to agree with him. She pulsed her hips in time with his and made no protest.

“Yours, Sam! Always.” Her body told his that it was the truth, and her eyes showed him a bitch wolf in complete agreement. Years of longing showed in those blue eyes, fear and hurt replaced by hope and lust. The bitch rolled in submission, so the Dom took a deep breath, set his jaw, and went for it. Her plastic shopping basket lay near her head on its side. The eggs had spilled and broken and turned her blond hair dark where the curls became sticky in egg white. Sam ignored the mess.

His guttural growls turned into grunting chuckles as he fucked his mate in public, in the grocery store, on the cold tile floor. What was Dean going to say when he heard about this? Sam was never going to live this down. He half expected he’d be on the internet within fifteen minutes, but he didn’t care even a little.

“You ready, Ginger?” It was an old pet name from an inside Gilligan’s Island joke that had fallen flat. The joke sucked, but the name stuck.

“Lay it on me, Professor.” She craned her head further back to give him access to her throat, and his possessive growling returned, far more aggressive than it had been, a Claim gathering steam. Sam sank his wolf’s Dominant teeth deep into the Submissive’s shoulder as he pummeled into her with his hips, snarling fiercely and letting a line of blood escape the seal of his lips as he sucked a bruise into the wounded flesh. He sucked hard, willing her flesh to make itself pliable to his will. She didn’t scream, but he felt her orgasm around the movement of his cock. The electricity of their connection as it snapped into place felt better than anything Sam had ever experienced in his life, and he lost the fight to prolong their coupling. Sam released his hold with his teeth to shout into her throat, grinding his hips in a barely-there motion, emptying into her cunt, scenting her deeply with his nose buried in her throat.
He sought and found her mouth, forcing his way in, sobbing, laughing, growling, moaning all at once. Jessica wrapped her arms around his huge shoulders and let her tears fall uncontested into her hair.

Soon they were separate again, wrapped in blankets and sitting in the manager’s office, ignoring the tirade from the Primate store owner about appropriateness in public spaces. Jess sat next to Sam, turned toward him, their knees touching, their hands in each other’s hair. They were just waiting to be picked up by Benny. Sam wanted to keep kissing his new mate, but he couldn’t look at her and kiss her at the same time, so he dove in to taste her lips and pulled back out again over and over.

“Should press charges… This here’s a clean, family establishment… Grandmas and little kids watching…” Blah, blah, blah. Sam winked at her, and she smiled at him. It was a smile that he’d never forgotten, hidden mostly in his dreams in the last few years, but cherished whenever he remembered.

A policeman stopped in before Benny could get there and wrote Sam the expected ticket for public Mating. It was a misdemeanor. He’d pay it without protest. Some things were worth far more than they cost.

Benny hugged them both. He didn’t know Jess, but he loved Sam, and if Jess was right for Sam, then she was Pack. ‘Nuff said.

“Have you called your brother?” Benny asked, driving Sam and his mate home. He should be taking the couple to get checked out by medical, but as he’d told Cas on numerous occasions, Mating was a natural drive. Wolves did it all the time without needing medical surveillance, and Sam had asked to be taken home. Benny was just glad Sam didn’t try to drive himself. Mating hormones were strong motherfuckers, and they could fuck up even the stoutest wolf for a good while.

“Not yet. I expect someone will show him a video soon enough. I’m not looking forward to the next time I talk to him.”

Benny laughed. “I’d love to be there. Can we call him when I get you home? Please?”

“No.”

Jessica had nothing to say. The leggy blonde was busy sucking hickies into Sam’s neck. They didn’t have eggs or cream with them when they made it home, so Benny agreed to do a fast food run, leaving the food on Sam’s kitchen counter once he had it, and ignoring the squeaking of the bedsprings and the grunting from Sam’s room. He locked the front door behind him as he let himself out. Jess’ scream didn’t need a door to make it out of the house, and Benny whistled lowly to himself as he walked to his car.

His single friends seemed to be toppling fast these past few months. Benny wondered who might be next.

One step ahead of all of them, he decided to take the rest of the day off. He texted Andrea to see if she needed anything before he headed home. Her cravings had just begun to turn weird, so he hoped she wouldn’t come up with anything too hard to find.

She texted back – fish sticks and pimento cheese. Benny smiled happily at her response. He headed straight back to the grocery for the goods, stepping carefully over the freshly mopped patch in the freezer section.
If this AU were real life, there's no way they'd all mate this close together, but it's not. It's my playground, and I was tired of seeing the Jessica Moore tag up there all this time, and not having her here. She needs to be here. For Sam.

Thanks as always for all the comments and kudos. They keep me fed.

It's Thursday, and I'm not at work. It was a long, long eight-day stretch, but I'm home and writing now. YEA!
Chapter Summary

The Pack gets to meet Jessica, and she's a little bit different. Let's hope Sam can catch on fast. Michael corners Dean about what he's been hiding. Also, Jo's kind of a bitch for no reason. IDK, it just happened.

Chapter Notes

I'm barreling ahead. I hope y'all have plenty of time on your hands. (That's a Styx song, isn't it?) I'm going to go straight from posting to cleaning my house, and then I'll get to the comments from last chapter.

I have tears in my eyes from laughing so hard at my alpha who asked me if I'm almost through writing this story. Um, no. No, I'm not even close. I will probably have to cut into several and set it up as a series eventually, but, no. Not anywhere close to finished.

Enjoy. Most of the smut in the last few has been relegated to implied stuff. Sorry about that. I'll get something explicit and hopefully hot penned soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN:

“C’mom, Baby, PUSH! One more, Omega! One more push.”

“Shut the FUCK UP, BILL! I’M PUSHING, DAMNIT!”
Ellen squeezed her mate’s hand with all her might and dug her fingernails into the arm he’d slung around her shoulders. Her feet shoved hard against the stirrups, lifting her backside clean off the delivery bed.

“Keep yourself focused, Mama,” the nurse chided her again. Fucking again! Ellen hated how the staff called her Mama. She wasn’t their Mama. “Put your energy into pushing through the contractions, not into your legs. Come on, breathe with me again.”

Ellen tried to focus on the rhythm of the nurse’s breathing, but she was so fucking tired and everything hurt so bad. All she wanted was this Goddamned baby out of her – this light of her life that she’d prayed for, tried for, that she’d begged Bill to give her – all she wanted was to get the damned thing OUT!

“Aaarghh! F…..uuuuuu….ckk!!” Ellen clenched everything she owned and tried to funnel it all through her channel.

“Good! That was a good one! One more, now. Come on, catch your breath, let’s do it again. Your pup’s almost here, Mama.”

“YOU FUCKING SAID ONE MORE THREE PUSHES AGO!”

“Looks like you’ve got a stubborn pup on your hands, Omega. Let’s go. Work with me now. She’s been crowning for a while. She’s ready. I know you’re ready. Look at me, I’ll get you through this, I promise. Count us down again, alpha.”

The nurse was too fucking calm. Bill began a slow countdown from ten, letting his mate grind the bones in his fingers together and dig more bloody divots into his arm.

“AAAAAAAAARRRGGHHH! GET IT OUT! PLEASE, FUCKING PLEASE!!!! AAAAAAAAAHHHHH!”

“That’s it, sweetie! Great job! We’ve got a head all the way out now. Just be still for me and breathe for a sec.” The nurse and the doctor switched places, working efficiently to support the wet, slimy head and suck sticky fluid from the pup’s tiny nose and mouth.

“Are you ready, dear?” The doctor’s tone was much gentler on Ellen’s nerves. “I’m not going to drop her, and neither are you. Just trust me.” The doctor switched her attention to Bill’s pale face. “Still doing okay, alpha? All you have to do is hold onto your mate. I’m not going to let anyone get hurt.”

Bill nodded vigorously and stifled a growl. His instincts were working in overdrive telling him to rip the staff into tiny pieces, but he’d been through their detailed training program, and he put all the coping mechanisms they’d taught him into use. The liability and insurance clauses still required two trained security alphas to be in the room during the birth if the couple insisted on Bill’s presence. Both were still parked casually by the wall. Bill watched them peripherally. He took their detached attitude as a good sign that all was still well. His mate was in good hands, and he needed to allow them to work.

“Okay, then. Let’s get this pup out into the world where she belongs. Give me a good strong push, Ellen. That’s it. The hard part’s over. You don’t need to strain. Good girl, just like that. There we go. We’ve got a shoulder. One more just like that, and she’ll slide right out. Breathe for me. You’re doing great. Yep. Atta girl. And another breath. Ellen? One breath at a time, love. Omega, take a slow breath.”
Ellen gasped with the pain and the exhaustion, the hormones and the fear. She didn’t feel like Dr. Grantiss could be talking to her. She wasn’t a good girl. She wasn’t doing great. She was falling apart, and she wasn’t following any of the alpha’s instructions. Ellen couldn’t breathe. Exhales kept getting in the way of inhales. She was certain that the tiny pup caught in her birth canal was suffocating along with her, but she couldn’t stop. She’d nearly succeeded before failing miserably. Almost there. The story of her life. Her vision began to cloud. She could feel involuntary spasms wracking her body torturously around the little life that she was terrified of losing.

“Alpha Harvelle, your mate’s hyperventilating. Get down there and let her scent you. Stroke her head if you can move either of your hands.” The doctor’s voice was so calm and soothing, Ellen rode it like a boat drifting in a deep sea. The doctor didn’t seem to think the pup was near dying. “Find your breath for me, Omega. You’re so close. You’ve done so well. She’s almost here, and she’s going to be strong and healthy. Talk to her, Bill.”

“Baby, I’m so proud of you,” he picked up as the doctor’s voice faded out. “I know you’re hurting, and you’re tired. I can feel it. I can feel how strong you are. Baby, Ellen, my love, you’ve got this. One more. Breathe. In….out….in….out. There you go. You back with us? You ready?”

Alpha Doctor Grantiss squeezed Ellen’s thigh to bring her back to task, and said, “All right, little Harvelle family, let’s make you a little bit bigger now. Listen to my voice, and don’t panic, Omega. I’ve got you. Your mate’s got you. Now, PUUUUSHHHH!”

“AAAAAHHHHHHHHH….AAAHHHH….AAARRRGHGH!” Ellen sobbed into her muscles, clinging to her mate and trying her damnedest to keep herself focused.

“Good! Aaaannd, she’s out! Great job, Ellen. Congratulations, it’s a beautiful baby girl! You did so good. Rest now, Omega. Good girl.”

Ellen slumped back in exhaustion, grinning in spite of the pain that still shot back and forth up and down her spine and across her belly. The nurses went back into motion. Someone spread Ellen’s birthing gown open down her chest so the doctor could lay the slimy lizard-looking creature on Ellen’s bare skin. Bill wept into his mate’s neck and put one of his huge hands on the puppy’s back.

Neither of the new parents paid any attention to the rush of movement all around them. The cord was cut, the placenta delivered, Ellen took a few stitches to close up the tearing that her anus had experienced incidentally. All of her focus was on the tiny, mewling, pointy-eared puppy on her chest.

“Got a name picked out yet?” one of the nurses asked the exhausted couple as she rubbed the baby’s body vigorously with absorbent towels.

“Joanna Beth,” Bill responded through his tears with no hesitation.

NOW:

“Hit play again! April, dude! C’mere, you gotta see this. I thought you’d never get up. C’mere, look! Sammy got hitched…at the grocery store…in fr…frozen foods!” Dean was laughing too hard to get the words out easily, and his groggy mate-in-law was slow on the uptake. She shuffled over squinting in confusion, her hair a mess, and her bathrobe hanging open, revealing that she’d not bothered with pajamas or underwear again last night.
She focused on the screen mounted on the hotel suite’s wall. Michael pushed the play button again, and the scene showed their local grocery store. She knew the one. And yeah, that was Sam - Sam, fucking a blonde girl on the ground. April frowned trying to make heads or tails, moving closer.

Dean had his cell phone to his ear. “No, Charlie, I think it’s great. I really do. I’ll call him in a minute, but you gotta admit this is fucking hysterical – ‘Mr. Vanilla-straight-lace-follow-all-the-rules-all-the-time-paddle-swing’ dropping trou and gettin’ dirty next to the microwave pizzas. I’ve never wished so hard Sammy had presented alpha before this. Just imagine if they tied, and he had to waddle her out of there with his ass hanging out and a chick on his cock.” Dean doubled over in laughter again. “Whew, Jesus! Hey, Michael, play it from the start again. Did you catch that crotchety old man in the corner threatening Sam with his umbrella? Gramps just went to the market to pick up some Toaster Strudel, but he can’t get his Toaster Strudel cause there’s a moose fucking a blonde in front of the Toaster Strudel case. Oh my God! Yeah, yeah that’s the one, you see him?”

Dean’s exuberance wafted from him in waves and set the other two chuckling happily as well. April and Michael found themselves giggling more at Dean than at Sam. Poor Sam. Michael silently tied April’s bathrobe closed for her, and she shuffled off to find a cup of coffee before her mate got up and switched her to juice or milk. Coffee wasn’t forbidden exactly, but he never seemed to pour her any, and since breakfast was a meal where she was expected to take only what she was given, she usually went without.

“Yeah, all right. Thanks Charles. Hey, by the way, grab Jo tonight and anybody else you want to and swing by my house. It’s been too long, and we have another Mating to celebrate.” He paused, accepting a mug from the young woman and kissing her cheek in thanks. “Oh, he is? Even better. No, not Cas’ house; mine and Sam’s. Yeah, we land at 2:00, so how about any time after 5:00? Give us a chance to get unpacked and shit, rest a little. You got it. Love you, too Charlie. See you soon.”

Dean hung up and took the internet remote from his mate, pointing it at the screen and searching for another video with a better angle. There were several videos already uploaded, so he had options. Wow, Jessica Moore. Go figure. That girl had some serious explaining to do when Dean could get her alone. She’d been too young to stop it when her parents moved her across the country years ago, but she hadn’t been too young to know how to work a fucking telephone, email, Skype, even licking a stamp and sending out paper by snail mail should’ve been well within her capabilities. Sammy hadn’t heard a single peep from her once she left though, and it had torn him apart. Dean’s Big Brother mode went on full alert again, and he intended to get some answers now that she was back. Nobody hurts the big, stupid, clumsy, pathetically emotional moose and gets away with it, not even said moose’s own True-Mate.

Michael calmly took the remote back from where Dean was tapping it against his own lips, no longer watching the screen, deep in thought. The Omega switched the television off and steered Dean to the kitchenette.

The Alpha joined them shortly. Breakfast was a selection from the breakfast buffet downstairs, delivered on platters by room service. The fridge was stocked with a random variety of groceries, but no one felt like cooking.

“What happens to all the food in the fridge when we check out?” Michael asked with his mouth full.

“Gets donated to the women’s shelter a couple of blocks over. It’s part of the contract we keep with this place. They stock the fridge with food in case the Lupins staying here Trip into a cycle unexpectedly. Whatever they eat gets added to their bill and the extra expense of the uneaten food gets averaged over all the rooms. It’s basically a tax on everyone to feed the battered women
April found her knee pillow had been moved between Castiel’s feet. She crawled beneath the table and took her place before him. They’d worked on a new set of hand signals, but she didn’t need to see his gesture to understand what he wanted from her this morning. The pillow’s placement was enough. April pushed his bathrobe out of the way and breathed in the heady aroma of Alpha as he spread his knees. She settled happily, stroking his firm hip with one hand. April sucked her Alpha’s flaccid cock into her mouth, breathed out easily, and held it heavy on her tongue, letting him feel as little movement from her once she’d taken up her position as she could. If he wanted more, he would take it. Cas’ hand stilled hers on his hip, but he didn’t chastise her for the motion. She was still learning.

Breakfast continued without comment about April. She was where she was meant to be, and the Pack felt balanced and settled. For once, even Michael managed to be sarcasm and snark-free. Cas knew about Sam. He’d been updated by text late last night by Benny. Benny evidently chose to withhold notification to anyone until late in the night to allow Sam and Jess a few hours of real privacy. The internet hadn’t waited though, and word began to leak out yesterday early in the evening. The group in Boston didn’t know simply because they hadn’t been looking for it.

Dean let Castiel know about the gathering at the house that was still in the planning stages. He didn’t want a huge crowd, but Dean missed his friends. He trusted Charlie to put together a guest list correctly and to get something for everyone to eat and drink. He trusted Charlie with anything.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll skip out on this one, Dean.” Cas reached for the platter of fruit and began to put April’s breakfast plate together. “I have a huge backlog at the office already. I could use a quiet evening at my desk to catch up. Would you mind keeping April with you? Watch over her, please.”

Dean snorted. “She’s not a puppy, Cas. She doesn’t need a babysitter at a party with my friends in my own house. Relax a little bit.”

Castiel turned his stoic face to Michael instead and tried again. “Michael, would you mind watching out for April this evening?”

“Of course not, Alpha. I’ll keep her safe.”

“Oh, please. Seriously? Cas, don’t do that to her. Michael’s stick is so far up his ass, she’ll be lucky to be allowed to walk two feet to the bathroom to take a shit without him calling for duct tape.”

They heard a giggle from under the table. Castiel cleared his throat menacingly, scooted his chair back and looked into her wide, startled eyes. He raised one eyebrow and one finger. That was a tally-mark. She nodded, and took him back into her mouth as he moved back into place.

“Dean, just because you don’t see the inherent danger in having alcohol and Ozzies at the same party doesn’t mean there isn’t danger,” Michael lectured.

“Yes, Mother,” he sassed, winking.

They finished eating. Castiel excused himself, collected his Ozzie and her breakfast plate, and he fed her by hand while she relaxed in the suite’s enormous bathtub. He was pleased with the trip, pleased with his Pack, pleased with his mate, and balanced. They weren’t perfect, but they were real. Cas
was ready to go home. He needed to see Gabriel. He needed to speak with Bobby. He wanted to meet Jessica and check on Sam. He was slightly annoyed with Benny for skipping protocol where Sam’s Mating was concerned, but at least the alpha had collected a Pelio reading before dropping the couple off at home, and he’d set up a routine to have them checked on regularly.

Dean declined the sedatives on the flight home, and that made him even more anxious. Castiel refused outright to allow the wayward couple to sit together. He wasn’t stupid. Michael didn’t care about rules unless they were his own, and Dean’s brat would benefit double from misbehaving during the flight, getting a chance to enjoy himself on the flight, followed by a delicious reprimand for his misbehavior later. Castiel sat beside Michael and put Dean in the aisle seat next to April just across the way. Cas could still touch and talk to Dean. He found that having an Ozzie to watch over helped keep Dean calmer than expected. All in all, it was a good solution, although no one seemed to want to chat much. Castiel reviewed emails and sipped his water. No one ever said being a responsible Pack Alpha was always going to be fun.

He scribbled out the new Pack rankings on a napkin with Michael looking on. He’d downloaded Jessica’s Keller chart from the Keller Foundation database this morning, and he tapped the pencil against his teeth as he thought it through.

“Jessica Moore Winchester – Het/F, 24, [X: 0], [Y: -11], [Z: 10],” he copied.

She was a Classic Sub with a positive Z-rating. That mix – having the Tertiary rating sit on the opposite side of the range from the Z-rating – sometimes led to some strange behaviors. It seemed an unlikely True-Mate pairing, and Castiel wished they’d had the opportunity to take a scent-room reading before the couple sealed the deal. Oh well. He couldn’t get hung up on what was lost, and there was no way to get the readings now.

Michael’s voice broke him out of his reflections. “Where does that put Jessica in the Pack?”

“She’ll be fourth, overall. She’s second-ranked beta, just behind Sam. As a Sub and a beta, she won’t be expected to play a leadership role really, unless it happens organically. I don’t know her yet. We may need to adjust her role a few times before we know how she fits. I assume Sam still plans to live at his house and not move in with us. Jessica will live wherever he chooses, and she’ll take his name.”

Michael resisted rolling his eyes. He knew how the Mating dynamics worked between couples. The Top made the life choices, and the Bottom went along and complied. All he cared about at the moment was to know if he could expect to have to answer to this woman he hadn’t met. Castiel sensed his unanswered question, and he sighed.

“Michael, your role doesn’t change. You’re still primary Omega, and you’re still a Pack Dominant. Defer to Sam where Jessica’s behavior is concerned unless you believe she’s done something that needs to be addressed immediately. Be sure you’re operating through your wolf if you need to call her down for something. As a beta, she’ll receive the same instruction concerning you in your Omega mindset. She outranks you officially, but I think you’ll find that you and Jessica don’t need to have much of a disciplinary relationship. How about you just aim to be in-laws or siblings? Maybe you can be friends.”

Michael wasn’t sure he needed any more friends, but he didn’t protest. Alpha was right that they’d just have to wait and see how she fit.
It wasn’t a party really, more a gathering of family and friends. So, a party. Fine. But there are parties and there are parties. This wasn’t that. Dean had come home with Michael and let himself in through the locked front door with his key. He texted Sam on his way so the couple might have a chance to clean up a little before they had company. Betas don’t cycle the way Omegas and alphas do. The females menstruate roughly quarterly, and they are fertile when they ovulate, but they don’t go through Heat or Rut cycles.

Betas do however, share a libido range that matches other Canids. Most betas don’t say no to opportunities for sex any more than their extreme-spectrum packmates do. And when they’ve just Mated less than twenty-four hours ago to an old flame they thought they’d never see again, they can be expected to display a rather heightened level of general randiness. Clinically, that is.

The house reeked of sex when Dean and Michael dragged their luggage into the front hall. The two originators of all the odors themselves were clean and fresh, cooking quesadillas together in the kitchen. Sam couldn’t prevent his huge moose-face from breaking into a grin of pure joy.

“Dean, you remember Jess? She’s just moved back to Lawrence to work in the Public Defender’s office. She’s a lawyer now. We, uh, we ran into each other at the Hy-Vee on 6th.”

“Yeah, we saw.” Dean’s eyes sparkled as he plucked a tortilla from the stack, halved it and handed half to Michael.

“You saw? Oh, shit, it’s on YouTube? Those assholes stood around and watched the whole thing. What happened to decency and privacy? Honestly!”

“If you want private, Sam, maybe don’t fuck the girl in Frozen Foods. I’m just sayin’,” Michael remarked.

“I couldn’t help it! It was a Mating drive. I’m not responsible for where it happened. Those voyeurs weren’t in an altered state of mind though. They could have fucked off when they saw what was happening.”

“Uh-huh. Remind me, little brother, what world do we live in? Yeah, thought so. Just be glad you didn’t set off an orgy. They cite the instigator when that happens.” Sam pulled Jessica in close and nuzzled into her hair, while Dean and Michael tried not to laugh out loud.

“Just own it, Sam. You did good. I like this one. She’s cute. Way outta your league, what with being a hot-shit lawyer and all, but she’s hooked now. No getting away, young lady.”

Dean stole her from Sam and gave her a welcoming hug.

“This one?” Jessica asked Sam over Dean’s shoulder.

Sam bitch-faced his brother and reclaimed custody of his mate. “Dean’s just being an ass. I told you, I never dated anyone seriously, after you.”

“Jessica, this is Michael, my mate.” Dean changed the subject smoothly. “Michael, Jessica Moore.”

“Jess Winchester,” she corrected as she reached for Michael’s hand. “It’s good to meet you. I saw you on TV a couple of nights ago. You guys clean up really well. You should consider wearing tuxes all the time.”
“Stop ogling my Omega,” Dean shooed her away, and she laughed.

“Sam, you heard I invited the gang to stop in tonight? We need to let everybody get to know everybody.”

“I did hear. Thanks for the warning, Dean. And thanks for giving us plenty of time to ourselves before you fill the house with people. I really appreciate it.” Sam’s bitch-face was back.

“Yeah, about that. I’m going to open the windows and get some fans going. This place reeks. Michael, grab the fans outta that closet there.” Dean directed his mate as Jess turned back to the griddle. They had party food to prepare. They had naps to take. Sex might be on the menu, but what’s a little more odor when it was already clinging to every surface in the house?

Sam attached himself to Jessica’s back and sucked messily on her neck while she cooked. She giggled at first and tried to shoo him off, eventually kicking him in the shin and directing him in no uncertain terms to sit at the table and leave her alone so she could finish without burning anyone or anything.

Dean’s and Michael’s barely suppressed snickers disappeared down the hallway, turning into raucous laughter that Dean’s closed bedroom door didn’t hide. Sam knew he’d face allegations of being ‘whipped’ already, but he didn’t care about much of anything now that he had Jess back. He sat, and he waited. She’d always been bossy, and he’d always liked it. To find that she tested as a Submissive surprised him, but he’d also seen her respond to his touch in the bedroom in a way that was pure Sub. Maybe the bossy was just Jess.

“You’re beautiful,” he told her.

“You’re biased,” she responded, smiling at him over her shoulder.

They had a lot of logistics to work out, but Sam wasn’t worried. Her job was close to the courthouse, which was close to his home. She didn’t have much by way of possessions, having moved into a furnished starter-apartment only four days ago. Her plan had been to get established in town, make a little money on the meager salary paid to junior lawyers in the P.D.’s office, and eventually buy a house of her own.

“You said Dean and Michael are honeymooning here right now. So, what does that mean for us? We just going to share the house?”

“No way. How about I take you somewhere for the month? I have vacation days built up, and I have some money saved. You want to go to the Caribbean? How about Fiji?”

“Sam, I’m just about to start a new job. How would it look if I ask for a month off before I even work a day?”

“But we just Mated. They’ll understand.”

“I wish that were true, but I had to beat out a lot of other applicants for this job. They’ll be all kinds of happy for me that I found my True-Mate, and they’ll kindly tell me my services are no longer required and fill the position with whoever was next on the list behind me. Not every employer puts Lupin needs at the top of their priority list, even in Lawrence. Some of them really do have work that needs doing.”

“That’s uncalled for, Jess. My employer has some pretty significant work that needs to get done too, but we don’t sacrifice people to do it.”
“Your employer also has a private sector budget and lots of donors to pay for the headcount to cover people when they’re absent. The Public Defender barely has enough of a budget to keep the lights on. They need every pair of hands working full time or the people they serve fall through the cracks.”

They were both angry at the situation. Sam wanted his month with his mate, and he didn’t want to have to ask Dean and Michael to clear out. Apparently, she wasn’t planning to ask for time off at all.

Great.

“Come work for us, Jess. We need good lawyers. I know Cas will find you a spot where you can help people. It’s what you want, right?”

“Sam Winchester, if you ever offer to slide me into anything on your coattails again, I will take this spatula to your ass until you can’t sit for a month! Let’s get one ground rule straight right now: You respect my career, and you stay out of it! Are we clear? I didn’t work as hard as I have just to have my mate, even though I love him dearly, sweep in and build my career for me. Don’t you EVER do that again!” Her eyes flashed, and she threw the spatula on the counter, swept out of the room, and slammed the bedroom door.

Sam stood still, in shock, staring after her. The smell of smoke knocked him to his senses, and he grabbed for the griddle and tossed the blackened tortillas into the sink to cool. Sam Winchester held several certifications and a Master’s degree covering Lupin development with a focus on Submissives – their behaviors, their care, their development. Sam had never known a Submissive to behave like that. It wasn’t provocative, like a brat would do. It was…Dominant.

Sam’s wolf cocked his head in confusion. He thought a call to Benny was probably in order. In the meantime, he owed an apology to his mate. Submissive or not, she deserved the respect of having her own career path in her own hands. Geez, it had only been a suggestion. Sam dropped a slab of butter onto the griddle and prepped another quesadilla.

So, it wasn’t really a party, more a gathering of family and friends. Charlie and Jo arrived first with supplies. They set up a mixed-drinks station and arranged snacks along the kitchen counters where everyone could graze. Music filtered through the speakers that Dean installed a couple of years ago, linking all of the rooms together on one sound system.

Dean and Michael were refreshed. They’d napped, then Michael fucked his alpha, then they showered and napped again. The house was still a little stinky, but no one cared really. With this group, someone at some point during the evening was sure to add to the layers of sex fumes. Both Dean and Sam put clean linens on their beds and placed another clean folded set close by. They knew their crowd of friends well.

“You and Jess okay?” Dean asked his little brother with concern. Jess had never tempered her volume when she was angry. Dean had, of course, heard the shouting. He and Sam were lugging cases of beer from Garth’s trunk to the back porch where they’d placed an ice-filled cooler.

“Yeah, I think. We’ll work it out. I kinda stepped in it pretty deep, though. She’s still pissed at me.”

“You may have broken a world record for first spats. What’d you do, Sammy?” Dean filled the
coolers as Sam handed him beer bottles.

“I, um, I offered to arrange a job for her as a lawyer for The Facility so we could have our honeymoon.” Sam looked sheepish.

“Oh, fuck. Yeah, you’re sleeping on the couch tonight, buddy. Good job, Sam. You almost made it a whole day.”

“I didn’t mean it like that!” he protested, following Dean back around the side of the house to get the rest of the beer. “She can’t ask for time off yet because they just hired her. I just wanted to figure out a way to have the time we deserve as a new couple. I want my honeymoon, Dean. I just got her back.”

“Welcome to the world of grownup responsibilities, my brother,” Dean chirped.

“You’re one to talk,” Sam protested. “You avoid responsibility every chance you get. Don’t lecture me on being a grownup. You’re twelve.”

Dean stuck his tongue out at his brother, hefted two cases into Sam’s arms at once and finished up with, “I know you are, but what am I?” Sam closed his eyes, breathed through his nose, worked his jaw, and counted slowly in his head.

“Look, Sam. You lectured me and Michael when we were moving too fast to slow it down. Same goes for you and Jess. Give it some time before you stick your foot in your mouth again. Get to know her. Find out what she wants, what she’s accomplished, where she’s headed, and then hold her steady while she gets there. That’s all you have to do, and for God’s sake, don’t try to do shit for her that she can do for herself. You hate it when people do that to you, right? Well, so does she. So do most of us.”

“And what about our honeymoon? She’s scheduled to start work on Monday.”

“That gives you six days. Use ‘em well. I’ll pick up and move Michael into the fucking Pool house or something. It’s not like we’re really spending that much time alone anyway. Plan a big vacation with her when she’s put her time in at work and she earns it. Tell her you’re proud of her, and then back her up and prove it.” Dean lead the way around the house to the back once more, and Sam followed like a kicked puppy. His disappointment poured off him in sheets. “She’s not going anywhere, man. Whether you do it now or later, you’ve got time.”

“Tell that to Gabriel.” Sam didn’t mean it, and he regretted the words as soon as he’d said it. He was just unhappy that the world had to work this way, and he was cranky. Dean didn’t bother saying anything. He let his hard look put Sam in his place. After a minute, they wordlessly went back to work. There was more than enough beer. Dean left what was left in his wallet tucked out of sight in Garth’s car to cover the cost.

Dean giggled on the couch, buried beneath the puppy-pile. He’d missed Jo. Her quirky sense of humor and her take-no-bullshit demeanor were the perfect antidote for Sam’s sour disposition and Dean’s lingering malaise. Jess emerged to meet the gang in a much better mood than when she shut herself away.
Castiel dropped April off, staying just long enough to eat one plate of finger-food, drink one beer, and introduce himself to Jessica. He clapped Sam’s back and congratulated him on his good fortune. Cas also quietly asked for Sam’s citation. As Pack Alpha, he would take care of it as a matter of Pack business. Sam handed it over guiltily. “Sorry, Alpha. I should have behaved better. I feel like I represented the Pack poorly, and I apologize.”

“Nonsense, Sam. These things happen. If you’ll recall, my behavior was considerably worse when I Triggered. I believe I threatened to bite you if you didn’t unlock the door. Something like that. It’s hazy. I’m just happy that you and Jess Mated with no complications. I’ll accept her oaths whenever she’s ready. Come by my office with her sometime this week so we can get the paperwork filled out. There’s no rush.” Cas leaned over the back of the couch to drop a farewell kiss on his mate’s lips and touch Dean’s shoulder.

“Yes, Alpha. I will. Thank you.” Sam had his arm around his mate’s waist. He kept her close as the house filled up, constantly touching her in one way or another, kissing her repeatedly. Jo made a puking gesture with her finger. April laughed out loud. Jess bitch-faced at the young alpha for it, and a quick and decidedly unfriendly conversation involving nothing but their eyes and facial expressions ensued. Cas calmly cuffed Jo upside her head as he left, and she giggled, unperturbed.

Dean watched the interactions with interest, and so did April. April leaned into Jo’s side, with her feet draped over Michael’s lap. She claimed Jo’s space and thereby voted her position as a supporter of Jo’s over Jess’, you know, just in case it ever turned out to matter where her loyalties were. She grinned up at the alpha conspiratorially. Dean frowned. It was unlike April to choose non-Pack over Pack, but maybe she just didn’t have Jess filed as Pack yet, and Jo had been there for April on numerous occasions.

Dean decided Jess needed a friend. As he’d told Sam, she wasn’t going anywhere and she needed a tribe of her own. “Hey Garth! Show Jess how to play Euchre. Just don’t let Meg play. She cheats.”

“Hey! Fuck you, Dean! I don’t cheat. Deal the damn cards, Garth. C’mon, Charlie. You’re playing too.” Meg appeared out of nowhere and took over as Dean had known she would.

Jess smiled her thanks at Dean as Charlie and Garth led her to the kitchen table. He nodded at her. Some things were always going to be easy. “You suck, Jo,” Dean whispered to his best friend.

“Can it, Winchester. They’re nauseating. Everyone’s thinking it,” Jo retorted, and April laughed again.

“Number one: they’ve only been Mated for twenty-four hours. Number two: you’ll be just as disgusting when it happens to you. And Number three:” he moved his finger from Jo’s face to April’s. “For as sweet a kid as I know you can be, you sometimes act like a real bitch. Knock it off. She’s Pack, and that means we treat her with respect and kindness.”

April blanched, but Jo just pulled a bored face. “I’m going to be nice to her. Eventually. But she’s not MY pack. April, you want another cheese puff? I’m going to the kitchen.”

“Yes, please.” She stood to let Jo up, and Dean took advantage of the change in position to take hold of the Omega’s arm and give her four quick hard swats to the center of her ass.

April’s brow wrinkled in distress and she gasped, not at the pain. He’d hit her over some bruises she had in layers, but it was disappointing Dean that she found upsetting. He had never spanked her before outside of their Claim-fuck, and she found she hated it. Tears sprung up in her eyes, and she bit her lip. Dean didn’t soften. He held her by the arm and kept his eyes hard. “Message received, Omega?” he asked her.
“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, Dean, um, alpha.”

Dean smiled then, letting the smile put crinkles at the edges of his eyes. He pulled her into his lap, and snuggled her close. “I don’t like seeing you be mean, April. I don’t think that’s who you really are. Why do you do that?”

“I don’t know,” she sniffled, scenting the alpha. “Are you mad at me?”

“No, sweetheart, I’m not mad. It disappoints me to see you be less than you are.”

Michael piped up from the other end of the couch, “If he was any less mad at you, kid, he’d be fucking you right now.”

“Now see,” Dean spoke to April. “Michael really is an asshole. I’m not going to spank his ass for that uncalled-for swipe at us because it’s his nature. You get it? YOU are a sweet, gentle person who sometimes needs to be reminded of that fact. HE’S a genuine dick who can’t help himself.”

She giggled into his throat. Michael sighed and removed himself from the couch. Becky took his place, and Michael’s pace toward the back porch quickened when he heard Becky’s voice. April perked back up, slid off of Dean’s lap and picked up with Becky as if their conversation were starting in the middle of one they’d left off some time ago. Jo deposited a small plate on April’s lap, and Dean gave her his spot on the couch.

“You not crazy about my friends?” Dean found Michael alone on the back porch, leaning on the rail.

“I don’t know what you mean, alpha. Your friends are delightful.” Michael’s face was flat. His emotions through the bond were still.

“I thought you’d moved past this kind of thing, babe. Is it just too many people? What do you need right now?”

“I, uh, I…hell if I know, Dean. I’m just pissy. Ignore me. Go back and hang with your friends.”

“Nuh-uh. Talk to me first.” Dean pulled his butt up to sit on the railing beside his mate and waited.

“I’m nervous about trying to talk to Castiel tomorrow. Even if we convince him, and we get the go-ahead to try for a pup, we still have to fess up that we went ahead and took a shortcut with our meds. Shit’s going to hit the fan one way or another.”

“Well, yeah. We already knew that. Baby, are you getting cold feet? You having doubts? Just say the word, and we cancel the whole plan.”

“Dean, what do you want? Do you want a baby right now, or are you just following me?” Michael wrapped an arm around Dean’s dangling calf and leaned in, not meeting the alpha’s eyes.

Dean looked at the top of Michael’s downturned head. “I want this. I’ve always wanted to be someone’s Dad, man. Us doing this now makes me happier than I can tell you, but yeah, I’m nervous about the consequences too.” Dean was glad Michael couldn’t see his eyes as he said it. A quick flash of the misery the next few months would bring crossed his mind before he could tamp it down.
“THERE! Right there!” Michael shot upright and stared hard into Dean’s wide shocked eyes. “What the hell was that, Dean? Don’t tell me it’s nothing. I’ve been feeling that from you for days now. What is that? Regret? Longing? Loss? You think you’re losing something…or someone, and I don’t know what’s got you feeling like that. Talk to me. Please!”

Dean went still and speechless until Michael took hold of his shoulders and pulled him off the railing, shaking him. “TALK TO ME, DAMNIT!”

“Michael, I…”

“There you two are!” Ellen poked her head out onto the porch, and then joined them. “Thanks for inviting us over, Dean. It’s been too long.”

“No problem, Ellen.” Dean hugged her. “Thanks for coming.”

“Everything okay? Oh, Dean, I wanted to talk to you about Michael’s Keller. You understand why I can’t use you in the test, don’t you? It’s nothing personal, and I know you aren’t really a possessive guy, so I didn’t anticipate you taking it so hard. I’m sorry. That’s my fault. I should have talked to you before the meeting instead of throwing it at you in public like that. You know I can’t put Cas in as Anchor either. The testers can’t have any kind of bond or claim on the subject.” She seemed genuinely remorseful.

Dean sighed, and looked at Michael. “Yeah, I get it Ellen. I overreacted. I’ve been meaning to come by and apologize more personally than I did that day. Do you mind if I ask who’s on the panel? Is it okay if Michael knows ahead of time?”

“I don’t see why it would matter as long as he doesn’t go get himself bonded to any of them before the test. Let’s see, it’s a standard, full-spread panel. I’ve got Adam doing the Lead-off leg, Jody’s the Bridge, and um, Rafael is going to be his Anchor.”

“You sure you want a standard spread?” Dean was quick to interject when a long-suffering look crossed the Omega’s face. She’d obviously argued this already. He put his hands up. “I’m not trying to tell you how to do your job, but you have to know he’s going to fall in a weird place.”

“That’s what we suspect,” Ellen admitted, glancing at Michael who was looking out at the back lawn instead of at either of the two wolves discussing him. “But we don’t know anything. As long as the data’s clean, we’ll be able to triangulate his ratings from the spread on the slate. Is this really you asking, Dean, as a professional? Or is it you asking as his mate?”

“Beats me, Ellen. I’m just uneasy about it for some reason.”

“That makes two of us,” Michael said quietly.

“You’ll be fine, Michael. We’ve done this thousands of times. We’re not going to let anything bad happen to you.” Ellen’s professional voice was so soothing that Michael closed his eyes and let the comfort ease him. “Everyone in that house there,” Ellen continued, “has been through this process. Ask any of them about their experience if you want to. We’re all here to help you.”

“Can we move it up?” Michael asked her. “The anticipation is killing me.”

“I’ll see what I can do for you, Michael. The schedule gets fixed pretty far out, and changing it knocks people sideways in a lot of ways. I’m not promising anything, but I’ll check, okay?”

Ellen left them with a hug for each of them.
“That was the smoothest fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” Dean told his mate. Michael smirked at him.

“We’re not through talking, Winchester. You still owe me an explanation.” Michael stole a quick kiss, plunging his tongue briefly into Dean’s mouth before popping his ass with a swat and leaving him standing on the porch.

Dean re-entered the house to a barrage of sound. It was like an auction, and it took him a minute to realize what he was hearing. They were laying bets on Michael’s test scores. Again. Michael stood by the food, leaning a hip into the counter and crunching through a carrot that he’d swiped through the dip after each bite. He had his resigned face on, and he was shaking his head slowly. Dean tried not to laugh, but it was hard. He bit his cheek and went to stand next to his mate.

“What’s the running average?” Dean asked Jo.

“Most popular guesses are about -17, +8, +20.”

Dean choked. “They know me, right? How does that make any sense? I’m ashamed that these people consider themselves professionals.”

“Shh, don’t talk too loud. I’ve got $100 riding on this, so I need the masses to stay ignorant.”

“What’s your guess, then?” Michael asked Jo.

Jo looked him up and down like she was just coming up with a rating right there on the spot. “I still say you’re a Central-O. Negative eleven, maybe. Barely Omega at all.”

“And the other ratings?” Michael had his own ideas too, but he wasn’t sharing.

“You two can’t bet, you know,” Jo pointed at Dean and Michael. “That would be cheating.”

“Says who?” Dean protested.

“We’re not letting any of the leadership team put money in, except for Meg because she threatened to break Charlie’s arm if we didn’t let her in the pot, and Charlie has a skiing trip coming up.”

“I’m not on the leadership team,” Michael pointed out.

“No way,” Jo insisted. “You still have way too much inside info, both of you.”

Michael cleared his throat. “You still haven’t told us what your full guess is.”

Jo considered him. “I guessed straight elevens across the board,” she admitted.

Dean shook his head at her and patted her on the back as he guided Michael back into the living room. “Better luck next time, Harvelle.”

“What? Wait, come back! What do you know? DEAN!”

It was a great par… uh, get together. As it turned out, Garth hadn’t overbought on the beer, and Sam and Jess hadn’t overcounted the quesadillas. Jody and Donna stopped by very briefly. They couldn’t leave the dorms unsupervised during the evening, and Sonny made it clear he couldn’t babysit for more than an hour.

Dean accepted Jody’s hug in the full knowledge that the tightness he felt in his gut was his problem and not hers. She would Bridge for Michael because it was the job she’d been assigned to do. Dean
took a deep breath and let the tension go as Sam stepped into Jody’s embrace in his stead.

“I thought you two were both lost causes, but look at you now. I’m proud of you boys,” Jody gushed while Donna fetched them drinks from the porch. “Thanks,” Jody said, taking a beer from her Omega.

“Where’s the lucky girl, Sam?” Donna asked him.

“Oh, she’s over at the Euchre table. I tried to get her to circulate, but I think she’s hooked now. Come here, I’ll introduce you.” Sam dragged the two women in his wake and Jody smiled a goodbye to Dean.

Dean’s phone dinged with a text. It was from Cas.

“Exhausted. Going home. Can you have someone bring April? Don’t let anyone drive drunk.”

Dean hit the speed-dial button and let himself into his bedroom.

“Dean.”

“She can just stay here tonight, Cas. You could drive over and stay too.”

“I need my own bed, Dean. I’m wiped out. If there’s no one sober enough to drive, I’ll swing by and pick her up myself.”

“S’okay. Jody and Donna are fine to drive, and they can’t stay long anyway. Your house is on the way back to The Facility, so I’ll ask Jody. Are you all right? You sound more than just tired.”

“I’ll be fine. There’s a lot happening all at once, and I’m stretched thinner than usual. My mother’s awful bill isn’t going away as fast as I thought it would, and it looks like the investigation into the Oklahoma explosion is going to dig into every competitor of Gordon’s, including us. It’s a lot of extra work on top of our usual.”

“Talk to me, Cas. What do you need?”

“I need my bed, a bowl of soup, and my mate. Not necessarily in that order.”

“You got it. I’ll send her home. Take care of yourself. I love you.”

“Love you too, Dean. I’ll be very happy when your month with Michael is over. This is turning into the longest four weeks of my life.” Cas sighed. “Not that I resent your time with him or anything. Please don’t go getting all self-sacrificing for me. Michael deserves your attention right now. I’m just…shit.”

Dean laughed. Castiel really was wiped if that’s where his head had gone. Dean usually knew he was thinking those thoughts, but the Alpha rarely let them slip out his mouth. “It’s okay, babe. I got it. I’m to stay here, April’s gotta go home. You get some soup and some sleep. No sex, no talking, straight to sleep, you hear me?” Dean teased.

“I hear you. Thanks, Dean.”

“G’Night, Cas.” Dean hung up, and pulled the soiled sheets off his bed. Frikken’ animals. He went back out to catch Jody and beg a ride for April. She agreed easily as he had known she would. Despite Michael’s assessment, Dean’s friends were good people.
Chapter End Notes

   Dang it, Ellen! Bad timing.

   Love you all, and your continued support.
Cas had just sat down with his hot bowl of soup and a slice of cornbread from the bag that Fred picked up at the bakery that morning when April let herself and Jody in through the garage door.

“Thank you, Jody, he’s here,” April called back over her shoulder, coming into the kitchen.

Castiel stood and greeted the beta and his own mate. “Thank you for bringing her home, Jody. I appreciate it. Would you like a bowl of soup?”

“No, thank you, Sir. I need to get back to the dorm. Donna’s waiting for me in the car. I just wanted to make sure April got in all right.”

“Thanks again. Good night.”

“Night Cas. Good night, April.” Jody smiled warmly and closed the door behind her. Cas led his mate back to the kitchen.

“You’re tired, Alpha,” she accused. “And cranky. And you’ve bruised your hand. Is it anything you can tell me about?” April filled a wineglass for her mate and a water glass for herself before settling into a chair next to him and taking his hand to check his darkening knuckles. He pulled his hand back wordlessly and dove back into his meal. She thought he pushed himself too hard, and his many reminders that it wasn’t hers to manage did nothing to stop her from prodding him to slow down.
It would be pointless to pretend she wasn’t right. She could feel his emotions. “I’m okay. Thanks for the wine. Are you hungry? Grab a bowl and join me.” She did so because he told her to, but she didn’t plan to eat much. Cheese puffs were more filling than she’d realized. The travel and the party had worn her out.

“Alpha, I hate to bring it up when I know you’re so tired, but I have to tell you…Dean spanked me tonight.” She made an anxious face at him as she confessed, more to do with the fact that she was laying another burden upon his tired shoulders than out of fear for herself. “I’m sorry, Sir. I shouldn’t have needed his correction, and I’m really embarrassed.”

“Tell me what happened, please.”

“Um…” This one was harder to confess to him, because there wasn’t any way to say it that didn’t make her look petty and childish. “Jo and Jessica are maybe not going to be good friends. They sort of seemed to be at odds, a little bit, not that they were fighting, but well…”

“April, I’m not in the mood for a rambling narrative about Jessica and Jo. Does this have to do with what I witnessed before I left? Jo was rudely provoking Jessica and teasing Sam?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Well, then tell me what I missed. Please keep it brief.”

“I laughed at Jess, too, and I sort of took Jo’s side. I think I hurt Jessica’s feelings. Dean told me to stop being mean and to be respectful because she’s Pack.”

“And he spanked you? How many swats?” Cas rebuked himself for having missed it. He hadn’t been standing where he would have seen April’s face, but he had no excuse for not feeling her derision if it was there at the time. Evidently, Dean saw what Cas had missed.

“Just four.”

“Did he bare your bottom?”

“No, Sir.”

“Psssshh, that wasn’t a spanking. That was a shot across your bow. He’s right though. I’d have given you a real one right there if I’d seen it. April, you remember that I made you write out your Pack oaths and give me an essay on what each one means?”

She nodded guiltily.

“You wrote beautifully about love and devotion and always putting the Pack first. You made me that oath, but I think you’ve forgotten it already.”

“I’m sorry, Sir.”

“I’m too tired to handle this tonight, Kitten. I’m sorry to leave you hanging, but I need to get some sleep first. We’ll clear your tally board tomorrow morning, and I’ll add whatever I need to to help you remember that Pack always has each other’s backs, even over good friends. You know, you didn’t need to choose sides at all.”

“I’m sorry, Sir.” She hoped saying it again would help drive it home. She saw it from a different light now, and it made her wonder what Jo’s problem was. April really was sorry. Cas nodded and went back to his soup. April took small sips of hers.
“Alpha?” she said into the near silence after a while.

“Yes, Kitten?”

“Is Dean okay? He doesn’t seem like himself. Do you think he’s upset about Sam and Jess Mating?”

“I think he’s ecstatic about his brother finding his True-Mate, but…” Cas put down his spoon and sighed deeply. “No, sweetheart, he’s not okay. He’s going through something very scary right now.”

“Is it something I can help with?”

“No, it’s not. And in fact, you’re to stay out of it. Far out. If I get a whiff that you’ve been meddling in Dean’s affairs, you and I will have morning meetings with your favorite morning ritual and in your favorite position for two weeks.”

“Sir? I don’t understand. Didn’t you just tell me to always have my Pack’s back?”

“This is different. You’re not stupid, April. You see more that goes on around this Pack than anyone realizes. God knows what you see from me, but you always know what I need before I do. I’m talking about Dean’s deepest insecurities, and you can’t help him. He has to face this himself. He’s the only one who can make a difference in the end.”

“Are you still getting married?” she asked him in a small frightened voice. Castiel wanted to comfort her, but he knew how vulnerable they all were right now to the tides of Dean’s waxing fears.

“I hope so, April, but it’s really up to Dean. I can’t help him either. All I can do is try to be there to give him what he needs. I can’t make him take it.”

“But what will happen to the Pack if he leaves you? What will happen to Michael? Why would he do that? He loves you!”

“Shhh. We’re a long way from any of that happening. It’s not something to worry too much about. He loves me, and he loves you. You just keep being you, and I need you to know that no matter what happens, it has nothing to do with you or me or Michael or Sam. This is Dean fighting the demons in his own head. You can’t do anything to make it better or make it worse, so just try to stay out of the way when you sense…whatever it is you’re sensing. I swear you have a sixth sense about people.” Castiel pulled her in and cuddled her, holding her close while he finished eating. He noticed hers was still virtually untouched.

“You didn’t have to serve yourself a bowl that you didn’t want. It was just a suggestion.”

“I wanted to share a meal with you.”

“Go on up to bed. I’ll be up in a minute.”

“I’d like to help you clean up, sir.”

“Nope. Bed. Right now.” She kissed him and disappeared before he decided she was dawdling.

Castiel buried his face in his hands and fought the urge to cry. Dean couldn’t be strong right now, he reminded himself. Cas needed to be strong for him. God bless Michael. At least the Omega was holding himself together. Michael had to know something was brewing behind those sun-dappled freckles, but he was standing fast, manning the rigging, or the wheel, or … something nautical, God, Cas was tired.
His row with Bobby had been brief but epic, although by tomorrow the drywall would be repaired. Thankfully, aside from Bobby, there had been no witnesses. Cas and Bobby would behave professionally as if nothing had happened. Castiel blamed it on his fatigue that he considered throwing in the towel, selling out his shares, and walking away with his family to somewhere he could give them all the attention they deserved.

Sleep. That’s what he needed.

Cas dumped his bowl with April’s in the sink and rinsed them out. Then he picked up the rest of the ware from the table, but left it all on the counter. Fred would find it, and it would all be gone by the time Cas came down in the morning. He heard his mother’s cold voice over his own objections, saying, ‘Don’t be stupid, Castiel, that’s what we pay the staff for. It’s not for the better classes to wallow in the filthy sink’.

He felt dizzy, holding on to the edge of the counter, trying to decide whether to wash the dishes just to piss off his mother or go to bed.

Bed won.

Castiel lost himself in the warm, comforting scent of Omega. Of Mate. His hips rutted sleepily into her as he spooned her close and drifted away. His body and his mind sought fulfillment in the hazy moments before sleep enveloped him, in the brief interlude when he dropped all of his walls.

Pups.

She could carry several at once. Castiel was already floating on the delta waves, but his hand swiped low across her belly which would expand to an almost unbelievable size as she waddled about, growing his pups within her beautiful body. “Mmmm,” he hummed.

“Shhh, you’re doing it again, Alpha. Go to sleep, now. I’m right here.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he whispered drowsily back at her.

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“What have you ever been whipped, April?” Castiel asked his mate calmly in the morning. She had fifteen tally marks for the week, which meant seventy-five hard swats, but he’d thought about how to address her deliberately choosing to side against her own Pack in a senseless minor squabble. No matter how petty, nor how close the friend she’d sided with, that couldn’t happen again. Pack must always come first.

He’d switched her, and she’d responded beautifully to that, but he thought her progress through his training sessions was going well, and it was time to take another step upward.

“No, Sir. Never. You mean, like with a real whip? Like Indiana Jones?” She knelt on the padded floor of Castiel’s play room early this morning. He hadn’t called in to work yet, but he was strongly considering doing just that. He’d already made her wait overnight. He wasn’t going to put it off any longer. That wasn’t fair to the Omega. She needed what she needed when she needed it, and it was his job to provide. Work might have to wait.
“Well, not as long as that, but essentially, yes. Here’s mine. Take it. Feel it. See what it smells like. I am going to use this whip on your back today, Omega. This is to address the matter you told me about yesterday. Do I need to explain why I’m going to this length over such a petty squabble? After all, your mate-in-law did not even see fit to chastise you properly at the time.”

“No, Sir. I understand.” She handed the short whip back to him. It looked…deadly, to April.

“Then tell me.”

April was naked in her kneeling position. She kept her eyes on his. She put her palms flat on her thighs. Her toes were poised beneath her, helping her to stay off balance enough that she needed to focus constantly.

“I promised you and the Pack to never forsake the members of Pack Winchester under any circumstances. Sir, I broke that oath for no good reason at all.”

“I agree. Aside from the split infinitive, well said. I’m pleased that you remember your oath so well. Rise and lay over the bench as I’ve shown you.”

She put herself in place. Castiel didn’t say anything else. Her spankings had become routine. He began with his hand. These warm up strikes hurt, and they added to the sting, but they didn’t count toward her total from the tally board. They were purely for prep, and he would continue until he felt she was thoroughly prepared physically, emotionally, mentally for the next step. Sometimes this stage was the longest of all.

He let the sound echo from the corners of the room without additional commentary. Castiel had awakened much more refreshed. He was up to this, and he intended to do it right. He still needed to hunt up Gabriel before he left. He knew his brother was in the house somewhere, he could feel his presence through their waning Claim, but the Omega was in hiding.

April’s butt was a beautiful pink above the lasting bruises that never faded completely. She was learning to hold position without flinching through the harshest strikes, but she still struggled to get her breathing patterns as fluid as he wanted them. She was improving rapidly. Today’s routine was going to challenge her. He intended to push no further than she could handle, but a part of him thrilled in anticipation. What if she took it all? Dared he to hope?

What she lacked in practiced technique, April made up for in raw stamina and will power. Castiel struck her ass again and again until betas or alphas would be wailing and begging. She huffed and one foot just wouldn’t stop twitching like it still wanted to kick up, even after months of rigorous training. But she didn’t break, and she didn’t cry, not from a hand spanking. Not anymore. It had all gelled nicely over the last couple of weeks; that last intense round in the hotel suite with his belt buckle cinched it, and she was his now in more ways than he knew how to count. It wasn’t that she had become immune to the pain, it was that she had learned how to funnel it through her body and feed her psyche on the energy of each strike, like a form of photosynthesis, like a coalescing of wills.

At last, Castiel stopped and rubbed his palm with his other hand. It never failed to hurt him too.

“How many tally marks did you count this morning, Omega?”

“Fifteen, Sir.” Her voice was foggy and distant. That was fine. He didn’t mind if she was floating in Subspace. His message would reach her there. He had his Bond-connection with her to help him break through.

“And how many strikes with your slipper does that mean?”
“Seventy-five, Sir. I take five for each mark.”

“All right, then. I’m prepared to deliver all of them to you right now, so that you may be forgiven.” Castiel modulated his tone to cast it into a meaningful range that would speak to all of her designations. “April. Omega,” he intoned. “I am quite displeased with you. You’ve broken my rules, and I am betrayed by your behavior. I would very much like to forgive you for your misdeeds, but I cannot until you’ve atoned to me for all of them.” His voice was loud and stern. She cringed, and squeezed the sudden moisture from her eyes. It was a ruse to trick her body into Releasing. She knew it was, but it hurt as if it was real. Her Alpha made it real, and she cried out when the first slap of her own house slipper cracked across her backside on top of the red, stinging marks he’d left with his hand.

Tears came instantly.

This was so much worse. April let herself yelp into the strokes as they fell, one on top of the other in rapid succession. The pain was an illusion. It was like those tricks on the computer where one region looked darker than the other, but in reality, they were all the same color. April’s ass could take so much more than this, but knowing that her Alpha was disappointed, knowing she was in a state of forced atonement, April lost it like always. The heat built. The pain built. The intensity pouring off her Alpha built until it exploded through her body. She Released with a loud, shrill wail, and her punishment went on until the Alpha reached seventy-five. A ruse it might be, but if he promised her seventy-five, she would get seventy-five, even if she Released after four.

April lay out on the bench, letting the hard structure hold her weight. Castiel regarded her with a cold visage. He had more work to do. It would be new and challenging, but he had no intention of making her face it alone. He maintained the mien she needed from him to make it through. He let her catch her breath.

“All right. On your feet, Omega. You need to stand for this next part. If I thought you weaker than I do, I would bind you to the St. Andrew’s so that you didn’t need to stand on your own, but I believe in you, April Renée. Place yourself just there. Face the boards. Put your hands up on the handles out to either side. Take your time.”

April stood slowly. He believed in her. She’d atoned for her minor misdeeds for the week. She’d felt the fuzzy tension rush out of her body, and her head felt clear and right again. Now she only needed to pay him for breaking her oath. It was all she had left. She could do this. April held his eye as she moved into position until she broke contact with him to lean in against the sleek wooden cross, face forward into the smooth-sanded boards. The cross stood at a tilt which she used to help her support herself. Her legs shook, but he believed in her. He hadn’t told her a count yet. She knew he would. This was new. He had a certain routine whenever he introduced something new.

“April Renée?”

“I can do it, Sir.”

She felt him filter through her head again and brush a mental touch across her flank. He was assessing the truth of her claim. If she was overstating her capacity, he would be displeased, but he wouldn’t punish her. He would stop the scene and cuddle her close, giving affection as freely as he did pain. She didn’t want his affection yet though. She wanted to fly.

“You’re getting four, Omega, and it’s going to hurt a bit like when I used the buckle-end of my belt...a bit worse perhaps. You will bleed, but you can do this. Breathe out for me. And in. Good girl. Out….and in. Here we go. Do not move.”
Cas took a deep breath of his own. He needed to swing true, or he could hurt her. The irony of fearing one type of injury while deliberately causing another was never lost on Castiel Novak. His life was irony. He routinely traversed the razor-thin edge between abuse and care, and he never did it without both eyes and all of his focus homed in on all the ways it could go wrong.

Castiel swung and popped the whip exactly where he meant it to land square in the middle of her beautiful, supple young back with a loud SNAP! She gripped the handles and flung her head back, screaming in pain as a deep stripe welled up with a red line across her back.

Castiel went deep into his bond with her and checked every corner and every crevice. If she was hiding anything at all, he would find it, but she was glorying in the white hot streak of divine agony.

Good God, she was incredible!

Castiel re-set his stance, and he swung again, laying a stripe lower than the first. She screamed again, and her legs wobbled, but then they steadied and held her. Castiel didn’t talk about it much, but inside him, a true sadist lurked in the dark, moist confines of his mind. Watching someone take the pain he doled out and then steady themselves and wait for more brought color high on his cheeks and filled his cock with deep, strong, base arousal. Good, glorious God, she was beautiful. He’d worried she would break under the whip, her body weaker maybe than her will. But she was taking it. And she wasn’t running away.

Castiel kept himself under control. As heady a feeling as this was, a Top could never give over to the sensations the way the Bottom could. It was a luxury the Alpha was denied. He had to hold her safe through the ordeal. He had to watch over her. Soon she would be able to take more. Soon he would set her free to fly away on a river of white hot pain that melted her mind and let her free of her body, but not yet.

She wasn’t flying just yet.

Castiel re-set his stance again. Her shoulders shuddered. He aimed, and he struck. Like swatting a fly, the new stripe appeared right where a ripple of muscle had just worked across her shoulders. The beginning of her scream was silent before slowly lowering into audible range and echoing from the high rafters. She shook her body against the hold of her hands, but she didn’t flee, and she didn’t fall. She didn’t beg out loud, but there was a keening plea inside his head.

Castiel wasn’t going in to work today. He would work from home. He could take his laptop with him into bed and stay with his Omega all day, petting her, feeding her, keeping her warm and safe, listening to her mumble in her sleep.

“One more, my beautiful Omega. You are exquisite in your strength and your pain. You are lovely in your agony. You are more than absolved, my love. You are more than forgiven.” The words tumbled out of him, another touch of reality for her to cling to, as tangible as the steel in her grip. “You put me and all of my ilk to shame in your sublime perfection, and I am humbled by you. Hold fast now, and give me… Just. One. More.”

Castiel swung and struck between his first blow and his third. She screamed a fourth time and shuddered against her hold before losing her battle to stay upright and sinking like a fluid to the floor. The Alpha caught her as she fell. Dropping the whip to the floor, he carried her to the big bed in the middle of the room, laying her out on her belly.

He held her close for long, wistful minutes. They were too fleeting, and the price to get to this place too dear to make it a frequent excursion, but he watched her through their link as she flew above his head, lost in the clouds, no longer on Earth at all, and he longed to fly beside her. That flight wasn’t
for him though. He hadn’t paid the fare. He didn’t have it in him to pay that fare. All he could do was witness.

She came back slowly, blinking and flinching, twitching. He helped her drink some juice, and he let her suck on an ice cube. He bandaged her wounds, but he snapped a picture with his phone first. He knew she would ask to see when she was back on the ground again. She always wanted to see.

She murmured too softly for him to hear, so he leaned in close to her face, smelling the sweet dankness of her sweat. “Knot me, please. Please, Alpha,” she whispered. “Knot….me…..” she seemed to have passed out, but he found her awake through the bond, poised in a state of waiting, not asleep or unconscious.

Castiel’s erection hadn’t flagged at all. As much as it pained his mother, this is what Alpha Novak truly was, had always been since his wolf emerged – a bestial monster who fucked bleeding, broken young Omegas and loved it. He bared himself, knelt above her, fell forward onto his hands and worked his cock into her wet channel. The beast kept himself well clear of her bandaged back. He could see bruises spreading from under the bandages, and he refused to touch them.

Her ass was a deep purple already, the slipper used to good effect, and his movements into and out of her channel in a circular grind lit her ass up from the inside and the outside both. The Omega moaned obscenely, shamelessly. Without asking permission, working on credit which was hers to pull from, she pushed against him and sought pleasure for herself. He rocked into her, copying her moans and grunts point-for-point. Their Mating-bond fed them an endless feedback loop. Castiel reached a hand beneath her and placed his fingers in firm position for her to rut against, and rut she did. She ground against his hand, working sparks and waves of pleasure from her clit, up her spine, behind her closed eyes, back down to her Omega gland, through the Mating-bond and into her mate’s head.

He keened high and long, and he picked up the pace, knowing he wouldn’t last long. Neither would she, and she needed to rest and heal. The Alpha was in an awkward, triangled position with one hand too centered to hold his weight well letting her work herself against his fingers, and the rest of his weight on his very tired right arm, but he gritted his teeth and pushed through.

His knot popped into position, so he was reduced to grinding circles instead of deep thrusts. His groin pulled with a pulsing pleasure, his balls tightened, and all too soon the Alpha was coming with a gravelly grunt that developed into a yell as he emptied.

His Omega never stilled against his fingers until she too, let go with a powerful climax. She whimpered into it, stopping against his hand, but keeping pressure on the spot until the last of the waves faded away. Then she melted into the soft bedding and went elsewhere. Castiel sent a prayer of thanks up into the Universe, an ironic rarity for him. He rolled his beautiful mate to her side, and he wrapped her up in his strong body, holding her, protecting her while she slept, careful not to touch her upper back with any pressure.

He kept one arm across her belly and stroked her down low on the abdomen. He froze. He was doing it again. Castiel wanted to fill her with his fertile seed so badly, he could taste it, but it wasn’t time yet. Adult responsibilities, he reminded himself like a mantra. Adult responsibilities. April would look ravishing with his litter in her belly. Her face would glow with health and youth, and her strong body could take anything. Well, almost anything.

There were still things he’d done with Dean’s body that he would never dare do to April, but she’d proven this morning that she held a power within her that rivalled and could humble the strongest Dominant. Those who thought Omegas weak didn’t know what Castiel knew. They’d never received the gift of deep Submission and unfailing trust. Omegas weren’t weak. Submissives weren’t weak. They were strong. So very strong. Castiel buried his nose in the hair at the nape of his mate’s...
neck and he scented her until he followed her back to sleep. He wouldn’t be going to work today.

“God, Fuck! Rachel, sweetie, yeah, I miss you, but I’m not coming back. You’ll be fine. Just tell him I’m okay. Where does he get these crazy ideas?…” Michael paused as his sister spoke through the phone he held to his ear on the back porch. “I know. Too much fucking television. You know, I wouldn’t put it past him to be secretly reading trash novels about abused Omegas.” Michael ran a hand into his hair and then held it there, gripping his hair between his fingers. He sighed deeply. “Look, if you want me to, I’ll come get you. There’s room here, and I know my new Alpha would help us out. You could go to school up here, get a job.”

She had something to say that Michael didn’t especially like, and he deflated, sinking onto a plastic chair on Dean’s back porch, the early morning sunlight much gentler than it would be later in the day.

“All right. It’s up to you, just remember, the offer stands. Any time, Rachel. Any time at all, if you change your mind, I’m there. Just think about it. What he’s doing to you, what he did to us? There’s another way. You don’t have to… Yeah, okay. Take care of yourself. I miss you.” Michael leaned back and let his head crane back uncomfortably. “I love you, too.” And then the phone clicked and she was gone.

Dean was up and showering when Michael returned, so he joined his mate in the shower. The image the alpha presented, with soap running in foaming clusters down his broad wet back, over his beautiful ass, down and around the curves of his thighs, knees, lovely perfectly turned calves brought Michael to full mast in an instant. He growled, stepping through the glass door, and pulling it closed.

Dean didn’t turn around. He knew Michael was behind him before he felt the cold rush of invading air or heard him vocalize his arousal, and Dean smirked. Sometimes Dean bratted to get a reaction, but sometimes, like right now, he just craved the simplicity of a straightforward fuck. Shower sex was easy. Everyone’s already naked, and there are plenty of ways to get a good angle. The only real tricks were not slipping, getting the lube to stay in place, and keeping your knees from bruising if you needed to get down there.

Dean used the corner of the shower to support his weight. He leaned in on his elbows and presented his ass to his Dominant. It helped that Dean’s libido insisted on a two-person shower with separate shower heads and handholds at varying heights along that corner. Planning ahead was key to playing safely – planning ahead and good strong wall anchors.

Lubricant was a different matter. Omegas didn’t need to worry. They produced a constantly replenished store from the inside, so no matter how much got washed away by the flowing water, they stayed fuckable. Dean was not Omega. Neither was Dean averse to pain, but that didn’t mean he could afford the damage of a lubeless fuck. If their play led to tearing, Cas was going to bench Dean until the rips healed, and he didn’t want that.
Michael leaned in and ran his hands over Dean’s back, butt, thighs, between them and back up to tighten a hold on his balls, making Dean suck in a breath and drop his head against the corner tiles. Dean widened his stance and bit his lip in anticipation. Michael sucked another bruise into the back of Dean’s neck where bruises are hard to pull. He used his teeth to grind out a good reaction beneath the surface. If the Dom wanted to lodge a mark there, by God there’d better be a mark there. He examined his work and kissed over it with gentle lips, continuing to knead Dean’s heavy sack with one hand. He worshiped his mate’s body with his mouth and his breath long enough to have Dean whining into his corner, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Be still, baby. I’ve got you. Trust me. I’m gonna make you feel so good.” Michael’s whispers straight into Dean’s ear tickled the little hairs and sent a shudder all the way down to his feet. Dean stilled, letting a long slow breath out to fog the tiles in front of his face.

Michael adjusted the spray from the two heads so that one was directed down Dean’s chest, and the other would cascade across Michael’s back when he…

Michael sank down Dean’s body to rest on his knees, using his alpha’s strong thighs for support. He massaged the glorious meat of his mate’s ass between his hands, and then separated those perfect cheeks and ran his flat tongue in one long motion from behind Dean’s balls, up the taint, over his fluttering rim, and then past to end the swipe at the divot at the top of Dean’s ass. Dean whimpered, widened his stance, and bent his knees outward a little bit more.

“Oh, you like that?” Michael teased. Dean nodded vigorously. He wanted to say ‘Yes, Sir’ as he knew he should, but the words didn’t want to come out. “Want me to do it again?” Michael’s firm grip on Dean’s butt tightened in preparation, and his mate responded by angling his hips back just a little bit more. He was so beautifully presenting to his Dom that Michael had to let go of one cheek and press a flat palm to his own need.

“Jesus, fuck! Me, too,” Michael told him. He went back in for another swipe. The water running down Dean’s chest kept him warm, teased his cock, and gave Michael just a bit of a challenge when it tried to fill his mouth at the initial contact way up front, but he soldiered through. He licked Dean just like that over and over again. Dean was practically vibrating in place with impatience, but he didn’t beg. Michael watched his inner turmoil through their bond in amusement. His Sub was so well trained that none of the fight to maintain control that went on inside the Sub’s mind was visible from the outside.

And while it hadn’t been Michael who taught Dean to behave like this, he would take it. As good as the Sub was being for him, Michael loved the fact that only he would ever get the chance to see both the struggle and the result. He decided it was time to move on, so he pointed his tongue and drove it deep into his mate’s hole, pushing against the tight ring of muscles there, ignoring the pain in his knees. Dean whined and shoved back against him. Michael halted his motion with a warning through the bond, and Dean responded by going lax and thumping his head into the corner.

Ouch. That had to hurt.

Michael was feeling generous, so he tongue-fucked his mate with power and aggression, delving deep, pulling Dean’s hips into his thrusts to get more depth. Dean opened up for him willingly. With each pass of the Omega’s tongue, the muscles relaxed and welcomed him in. Michael was in heaven. If there was a heaven, the only things that would be different there than here would be the hardness of the tiles beneath his knees and the stamina of the muscles in his tongue. He wore out before he felt finished, and he released Dean with regret and longing that Dean mirrored.

The alpha wasn’t fully prepped yet. Michael wanted to take him hard, but he didn’t want to hurt his mate. Dean’s body was young and elastic enough that tearing wasn’t likely, but he wasn’t built for
intrusion without a burning stretch and an ache. Michael wanted to avoid that. He reached behind his own hard cock and carefully collected the slick that issued copiously before it mixed with shower water and became too diluted to use. Then he stood behind his mate, draped himself over Dean’s back and pushed two slick fingers slowly into his ass. The sound that came out of Dean’s mouth really didn’t have a name. It was raw pure lust. Was it a moan or a whine? A whimper? Michael pulled out and pushed in to see if he could hear it again. No, this one was different. This one was higher, definitely a whine. Michael resolved to hear them all, so he fucked his mate over and over again on his fingers and listened to him sing. Still Dean didn’t beg, although Michael could tell he wanted to.

Michael had learned his mate’s real affinities through practice and play. He knew what Dean liked – what Dean really liked, and alpha Dean Winchester liked to be fucked. Michael didn’t know if it was because he was also a Sub, but as they played, as they learned each other, he came to realize that Dean’s propensity to Bottom wasn’t only something that came up when he Subbed for Michael. Even when he lay with Michael as an alpha, or as a simple, human man, unless sparked to Claim or please his partner’s wishes, Dean preferred to have a cock thrumming away inside him over thrusting his own into anyone or any thing.

Yeah, that’s enough prep.

Michael shook himself out of his reverie. He collected more slick and doused Dean’s relaxed, widened rim with it, then he spread it over his own flesh, giving himself a couple of completely unnecessary pumps. Michael held Dean’s hip and his own cock and pressed forward into the delicious tight warmth of his mate’s hole, letting the rhythm of Dean’s clenching pull him deeper and welcome him home.

He held for a few breaths after he bottomed out, and he re-greased the base of his cock where he could get to it. It wasn’t going to be enough lube. The shower was too damp, too humid to keep the slick in place, but he snickered when he felt Dean warning him through the bond not to stop over a simple thing like chafing. “Or what?” he whispered into Dean’s ear, and Dean smirked over his shoulder, not meeting his eye.

Then Michael fucked him. Fingers went white around the shower’s handholds. Elbows ground into the tiles for purchase and turned red and sore. A foot slipped precariously and had to be quickly set right before they lost their balance. Michael dug finger-bruises, five of them on each hip, into Dean’s flesh as he pounded into his mate in a hot, wet, steaming rhythm of slapping skin and flinging water. The friction pulled at Michael’s flesh, and it dragged at Dean’s rim. They should stop. They needed to re-lube. They should move this somewhere else. But it felt. So. Fucking. Good.

Dean surprised Michael by coming untouched and unexpected. He doused the corner with long streams of white, sticky come, his hips thrusting involuntarily into the motions of Michael’s fucking. His asshole clenched rhythmically around Michael’s cock, and the pull, the friction, the heat, the sounds from Dean’s throat as he lost it drove Michael crazy. The Dom jerked Dean hard against himself, driving in as far as he could go. It was a knotting without the knot. It was a Claim-fuck in miniature right there at the end, and Dean felt his body respond to the Claim renewal with a burst of warmth and a tightening across his skin. He made a noise like a sob, but it was built from unadulterated, unrestrained, unleashed joy.

Michael came into Dean’s sore ass, at last providing an injection of the lubrication they’d needed now that it was no longer needed. He rested his chin on Dean’s shoulder and panted as his hips twitched through their last involuntary thrusts.

“I wish you had a channel for me to fill, my love,” Michael whispered as he registered that the water
was cooling rapidly. “I want to fill you up with pups.” Dean huffed and leaned the side of his head against his mate’s. Michael’s cock softened and slipped out, followed by a slimy flow of come that ran down Dean’s legs to be washed away by the cooling water.

They finished up quickly, motivated by the loss of warmth and Sam’s pounding on the bathroom door, pissed that there was no hot water left in the house.

“Go back to bed, Sam! Fuck her again, and then shower in a couple of hours!” Dean hollered at him through the locked door.

They’d made it through the morning, and Dean was making sandwiches in the kitchen. He and Michael had worked hard all morning packing up Dean’s household belongings and getting their suitcases ready to make the permanent switch to Alpha’s house. They still hadn’t broached the subject of Dean’s recurring unease again. It was an elephant in the room. The damned elephant wouldn’t leave Dean alone. It followed him wherever he went with its lumbering trunk and wide, swaying steps.

Michael accepted a plate from his mate with a hard look. He knew Dean didn’t want to talk about it, but the alpha hadn’t denied there was something eating at him either. Dean met his eye, and Michael felt an acknowledgement stroke his irritation, but neither of them said anything out loud.

Sam and Jess stayed out of the way. They kept mostly to Sam’s room, although they both emerged for breakfast and lunch. Sam’s halfhearted offer to help Dean pack earned him a pointed look over his shoulder into the bedroom where his beta mate lay awaiting his return and a roll of Dean’s eyes. Sam didn’t argue the point.

At lunchtime, Dean broke out the electrolyte-laced sports drinks. Constant fucking burns a lot of calories and depletes a wolf’s body of important fluids and minerals. Sam accepted a flat of Gatorade and took it back to his room while Jess carried the sandwiches behind him. They looked tired, Dean thought. And they both needed a shower. He snickered about that.

Dean and Michael ate in silence at the kitchen table. Dean was wistful. He was going to miss this house. It was Sam’s now. They’d drawn up the papers, and Dean had grudgingly accepted a sales price from his brother of about one-quarter what the house was worth. Sam wanted to pay full price, but Dean insisted it had always been half Sam’s, and he didn’t owe anything because Dean was moving to a bigger place cost-free. Plus, Dean had never paid a dime for the house either. Somehow, somewhere in their arguments, they’d settled on one-fourth of the value and a deed exchange to clear the legal aspect of probate’s assumption that the alpha in the family inherited all property by default. It didn’t make any sense to either of them, but it was the only number they could agree to, and the only way to get Sam to shut the fuck up and sign the damned papers.

The silence wasn’t uncomfortable, exactly, but Dean could feel Michael working himself up to break it, and Dean wasn’t ready for that. He put his hand on Michael’s on the table. “Let’s just get through our talk with Cas and then go from there. Okay? Please? Michael, I need you to trust me. I know I’m confusing you. If you’re wondering if I’m having second thoughts, I’m not. I’m really not. Okay?”
Michael knew he was being dismissed, and he didn’t like it. “This isn’t what we agreed to, alpha. You told me to tell you everything, and I know you’re hiding something from me. Something’s tearing you up, and you won’t tell me what it is. How can I help you if I don’t know what you’re thinking?” The Omega turned his hand over beneath Dean’s and clutched it.

Dean’s expression said everything. He was close to panicking, close to breaking. He clutched Michael back and looked at his beloved mate’s face, pain written clearly in his eyes. Dean looked away.

“HEY! Look at me!” Michael shook their joined hands.

“I can’t, Michael. I’m not ready to talk about it. I will be, but not yet. I’m not leaving you. I can feel how I’m scaring you, and I’m so, so sorry. Michael, listen! I’m not leaving you. Not ever. I will always be here for you. I’m going to give you all the pups you want. I’ll give you everything. Baby, please don’t be afraid.”

“I want to trust you, Dean, but everything you’re saying feels wrong.”

“Please trust me. I’ll explain everything, but let’s just get through today. I have to know what he’s going to say. Maybe I’m all worked up for nothing.”

“This is about asking Castiel to allow us to try for pups?”

“Sort of.” Dean met Michael’s eyes tentatively. “And I’m not asking him for permission, damnit. DAMNIT!”

Michael looked at his mate as Dean calmed himself back down. He couldn’t make heads or tails of Dean’s emotions. He was everywhere. What did Dean need from him right now? His mate wasn’t in a Sub mentality. He seemed front-brain and stable there, but he was in so much turmoil, there was pain a layer or two down that just seemed bottomless, and it showed through his eyes. Michael didn’t know what to do. Should he press his mate, or would that just send him deeper?

“Do you need me to spank you, baby?” he tried. “Would that help?”

Dean scoffed through his nose, leaned back and fitted the inside of his elbow across his eyes. “No. That’s not gonna help this time, but thanks for the offer.” It could’ve been interpreted from the outside as snarky backtalk, but Michael felt Dean’s authenticity. He meant it.

Michael sighed and gave in. “I don’t know how to help you, and you’re not making it any easier. I don’t really have much of a choice but to trust you, do I? I’m just the Omega here. All the real choices are yours.”

Dean’s bitch-face would’ve made his brother proud had he been there to see it. When had the alpha ever treated his mate like he held no power between them? “Come on, Michael. Let’s get lunch cleaned up and pack up the car. Sam and Jess are back at it again, and I’ve about smelled all the estrogen I can stand.” In the back room, a rhythmic, harmonic grunting matched the thumping of the headboard on the wall, and Dean was glad it would no longer be his responsibility to touch up the wallboard and paint.

Someone had once told him that betas don’t go into Heat, but that someone had obviously not met Samuel and Jessica Winchester.
Dean and Michael pulled into the garage with their luggage in Baby’s trunk just after four that afternoon. Dean led his Omega back into the house they kept trying to avoid. “I guess we’re home to stay now, babe,” said Dean to his surly mate. With predictable inevitability, Michael had grumbled about being the ones to have to leave the house they’d been granted refuge in. It was supposed to be for the month, but who could’ve predicted that Sam would fall only a couple of weeks after Dean did.

Dean planned to ignore Michael’s selfishness unless it raised its head as more than a general, grumbling irritation. He could bring his mate around with a good blowjob. That always put a smile on Michael’s face. Plus, this house had the benefit of not requiring as much upkeep. The grocery shopping mostly did itself, for example. Loose socks accidentally left on the landing washed and dried themselves, folded themselves, and tucked themselves tidily back into their drawer. It was a magic house. Not that Dean planned to take advantage of that fact. There was plenty of work for the small staff to do without needing to collect his dirty whites and wash his dishes. But still.

They didn’t expect to find anyone at home on a Wednesday at four in the afternoon. April still had class. Castiel always had work. So, it was a surprise to discover the couple in the play room, talking through a scene. Cas had April up in the swing. She was dressed. They weren’t doing anything but talking it through, but Michael blushed anyway. Dean laughed at him and shoved his shoulder in a good-natured tease.

“I think you’re taking this ‘sister’ thing too far, man. You need to get used to it. I know that Alpha, and he’s not gonna keep it behind closed doors.”

“He always did for you, didn’t he, Dean?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s because of my hang-up. He’s not an asshole. Much.” Dean added that last as he embraced his welcoming Alpha just to get the swat on his ass he wanted. Castiel obliged him with a smile.

“What are you doing home, Cas? Thought you were so buried in work you couldn’t take an evening off, much less the day.” Dean leaned in and kissed him then released him to help April down. She squeaked when he touched her back, and Dean’s brows shot up.

“I worked from home today, Dean. I got a lot accomplished, and we’re taking a break. I still have several hours to put in to get caught up.”

Dean worked April’s top up to her shoulders while Castiel talked, and he whistled at the extensive bandaging that didn’t hide her bruises. “This have anything to do with you staying home today?” he asked.

“Yes. April needed me close.”

“You okay?” Dean asked her. He trusted Cas with his own body, but he worried about the Omega. Cas never lost control entirely, but sometimes the wolf needed a meal, and he let his wolf go when he felt it was safe enough to do so. Dean knew he could take it himself – wanted to take it – but he didn’t yet know about April. What if Cas and his wolf misjudged her capacity?

She radiated joy back at him, so he smiled and chuckled her gently on the chin. “You be careful in there, okay? Promise?”
“I promise. We experimented with the whip today. You should’ve seen me, Dean. It was glorious.” April wrapped an arm around his waist and snuggled. Dean didn’t know where to put his arm. Her back was a mess, so he settled for placing a hand on the back of her neck instead.

“Since you’re home,” Michael introduced awkwardly. “We’re moving in today for good. Dean’s given up our space so Sam and his new mate can have it.”

“Her name’s Jess,” Dean reminded him.

“Right. Jess. Jessica. Whatever. Alpha, can we please speak to you before you go back to work? Do you have a few minutes? No rush. Finish whatever you’re doing here, of course. I mean…that is…of course you’ll finish here first. I wasn’t trying to tell you what to do, Sir. I just meant, when you have time. I, um…” Michael blushed crimson as he slowed to a stop and realized they were all laughing at him.

“I’ll be in the living room,” he groused and slunk out.

Castiel turned to his fiancé. “Dean?”

“Yeah, Cas. We want to go back over what we brought up before the trip. You know, about pups. Can you spare us a few minutes?”

“Of course. My office?”

“Wherever. Lead the way. Let’s get Michael.”

“April, please stay here and do your afternoon exercises. You can skip seven through ten because of your back. I want it healed before it takes any pressure.”

“Yes, Alpha. May I get a snack?”

“Of course. Help yourself. No sweets.”

Cas gestured to Michael as they passed by the living room, followed them through his office door, and closed it behind him.

The house fell into an uncomfortable near silence, an anticipatory silence. The grandfather clock in the hall ticked quietly as its pendulum swung back and forth, measured and unhurried, but there was no other sound.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Saturday! It is Saturday, isn't it? I'm getting so turned around RE days of the week with my constantly changing schedule.
Wednesday, May 24, 2017

Chapter Summary

Because it's SPN-themed, it wouldn't be canon compliant if everyone wasn't lying in one way or another. I think that everyone...fuck, yes...I think everyone is lying right now, except maybe Michael? Nope, nope, Michael's in it too. Some shit hits and they finally pose the question and get an answer, but what's really being said?

Chapter Notes

Four chapters in my Thur - Sat weekend is enough for me, even me. I have callouses growing on my finger-tips like if I were really a typist. Cool. Battle-scars.

I hope you like this one. This is the stuff I write the story for. If you're not sure what's happening, that's probably intentional, or not. Maybe I just suck at this slow reveal.

I had a thought: How did I get to chapter 34 of an A/B/O Heat/Rut fic and not show any classic Heats or Ruts? April's been through two, and I skipped over those, and we missed Michael's, but still. Seems like something's missing. Just a thought. Go ahead and enjoy. It's a short chapter, but meaty, I think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

NOW:

Castiel closed the door and circled his desk to sit. Dean realized his mistake immediately. He was already a petitioner in this setting, an extra step down the power ladder merely by the placement of furniture in relation to the participants and the custody of the space. No matter. It helped his ultimate cause if not his nominal one.

“How was the party?” Cas opened.

“It was good to see everybody. We had fun. I didn’t see much of Charlie, but I got to catch up with Jo.” Dean shuffled some of the knick-knacks on Cas’ bookshelf while he talked, back into the orientation he preferred. He always set them up correctly, and Castiel always fucked them back up again. “By the way, I had to swat your mate last night. I don’t like some of her more adolescent behavior, and I got on to her for it. That’s okay with you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, you know it is. Thank you for telling me. I heard the same from April, and I’ve taken care of it.”

Michael sat up stiffly. “That,” he meant her wounded back, “was you taking care of it? All she did was giggle. What the fuck?” Michael remembered himself suddenly, and paled, snapping his mouth closed, but Castiel was pleased that he seemed to be relaxing a little around the Big Bad Wolf – at
least when he was upset. It was a start.

“What she did,” the Alpha corrected him, “was take sides against her own Pack over the most trivial matter imaginable. We’re not just building a household together, Michael, we’re building an impenetrable, impregnable family, a wall of packmates that will stand shoulder-to-shoulder against anyone anywhere for any reason. Anyone, even good friends.”

“Sounded like a giggle to me,” he insisted bravely, deciding not to back down. It was a hard decision.

“You don’t think you might have overdone it just a little bit, Alpha?” Dean stepped between his mate and his Alpha.

Cas sighed. “Yes, of course. For the crime, the punishment was too harsh, but we needed a good excuse to level her up in her training. She was ready, and it went very well. She’s incredibly strong. I haven’t hit her limit yet, and I’m beginning to fear that her will doesn’t have a limit, kind of like yours. Our limits may have to be set at what her body can take physically.”

Michael was aghast. “You did that to her just because? Just because you wanted to?”

“Michael, please,” Dean stopped him from getting wound up. “I’ll help you understand about masochists and sadists later. Let it go. April’s fine. I checked on her. She’s fine.”

“Everyone’s needs are different, Omega,” Castiel instructed. “You are a Dominant and a brat tamer. It’s what you need to stay balanced. You use pain to achieve that end if you need to, but it isn’t the pain itself that drives you. Your mate and April and I, we’re different. The element of pain itself fills something deep within us that is its own reward. It is!dangerous need, fraught with hazards. When it’s done badly, people get harmed. When it’s done well, they fly. April flew this morning. That’s all I can tell you.”

Michael sat back against the cushion of Castiel’s soft loveseat and took it in. He knew it intellectually. Michael had been all around the scene in San Antonio. He knew what they did with and to each other. He had thought he understood, but maybe he didn’t.

“So, you’re moving home today.” Cas changed the subject with an airy wave of his hand and a much lighter tone. “I’m glad. Welcome home. Have you selected a room yet?”

“Not yet. I’m down on the selection list. I think you said Sam gets first dibs.” Michael played with the cuticle of his thumbnail.

“Sam’s not here. I authorize you to select any unclaimed room that suits you, Michael. And, in addition, you and Dean still have almost two weeks left of your month of isolation. I will continue to honor that – to the extent that I can. I never thanked you appropriately for allowing me the opportunity to re-balance myself last Saturday. I don’t anticipate needing such an encounter again before the end of your month.”

“Uh, no problem. Thank you, Sir. We’ll go pick a room out in a bit.”

“Would you rather stay in one of the annexes for the next two weeks? You would be free to move about without running into the rest of us, maintaining your isolation.”

“Yeah, that’d be great, Cas. Thanks.” Dean moved to intercept again.

“I believe the Guard house has been kept ready for guests. How about that?”
“Mm-hm. Sounds good.” Dean sat on the edge of Castiel’s desk. Cas sat back and regarded him, noting his clipped tones.

“Fine, then. You think I’m stalling. All right. Go ahead. Lay it on me.” The Alpha’s posture communicated immovability. His face was flat and set. He’d already made up his mind. Well, so had Dean.

“We’re ready to try for pups, Alpha. I Rut in the second week of July, and Michael’s midseason is due on the fifteenth, about a week later. We’ll no doubt sync up this round or next. Either way, it’s close enough for this. We’re going to go for it. We’d like your blessing, as Pack Alpha.” Dean stated it calmly, without confrontation or any means of manipulation tactic. He spoke his piece, and then he stopped. It was simple, straightforward, cut-and-dried. Except that it so wasn’t.

Castiel had to take a minute to think about how to respond. It was a good thing his mate wasn’t in the room to give away his agitation. Could they see his pulse rate kick up? Could they hear his heart pounding in his ears? This could go so wrong.

‘Oh God, Dean, please be careful’, he thought desperately.

“Why right now?” he asked them both, including Michael with his eyes.

“Why ever?” Dean responded for them both. “We’re ready. What more is there? Look, Cas, no one’s ever really ready for a pup. Babies change your life in ways you can’t anticipate. We both know that. But we’ve got everything in place that we need. We’re in way better shape than most couples who jump into the pool. We have enough means to cover whatever expenses, a supportive, loving pack, a stable, committed Mated relationship. We have a home, and resources to help us, friends and family out the wazoo. Cas, we’re ready. I want this. Michael wants this. We want this right now.” He drew a breath and resisted looking back at his mate. Dean could feel Michael’s eyes and concentration, but they’d agreed that Dean would lead the charge. Castiel didn’t respond. He knew there was more prepared in Dean’s sales pitch, and he characteristically wanted to hear it all before he answered.

“Don’t tell me you need me to explain biological mandates to you, doctor. Michael’s twenty-three years old. He’s older than Omegas usually get without having at least one pup, and it’s eating away at him. You can’t feel it, man, but I can. And I’m almost thirty. Alpha, most wolves don’t spend their whole adult lives on birth control like we do. You know what that means? It means they get knocked up when they Mate – most of them. Babies show up exactly seven months after a standard, non-Facility-regulated True-Mate encounter. And they all fucking make it work! This is not Calculus! Aren’t you the one who always says that?!” Dean took a calming breath and then pressed on.

“What if it doesn’t stop at waiting just a year or two? What if you never feel like the time is right? How long are you gonna make us wait?”

Dean fixed his eyes on the Alpha and went for the low blow. “Castiel, I know you think we’re not stable enough yet, but Michael and me? We’re solid. We’re an unbreakable team, and you know that, so what exactly isn’t stable? You and me? You don’t get to rush through a relationship like you already know everything you need to know, and then tell me to hold my horses. Are we not stable enough for you? Are you worried? Seriously, tell me what you think we have to wait for.”

“All right Dean, you want the truth?” Cas said looking straight into Dean’s eyes, “I believe you and Michael are both irrational and impulsive right now. I believe you are in an unhealthy headspace, and I feel it is my responsibility as your Alpha and a man in love with you to protect you from yourself. Is that plain enough for you?”
“No. It’s not. Irrational? About what? I just want... we, just want to have a baby. Don’t ask me why. There’s not an answer to that question that doesn’t sound selfish, but we’re not being selfish. We need this. Why the fuck is it okay to lay April’s skin open till the blood flows down her back because she needs it, and it’s not okay for me to be a Dad?”

“I never said it wasn’t okay for you to be a dad. I long for that day as much as you do.” Cas ignored Dean’s interjection of “Bullshit,” and bowled on over him. “But I know you, and you’re not settled enough yet. WE aren’t settled enough. You still play too big a role at The Facility. It eats away at your time. I’ve seen you spend three straight days in the lab and go off of four hours of sleep the whole time. Plus, we haven’t clarified the matter of how we are going to parent our pups yet.”

“One.” Dean held up a finger in Castiel’s face. “Michael’s already seen to my work hours problem. He added an extension to the ‘No fucking at work except for testing’ rule and now he’s cut me off completely: no fucking at work, period. If I don’t do any Kellers, and the board approves a research assistant for my team, that frees up a huge amount of time for me to be there for my pups.

“Two. I’m not asking for your fucking permission anyway. We just thought it might be nice to have your blessing and your support, but whatever.

“And three – Michael’s coming around on the issue of co-parenting. Aren’t you, Michael?”

“Uh…” They hadn’t talked about it again.

“What are you doing? Love, I don’t want to think where your head’s taking you. You are a gentle and compassionate man who sacrifices everything for the benefit of others, and...
you’re considering throwing your own child into the sacrificial pit over a stupid power battle? Why? What more power do you need? I already offered you everything, and you turned me down cold.”

The lie tasted like chalk on Castiel’s tongue. He’d never been religious, but he prayed to every being who ever might have existed that Dean would take the out.

“Guys, both of you. Please, just stop and slow down and think it through. I know twenty-three is pushing at your biological clock, my boy, but I beg you not to do this yet.” Castiel let his desperation turn his voice pleading, and he hoped Michael’s Omega would respond to the familiarity before his wolf heard it. “Just give it a year, two at the most. It seems like forever, but it isn’t. You’ve only known each other for a few weeks. How can you possibly believe we’re – all of us – ready for a child?” Cas sat forward, appealing to the Omega, then he shifted to speak to the alpha.

“We still don’t understand how your dynamic works. I’ve got researchers who’ve been in this field their whole lives scratching their heads over your double bond. You weren’t ready for a Mating like that when you ran into each other. That’s my fault, Dean. I knew your designations, and I never thought to prepare you for what that might mean when you encountered your True-Mate. I apologize for that. But that only means that you should expect to take a longer time than others to find your footing. Are you seriously trying to tell me you already fully understand the Mating and Claim-bonds? What if there’s some kind of backlash down the road?”

“You’re reaching now, Cas,” Dean told him, still sitting at an angle on his desk, looking at the desk stuff and moving things around arbitrarily.

“My answer is no, Dean. And before you remind me, I realize you weren’t asking. I’m asking you both for a promise to wait with the full knowledge that I can’t force you. I’m asking you to trust me to do the unhappy job of saying no to you when I know it’s the right answer, even if my heart yearns to say yes. I’m asking you to trust me as your Alpha and follow my lead. I swear to you I won’t let you fall. Just, please. Dean, please.”

“How long?” Dean’s face was angry and broken. Michael just looked tired.

“At least one year. Give us all a year.”

Dean looked at Michael for the first time in a long while. Michael shrugged and looked away, scratching his head.

“A year before we try, or a year before we give birth?”

“At least a year before you try.”

There was that overwhelming feeling of loss again. Michael felt it inundate Dean, so much so that he finally let it show on his face. Why was he in so much pain? Didn’t he think he would be here in a year? Was Dean worried he would lose his fertility if they waited? Was this their only chance? Michael needed to talk to Dean right now.

“All right, Alpha,” the Omega spoke up. “I’m not going to pretend we like it, but we accept. For good or bad, I promise to wait. Dean?”

Dean nodded morosely. A teardrop fell off his downturned face and smeared the ink on one of Castiel’s papers. He stood and bolted so fast, Michael felt the rush of wind in his wake.

“Thank you, Michael. Please be careful. We’re all in uncharted waters right now.” Castiel looked like he was only holding himself up by willpower. It didn’t make sense. It was just a pup, and it was only a delay. Wasn’t it? Why were they all acting like it was the end of everything? Michael wanted
Michael caught up to Dean down on the back lawn behind a huge hundred-year live oak. Dean’s butt was in the dirt, his knees were pulling him fetal, his head tucked tightly in the crooks of his elbows with his forearms covering it, and he was crying hard enough to have already given himself the hiccups. He looked to be protecting himself in expectation of a blow from above. His emotions had overflowed, the mourning and loss so raw he wasn’t coherent in his own head.

Michael sat down beside him and pulled Dean to lay his head in the Omega’s lap. Whatever this was, it was real, and it was tearing his mate apart. Castiel seemed to know, but he hadn’t really given Michael any kind of clue. A power play? Cas had nailed the Omega’s ass to the wall on that one, but not Dean. Michael didn’t believe that Dean was motivated in any way by power. He did what he had to, and he played hard within the confines around him, but Dean didn’t care about any kind of status really. Castiel had to know that.

Michael hummed a gentle tune as he rocked his beautiful Submissive alpha and stroked his hair. He let Dean cry without shushing him or trying to stem the tide. He could tell Dean needed to get it out. There was time. They had all the time in the world. Dean had promised.

The late afternoon sun still had a way to go before it reached the horizon this far into May. Michael shifted every now and then to keep his muscles from cramping and keep his ass from falling asleep. Dean’s sobs eventually slowed to a hiccapping snivel. His eyes were open but unfocused ahead of him. He’d allowed himself to melt into Michael’s lap and accept the strokes. He seemed so vulnerable. Castiel had warned Michael about that; how easily Dean could be broken by pressure applied at just the right point, but Michael never expected to see his cocky, arrogant, sex-God hero in a state like this, and where was the pressure coming from?

Michael hated to think that Castiel might have a point about Dean’s headspace.

“I’m here whenever you’re ready, baby,” he reminded Dean quietly. It really was a pretty back lawn. There might be deer in the trees at the back, and Michael couldn’t see any sign of a fence despite how close they were to the city center. The depth had to be an illusion.

“Love you…” Dean tried, but his voice grated through sob-swollen passages, and he stopped.

“I love you, too, Dean. It’s going to be okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Need to tell you, but I don’t know how.” Dean rolled onto his back, into Michael’s belly so he could look up into his mate’s face.

“Maybe just little bits at a time? How about that? Baby, is it me? Have I done something? Is my idea setting you off?” Michael dreaded hearing the answer to that, but he had to know. He knew Dean’s words would demur, but he was watching his bond connection instead. The bond flared possessively, and a wave of love crashed over Michael. Dean didn’t even try to use words. Michael was flooded with relief. It wasn’t him. It really wasn’t.
“Thank God. But…what then? Cas? This is about so much more than his decision to ask us to wait. Don’t try to tell me otherwise.” Michael risked a little bit of Dominant sternness.

Dean sighed and pushed himself up to sit beside his mate. Michael watched him to make sure he wasn’t dizzy. “Take your time, alpha, but please tell me the truth. I deserve to know.”

Dean glanced at Michael’s face then back down at the ants at his feet. They were carrying something bigger than themselves, a stick or a leaf, Dean couldn’t tell without poking at them. He left them alone and let them struggle down a narrow well-worn path. He couldn’t figure out where to start.

“Are we still going ahead like we planned? I’ve still got my meds, Dean, and I’ll start right back up if you tell me to. I want you to call it though. You pick a direction, alpha, and I’ll follow.” Michael wondered if he was learning to embrace his Omega or if he was just a chickenshit.

“Sti…ahem…stick to the plan. Nothing’s changed.” Dean’s voice was still ragged.

“Dean.” Michael’s answer was both exasperated frustration and Dom warning. “We’ll stick to the plan, if that’s what you want, but don’t try to tell me nothing’s changed. This isn’t about a power play between you and him, so what’s it about? What’s it about, really?”

Dean couldn’t, he just couldn’t give this to Michael. Dean sucked as a mate. He sucked as a person – and really isn’t that what Michael needed to hear if he really wanted the truth – but Dean had to be strong right now, well, as strong as he was capable for whatever that was worth. Cas would let him go, if Dean asked him to, but it wasn’t what Dean wanted, and he’d never be able to convince the Alpha that he did. He had to get out another way. He had to make Cas do it. God, Holy Lovin’ Fuck, he sucked as a human being. Who does that to their own beloved? (Man up, Winchester! Just tell him it was a mistake to say yes in the first place and walk away with your mate and your pup, and live your fucking life!)

Tears started to well up again, but he fought hard, and they subsided.

“Dean?” Michael was genuinely concerned. It hurt so bad, and Michael had never wanted in this Pack anyway, but here the man was, nursing his frail, pathetic, weak excuse for an alpha through breaking up with the rival that Michael should never have to tolerate in the first place. Self-loathing was a pool of sticky syrup, and Dean drowned in it regularly. Today, it was particularly viscous, tacky, slimy… Cold.

“He promised to stay out of our relationship, man,” Dean croaked. Could Michael tell it wasn’t the whole truth? “He said I could have you and that you and me, we could build our own place in the Pack. Now it’s all about him making all the decisions? Nuh-uh. I didn’t sign up for that. What’s next? He tells me what books to write or where I can work? He gonna decide whether you finish your degree?”

Michael frowned. Dean wasn’t lying to him exactly, but did an imbalance in their relationship really deserve a reaction like that? Was Michael Mated to a drama queen? Why didn’t Dean just talk to Castiel about it?

“O…kay…and what else?”

“What do you mean what else? Shit, my head fucking hurts. You don’t get it. You don’t, but you should. So…fuck…when you’re Dom and alpha, people just, they just assume you know everything. They defer to you. You get whatever the fuck you want just because you want it. If you’re Sub and Omega, people take care of you. You have, like, zero responsibility. I know it’s not perfect, but they’ve each got something going for them. You and me, Michael, we’re the same. No
one knows which fucking pigeon-hole to put us in, so they just keep shoving us in and taking us back out again to shove us somewhere else. It makes me fucking dizzy! Don’t you get that too?”

“Well, not yet, I guess. I mean, I’ve been treated like nothing but an Omega since I Presented. No one gave me any credibility as anything else until I met you. Maybe it’s coming somewhere down the line, but I think you’re ahead of me. So, this is about struggling to balance being Sub and alpha? It can’t be that bad, man.”

“Trust me, it bites! So then, Castiel comes down to get me from Dallas, and he’s got the whole sales pitch worked out: the ring, the fucking roses at the table, for God’s sake, and I can resist all that shit, but he looked straight into my face and told me I could be a person with him, not a Sub, not an alpha, none of that fucking pigeon-holing bullshit, and that we’d be making our decisions together, as a team, in a partnership. Did that look like a partnership to you?” Dean gestured back up to the house behind him.

“So, yeah, great. I get to plan the menu and pick out my own room, but the biggest decisions of all, the ones that really matter to me – to you – they fall to him? All of them? I can’t do it. God, it’s tearing me up, but I can’t live like that. I love that asshole so fucking much, but I won’t be his bitch.”

“And so, then…” Michael tried to pick up the logic of Dean’s progression. “You want to go ahead and knock me up to see how he responds?”

Dean nodded grimly. “Like I said, nothing’s changed.”

“It really is a power play. Dean, this is wrong. It’s an innocent puppy we’re talking about.”

“I already tossed you that one and you batted it away, remember?”

Michael blinked at him, a furrow of worry between his eyes.

“Goddamnit, Michael! Forget him. Forget everything he said. Forget he owns both our asses and tell me straight up and real: Do you want to have my pups? Do you want them at all, and do you want them right now, or is it okay to wait a while? Seriously, waiting wouldn’t be a bad idea, but that doesn’t mean it’s the right answer for us. Close your eyes and listen to your wolf. What. Do. You. Want?”

“I’ve only known my wolf and my Omega to agree with each other on two things in my whole life, alpha.” Michael’s voice was resolute. “The first is that you and me, Dean Winchester, we belong in the same bed. Forever.”

“And the second?”

“The second is that if I have to wait beyond one more Heat to get a chance to carry a pup, your pup, I’m going to go insane.”

Dean blinked back at Michael. He hadn’t expected the truth, but Michael gave it to him.

Dean whispered into Michael’s ear, “Then forget about everything else. Let’s have a baby. Cause that’s exactly what I want too, and no one but you and me get a vote.”

“And what’s going to happen when the Alpha finds out?”

“Baby, nothing’s changed. Whatever our motivations, whether we’re two fucked up adolescents pulling some kind of fucked up power play to rub the Alpha’s nose in it, he’s a big boy, and he’ll deal. He’ll be hurt and pissed. We’ll shout at each other some more. I’m gonna slam a few doors, I
promise you that; and at the end of the day, we’ll settle. Everyone will apologize cause we’ll all feel like shit, and seven months later, you will give birth to the first born second generation Winchester Pack offspring. That’s how it’ll go. By the time the pup comes along, it’ll all be so settled, we’ll laugh about how stupid we were to get worked up over it in the first place. I’m always right about these things.”

Michael rubbed his brow with a firm hand. “And where does the whole, ‘I’m not going to be his bitch’ thing fit in? What if the consequences are too steep a price and your marriage falls apart before it even happens?”

Dean stilled, then he shuddered. He slowly worked himself to standing against to massively strong trunk of the tree at his back. “I can’t predict that part. All I can do is be who I am and do the best I can for you and me. I will always give what I can, but I’m still an alpha, and there’s that point I can’t make myself step past, not even for Cas, not even though I’m in love with him. If he needs me to, I guess it’s better we find out now.” Dean looked up at the house. “Either way, I’m going to be there for you, whatever you need. Anything you need. You know that, right? Even if I don’t want to, and even if you don’t want me to.”

Michael laughed. “What, like as in, ‘This hurts me more than it hurts you?’ I dare you to try it, Winchester. Pull me up.” Michael reached for Dean, and the alpha hauled the Omega to his feet. The action ended in an embrace so tight they both struggled to breathe.

“Well?” Michael prompted into Dean’s shoulder, his voice muffled.

“Well what?”

“Are we doing this, or not?”

“You tell me, Omega. You’re the one who has to carry it.”

“Coward,” Michael accused, but he pulled back, and his eyes were lit with excitement. Dean smiled back at him, and his smile almost reached his own eyes as well. Dean raised both eyebrows and cocked his head.

“Yeah, fine,” Michael said heading back up toward the house. “I’m in. Let’s do it. And not tell Castiel or April, or anyone, and get our asses handed to us later, and hope it all somehow turns out fine and our little rug rat doesn’t become some kind of demon-child because of all the resentment piled on its tiny, furry head from before it was born…”

“Is that a yes?” Dean called, following slowly.

“It’s a yes, Dean! FUCK, this is a bad idea!”

Dean smiled sadly to himself. People always wanted to tell him yes. He hoped this yes didn’t tie a noose around both their necks.


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“So, where are we sleeping?” Michael asked Dean as they headed to the garage.

“Well,” Dean thought out loud. “We can stay in the house. It’s big and comfortable. We can stay in
the Pool house. It’s small like a little cabin, but it has a bedroom, bathroom, living room, and kitchen, plus it opens right onto the pool. The Guard house is by the front gate. That’s the one Cas says is kept ready for visitors, so it’s clean and prepped. We might have to share the bottom floor with the security team, but the top floor would be all ours.”

“Which one is furthest from Castiel?” Michael broke in.

Dean laughed and opened the trunk to retrieve their luggage and load it onto a golf cart nearby. “That would be the Guest house. It’s in the back way past that oak tree, but the track through the trees is too narrow for my Baby. She’ll get scratched up by branches. We have to take this guy right here. I don’t know if anyone’s been in that house for years. It might have spiders. Not sure how good the cell reception is.”

“It sounds perfect. Take me to the Guest house, Dean.”

“Yes, Sir!” he responded, swiping the key from its spot near the door to the kitchen. “Your chariot, sir.”

Chapter End Notes

Why, Dean!?! What the fuck is wrong with you?

I promise to catch up on comments as I can. I'm reading them, I promise, and they still mean the world. I LOVE the feedback and the interaction. Like, seriously, I think it's an addiction.
Then:

Dean struggled against the wind as he headed across campus. He was wet all through, and he was shivering by the time he reached the research facility and lab. He and Castiel had spent three months prior to the start of the new semester jockeying for a space of their own to set up the project, and it wasn’t big or fancy or wired correctly, but it was now theirs. He stopped inside the door to shake the water from his hair and Jo crashed into his back as she tried to escape the pounding rain behind him.

“Move it, Winchester! You’re blocking the door.” Dean set his plastic-covered box on the ground and took hers out of her hands too.

“Thanks for the help, Jo. Let’s see if we can get dry. I’ll make you coffee. I need to get these stations set up today. Training starts tomorrow.” He started off down the dusty hallway to the tiny breakroom, and she followed, wringing her shirt tail out onto the floor.

Castiel and Charlie were already there. Each had a mug in front of them. Charlie sprang to her feet as Dean and Jo appeared. “Oh, uh, thanks then, Alpha. I’ve got to get back to work.” She turned to Dean and smiled at his pathetic, soggy state. “Did you bring the computers with you?”

“They’re in the front entrance.”

“Both of them?”

“Mm-hm. Give us a chance to warm up, and I’ll help you set them up.”

“Not necessary, Dean. Jo will help me. Right, Jo? I have a change of clothes I keep in my locker you can put on.” Charlie didn’t wait for Jo’s response. The beta grabbed the alpha’s hand and dragged her, blinking, from the breakroom, abandoning her mug on the table where she’d been sitting. Jo didn’t even get a chance to protest that she didn’t work for the project before she was swept away.
Dean removed Charlie’s mug, dumped it, rinsed it out, and left it drying next to the sink. Then he fetched his own steaming cup, doctored it with a little cream from the refrigerator, and took a spot across from Cas. Castiel waited for him to settle.

“I expected you twenty minutes ago, alpha. You’re late.” The Alpha’s tone was annoyed but controlled.

“I’m sorry, sir. Have you seen the storm out there? I had to get those boxes wrapped in plastic well enough to keep the water out. It’s not like we can afford to replace two brand-new stations if they get ruined.” Dean blew across his cup to cool the surface enough to sip, and he fussed with his shirt, trying to pull the fabric away from his chilled skin.

Castiel didn’t respond. He simply sat at the breakroom table and stared at Dean, waiting. After a pregnant pause, Dean looked up, catching on to the Alpha’s mood. He set his mug down slowly. Dean could smell Castiel’s scent in the small space. It was predatory, and Dean shivered again, but this time not from cold.

“Sir?” he asked the Alpha, bouncing a knee under the table from nerves that had sprung out of nowhere. “I’m sorry I’m late. It won’t happen again.”

“Hand me your cellphone, Dean.”

“Um, yes, Sir.” Dean dug the phone, encased in plastic to protect it from the driving rain, out of his pocket, took it out of the baggie, and relinquished it to the Alpha.

Cas activated the screen to check the time and the battery life. He turned it around to show Dean. “You were scheduled to meet me at two o’clock. I see you have plenty of power available on your cellphone, and it is now almost two-thirty. I dislike waiting, Dean, but I dislike even more being forced to wait without knowing why or for how long.” Cas leaned forward across the table, the first movement he’d made since Dean walked in, and Dean leaned back in his chair like a negative magnetic response. “I dislike being forced to do just about anything, Submissive.” Castiel’s voice hit the register that Dean heard more with his groin than his ears. His physical response down there strained dangerously against wet denim. Dean pulled a grimace of discomfort and adjusted himself awkwardly. Not a good time to have chosen commando.

“Sir, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were waiting on me. It won’t happen again. I swear.” Dean took a shaky breath when Castiel didn’t relax or respond. They were still new at this, at least as a couple, as partners, but Dean was learning. Castiel wanted him to be capable of reading by body language, by scent and tone, just what kind of response the Dom wanted from his Sub, and Dean was suddenly aware that the room was full of nonverbal signals he’d missed upon entering.

“Um, Sir? Are we….? I didn’t know it was going to be one of those…. I mean, no complaints, but you didn’t tell me you wanted to have a…. Am I still supposed to set up the computers?” Dean waited for a response which was slow in coming, and he lowered his chin, breaking eye contact with the wolf before him whose eyes were still hard.

“Charlie can do the setup.” Castiel didn’t say anything more. He was back to waiting, stoically, blinking every now and then as Dean rubbed his own hands up and down his wet thighs and thought furiously. He’d been training as a Sub through the fall, learning to control the rhythm of his breath and the movements of his body, learning to package all of his own desires into a tightly wrapped bundle and hand it to his Dom for safekeeping. He’d had more fun, more intensity, (more orgasms), and more personal revelations over the last few months under Castiel’s firm hand than he had ever known was possible. The Alpha never let him rest too long after reaching a milestone before he pointed their sights at another spot up the hill and set Dean to climbing for it.
But he’d never surprised Dean with an unplanned scene before. And they were at work. In public. Well, sort of. The lab building sat at the very edge of campus, occupying the extreme northwest corner and bounded on two sides by nothing but open unclaimed empty space, owned by the college, but not developed. No one ever walked down this far without meaning to. No one was here except project employees and undergrad research assistants. With the storm as it was and the lab still in a sad state of incompletion, there might not be anybody in the building at all except Charlie, Jo, Cas, and Dean.

Dean shivered again and lowered his head further, biting his lower lip.

(Come on, Winchester), his wolf nudged his thigh with its muzzle. (You know what he wants. Get to it.)

But Dean balked. He shoved the heels of his hands into his eyes and then up into his hair. “Sir, I’m… can we do this at your house? I’m not saying no, I swear, but…” The blood was draining from Dean’s face, and his pupils contracted as his heart rate kicked up. Dean rocked forward in his chair and whimpered to keep himself under control.

(You can do this, kid. You do it all the time. Who gives a fuck if someone else sees?), the wolf pushed him.

Dean shot back, (Mind your own fucking business, bitch!)

Castiel’s expression changed instantly as his partner crumbled. The predatory gleam was gone, replaced by concern. He stood, held out his hand to his Submissive, and said, “Come with me,” in his gravelly voice. Dean slid his cold hand into his master’s warm, dry one and slouched to follow him.

(Now you’ve done it), the wolf jeered at him.

Dean followed the Alpha’s lead down the hall in dread. Yeah, now he’d done it. He had never refused Castiel before, not in any way once their negotiations set the context of their partnership. The Alpha had told Dean to make liberal use of his safewords any time they were called for, and Dean understood, but that didn’t mean he was ever going to do it. Cas had also told him that unless a safeword was called out, the Submissive was not to refuse his Dom. “You do NOT tell me NO, Submissive. Am I clear?” Cas had said those words while Dean’s nipples were both chafed and pulling painfully by the clamps his Dom had chained together and bound to the bed frame.

Intellectually, Dean knew the two instructions weren’t counter to each other, but once his wolf was in front he couldn’t reconcile them, and he resolved to apply all his vast stubborn will to following the latter, not the former. Dean’s wolf trusted his Alpha so completely that it felt no need to select a unique safeword, as he was never going to use one. Whatever the Dom chose to do, the wolf would allow, no matter what. His resolve put the Sub into a very uncomfortable position today, here in this cold, lifeless, empty space. He wanted to be good for Cas, but he broke out in a cold sweat at the thought of baring himself in a place where someone outside the two of them might walk in.

Castiel led him by the hand down the hall. Dean could see Jo and Charlie through the plate glass windows to the right side of the corridor, bent awkwardly, trying to connect cords and arrange components. They didn’t look up, for which Dean was immensely grateful. The space was empty save the two women; a fact that also made him grateful. Cas opened a door on the right past the lab and led Dean through it. The label on the door read, “Unit 2,” and it held nothing but a wide, low bed, a short counterspace built into the wall, and a rolling aluminum cart. The door label came from the building’s previous occupant, but the bed was new. When he was not struggling to breathe underwater, tossed beneath the pulling tides of his Submissive mindset like right now, Dean had
taken to calling the space ‘Fuck Unit 2’, or just ‘F.U.2’ for short.

The Alpha efficiently stripped Dean’s wet clothes off of him. He set Dean on the bed and backed up a few steps. Dean kept his eyes lowered; his hands folded in his lap. He was in trouble, and he knew it.

“Please look at me.”

Dean complied uncomfortably. He knew the Alpha could read his thoughts through his eyes, but he’d been given an instruction and he had already failed once.

“What just happened? Where are you right now? Can you talk to me?”

Dean cleared the logjam from his throat. “I’m fine, Sir. I apologize for my behavior. There’s no excuse for hesitating to obey like that. I...uh...I’m ready for your, um, for your decision, I guess. You want me over the bed, Sir?” Dean began to turn and lay his body out for his Dom, but Castiel shifted forward and stayed him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Dean. We’ll get to what you owe me for being late, but I’m not going to touch you until I know what happened in there. You looked close to panicking. I need to understand why.”

“Doesn’t matter, Sir. It’s not up to me what we do. It’s your call, and I ruined your plan. I’m sorry. Please punish me.”

Cas hardened his face again. “Try again, Dean. I asked you a question. You remember I told you that not all safewords are verbal, right? Medical, mental, or emotional incapacitation serve as the same emergency stop button, and you almost had a panic attack on me just now.”

“I didn’t, Sir,” Dean protested bravely, stubbornly. “I hesitated because it was a surprise. It took me a minute to switch into the right gear. Let’s start over. Please, Alpha? I can do this.”

Castiel backed up again and leaned against the countertop, folding his arms across his chest. “I can’t scene with you if you aren’t going to be honest with me, Dean. It’s too dangerous. Either tell me what happened, and we find a way to work through it, or we walk away from this here and now.” Castiel’s voice and body language showed how resolute he was. “Was it the surprise and the lack of prior discussion or the location?”

Dean’s eyes popped up to meet the Alpha’s when he mentioned location, and Cas narrowed his own in thought. “All right, then. Are you okay with being taken by surprise if you are in a private space?” Dean shivered again, and Cas startled in shame, realizing he’d left his cold wet Submissive naked in a bare room, emotionally distraught. While the physical distance helped Castiel to think and talk it through, it left Dean bereft at a time he obviously needed comfort.

“Come here, Dean. Let’s get under the blanket and get you warm. Maybe it will be easier to talk if I hold you from behind.” Cas kicked his shoes off, then stripped out of his pants and shirt and helped Dean to lay on his side in the bed. Cas snuggled in tight behind him in his underwear, careful not to touch him in any particularly erogenous regions and pulling the blanket over them both. He held Dean closely for a few minutes without speaking and rubbed a warm hand over his hip and thigh to warm him.

“Can you talk to me now?” Cas prompted. “Is it about where we were and who might see?”

Dean nodded silently. Shame washed over him, strong enough to clog Cas’ nostrils.

“You didn’t tell me about that when I asked for your limits and preferences. I didn’t know. I would
never put you in a situation where you can’t feel safe, Dean, not on purpose. You know that, I hope. But I can’t read your mind. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone has some… turn offs, shall we say. Me, I don’t like it when someone touches my anus. I hate it, in fact. It’s the fastest way to turn me off completely. You don’t like to scene in public. That’s okay with me, Dean. We just won’t do that.”

Dean’s body was warm, and his mind was calming. He felt stronger. He was beginning to feel safe again.

Cas whispered to him, “I locked the door on the way in. You can see that the blinds are all drawn. It’s just you and me here. I’ve got you. Can you talk to me about it? No one else will see or hear you. You’re safe.”

“It’s stupid, Alpha,” Dean protested quietly. “It’s like I’m ashamed to be a Sub sometimes, but I’m really not. I don’t know what it means. I can let go while I’m working, and it doesn’t hit me like that at all. Fuck.” Dean tried to figure out how to explain the difference. He was accustomed to seeing all kinds of wolves fucking in all kinds of ways. Sometimes couples fucked right there at their desks before a lecture class started, and in general, it wasn’t a problem as long as they finished and quieted before the professor began to lecture, even if it left them tied together through the class. Public sex in Lupin communities was common enough as long as it stayed where apes weren’t expected to be unwitting witnesses. The wolves were trying to build relations with the apes, not scare them. Among the wolves themselves, sex was no less prevalent publicly than other displays of affection like kissing or holding hands. Dean had no reason to get this worked up, and it bothered him not to be able to put it into words.

“You don’t have to try to explain why, Dean. You don’t owe me that. I want to be sure I understand well enough to keep you safe. Is it still all right with you if I make plans without consulting you beforehand? I felt that we’d progressed to that level at this point, but now I want to be sure. Obviously, I still have some things to learn about my beautiful, mysterious Submissive.”

“No, I’m good, Sir. I promise. I can be ready for whatever at the drop of a hat, and I’ll be good for you, but can we just keep it behind doors? For now? If you want me to work on it, I will.”

“There’s no need. I can do what I need to do with you anywhere at all, so if you’re more comfortable behind closed doors, then that’s what we’ll do.” Castiel felt Dean relax fully. He was curious about the unusual hang-up of Dean’s, but it really wasn’t any of his business. As long as the Dom understood Dean’s limits and didn’t cross them, he knew everything he had a right to know.

“I’m ready, now, Sir. I wanna move on. Did I ruin everything?”

“You didn’t ruin anything at all. I would take you back to my house, but I don’t want to stuff you back into your wet clothes, and unlike Charlie, I don’t have another set stashed somewhere to lend you. I guess we’re stuck here until your clothes dry. What a pity. However will we fill the time?” Cas’ teasing words were accented by a touch that barely skipped across Dean’s warm skin beneath the blanket. His fingers triggered the fine hairs on Dean’s arms and raised goosebumps all up and down his body.

Keeping his mouth close enough to Dean’s ear to let his breath tickle, Cas asked him, “How did yesterday go? Did you follow my instructions all day long?”

“Yes, Sir. Of course,” the Sub responded.

“And?”
“It was hard.” Dean snickered at his own pun and corrected, “Difficult, I mean. I wanted to come so bad, but I was good for you. Do I get to come today?”

“We’ll see. How many rounds did you manage?”

“I was home all day by myself. Sam wasn’t there until six, and I started at eight in the morning. Uh, so that’s…” Dean counted the hours off on his fingers subtly. Research scientists were usually expected to have basic arithmetic down, but figuring numbers wasn’t his strong suit. That’s what calculators were for.

“That’s eleven hours, if you started at eight. Did you make it through eleven rounds?”

“I didn’t do the one at six, ‘cause Sammy came home. Uh, so ten rounds, I think.”

“And you didn’t come once?”

“No, Sir. I pushed right up to the brink and then stopped like you said. My cock’s a little sore – not too sore to play, just a little bit.”

Cas growled and threw the blanket off. He shoved Dean onto his belly and delivered ten swift strikes to his left upper thigh. “I decide when you’re too sore to play, Dean. Not you.”

“But I did good, Sir. Right up to the edge every hour, on the hour, and something stiff up my ass on the half hour. All day. I did exactly what you said.” Dean was pleading in his innocent, young, fully Submissive voice, sinking into the floaty feeling of Subspace. “Please let me come. I was so good.”

Castiel hummed and massaged his ass. He planned to allow himself a full and unfettered addiction to this perfect, firm round ass. Why should he not? The big wolf licked its chops and dove in for a taste, raising his head just enough to speak as the thoughts needed voicing.

“You were very, very good for me, Dean...I’m so pleased.” Cas nibbled his way to Dean’s center, leaving tiny red pinch marks with his teeth that had Dean clenching the cheeks together. “Relax your muscles.” Dean did so on his next exhale, glad he wasn’t facing the Dom and trying to concentrate on holding his eyes open in addition to all of the other requirements that pulled at his concentration. He smelled alpha arousal in the air and assumed it was from both of them. Certainly, some of it was from Dean, but he couldn’t normally smell himself.

After hours of edge-play yesterday, expecting at any moment to hear Cas pull up in the driveway to come put him out of his misery, Dean went to sleep last night unsatisfied. He never considered defying the Alpha, but he was disappointed as he knew there’d been no plans communicated for today. Now, with the trauma of the public surprise behind him, his cock woke up fast in the realization that he might get to finish what he started yesterday at last, and it woke up fully. Dean didn’t realize he was humping into the mattress in anticipation until Cas stopped him with a hiss and a hand on his hip.

The Alpha had made his way to Dean’s fluttering hole, still not completely tightened up after its exercises the day before, and he plunged his tongue in with no preamble, fucking Dean on his tongue with happy abandon.

Yeah, probably already addicted.

“I can’t decide which hole to fuck first, Pet. My buffet all spread out before me offers so many delicious dishes, and I am overwhelmed.” Cas pulled back up and spread Dean’s ass open with his broad hands, working both thumbs deep inside on the moisture from his tongue.
“Tell you what.” The Alpha removed himself to fetch a small bottle from his pants pocket, along with a small, tapered, needleless syringe in a sterile package. “If you come, you can come, but I don’t authorize any participation on your part. You are my toy, and you have no will of your own. Sound like fun?” Dean groaned, but his cock thickened further. Cas filled the syringe with synthetic slick and injected it high up into Dean’s ass with a medical, businesslike hand. “Be a sex doll for me, Submissive, and let’s see what happens. First thing’s first, I promised you some bruises if you did a good job yesterday, and I always keep my promises. Put yourself out over the end of the bed with your feet on the floor. Show me that pretty round ass, so I can paint it.”

Dean slid down into place. Cas sounded controlled, but his voice quivered a little on the last sentence, a sure sign his wolf was chomping at the bit to be released from its shackles. Both of their cocks were hard enough to drive nails and already beginning to bulge at the base just from the anticipation.

“I’ll warm you up for a while. Get comfortable Dean. Then I’m going to use my belt hard enough to mark you, and after every stroke, you’re going to tell me what ‘stiff object’ you inserted up your ass on my instructions yesterday.”

The Alpha-Dom didn’t wait to determine if Dean understood. He’d said all he planned to. It was up to the Sub to keep up. Cas let the lust fill him and take him where his large wolf had control. He kept a loose grip on the wolf’s leash, ready to yank him back if it went too far. The wolf wouldn’t harm Dean, so he knew they were both safe, but he couldn’t let go of it completely. Not yet. Dean floated freely as he grunted through the warmup. For most alphas, Castiel’s idea of an appetizer was the full meal, plus drinks and a dessert. Dean was the only alpha Cas had ever met who could take the full weight of the Alpha’s strong arm at the height of his power…and beg for more.

Castiel’s hard hand fell again and again, covering the entirety of Dean’s ass. In the short few months they had been scening together, they had already done this more times than either cared to count. They both fed off the rhythm, the power, the exchange of trust, and the delivery of simple, hot pain. Dean moaned like a street corner whore and fought to keep his hips from driving his cock into the bedding. If he did that, Cas would stop. Dean knew he would because he’d done it before. That had been the hardest lesson of all. Instead, Dean shifted his weight subtly to remove the pressure on his dick, and let it dangle over the side of the bed, touching nothing.

“Good boy,” Cas praised. Dean was relieved that the motion wasn’t interpreted as participation or an act of will. That would get the spanking stopped as well. The Alpha kept it up until his hand ached and burned. If Dean were Omega, he would’ve Released ages ago, but he wasn’t. The Sub’s mouth hung open against the bedding. He panted and grunted into the blanket, squeezing his eyes and moaning in his flight. His cock ached so badly it distracted him from the delicious burn.

At last, the Dom stopped and caught his breath. “Very good, Pet. I think you’re about warmed up now.” He ignored Dean’s huff of disbelief. Warmed up? He was on fire. Castiel fetched his belt. He’d deliberately worn the wide thick one, the black one that Dean always chose when Cas let him pick. It left the best marks.

Reveling in the feeling of power over the fate of another person, Castiel scowled darkly and swung the belt as hard as he could to land high on Dean’s ass. Dean howled and clutched the bedding between his fingers. His cock dripped onto the floor at his spasms of pain, but Cas waited coolly for the Sub to fulfill his part. He wasn’t getting another blow until he remembered, and he wasn’t getting a reminder.

“Ohhh, fucking hell! Fuuuuuuck! Okay. God. SHIT! Gimme a second.” Dean gyrated back to himself, glad he’d not left his cock touching the blanket. The way his hips had moved on their own
would definitely be classified as participatory if it allowed him friction. He panted heavily and
managed to get the words out. “I used a glass bottle on the first round. Just lubed it up, and shoved it
in like you said. Please, Sir, will you do that again?”

“No asking! You take what I choose to give you! That’s the only warning you’re getting.” Dean
whined loudly and rocked minutely in place, the wide red welt across his hips deepening in color.
Castiel snarled and huffed through his nose aggressively and rared back for another powerful blow,
landing this one only slightly lower than the first and overlapping a little. He groaned as he nearly
lost control of himself at his Sub’s high-pitched scream. The wolf wanted to sink his teeth into the
Sub’s flesh and rut into him in ownership and claiming.

Dean’s hands and feet made an unconscious climbing motion as he wailed, as if to skitter up the bed
and away from the fiery pain, but he didn’t actually go anywhere. The panting was faster this time,
and he didn’t bother with words as he tried to fight back up to the surface so he could earn another
one. Castiel shoved his boxer briefs to the floor and took hold of himself around the base of his cock.
He squeezed to keep himself steady. Did Dean know how beautiful he was in full submission?

“I…I…used the…the vibrator next. Fuck, ple…” Dean nearly begged again but remembered in the
nick of time and cut himself off, turning his face into the bedding so he couldn’t accidentally ask for
another blow out loud. His ass said it for him. Purpling around the edges of the first blow’s welt, his
blazing ass angled of its own accord toward where the strikes were coming from and fell still –
maybe vibrated just a scosche.

Castiel swayed in place. He let everything go – everything but that last bit of the wolf’s leash. He let
go of the anxiety that he carried that someday he would lose hold of his wolf at the wrong time and
hurt someone. He let go of the pressure he put on himself to make everything perfect for everyone he
knew. He let go of the burning need that drove him to keep digging and building, trying to prove the
bitch wrong. She HAD to be wrong, and it ate at her son every moment of every day – except not
right now. In this moment, there was only the belt in his hand, the snarling, hungry wolf driving him
to the edge, the whimpering masochist writhing on the bed in submission, and the swirling hot pain
between them. Castiel’s eyes blazed red and blown. He watched Dean calm himself and relax in
what had to be a supreme act of self-control. How was it possible to stay the man in place to take
burning stroke after burning stroke with nothing more than the power of his command? Who was in
charge here? Did Dean stay because Castiel willed it, or did Castiel strike because Dean willed it?

(MINE!) roared the wolf, and he swung again with a mighty grunt of effort.

Dean’s feet lifted off the ground, his knees catching on the top of the mattress and going no further –
refusing to go further. The Alpha had forbidden Dean from exerting his own will, but he was under
no illusions as to whose will was taking more of a load in this moment. Dean’s scream had gone
inaudible. He rubbed his face back and forth across the mattress, overstimulated to the point that he
wasn’t fully sentient anymore.

With Dean, Castiel had discovered the rush that lay in using the full power of his arm and shoulders
to drive through the blow as opposed to a more restrained swing. Any Omega could take a standard
strapping applied in punishment, but that’s not what Castiel’s wolf was giving to his alpha-Sub. Cas,
not yet thirty and in the full span of ripened youthful vigor combined with full adult maturity to round
his body’s structure out, could land a blow with meaning. Dean’s alpha body was happy to take it.
Cas had never dared strike anyone as hard as he did Dean. He wanted to tear the young body apart,
find out what magical components the Universe fit together to make him such an intoxicating
cocktail of perfection to drive the dark-haired wolf out of his mind with lust.

“Popsicle…” Dean breathed out eventually.
Wait. What?

Ten minutes at a time. That’s how long he was told to hold something inside his ass. A popsicle up his ass for ten minutes could cause damage. Cas grabbed Dean’s thigh and hauled him in close for inspection. Dean looked around, huffing, his own eyes as red as Castiel’s. His rim looked tight and pink and perfect – a little more give than usual when pressed, but Cas didn’t see any sign of frostbite or freezer burn.

Cas looked up and met his Sub’s eyes. The Sub was close to flying. He could see the desperation on his face, but Dean restrained himself from asking for what he wanted, and he’d even remembered this time not to bite through his own lip. That was a first. He deserved one more.

The Dom released him, and the Sub relaxed into the bedding. They breathed out slowly in tandem. Cas let go of the wolf entirely, and the wolf swung twice in rapid succession as hard as it could, and then it flipped the Sub before Dean’s scream even coalesced into sound waves. The Alpha buried his cock deep into Dean’s ass in one deep thrust, bottoming out into the slick he’d left there earlier.

He paused for the briefest of moments – a tease of a pause actually – before rutting into his Sub’s hole like the beast he was. Dean’s scream turned into a high wail of agony, as Castiel’s skin slapped into the hot damaged flesh of his ass and the Dom’s teeth sank into Dean’s shoulder to force him to take it. Dean was folded in half, his legs forced up so that one knee almost punched him in the side of his own face, while the other sprawled awkwardly out to the side of Castiel’s shoulder.

The Dom’s teeth tore at Dean’s shoulder. His knot buried into Dean’s ass; the only thing keeping the rim from tearing was the hours of play he’d given himself yesterday. The knot locked, and the alpha’s body tried to reject it, but failed. Dean’s body cramped and spasmed as the knot forced a hold inside him, and his rim clutched it unnaturally.

Cas felt Dean stiffen. He heard the growl deep in Dean’s throat and felt his mindset shift to defiance. He released his hold and lifted up to force Dean to look at him. Their eyes met in alpha challenge. Dean’s were wide and fierce, red and angry. Cas’ eyes didn’t back down. He had not tried to knot the alpha since their Keller test together months ago, and this time the alpha-Sub didn’t just roll over and take it. The Submissive had played his part and done what was asked. Now his alpha was emasculated with a knot up his ass. How was this a reward? Dean shoved at Castiel’s hips with his hands as if he could force the knot out.

“NO, Dean!” the wolf told him. “You don’t say NO TO ME!” Castiel’s wolf snapped fiercely at him, and the alpha’s eyes went wide. Castiel knew he was hurting Dean; hurting him in a way that wasn’t part of their agreement, but he pressed on, grinding his hips in tighter than ever. “Take it, and FUCKING SAY THANK YOU!” Dean murmured something unintelligible, his breathing shallow and rapid. He broke his eyes away, unable to hold the huge wolf’s judgmental gaze.

“SAY IT, DEAN WINCHESTER!” That was the wolf talking; the one Dean trusted 100%, the one who wouldn’t hurt him. His ass hurt badly, but it wasn’t a scary hurt, it was hot, close, embracing fire.

“I CAN’T WANT THIS!” Dean finally shouted back. “I’M A FUCKING ALPHA!” Castiel roared loudly and fucked harder, pulling brutally at the tie and bringing the deep, awful ache even closer to the surface. He didn’t speak again, but he snarled and grimaced as he fucked the Submissive. The wolf knew what Dean needed – more than he needed the simple release of an ass set on fire by spanking, more than he needed to be called down when he was a brat. The wolf knew why Dean couldn’t scene in public unless he had the excuse of a professional or societal assignment to fall back on. The wolf sensed Dean’s deepest pain, and it made him face it. Own it.
“LOOK AT ME, SUBMISSIVE!”

Dean did. And then he broke into a million pieces. He saw everything the big wolf knew, and his shame consumed him. His wall crumbled to dust before the man who knew him at his most vulnerable and still held onto him as if he had real value.

“Come for me now, Pet.” Castiel’s voice cradled him tenderly. He pressed his own belly against Dean’s, trapping his Sub’s erection between them. The angle pulled at the tie in Dean’s ass, and his voice gave out as he screamed through his climax, burying his face in the Dom’s shoulder and bursting into tears of shame, relief, and release. The throbbing went on and on as the tension he’d built over a full day of edging all broke through the dam at once and spilled across his stomach and chest.

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“How did you know to do that?” Dean rasped later, after they’d untied. He was going to be sore for days. “I was ready to fight you and go down swingin’. I was ready to tear myself a new one to get you out.”

Cas huffed into Dean’s hair. He’d claimed Dean’s time for his own as long as Dean’s clothes were still wet, so he would own him for another couple of hours at least. Cuddles were a necessary part of Dean’s aftercare, so far be it from Cas to deny his duty.

“The wolf knew. Somehow. I let him go this time. I don’t always do that. I apologize because that probably means there’ll be no round two.”

“Says who?” Dean challenged, craning his head to look up at the Dom.

“I’m not fucking you again until you’re healed, and you’re not going to be fucking me, so…”

“Pssshh. That’s what the proctologist says, but what about the dentist?” Dean sassed.

Cas quirked an eyebrow that Dean couldn’t see. “Your dentist, or mine?”

Dean chuckled happily. He felt like all of the bones in his body had turned to rubber, like a cat’s. He slid a hand down to fondle his partner affectionately. “You get what you needed, Alpha?” he asked sleepily.

“Of course, Dean. Did you? How do you feel about the intensity level this time? You took quite a beating. Those bruises are deep.”

“Mmmm. I’m peachy. But it’s not about me, man.”

Cas leaned out a bit in order to see Dean’s face. “Why do you say that? Why wouldn’t it be as much about you as it is about me?”

“I’m not the ‘Big Bad’ here, Cas. If I get unbalanced, I get bitchy, and Sam spanks me, and we all move on. If you get unbalanced, heads roll. We can’t let that happen.”

Castiel frowned. “That’s ridiculous. Your needs are every bit as important as mine. Don’t you know
“That?” Cas squinted down awkwardly at him. Dean didn’t reply.

“Okay, this is absurd. Dean, Jesus. Look at me.” Cas wiggled out from under the alpha-Sub and let him fall onto his own belly on the mattress. Cas sat facing him. “I’m starting to realize that you have no idea how valuable you really are. You put everyone else first, and if it was simply altruism, I would applaud you for it. But I think it goes deeper than that. Listen to me, alpha. You are no less worthy than any other person who’s ever lived and a great deal more worthy than many I’ve known in my life. Whatever you’re struggling with, I’ll help you through it however I can, but I can’t do it by myself. You. You have to fight for your own worth and wellbeing. Those voices in your head? I don’t know what they’re telling you to make you think you don’t rate equal to anyone else, but they are. Lying to you. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you, Cas. We through here?”

“No, we’re not. You still owe me for showing up to a scene almost thirty minutes late.”

“Bullshit. I didn’t know it was a scene.”

“You knew you were expected, and you didn’t even text me.”

“You already laid me raw with your steel-plate hands, man. Don’t you think that’s enough?”

“What do you think?”

“Yep! I’m good. Thanks for the chat. I’ll change when I get home. See you tomorrow, boss.” Dean rolled to the edge of the bed and stood, but he didn’t make it three steps. The Dominant’s hand came down on his neck, and he stilled instinctively.

“I believe you’re testing me, Dean. Are you?” Dean whined, closing his eyes. He wanted to let go of the branch he was dangling from and know without a shadow of a doubt that someone would always be there to catch him and keep him safe. “Would you like to see how I respond to being tested?”

Cas walked him back to the bed and pulled the naked man over his lap. “We’re going to have a talk while you’re down there. Well. I’ll talk. You cry. All right? Good.” Cas spanked Dean’s thigh slowly, using a restrained amount of power, waking up the red marks and deepening them subtly.

“Here’s what I think is happening. I’ll be honest. I’m not sure how deep your self-worth issues go, but I believe much of what I see from you that I find disturbing is related.” Cas kept his tone interested and conversational, but his hand kept up a measured swatting that had Dean grunting into it.

“You don’t believe you deserve praise or love. You believe you deserve to suffer. You believe that having a desire for a certain kind of touching isn’t acceptable unless it originates from a socially acceptable source. Somewhere along the way you’ve become convinced that you are the least valuable person in any room, even in a room by yourself.”

Dean sniffled. A teardrop fell off the tip of his nose, the lowest point of his face at the moment.

“Do you punish yourself, Dean, when you feel your lowest? When you feel particularly out of sorts?” Cas knew the tendency ran high in true brats, and he’d seen evidence already that Dean may have developed that habit. Dean tucked his head in tight against Cas’ calf and wept quietly.

“All right. Let me make this clear to you now. I won’t put up with self-destructive, or self-recriminating talk or actions. You don’t have permission to apply punishment. Only I do. …And your brother, I suppose.” The Alpha allowed his charge a moment to let that sink in. He doubted
anyone but Sam had cared enough about Dean to give him a limitation like that since his childhood. It would take time for him to understand.

At length, he continued. “Do you know why you can’t scene in public, Pet? Do you know why you fought my knot when it’s exactly what you wanted?”

“CAS, please! I thought this was gonna be about showing up late. I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

Dean’s grip around Castiel’s leg was beginning to feel like a tourniquet.

“Well, that’s certainly what brought you here, but I thought we should address some critical things while I had you in this position. You always seem to listen to me better when you’re down there.”

He smacked Dean several more times and then spoke up again. “Answer the question. Do you understand where those issues stem from?” It really wasn’t any of Castiel’s business. He had already resolved to stay out of Dean’s personal issues, but Castiel’s wolf had addressed them head-on, and Cas didn’t see any alternative now but to follow his lead.

“I just don’t want to fuck in front of people, all right?”

“Think harder. I’ll help.” Cas moved his strike zone up to the curve between Dean’s thigh and his ass.

“I’m not supposed to want to be a bitch! Okay? I’m a fuckin’ alpha!”

Castiel stopped and began to lightly rub Dean’s ass and thighs, up over the angry raised welts and down each leg, easing the sting. “But you do want that, don’t you? Well, I wouldn’t’ve put it the way you did, but you crave the opportunity to submit, don’t you?”

“Can I get up now? If you’re done? This is fucking embarrassing.”

“Yes, I know, and that’s the point, isn’t it? You feel fine about being a Submissive. It’s what you are. How you were born. It’s hardwired into you. And it’s not something you can alter. I believe you’ve accepted the biological side of your wolf, Dean. And no. You can’t get up yet. I’m not through.

“It’s the soft side that irks you. The truth is that you’d want to submit even if you hadn’t been born that way, anatomically. You have a need to submit sexually that comes from your front-brain. You’re not merely a gay man, Dean, you’re an intrinsic Bottom in every sense of the word, and you would be so even if you were a Primate and not a wolf. It’s hard to spot the difference because we put so much focus on the needs of the wolf, but this is different.”

Dean gave a great, unexpected shove and toppled himself onto the floor where he rolled heavily onto his backside and flinched but didn’t shift.

“Am I wrong?” Cas asked him. He didn’t try to retrieve his recalcitrant Sub or call him down for pressing into the pain in his butt in punishment. Maybe Dean found the pain grounding. This had to be a hard conversation, and it really wasn’t any of Castiel’s business. But they needed to be able to trust each other completely if they were going to go as deep as Cas wanted to.

“What’s being gay got to do with it?” Dean asked petulantly.

“Nothing, really, except heightened opportunities for penetrative Bottoming,” Cas answered carefully.

“Alphas don’t Bottom unless they’re Submissive, Cas.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.” Cas waited a beat then he sighed.
“Dean, I’m not trying to pressure you into opening up the bedroom door, but I think you can’t take your private scening out in public because you’re afraid someone will realize that sometimes you play from your front-brain and not just the back one. And when that happens, you’re still a sub, aren’t you? Small “s,” submissive, not capital “S,” Tertiary wolf.”

“What?”

“Strip away all of the Lupin layers, Dean. Just peel everything back to nothing but you, the man. You, Dean Winchester, are a submissive and a sexual bottom, and that’s embarrassing, because as an alpha, you don’t think you should feel that way, and you can’t let anyone know it. Lucky for you, you were also born a Profound Submissive, anatomically, so you can always hide behind that.”

“Have you finished, Dr. Phil?”

“Almost. Here’s the final stretch. I want to keep on scening with you, Dean – now more than ever. In fact, I’d like your word that you won’t go to any other Doms without asking me first. I can make you the same commitment. I will not sleep with anyone but you recreationally.”

“Okay. That’s no different than the last several months.”

Cas raised his eyes in surprise. Dean shook his head at the Dom and rubbed the back of a thigh. “Cas, I haven’t been anywhere but your bed since day one. Thought you knew that.”

“No, I didn’t. Um, thank you for your trust, Dean. It means a great deal to me.”

“No problem, man. We done?”

“You might be in less of a hurry to leave once you try to put your jeans back on. I noticed you aren’t in possession of a pair of underwear at the moment. And, no. I’m not done. Do I need to put you back over to get you to stay and listen?”

“No, sir,” Dean grumbled. “Thank you. Here’s the second part. I’m not here to change you. I’m not going to ask you to push past any of your limits or try anything you don’t want to do. I won’t knot you again without talking to you about it first. I promise to play only in private places. BUT. I expect you to be honest with me when we play. Don’t pretend to hate something that you love just because you are uncomfortable in the fact that you enjoy it. I will keep you safe, as you do me. Your secrets are safe. Your insecurities are safe. Your kinks and predilections are safe. Of course, your body is somewhat less safe, but that’s the price we pay.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “No one gets it, Cas. I tried explaining it once or twice, and it didn’t make any sense. Don’t get all high and mighty about how I’m not being honest with you. I’ve tried, and they all look at me like I’m crazy. I’ll say, ‘yeah, I know I’m submissive, but I mean, like I’m actually SUBMISSIVE.’ And they all go, ‘And?’”

“I’m not upset with you. I just wish you’d told me more before you handed me the reins.”

“You make me sound like a skittish horse.” Dean began to soothe the other thigh.

“Now there’s a pretty image.”

“Down, boy,” Dean chuckled, focusing his eyes on the floor.

He sat quietly on the hard tile floor for a minute. “You Claimed me again, didn’t you?”
“Yes.”
“I didn’t feel it this time.”

“Maybe you were just distracted by how hard I made you come on my knot.”

“Shut up.” Dean rocked back to lay flat on the floor. “You said something about your dentist?”

“Oh, I thought we were talking about yours.” Cas looked at him calmly. “Was there something you wanted, Submissive?”

“May I have a blowjob, Sir?”

“Mmm, that sounds like something I can do for you. You’ve been very good for me today, excepting some unnecessary cheek and several attempts to leave before you were dismissed.” Cas dropped a pillow on the floor and knelt. After the revelations they’d just discussed, it was a backward scenario, but it only seemed that way until Dean realized Cas planned to use his teeth and two fingers up his sore ass. What had happened to waiting to let him heal? Castiel wrapped a fist around Dean’s knot and squeezed hard.

Dean went off like the Fourth of July.

NOW:

Castiel finally found Gabriel reading by penlight at the back of Cas’ own clothes closet.

“Out!”

“Fine,” Gabe grumbled and stumbled into the light, blinking.

“You were deliberately hiding from me. Why?”

“Bobby took the stitches out.”

“Yes, I know.” Cas clicked his tongue and ran his hand over the tender scars on his brother’s back.

“And I’ve been working the Omega case, too.” Gabe looked like a guilty pup caught throwing rocks at puppies.

“Yes, I know,” Cas repeated. “As long as you don’t leave the house and you only use our secure devices to aid in your search, I’ll allow it. You’re doing good work, and you deserve to be allowed to finish it.”

“Oh,” a surprised Gabe said. “Uh, thanks.”

“Is that all you want to tell me?” Cas asked his brother. The air was heavy with unsaid words.

“I asked Bobby to Claim me, Cas. I’m sorry. I should’ve gone through you since he’s not Pack, but I need him to trust me, and he didn’t anymore. I told him to see for himself and put a leash on me, and he did.”
“I see. I’m glad you told me.”

“You already knew, didn’t you?” Gabriel accused.

“I did. I heard it from Singer first. I can’t say I’m happy about it,” Cas examined his own bruised, scraped knuckles. “But it’s really up to you. I’ve never known you to respond to that kind of a leash anyway, Gabe.”

Gabriel kicked the carpeting in chagrin. “I fucked up, man. I have to fix it. I can’t fix it if he won’t tell me everything. Thing is, the reason all of this happened is because he didn’t trust me anymore in the first place, and that’s because I KEPT FUCKING UP! This is all on me. I have to do better. No more sneaking. No more lying. I’m doing all my work through him now. Straight up.” Gabriel paused and risked a look into his brother’s icy face. “We pulled out another four this morning. That leaves five more, and I know where they are.”

Castiel closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he took a deep breath. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Do you have any idea what you put me through?”

“You went through way less than I did; less than I do every time I leave on a mission. Cram the big brother shit and do what you have to do, but don’t make this about you, Castiel.”

Cas looked at him and worked his jaw, making a decision. “Fine. We’ll do this right here. I’m only using my hand and my belt, but we’re not finished until I hear a full description from you of what you went through. We’ll take lots of breaks so you can think and find the words. You’re going to tell me everything, Gabriel, or we’ll just keep going until the sun comes back up.”

Cas flexed his hand, noting the stubborn set to his brother’s face. This was going to take a while, and they would know at the end who the more stubborn brother was. Cas had confidence. He also had the advantage. But he’d underestimated Gabriel before, to his own mortification. He didn’t intend to let that happen again.

“You know what to do. Tell me when you’re ready.”

It took three hours, but Castiel eventually won out. He left Gabriel aching and spent, sleeping in Cas’ own bed, the fresh Claim ringing through his body only beginning to slow its effervescence. After what Gabriel told him, Cas regretted not taking a harder swing at Bobby. The alpha had mishandled everything, and now Gabe believed it was his fault.

Cas hummed quietly as he changed the dressings on April’s back. She allowed the care contentedly, humming his tune back to him in harmony. He smiled.

Chapter End Notes

It’s an upside-down chapter relative to THEN vs NOW, but there’s some important points in there that you needed to see in context to what’s going on in their pack right now. Cas and Dean have had many such revelations over the years due to the raw emotion that their play unveils. It would be impossible to do what they do and NOT know each other well.
I've said in a number of comments that writing a full scene between the two of them might fall far short of the promised intensity, so I kept it shorter than what's normal for them. As mentioned way back in Ch 1, when they go full out, they usually go all night and need medical assistance when they're done. I'm not up to writing that in detail. Use your imaginations.

If you're in the U.S., please be safe with fireworks. And enjoy Independence Day.
Thursday, June 8, 2017

Chapter Summary

Tying up or carrying through lots of loose ends: Dean and Michael end their honeymoon. Dean gets ready to head back to work, and Michael does too, to his surprise. April needs to take some adult responsibility. And also, trouble in paradise for Sam.

Chapter Notes

Friday, July 7th is "Tell the Truth Day." (IDK, that's what Google told me.)

So

Full disclosure, the dynamic between Sam & Jess is completely stolen from a couple in a Robert Jordan's books. It's a nod to my favorite shaggy-haired wolf and the fact that much of the flavor of this AU developed from my adoration of how he built his. It's a genre-match, not a swipe of someone else's universe, but I'll admit that mine is a bit derivative. If you want, check out Robert Jordan's "Wheel of Time" series. It has wolves in it. It's long. Be ready to invest.

Also, I may have to slow down a bit. I've said that before, and then not done it, but it's becoming crunchy around here (as in time-crunch, not as in dirty laundry) and I may need to go back to being a grown-up. I only tell you this so that if I miss one or two of my standard posting dates, like I did yesterday, you won't think I've died. I'm still writing, and they will still be fairly regular, but maybe not 30,000 words per week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The last half of their month passed in a tingly, sticky, moist, stinging blur of filthy noises and sensations. They spent an afternoon and an evening with Charlie, taking in a terrible Indie movie she’d been told to see by her Italian pen-pal. Jo brought a case of beer and a rack of ribs which Dean joyfully smoked for hours on the back patio until the meat fell off the bones and all three wolves moaned in carnivoral pleasure. Mostly, the two mates stayed nude and plastered against each other, ignoring the rest of the world, keeping to themselves.

Fred had rushed down to the guest house with three assistants as soon as he knew Dean and Michael had taken up residence, shooed them out for the afternoon, and set to making the space livable. The spider problem wasn’t as bad as Dean had anticipated, but Fred was embarrassed nonetheless. Dean grilled steaks that night and sent servings up to the house by way of a thank you to the staff.

Michael fucked his mate again and again, in every position he could think of except underwater in the jacuzzi on the patio. No one wanted to try to clean jizz out of the filter. Dean caught a bad case of stubble burn when Michael laid him across the coffee table on his belly and ate him out for the length of the Ken Burns documentary they found on Netflix, refusing to allow Dean to come until the very end. Dean returned the favor, growing increasingly addicted to the flavor and the texture of Michael’s slick, hefting Michael’s legs to lay over the alpha’s shoulders while he worked away, driving his tongue and his fingers deep into Michael’s channel until Michael shot his load high onto his own chest, clutching at Dean’s hair to hold him in place.

Dean had Michael in stitches with an imitation of their Alpha that was so grotesquely rude and at the same time so aptly perfect that he seemed to be channeling a caricature of the lead dog.

By the end of the last week, they were both raw and chafed. Dean’s body was covered in spot-bruises and long thin switch lines, deep purple muscle damage, and red, swollen welts. The house smelled viscous with sex and lust, a virtual fog making the cleaning ladies cough as they crept in to change the sheets daily. Neither of the mates brought it up, but neither suggested knotting. Dean’s cock received plenty of attention from his Omega who suckled it, massaged it, licked and stroked it, but never suggested riding it. By unspoken agreement, they both seemed determined to put off any chance of an early conception by just not going there. It didn’t matter, though. Dean preferred to bottom anyway.

It was the filthiest two weeks of their lives as both gave in to every impulsive craving to taste and pinch, fuck and strike. They sneaked quietly into Castiel’s play room at the main house while Cas and April were out for the day to dig out some toys from Dean’s toybox. Dean selected an enormous vibrating dildo, a set of anal beads, and a flogger with knots tied into the leather tips. They didn’t sleep at all that night.

Michael, wanting to learn the intricacies of Dean’s desires, set Dean to playing a game of “Optometrist.” The premise was simple, just like an eye doctor evaluating a patient’s vision function through a series of choices – which one is clearer, A or B? – Michael applied two options at a time and asked Dean to select which he preferred. Dean picked a hand-strike over a feather stroke, then he opted for a nipple-twist instead of a pinch to his hip. For round two, between the nipple-play and the stinging swat to his thigh, Dean proved predictable, and the swat won out again and again. The game left them both wide-eyed and panting. Come dribbled off Michael’s hand where he still held both of their throbbing, deflating cocks. Michael released the hold his teeth still had on Dean’s shoulder and he leaned his head against Dean’s jaw, trying to catch his breath.

“I’m definitely using that one in class,” Dean told him, his face flushed and sweaty.
“No, you’re not,” the Omega reminded him. “No fucking in class.”

“I know, babe. I can lead the game without touching anyone. I can’t wait to see how the Ozzies respond though. They’re going to lose their minds.” Dean kissed Michael, softly opening his Omega’s lips with his tongue and tasting the flavor of his own blood left in Michael’s mouth. Dean wasn’t a big proponent of blood play, but like any wolf, a blood-claim pulled a response from deep within him, and he moaned happily.

Castiel, April, and Gabriel walked down for dinner near the end of the last week. Dean made lasagna and garlic knots, baked from hand-kneaded dough and drenched with garlic butter. They ate on the patio by the jacuzzi because it was a beautiful evening and because the house still reeked.

Dean ate standing up, his plate balanced on one hand. Cas noted his stance but didn’t comment.

Castiel announced to them that Andrea and Benny were expecting at last after too many failed attempts to count, and that Benny was over the moon. April raised a glass to the happy couple which Michael seconded and they all toasted the Lafitte’s good fortune.

Cas also gave them a short rundown on where the investigation over Gordon’s and the others’ deaths stood with a meaningful look at Gabriel. Dean swallowed a mouthful of wine and wondered if his Alpha was ever planning to come clean to his fiancé about his involvement in that. Dean didn’t confront him, but he wasn’t stupid either. A whole building magically explodes a couple of weeks after Castiel Novak’s brother barely escaped with his life and no one seems to have any idea why? No. Dean wasn’t buying that bullshit for a second. Dean let it pass and served up a second serving to those who wanted one. Everyone did. Plausible deniability was probably in play, and he expected he’d have a role in that.

Not stupid.

“I’ve selected the room I want, Alpha,” Michael announced. Cas looked up from his pasta, so Michael finished his thought. “I want that one.” He pointed at the second floor above their heads. The room above them had a balcony terrace that overlooked the patio and a narrow greenspace. Faint sounds from the freeway on the other side of the trees made it through, but it was muffled enough to be easily ignored.

“Sorry, Michael. When I told you to select any unclaimed room, I meant to pick one in the main house.” Castiel went back to his meal.

“You never said that.”

“It’s what I meant. You won’t be surprised to know that I don’t want my Pack this isolated from the rest of the household.”

“But why?”

Everyone stopped eating. Dean suppressed a snicker by pulling his upper lip between his teeth. Castiel fixed a quiet, uncomplicated blue eye on the Omega. “Because I said so.”

“That’s tellin’ him, bro,” Gabriel crowed.

Castiel cut off further protest or argument by changing the subject. “I have an offer for you, Michael. It will require that you live in the house anyway. Are you interested in hearing it?” Castiel picked his fork back up and let the stringy cheese drip from the end before eating.
“Do I have a choice?”

“Be careful with your tone, Omega,” Cas warned. “I’m in a generous mood, but I can be pushed to action if you continue.”

“I apologize, Alpha. I’ve forgotten myself. Please continue,” Michael demurred. Whether he meant it or not was irrelevant. The words and the tone were acceptable. Dean choked on a bite in his amusement, and Gabe reached up to whack him on the back.

Castiel cleared his throat, looking at the two of them on the far end of the table in irritation, but Gabe just shot him an innocent look. Castiel continued, looking back at Michael. “It will depend upon whether you’ve changed your mind about returning to complete your degree or not. If you have, then you have my full support. The Pack will pay for your tuition and provide whatever you need by way of resources.” Cas paused to allow Michael a chance to respond.

“Um, no Sir. I’m not going back to school. I was planning to look for a job once our honeymoon was over.” Michael was suddenly very uncomfortable, feeling judged by the Alpha who held two doctoral degrees and ran a world famous and award-winning research facility.

“Well, you still need to complete your testing, assessments, and training, so please hold off on committing to any outside employment until you’ve finished with that, but in the meanwhile, I would like to offer you the opportunity to contribute directly to the welfare of the Pack.”

“Sir?” asked Michael.

“If you would be willing, I’d like to name you our official Pack Manager. It’s a very important position with a great deal of responsibility. You would essentially run the day-to-day Pack business and household goings on.”

Michael put his fork down and stared from Castiel to Dean, back to Cas, and then back to Dean again. Dean didn’t look surprised. He looked expectant. He looked…encouraging. Dean nodded at him, telling him to answer in the affirmative, but Michael frowned. “What kind of business?”

“You were studying Accounting and Finance in San Antonio, were you not, Michael? And you had nearly finished your degree before you lost your position with the school?”

Michael huffed sarcastically. “Lost my position? Yeah, that’s one way to put it. Snappish Omegas aren’t looked on fondly by the admins in Texas.” Castiel just looked at him in expectation, so he cleared his throat and finished answering the question. “Yes, Alpha. I was an Accounting and Finance major, and I was near the end of my last semester.”

“Can I perhaps assume, then, that you are basically a degree holder without the actual degree?”

“I guess,” Michael muttered, blushing and casting his eyes down in shame.

“I’m not trying to embarrass you. I’m merely hoping to ascertain your level of competence in the field. If you agree to this position, you would need those skills to keep our books and run the household. It is, as I said, a significant amount of responsibility. Down the line, in the future, if you enjoy the work and would like to finish your degree, we can address it again later.”

“I didn’t know this was a job interview,” Michael muttered. “I would’ve worn a suit.”

“There’s no need to be snarky,” Cas chided. “You don’t have to accept the job. If you do, you will work closely with me initially so I can teach you the Pack business and get you squared away. I won’t let you fail, and I believe you will find it very rewarding.”
“So, I’d be a housewife?”

Gabe and April both laughed, thinking Michael was joking, but Dean frowned in worry. He could feel Michael’s discomfort. The offer wasn’t sitting right with his mate, but he didn’t know why.

Dean cleared his throat and raised his chin. “Hey, Cas. Let’s table it for a little while. We can explain it better and give him a chance to think it over. No pressure, ‘kay?”

“Of course. We can continue as we’ve been going along,” Cas agreed. “I have a paid accountant, and a business manager, and I can keep them both contracted for good. It’s just a suggestion. Michael, the offer’s on the table if ever you want to consider it.”

Accountant and Business Manager? That sounded like a real job. Michael assumed at first that Cas was offering him a token title in order to tie him to the house so he could have tabs kept, but maybe this was something more. Certainly, the sendings Michael was receiving from Dean felt real.

“How would it tie in while I’m doing my training?” he ventured, toying with his salad.

“Your Omega and Dominant trainings come first, but there will be time to work in some minor responsibilities of the management job as well along the way. You would still be living here with us, and your evenings will be free once you’ve completed your homework.” Castiel scraped the last of his lasagna onto his fork and ate it, following with a long swallow of red wine.

Another thought came suddenly to the Omega, and he felt brave enough after his third glass of wine to broach the idea. “Are you just trying to keep me occupied all the time so I won’t have time to interfere between you and Dean?”

Dean laughed, putting a hand over his mouth to prevent his meal from escaping back to his plate. Cas shot him a disgusted look. “On the contrary. Your Lupin training is going to involve a lot of practical work at home, and that means with your mate. If anything, you will be more heavily involved with Dean than usual.”

“More than the last couple of weeks?!” interjected April. “Their dicks would fall off. Have you smelled inside the house?”

Cas ran an exasperated hand over his face and pressed into his eyes. Yes, he could smell the house from here even with the doors closed. He could also smell that neither of the new mates were taking any birth control. They would both be fertile at Michael’s next heat. Castiel ached with envy and frustration. “Will you think about it?” he asked Michael eventually. “I’ll draw up a job description so that you can fully understand what I’m asking you to be responsible for.”

“Alpha, would you please excuse us for a couple of minutes?” Michael was on his feet and pulling Dean into motion as he fled into the house.

Dean nearly dropped his plate, but he caught his balance and followed his mate, dropping the plate onto the sideboard as he stumbled. The door slammed behind them.

“What the fuck is this, Dean?!” Michael turned and face Dean, angry at having been ambushed, and trying to hide the sliver of hopeful anticipation that had begun to work its way into his brain.

“Uh, I thought you’d be pleased. Babe, I go back to work on Monday. Have you thought what you want to do all day? You just gonna lay out by the pool and get a sunburn?”

“I’ve got the test, and then y’all are gonna put me into months of training. Forgive me if I hadn’t put my resume into presentable form just yet.” Michael lowered his voice and put his face close to Dean’s. “Have you forgotten that I’ll probably be waddling around soon?”
Dean raised his own brows and lowered his chin conspiratorially, “And this interferes with that how, exactly?”

“Talk to me, Dean.” Michael was unsettled. He needed to think, but he couldn’t place all of the moving pieces into any kind of pattern, and they were swirling through his head. Michael liked order, not chaos. “What do I do?” He knew there was something he was missing, but he couldn’t figure out what it was.

Dean wrapped his arms around the young man, letting his calm flow into the Omega. “Shh. Michael, it’s not a big deal. Take the job if you want, or walk away. We’ll manage either way.” Dean kissed Michael’s temple. “I thought you wanted to be an accountant. This lets you get there.”

Michael chuckled in Dean’s arms against his shoulder, rolling his head. “Dean, I was never gonna be an accountant. My Pop signed me up for accounting because he thought the other students were likely to be boring and a good influence.”

Dean pushed Michael to arms’ length to look at him, his face surprised. “Really? So, do you hate it? Babe, you don’t have to do this, I mean it. Don’t say yes if you’re going to hate it.”

“It’s funny,” Michael shook his head. “I hated that my Alpha didn’t give me a choice. I wanted to study Marketing, but he thought I’d be surrounded by extroverts who would party all the time and lead me astray. Turns out I’m the bad influence, and I made some waves no matter where I went.” Michael said it with equal parts pride and chagrin.

Dean grinned, mirroring his pride. (That’s my Mate), his wolf smugged. “But I didn’t actually hate the coursework. I like the organization and logic. It’s not subjective – complicated maybe – but if you can just work out all the details correctly, you always get the same answer.” Michael was suddenly someone Dean wasn’t sure he knew yet, and it sent a thrill through him to know another of Michael’s complicated layers might be unfolding for him. The alpha’s eyes lit up, and he pressed his forehead against his mate’s.

“I’m yours, you know, Omega,” Dean whispered. “You do whatever makes you happy, and I’ll be right beside you the whole way. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“So?” Dean encouraged. “Would running the house make you happy?”

“You put him up to this? For me?”

“It was a mutual decision, but yeah, it was my idea. Should I have come to you about it first?”

“Yes, you should, but Dean…it’s not that I’m upset you didn’t ask me. It’s…I’m afraid I’ll screw it all up and embarrass us both. What if I fail?” Michael shifted on his feet and dropped a crap-ton of anxiety onto Dean through the bond.

“Not gonna happen. You’ll make mistakes, but then you’ll learn. You’re smart and logical. You can do this, baby. We’ll all help you. Don’t you just itch to be in charge of something besides me, something big?”

Michael let a slow smile spread onto his face as he imagined how important he would be to the Pack if he succeeded. “Is this to placate my wolf, Dean?”

Dean nodded, pursing his full lips into a thoughtful impromptu duck face. “To help feed your wolf,”
he clarified. “I promised you we’d give you everything you need in this Pack, and I meant it.”

Dean’s emotions were all confidence, smugness, and pride. Gone was his agony from two weeks prior. Michael hadn’t seen more than a miniscule glimpse of that angst since they’d taken up residence in the Guest house beneath the oak trees. Michael hadn’t forgotten, but his focus had been adeptly shifted to happier things. Michael pursed his lips, stared at his mate, then slowly nodded.

Dean took Michael’s hand and led him back out onto the porch. Michael returned to his seat again without meeting anyone’s glances. He took a bite of his cooled pasta and tried to suppress a growing smile by keeping his face low.

“Dean?” Cas attempted to find out if a decision had been reached without pressing the Omega. Dean grinned at his fiancé, but he just turned to the sideboard to begin serving pie without answering the Alpha. Cas smiled sadly at Dean’s back, happy to see his beloved so lighthearted and wishing it could last.

“Jesus, you people are weird,” Gabe decided. “Why is everyone smiling? Did I miss something?”

“I accept your offer, Alpha,” said Michael abruptly. “Is there a salary?”

“Yes, there is. We can negotiate an appropriate rate when we go over the job description. And Michael?” Cas waited until Michael looked up at him. “This is not a contract. If you find it’s not for you, you aren’t locked into it. You can quit at any time with no hard feelings.”

“I suspect that works the other way, too,” observed Gabriel. Dean cuffed him as he set a plate of cherry pie in front of the Omega. “WHAT? I’m just saying, if Michael sucks at the job, we’re not stuck with him, right?”

“That’s true,” Cas confirmed. He thanked Dean for the pie and smiled at Dean’s eye roll.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the perfectly flaky butter crust and the fresh summer cherries, then Castiel spoiled it all.

“I have a first assignment for you, Michael, if you’re feeling up to jumping into the deep end.” Michael looked up, so Cas broke the suspense. “I’d like you to plan an official Pack dinner for a week from tomorrow. I’ve invited my mother to dinner to meet you both.” Dean barely resisted spewing his cherries across the table, but Gabriel’s response was bigger. He stood so fast, his chair flew back against the wall of the house and dented the facing.

“What!? Why!? No way! Cas?” Gabriel spluttered.

Cas rounded the table to stand before his brother. He put a hand on Gabe’s arm and shushed him calmly. “Don’t worry, Gabe. It’s our house. She’s just a visitor. She has no power over any of us, and she’ll behave herself or she’ll find herself on her ass on the sidewalk outside the gate.”

“Can’t we just send a family photo?” asked Gabe. “Why does she have to come here?”

“Because she’s Pack, despite everything, and she needs to meet our new mates. Besides, it’s been a very long time since we’ve seen each other privately, and I’d like a chance to speak with her.”

“What are you planning?” Dean asked astutely, narrowing his green eyes.

“Nothing,” said Cas with an innocent face. Dean didn’t believe it for a second, and he checked April’s expression for confirmation. The Omega sat frozen with her wide eyes fixed on her mate.

“Mm-hm.” Dean took a bite, not remotely convinced. “You and me are going to have a talk before
this dinner party of yours, Alpha.” He shifted his focus to his own mate. “And be sure to put anchovies on the menu, Michael. Naomi loves anchovies.”

“Do I have to, Alpha?” April asked quietly.

“You’ll be fine, April,” Cas assured her. “She’s not the monster she’s made out to be. In person, and in private she’s much nicer than she seems on TV.”

He might’ve convinced his mate just a bit, except that Dean and Gabriel both choked at the same time and spewed red, chewed cherries in tandem.

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Michael threw himself into planning the dinner the very next day. He toured the house and picked out a large room overlooking the huge old oak tree in the back; a room that was at the other end of the house from the Alpha and that had its own bathroom and fireplace. Then, he and Castiel busied themselves.

They double-checked the attendees and realized that Michael’s father would need an invitation as he had planned to bring Michael’s belongings up that weekend. It was the week before Michael’s Keller test, and Michael started to panic, but Cas calmed Michael with a firm hand on his neck and a gentle word in his ear. Just as Naomi held no authority in this house, neither did Jerry Lancet. They would all be fine. The invitation would be issued, and Jerry would likely accept since Naomi had long been a personal hero of his, but Cas assured Michael that no one outside of their active Pack family had the power to disrupt the stability of the Pack.

They planned the menu, then Michael phoned several caterers to arrange for quotes and tastings and let Castiel show him the inner workings of their accounting system and how expenses were documented. Michael clutched the arm of his chair in shock when the numbers flashed across the screen in front of him. There were…a lot of digits.

“You trust me to manage this?” he asked the Alpha, sure suddenly that he’d misunderstood.

“I need you to manage the household, Michael. This dinner isn’t a big deal, organizationally, but it will allow me to show you how our budget is arranged, how to issue payment and keep the records, how to organize our business schedule and tie the personal Pack side to the business venture of Novak, Inc. It’s too complicated for me to try to do in addition to my job at The Facility. It’s a full time job in itself, and I trust that you can handle it. You’re a bright man.”

“But it’s so much money. What if I screw it up? How do you know you can trust me?”

“Are you planning to steal from the Pack?”

“Of course not!”

“Then don’t worry about it. Just use your best judgement. Please don’t purchase anything over $5000 without consulting me, and let me know what assistance you need.” Cas seemed utterly calm about the whole thing. Five thousand dollars?! Michael had never seen five grand in one place in his life before, and now he had the authority to blow it at his own discretion.

Cas broke his bubble in the next breath. “We’ll have an accounting meeting once a month to go over
the expenditures. If it looks like the household needs a higher budget allowance, I can raise it. With
the new members and more of us living in the house, I’ve already allocated more funds to the
monthly budget, but I’ll expect to have to tweak it a few times before we get it settled.” He just
seemed so confident that Michael could do this. “You’ll need a credit card and a checkbook in your
own name for the Pack account, but that shouldn’t take long to arrange. Do you have any
questions?”

“Why are you doing this, Sir? I’m an Omega and more than halfway down the rankings. Why give
this to me?”

“Because you are the best suited to the job, I think you’ll enjoy it, and I think you’ll be good at it.”

“But why not just leave it like it was? You’ve gone this long without a Pack Manager, why do you
need one now?”

Cas frowned and sat on the arm of a chair. “Our Pack is growing into something new. I want it to be
strong and self-sufficient. I also want you to have a fulfilling purpose outside of just being Dean’s
mate. That won’t be enough to satisfy you, my friend. I see you as someone who needs a purpose, a
goal in life beyond what Omegas are typically expected to achieve. Am I wrong about that?”

Michael didn’t know how to answer. He’d been a dick to Castiel from day one, only bending his
neck when the wolf scared the daylights out of him. Cas seemed to be offering him a new way to
relate to each other, one that was built on a business structure instead of just as rivals in a sexual tug-
of-war. “No, Sir. You’re not wrong.”

“You aren’t tied to the house, Michael. I would like to encourage you to pursue outside interests and
relationships, and if you ever feel stifled by these stupid grandiose walls, you can walk away and
find an outside job you enjoy.”

“I don’t like most people, Sir,” Michael admitted. It was true. Outside of locating a likely fuck and a
new Sub, he’d always avoided making friends. It was one of his father’s chief concerns about his
son. “I don’t think I’ll mind staying home, eh, staying in the house most of the time. It’s a nice
house.”

Cas put a hand on Michael’s shoulder and thumped it a couple of times. “I’ll leave you to dig around
in the spreadsheets. Find what you need and let me know if you have any questions.” Cas stood to
leave the large office he’d given Michael for his own. “Oh, and one more thing. I would like Dean in
my bed tonight and tomorrow both. Is that acceptable to you?”

Michael looked up in surprise, frustrated with his own startlement – the Alpha always seemed to
catch him off balance. He huffed and stuttered. “I, uh, yes, Sir. That’s okay. Um, will you be sceneing
with him?”

“That’s my plan, yes. If you authorize it, that is.” Cas had a distant, slightly alarming look in his eye.

“Oh, uh. Right.” Michael took a deep breath. “All right, Alpha. You have my permission.”

“Sir? Excuse me, do you have a minute?” April appeared in the doorway to Michael’s new office
quietly. She may have been there for a while. Michael didn’t know.

“I believe Michael and I are finished for the moment, Kitten.” Cas checked with Michael, who
nodded absently and turned back to the spreadsheets open before him. “What do you need?”

“It’s my audition piece, Alpha. Matt gave me three to choose from. He said all of them are
appropriate and challenging enough, but I have to pick one by our lesson time tomorrow. I don’t
know which to go with. Will you help me decide? Please?"

“I’d be happy to help.” Cas left one Omega to it and ushered the other to her conservatory. “Perhaps you could play a little from each one for me. I’m no musician though, April. I can’t give you any kind of expert opinion.”

“I’m not ready to play them for you yet, Sir. They aren’t prepared. I have recordings though. Will you listen to them and tell me which one you find the most engaging? I can’t pick.” April left him sitting on one of the sofas and began pushing buttons on his expensive sound system.

“I’m not going to pick for you,” he clarified. “You need to make the selection for yourself, but I’ll try to help you get there with what limited knowledge I can offer. This is your audition, April. It has to be your choice.”

“Please, Sir. I can’t choose. I can’t do this. Please, just listen to them.” She pushed play on the first before he could protest, so he closed his eyes and let the piano music fall over him like a warm blanket. His mate tucked herself under his arm, and he cinched her in silently. Each piece filled the room one by one and he had an instant favorite, but it wasn’t his opinion that mattered.

April used every trick she knew to connive him into choosing for her, and she was in tears with frustration in no time. “April, stop this!” he told her sternly as she wheedled another protest. “You are perfectly capable of deciding for yourself. This is your life, your work, not mine, and you need to step up and take responsibility for it. Let’s talk through them again. Tell me, for the first one, do you feel that it stretches your capabilities? Does it draw something emotional out of you when you hear it?”

“I CAN’T!” she cried. “You said you would help me! I can’t pick for myself. I’m just an Omega!”

The words echoed in the huge space, hanging pregnant in the silence that followed. Castiel ached for her. As confident as April could be in her own space within the Pack, at heart, she was a comfort-seeker who wanted to bury herself in responsible caregivers and float through life sure that someone else would always be there to make the hard choices for her. That would work fine for an Omega with a homesteading instinct. For an Omega, for any wolf, who was driven by talent and ambition to be something else, that instinct to bury herself beneath a blanket of abdication and let others direct her life was crippling. April needed more than a mate, a home, and pups. Like Michael, she needed a pursuit that was bigger, that fed something besides her biological mandates. Above being an Omega or a Sub, April was a person. Castiel couldn’t give in to the liquid blue eyes that begged him to take control. He kept his face hard, and he waited for her to make another statement. She needed to direct the next move, and he knew how badly she was struggling.

She set her jaw and stubbornly refused to acknowledge how close she was to the precipice. “Just forget it. Forget the whole thing.”

“Wrong answer. Try again, Omega. And that’s three marks on your board. One for arguing with me, one for putting yourself down as if being an Omega makes you incompetent, which it doesn’t, and another for your tone. Take a breath. Let go of your frustration. It’s not helping you. Perhaps if you’re having this much trouble deciding between the three options, that means they are similar enough in difficulty and presentation that it doesn’t matter. Just pick one.”

April buried her face in her hands, and Cas changed tack. “Sweetheart, this is just the first hard decision you’ll need to make along the way. I need you to dig deep and find the confidence I know is in there. I’ve heard you play. You’re a natural. Stop doubting yourself. You can do this.”

“I don’t want to go to this fucking school!” she wailed. “Nicholas even said it was a waste of time
and money. Please, just forget I said anything. I don’t want to do this, Alpha!”

Castiel’s face didn’t thaw. “You’re panicking right now, but you will be fine in the end. I’m not letting you out of the audition. You asked for it, and I had to pull some strings to get you in past the deadline. You’re committed, and you’re doing it. Now. Pick one.”

In the end, she picked randomly. It wasn’t the one Cas would have selected, but it had never been his choice anyway. Castiel spanked her to help her let the panic run its course through her body and give her a chance to Release, then he took her to the kitchen to add to her whiteboard tally, call her piano tutor with her selection, and have lunch before she needed to settle back in front of the keyboard to begin working.

Castiel also collected Michael and Gabe. The group threw sandwiches together in a sloppy mess that would have had Dean cringing and shooing them all out of his kitchen. Dean had run back to Sam’s house with the gardener’s pickup truck to collect the last of his belongings. Castiel had elected to work from home to help them get settled. He wasn’t getting much Facility work accomplished, but he felt good about being here for his Pack while they were in full transition.

Cas addressed the schedule as he ate. “April’s Ozzie class ends in a few weeks, and then her Pembrandt audition is about a month after that. Michael, will you please make sure all of her engagements make it into the calendar?” Michael nodded, his mouth too full to speak. “Also, your Keller test is still scheduled for June nineteenth. Ellen told me you asked to move it up, but she wasn’t able to change the schedule without upsetting everyone’s obligations elsewhere. Please make sure that you review your checklist before you arrive on that morning and get everything situated. Dean and I will be available to answer any questions you might have.”

Michael wondered if he should have brought a notepad and a pencil to lunch. Apparently, the Alpha didn’t believe in taking breaks.

“We’ll need to confirm with Dean that he’s arranged for your training classes to begin after the Keller test. I know you have an appointment with our psychiatrist, Dr. Barnes, for your evaluation. That’s on, um, the, uh twenty-first of June, I believe. It’s a Wednesday. It’ll take several hours to get through the whole thing, so please don’t schedule anything else for yourself on that day.”

“Yes, Alpha,” he mumbled around his bite. Michael had forgotten about the psych eval. Maybe he’d just assumed it was no longer necessary now that his Tertiary gender had been pegged. He didn’t feel quite as misaligned with his Omega now that he had an outlet for his Dom and had been given some acknowledgment that it wasn’t all in his head. Guess not. Looked like the evaluation was still a thing.

Great.

“Michael,” Cas started up again after swallowing a bite of his sandwich. (Geez, doesn’t the guy ever stop?) asked Michael’s scrawny wolf. “I need to be sure I understand the restrictions you’ve placed upon Dean while he’s working…sexually, I mean. What is he allowed, and what is he not?”

“Oh, right.” Michael straightened. “He’s allowed to punish just like before. He can demonstrate anything he needs to in his classes as long as the contact stays chaste. He’s not allowed any direct penetrative contact – either giving or receiving – and no one touches his penis. I realize this means that he’ll need an assistant in class and that he will be hampered because he can’t Claim or Dominate as he’s accustomed to. We’ve talked about it. As much as I regret the inconvenience, Sir, I really must insist.”

Castiel blinked at him, thinking. He knew where the new limits were arising from. If Dean wasn’t
allowed to fuck anyone at all, he couldn’t accidently impregnate a client now that he wasn’t protected. Dean’s activities in the Keller tests were heavily weighted to the submissive side, but there was always the occasional instance where his alpha wrangled a borderline Submissive into compliance and Dean Topped someone. There was never any way to know ahead of time which way it might go, and Dean was obviously playing it safe by acceding to Michael’s demand in order to keep accidents from happening.

Also, with the new restriction listed in his file formally, Dean would be reclassified through the medical guidelines as a non-participant in sexual activities, changing his turnstile entrance matrix from Class A to Class C. The kiosk sensors wouldn’t need to even scan his urine for birth control at all anymore. It was a brilliant plan to keep their subterfuge under wraps. They didn’t know the cat was already out of the bag. Cas was even impressed that they’d thought to try to move Michael’s Keller up to take advantage of the lingering hormonal birth control before it flushed out of the Omega’s body entirely. It hadn’t worked. Ellen didn’t know the reason for the request, so she hadn’t tried very hard to reschedule.

Castiel would quietly prepare the testers for the slight risk involved, wherein only one participant was protected, and would provide them with a ‘morning-after’ abortive if needed. It was wrong, and the Alpha knew he should just bust the plan wide open, but he couldn’t do it. He had to let Dean’s tantrum play out. He had to know where the love of his life was going to go with this plan of his before they got married. Dean was inching his way out onto the highest, thinnest, weakest branches of the tree again, preparing to let go, testing the Alpha’s resolve.

He had done it again and again over the years, and Castiel worried about what was going to happen if he decided not to catch the Submissive as he had always done in the past. How destructive was Dean capable of being? How much would he risk? When did Cas get a chance to test back for once? Was it possible to discern from a test like this if there was any way to make their marriage stable, or were they doomed to repeat the pattern again and again for their whole lives? Could Castiel survive it if they were? What if a test came along that he didn’t clue into in time to save Dean from his own destructive instincts? Where were those goddamned voices in Dean’s head coming from anyway? – the ones he put more faith in than he did into Castiel’s constant praise and reassurance? – the ones that tore Dean into scrap meat for the vultures to rip to shreds? The ones that convinced him that everyone he cared about would abandon him one day?

“All right, Michael,” Castiel said tiredly. “It’s your right as his Dominant mate. I’ll get the paperwork turned in to Human Resources and to Medical to change Dean’s classifications. We need to get busy hiring a replacement alpha-Sub to fill in the Keller matrix. It’s probably time we started pulling back anyway and focused on management instead of doing the work ourselves. We’ve grown too big for that. I suppose we may need to fill in with a new Contract scene worker or two as well. I know I don’t have time to pull more than two or three scenes a month on that wing anymore. It’s time to step out and let some new blood take over.”

“I agree, Alpha,” Michael confirmed, and Cas had to close his eyes to keep from smacking the trouble maker upside his head. When this was all over and the dust had cleared, Michael Quentin had better be damned grateful for all the sacrifices Cas was making for the presumptuous upstart.
Sam was at a complete loss. Mated life in the younger Winchester’s house wasn’t going like he’d expected. His mate confused the fuck out of Sam. She was outwardly everything a Submissive beta ought to be. She did things for him, responded to him, made love to him sweetly and otherwise. She could be filthy or gentle, and she could take a hit like the strongest Omega. She worked long hours and came home tired and cranky, but she only got crankier if he tried to soothe her tired feet or serve her a warmed-over meal.

The Mating-bond only made things worse for Sam, not better. He tried everything he could think of to make her happy, but her emotions made no sense to him at all. When she snapped at him for driving to work and leaving the lunch she’d packed behind by accident, he’d apologized sincerely and moved in for a hug, only to have her stiffen in his arms. The bond showed him a confusing mix of frustration, anger, and…hurt? Why would a hug cause her pain? She loved him fiercely. He could feel it. The love was there, and it was real, but when he asked her what was wrong, she slammed the bond closed and refused to talk to him for hours. Sam was starting to spend more nights in the spare bedroom than he did with his mate, and he didn’t know what to do about it. What was he doing wrong?

“Jess, seriously. Tell me what the fuck you want from me. I don’t understand why you’re upset.”

“I’m not remotely upset, Samuel. Would my mate prefer swiss or cheddar on his sandwich today?”

“Forget the fucking sandwich. I can eat in the cafeteria. Please, just tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong!” she snapped again, obviously at the end of her rope. “If you don’t want the lunch, then don’t fucking eat it! I’ve got to get to work.” She was gone before the sound of her voice fully dissipated from the house, leaving Sam gaping, wondering if the drywall could withstand him pounding his head into it again and again until he knocked some answers out.

Sam needed help. He needed someone he could trust who had a good handle on submissives and a willing ear, someone who could help him untangle Jess’ confusing reactions and tell him what to do. Sam put the half-finished sandwich together, stuck it in a lunchbox and left for work with a wrinkled brow and his lower lip caught between his teeth. He’d tried spanking his mate as a consequence of her irrational behavior, but his carefully methodical process made her even more angry, and she’d ended up in a worse place than she started.

Sam had options. He had all the leading experts in Lupin Submissives at his fingertips, but didn’t he owe his mate some discretion? He wanted to call his big brother. That was Sam’s first impulse, but then he had second thoughts. Dean, as a brat and a Submissive himself, as well as a fellow Pack member, was maybe not the best person to go to if Sam wanted to preserve Jessica’s privacy. Not that Dean would talk about it with anyone else, but…well, actually, Sam was sure Dean would share with Michael, and Sam wanted Michael nowhere near his problems with Jess.

Cas.

The Winchester Pack Alpha would know what to do. As the leader of the Pack, he would insist on knowing about it anyway. Sam had never really confided much in Castiel before this. They worked well together, and through Dean, they had become friends, but not confidants. This was going to be all kinds of awkward.

Sam drove to work as he had done every day for the past two weeks, feeling the pull to turn back around, kidnap his mate, drag her to a secluded place, and drive his cock into her until she screamed and passed out. He pulled to a stop for a red light and rubbed his face. He’d retracted his request for time off almost as soon as he submitted it to HR. If Jess was working, there was no point in Sam staying home alone. The light turned green, and Sam continued forward with no emotion at all. Just
When Sam arrived at work and learned that Cas had called in his plan to work from home, Sam felt the remaining strength melt out of him. He secured his lunch in his desk drawer and logged onto his computer with a drawn face, checking his calendar and feeling that all the light had drained from the room. Why was his mate so unhappy with him? She denied it time and again, but he could feel it. They had moments – quite a few of them in fact – where they connected happily, and he felt her affection and pride flow to him and embrace him without his even having to try. It usually happened while they were scening. It was real. He knew that she was his soulmate, and he loved her with his whole self, but he just couldn’t understand why the more he tried to give her kind, firm structure and a loving, consistent hand, she turned more and more resentful and sour.

“Sam? Is anyone sitting here?” Pamela stood over him in the cafeteria with a lunch tray in her hand. He put down his sandwich and invited her to sit with a gesture. “That looks like a home-packed lunch. Someone’s taking care of her new mate, I see. I’m glad. How are things going at home? Do you mind?”

Sam sighed. He didn’t know if he should tell Pam his problems or pretend everything was fine. He knew he didn’t look fine, and as a freshly-Mated Lupin, his stress level made no sense. She’d probably picked up on his scent and singled him out deliberately.

She laughed into her meal. “That good, huh? You want to talk about it? I’m free for the next hour or two. I don’t charge much, and I’m fairly good at keeping a secret.”

“I don’t know, Pam. I appreciate it, but I think I need to plug away at this one myself. It’s kind of personal.”

“Everything’s personal, Sam. That’s why I’m here. You know it’s none of my business unless something starts eating at you that you can’t keep out of your swinging-arm. Then it becomes all sorts of my business. What do you say? Nothing to lose, you know. I can either help, or not, but either way, you won’t be worse off than you are right now. You know how confidentiality works. I keep records of how many staff members I talk to in a month, but even the owners don’t get to know who or what we talk about.” She ate as if she didn’t care either way.

“If it’s just…” He decided she was right. He had nothing to lose. “Everything I do for Jess seems to make her mad, and I can’t figure out why. I’ve tried everything, but she just gets angrier and angrier, and now she seems to be hurt on top of being pissed off, like I’m doing something wrong on purpose.”

“Give me an example, Sam. When you say you’ve tried everything…tell me about something that happened, just like you remember it.”

“Okay, so like the other day, we were watching television, and everything seemed fine. I was holding her. I pulled a blanket over us to keep her warm because I could tell she was getting chilly and she snuggled right down into me, and it was sweet, you know? But then she started to seem a little annoyed for no reason. I asked her if she wanted to watch something else. Did she want to do something else, go somewhere? Was she bored? Was she behind at work? She said no to everything. Said she was just fine and nothing was wrong. Denied feeling what I know she was feeling. Finally, I confronted her with it. I told her I knew she was lying to me and that if she didn’t come clean I would have no choice but to punish her for the dishonesty and that I still wanted to know the truth. You know what happened?”

Pam shook her head and kept eating, keeping her face impassive as Sam spilled his frustration on
“She still insisted there was nothing wrong and said that if I couldn’t handle a simple thing like watching TV together without losing my shit, that maybe we should just spend less time together! Pam, she was so hurt, I thought she was going to start crying right then. I had committed to it, so I had no choice but to spank her. I kept it really businesslike so I didn’t accidently overdo it, but Jesus, I can’t keep this up. After it was all over, she was so pissed at me and hurt at the same time, she just went into the bedroom and locked the door. I am so confused. She’s a Sub, isn’t she? Is there a chance the test was wrong? Maybe the True-Mate Trigger went screwy and we’re not supposed to be mates at all.”

“Hmm. Sam, I don’t know Jess. Would it be all right if I reviewed her Keller report? I’ve never known the test to come out wrong if it’s administered correctly, but I’d like to see it for myself to be sure.”

Sam felt a great weight fall away from his shoulders. He’d expected Pam to laugh at him in her gentle way and tell him that it was all in his head; that even True-Mates needed some time to adjust. She seemed to believe him when he told her something was off though, and just that reassurance made him feel much better.

“You have to get permission from Cas, not me,” he reminded her. “Would Jess have to know you’re digging into her personal files?”

“No if the Pack Alpha signs off. But the other thing you can do is ask Castiel to review the file himself. He’ll spot anything in there if it’s wrong better than I would anyway.” Pamela fixed a sharp eye on Sam. “I’m sure you mean to speak to your Pack Alpha about this, too. Right, Sam?”

Sam nodded. “He’s not onsite today, or I would’ve talked to him already. Pam, do you have any idea what might be eating Jess? I love her so much, and it tears me up that she’s unhappy. I need to know what I’m doing wrong.”

“I have a couple of ideas, but I can’t be sure without some more information. Hang in there Sam. Keep trying to talk to her. One bit of advice I can give you is go with your gut. You’re being very, very careful, and that’s probably a good thing, but is that what your wolf wants you to do? What does your instinct say?”

Sam ran a hand through his hair and closed his eyes. “I don’t even know anymore, Pam. I’m so turned around. I thought I was the expert on Subs after all the training and experience, after spending so much time keeping Dean balanced when we were younger. I thought I’d seen it all, but I’ve never seen a Dominant Submissive before, and I don’t know what to do. Why won’t she just tell me?”

“You know,” Pam looked pensive. “Not all brats are the same. Maybe this is just a type of brat you’ve not seen before and you have to figure out what kind of response she’s trying to pull from you. You say you’ve tried everything, but have you really?”

“Beats the fuck out of me. I’m not going to beat her, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“No, I’m not suggesting that you beat her, but maybe a little less careful on the presentation. Maybe show her your wolf means business. She’s not your client, Sam. You’re not risking a lawsuit, so try going with a little less business and a little more heart. I don’t know. What do you think?”

“I think I need to talk to Cas before I screw this up too badly to fix.”

“There. Now that sounds like a good idea, too. Hang in there, Sam. These things have a way of
working out eventually as long as you don’t give up.”

Sam crumpled the waxed paper that he’d wrapped his sandwich in and stood to get something more from the lunch line, nodding absentmindedly to Pam. “Thanks Doc. It’s good to have you home.” She nodded.

One sandwich, even one made with grace and love, wasn’t enough to feed a moose in wolf’s clothing. Pam had been right; at least he wasn’t worse off. Could she be on to something? Should he just let go of his control and do what the wolf wanted him to do? Sam’s wolf had been dying to shake Jessica by the scruff of her neck, abandon the punishment formula that Sam had been trained to use in The Facility, the one that kept everything unemotional from the E.O.’s side, shout at her until she winced, and nail her ass to the wall. The wolf had had enough. That’s not what Sam wanted though. He wanted to pet his mate with a gentle hand and caress her silky skin. The question was, what did Jess want? What did she need?

“Oh, hey, Sam!” Garth sidled up beside him in the lunch line. “Bess wanted me to invite you guys over. She missed the big do at your house when you introduced Jess.”

“That’d be great, Garth.”

“And, congrats, my friend. I think you’re gonna find it’s a ride like nothing you’ve ever seen before. I’ll pick a date, and Bess will make her signature chicken enchiladas. Deal?”

“Thanks, man. Sounds perfect. Just tell us what to bring, and we’re there.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope this made sense. Sometimes, I just kinda get a bad feeling about how a chapter is going to feel to me later, even when it seems fine when I post it. Tell me what you think. I’m all ears, as always.

Be well. Enjoy your summer.
Chapter Summary

There's a chat with Sam about Jess. There's a chat with April about what Cas likes, and also, there's a night with candles and rose petals.

Chapter Notes

It's late. I'm usually in bed by now. What's up with that. Thanks for the great feedback on last week's chapters. I love it.

Be aware that this chapter has some self-esteem mentions. If you've made it this far, you already know where our alpha is heading, so the warning is probably not necessary, but it's there anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN:

Castiel pulled up beside the single story red brick suburban home and put his car in park. Before he could begin an explanation, Jeremy sat up straighter in the passenger seat, looking decidedly shocked.

“Here?!? But this is only two blocks from my house!”

“Correct.” Cas unbuckled his seatbelt but didn’t turn the car off or open the door. He turned to Jeremy. “Alpha Caruthers is forty-five years old and a widow. She’s been through our rigorous scene-worker training program, and she’s been helping unmated Omegas just like you stay balanced for more than five years now. She has my trust. I believe, Jeremy, that she’ll earn yours as well. The fact that she lives within walking distance of your parents’ home is pure lucky happenstance, but that did play a role in my decision to place you in her care.”

Jeremy looked out the window at the small house with its neatly kept yard and handsome landscaping. “So, how does this work?” he asked the Alpha.

Cas didn’t answer the question. He knew that Maureen would do that very soon, and Jeremy already knew the basics. Instead, he took the chance to give Jeremy something his parents should have been giving the boy all along. “I’ve never told you just how much I respect the difficult decision you made to enter our doors three months ago – against your parents’ wishes, and lost in your Heat. That took real bravery, Jeremy. I admire you for taking control of your life the way you did.”

“But then I lost control of my life,” he said wistfully. “Now I’m a ward of some lady I don’t know.”

“You don’t know her yet, but give her a chance. She’s actually very kind, smart,…very witty. She
has a dry sense of humor like yours. And if you find it a bad fit, we’ll try someone else. The beauty of this arrangement is that it allows you to continue living at home with your folks while having an alpha close by when you need one. She’ll be watching out for you, checking up on you, but the two of you needn’t become best friends. Think of her as a health-maintenance worker if that makes the custodial part easier to swallow.” Cas let Jeremy process for a minute.

“You can finish high school with your friends and no one needs to know you have an alpha if you don’t want to tell them.”

“Have you cleared this with my mom?” Jeremy asked. He hadn’t even tried to contact his parents since he left them screaming at him in the doorway; screaming to get back in the house while he had all that disgusting shit leaking out his rear end. Even in Heat, Jeremy had been mortified. He needed help, and all they cared about was how it looked to the neighbors that he was stumbling mostly naked down the sidewalk in the bitter cold, clutching his abdomen and groaning in agony.

“I’ve been keeping your parents up-to-date on your progress and what kind of care you would need once you finished the program. They weren’t receptive at first, but they’ve made a great deal of progress over the last few weeks. After you get a chance to meet alpha Caruthers, I’m going to drive you home for good – that is, as long as you still want to go home. If you prefer, you can stay here with Maureen. She’s housed Omegas before when their home life was less than ideal.”

“I want to see my folks.” Jeremy wasn’t looking at Cas. He was still staring at the house. Cas could see the strong set of his jaw though. He hadn’t been lying to the boy. Leaving home and security the way he did must’ve been a terrible choice to have to make, and then returning couldn’t be any easier. Jeremy was Omega though, and that meant he was a survivor.

“All right, then. This first. Shall we?” Cas cracked his door open and stepped out into the June heat. He made it to the other side of the car before Jeremy followed suit. With slow, reluctant steps, the Omega followed the Alpha he’d grown to like and trust up the sidewalk to a painted blue door with flowering plants set on either side. It was pretty. Cas rang the doorbell, and it was opened almost immediately by a middle-aged alpha in blue jeans. She was thin and plain, but she had kindness in her eyes as she welcomed them in.

“Alpha! It’s so good to see you again. Please come in. This must be Jeremy!”

“Hello, Maureen. Thank you. Yes, this is Jeremy Lister. His family lives only a couple of streets from yours. I appreciate your willingness to help us. Jeremy’s parents are Primate, and so he’s in need of an alpha.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Hello, Jeremy. It’s nice to meet you.” She extended her hand in welcome.

Jeremy kept his eyes downcast, but he shook her hand firmly. “It’s nice to meet you, alpha. Thank you for helping me.” He was very nervous. This was the woman who’d been selected to Release him and fuck him through his Heats? She didn’t seem very alpha-like to Jeremy.

“You have lovely manners, dear. Oh, and feel free to look at me in my home. If we go out somewhere, I may ask you to defer like that, but when we’re here, it’s my home, my rules. I don’t stand much on ceremony in my own house, so please be comfortable. You can take your shoes off if you like. I find most Omegas find shoes very confining.” She chattered away cheerily as she set Castiel up with a cup of tea at her kitchen table and offered him freshly baked scones. The smell made Jeremy’s mouth water. “And what would you prefer to drink, Jeremy? In the future, once you know your way around the house and the kitchen, you’ll serve yourself. But for today, let me.”

“Um, just water, I guess.” She nodded and filled him a glass from the tap, set it front of him next to
Cas and took a seat on the opposite side, filling a cup from the teapot for herself and taking a scone.

“Help yurself,” she mumbled with her mouth full. Jeremy decided not to try to eat anything while his nerves were jangling so badly. He shook his head, still not meeting her eye, and sipped his water just to have something to do with his hands. She shrugged and turned to Cas. “The custody papers haven’t come through yet, but they should be finalized any day now. We’ve got some overlap, I assume?”

“We do,” Cas confirmed, placing a calming hand on the Omega’s neck and squeezing a little bit. Jeremy stiffened then relaxed into the touch. “My custody stays in effect until yours takes over. They are both written that way, and I’ve listed you on my papers as an official interim custodian, so however you look at it, he’s covered.”

Maureen Caruthers nodded. She regarded the scared wolf pup across her table. He looked moments away from flight. “Jeremy. Look at me, Omega.” Her voice had gone from nonchalant to commanding in an instant, and Jeremy responded before he even had a chance to think about it. He looked into her grey eyes tentatively. She locked hers on him. “I don’t have very many rules in my home. Don’t ever lie to me. Tell me what you need and what you want. Tell me if I hurt you, even unintentionally.” She thought about that, and then changed her mind about the wording, shaking her head. “Strike that. I’ll never hurt you on purpose, so just please tell me if I hurt you.

“Don’t hide yourself from me. I’m here to help you, not direct your life. As long as you understand that, we’ll get along just fine. I want you to think of my house as your home. I’m not your mother though, so if you’re hungry, cook something and eat it. If you are here at a mealtime, you are always welcome to share what I’m eating. You may sleep here any time you want to. Make free use of the shower and the facilities, but clean up after yourself. I’m not your maid either. If you break something, fix it or tell me about it. You see where I’m going with this?”

He nodded. She was offering him sanctuary – not that he needed it, but he hadn’t been home yet. What if they kicked him out? “Will…will you have to spank me and stuff?”

She thought about how to answer him, biting her lip, uncomfortable that he was so uncomfortable. Castiel had warned her that the pup had grown up in a Simian household and was still having trouble with aspects of being a wolf that other wolves took completely for granted. “You know what you need better than I do at this point. I fully expect to include spanking in one form or another to be a part of our strategy to keep you Balanced, but I’m always open to alternatives if they work. You are free to seek Release from your own parents in their house or to find someone else whom you trust. Of course, as your alpha, I reserve the right to meet and get a chance to approve anyone you choose to scene with or take punishment from other than your own parents. Are we clear?”

“Y…yes, ma’am,” he stuttered, his face flushing and his heart rate kicking up. “Um, if I may ask, how often would I be coming here?”

“As often as you want or need to. What’s your Release schedule?” She spoke calmly and assertively, but the air of kindness stayed a solid vein through her tone. Jeremy found himself relaxing a little bit. “I’m, uh, that is, every three weeks?” He faltered and looked to Castiel for confirmation. Cas nodded. Jeremy looked back at alpha Caruthers and found it wasn’t quite so difficult to look her in the eyes. He sipped his water again.

“Well, then, we’ll be seeing each other at least once every three weeks, won’t we?” she chuckled. “But I really want you here more often than that. We need to try out some different scening techniques. I don’t want to try to wait until you go into Heat to figure out what you respond to either. I’ll be assigning you some exercises to do at home, and I’ll want you to report regularly to me about
how they’re going. How about we start with a couple of visits a week and go from there? But, Jeremy, you are always welcome here, even if it’s the middle of the night. I’m going to give you a key. Just let yourself in. Don’t let Morris out though. He’s a dick on four paws and he’ll start fights that wake up the whole neighborhood.”

“You have a cat?” Jeremy looked around the room and spotted a flat tray filled with litter inside the laundry room off the kitchen.

“Actually, he has me,” she laughed. Cas chuckled. “The bastard just moved right in on me without so much as a ‘how-do-you-do?’ and he’s been here ever since.” She finally finished her scone, watching Jeremy eye the last bite disappearing into her mouth, and she smirked as she nudged the plate toward him. “Don’t go hungry in my house, Omega. If you do, it’s on you, not me.”

Jeremy sheepishly took one, and pulled a napkin off the stack in the center to serve as a plate as Castiel had done. She glowed at him. Normally, Jeremy would have been annoyed or embarrassed at being praised for accepting a snack. He would have seen it as patronizing, but he found himself smiling shyly back at her.

“Here’s my contact information.” She slid a card across the table to him. “Put it in your phone immediately so you can’t lose it.” She waited with her brows raised until he clued in and pulled his phone out to add her information. “Call me absolutely any time day or night about anything whatsoever. I’m your legal custodian, so you can call me up to school to speak for you if you want. I can bail you out of jail and sign your class permission slips.” Those two last things seemed such a strangely juxtaposed pair that Jeremy laughed.

“Now, I know it’s a lot, and I don’t want you pressured too much today. Alpha has let me in on your family situation already, and I know you’re going home next. I won’t keep you. I expect you here at 8:30 am on Tuesday though. If the door’s unlocked, just come on in. Don’t make me answer the bell unless I forget to unlock it for you. I’ll have a key ready for you by then, and after that, just come straight in. Put whatever bags or backpacks you have on the entryway table, and then come in and check for notes right here on the table. You’re my only ward at the moment, so if you see a note, it’s for you. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So beautifully polite. We’re going to get along just fine, Jeremy. What time will you be here?”

“8:25 on Tuesday morning, alpha,” he cheeked, testing how much give she had.

“That’s my boy.” She escorted them to the front door but didn’t touch the Omega at all. Jeremy was surprised to find that he was disappointed not to have a touch from her. Maybe he should offer to shake her hand again.

Cas thanked her for the refreshments and for her help with the Omega. Her eyes turned serious as she looked at him, and she nodded. Cas felt good about Jeremy. He was young, innocent, and vulnerable, but the Universe had been watching out for this one, and they’d been able to sweep him up into their protective circle where they could keep him safe and help him flourish. Maureen knew what this victory meant to Cas. It meant the same to her.

“Are you ready to go home, Omega?” Castiel asked him as they got into the car. Jeremy felt stronger suddenly than he had felt in months.

“I’m ready, Alpha. They can say whatever they like, but I don’t have to take it. Will you stay with me for a few minutes, so I can try to talk to my folks? Then if they don’t want me as I am now, you
could maybe just bring me back here.”

“I will bring you back if you ask me to, Jeremy, but I don’t believe you’ll have to choose. I’ll help you state your needs to your parents if you need my help. If not, I’ll let you handle it, but I won’t leave until you tell me you’re ready for me to go. And if I sense any danger for you there, you’re not staying even if you want to. Do you understand?”

“Thank you, Alpha.” Jeremy launched himself across the seat to hug Cas hard, awkwardly holding onto him from the strange position mandated by their bucket seats. Cas hugged him back and kissed the top of his head.

“You’re welcome.”

NOW:

The last two days before Dean returned to work were notable in the amount of personal shuffling involved. Friday afternoon, Dean pulled into the gravel driveway in the gardener’s beat-up truck with a little bit of random furniture and a chest full of his garage tools. It didn’t take up much space in the truck. “I thought there’d be more to bring,” he admitted, dropping the tailgate. “I never realized that this is all there is to me after almost thirty years.”

Cas kissed his forehead and murmured a quiet disagreement that no one else heard before taking one end of a heavy bedside table that Dean had built himself and working it carefully out of the truck bed.

Once all of Dean’s belongings had been re-homed, they pulled together a light meal and relaxed in the pool as Friday afternoon waned hot and sticky. Sam stopped by without his mate and asked to speak to Castiel alone. He looked worn and tired, as if he hadn’t slept, but unlike most newly-Mated wolves, it didn’t sit well on his countenance. Sam was troubled. Dean slipped out of the pool, grabbed a towel, and followed his brother and his Alpha to Cas’ office, letting himself in without knocking.

“…so angry all the time. Angry at me, but I don’t know why.” Sam acknowledged his brother and let Dean in without protest.

“Who, Jess?” Dean tried to catch up quickly. Sam nodded. Dean continued to dry himself off, and he offered Sam his opinion. “Dude, you Mated a Sicilian. It comes with the territory.”

“What? Jessica’s not Sicilian. Dean, her name’s Moore. That’s English or Welsh or something.”

“I beg to differ, Sammy. Didn’t you ever meet her dad? He’s not the Top in that family, but he’s a spitfire like you wouldn’t believe. God, how do I know this and you don’t? Have you shouted her down yet?”

“Of course not. I don’t want to shout at her, man. I love her, and I just want her to be happy. Why would I want to fight with her?”

“I think Dean’s onto something, Sam,” Castiel added. “If she’s a Sub and a brat, she may be goading you for a response.”

“Well, it’s not working. I’ve responded plenty of times, and it only makes her madder.”
“Sicilian…” Dean reminded him.

“What?”

Cas put a hand up to Dean to prevent him from just cranking Sam’s chain. “Sam, you’ve been trained to handle Subs in an institutional environment. It’s critical that you keep your emotions out of your work because the other party involved is often out of control emotionally and you need to stay objective to watch over them. That style of punishment suits you well. It’s a comfortable place for you to work from, and it makes you ideal in your job.” Cas looked at Dean. “I think Dean’s trying to tell you that your mate isn’t suited to the same approach. She wants your anger and your fury. Her Submissive wolf, for whatever reason, needs to see you get emotional. I believe she’s looking for you to get riled. Do you think you can do that for her?”

“I talked to Pam at work about it. She wants to review Jess’ Keller report in case something got scored wrong. Maybe she’s not really a Sub at all.”

“Pam’s back?” Dean asked. “When did they get back from Dallas?”

“Yes, she’s back. Dean, please don’t change the subject. We’re scheduled for a debrief on Monday.” Cas turned to Sam with a frown. “I’ve already reviewed Jessica’s report, Sam. I didn’t see anything that seemed questionable. I don’t think it’s a bad test score.” He paused, unsure how to ask Sam the next question.

“Can you tell me honestly, definitively, that you believe you and Jessica are True-Mates?”

“What? Of course we are. How else could that Mating have happened? I wasn’t out trolling for mates or old girlfriends that day. She’d changed so much, I didn’t even recognize her at first. I didn’t know she’d moved back to town. How else do you explain what happened?”

“I’m not sure, and I’m not challenging you or your right to mate whom you will. Maybe your nose scented her and communicated with your wolf without your front-brain catching on. I know that when I watch it play out, I see very little that looks like classic True-Mate response from either of you.” Cas chewed the inside of his cheek in thought. He took a jacket from the coat rack by the door and draped it over Dean’s shivering shoulders. “I’ve watched the security footage from the store and the videos posted publicly, and I can’t honestly say that it looks like a Triggered Mating to me. Not that it matters in the end. Sam, you love Jessica, and she loves you. Of that I have no doubt. I’ve observed you both carefully when you’re together, and there’s a real connection between you that you can build on. But if you aren’t True-Mates, then you lose the luxury of having predispositions that align effortlessly. That’s all that you lose. The rest, you can build with her through hard work and effort.”

Sam sat down heavily on the couch. “How could we not be? I didn’t even…” He trailed off.

Dean put an arm over his shoulders. “Relax, Sammy. It doesn’t matter. Here’s all you need to know about Sicilians. The Bottoms are as tough as the Tops, and they want their Tops to acknowledge that strength by testing it. If you act all sweet and unemotional when you call her down, it makes her think that you see her as too weak to handle you at your full strength. Do you think she’s weak, Sam?”

“Jesus! Of course not! She’s the strongest woman I’ve ever met!”

“Then show her you know that, and don’t treat her like you’re gonna break her if you look sideways at her. Yell at her. Fight with her. Spank her like you mean it. Put her in her fucking place! Don’t tell me you don’t want to. Man, I remember some of those fights you two used to have when you were
kids. There was nothing wrong with your lungs back then. The damned walls would shake, and then
the shouting would stop, and the walls would shake for a whole different reason. Christ, sometimes
Dad and I had to leave the fucking house.”

Sam turned beet red. “You knew about all that?”

“Knew about it? Sam, we couldn’t have avoided it if we tried. And we tried.” Dean pulled Cas’
coat tighter around himself. He spoke calmly but with firmness, coaching his baby brother through
the hard stuff. “Don’t baby her when she’s tired. Ask her what she wants, but if she doesn’t give you
a good answer, you just blow her off, get it? Don’t ever apologize to her unless you are absolutely
sure you did wrong. Don’t explain your decisions unless you have to. You don’t have to give her a
choice a lot of the time. Just tell her what to do and make her do it. Give in to her demands on
occasion when there’s nothing important riding, but say no just for the hell of it often enough to
remind her you can. And don’t give in. Practice saying ‘Because I said so’ in the mirror. Let your
wolf out, man. I’ve seen what he’s like. You two may be better aligned than you think, but you have
to step up and dominate her for real. Do you think you can do that, Sam? For your mate? If it’s what
she needs from you?”

Sam rubbed his face. “It doesn’t feel right. It feels like pouring gasoline on a fire. I don’t want to turn
every minute of every day into a D/s scene. I don’t enjoy where my wolf takes me when I let him
out. Why does she get what she wants, but I have to change?”

“Because you’re a Top, Sam.” Castiel’s face was serious. “You are responsible to provide what the
Bottom needs. It’s her needs above yours. It’s always going to be that way. The question is, does it
put too much of a strain on you? Does it break who you are?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been…holding my wolf back really hard these last few days. I thought it was the
right thing to do, but maybe I should just let him go. I’d forgotten about all the fighting we used to
do. In my memory, she was just sweet and beautiful…gentle.”

Dean blew out a rude breath. “Gentle?!? That one?!?! That’s some memory block you developed,
Sam.”

“And if we’re not True-Mates? Cas, did I assault her? Did I Mate her against her will?” Sam ignored
Dean’s jibes.

“I believe the decision was mutual. There was an audible, if vague, question and a verbal consent.
It’s all we have to go on now, but it looked mutual to me. Don’t worry Sam. You and Jess may take
time to grow into each other, but the love is there, and respect, and a shared history. You’re not a bad
match at all. You just need to take the time to get to know what she needs and what she responds to.
I don’t know Sicilians, and Dean may very well be full of shit.”

“Hey!”

“But it’s a direction you haven’t tried yet, and if it’s what your wolf wants to do, then by all means,
give it a try. Move the breakables to a safe location first, please. And I appreciate you bringing this to
me. I want to hear how your progress is coming along.” Cas paused, watching Sam process the
Alpha’s advice. “Sam, have you read Jessica’s Keller report? You’re entitled to access as her
Dominant mate.”

“Not yet.” Sam spoke in a distracted voice then clued in to Castiel’s serious tone and his focus
sharpened. “Why? Is there something in it that I’m missing?”

“I don’t know what she’s told you, but you need to know what’s in the report. I suggest you talk to
your mate and read the report both. I have a copy here that you may borrow. I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that it’s confidential. You can share its contents with your mate and talk it over with her. Please return it to me when you’ve finished and don’t make any copies.” Cas dug a folder out of one of his files and handed it to Sam. Sam stared at the folder like it was a snake about to strike.

“What’s it say?”

“Just take it home and talk it over with Jessica. She already knows what’s in there, I assume, but I’m guessing you two haven’t talked as much as you need to yet.” Cas opened the office door and held it for Sam. Sam muttered under his breath, lost in thought, and then was gone as abruptly as he arrived, the folder clutched in his hand.

Cas embraced his fiancé in the office doorway and kissed his lips which were turning blue with the air-conditioned house chilling his damp naked skin. “You’re with me tonight, Dean.” He kissed him again. Dean let his cold body seek warmth from the strong wolf before him and kissed him back. “And tomorrow night as well.”

Dean hummed in pleasure. As much as he loved his mate, two straight nights in Castiel’s hands would be a welcome change. “Your bruises raise an interesting challenge though. I can’t strike you…anywhere, it seems without risking overtaxing your vein structure. I suspect that was intentional on someone’s part, but I’m not naming names.” Cas held Dean at arms’ length and turned him for inspection. Michael had been thorough in his coverage, but Cas knew Dean had probably begged for it. Cas loved it when Dean begged. He had to believe Michael did too. “Not to worry. I have other ideas. We have a whole toybox of ideas.”

“Where are you gonna leave April for two nights?” Dean wrapped his arms around Castiel’s waist and scruffed his five o’clock shadow along Cas’ sensitive throat.

“She’s got her own bed now. Her room is adjacent to the master. It may be an adjustment for her to get used to sleeping alone again sometimes, but we’ve talked about it, and she’s fine.”

The TV kept the pack up to date on the rumors and social buzz about their impending nuptials and both recent Matings. The Simian side of the mass media gluttons seemed to love any type of drama and weirdness the famous Lupins threw out, but it was the Lupin reactions the Winchesters cared most about. Not that they cared. But they so did. Of course they did. April and Dean in particular stayed abreast of the buzz by checking Twitter and magazine covers incessantly. They sat together on the couch before dinner and caught up. Well, April sat. Dean lay out on his hip, the least damaged part of his lower half.

The community seemed fairly evenly split between those who felt that adding an Ape-like marriage on top of traditional wolf Mating-bonds was a recipe for disaster, and those who went starry-eyed over the love story that almost hadn’t been and felt that the two alphas’ bravery in the face of all odds spoke as justification in itself.

Wedding gifts from random strangers had begun to trickle in through the delivery route Billie had set up years ago to receive random gifts from fans. Dean opened the newest arrivals that Billie forwarded to them as the television program continued. He picked through them and marveled at the artistry, at the time, money, and creativity people who didn’t know him had invested to wish him
April caught him with a sad expression as he inspected a sculpted ceramic Dean and Cas wedding cake topper. She met his eye with a curious look, and he masked his face immediately, turning the figure to point out to her that she and Michael were both represented as well, to the side and gracefully naked on their knees. April giggled when she noticed the extent to which Michael had been ‘gifted’ by the artist and let Dean bury his sadness without comment. Castiel had told her she couldn’t help, at least not directly, but she couldn’t just sit back and watch all her hard work unravel either.

“If the sculptor had made his dick any bigger, she’d have had to give him a knot,” April observed, taking the piece from Dean and rubbing a finger over Michael’s embellishment.

“Paws off the merchandise, kid.” Dean swiped it back. He looked at it longingly for another moment then rewrapped it in paper and put it back in the box. “Come on, let’s go make dinner.” He dragged her into the kitchen and set her up with a cutting board and some veggies.

“Are you going to be okay on your own for a couple of nights?” Dean asked airily with his back to her across the kitchen, each working on their own.

“I’m fine, Dean. I told you, I want you and Alpha to have plenty of time together. It’s not going to bother me.” She swept her pile of celery into a bowl and set it next to the skillet he had heating.

“You say that, but nights can get long and lonely once you’re accustomed to having a warm body next to you and then it’s not there.” Dean caught her by the chin before she crossed back to set to work on the bell peppers. He kissed the tip of her nose. “You know where Michael’s sleeping. If it gets to be too much, just climb in with him, okay? He won’t mind as long as you don’t wake him up or kick in your sleep.”

April frowned at him, confused. “Dean, that’s not…a good idea at all. What will Alpha think? What if he thinks we’re…?”

Dean held her face and looked deeply, meaningfully into her eyes. “If he hasn’t made a rule against it, he can’t complain. He’ll know you two aren’t having sex. That would come right through the Mating-bond. Besides…” Dean let her chin go and turned to stir the celery in on top of the diced onions and butter in his skillet. “Cas needs to have a challenge against his authority every now and then. You gotta play with him a little bit to really feed him. Have you tried to tweak him at all yet? It’s a trip. You just sneak in and do something that you know is gonna rub him the wrong way, but that he never thought to make a rule about, and watch him get all tangled up over it in his own head. The spankings at the end are always more intense and crazy good. It’s worth it, kid. I swear. Then the sex after all the swats is the best thing ever.”

April regarded him with concern. He nudged her hip to send her back to chopping, and she went reluctantly. “You’re trying to get me to be a brat, like you.”

“Only a little. Trust me, April, it’s all in good fun. He really loves to be wound up a little bit. Don’t do anything that’ll really piss him off, like screw Michael or anything. Keep it light and spirited, play innocent, and let him get all huffy about it.” Dean added minced garlic and accepted the peppers when she brought them to him.

“That’s not me though, Dean.” April leaned her butt against the counter beside him and watched him stir. “That’s you. Don’t you think we give him different things? Why would he need from me what he already gets from you?”
“Suit yourself.” Dean pulled grey shrimp out of the fridge. “I’m just trying to help. I know you’re a masochist, and I’m just trying to let you know how to pull the good stuff out of our Dom. You’ll never know if you like it if you don’t try. Get the rice going, would you please? I should’ve started that first.”

April moved on autopilot. Was Dean right? Castiel had never seemed to like her misbehavior one bit when she’d done wrong by him, by his rules. Was she missing out on a side of the Alpha that would be satisfying to both of them by trying always to be the perfect, obedient Sub?

Dean served shrimp étouffée with crusty bread and rice. They licked the bowl clean, and then Michael kissed his mate goodnight, trying to suppress his suffering expression. Dean let his mate feel him through the bonds, whispering his pride and appreciation into the Omega’s temple. Michael sighed and took the half-finished wine bottle from the table with him to his room. He was going to need to drink heavily to survive the sensations he knew would be coming through the bond from Dean’s body tonight. He knew he should probably just close the link for the night, but the Dom in him refused to turn his Sub’s wellbeing completely over to anyone else, even Castiel.

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Cas led his Sub up the stairs and into the master bedroom. He undressed Dean like a present, like a gift, his hands gentle on Dean’s damaged skin. Chill bumps broke out on the alpha-Sub’s flesh at the touch. Dean closed his eyes and let his head fall back, baring his throat, standing naked in the middle of the large room. Dean needed this. He needed this so badly. He knew that his time with Castiel would draw to an end soon enough, and he was determined to take everything he could while he still had the chance. Dean trembled as Castiel trailed warm lips across his throat, dragging teeth in a gentle threat that he would never act upon, pulling a whine from the Submissive wolf.

Dean let the Alpha take complete control, standing still and soaking in the sensation of broad gentle hands stroking his hips and sides, his back, soft lips tracing his jaw, whispered words of adoration that barely made it to his ears audibly. Dean kept his eyes closed, letting his other senses tell him everything. Castiel would reprimand him for it soon, but for now, Dean let himself go, following no instruction, just feeling.

A warm hand slid down the length of his arm and took hold of his hand, tugging gently. Dean opened his eyes slowly, meeting Cas’ eyes. There was no reprimand there. There was only love. Dean felt his throat constrict at the unexpected acceptance. Cas tugged again, not demanding, just requesting: come with me? Trust me?

Dean followed his Alpha’s lead into the bathroom and found a tub full of steaming water, rose petals floating on the surface, lit candles everywhere. He looked around, taking in the overt romance. It was unlike Castiel. It was unlike anything Dean had ever experienced. He thought back over the years and realized he’d never known romance directly. He’d spent his entire adult life sceneing and working. Sex was for fun and recreation, for balance and stability, for claiming a place in the hierarchy of the pack, for putting another wolf in their place. He’d partnered with the Alpha, but he’d never in his life made love with him, not out in the open like this. Dean had a few shame-filled memories stashed away inside his head of moments when he’d allowed his adoration of this man to turn what Castiel gave him for balancing purposes into something decidedly less businesslike – purely in his own head, of course, and kept secret for all those years.

He and Michael had toyed with the idea of romance several times, soothing the strains of the rapid
changes in their lives, but they hadn’t yet done…this.

Dean and Cas had been heading this way when they encountered Michael. What they would have done with each other as soon as they arrived back home from Texas had been put abruptly on hold. Dean let Cas put him into the tub. It was steeped heavily in lavender and mineral salts. It was very hot. His muscles spasmed around his bruises then began to relax even as Cas laid him back to rest his head against the pillow attached at one end.

“Close your eyes, Dean. Let me take care of you.” Castiel’s whisper fit the ambience, and Dean let himself accept the luxury. A soft background accompaniment of instrumental music floated through the room. Castiel let a gently massaging touch run the length of Dean’s leg, ending at his foot. He knelt beside the tub and worked Dean’s foot, his toes, his arch, the heel, the ankle, and back down to those short toes. He rubbed soap into the skin of Dean’s foot, moving so deliberately, so slowly, Dean suspected the water would have long grown cold before the Alpha covered his whole body, and the idea that anyone, even Castiel, would take that much time and attention just for him sent another shiver down his body.

He wasn’t worth it.

The ripples in the water from his shiver made Cas look up at Dean’s face. Dean’s brow was furrowed. He was fighting something. He was fighting against the voices in his head again, and Castiel felt a wave of despair pass through him. He shushed Dean and worked his massaging hands up to the Sub’s calf and shin. His shins were unscathed, but his calves bore perpendicular switch welts. They covered the backs of Dean’s legs from halfway down his calves, skipping over the backs of his knees, and starting up again to cover his entire thighs, front and back.

Michael had clearly been careful, deliberate, and thorough. Cas inspected Dean’s legs as a doctor would, even as he continued to soothe his beloved with his voice and massage the sore muscles beneath the bruising. Dean’s mate had done a very good job applying his marks. Where the skin had broken, it had been carefully tended and was already healing with no signs of irritation or infection. Some areas showed the yellowing of older bruises, but the newer purple areas were nowhere near the older ones.

These were not the marks of careless, out of control youthful lust. These were deliberate marks. There was a pattern of attention to the way they had been applied, a pattern of love.

Cas let his worry about Dean’s fucked up self-image lead his hands to find all the places on Dean’s body where his healing touch might bring Dean peace. He never stopped whispering gentle words. He wanted to shout them rather than whisper. He wanted to drown out those God-forsaken voices that told Dean he was worthless, but he’d learned over the years the voices had the advantage over any volume Cas could reach. They were right there inside Dean, and decibels didn’t make a difference. They were insistent and insidious, persistent. When both voices sounded at once, the Alpha’s and the ones inside Dean’s psyche, Dean had always elected to listen to the ones that tore him down. Cas had been fighting this war for going on nine years now, and he’d not made a single step forward that the voices hadn’t recovered their real estate back from and then some.

Cas was beginning to believe it was hopeless.

Cas started on Dean’s other foot and leg, keeping watch on his fiancé’s face. The lines were starting to relax on his forehead, but Cas couldn’t be sure if it was from his relaxing state of mind or if he was beginning to doze. His Claim on Dean gave him only the barest hint of what was going on in that complex mind. Dean hummed as Cas worked a hand around the back of his thigh, around to the inside and very near his testicles. He turned it into a moan as Cas rolled him gently up a bit onto one hip to work the muscles of his ass. Cas knew that kneading the damaged muscles of a well-spanked
ass was one of Dean’s base pleasures.

Dean’s eyes cracked open, and he smiled. “Feels good, Alpha.”

“I’m glad, baby,” Cas told him sincerely. Dean’s eyes slipped closed again. “Hey, look at me a minute,” Cas whispered. “Tonight is for you. Just for you, Dean. Tell me what you want, and it’s yours.”

“What kind of scene is this, anyway?” Dean mumbled, slurring his words and slipping his eyes closed.

“It’s not a scene at all, my love. Who said every time I touch you was going to be led by my wolf? Can you feel me right now, Dean? Can you see me? This is me, not him. I love you so much, and tonight is just for you. You can slip into Subspace or stay out here with me. Either way, I’ll take care of you. I’m going to make love to you, Dean. I’ve wanted to do this for so long. Do want it as much as I do?”

There were several questions in there. Dean’s muscles were turning into a pool of goo. Cas’ hands were magical. His voice was silken chocolate. The hot water made a safe cocoon that surrounded Dean and held him in a safe place. The scent of roses and lavender, the gentle music, all of it felt… Dean wanted to take it. He wanted everything that was being offered. He struggled to sit upright and shift forward, and Castiel took the offered space, stripping quickly and slipping wordlessly in behind Dean. He pulled Dean in to lean against his back.

“Is this real?” Dean whispered quietly rather than answer the questions. Too quietly. He was close to losing it. If he became overwhelmed, he would bolt. Cas had seen him do it time and again. He wrapped Dean up with one arm across his chest and snaked the other beneath one of Dean’s thighs, his fingers reaching back up to run a firm touch over Dean’s perineum and down to his hole. He rubbed a circle around Dean’s rim and then back up his taint, careful not to touch his balls.

This was a touch Dean could relate to without feeling the need to flee. Dean let his body melt and pulled his leg up with an elbow behind his knee to hold himself out of the way, and he moaned. Cas kept up the slow, firm pattern as he began a new litany of whispered love and praise straight into Dean’s ear.

Dean’s cock, only half hard during the slow massage of his legs, stiffened to full post at the touch to his asshole. His hips began a slow rotation in concert with Castiel’s fingertips, and Cas praised him for it, told him how beautiful he was, reminded him to feel how hard the Alpha was against Dean’s lower back, reminded him that that was all Dean’s doing.

Dean’s worries slipped away again, and Castiel continued to touch him slowly. It wasn’t enough to get him off. It would eventually drive him crazy with want if Cas kept it up, but he had no intention of teasing Dean tonight. Tomorrow night would be a different story, but tonight was just for Dean. Cas kissed Dean’s hair and then his temple. Dean turned into the kisses and claimed the Alpha’s lips, sucking them, biting them gently. Dean began to grind into Cas’ hand with a purpose, the water starting to slosh a little bit.

“Anything you want, Dean,” Castiel reminded him.

“C’n I suck you, Alpha?”

Cas released his hold on Dean and pulled himself up to sit on the edge of the tub, his feet planted on either side of Dean as the Sub turned himself around. “Would you like to stay in the tub or get out?”
Dean didn’t answer. He lay out on his belly in the tub, his knees cramped uncomfortably at the other end, and pulled himself up to Castiel’s crotch with a hand on either of the Alpha’s thighs. He sucked as much of Castiel’s cock into his mouth as he could and held it there, heavy and heady on his tongue. Cas’ hands ran lovingly through Dean’s damp hair, caressing. A moan escaped both of them simultaneously as Dean began to suck and slide up and down the shaft.

Cas wrapped a supportive hand around Dean’s arm at his armpit to keep him from having to hold himself up. Dean pulled one knee up to give himself something to push against, but the surface of the tub was slick and hard, and he couldn’t get a good footing. He slipped suddenly and fell back down to submerge beneath the water with a messy sloshing wave over the sputtering candles. He emerged with a cough that turned into a laugh.

“Think the bed might work better,” he admitted sheepishly. Cas helped him get out and dried him off, kissing him the whole way. When Cas kissed Dean’s inner thighs on both sides but didn’t touch his cock, Dean growled and pulled his fiancé up, pressing him against the counter and rutting his hips into Cas’ groin. The temptation was just too great, and Dean lost control, needling the touch. Cas gritted his teeth and clenched his eyes but pressed Dean away with one hand to his hip and the other on his shoulder. They stood a foot apart, panting, afraid to look at each other for fear they wouldn’t be able to resist. Dean’s hips continued to rut abortively for a moment, then he managed to regain his control. He huffed. Dean stepped back and grabbed Castiel’s hand, pulling him to the bedroom, and Cas went willingly. Dean shoved him down on his back across the bed and climbed up between his legs, going down onto his belly and letting his legs trail off the end of the bed awkwardly. He ignored his erection pressed into the turn of the mattress and took Cas’ cock back into his mouth. He chuckled as he felt a blanket fall down across his still-damp skin. How had Cas even reached that from where he was situated? It had been across the back of the chair in the corner a moment ago. Had Cas grabbed it as he’d been marched by? He must’ve done.

Dean went to work bobbing on the Alpha’s large cock, massaging his balls, and keeping a hand moving insistently across the Alpha’s torso and hips. He pressed fingers against Castiel’s mouth, and the Alpha sucked them greedily in and pulled them to the back of his throat, working them as if drinking long pulls from a tall glass on a hot day. Dean moaned with his mouth full, and the vibration on his cock led Cas to push up with his hips to chase the sensation. Dean grabbed his hips with both hands, leaving wet, spitty streaks on Cas’ right hip, but holding him down to still him.

The Alpha allowed the command and stopped thrusting into Dean’s mouth. The power to command his Alpha gave Dean a sudden rush of adrenaline, and he whined. He pulled his knees up to support him, wrapped a hand around Castiel’s bulge at the base of his dick, squeezing just short of too tightly, and sucked hard and fast while Cas bit his lip to keep his hips still.

Pre-come dribbled onto Dean’s tongue. He sucked it away greedily. Cas’ hands ran in massaging firmness across Dean’s shoulders. “What else do you want, Dean? Do you need your toys?” Dean whimpered and thrust his hips into nothing, imagining Cas fucking him around a vibrating dildo. He let Cas’ cock slip from his mouth and took his left testicle into his mouth, sucking gently, tugging on the other one with his hand. He pulled off after a moment and licked the dribble of pre-come off Cas’s dick. Not tonight. No toys tonight. Tonight, he wanted nothing but Castiel. Dean let his gaze drop down to Castiel’s asshole. What would it be like to try?

He pushed Cas’ legs up off the bed with a hand behind each knee, and the Alpha let himself be positioned like a Bottom. Dean leaned in close and let the musk of Cas, of Alpha, fill his nose. He bit gently at the delicate skin of Cas’ inner thigh very close to his hole, working his teeth against each other and sucking to bring a bruise to the surface in a place no one else would ever be allowed to
touch him, not even his mate. He pulled back just enough to see his mark deepening at the intersection of Castiel’s ass, thigh, and genitals. Cas trembled in his grip. Dean exhaled deeply, letting his breath out against the tight pucker so close to his nose and his mouth. Could he…just…reach out with his tongue?

No. Castiel hated to be touched there. He’d given himself over to Dean with a trusting heart. Dean turned his head and kissed the thigh he held in his grip and then he lowered both legs back to the bed. He raised his head to check on his partner. Had it been too much? Everyone has their limits, and an Alpha-Dom is never going to enjoy playing the submissive. Castiel looked back at him with a steady eye. He smiled at Dean and winked. His cock was still rock-hard and leaking. It hadn’t been too much, and by the looks of it, his trust was still well placed.

Cas reached for Dean, pulling him up to lay next to the Alpha and pressing their bodies closely together. There was no avoiding touching Dean’s cock in a position like this, but Cas wasn’t worried about incidental touches. If Dean rutted, he’d put a stop to the motions and pull away, but Dean just melted into the Alpha’s kisses instead. Getting lost in Castiel’s kisses was a base pleasure all its own. This one was new enough that Dean didn’t feel he’d experienced all of the various kinds of kisses Cas had to give yet. He especially liked the sucking ones. Those left his lips swollen and so red, he looked airbrushed for a magazine cover, and they left pink blushes high on Dean’s cheeks that he couldn’t do anything to prevent.

Dean moaned into Cas’ open mouth. He pushed the Alpha gently onto his back and straddled his hips, letting the Alpha’s cock jut against his taint and up just behind his balls. There might have been just a little bit of a touch, but…accidents happen. He pressed down on Cas’ shoulders and kissed him hard. Shifting a little, Dean angled his hips to clear his own junk (unfortunately), bowed his back, and ground his ass down onto Castiel’s while he plundered the hot, wet mouth under him. Cas leaned up to reach Dean’s mouth. He whined and gripped at Dean’s hips, helping to direct Dean’s motions, but not demanding.

Dean lost himself in the kissing, and as his intentions and inhibitions fell away, his emotions came crashing over him. He grew frantic in his need, plunging his tongue into Castiel’s mouth as if it was the last time he’d ever be allowed to taste. Dean wasn’t in his wolf. He wasn’t in his alpha. Dean was still himself. He felt his eyes fill with tears that overflowed almost as soon as he knew they were there. His breath grew ragged as he ground his ass down on Castiel’s cock, trapping it, probably painfully, against the Alpha’s own belly. Dean began to sniffle and whine, a cry of pent-up frustration, fear, want, need, and despair passing from his mouth into Castiel’s.

Cas took hold of Dean’s hips and lifted them enough to free his own cock. It sprang back upright and pressed against Dean’s hole, but he stopped moving his hips and didn’t try to press in.

Cas turned his head enough to break the kiss and grab Dean’s attention. “Dean. Stop a minute. Stop. Are you okay? What’s wrong?” He shifted his hold on Dean’s hips to lower him down onto Castiel’s belly.

Dean pulled up on his shaking arms. “It’s not wrong, Cas. Nothing’s wrong. I’m just…It’s a lot, and it feels…I feel…” He sniffled and ignored the sweat and tears mixing on his face to drip onto Castiel’s throat. “I love you, Cas. So much.” Cas watched him with scrutinizing eyes, trying to discern his state of mind. “Make love to me, baby. Please.” Dean leaned back down to kiss Castiel on the forehead.

His tears abated, and he began to press his ass backward against Cas’ erection. Cas moved beneath him, to shift away enough that he didn’t breach Dean yet. He brought his hands up to cup Dean’s face and bring him in for a deep and sensuous kiss. He whispered to Dean so softly that Dean could
barely hear him, “I love you too, Dean. You deserve to be loved. You deserve everything. Please, don’t ever forget it. I love you.”

Cas moved to the side and tapped Dean’s thigh to prompt him to let the Alpha up. He quickly dug a small bottle of synthetic slick from the drawer next to the bed. He laid Dean out on the bed and spread his legs, then knelt between them. “Is this what you want Dean?”

“Yeah. Real sweet and gentle, okay?”

“Okay, love. Whatever you want.” Cas warmed a dollop up on his fingertips then pressed two of them slowly into the man he loved. He kept his eyes locked on Dean’s face, watching initially for signs of discomfort, but soon mesmerized by Dean’s pleasure. Dean let his eyes roll up and closed. He took hold of the wrought iron above his head and used his grip to help him work his body on Cas’ fingers.

Cas worked hard to open Dean up enough for the Alpha’s huge girth. Dean usually liked the stretch of an inadequate preliminary prep, but not tonight. Castiel wanted him to feel nothing but pleasure and love. Dean helped. He pressed into Cas’ fingers to force them over his prostate, and Cas went wherever Dean wanted him. He pulled out just long enough to add a third finger, spreading them as they sank into Dean’s body. All the while, Cas spoke to Dean.

“You’re so beautiful, baby. Look at how you move just for me. I love you so much. I’m going to give you everything you’ve ever wanted. God, please, Dean. I don’t know how to show you, how to tell you…I’ll do anything for you. You are everything to me. You are worth all the stars in the sky and all the atoms in creation. You are magnificent and so, so strong. Open for me, Dean. Let me in. I’ll take such good care of you…I trust you with anything, with everything. I love you…”

Castiel’s words immersed Dean, and he was tearing up again as he ground himself onto Cas’ hand. He’d added a fourth finger after too long a wait. The burn was just barely there. Plenty of slick and enough time relaxing in the tub left him loose and easily opened. Dean felt split apart emotionally. He felt open and exposed. For just a second, he fought the urge to cover back up, to hide himself from the raw emotion pouring out onto Castiel, but it only lasted a moment. Dean decided to let go; to just let it sweep him away into wherever it would take him and to let Castiel stand witness. His body felt tingly and alive as Castiel’s fingers stimulated him physically, and his emotions felt out of control as Castiel poured devotion over him with his incessant whispering. Dean sobbed and pushed himself deeper onto his love’s hand, his whole fucking hand, well, all of his fingers anyway, and the sensations from Dean’s body told him everything was just as it ought to be.

Castiel watched in awe as Dean fell apart. How could this utter miracle of a man ever believe he was anything but perfect? Cas was so hard, he ached and throbbed. He realized he’d added his thumb and was sinking so deeply into Dean’s body he’d just pushed straight past prepping and into a whole different action entirely. He pulled his hand out slowly and shushed Dean’s whimper, crawling up Dean’s body and bracing himself above him. He looked into Dean’s teary eyes and caressed his face with his clean hand.

“How do you want me, Dean? It’s your decision. Do you want me to knot you?”

Dean nodded, his sobs not letting up. “Please, Cas. Can I turn over? I want to feel you at my back. I wanna…” Dean paused to try to explain what he needed. “Wanna feel you cover me and keep me tethered to the ground. ‘Kay? Feel like I might float away. Hold onto me. Please, Alpha.”

“Of course. I’ll do anything you want.” Cas helped Dean turn himself over and pull up onto his knees. Cas could usually tell when Dean had let his Sub wolf take over, but he couldn’t quite get a read on the man right now. His words were all classic Sub Dean, but it didn’t feel that way to Cas.
No matter. It’s what Dean wanted, and Cas was ready. Cas pulled Dean up onto his knees so that the two of them knelt back-to-front. Cas kissed the side of Dean’s face, and Dean craned enough to press their lips together, reaching back to grip Castiel’s hip too.

“Make love to me, Castiel James,” Dean whispered through his tears. Cas nodded then carefully pressed his torso forward to bend Dean over and cover him with his body. Cas lined his cock up and pressed in slowly. He made it one long, even push into the warmth of Dean’s relaxed muscles, letting the embrace around his cock send a shiver of pleasure through his body. He had a brief flash of symmetry as he could tell that his mate was awake and feeling his sensations vicariously. She’d obviously lost the battle to adhere to her ‘no touching’ rule, and he’d have to punish her for that later, but he ignored her for now.

She had to be experiencing a powerful sense of eroticism from inside his mind, and he couldn’t really blame her for failing. Castiel was overwhelmed himself.

Bottoming out, Cas held still, wrapping a hand around Dean’s middle and kissing his neck and shoulders. “I’m in love with you, Dean Michael. I can’t believe how deeply you trust me. I’m so honored. I’ll keep you safe, my love.” He began to move slowly, just a gentle pumping of his hips, sending waves of pleasure through Dean’s body. A hand sneaked up Dean’s chest and took hold of a nipple, worrying it to a peak. Dean gasped through his sobs, but he didn’t stop weeping. Cas hoped they were tears of emotional release and trust, not the despair he knew was so close to the surface for Dean these days. The Claim-bond seemed to confirm that Dean was in a good place; a vulnerable and raw place, but as long as he was in safe hands, it was a place of catharsis, not destruction.

Cas began to pulse into Dean faster, angling to strike against his prostate as often as he could. Dean was primed, fully aroused, relaxed and open. He could come like this. He’d done it within his wolf thousands of times. Could he do it while in his front-brain? Was he still in his front-brain? Cas kept up the careful pinching and rolling to Dean’s left nipple, and he kept alternating laving his lips against Dean’s skin with whispering his adoration into his ears. Was there a way to make the words stick?

“What can you come like this, baby?” Cas asked him, letting his breath tickle the hairs in Dean’s ear. Dean shivered and hid his face deep in the pillow. He whimpered through his tears and pressed back against Cas’ hips, taking up the rhythm for himself. Dean moved with Cas rather than against him, so that their hips never separated and Cas’ cock was barely moving relative to Dean’s ass, but it was obviously what he wanted. Dean began to groan rhythmically with the rotational motion and to press back harder. He must have found a sweet spot where Cas’ cock rubbed just right over his prostate, and he was grinding onto it in unadulterated pleasure.

“Holy fuck, you’re incredible,” Cas told him. “Come for me, Dean. Come on my cock, and let me hold you while you fall apart. I’ll catch you, baby. You’re safe. Just let go. Let go.”

“Bite me again…” Dean’s muffled request came from inside the pillow. How was he even breathing down there? Cas pulled his head back to find the right spot. He fixed his teeth around the place on Dean’s shoulder where his bite-scar would’ve been placed all those years ago for the first time and countless times after. They were lucky that when Michael bit Dean, he’d chosen the opposite side from where Cas always left his mark. Michael couldn’t have known, but he never needed to worry now that sides had been claimed, because Castiel never altered the placement by so much as a hair’s breadth. He shoved his cock as deeply into Dean as it would go, his knot spurred by the image of a chance to mate the wolf he’d always wanted, again, and he locked in. Dean grunted and cried out at the sudden pain of the knot, and Castiel bit down hard. No matter how many times Castiel had tried and failed to mate Dean over the years, his body was always willing to respond to one more attempt.
Dean’s orgasm forced his hips into a staccato pulse, freezing into motionlessness at the end, as he lost all of the control of his own body. Cas rutted in tight and hard, chasing his own, and spilled into Dean as Dean’s sobs broke back out into the big space with the high ceiling. They echoed back at the couple as Dean turned his head into Cas’ chin and kissed the side of Cas’ face again and again, crying shamelessly. “Love you so much, Cas. Please don’t ever leave me. I can’t…I love you. God, baby, I need you so bad…” Dean fell apart beneath the Alpha. Cas wrapped both arms around his love and let their tired bodies collapse onto the mattress. He released Dean’s shoulder and kissed him over the bite again and again, still pressing his hips into Dean’s ass, keeping the pressure steady and tight so his knot wouldn’t pull. It wouldn’t hurt for long after Cas had prepped Dean with his entire hand. He might even be able to work the knot loose if he tried, but neither of them wanted to let go that quickly.

Castiel let his own tears fall silently as he held Dean through the emotions washing out of him. Whatever it was, it was painful, and Cas wasn’t going to let Dean feel alone for even a second while he struggled and wept. Cas curled his knees in and shifted his weight to roll them expertly to the side without pulling. “I’m not leaving you, Dean. I’m going to marry you and make love to you again and again forever. We’ll raise a beautiful Pack together. Please, my love, tell me what’s wrong. I know you’re hurting. I can feel your disquiet. It’s been there for some time now. Can’t you please talk to me? You can trust me with it, whatever it is. Don’t you know that?” Cas kissed Dean’s neck, shoulders, the back of his head, his upper back. He held on tight and kissed Dean everywhere he could reach.

Dean reached around himself, hugging across his own chest to hold tightly to Castiel’s shoulder. “I want to tell you, but I…I just don’t know what to say. Cas, I don’t know what it is. I just feel so scared all the time.”

“Is it me?” Cas was whispering again. Maybe he could get through to Dean while he was open and ready to believe that Castiel loved him enough.

“No, it’s not you. It’s me. I feel like I’m gonna fuck everything up again; like I always do. I don’t know what it’s gonna be, and I don’t know how to stop it if it happens.” Dean’s voice was gone. He was whispering in a gravelly voice that told Cas he had no alternative at the moment.

“Can you trust me and Michael enough to tell us when you feel the urge to do something before it happens? If you can just do that, we’ll keep you safe. Do you think you can do that, Dean?”

“I dunno. I doubt it. I’ll try.”

“Baby, are you doing anything right now that I need to know about?” Cas held his breath as he asked the question. How much trust was there really between them? Did it reach outside the bedroom? Was Dean capable of giving this to Cas?

Dean huffed a laugh through his tears and pushed his ass back against Cas’ groin. “I’m not doing anything much right now, Alpha.”

“Please, Dean. You know what I mean.”

“I feel something bad coming, Cas. I don’t think I can control what I might do.”

It wasn’t the answer Castiel wanted, but it didn’t surprise him either. Dean already had his mask pulled back up. The tears had stopped, although he’d developed the hiccups as he always did during a hard cry. Dean hadn’t really lied to him. At least he hadn’t said no, when Cas knew damned well there was already a plan in motion. “Please just come talk to me, Dean. Whatever it is, you can talk to me. Always. I love you, and I’ll always choose you. I’m not going to leave you. I’m never going
to throw you out. You mean everything to me. I need you to believe that. I know you hear other voices telling you different things, but I’m asking you to choose me back. Choose me instead of them. They are lying to you, baby. They always have been. You are worth everything. Can you…? Dean, can you choose to trust me more than them? Please? That’s all it will take to shut them up for good.”

Dean held on to Castiel’s shoulder like a lifeline and tucked his head in as if in free fall. “I’ll try,” he whispered. Cas held onto him and felt the bottom fall out of his heart. Apparently, they were doing this. Castiel had never been so scared in his life that he was going to screw it all up. What if he was making the wrong decision? What did Dean need from him? What did Cas need from Dean? That was the pivotal question, he reminded himself. Dom/sub relationships he could do. Alpha/beta/Omega roles he could play without blinking, but what exactly did he need from Dean to make a marriage?

What exactly was a marriage, anyway? Cas had thought he understood. It was a choice. It was waking up every day and choosing again and again to stay and fight and work and love and hold tight to one other person. But…what if only one of the partners was fighting for the marriage? Could it last without all four hands on the wheel? Cas knew they both deserved the freedom to have times of frailty when the other would need to sustain the relationship through sheer will alone, but what if it wasn’t just sometimes? What if Dean’s time of frailty was always? Could a marriage survive like that? He knew that a Mating could. Mated relationships were not balanced things. Only the beta-Neutrals had a regularly even keel.

Even worse than trying to sustain a marriage with only one set of hands working to save it, what if the other was deliberately trying to sabotage it again and again from a deep-seated need to test the limits of the other’s love over and over? Those damned voices in Dean’s head. They never stopped. They exhausted Dean to the brink. He fought them valiantly. He was incredibly strong. But he couldn’t always defeat them. They were incessant. Eventually, even while he was well-balanced, even while he had a solid support structure around him, eventually Dean always cracked. He held tightly to Castiel as to a strong tree, and he depended on Cas’ strength to sustain him, but eventually, the self-doubt and the broken esteem sent him crawling back out to the thin branches where he was sure to fall.

Cas always caught him, held him, protected him from his own destructive tendencies. It was his responsibility as Dean’s Dominant and his Alpha. But what about as his husband? He could still do it. He knew he could. But was it right for their marriage to remain so perpetually uneven? Was it fair to both of them, and could they flourish that way? Wasn’t marriage a partnership of equals?

Cas had always imagined it so.

Dean snored softly in Castiel’s tight grip. Cas kissed him again and let his head rest behind Dean’s. He didn’t know what was right anymore. The lying and the scheming that Michael and Dean were up to was wrong. But so was Castiel’s deliberate hiding of his role in the death of four people in Oklahoma. Michael wanted a pup and was willing to scheme to get one now instead of later. April did as well, he’d concluded, and she was much sneakier about how she went about it. All four of them were guilty of underhanded schemes.

Dean’s seemed particularly destructive. Dean felt a need to test Castiel’s commitment by pushing him so hard he was sure to be disgusted enough to throw Dean out. It wasn’t going to happen like that. Cas would never throw Dean out, but he couldn’t control all the collateral damage either. He didn’t know what would happen in the end. Dean’s insecurities were eating away at the bedrock of devotion they were desperately trying to build upon, and if allowed to fester, they would destroy the fledgling relationship before it gained any traction at all.
But at least Dean was acting out of frailty, not callous disregard, not presumption. All of them were lying to each other, but Castiel… Dean’s scheming might be the most dangerous, but Cas was under no illusions. His dishonesty was the least defensible. He was a murderer, and he pretended to hold the moral high ground where his packmates were concerned. Next to him, their ‘crimes’ were trivial.

Castiel lay awake and worried far into the night; long after his knot slipped free and let his come dribble messily out of Dean’s ruined hole. Dean moaned in his sleep and pushed his ass back against Cas as if to reclaim what he’d lost.

Chapter End Notes

G'Night, y'all.
Friday, June 9, 2017

Chapter Summary

Sam and Jess are talking. Dean and Cas are talking. Michael and April don't say a word to each other. Shhh.

Chapter Notes

Still creeping towards it all in teeny-tiny little increments. Sorry, not sorry.

Warning for rape/non-con. You'll have processed the difference by now. This is Lupin stuff, not us. Not remotely suggesting this is OK in real life.

Apologies to Aralorn and all the readers who asked for a full night-long scene between Dean and Cas. I still haven't written one. They went there in this chapter, but they asked for privacy, so I didn't write it. That would have been rude.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

NOW:

Sam picked at his fingernails and frowned as he waited for her, the folder open on the table before him. He had read it in its entirety, but while it contained information she hadn’t shared with him yet, it didn’t explain her sour moods. Sam had been full of self-doubt when he finished perusing the report, but as the clock ticked on into the evening, the self-doubt was giving way to…Sam was pissed. She often worked late, but she always called him, or at least sent him a text to let him know when to expect her. It was basic common courtesy. Sam did the same for Jess.
Clearly, she was testing him tonight.

And tonight, Sam was through failing that test.

At nine, he’d given up and eaten a lonely meal, leaving hers in the oven on warm. At ten, he dumped hers into the garbage in a fit of pique. It was ten-thirty. He’d just sent her another text with too many exclamation points. He knew she was getting them. He could tell when the message app had been opened and the text read. Sam gritted his teeth. Maybe she was driving now. He didn’t want to cause an accident by demanding she respond if she wasn’t in a safe place to do so, but that didn’t excuse the last five hours.

At ten-forty-two, the garage door finally opened, and he heard her car pull in. He took a deep breath and put his sweaty hands on the table. The door from the garage opened, and she bustled in, all motion and energy. “Holy fuck, what a day! Don’t talk to me, don’t fucking touch me. I’m going to grab a plate and a shower and go straight to bed.” She didn’t even look at her mate as she passed through the kitchen and into the living room to dump her bag and files on the couch. Sam put his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his folded hands.

Jess came back into the kitchen with empty hands, looking around. She cracked open the oven door then the microwave. “Where’s dinner?” she asked.

“I threw it out. You weren’t here to eat it, and I had no way of knowing that you were planning to join me this evening, so I assumed you had made other plans.” Sam’s voice held cold, restrained fury that Jess didn’t appear to notice. He didn’t move.

“What the fuck, Sam?! Why would I make other plans? How could you fucking throw out my food? Are you kidding me!? I’m starving!”

“You’re not eating tonight, Jessica. Have a seat. We need to talk.”

Jess finally looked at him, and it took a moment for her to process that he wasn’t the same man she’d left that morning, but when she did, and when she saw the “Keller” logo on the top of the paperwork before him, she froze, thinking fast. “Fine. Play your little Dominant games. I’m too tired to give a shit. I’m going to bed.” She turned on her heel and took two steps toward the hallway.

“PUT YOUR ASS IN THAT CHAIR, WINCHESTER, AND DON’T MOVE IT UNTIL I TELL YOU TO!” His voice carried command more than volume, and he saw her body react to the tone.

Jess froze then slowly turned on her heel again. Her eyes had gone flinty. “I’m really not in the mood for this right now, Samuel.”

“Did it sound like a request, Jessica? Because it wasn’t. Sit down, or I will sit you down.” Sam let his wolf into the forefront. He rarely did that. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust the wolf. Sam’s wolf was massively dominant and powerful, but it just didn’t need much by way of exercise. In truth, it had grown a little lazy in the past few years. Sam enjoyed scening, letting his wolf out as a contract scene-worker for The Facility, and just as often signing up on the other side of the contract as well. He’d liked playing with Meg a lot. Kind of a very lot. Sue him. He liked brats.

Jess noted the transition, and he allowed her a moment of deliberation. The wolf enjoyed with his food, and its ears were pricked forward to detect which way the prey would run. Jess met his eyes, thought for a bit, then sighed heavily and flounced to the chair opposite Sam and fell into it, heavily put-upon.

“We’re going to be making changes around here starting right now,” he informed her. “The first is
that whoever arrives home first starts dinner. Sound fair?"

Jess rolled her eyes. “Yeah, fine. Whatever.”

Sam cleared his throat. “Anyone who is not home by six-thirty and has not provided valid notification before six-thirty goes hungry. Don’t plan to stop and pick up takeout. Don’t plan to microwave leftovers. If you don’t come home, and you don’t tell me why, you’re not eating. Still sound fair?”

“That’s ridiculous. Who gave you the…” Sam slapped his hand down on the table to cut her off.

“It’s a rhetorical question, Jess. I don’t really care if you like it or not. I’m through with the rudeness, the moodiness, the sulking, the snarky comebacks, and all the childish tantrums. I’ve had enough. You will obey me. You will follow my rules, or you will suffer the consequences. Do you understand? This one is not rhetorical.” Sam’s lip twitched and his hazel eyes had gone icy.

She sighed dramatically. “Yeah, whatever. I’ll try to call next time, okay? Can I go now?”

She didn’t stand up. Despite her offhand demeanor, she was waiting for his permission to rise. That was a first. Sam rubbed his hand across his mouth and chin, watching her, thinking hard. “I just told you I’ve had enough of your rudeness.” He paused and let the silence drag uncomfortably. “How would you characterize your response to me just then?”

“Oh, Christ, Sam! Give it up already. This is not you! I don’t know who put you up to this charade, but just knock it off already. We both know you don’t have it in you. Go play your little spanking games with the Omegas at your little school.”

He was out of his chair before she could blink and had her on her feet and pressed face first into the wall before she registered she’d been touched.

“I asked you a fucking question! Answer the goddamned question!” His face was right beside hers, and spit flew onto her cheek. She winced.

“All right! I’m sorry I was rude! Jesus!”

“Too little, too late, Submissive,” Sam’s wolf told her. “You’ve been a BITCH to me, Jessica, and I don’t fucking deserve it, and I’ve had ENOUGH!” Sam pressed his body tightly into hers, crushing her against the wall so she couldn’t move. “I’m in love with you, and I’m not sorry I Claimed you, but you don’t know your place, and it’s about time you learned it.” He was breathing coarsely, and his voice came out like he’d been sick for a month. The tension in his words belied the soft volume. He tangled his fingers so thoroughly in her hair that they might need to be cut out in the end, slamming his fist against the wall just above her head. She cried out as her hair was pulled tight against her scalp, and her face was forced even tighter against the hard wall. She shut her eyes and grimaced.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Sam! I’m sorry!”

Tears had sprung up behind her eyes at the pain in her scalp.
“Kick off your shoes.” It was a simple enough demand, but still she hesitated to comply. They both knew where this was going, but the Sub bitch needed more than a demand. She needed a hand strong enough to make her do it. Jess whined against the wall. She wanted to struggle, but he had her in a hold there was no getting out of and any struggling she did would only cause her more pain.

“Take off your goddamn shoes, or I swear I will burn every pair you own but this one to ash,” he whispered into her ear, full of menace. It wasn’t a threat, and she knew it. She lifted her feet one by one and let her shoes fall off onto the floor. A heaving sob escaped her throat.

“Sam, please don’t…”

“You think I want this? You know me, Jessica. You think THIS IS WHAT I WANT!?!?” He shouted into her ear, pushing his body right back up into her space and sliding his fist just slightly higher on the wall. She went up on her tiptoes and screamed shrilly.

“NO, NO, I’m sorry. Please. I’ll be good. Please don’t! I’ll be good.”

“No, you won’t.” His voice came back to its normal volume. He sounded like Sam again. He sounded like a very tired, very sad version of the man she loved. “You need me to prove I can handle you. You need to be forced, or you’re always going to think I’m weak; too weak to deserve you. So, let me explain something to you, my mate.” He shifted his fist and flipped her head around so the opposite cheek was pressed against the wall. He leaned against the reddened cheek, warm and pink from its time against the paneling, and he whispered very softly.

“I’m not weak.”

Sam backed his body away but gave her no mercy on the pull to her hair, and she was still trapped on her tiptoes. He quickly unbuttoned her business skirt, then unzipped it with one hand, letting it fall to the floor. Then he tore a huge hole in the back of her pantyhose. With his one free hand, he awkwardly worked her panties down with the scrapped remains of the nylons around her waist. That hadn’t gone quite how he pictured it in his head, but his wolf didn’t care.

Jess began to struggle despite his grip on her hair. “FUCK! NO! SAM! Fucking stop it! I’m sorry! NO, DON’T!”

He had nothing more to say to his mate. He could feel her panic through the bond, and she could feel his resolve. Sam slipped a tiny single-use packet of lube from his pocket and held it in his teeth. All of his self-doubt was gone. The wolf knew what it was doing and what it was going to communicate to the bitch he loved. He quickly worked his belt and pants open and pushed everything down to his knees. He ripped the packet open with his teeth and smeared the contents on his cock. He was hard and ready. He didn’t know exactly when that had happened.

Sam kept his hand in her hair and grabbed her hip with the other. She flailed in panic, trying to shift and dodge, but she had nowhere to go. Sam kept hold of her hair, and he moved his fist from the wall to her left shoulder. The pull forced her head back painfully, and he took advantage as she tried to adjust to her new position to shove his cock deep into her ass in one fierce, dragging thrust.

Jessica screamed at the pain. Sam bottomed out and growled into her ear. His hips held her in place while she cried out against the intrusion. He held her there until she sucked in a ragged breath and tried to resist hyperventilating, then he pulled back and shoved in again forcefully. Then he did it again. His movements were harsh. The wall allowed no give. Jessica’s knees and hips ground into the hard surface. Her cheekbone ached. Her ass was split in two and she howled every time she caught a breath. Sam held her tight against the wall and fucked her ruthlessly, mercilessly, dominantly. It was rape. Sam raped his lovely mate against the wall of their home, and she wept and
whined, grunting in pain and humiliation.

Then without warning he froze, his cock buried as deeply inside her as he could shove it. He grunted with fierce satisfaction as he shoved in just that much harder. “Ungh!” Twice. “Unghhh!” Jess flinched. Twice. His lips pulled tight against his teeth, straining to hold the position, then he felt the telltale warmth through his lower belly and his balls draw up close. Sam yelled as he pulled out and drove back in hard, shooting his come into his mate’s tight, swollen ass. He panted as he stilled his hips, keeping his cock firmly buried. Come leaked out around his dick and dripped onto the worn hardwood floor.

Jess had gone slack. She was breathing fast and shallow, whining in a pulse with her breath. Her body was trembling, held up by the grip in her hair, the cock in her ass, and the firm, hot body pressing her in.

“Don’t you ever make me do this to you again, do you hear me? You think it was painful this time. If I have to do it again, you won’t walk away from it – I’ll have to fucking carry you. You ready to talk nicely yet?”

“Yes, sir, yes. Please. I’m so sorry.” Her tone was different this time. The words were the same, but she was a different Sub. There was no attitude and no panic. She was exhausted. She’d experienced emotional and physical trauma, but she didn’t sound…assaulted. She was remorseful.

“Much better,” he accepted, pulling free and wincing as his hand cramped when he tried to release the grip on her hair. Sam held her up with a grip on each shoulder and helped her to the chair he’d pulled her from in his violence. She sat where he placed her, gingerly, still wearing her business blazer and her nylons trapped at her knees.

“For the record,” he told her, taking the seat next hers and pulling in close, working her hose and panties off her legs for her, his expression still stern. “I don’t think you’re weak either. If that’s what you think when I treat you sweetly, you can just put that thought out of your head right now. Jess, I’m not gonna live with you like we’re enemies or rivals or something. I fucking love you, damnit. I get to be sweet to you without having to listen to you pout and swear and kick up a damn fuss about it, you get me? Straighten the fuck up. Right now.”

“Yes, Sir. I will.” She was serene, at peace. She took a deep breath in through her nose, and let it back out shakily, releasing the last of her tension. She kissed his lips with no outward sign that they’d just been through…that…together. Sam dug into her emotions mentally and found no trace she’d ever been upset in the least. She was tired, hungry, her ass ached like blazes, but she seemed to feel all was right with the world.

Sam pressed the advantage. He leaned in again, his eyes still hard and cold. “Here’s how it’s gonna work. Right now, you’re…on probation. You’re…grounded, I guess we’ll call it. You go to work. You come home. That’s it. You’ll do the chores I assign you, and you’ll do them by the deadline I assign you. I expect a text from you at four-thirty every work day telling me what time I can expect you home, even if you’re not working late. If that changes, you are to send me updates as soon as you know something new. And as I said, whichever of us arrives home first, starts cooking dinner. You’ll be…grounded until I decide you’ve shown me what I’m looking for, and then you’ll get the chance to earn some privileges back.”

Jess nodded as he laid down the law, in complete acquiescence; in submission. Sam tucked his wolf back under and continued from a more routine part of himself. He sat up a little bit but didn’t let her out of the hold he held over her with his eyes. “If you break any of my rules, I’m going to punish you. And Jess? If you think you know what that means, I want you to think again. What we did before didn’t work.” Sam shook his head and cracked his neck. Jess looked at him with trust in her
eyes. “That’s on me, and I’m sorry. I didn’t know what you were looking for, but I do now, don’t I?”

“Yes, Sam,” she confirmed proudly. Finally, her wolf had bared his teeth and put her in her place. She knew where she fit, and she knew he deserved the likes of her, and she wasn’t going to have to weaken herself for him. She’d taken what he dished out. She deserved him, too. Finally, he was acting like the wolf she knew he could be.

“Get into bed. I wasn’t kidding about sending you to bed without dinner. I want you naked on your belly on the bed when I get in there so I can take a look at you. We still have something to talk about, but it will keep until tomorrow.”

Jessica’s eyes shot to the open folder on the other side of the table briefly, but she didn’t speak. She slipped to her feet and wobbled a little as she made her way to the bedroom. Sam closed his eyes and let his head drop to the table. He checked on his mate through the bond, and he found her nervous, anxious, but not angry. Sam closed the bond quietly. He began to tremble. He fought to resist the well of tears as a wave of adrenalin swept over him. He feared for a minute he was going into shock, but he breathed through it and began to calm. The tightness eased behind his eyes. Sam’s wolf leaned into him to steady him. (It’s not always going to be like that, you know,) the wolf told him. (Don’t let it go that long, and she’ll be sweetness and light for you. I’ll see to it.)

(I can’t do that again. I need you to guide me and let me know when to give over to you. Will you do that for me?) Sam spoke directly to his wolf. The wolf blinked at him and then collapsed lazily onto the ground, exhausted, but slaked for once.

(Sure, Sam. I kinda liked that. I’ll be right here watching.)

Sam cracked his neck again, steeled his jaw and went to check the damage he’d done to his mate, opening the bond again slowly. She was laid out just as he’d told her to be, but her head was buried in her arms. Sam touched her hair. “Hey, you’re okay. I’m going to take a look and see if you need a doctor. Just relax and let me look.”

Jess sniffled into her arms, but she spread her feet wide apart to give him access. Sam frowned at what he felt from his mate. Why was she anxious now? She’d been fine right after the D.F. and it wasn’t until he sent her to bed that she began to feel nervous.

“Jess? Tell me what’s wrong. I can tell you’re worried about something. Tell me what it is.” Sam thought he was starting to get the hang of not just wondering, but rather demanding answers and expecting her to give them. Sam bit his lip as he waited to see how she’d respond. He’d demanded before and been blown off.

She sniffled again but turned her head and answered him. “You read my report?”

Oh, yes. Of course. She knew what was in it. Apparently, they weren’t waiting until tomorrow. Sam sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair. “Why didn’t you tell me? You don’t think this changes anything do you? Baby, I love you no matter what. You’re my mate. I don’t care about anything else.”

Jessica rolled up onto her hip. Her eyes were sad. “I’m so sorry, Sam. It’s not going to be that simple. It’s easy to say that now when we’ve just Mated. It’ll hit you hard in a couple of years when everyone you know has a new pup or one on the way. This is not going to be swept away by making a grand declaration of love now and then moving on. It’s not a problem you can just fuck your way out of either,” she said with a sad smirk.
“You let me worry about how I’m going to deal, all right? We’ll deal together. I’m here for you just like you’d better be there for me, but don’t tell me how I feel or what I can handle.” Sam needed to end the conversation before she crashed emotionally. He could feel her going there. They had a lot of work to do together over this, but she was exhausted. They couldn’t do it tonight, and they weren’t going to finish dealing after only a couple of conversations anyway.

“Roll back down and let me take a look.”

“Sam.”

“Do it now, or I’ll call Castiel and have him come over.” Sam moved to the end of the bed and leaned up between her legs. The overhead light was on and bright enough. He touched her gently, noting the rawness of the skin near her hole. She was inflamed, red and swollen, but he didn’t see any blood. Sam pulled her cheeks apart gently to get a better look, and a dribble of come leaked out.

“Does it sting when I touch?” he asked, placing his fingertips softly right on her swollen rim. She winced through her shoulders, and her muscles tightened around his hold.

“A little. Mostly just aches. I’m all right, Sam.”

He agreed. For what he’d just done to her, she looked good. He patted her ass and slipped into the bathroom for a warm washcloth. She watched him go and return nude with just the cloth. He could tell she still had something she wanted to say. Sam flipped the light out. He could see well enough in the dark with a bit of moonlight coming in through the windows, and he didn’t really want to get up again.

“Let’s talk it out in the morning, Jess.” He cleaned her up tenderly. “Nothing’s going to change between now and then except we’ll both be better rested. I’m not going anywhere.” Sam launched the washcloth across the room and miraculously landed it in his sink in the bathroom. He stretched out next to her and wrapped her up in his arms. “You’re not working tomorrow, are you?”

“No. I stayed late tonight so I could take the whole weekend with you without falling behind.” Her voice stayed at just a whisper in the darkness.

“Love you, Jess.” He kissed her. She responded sweetly and melted into his touch. It was exactly how he wanted her. He hoped the price didn’t turn out to be higher than he could pay, but then Sam remembered his wolf was on board, and he relaxed a little.

She had tears in her eyes when he pulled back. The moonlight made them nearly glow. “The report doesn’t bother to say how it happened,” she told him, her voice quiet as if confessing a dark crime, her heart rate accelerating. "Just a little letter in a box. That’s all. ‘Base Fertility’. It’s a Pass/Fail; Fertile or Infertile, and they just put an ‘I’ in the box like they were recording my eye color or my height.”

“You’re too tired to do this right now, Ginger. Let it go and sleep.”

“I picked up some kind of a bacterial something on the airplane when we moved. Back when I was fifteen. At least, that’s what they think happened. By the time we got settled in the house, I was running a temperature of 106, and I was delirious. I spent eight weeks in the hospital in and out of consciousness. I don’t remember much at all. They don’t know if it was the infection or the powerful drugs they gave me to fight it, but after it was all over, I was…” Jess sobbed and pressed her face into Sam’s bare chest.

Sam went cold. He’d written her letters for months and received no reply at all. He’d been so hurt.
He thought she loved him and then convinced himself that she didn’t. While Sam had been sulking and nursing his broken heart, Jessica lay in a hospital bed fighting for her life. “Shhh. You’re alive. You lived through it because you’re the strongest woman I’ve ever met, and you made it back to me. I’m so fucking grateful, I can’t…Jess, I’m not ever going to be able to express to you how much I love you. I will take whatever you give me, and it’ll fill me up, and it’s enough. Just exactly what you are is enough. You hear me? You’re enough for me. I love you.”

She shook her head against his chest. “You don’t understand yet, but you will eventually. I feel so guilty for not pushing you away when you Mated me, but it happened so fast. You caught me off guard, and I said yes before I had a chance to think about it. And now you’re stuck with a barren mate. It seems like an easy choice to make right now, but I’ve been living with it for years, and it never goes away, and it never gets any easier. I wish I was strong enough to walk away, but that wouldn’t help anything now. We’re Mated, and now you can’t Mate anyone else.”

Sam growled at her and pulled her in tighter. “I don’t want anyone else. I love you. If it sounds to you like I need you to protect me from all this, then I’m not making myself clear. I LOVE YOU. Yeah, I’d hoped for a family of my own. Yes, I know this is going to hurt like hell, and I’m still reeling from the news. But you don’t get to decide how I feel about it. Don’t you dare. You have enough of a burden to carry for yourself. Don’t carry mine too. We’ll help each other. Jess, you know how it pisses you off if you think I’m treating you like you’re weak? Yeah, that. That’s what you’re trying to do to me. You don’t need to protect me or fucking leave me just so I can go out and find some chick I’m not in love with to breed for pups. That’s not what I want, and you don’t get a say in what I want.” He kissed her to soothe the burn of his fierce words, and he softened his voice. “I love you, and we’re going to build a life together.” She looked at him without moving. “Nod for me, so I know you heard me.”

She huffed a simple laugh and eventually nodded.

“Go to sleep. We’ll talk tomorrow. I want to take another look at you in the morning to make sure I didn’t miss anything, and I’ll make you a big breakfast if you’re good.”

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Dean awoke to the persistent thrum of Michael nudging him to consciousness from another room entirely. He groaned pathetically and rolled over into the warm body beside him. “Caaaas, make him stop,” he whined.

Castiel put an arm around Dean’s shoulders. “What’s he doing to you, sweet boy?” He played into Dean’s complaint. “You want me to go out there and whip his butt for you?”

Dean chuckled and nuzzled in. His ass ached in typical morning-after fashion, but he felt very, very good otherwise. “Yeah. Whip him and make him leave me alone. Still sleepy.”

Cas laughed and kissed him on his forehead. He rolled to check the time. It was 10:30. “Oh. Dean, baby we need to get up. We promised Michael we’d start nailing down some wedding plans today. Remember that? Come on, up you go.” Cas pulled himself and then Dean to sitting. Dean looked so used and fucked out he could pass for Omega this morning. His hair went everywhere, and his eyes were glazed. “On your feet, beautiful. Breakfast, or brunch, I guess.”

The promise of food was enough. Dean slid off the bed and winced as he felt a slick ooze down his
inner thigh. “Cas, hold up, I gotta…” He pointed toward the bathroom.

“I’ll meet you down there. Take your time and clean up thoroughly. Breakfast will be waiting.” Cas tapped his ass and then pulled a bathrobe on, closing the door on his way out.

The bathtub was still full, but the rose petals looked sodden and sad. Dean pulled the plug and took a minute to scoop the flowers out to protect the drain. He wiped his thighs off by the toilet and then pulled his kit out of the cabinet, starting the tap on the sink to get the temperature right.

The enema was an old source of embarrassment for Dean. He used it when he expected to Bottom and after any night like last night, but the necessity never stopped feeling like a burden. Omegas didn’t have to do this. Why should Dean? The alternative was too gross to consider though, so he did what he had to do. Castiel’s complete nonchalance about it had always irked him. Even after years, Dean still blushed every time the Alpha brought it up. There was a part of Dean that wished Michael or Cas, either one, would just take the responsibility out of his hands and require that he make it part of his daily routine, so he didn’t have a choice. It would be easier to face that way, but neither of them did.

Dean went through the motions. Finished the routine, felt much better, washed up, threw on a pair of sleep pants and a t-shirt and went looking for food. He found breakfast tacos and a hot carafe of coffee. Dean hummed happily and slid tentatively into a chair. His massage and bath had helped ease the stiffness in his muscles enough to make sitting substantially easier this morning. Whatever dissatisfaction remained after facing the need to wash himself out dissolved as he sank his teeth into soft flour tortillas. Michael watched him from the end of the table, a laptop open before him and several folders spread around.

“Do you need some alone time with your breakfast, Dean?” he teased.

“Mm-hmm. Give me just a sec.” Dean closed his eyes.

Cas bustled into the kitchen. “Here it is, Michael. I knew I’d saved it. Take a look and tell me what you think.” Cas turned to Dean with a hand on his back and a kiss to his cheek. “Dean, we’re looking into venues. I’m not crazy about using a church setting since I have no intention of adhering to a religious life. I don’t want to be disingenuous. I found an event venue that is large and adaptable to a range of different configurations. What do you think?”

“I don’t really care where we do it.” Dean leaned over toward Michael, who shifted the brochure so Dean could see it too. “It’s in the city?”

“Yes. It’s easily within driving distance, and I believe I’ve been there before for some kind of function, but I don’t remember what exactly. If it’s the place I’m thinking of, it was very nice.”

“I’ll call to check availability and schedule us a tour,” said Michael. “If they don’t have September 9th available, do we keep looking for another venue or change the date?”

“Good question. Let’s just find out first, though.”

“M’Kay. Guest list.” Michael was obviously running down a checklist on one of his papers. Dean finished his taco and settled back with his coffee. Sitting back on his tailbone brought the ache forward, and Dean liked the way it felt. He yawned. Michael watched up at him and cleared his throat but didn’t remark on it.

Cas picked up the prompt. “We invite everyone from The Facility. We invite all family we can reach. I’ll put together a list of friends and another list of business and professional contacts I’d like invited.
Both your family and April’s are invited of course.” Michael scratched notes, frowning.

“It’s going to be a long list of people, Alpha. You sure?”

“I’m sure. They won’t all come, but I plan to be as inclusive as I can. Dean?”

“I’m game. Let’s fill the place. It’s only money, right?”

Cas rolled his eyes. “We don’t have to do the whole fairytale thing, Dean, with caviar and filet mignon. I expect a large turnout, but other than that, can we keep it simple?”

“Whatever you want, Alpha. I’m just teasing about the cost. No, but I’m serious; I don’t care even a little where or how we do this, just as long as you’re there on the day, and you say what the guy tells you to say.” Dean refilled his mug and settled back in his chair again, proud of his impromptu rhyme.

April wandered in looking hesitant, and Cas looked up at her. “Well?” he asked.

“He wants to speak with you, sir. He says I’m not practicing enough.” She took a deep breath.

“Come on, Kitten. Let’s see what we need to do to fix that.” Cas held his hand out for her to take and led her from the kitchen.

Michael finished his notes and looked up at his mate. “You really don’t have an opinion? It’s your wedding, too.”

Dean looked over his shoulder to make sure Cas was gone and then turned conspiratorially back to Michael. Michael’s eyes went wide. This was not good body language from his mate. He should put a stop to whatever Dean was about to say before he even got a chance to voice it.

“I want a ‘Shareer ka Daava’,” he whispered. “Does this place have a way to configure the front podium for that?”

“Why are you whispering? You’re not keeping that from Cas, are you?” Michael cocked his head and used his Dom voice although he didn’t trip into that mode.

“Yes, I am. He’ll say no if I ask him, but if we get the robe and set up the platform and the canopy, what’s he going to do?” Dean stood up and leaned over Michael’s shoulder. He activated a new tab on Michael’s laptop and went to the website he’d found for ordering custom robes. The images were beautiful. Heavy layers of rich fabrics and gems sparkled down the front. Robes in every imaginable hue and complexity filled the screen. They had to weigh a ton with all the layers and pleats of linen thick spun and layered over heavy wool backing. The front panels ran smooth and unbroken, then gave way on the sides to deeply folded pleats. At the back, each of the panels attached to either shoulder in a crisscross that, when the models were standing, overlapped to their calves, but when bent at the waist, fell easily apart to bare their legs, ass, and lower back.

Michael stared as Dean logged in and brought up the custom design he’d been working on. It was ivory with a top layer of nearly sheer silk. Despite the silk, it had a distinctly masculine, maybe military, look about it with few embellishments, broad nautical shoulders, and just a simple paired line of embroidery that traced the lines of his chest to his waist and then disappeared into the pleats. A golden sash that tied around the waist like a sword-sash finished the front. At the back, there was no embellishment at all, just one clean line that ran as the edge of the panel from the model’s outer left shoulder, down to his right calf in a graceful, curving line, the bottom of the opposite panel just visible at the left calf.

“The sash needs to be red, Dean. You’re not Omega.”
“I can order it that way, but they didn’t have red as an option for the first draft of the design,” Dean explained.

“I wonder why,” Michael snarked. “Look, Dean.” Michael turned to look at his mate. “It’s beautiful. I would love to see you in it. God,” he turned back and looked at the screen again, “I’d love to fuck you in it, but you can’t keep hiding shit from Cas. I’m not helping you with this behind his back.”

Dean stood up and cleared his plate off the table. “He’ll say no, man.”

“And what does that tell you? Hey, if you two can’t figure out a way to agree on anything, maybe you’re not ready for this.” Michael put his hands up to ward off Dean’s fiery response the alpha was preparing. “I know. Crazy talk coming from me, right? But, seriously, what does it say about you two if you always feel like you have to go behind his back to get what you want?”

Dean leaned on the counter and dropped his head between his spread arms. “I dunno. Kinda feel like it’s swirling out of control.”

“Then grab it by the balls and take control right back. You think that if you spring this on him, like you even could – the guy looks at every receipt that passes through here – that he’s going to go along with it? He’s more likely to beat your butt on the dais in front of everyone than he is to perform a ritual Claiming. Fuck, Dean! TALK TO HIM!”

“Talk to me about what?” Cas asked, unperturbed as he came back into the kitchen alone. Dean jumped, and Michael closed the tab. His laptop was facing away from the door, so Cas wouldn’t have seen it the page, but the movement hadn’t been subtle.

“Dean has something to ask you, Alpha.” Michael shut the laptop but left it sitting on the table. He collected all of his notes and swept right past Dean’s bitchface and straight out of the kitchen.

“Dean?” Cas turned to him, filling a mug for himself with the last of the coffee.

Dean leaned back against the counter and kept his eyes on the floor, thinking. “Cas, do you really want to get married? Are we doing to the right thing?”

“Um. This is not what I was expecting. Are you having second thoughts?” Cas pulled a chair out from the table and sat down. He wasn’t letting Dean see it, but he couldn’t have stayed on his feet if he wanted to. The ground had just dropped out from beneath him. A lump formed suddenly in his throat.

Dean wasn’t watching. He kept his gaze lowered. His voice was husky when he spoke. “Not exactly second thoughts. I love you. You know that. But does that mean the best choice for us is to get married?”

“It’s what I want, Dean. I want it very badly, but you have to want it, too. I can’t do it by myself, and it’s not fair to either of us to try.” Cas’ voice had developed a telltale huskiness as well. “May I ask what sparked you to bring it up right now? Like this?”

“I guess I kinda feel like you’re running the show more than I thought you would, and I found myself sort of, um…Jesus, how do I say this? Sort of squeezed out of the decision making. I’m confused as hell. I feel like if I ask for what I want, I’m gonna hear no more than is fair. And once you’ve decided, it’s closed for good. I feel stifled, like I’m not really part of this, so I kinda started to think of ways to go behind your back, and I hate feeling like that. I don’t want that. Michael, he, uh, he set me straight just now. He told me maybe we’re not ready to get married, and it made me really think about it…hard. So, I’m asking…should we maybe not do this right now?”
“Can you tell me what you talked to him about?” Dean didn’t lift his head or speak. Cas couldn’t see him squeeze his eyes closed, but he saw the tension in his shoulders. “Dean, do you trust me?”

Dean looked up at him. “Yeah. I do. You know I do. I trust you so much I’ll literally let you do anything you want to me.”

“No, I mean you. Front-brain you. Do YOU, Dean Michael Winchester, trust me as a man, not as an Alpha or a Dom?” Cas stood up, but he didn’t approach Dean. “You know you can tell me or ask me anything. I’m not trying to ride roughshod over you, love. What I have envisioned for us is the very opposite of that. Ideally, we would continue to scene as we’ve been doing for years, but aside from that, we’re partners. That’s why I proposed marriage rather than a domestic bond. I want you for my husband more than my subordinate. Dean, that can only work if we trust one another. Do you trust me?”

“I don’t know if I trust you or not. If I feel like I have to hide shit from you, then I guess not. At least not fully.” Dean’s eyes looked lost. The pain was back. The voices were back. Cas swept in and embraced him, kissed him.

“Thank you for being honest with me. That’s what we both need. Baby, I can’t fix what I don’t know is broken. I told you back in Dallas, if you want to slow down, or even if you want to call ‘Red’ and stop the whole thing, I’ll do whatever you want. Please don’t think the only two choices for us are to get married in September or to separate for good. There are a million different options, and we don’t have to do anything but what you and I decide is right for us.” Cas pulled back to look at him. “Please trust me enough to tell me what you said to Michael just now. Can you do that?”

Dean looked at him then took a deep breath and went to the laptop, opening it and finding his place on the website. He clicked through to the design he’d built and turned the computer to face Cas.

Dean didn’t say anything more as Cas studied the screen, his eyes going wide at the robe and then even wider as he realized he was logged in to Dean’s custom account. Castiel’s face settled on confusion.

“For Michael?” he asked. “You want a ceremonial Claiming?”

“Not for Michael, Cas. For me. I want a Shareer ka Daava as part of our wedding.” Dean’s voice was stronger. Somewhere he’d pulled out an old batch of assertiveness, dusted it off, and pulled it over his skin.

“But…it’s a Hindu ceremony, and we’re not Indian. Plus, you’re not Omega. Why would you want this? Dean, you don’t even like playful public sex. Why would you want a full-submission ceremony – in front of everyone you know? I don’t understand. This is a Mating ritual. It’s not intended to be part of a wedding.” Castiel was baffled. Hadn’t Dean just confessed that he felt stifled in their relationship? That Cas was assuming too much authority?

Dean took a deep breath. “You want me to trust you? Here it is. I’m a fucking Sub. I own that, or at least, for the first time, I’m starting to. Help me with this, man. It’s not easy, but I feel like this is going to help me take a step forward. Like a coming out or something. We don’t have to let everyone we know in for this part. We send out two sets of invites – some for the public, fully-dressed classic marriage part of the wedding, and another just for our intimate friends and family. See if this place can install a curtain around the dais and make a room out of it.”

“You designed this robe with no plan to tell me about it?” Cas didn’t try to keep the hurt out of his voice. “How was that supposed to work, Dean? You just spring it on me at our wedding? Show up dressed like an Indian Omega and expect I’ll just go along with it because it’s already done?”
Cas slipped out early in the afternoon. He had quietly called Michael’s testing panel to a coffee shop on campus to explain what he knew and give them all a chance to back out if it made them
uncomfortable.

“And you want us to keep it quiet?” Adam asked in disbelief.

“I’m asking for your discretion, yes. You are not required to participate at all. I won’t take offense if you choose to excuse yourself from the test for reasons of your own safety or ethics. I admit that what Michael is doing and my response to it are not appropriate in any way. Do not feel pressured to agree, but I ask that if you wish to pull your names from the panel, that you maintain discretion. This is a personal issue, and I’d, very unjustifiably, like to keep it quiet.”

“It’s not going to bother me, Alpha,” Jody told him. “I’m past the point where I’m going to catch a pup. Besides, we all take the industrial strength version of birth control. I never understood why it has to come from both sides anyway. Nothing’s getting through those fuckers.” She sipped her iced tea. “You really think he’s going to Top Raphael? Me, maybe, but Raphael? Really?”

Cas relaxed. Jody had a way of making the whole thing seem like a non-issue. She was right. The birth control protocols were already complete overkill. Adam, Jody, and Raphael were protected no matter what happened. But there was always the ‘what if.’ “I don’t know, Jody. Michael’s fertility, without any prophylactic in his system, is not a concern if he Tops a male alpha, but we’ve never seen an Omega do that. That’s not to say it can’t happen.”

“Alpha, if I may?” Adam put forward. Cas nodded and turned to him. “Doesn’t it maybe change the test outcome if you tell us all this beforehand? I mean, if Raphael was worried he might, you know, knock Michael up, or something, don’t you think it might change how he acts in there?”

“I’ve considered that, Adam, and it’s a fair point, but I think the reverse is true as well. Michael may well fight harder to Top since he knows he can only get pregnant by receiving. Raphael deserves the same knowledge. It levels the field. In truth, you’re the only one I’m really concerned about. Either way, in the first round, both of you are Omega, and one of you is fertile. We need to be careful.”

“I’m in,” Raphael said unexpectedly. It’s the only words he’d spoken since placing his order at the counter. “We through, Alpha? I gotta go meet my nieces at the park. Promised them we’d take in a movie.”

“Of course. Thank you, alpha. I appreciate your professionalism in the face of my shortcoming.” Cas shook his hand. Raphael gave him a rare smile.

“We’re all human, Castiel. You’ve always been a fine leader and a good boss. I trust you. We all do.” Raphael put a hand on Cas’ shoulder and then left without another word.

“I’m in, too,” Jody said confidently. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world. Don’t know if Dean’s ever going to forgive me, but I’ll take the chance. That boy is delicious.”

“What?” Adam turned to her. “You said you were only into girls.”

Jody smiled in amusement and shook her head. “So did you. And besides, this is different. I tell you what. If I did go for boys on my own time, that Omega is exactly the type I’d go for.” She left Adam with his mouth hanging open, grabbed her keys and her drink, dropped a kiss to Castiel’s cheek, and pushed the door open with a jingle. She winked over her shoulder and left.

“No pressure, Adam. Think it over and let me know. If you say yes, I will administer an abortive afterward just to be safe, so you need to understand everything you’re saying yes to.”

“Are you giving one to Michael?”
Cas looked at the table and thought how to explain. “Adam, Michael’s not going to need one.”

“Oh,” Adam peeled the label off his cup in silence. ”OH!” Castiel sipped his coffee and watched the people come and go. He tried to ignore the faint smell of Omega arousal coming from the young man across the table from him.

“I suppose I can’t think of a reason not to go ahead and say yes, sir,” Adam finally said.

Cas chuckled, his eyes crinkling. For a straight man, Adam had no more defense against the allure of the Dominant Omega than Jody had. Some things, once-in-a-lifetime things, you just had to experience for yourself if the opportunity arose. “That’s not a very confident yes, Omega. Are you certain?”

“Yes, sir. I’m certain.” Adam bit his thumbnail as he looked up at Castiel. Cas casually pulled his hand away from his mouth and offered him his drink instead. Adam took it and sipped, lowering his eyes back down again. “Do you think I could sit in the booth for the last round and watch?”

“We’ll see,” Cas answered with a laugh, proud that Adam had caught his subtext. “I’ll take care of everything. Thank you for listening to me, Adam. Thanks for giving me the benefit of the doubt. Do you need a ride anywhere?” Cas collected his belongings and stood.

“No, Alpha. I’m close to home, and it’s a nice day. I’ll walk.”

“Suit yourself. Have a pleasant weekend.”

“Thank you, sir. Thanks for the coffee.”

***************

Castiel finished his dinner and leaned back in his chair. Dean kept on eye on him. Alpha had eaten well but hadn’t touched a drop of alcohol. Dean had a beer with his meal, and no one had stopped him, but would he be allowed another? The implications were obvious to a Sub who’d played as long as Dean had. Last night, there was white wine with the shrimp. They went through a bottle and a half at dinner. Cas had three glasses himself, but their night together, while very emotional, had never put Castiel into a place where he needed to keep watch over his beloved in a Submissive state.

Tonight, the Dom wasn’t drinking. Dean had to close his eyes as a tingly shiver ran straight to his cock and stayed there, taking up space in his jeans. He was still too damaged for impact-play, and his ass wasn’t going to pass inspection for fuckability. Dean was game, of course, but it wasn’t Dean’s call. What did the Alpha have planned that didn’t involve leaving bruises, didn’t involve touching Dean’s genitals, didn’t involve fucking his ass, but required the Alpha to be alert and unhindered by alcohol?

“Michael, would you please do me the courtesy this evening of putting a block between yourself and your mate? It’s a show of trust, I know, but we would appreciate the privacy.” Castiel was staring thoughtfully into his water glass as he spoke.

“No, sir, I’m not comfortable doing that. I won’t interfere, but I wouldn’t be able to relax without being able to feel him in my head.” Michael finished his dessert, and set his spoon down.
Dean sighed, looked right at Michael, and switched his side of the bond closed in his mind. Michael’s eyes flashed, but Dean got there first. “Trust and good faith, remember, Omega? I deserve some space and some privacy.”

Michael struggled with himself internally, fought for a moment to pry the bond back open, and then gave up. “Fine.” He pushed his chair back and stomped from the kitchen.

“HEY!” Dean called to him. “Have your tantrum later. It’s your turn with the dishes!” Michael came back in slowly, a world of unsaid things on his face. Cas took the opportunity to take Dean by the hand and pull him clear of the imminent explosion.

“April, please help Michael with tidying the kitchen. I’ll see you in the morning.” He pulled Dean out before the mates could say anything else. There would be a re-settling to do over the tiny power struggle, but Cas wasn’t about to let it throw off his evening.

“Good night, Alphas!” she called, stacking plates.

Cas took Dean into the playroom and closed the door, locking it from the inside. “You’re not going to come tonight, Dean. But if you’re very, very good for me, I’ll let you suck me off and I’ll feed you from my cock. Does that sound agreeable to you?”

“Fuck, yes!” Dean was hard already, knowing there was a long, painful, agonizing tease coming tonight and going nowhere but straight into Subspace. It was going to be brutal, and it was going to be incredible.

“Good. I’d like you to shower and then place yourself in the middle of the bed, on your knees. I’ll wait.”

April couldn’t sleep. Her bottom was still a stinging, swollen mess, but it wasn’t that. She’d grown accustomed to that. After she lost to the temptation last night and made herself come on her fingers and the sensations from her mate, he’d spanked her soundly with a wooden paddle she had never seen before and told her to keep the bond closed tonight. April was alone in body and mind for the first time in months. She whimpered in her bed. At two-thirty she gave up and sneaked up one doorway in the hall only to find the master suite empty. They must have stayed downstairs in the playroom.

April bit her lip miserably. She was tired and alone. Finally, she decided, and she crept down to the end of the hall, opened Michael’s door and slipped in, closing it behind her. She could see the shape of him forming a mound under the covers on the left side of the bed, so she slipped silently around to the right and tucked herself under the covers. She rolled to her side with her back to him, not touching him and hoped like hell he wouldn’t kick her out.

Michael wasn’t sleeping either. He raised his tired head and regarded the Omega. She was dressed in a thin cotton nightgown, and she didn’t seem to want anything but a bed with a warm body in it. He heard her sniffle quietly. Michael rolled his eyes in the dark and then spooned up quietly behind her, rested an arm over her waist, and then went still. Neither of them moved or spoke. Ultimately, they both began to relax, and each slipped away into deep sleep without having said a word.
Chapter End Notes

So they talked, and it did some good. Was it enough? Eh, probably not. They didn't talk about it long enough or deeply enough. Cowards. Fucking cowards.

See you all next week. Thursday or Friday...ish.
Thursday, June 15, 2017

Chapter Summary

Michael's family arrives for a visit.

Chapter Notes

I'm still trying to get to the big dinner with the Congresswoman from District 3. It's coming soon, I swear. Hopefully they'll all cooperate, and it'll be next.

Our boys are still having trust issues, but they seem to be doing better, at least with a few things anyway.

I hope you like Michael's family.

This chapter starts with the Winchester family when Sam's 8 and Dean's 12. There's a Weechester masturbation scene, but he's alone, so if that squicks you, skip to NOW. I'm not too concerned about all you kinky bastards. If you've been with me this long, you know I'll go there...wherever that is...I'll go there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THEN:

“Are you fucking serious right now?! You challenging me, little girl?” John was livid.

“I'm not a little girl, damnit, and I'm not challenging you, you stubborn bastard, I'm just sick of
having my every move watched over like I’m about to run with scissors or out into traffic. Why are you so fucking controlling? Don’t you trust me at all?” Mary wasn’t any less angry, but she needed to be careful. Her mate’s eyes were already swamped with red.

“All I ask is that you let me know where you are. Just leave me a simple note when you go out, so I don’t have to guess.” He had a tight rein on his temper, but it still leaked through in the veins on his neck and the jut of his jaw.

“C’mon Dad, relax. She just went to the store. What’s the big deal? Why do you have to know every step she takes?” Sam had turned away from the TV, sitting sideways on the couch to face his parents.

“Stay out of it, Samuel, unless you really want in. This is not going to a place you want to join.”

“You leave him out of it, John!” Mary flashed at him, beta eyes blazing. “This is between you and me, not Sam.”

“Then he can keep his fucking opinions to himself.”

“He’s just a pup, and you’re shouting loud enough to frighten him. Please lower your voice and just talk to me. What did I do that was so wrong?”

“I came home,” he counted off, advancing on her in full alpha mode. “To a house with just my eight-year-old son in it, alone. He had no idea where you were or when you were coming back. There was no sign that any plans had been made for feeding any of us this evening, and there was no note from you, nor any sign of where my other son might be.”

“And when have I ever left you without a meal in your belly, John Winchester? I told Sam where I was going, but he’s young and distracted, and he missed it. Dean’s at ball practice until late, just like every Tuesday. I didn’t leave a note because I expected to be home before you were. I just got caught up talking with Steph outside the store and lost track of time. It was no big deal at all until you turned it into ’Grocery-Store-Gate’. For some reason, you can show up at whatever fucking time of the day that you want, but my leash has a magic spring-back mechanism that pops me right back here at 4:00 every day. Fine. What-the-fuck-ever. Now if you’ll excuse me, Your Royal Majesty, I have dinner to prepare. It’s going to be a little bit late because someone can’t keep his fucking temper in check.”

John took hold of her bicep before she got past him, and he gripped it tight enough to redden. He breathed in through his flared nostrils, whispering very close to her ear. “I don’t give a fuck what you have to say to me, LITTLE GIRL! You say it with respect, or your backside is going to feel it. Get your ass over that Goddamn table and stay there. I’m about to remind you who makes the rules in this house, because you’ve obviously forgot.”

“DAD, NO!” Sam came dashing in and threw himself across his mother’s body, already breathing heavily and laid out on their kitchen table. John took a breath, calmed himself, and crouched down to speak to his son.

“Samuel, this is not a conversation you need to get involved in. This is between your mother and me. It’s my job to be the alpha in this family, and it’s important that I do my job correctly. Your mother is out of balance right now, and as hard as it is to see what I need to do for her, I still have to do it. She needs me to. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.” Sam pouted, but he let his father shift him away, his sad eyes on his mother’s panting form. John laid down four stiff swats to his son’s butt before giving him a gentle shove back toward
the living room. Sam’s hand ran over his stinging backside as he walked slowly. The doorway between the two rooms had a wide, open archway so Sam still had a good view of his mother, holding tight to the edge of the table, her eyes closed.

“You don’t have to keep watch, Sam. Your mother is safe with me. Would you rather step out on the porch?”

“No, Sir. I want to stay.” Sam set his jaw and settled in. John nodded and pulled a wooden spoon from the tall canister of utensils on the kitchen counter. The pup was stubborn and reminded John of himself at that age.

“Who makes the rules in this house, Mary?” His voice was cold and angry.

“You do.” She said it, but she didn’t yet mean it.

“Yes, I fucking do, and who follows them?” John pulled her skirt up over her waist and spread it out on her back. She was commando, just like he liked her.

“Everyone else.” Her voice was dripping with frustration and disdain. She widened her feet to give herself better support on the table. It also opened her up to him. John flicked the spoon against her pussy and she gasped.

“Who obeys me, again?”

“I do!” she breathed it out this time with less contempt.

“That’s right. You’d better, or you’re going to feel it for a week.” John smacked her ass hard with his hand, quickly covering the whole canvas and turning her pink. He picked the spoon back up and gave her four more hits to her hole and her pussy, making her cry out and flinch. Her leg kicked up, and one hand moved down to cover her.

“Uh-unh. You asked for this. You’re going to get what's coming to you, and you're not getting up until I’m through.” John checked on his son surreptitiously, but Sam seemed almost bored already. His TV program kept drawing him back in, so John let him be. He started swatting his mate’s ass and thighs with the spoon, giving it to her hard and without pause. She grunted and cried, yelped and moaned. John noticed her pussy swelling and beginning to moisten. He kept up the spanking until she started to apologize with intent, a clear indication that she had taken the correction to heart. Then he set the spoon down in front of her face, and he unzipped his fly.

Sam yawned and settled into the couch, his eyes glazing over at the screen in front of him.

John pulled his cock out, stroked himself roughly a couple of times, and shoved his way into his mate’s wet cunt, rutting hard into her sore folds. She cried out harder. He fucked her ruthlessly, letting his body slam into her red backside as his cock claimed his property.

“Tell me the rule again, Mary,” he said, going still with his cock embedded deeply, keeping pressure against her throbbing body.

“Don’t leave the house without telling you where I’m going.” She breathed through her sobs.

“Why is that a rule?” He fucked into her hard a few more times before stopping to let her answer.

The front door slammed. “Hey, Mom! They called practice ‘cause of lightning. I’m starving! When’s dinner?” Dean’s voice made it into the kitchen before he did, but he stopped in the doorway when he saw his parents fucking on the table.
“Dinner’s going to be late, son. Go take care of your homework.” John rutted again hard enough to pull his mate up on her tiptoes.

Dean mumbled a yessir and sneaked an apple as he skirted through the kitchen on his way to join his brother on the couch. He didn’t have any homework today. He tried to ignore the movement and the noises coming from the kitchen, but the sounds made his own cock swell, and he shifted uncomfortably. His alpha knot was new enough to feel strange even when it was dormant, and Dean had no control over when and where his erection might pop up. He tried to press down on it without Sam noticing, but his little brother smirked at him. Then Mary wailed high and long, begging the alpha to knot her and let her come. Dean fled to the room he shared with Sam as he heard his father grunt louder and groan through his release, refusing his mate permission. Realization that his mother was being punished and not just fucked sent Dean into a deeper well of arousal.

Dean closed the door as gently as he could, then stripped out of his pants and briefs, spreading out on his belly on the bed, hoping Sam wouldn’t follow him. There was no lock on the door. Dean wrapped one hand around his cock, pulling up onto his knees, then he spit on the fingers of his other hand, and pressed two fingers into the tight, puckered tunnel of his asshole, feeling it burn as he stretched himself on his own fingers. His imagination turned his hand and his fingers into those of a large, faceless man who whispered sternly into Dean’s ear, making all kinds of hot, nasty threats.

Dean pulled his fingers out and whacked his ass as hard as he could. The noise was too loud, and he winced, but he relished the feel of a handprint forming across his cheek. He sucked his fingers back into his mouth to recoat them with spit, ignoring the bitter taste of the musk that filled his rectum. His health teacher explained that the odor of alpha coming from ‘that region’ was a pheromone draw to Omegas. Dean didn’t like the taste, but he needed more spit on his fingers. He rutted into the tunnel of his hand and forced three fingers up his ass, fucking himself as hard as he could both ways. It was awkward, but the images in his head of a paddle that came down on him again and again matched the rhythm of the finger-thrusts up his ass, and he was coming with a muffled groan in no time.

Dean lay sprawled out in his own mess afterward, wondering if it was normal to get horny from your own parents’ activities. Nothing about his folks’ behavior was new. They were a normal Lupin Mated couple, and they fucked on a regular basis, usually behind closed doors, but often enough in the main rooms. Dean was used to it. What was new was his body’s response to any sexual trigger at all. Even just a lingering smell of an alpha release made Dean hard in his pants. He didn’t think that was normal. He knew he felt the same response to Omega odors as well, but he didn’t know any Omegas closely enough to smell them regularly. Dean groaned and rolled out of the wet spot, pulling the sheets free as he rolled. It was time to talk to Dad.

NOW:

When the front bell rang, Michael was off like a shot, the word, “Rachel,” whispered under his breath as he flew down the stairs. Dean smiled and followed his mate at a slower pace, straightening the tie Michael had only just finished knotting. In the foyer, Fred beat Michael to the door, and the visitors were already stepping cautiously in, only to be sideswiped as Michael’s feet slipped on the marble tiles, and he crashed into them, arms and legs whirling to arrest his momentum. He toppled the young beta girl whose long wavy hair was as dark as the Omega’s, and they fell heavily to the hard floor, tangled together.

“What the…? Oh, for the love of God…” The Alpha bent down and hoisted his son to his feet by the back of his belt and then took hold of his daughter’s hand to do the same. Both of his offspring
were laughing, but the Alpha didn’t find it funny. “You’re twenty-three years old, son. Don’t you think it’s about time to start behaving like a fucking adult?”

Michael snickered happily, ignoring his father’s testiness. “It’s good to see you, too, Pop.” The Omega hugged his sister hard, lifting her off the ground and kissing her cheek before checking that she’d not been hurt. She didn’t want to release the hug, so Michael greeted his parents with one arm still wrapped around his sister.

“You’re twenty-three years old, son. Don’t you think it’s about time to start behaving like a fucking adult?”

“Mommy! I’m so glad you came! How was the drive? Did you bring everything? What about the game console from the game room? Did you bring my movie poster collection?” Michael babbled at her with no break as he squeezed the tiny Omega woman with one hand. “You packed my comics, right?”

“Holy crap, Michael. Give the woman a chance to speak. Maybe ask how she’s doing before you break out all the gimme’s. And intros, man,” Dean prompted, joining them.

Omega Lancet had tears in her eyes when her son released her, and she kept a hand on him as he pulled away, but didn’t say anything. It didn’t look like her voice was working yet. Rachel still held claim over his left side, and now his mother had his right. He leaned down and pressed his cheek to the top of the Omega’s head, soaking in family.

Castiel emerged into the foyer to join them, his hand already extending to the other Alpha in welcome. Both Alphas suppressed the instinct to challenge and fight that rose beneath the surface. There was no outward sign of it on either of their faces.

“Jerry. I appreciate your driving up all this way to deliver Michael’s belongings to him. We’ll get started unpacking everything once you’ve had some time to relax from your journey. Please, come this way and have a drink with us. Michael, I see you have the ladies well-escorted. This way everyone.”

Cas led them off to the parlor on the right. Michael grinned as he followed, pulling his sister close as if to soak in her scent while he had the chance. Dean took up the rear.

Dean was tired from a long and exhausting week back at work – and it was only Thursday. He had another full day to go and a formal dinner at the end of Friday’s daily grind. Dean didn’t ever remember work tiring him out like this before. He didn’t know if it was age creeping up on him or the sinking feeling he got every time he opened his email folder and saw how much catch up he needed to do. He hadn’t taken a full month off since he started working at nineteen, and yeah, even before that. Dean hadn’t experienced a full month of R&R since the summer before he turned fourteen. Maybe it was the jar of having too much time to relax and then jumping right back into the grueling schedule of The Facility that was wearing him out.

(Maybe you’re knocked up), joked his wolf.

(That’s not funny), Dean shot back. He found April standing beside one of the parlor couches and put an arm around her waist, careful where he put pressure on her skin.

“Aren’t you going to introduce your old family to your new one, son?” Alpha Lancet prompted again, sure that the tall Alpha would suppress his son, and wanting to test their interactions. Michael stood up straighter at his tone, responding immediately to his years of conditioning. Castiel deferred to Michael rather than step in, so Michael answered the question.

“Of course. Yes, Sir. Uh, Alpha Novak, may I present my, uh, my father, Alpha Jerry Lancet, and my mother, Beatrice. And this here, this is my sister, Rachel.” Michael hip-checked Rachel gently,
making her smile up at him. Alpha Lancet only nodded in confirmation this time. Neither Alpha felt
the need for another handshake. And if the prickly man felt his stereotypes wobble a little at Castiel
allowing an Omega to make introductions, he didn’t say anything about it.

“You are welcome in our home, Omega Lancet. Rachel.” Cas formally greeted them both. He only
nodded to Beatrice, honoring the other Alpha’s ownership, but he shook Rachel’s hand, forcing her
to release her brother for a moment. She went right back to him though, once she had her hand back,
wrapping an arm possessively around his waist the way Dean held April.

“You may call me Alpha if you prefer, but my name is Castiel, and I’ll answer to that…or Cas.
We’re very informal at home, and you’re family now, too, so please make yourselves comfortable.”
Cas turned back to Dean and smiled. Dean smirked at him, amused that Cas had chosen his socially
awkward front-brain for this first meeting. “And may I present the Pack to you. Jerry, you’ll
remember Dean, but your family hasn’t had the pleasure yet. Ladies, this is Michael’s mate and my
fiancé, Dean Winchester.”

Dean stepped forward and kissed each easily on the cheek and gave full hugs. He wasn’t a pack
Alpha, and so had fuller liberty to touch. Dean’s ease with people shone through as he pulled them
both into a comfortable place in their heads. He did it effortlessly. He complimented the Omega on
her dress and told her how grateful he was for how well she’d cared for and raised Michael.

“And you,” he winked at Rachel. “You’re the one with all the dirt on him, aren’t you? You and me
need to get to know each other. I wanna know everything.”

“Like the time he was nine and didn’t want to take a bath, so he pooped in the tub?” she said loudly.

“YES! Just like that.” Dean turned and looked at Michael, whose face had gone beet red.
Mortification seeped through both Mating-bonds in different colors of red and black. He shoved his
sister’s shoulder roughly and escaped to the drink cart in the corner.

“Pop beat his ass black and blue and then made him sit in the dirty water until it went cold.” Rachel
didn’t seem to be aware that Cas and Jerry had both become very uncomfortable suddenly. Even in
the short time Castiel had known Michael, he could recognize what a counterproductive, not to
mention downright unhealthy, response that had been for a pup like Michael. And Jerry didn’t
appreciate his own daughter so cavalierly showing off how little control he had in his own Pack.

April stepped up into the center, stumbling deliberately over the footstool in her way, and it broke the
tension. Dean, still chuckling, caught her and pulled her forward, wrapping his arms around her
waist from behind, so Castiel picked the introductions back up.

“And this is my mate, April. Rachel, I believe you and April are just about the same age. Please feel
free to get to know one another if you like. As I said, we don’t stand much on formality here, and
she’s free to make friends where she will. April…this is Alpha Lancet, Rachel, and Beatrice.”

April lowered her eyes, pulled out of Dean’s embrace, and approached the Alpha, stopping just clear
of his reach and standing still to await his response as she’d been trained to do. Her hands were
clased demurely behind her back, baring her front to the Alpha in submission. The Alpha took her
in but addressed Castiel. “She’s lovely and very sweet, Alpha Novak. Awfully young, too, is she
not?”

“Yes, Alpha,” April responded with genuine affection and pulled back to tuck herself beneath his
“Drinks!” Dean suggested, joining his mate at the cart with a smack to his ass. Michael grumbled something under his breath that made Dean laugh good-naturedly. “What are you drinking, Jerry? What’s your poison?”

“I’ll have a Bourbon, if you have it.” Dean nodded and pulled a bottle from the middle shelf and selected a glass. “You have a beautiful home, sir,” he continued, addressing Castiel again.

“Thank you, Jerry. It’s been in my family for three generations now. My grandfather built it in 1923 in the style of the day. He did a good job with the styling, but I find the size and scope unnecessarily pretentious.” Cas accepted a glass that April handed him. She delivered Jerry’s next and then turned back to the cart. “It’s my hope that we’ll find a purpose over the next few years for more of the rooms than we’re using now.”

Beatrice sidled back up to Michael and whispered into his ear. “Oh, yes. Of course, Mommy. It’s just out that door. First door on the left. You want me to show you?”

“I’ll do it,” said April, slipping her hand into the anxious woman’s hand and pulling her gently. Beatrice clung to April’s hand and followed behind her, keeping her eyes low until she’d passed the alphas.

“What’s up with your mother, Michael? I thought your family was progressive. Why’s she acting like a full-traditional Omega?”

Michael shook his head in disgust. “Pop’s got her convinced that you and Castiel are monsters, and she’s going to get herself a beating if she makes a wrong move. She’s always reserved, but I’ve never seen her so scared.”

“Dude! That’s…” Dean struggled to find the right words.

“I know, Dean. Give it a little time. My Pop’s not a bad person…exactly. He’s just so full of…”

“Shit, Michael,” hissed Dean angrily. “He’s full of shit. He judges us based on completely false assumptions while all the while he’s squashing his own mate under his heel. And his Omega son, too. I’m not going to sit here and put up with it, even if you’re planning to. He doesn’t need time, he needs a swift kick up his ass. Oh, shit,” Dean realized. “He’s going to be here with Naomi at tomorrow’s dinner. Dude, I can’t do this. I feel a massive headache coming on. I think I have Typhus.”

Michael set down his drink and wrapped his arms around Dean, laying his head on Dean’s shoulder. “Don’t you dare leave me alone, Dean,” he whispered fiercely. Dean hugged him back and kissed his temple, chuckling darkly. “I know it’s fucked up, but he’s family. He’ll come around if he spends some time with you and April and Castiel. He just needs a few opportunities to see that his assumptions aren’t true. Besides, maybe he and Castiel’s mother will spend the whole evening talking to each other and leave the rest of us alone. How would that be?”

Cas broke their moment by calling to Dean and asking if he’d seen Gabriel. Michael answered. “I’ll go find him. I seem to remember seeing him heading toward his room.” Michael slipped out, and Dean went to hand Rachel a beer.

“I’m glad you made the trip,” he told her, tapping his long neck against hers before taking a drink. “He adores you, you know. And he misses you a lot. You ever consider transferring to KU? You’re a business major, right?”
“Yes, but there’s no way Pop would let me move, even if I wanted to. It’s good to see Michael. He looks really happy, Dean. Thank you for that. I know the truth of the situation, so I can ignore all the crap my Pop says, but you should know he’s got some fucking up ideas about you ‘Neo-Traditionalists’.” She used finger quotes awkwardly with the beer in her hand. “He watches these talk shows that try to make it sound like you folks have a harem chained up in your basement, and he just soaks it in. I was shocked that he came home last month and said he’d approved the match without putting up a fight. I think it took him by surprise, and he said yes before he had a chance to think it through. He was pretty desperate about Michael anyway. He was primed for any solution that popped up, and I think he practically threw Michael at it with both hands. He’s been second-guessing that choice ever since.” Rachel took a long drink and then smiled over Dean’s shoulder at her mother. April was guiding her to the drink cart to get her a lemonade from the mini fridge behind the bar. “But for me, Dean, I could never leave Mommy. She needs me. Even when I Mate, I’m planning to stay in the pack. He’s Alpha over all four of his younger brothers and their pups, and he’s convinced one of Mommy’s sisters and a brother to join, too. It’s a big, stable pack with lots of resources in spite of my Pop’s biases.”

“You’d be welcome here, Rachel, any time for any reason, but I understand wanting to stay close to family. If you ever do decide to switch and if you needed help with tuition, Michael’s Pack now, and he has a salary he doesn’t really need. We can make that happen for you without it being anything but family helping family. I get it if you want to stay in Texas for your mother.”

“Not just her, Dean. Pop needs me, too. He’s struggling these days. He’s…kind of lost right now and looking for which way to go. I think all the crazy hate-filled venom is just him trying to take a last stab at holding onto something that gave him a sense of stability for a long time. He used to think he understood how the world works and now it’s all falling out from under him.” She took another drink and went thoughtful for a moment. Dean gave her time, and she began again. “Michael imploded at college. I don’t know what he’s told you, but he was on a scary course. He could have really hurt himself or someone else. Pop was at his wits’ end trying to help him, but everything he did made Michael worse. Finally, Pop just gave in to all the advice he got from the school to get Michael tested. They all said to bring him here to Kansas, and Pop had no idea what else to do. I’ve never seen him swallow his pride like that before. Listen, before you judge him too harshly, just please try to understand. The world you live in is so new. It’s not the world he grew up in at all, and he doesn’t understand it. He was never equipped to raise a dominant Omega.” She laughed ironically into her drink. “Who is?”

Michael emerged again, alone. He walked to Castiel, pulled him aside, and whispered in his ear.

“Would you please excuse me, Rachel?” Dean went to see what the whispering was about.

“Gabe can’t come right now,” Michael told him. “I found him in Alpha’s office. He wouldn’t tell me what was going on, but it sounded urgent. He’s got a cell phone, a radio, and a computer all going at once. I thought you should know.” Dean looked at Cas, who nodded.

“Me or you?” Dean asked him.

“I’ll go. Are you all right to keep hosting without me for a few minutes? I knew he was close, but it sounds like they’re moving now. I need to see if he needs anything.”

“We’re fine, Cas. Go on and take your time. Sam’s not here yet anyway. No rush.” Dean put more confidence in his voice than he felt. He was in no mood to entertain a bigoted Alpha who was helping himself to more Bourbon, but he knew Cas needed to know what was going on in his office. Castiel excused himself and disappeared at a fast clip. Dean turned and faced the room, sighing. He suddenly felt very alone and surprisingly unprotected. A wave of anxiety washed over him that
hadn’t been there until Cas left the room. Dean didn’t feel remotely up to facing either the Alpha or his frightened mate.

“You’ve got this, babe,” Michael whispered to him. “I’m right here. We’ll do it together.” Michael could feel Dean from the inside, so he knew that Dean was pushing himself to stay genuine rather than slip into his extroverted public persona. It would be so easy to put that Dean on like a cowl and hide behind the sparkly mask as he’d done so often in front of cameras. Here in his own home, he wanted the freedom to be himself. He didn’t know what it was about the Alpha that made him so uncomfortable – feel so unsafe.

Dean wasn’t threatened by him. Their alphas had already weighed each other, and Dean knew that his was the stronger of the two, despite lacking the pack Alpha title. Too, they were in Dean’s home. Jerry Lancet held no power here, no matter how strongly his prejudices were held.

The Alpha had been there when the Mating-bond Triggered though, so he knew Dean was a Profound Submissive. Jerry was the kind of guy to see that as a weakness, and Dean feared as he always had in public, that if he didn’t assume a mask, that Jerry might somehow sense just how far reaching his submissive side went. Dean swallowed a gulp of beer, realizing that’s where his anxiety was coming from. He felt naked in the worst way. “Help me, Michael,” Dean whispered to him, hoping the Omega knew what he meant.

He did. Michael pulled out his Dom and looked sternly into Dean’s eyes to send him into a Submissive state. Dean sighed with relief as he gave up control and let his mate decide. “I’ll take care of my father, Dean,” Michael instructed. “You’re not to speak to him until Castiel returns unless I give you permission. I want you to take Rachel and Mommy on a tour of the house. You’re going to be friendly and gracious with them. Your assignment is to see if you can charm my mother into relaxing around you enough to open up a little bit. When you return, I expect you to know three things about her that she told you herself. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Sir. I can do that.” All the tension faded from Dean’s shoulders.

“And Dean? There will be punishment involved if you fail. Just so we’re clear.”

Dean nodded, relishing the tingle in his groin, then rolled his shoulders, smirked, and set his empty bottle on a coaster. “Ladies!” he effused cheerfully, as he approached the small group by the drink cart, “Would you like a tour of the house? It’s a bit of a museum piece in some places, and I might get lost, but I’m game if you are.” Rachel and April collected Beatrice, who shot a frightened look at her mate but lost the battle and was shuffled out the door. Alpha Lancet watched them go with a frown, then turned to face his son.

“Your doing?” he asked. Michael nodded, still well-ensconced within his Dominant wolf.

“Pop, we need to talk.”

The rest of the late afternoon slipped easily by. Cas pulled Gabriel away after he made sure that Gabe’s participation was entirely observational at this stage. Cas allowed him to keep the cell phone with him and to check it occasionally in case he was needed for an emergency, but Alex assured them both that she had it all under control.
Sam and Jess arrived about twenty minutes late. They made their apologies, but Cas’ eyes bore in a way that communicated clearly that he would be following up later. Dean watched the pair for any sign of the tension that had Sam so upset last week but couldn’t find it. Jess fawned over him just as nauseatingly as she had done at the party the day after they’d Mated. She was a perfect Submissive, with her eyes tracking her mate and anticipating his every need or want. Sam touched her neck a lot and whispered into her ear every now and then with a hard line to his jaw. Dean was baffled. Where was all this rage Sam described in his mate? She seemed downright docile. Could it be that his brother had tamed him a Sicilian? That was said to be nearly impossible for a mainland.

Alpha Lancet had nothing offensive to say whatsoever during the evening. Whatever had passed between father and son in the short span that they had the parlor to themselves obviously had an effect on the Alpha. He spoke much more gently, and he listened and observed more than he talked. And his mate benefitted, too. The change in her Alpha, as well as having spent a good forty-five minutes with Dean in full charm mode allowed Omega Lancet to relax a bit as well.

Dean returned from the tour a different man. He glowed in triumph, with his arm around his mother-in-law’s waist, and a grin of victory lighting his face. April was blushing. Rachel looked mortified. Michael felt his stomach drop. Oh, Lord Jesus, what had his mother said to Dean? He quickly separated his mate from the women. “Well?”

“No lie, Michael. Your mother’s a trip. You really want to know what she said?”

“Oh, God. Probably not.” Michael glanced over his shoulder as Sam and Jess came in looking harried. “All right. Lay it on me.” Introductions were being conducted on the hoof as Cas led them all outside to begin the unloading process.

“Well, first, she said that carrying you to term was way harder than Rachel. You were a backdoor baby, but your sister wasn’t. You knew that, right?”

“Of course I know that. Is that the worst of it? That’s not so bad.” Michael relaxed a little.

“Okay, so that’s number one. Then she also told me that she’s not crazy about being knotted in her cunt. Her words, dude. She likes ‘em big and up the back entrance just like her boy does. Her words again, I swear. I guess you come by it naturally.” Dean was snickering happily as Michael paled.

“God, Dean, did you ask her to tell you that?”

“Nope. Strictly voluntary. All I said was I’d like to get to know my new in-laws, and the dam burst. Apparently, she thinks that since we Neo-Traditionalists are all about wild sex all the time, that it’s a good time to let her hair down. I suspect that with a little wine and a little more dirty talk, your Mommy might be a firecracker behind the bedroom door tonight. It’s a good thing for you that they’re staying in the guest house. There might be screaming. I believe she said she’s a screamer, but I’m not counting that one, so that’s two.”

“Please don’t tell me the third one. I don’t want to know. Dean, please.”

“You gave me an assignment, sir. It wouldn’t be right not to let me complete it.” Dean’s eyes were wide and innocent. Fred was summoning them at Castiel’s command, but Dean refused to let Michael leave the room.

“Fine. I’m going to regret this, but what’s the last one?” Michael closed his eyes and braced himself.

“Says she really loves a couple fingers up her channel, and she goes bonkers for just the right amount of fingernail action all up in there. Told me the slick just gushes if your Pop hits the right spot. She
recommended I give it a try, the fingernail thing, and she told me that if I want any advice about how
to turn you on, she might know a thing or two from watching you go through adolescence and what
she found in your room. I’m thinking of taking her up on the offer.”

Michael sat down heavily on the couch and buried his face in his hands. Dean clapped a hand to his
shoulder and left his mate to process, grinning his way to the dining room. It was a victory, Michael
told himself. It was. He might never be comfortable in the same room with his mother again in his
life, but Dean was back to himself, and his father had listened to him for the very first time. It was a
victory.

Michael felt lightheaded.

It was one thing to know your parents had sex, but another thing entirely to… And then the
revelation hit Michael that in Castiel’s house, their pups were going to be brought up with full monty
right there in the open. They would be seeing it all. Well, not all of it, but enough: spankings and
mountings both. Most traditional wolves didn’t keep their sexual behaviors strictly relegated to the far
side of the bedroom door, although the lengthier and kinkier scenes were usually private if for no
other reason than to allow all parties involved to focus. A simple daytime fuck or blowjob was fair
game for any part of the house.

It clicked in Michael’s head almost as soon as he thought about it. Sex like that – punishment like
that, too – it helped everyone in the pack to feel safe and secure. It wasn’t about wanting to watch so
you could get off vicariously. It was about the chance to feel in your gut how every puzzle piece fit
together and see that each and every one had a place and was needed and valued. In Michael’s home
growing up, the fights could get frenzied and achingly painful to watch, but the making up always
seemed to happen behind closed doors. It left Michael and his sister with a sense that the fight had
never really ended, and he’d often felt unsettled for days, even weeks, after his parents were both
back to normal. How different would it be if the makeup sex following a big fight was also out in the
main rooms? Wouldn’t a full circle view help the whole pack move on?

Not that Michael wanted to see his mother lose her shit with a stroke inside her channel – perish the
thought – but would it really have been that bad? He’d seen his sister with lovers before, and that
hadn’t bothered him at all. Rachel was…promiscuous and free-wheeling when not around her
parents. Being in the same room with her had never exactly meant watching her, and he didn’t get
aroused or alarmed either one. All he walked away from that experience with was a vague feeling of
rightness in the knowledge that his sister was happy, or at least satisfied. It felt good, not
uncomfortable.

Michael knew his father paddled his mother when she needed Balancing, but without the chance to
witness firsthand how it happened, how it helped her, or how she begged him to do it, Michael had
been left with an overarching sense of wrongness about it all that he’d carried with him from the day
he Presented. Castiel did things differently. He’d whacked April’s ass in full view of whoever
happened to be there a number of times already, and the difference in the way Michael felt about the
process was stark. April’s process was odd, but there was no mistaking that it worked to keep her
happily aligned in her head, and there was no lingering feeling of shame afterward. It was a simple
therapeutic process that she needed, and once done, it was over. Simple, clean, uncomplicated.

Gabe stuck his head in the door. “Dude! It’s YOUR CRAP! Get your ass out here and help or I’m
dumping it all into the pool.” Gabriel’s threat bounced harmlessly off Michael, but he chuckled and
got up to join the effort. Michael asked him about the phone calls that had seemed so urgent, and
Gabe grinned happily at him, walking backward as Michael caught up, but he didn’t explain. Gabe
wrapped an exuberant arm around Michael’s shoulders as he came flush, snickering happily to
himself.
They discussed Michael’s upcoming test over dinner. Dean and April both assured him he’d be fine. The Lancets seemed less sure, but they didn’t contradict anyone. Cas and Gabriel stayed mildly distracted, but not rudely so.

“And once we’ve got all the test results, he’ll go into training,” Dean explained to Michael’s mother. “We’ve chosen to have him do the training with tutors instead of with a class. Your son’s really not a good fit for a classroom setting like most wolves are. He’s going to need teachers who can focus in just on his needs.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask about that, Dean,” said Castiel. “You’ve got someone lined up to teach him?”

“Yes, I do. Or, we do, I mean. Michael and I met a few people, and we chose together. He’s going to work with Joshua and Hannah. Joshua for the Dom work, and Hannah for the Omega side, although they’ve agreed to work together at times as well. Balthazar is going to help out with demos now and then.” Dean took a bite and then spoke with his mouth full. “What we haven’t decided is whether to do the training up at The Facility or bring the trainers here. I’mma let Michael decide where he’s more comfortable.”

Castiel mulled it over. “You know that Joshua’s wolf has just about gone completely to sleep. He doesn’t have much left in the tank anymore.”

“I know. But he can still teach. That man has forgotten more than most of us ever knew, and he was Traditional back when the whole world was still trying to be Primate.” Dean never stopped eating while he spoke.

“All right. It sounds like you’ve done your homework, both of you. Please keep me informed about your progress and let me know if you need anything from me.”

Beatrice, seated beside her son, kept trailing a hand over him as she ate, eventually venturing up to the collar of his shirt and tugging gently. It took Michael a minute to realize what she wanted, and then he smiled at her. He turned his chair a little and took her hands. “Brace yourself, Mommy. It’s a little strange, but here, let me show you.” Michael unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and pulled his collar to reveal the flat of his left shoulder where Dean’s first bite scar, the one that housed Michael’s Claim over Dean was still visible, although somewhat softened and flatter than it used to be. He took her hand and brought it to the scar so she could feel that although it didn’t show very much on the surface, the scar went deep into the tissue of his shoulder. Michael caught Dean closing his eyes at her touch out of the corner of his eye. She was close Pack, and her touch wasn’t out-of-bounds, but it felt strange to them both.

“It’s not very prominent, is it?” she asked in surprise, running her fingertips lightly over the skin.

“Oh, but hold on a second,” he told her. He shifted his chair further to let her see the other side, and he pulled his collar down to reveal a much more vivid and raised scar higher on the right shoulder, near his neck. Beatrice’s eyes widened when she saw it. Jerry’s fork clattered as it hit his plate, and Rachel stood up from her chair.

“You let them BOTH Mate you? What the fuck, Michael?!” Jerry shouted in shock.

“No, Pop,” his son told him calmly. He’d expected the outrage and was prepared for it. “Even for Traditionalists, that’s impossible. Both marks are Dean’s. We don’t know why they both stuck around. It’s as if we Mated each other twice. This one,” he touched the darker one on the right, “is stronger, but the other one is active, too.” Michael didn’t go into the dual-directional aspect in the bonds. He didn’t want to overload his family at dinner. He startled as his mother’s touch to Dean’s
Claim mark sent a tingle through his body, and Dean’s breath hitched. She pulled her hand away as if burned when she realized that they could both feel it.

“I’ll be damned,” Rachel said, sitting back down. The three Lancets had questions. They all asked them at once, and Michael was soon enveloped in a cacophony of question marks that Castiel calmly lifted him from. Cas broke in with an even voice, explaining everything he could and telling them just how much no one knew yet, but that answers were actively being sought.

Dean and Gabriel served dessert. Dean’s cooking was a success as usual. The pot roast melted in their mouths, and the garlic potatoes begged to be savored. The pie though. Dean’s cherry pie, made with local fresh fruit was the hit of the meal.

Jess decried that there wasn’t enough pie for seconds until Sam quietly slid his plate to her. Dean was watching her face, so he caught the moment that she stiffened slightly. Sam pulled another of those quiet, stern whispering moments with a hand in her hair, and she softened immediately and smiled up at him before digging in with gusto. Weird. Maybe she was already pregnant. Dean hadn’t scented anything on her earlier when they hugged.

Sam caught Dean’s eye and smirked, nodding almost imperceptibly. Hot damn. Dean smirked back, hoping to pull his brother aside before he left for the evening, tomorrow at lunch at the latest.

“By the way, since you’re both here,” Cas said, catching Dean’s and Sam’s eyes, “Billie and Charlie both asked me to check with you. Are you both still on for the convention in Phoenix next month? I see no reason to cancel or postpone it, but we need to confirm with them.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Sam confirmed. “I spoke to Charlie this afternoon. Everything’s still good. We’ll be there.” Sam turned to his brother. “Are you taking Michael? It might be good for him to see one for himself.”

Dean didn’t look at Michael, but he felt his mate tense up. “No, he’ll still be in training, and he needs to focus on that. Besides,” Dean narrowed his eyes a little and looked at Cas, “I have no plans to make Michael a part of any of this. Just because his mate has a public job doesn’t mean he has to participate.”

Cas nodded and Sam did as well. “That’s fine, Dean,” said Sam. “But what if he wants to participate?”

“Then we’ll teach him, get him certified, and bring him on board just like we do everyone else on the team, but we’re not going to parade him around like a trophy and pose him there in front of cameras just because he’s pretty. Either he works like the rest of us, or he stays home.”

Sam looked taken aback. “Dean? I had no intention of parading him for show. What the heck? Where did that come from?”

“Look,” Dean stated in clipped tones that had every eye on him. “You and me and Cas, we’re playing a game with the cameras. We all know that. We talked about it and we consented to it, and everyone’s comfortable with their job out there. I’m just telling you right now as clear as I can say it: he may be Omega, but Michael’s not going to be a part of that. Period. If he decides that a career in Lupin research or outreach is for him, then he does it the right way, through the certification programs, and he stays in the herd. He’s no one’s figurehead, and he’s no one’s research project. You hear me?”

“Research project? Who said anything about a research project?” Sam’s brow was knit in confusion, and he leaned forward on his crossed arms.
“No one. Yet. But just you wait, Sam. Wait until they start to figure out how rare he is and how strange our Mating-bonds are and they’re all going to want to poke at him, interview him, shine lights in his eyes and up his channel, and I’m saying NO! You hearing me, Alpha? I’m saying NO!”

The table went silent. Michael felt like a spotlight was burning a hole through the top of his head, and he wished he could melt into his chair. He felt an apology from Dean, but he didn’t look up. Sam’s mouth hung open in surprise. Jess was looking from Castiel to Dean and back again. Suddenly, there was more being said than had come out in words. Dean was ready to flash to violence, and Castiel regarded him with an air of weighing his intentions. April went still with her hands in her lap and her eyes downcast.

The Lancets had no idea what was going on, but it sounded very much like their Michael’s mate had just thrown down a challenge to the Alpha in protection of his Omega. If push came to shove, they would all stand with Dean. This is not at all how any of them expected a Traditional household to function.

Cas set his fork down. “Yes, I can hear you, Dean. I believe our neighbors two miles down the road likely heard you as well. I understand you wish to protect Michael. You know very well that I will protect him right alongside you. We are not going to sacrifice your mate for science, and you already know this. However, he IS an anomaly, and your Mating-bond IS extremely unusual. Without turning Michael into a sideshow attraction or laying him out on a steel table to be vivisected, we have a responsibility to him and to you as his mate to attempt to understand his rare designation.”

“I said no. I meant no, Castiel. No research. Understanding what he needs is not a matter of filing a new grant proposal with the government. You’re telling me that you don’t already have a draft proposal saved on your computer? You’re not planning a study?” Dean was tense, and his tension travelled the length of the table, unnerving every wolf in attendance.

Cas went wide-eyed. “Scout’s honor, Dean. Michael. I’m not. There’s no draft. There’s no plan. Michael is Pack, and as much as the scientist in me would love to see him only as a specimen to examine, I’m not going to do that. Ever. I ask only that you allow the collection and use of data that we will have access to through his scheduled tests and training. Everything will be unobtrusive. As you know, I’ve approved the study of your Mating logs and video. I would like to add his Keller data to that, but please believe me, Dean, there’s not going to be anything added or extra. Can you give me that? Just what we would already have organically? That’s all I had planned. I swear.”

Dean sat upright and kept his eyes tight on his fiancé’s face for a full minute. No one moved. Finally, Dean looked to Michael.

“What do you want to allow?” he asked.

Michael swallowed and ran his gaze across the table to his father and sister, then to Gabriel, and back to Dean. He didn’t try to look at the Alpha who was sitting very still and controlled. Michael could practically feel the barrier walls in his father’s head crumbling, his assumptions falling away. “I’m okay with them using the data they’re going to have anyway. They might learn something that we need to know. Don’t extreme designations run in families? What if we have an Omega-Dom pup? Wouldn’t you want to know more about that before we raise one? Dean, I don’t want others to have to go through what I did. No offense Pop, but growing up with no idea who I was sucked ass. It couldn’t have been easy on you either. And if down the road, we find out that studying how I’m put together could be helpful to others, I’m not going to stop that. If you’re really asking me, that is. If it’s my choice, I’m not opposed to helping out a little.”

Dean softened immediately. He looked at Jerry and the two alphas found themselves on the same page. Michael would get whatever Michael needed. If that meant protecting him, he would be
protected. If that meant allowing a team of scientists to probe his inner workings and take blood samples, neither alpha would like it, but they wouldn’t stand in the way. Michael was strong, and he knew his own mind. Dean turned his eyes to Cas, but Cas was watching Michael, a look of respect and affection on his face.

“While I don’t particularly appreciate your timing, Dean, as this was perhaps not the appropriate time and place to bring the topic up,” Cas said, sliding his eyes to Dean’s halfway through the sentence, “I had it on the agenda to discuss at our one-on-one debrief tomorrow morning. I need you to trust me. I’m not going to go behind your back and make elaborate plans involving your mate without telling you. That you suspected me of doing that is worrisome. If you like, Michael is welcome to come in tomorrow to participate in that discussion as well. I’m not hiding anything from either of you.”

Dean felt like shit. He’d seen worrisome signs from Cas, and he’d clearly misread them. He thought he was taking a stand to shelter his mate, and instead, he’d thrown his fiancé under the bus for no reason and highlighted just how little faith he evidently had in Castiel’s integrity. Why had he assumed Cas was making under the table, dastardly plans to cut Michael’s innards up for inspection? Where was that coming from?

“I’m sorry, Cas. I, uh, looks like I was mistaken, and I apologize.” Dean looked at his plate. “If you want to call that a breach of number three, I won’t argue. I was disrespectful, and I deserve to be punished for it.” Sam and Michael both started to voice protest, but Castiel cut them off.

“No, you don’t,” Cas assured him. “You made an assumption, but you were acting in the best interest of your mate out of a need to protect him. No one was harmed. Next time, please just ask me what my plans are before you jump to conclusions. As to your statement, I want you to know that I DID hear you, and your restrictions will be entered into our Facility notes. No one will be approved to initiate any studies involving Michael and his rare designations without your approval first; yours and Michael’s both. I would add parenthetically, that that was going to be the case all along, but now that you’ve said your piece explicitly, it will be noted.” Cas picked his fork back up to finish his dessert. Dean didn’t.

“Cas, I um, I feel like I need you to, uh… I’m not going to be able to, um, let it go on my own. I feel like crap right now.” Dean stuttered his way through the request. The remainder of his pie was the least appetizing thing he had ever seen. His stomach roiled, and his head was foggy with regret. Well, crap. Looked like the Lancets were in for the full experience after all.

“You haven’t broken any rules, Dean. You don’t deserve to be punished over a mistake like this.” Cas spoke very carefully, his Alpha assuming its position in front.

“Maybe I don’t, but I need it.” Dean’s voice was nearly a whisper as his wolf stepped up to face the Alpha. An anticipatory tingle began to vibrate in Dean’s groin, and he refused to meet the Alpha’s eye. Cas pushed his chair back and stood up, sighing. He went to the door into the kitchen and stopped, looking back at Dean, waiting for Dean to join him. Dean took a deep breath and scooted his own chair back, standing slowly as if he hadn’t just asked for this.

“Please excuse us for a few minutes, everyone. Enjoy your coffee and pie, or feel free to move back to the parlor if you like. We’ll be right back.” Castiel put a hand on Dean’s lower back as the alpha came alongside, and he escorted Dean into the kitchen. No one moved. No one spoke. No one met anyone’s gaze. The door into the kitchen was still open, and voices floated unimpeded into the dining room. Rachel began to stand, but her father stayed her with a hand to her shoulder. She sat back down silently.
“Right here over the back of this chair will do, Dean. Pants at your ankles. Very good. Put your hands on the chair seat and rest your belly on the back. Yes, just like that. Let me know if it digs into your ribs. I haven’t used this position with you in a long time.” Cas walked away to select an implement from the kitchen utensils and returned, touching Dean’s back. Dean couldn’t see what he’d selected, and Cas didn’t show him. Dean squeezed his eyes closed. He could hear the remaining servers and caterers clearing out in haste. None of them had anything to say but a couple of murmured excuses.

“When are you being punished, Dean?” Castiel’s voice broke through the whirlwind that was just getting started in Dean’s head. They both knew that the pack and all their guests could hear them, but Dean’s focus would soon be tunneled into just this room, just that unknown implement and the Alpha who wielded it, just the hot pain in his body and the pathway it created to let his guilt go.

“I made a false assumption about your plans for my mate without asking you about it, and I accused you in front of everyone. I was disrespectful to you, Alpha. I’m sorry.”

“You’re forgiven, Dean. I’m not angry, and I don’t feel disrespected. This spanking is for you alone. I’ll help you work through what you’re feeling and let it go, and then we’ll rejoin our guests. It’s getting late, so I’m going to have Michael put you to bed shortly. Are you ready?”

“yessir.”

Cas didn’t say anything more. He brought the wide rounded spoon down on the meat of Dean’s left cheek, convex side to Dean’s flesh. Dean flinched just a little at the first blow and then he settled and breathed as his ass went from pale, to light pink, to dark pink, to red and splotched. He kept his eyes squeezed closed, and he kept his thoughts on his pain and on his emotions, letting it all run together in his mind. He deserved to hurt for his lack of trust. Castiel loved him, loved Michael, would always protect them both. A particularly hard swat beneath the crease of his ass broke his breathing into a gasp, but he didn’t cry out.

Castiel had begged for Dean’s trust. Why was he being so pig-headed about this? Why was he finding it so difficult to have faith in the man outside the bedroom? Another swat caught him off guard as Cas changed up the speed, power, and location randomly. That was the large-bowled plastic stirring spoon, wasn’t it? The really big round one. It was almost a ladle, and it was plastic, not wood, making the sting a thing of power and intensity. Dean hoped it didn’t break over his ass, but he had every intention of melting it down after this. Who needed a spoon that big anyway?

Castiel stopped spanking him. “Well?” he asked. “Is that enough, or are you still thinking?”

“I want to trust you, baby. I really do. I don’t know why it’s so hard.” Dean rested his cheek against his arm.

“What did you call me?”

“Sir! I’m sorry. I meant Sir.” Another few whacks drove that point home, and Dean hissed. Yep, definitely melting that spoon.

“Trust will come with time, Dean. We can’t force it. What you can do though, is bring your suspicions to me and ask me directly – preferably in private.” Cas ran a soothing hand over Dean’s red ass. Cas didn’t say anything else for a minute or two. This conversation right here was going to come back to bite him, and he knew it. He needed to be very careful. Finally, he asked Dean again, “Have you had enough, or do you need more?”
“Little bit more, Sir. Can you, uh…go ahead and let ‘em fly? I think I need to cry before I’m done. Is that okay?” Dean’s voice was a strange mix of the little mischievous boy and his responsible alpha all at once. Cas didn’t see Dean like this often, so it was a gift. In a way, it was Dean at his most authentic. He moved his hand to Dean’s shoulder and patted it once, then dug in his fingers and let the spoon blur fast and furious down on the abused flesh of Dean’s bottom. The Sub held position, but he howled at the pain and stiffened his knees to keep in place. Soon he was crying out loudly in a long wail. Cas stopped and laid the spoon on the table in front of Dean. He pulled his Sub up and held him tightly against him, chest to chest, rubbing his back and soothing him with soft sounds. One hand rested under the curve of his ass so Dean could lean against it as much as he needed to finish up with a final sense of closure.

“You good, my love?”

“Thank you, Sir. I’m done. I feel better.”

Cas bent down to pull Dean’s boxer briefs and slacks back up, sliding both carefully over Dean’s ass, but not commenting on the face Dean made as they slid into place. He didn’t attempt to tuck Dean’s dress shirt back in. Castiel took him back into his arms and kissed his temple. “I love you, Dean. I’m sorry I ever let you think you needed to worry that I might put my research ahead of our Pack. Michael is important to me but not because he’s unique or a good research subject. It’s because he’s an essential part of our Pack, and I’m not ever going to take advantage of him or exploit him. I know I’ve made choices in the past that called forth questions about how I might respond to Michael’s uniqueness. Dean, look at me. I’m not going to hurt Michael. You’re not wrong that I feel those impulses. You know me very well. But I’m asking you to allow me to grow past who I used to be. I love Michael more than I love the potential his existence grants our work. You hear me, right? Please hear me.”

Dean’s tears didn’t last long. He nodded in resignation. The pain throbbed through his ass, but he pushed it into the place in his mind that processed pain as a normal circumstance of life. It proved to him that he was alive and awake, and he let it cleanse him of the fogginess he’d felt earlier. He dried his eyes on his shirt sleeves before Cas could stop him, but he accepted the deep kiss from his Dom in a moment of connection. Dean took a deep breath when Castiel pulled back, searching his eyes. Dean smiled just a little and nodded to him again.

“You sure?” Cas whispered. “I can step in and make our goodnights then take you on upstairs to bed.”

“I’m fine. I can go back in.” Dean seemed to be strengthening by the second, recovering his equilibrium. The guilt was gone; the little boy fading from his speech. Cas nodded and took his hand, leading him back into the dining room where every seat except the two on the ends was still occupied.

Cas invited them all to the parlor and kept walking without pause through the room and out the far door, Dean’s hand still in his, leaving the others to trail along behind. Once there, he sat in one of the big soft chairs and pulled Dean down carefully onto his lap. The room filled, but it was more a chance to say goodnight than a spark for another round of drinks. The Lancets were all tired and a bit unbalanced after what they’d just witnessed aurally. Rachel whispered furiously into Michael’s ear, making her brother blush and shove her away in mock disgust. April stayed close to Beatrice, the older woman smiling maternally at her. They seemed to have made an easy connection. Jerry looked uncomfortable but unsure of why or what to do about it. Dean suspected a good night’s sleep, maybe a quickie with his mate, and another long talk with his son would help.

Sam and Jess shared a long sloppy kiss in the dining room doorway as they trailed behind all the
Gabriel was suddenly absent.

“Let’s get you three settled in the guest house. Breakfast is here in the house at six-thirty if you’d like to join us, but you don’t have to.” Cas spoke to Jerry with a hand moving over Dean’s back. “You’ll get Michael all to yourself tomorrow, Alpha. The rest of us need to put in another hard day’s work, unfortunately, before the weekend, but we’ll be home early to prepare for my mother’s arrival for dinner. Michael’s duties as Pack Manager are flexible. I believe he has nothing much pressing to accomplish tomorrow, so he’s yours for the day. If any of you would like to visit our Facility for a tour, just have Michael text ahead, and I’ll arrange an escort.”

Jessica moaned suddenly, drawing eyes to where Sam had her pushed up against the wall, his hand squeezing her breast. Castiel glanced at them but ignored the distraction as Sam began to rut his hips into hers.

“Sir, I need to get the monthly bills out, but I can do that first thing in the morning. I’m free for the rest of the day.”

“Very good, Michael.” “Sounds good, son.” Castiel and Jerry responded at the same time, each assuming that Michael’s “Sir” was directed at him. Jerry looked taken aback, but Castiel didn’t seem to mind the impertinence.

“Here, Michael,” Cas said taking hold of April’s wrist from his place on the chair. “Take these two to bed, and make sure they stay there. I’ll see you all in the morning.” Cas shoved Dean from his lap, stood up, and put April’s hand into Michael’s, pretending he didn’t hear the huff of offense from both of the Subs as he handed them off like soiled dishes that needed cleaning.

Michael snickered, but he collected them both, kissing his mother’s cheek on the way out, and herding the two toward the stairs.

“FUCK, SAM! OH GOD, I’M GONNA...!” Castiel turned the light out on them as he and the three Lancets headed back to the front door. “OH, OH, SHIT! SAM!!!” Jess’ voice carried out into the foyer.

“G’Night, Sam! Night, Jess!” Dean called over the railing as he climbed slowly. “Don’t be late for work in the morning!”

Chapter End Notes

I'm hoping to do the next chapter tomorrow, but no promises either way. If it flows, it'll get posted. If I have to dig for it, it'll be next Thursday.

Love all y'all.

(ps, I'm so close to 400 kudos...Seriously never expected that. Thanks.)
Friday, June 16, 2017

Chapter Summary

Shit, a summary? I don’t know. Lotta stuff happens, and it all kind of builds, and some folks do some shouting, and Dean shouldn’t try to speak Texan. And also, Naomi.

Chapter Notes

I think my favorite thing in this chapter is that Rachel gets to call her brother "Mike." I didn’t see that one coming. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NOW:

Sam didn’t repeat the words even after Dean asked him to. He knew Dean heard him. The brothers sat on opposite sides of Dean’s office desk and looked at each other. “You didn’t know, did you?” Dean asked, trying again to get something more from his little brother.

“How would I know? I haven’t seen or talked to her since we were fifteen years old.” Sam steepled his fingers, his forearms resting on his thighs and hunched over, looking at the plush blue carpet so he didn’t have to keep seeing the concern on his brother’s face. Dean leaned back in his chair and studied the ceiling.

“Does it have anything to do with how she went radio silent after she moved away? I can’t see why it would, but that never made any sense to me, man. No sense at all. She just vanished.” Dean rambled, his mind trying to wrap around the painful information and figure out what to say next.
“She got sick during the move and spent two months in the hospital close to dying. She nearly died, man, and all I was worried about back then was how she’d hurt my feelings. The infertility is a result of her illness. It’s not curable. She’s completely barren. We’re never gonna have… She’s… Fuck, Dean, what am I gonna do? I don’t even know how to think about this.” Sam put his face in his hands.

Dean stood and crossed around the desk to kneel in front of Sam and touch his thighs. “I don’t know, man. I can’t tell you it’s gonna be okay. I don’t know that it is. But I’m not going to leave you two to deal with it alone. You hearin’ me? You got me, and you’ve got the whole pack, and we’re here for you. Whatever you need, Sam. This sucks.” Dean moved a hand to Sam’s bicep and rubbed gently up and down.

“I never even thought about it before. I always assumed I’d Mate and raise a family. But I never dwelled on it, you know? It was always a hazy vision in the future somewhere, not something I spent any time thinking about. It never occurred to me how much I want that until it was taken away. Suddenly I’m getting all these images, these little movie reels in my head, of me and Jess in the delivery room, and I’m holding a little fuzzy pink baby all wrapped up in a blanket, and Jess is sweaty and tired, and I can’t get rid of the image. It runs over and over again in my head.” Sam began to tear up as he unloaded it all onto his brother.

“Jess, she feels all kinds of guilty, like she tricked me into Mating and trapped me or some shit. Like she should’ve stopped me before I bit her to let me know. Full disclosure or some such bullshit. I don’t know, but she feels like it’s her fault that I’m tied to a defective mate, and now I’m fucking stuck.”

“Jesus, Sam. That’s not…”

“No, but the thing is, man, she’s not entirely wrong. It’s wrong of me, and I feel so fucking bad, but deep inside where I can’t show even her, I’m fucking pissed as hell. I’m so mad, just, totally enraged. I feel like I had a whole portion of my life ripped away, and it’s so damned unfair, and a part of me blames her. What the fuck is that all about? What kind of mate feels like that? Like she’s not going through ten times more than I am, and she’s been dealing with this for almost ten years now, and she says it never gets any easier. In fact, I’m sure it’s about to get a shitload harder since we’re Mated and kind of at the baby-making stage, only there’s not going to be any goddamn babies! Dean, man, it hurts so fucking bad. I can’t even put it into words. It’s like I had a whole pack full of pups, and they were all going to do great things and be great people, and then they all died at once. They just died, man, and somehow I’m supposed to pretend they never existed, because THEY NEVER FUCKING EXISTED!” Sam dissolved into sobs. Dean wrapped himself around his brother and pulled him onto the floor, so they could sit, tightly wound together. He rocked Sam gently and kissed his hair.

“I know, Sam. Don’t rush it, man. You only just found out.” Dean spoke very softly. “You’re not a monster to be feeling like this. Let it out, Sam. It hurts, but it’s not going to kill you to feel it. You know that. Let it out, man. God, I’m so fucking sorry.” A million platitudes went through Dean’s head: you can still adopt, you’ll be a great uncle, pups are not right for everyone, it’ll all be okay, it’ll bring you closer to your mate… Dean rejected them all and let Sam cry. He wondered if Sam had grieved this directly with Jess yet, or if they were walking on eggshells like new couples sometimes do just after they mate. He decided bravely to go there, knowing it might well be the wrong thing to do.

“Have you cried with Jess yet?” Dean let Sam keep his face hidden. He stroked his brother’s hair.

“A little. Dean, I’m afraid I’ll say the wrong thing to her and make everything worse. I can’t let her
know I’m so angry. It’s not right for me to put this on her. She didn’t do anything wrong, and I can’t burden her like that.” Sam wiped his nose on his own sleeve, and Dean reached up to his desk for a tissue.

“I think you’re short changing your mate, man. You know she can feel all that rage inside you anyway, but you have to explain it to her, or she’ll mistake what it’s about. Just be straight. Tell her you’re grieving and feeling pissed. Sam, that’s normal. She’s gotta be feeling the same thing, and she may very well be mad at you like you’re mad at her. You’ll never get it lined out if you don’t talk about it. Look, anger is normal. Anger at your mate isn’t going to tear you two apart unless you don’t talk about it. It’s irrational, yeah. You’re pissed and hurt and mourning, and a part of you wants to lay that on her. It’s not rational, but it’s real and it’s there and you have to deal. Tell her honestly, and then she can deal too.” Dean pulled back a little as he noticed that Sam had stopped sobbing.

“I wanted to be a daddy, Dean.” Sam’s huge liquid hazel eyes looked up at Dean, and Dean’s heart shattered. He didn’t try to stop the tracks running down his face as he leaned his forehead intimately against his little brother’s.

“I know.”

Much as the conversation hurt and their emotions were raw, neither of them could afford to stop working for long. Dean hauled Sam to his feet, and Sam assured Dean he was all right to keep plowing forward with his day.

Working helped.

Sam walked across the hall with Dean to Castiel’s office when Dean’s one-on-one appointment with his boss came around. Sam filled them both in on how he and Jess were doing.

“It took a full D.F. to get us there, but we’re on the same page now. I think I understand her better, at least. I wasn’t expecting her to need a show of force that brutal. Man, she’s got some strange ideas about what strength means. To me, at least. It’s like she actually wants to be treated like shit so she can struggle against it and then make me shove her back down in the dirt. I’m supposed to be all strong and forceful so she can be too? I don’t really like the approach she wants to take, so we’re going to change it up. Instead, I’m making her accept kindness as a show of strength. She’s resisting, but I think we can get to a happy medium in the end. Basically, I’m thinking what she’s looking for is for me to set the direction and make her go there. And I mean make her. She’s not going to go along with it from a straightforward request. I’m just not setting her a direction she expected to go, and she’s finding it hard to adjust.”

Cas nodded. “I liked what I saw between you two yesterday. You’re meeting each other’s eyes more, and all the other nonverbal cues look positive. I saw her hesitate to accept your instructions, Sam, and I saw you respond in an appropriate way, so I’m very pleased with your progress. Please endeavor to be on time when you’re expected at a Pack function though.” He ended with a hard look at Sam.

Dean scoffed. He’d have had his butt roasted if he sauntered in twenty minutes late, and Sam just got
‘the look’ from the Alpha. How was that fair?

“I’m sorry, Alpha. Jess was home from work later than we expected, but we really thought we could make it, and then we got stopped by the train. I should have called you. I apologize.”

Cas accepted the apology with a wave, and Dean huffed another quiet protest. Cas addressed the elephant in the room. “Have you and Jess discussed her test report?”

Sam shot a glance toward his brother. “Um, yes sir. We have. It’s not going to be pretty, but we’ll get through it. It’s not like we have a whole lot of choice in the matter, is it?” Sam kept his voice stable, but he swallowed uncomfortably.

“How you handle it now will set the tone for a good many years to come, Sam. I advise you both to seek counseling together. Please don’t try to handle this all on your own. Our pack resources and connections are available to you, and in fact, the ACRI resources are also available. You have options, and I’ll help you however I can. Dean will too, of course. I caution you to avoid trying to shove the emotions you’re bound to be feeling under the rug right now out of expedience. The sooner you bring them to light, the sooner you’ll begin to heal. And Sam, don’t feel that your pain is going to be any less intense than your mate’s just because you wouldn’t be the mother or because it’s her body that’s the source of everything. You have as much of a right to be hurting as she does.”

“She’s not defective, Castiel!” Sam protested fiercely. “And I never said I wasn’t hurting too.”

“Just think about how you want to approach the issue, because defective or not, her infertility IS an issue, and if you don’t find a way to work through it in a healthy way, it might eventually show up in your work. We can’t let that happen.” Cas let Sam’s anger go without comment, letting the echoing rage make his point for him. Sam nodded abashedly, looking away. He knew his anger was misplaced, but he didn’t have any appropriate targets to aim it toward. How do you take your rage out on a bacterium?

Cas took a deep breath and dismissed Sam then gestured Dean into his visitor’s chair as the door closed behind the beta.

“I’m sorry we had to put this off until the end of the week, Dean. I literally had no other times available in my schedule.” Cas clicked through his computer to find his notes from the month past. He needed to bring Dean up to speed quickly, and a lot had happened.

“You know, we could have done this at home, Alpha. We kind of live together now and all. We wouldn’t necessarily even have to wear pants.” Dean’s sassy brat peeked out at Cas. Castiel smiled at how welcome it was.

“We could, but I fear we might get distracted from our work, and I find it hard to scroll through my laptop from a spooning position once my knot catches in your ass. Can we focus please?”

“You’re the boss. …Spoilsport.” Dean opened the manila folder he’d brought along filled with questions he had about what he knew and what he needed to know.

“First thing’s first, then,” Cas started. “Michael’s test is on Monday. Is he ready?”

“He’s ready,” Dean replied nonchalantly without looking up or ceasing his paper shuffling.

“I know it’s going to be difficult for you, Dean, but once you’ve dropped him off, I would like you to go back to the house and work from home. And before you protest, I ask the same of every employee whose mate undergoes testing here. It’s for everyone’s safety.”
Dean looked up at him, reading his face. “Yes, Sir. I guess I’m not going to win this one, am I? Ellen talked to me some more about the panel. You know, for some reason, it’s only Jody that’s making me go all possessive. Like, you’d think it would be Raphael, but I’m cool with him. I just don’t want Jody touching my mate.”

Cas scoffed a little. “Go figure. We’re still instinctive creatures despite everything, aren’t we? I don’t know what you’re responding to, but I promise you I’ll keep watch over him and bring him home safe and sound to you after it’s over.” He typed into his computer, and then looked up at Dean again.

“How have you set a start date for his training yet?”

“I gave Joshua and Hannah a tentative date of June 26. That’s a week after his test, so the prelims should be in. Plus, April’s training will have just ended. We won’t have both of them in class at the same time. Cas, do you have any input about where to hold his training?”

“There are benefits to both options,” Cas replied. “He would be more comfortable at the house, but I fear that Michael’s tendency to isolate himself may not be the healthiest thing right now. Having him train here would force some interaction with others even if he’s training alone. If you’re asking for my opinion, I’d suggest doing it here if for no other reason but to keep him from turning into a recluse before he’s thirty. It’s entirely your decision though.”

Dean nodded and slipped his glasses onto his face. He jotted a note on the inside of his folder. “That’s actually what I was thinking as well. He’s not going to like it, but I think I’m going to make an executive decision on this. Hannah said that they don’t care either way, but they’ve got other work going on, and I don’t want to burden any of them with extra commute time just because I can and I’m engaged to the big cheese.” Dean smirked.

Cas moved on. “We’ve started receiving resumes for the alpha-Sub tester opening. I want you to review them and lead the search panel, please. I’ll expect a decision to be reached by two weeks after the posting closes.” Dean nodded and jotted another note. “Also, your entrance matrix has already been changed. You are no longer permitted any direct sexual contact within the context of your job. If you feel that you may forget or slip up in that regard, please let me know, and we’ll cage you until you’ve assimilated your new status.” Cas looked at Dean seriously, and Dean tried hard to ignore the chubby that wanted to spark to life. “Old habits can be difficult to break, especially if you are focused on teaching and not on your restrictions. I know you’ve been free to touch your students for a long time, and there will be an adjustment period.”

Cas paused, obviously waiting for a response from Dean. “I don’t need a cage. I’ll remember. Michael made his feelings very, very clear, and he left a lasting impression. I’m not likely to forget any time soon.”

“All right. Next up is the research aspect of Michael’s testing that we discussed at dinner yesterday. As I said, I very much want to learn everything I can, um, I mean everything WE can from the data that will be collected during Michael’s test. It stops there though. I’ve already added your comments to his file.”

“It’s tearing you up, isn’t it?” Dean had a sparkle in his eye, but he was only half joking. Dean knew Castiel’s passions very well, and he knew that having an Omega-Dominant underfoot and observable all the time with no access to study him was going to kill the research scientist in Cas.

Cas stilled and looked at Dean. “It’s killing me, Dean.” His answer was honest. He knew no other response was going to get past the man smirking in front of him. They both chuckled. Cas was predictable to a fault.
“I’ll be good though. I swear. I mean it when I say he’s more important to me as a person than as a research subject, but God, he’s so effing close!” Cas wiped his hand across his face and refocused.

Dean laughed. “Take some observational notes if you want, but don’t go poking at him to see how he responds, okay? Be Jane Goodall before the chimps crawled into her lap and made her part of the troop.”

“We’ll see. I’m going to refrain from all of it for now. Michael deserves to be treated with respect at home, not followed around by a clipboard-carrying scientist.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear you say that. What’s next?”

What was scheduled to be a two-hour catch up meeting ran all the way through lunch. Dean ran out of room on his folder for notes and pulled out his phone and stylus. Cas filled Dean in on Gabe’s vicarious mission in Memphis. They pulled three Omegas of the remaining five to safety, but learned in the middle of the night that the last two had died before the rescuers could get to them. Died or been killed. Castiel didn’t know yet. Gabe seemed to be taking it well, but Bobby planned to swing by the house to talk it over with the Omega later. Dean noticed the chill in Cas’ voice when he talked about Bobby but didn’t bring it up yet.

Then, they hashed out an agreement between them to pull back in a number of work areas. Dean’s contract scening days were over by default, but Cas agreed to remove himself from the panel as well. It would mean revenue loss for The Facility because they were both sought after. Everyone wanted a chance to fuck the famous sex-gods, so their waiting lists stayed prohibitively long.

Cas also agreed to stop C.F.s for training purposes. That would mean while he would still do Keller tests as a full panel member, and Claims would form much of the time, he didn’t have any responsibility to work privately with Omega or Submissive trainees, and he wouldn’t seek to set Claims intentionally. Alternate trainers would be assigned. He would miss the intimate one-on-one work, but his time had become too limited. Cas thought sadly of Jeremy Lister and was glad that he’d at least had the chance to take him through his training. New days were coming, and it was time, but he felt in a way that he was losing out on what had drawn him into the research and training field in the first place – a chance to help real people in their real lives, directly, a chance to get his hands right into the mix himself. He was going to miss it badly.

Dean balked at giving up his classes. He agreed to cut back, but he wasn’t ready to step out entirely. He instead went with handing over his Research Lead position for the two big upcoming projects. Kevin could do them both with his hands tied behind his back. Dean would stay on as Project Director, keeping the projects on track while day-to-day decisions would be in Kevin’s hands.

Then they crunched numbers. They were losing revenue at the same time they needed to increase staff. It was going to be tight, but they’d been in worse places before and always found a way through. Budget matters like this one would take the whole team, so Cas entered it in as an agenda item for the next leadership team meeting, sighed, and took his beloved out to lunch.
Michael breakfasted with the Pack as he had done all week, and just like the previous four days, Dean, Castiel, and April hustled out the door, leaving him alone with Gabriel who disappeared as soon as his dishes were dumped in the sink. Michael’s family had opted to sleep in and have breakfast in the guest house. Michael ran the budget numbers, paid out the bills that were due, reconciled the books, checked the Pack schedule, updated his own for next week, and forwarded it to his mate according to Dean’s rules. He checked on the arrangements for tonight’s dinner for the umpteenth time and then closed down the computer. He meandered aimlessly from room to room with a coffee cup in his hand, then pulled a golf cart out of the garage and headed down to check in on his family.

Rachel was dressed and sitting sideways on the couch with a book in her hand, waiting for her parents to get up. Michael squeezed her ankle as he sat beside her, and she smiled.

“You look really good, kiddo,” she told him.

“How am I the kiddo here?” he asked.

“Michael, you’ll always be younger than me, even though you’ve always been older. It’s just how it works. Stop fighting it.” She spoke with such a straight face that it took him a minute to remember his sister and whap her in the face with a pillow.

“I miss you,” he said starkly.

“I miss you too, but you belong here. You fit here, and it makes me happy to see you without all that crazy stress you used to carry around. It’s only been like, a month, and already you’re a whole different person. I like this version of you, little brother. It suits you.”

“Little brother,” he mumbled, digging his nails into her calf until she squealed and kicked up, laughing.

“I wish you would stay, Rachel. We’ve got the space. Hell, you could live right here in this house and drive up to KU, or get a dorm room there and still be close. I hate to think of you down there under Pop’s thumb like you are. Plus, now that he doesn’t have me to buffer for you, you get his full attention. That can’t be good.” His eyes glazed as he imagined the fights he was probably missing and couldn’t deflect.

“It was never your job to buffer for me, you know. I’m a big girl, and I can handle it. When he goes on a tear, I have places I can go to avoid him until he cools off. I have friends. He doesn’t treat me like he did you, so it’s not that bad. You know I can’t leave them, Mike. They both need me.”

Michael frowned. His sister shouldn’t have to sacrifice herself to take care of their parents like that, not when it wasn’t a healthy place for her to be. It wasn’t right.

“He’s coming around,” she continued when she read his skepticism. “I think this trip is going to change his mind about a lot of things. Unless, of course, meeting Naomi Novak sends him crashing right back down into it. Is there any way we can cancel this dinner-thing tonight?”

“I wish.” Michael stood up to check for coffee. “Seems like no one wants to be there, even Castiel. I’m not sure I understand why he invited her here.”

“Well maybe he’s not ready to give up on her yet. She’s his family, you know?” Rachel called to
him without getting up.

“Rache, she’s awful. From what Dean’s said about her, she treats Castiel like a first-rate fuck up, and she pretends Gabriel doesn’t exist at all. How much of that do you make yourself suffer through before you say enough is enough?” Michael brought his steaming cup back into the living room and sat down in a chair oblique to Rachel’s couch.

“I don’t know. But it’s his call, not yours, so just try to be supportive, okay?”

“Look at you being all traditional,” he teased. “Omega boy needs to zip it and kneel quietly on the floor?”

“You know that’s not what I meant, you doof.” Rachel went quietly back to her book while Michael sipped his coffee and enjoyed the silence. He ached suddenly as he realized how well she understood him, his need for solitude and stillness, his wish for human connection without needing to fill every empty moment with senseless conversation. A bluebird trilled angrily outside the window, and he watched it without commenting.

“I’m in love with Dean,” he said, apropos of nothing, just wanting her to know. She smiled without looking up.

“I know. You’re fucking transparent.”

“The thing is, I’m at least a little in love with Castiel too, and I don’t want to be.”

That made her look up. “No, you’re not. Mike, look at me. You suck at naming your emotions. You’ve got like, a hero-worship-complex, crush-thing going on with Alpha Novak. It’s fucking adorable, but it’s not love.”

He scoffed. “Oh, is that what it is? Is that the clinical name for it? Jeez, I wonder why I would have any trouble coming up with a name for that emotion when it’s so fucking clear to you.”

“Shut up,” she said. “Relax, all right? You said that Novak put a Claim on you, so you’re feeling the effects of that pull. It’s supposed to be really powerful but, like, subconscious where you can’t really tell that it’s there from the surface.”

“How are you such an expert all of a sudden?”

“I have my sources,” she said. “But I’m not revealing them to you. You’re a blabbermouth, and it’ll get back to Pop. I don’t want to lose my good thing.” Rachel hid behind her book again, but Michael wasn’t having it. He snatched the book and held it hostage.

“Are you in love, Rache? What’s his name? Do I know him? Oh man, he’s traditional, isn’t he? Pop’s gonna blow a gasket. First me and now you. Are you gonna Mate him?”

“Are you finished?” she asked levelly. He nodded energetically, his eyes wide and excited.

“No, I’m not in love, but yes, you do know him, and yes, he is traditional. We’ve been seeing each other for a few months now, and he’s teaching me a lot. I like how we are together.” Rachel blushed all of a sudden and snatched her book back.

Michael lay up beside her on the couch and wormed his way beneath her arm, snuggling close. “And how are you together, big sister?” he wheedled. “Do you Top with a strap-on and make him beg for a knot? Do you whip him until he comes all over himself?”
Rachel shoved him off the couch with a whoomph and an unmanly squawk from Michael. “None of your business, you creep. But, um, he’s about got me convinced to sign up for a test. I know his designations, and he even showed me his kink-rating. I got to read the whole report, and it’s fascinating. I’m getting more and more curious about my own. Pop’s not going to pay for it, though. I’m not the train wreck that you were.”

“Wow, thanks,” he shot at her, but she ignored him. He wasn’t really hurt. She’d know if he was really hurt.

“I wanted to ask, kind of quietly, and hopefully Pop doesn’t have to know. Do you think you could help me pay for the test? I’m of age, so I should be able to do it without him finding out.”

Michael sat up and went serious. “I’ll pay for it, no question, but Pop’s not just our father, he’s also your Alpha. They will probably want a sign-off from him.” Rachel’s face closed off. “You’re going to have to face up to him eventually, kiddo. Maybe this is what you stand up to him about. You said yourself he was coming around a little.”

“I’m not ready for that,” she admitted. “It’s easier for you, Mike. You don’t have to live with him and interact with him every day.”

“Neither do you,” he pointed out with a pointed look. Rachel thought it over, but then let it drop and changed the subject.

“So?...” she prompted cryptically, and he frowned in confusion.

“So…what?”

“What’s it like to be Mated to fuckin’ Dean Winchester? Are you kidding me? I want the dirt. Is he as hot for real as he seems on stage?”

Michael blushed and looked down. “Yeah, he is,” he admitted shyly. “Hotter. I’m out of my league, Rache. I’m not…shit, this sounds awful, but I’m never going to be enough for him. He’s way out there in terms of what he needs. Jesus, this is all strictly confidential. You get that, right?”

“Fuck, Michael,” she whispered, leaning in and setting her book on the table. “What’s it like?”

Michael let a far off half smile spread on his face. He knew he was safe to confide in his sister, despite her reluctance to do the same. She would keep whatever he said private. “He’s a really intense masochist, so like, I can’t even begin to lay it on hard enough. And you know me, I’ve never had a problem taking a swing at a brat, but he’s…he would let me flay him to the bone if I wanted to, and he’d love every minute of it. And he takes instruction so well. I mean, he’s not just good, but he’s perfectly trained, to the point where he almost reads my mind. And don’t get me started on the Mating-bond and what it feels like to fuck somebody while you can feel what they’re feeling. You get to skip all the ‘yeah, right there,’ and ‘a little harder’ shit, because you just…know. You can feel it, and it’s incredible.” Michael was flushed and a little breathless.

“Do they ever do orgies?” Rachel asked, still whispering like they were small children and telling secrets beneath the covers at night.

“Alpha helped me scene with Dean one night. I wanted to see how he would do in front of others. He’s never wanted to do that before, but he’s kind of trying it now. It wasn’t an orgy, but it was a threesome, and it was really fucking hot.”

They both sat upright as they heard footsteps approaching the top of the stairs. “Morning, Mommy!” Michael called, recognizing her step.
“Good morning, sweet boy,” she purred as she descended the stairs. “Have you eaten? Let me make something. Our kitchen is already stocked, can you believe it? Look at all of this.”

“Believe it? Mom, I stocked it. OH! I have to show you my car! You won’t believe what Dean bought me so I can go out and do the grocery shopping and stuff. He got me a Chevelle, and it’s mint! You should see the looks I get driving it around.” Beatrice smiled at him, cupped his cheek, and pulled him in for a kiss and a good morning hug. Her baby boy was himself again, and it brought everything in her world back to rights. She pulled eggs and bread from the fridge and set to work, humming.

They spent the day visiting and driving around town. Michael fed them lunch at Maurice’s, Dean’s favorite burger joint. Even Jerry had to admit it was pretty tasty, although he complained about the layer of grease on every surface. Michael was shocked when Cas and Dean walked in for lunch just as he and his family were finishing up. They stayed and chatted through the alphas’ meal and let Castiel convince them to tour The Facility.

Michael used the tour to start the salesman process in convincing Jerry that Keller tests could benefit any wolf, even those who weren’t dangerously off balance. Charlie, their tour guide agreed wholeheartedly and kept up a running commentary on all the benefits involved in getting all your numbers and preferences out in clear, black ink. Rachel bit her fingernails and asked Charlie some very directed questions but didn’t comment on her answers. She kept an eye on her father though, assessing his response.

Charlie showed them where Michael would need to arrive on Monday morning and walked them through the changing rooms where an Omega and a beta were both being explicitly prepped for their tests, now moving into the Bridge phase. Beatrice whined a little bit out loud, and Jerry took her hand and pulled her away as Charlie kept moving. Omega Lancet kept her eyes on the Omega’s dildo until they rounded a corner and she couldn’t see it anymore.

Soon Michael declared he needed to get home to await the caterers and begin to prep the house for the dinner. They stopped back by Dean’s office to let him know they were leaving, and then they headed home. Michael realized as he drove his shiny sedan that he really did consider the huge pretentious house his home now, and it surprised him.

Fred met them at the kitchen entrance with a list to go over with Michael, and they spent the next twenty minutes confirming with one another that all was in readiness. Michael liked working with Fred. He wasn’t Lupin, and that meant he didn’t care even a little that Michael was Omega. Castiel had told Fred to report to Michael from now on, and Fred trusted Cas, so he had no issue with the new instruction. Too, they both thrived off clear, concise, detailed lists of tasks that could be checked off as they went. Both were very organized in their thoughts and implementation, so they made a good team. Michael made a last minute center piece change after seeing that the flower garden blossoms were particularly vibrant this week, and Fred agreed wholeheartedly. Everything was ready in the kitchen when the caterers arrived at 3:30. Michael showed them in himself and got them started, leaving them a cell phone number to Fred’s phone as well as his own in case they had questions or needed to find something.

Then he joined his family in the television room. It was the most casual room in the house and where the Pack wound up most evenings after dinner to relax. Fred sent a maid with a drink cart for them,
and Jerry rolled his eyes but Beatrice splurged with a glass of white wine.

“So, what do you think now, Pop?” Michael ventured. “Still think it’s all a bunch of psychobabble?”

“You already know my answer, son. You really need me to say it again?” Jerry steadfastly refused to concede that his presumptions were flawed. “Wolves are either alpha, beta, or Omega. That’s all there is to it, and the rest is nonsense. Alphas make the rules inside the home, Omegas follow them. And outside the home, we’re all the same as everyone else.”

“So, then how do you explain that I’m magically so much better in only a month?” Michael posed, grabbing a Coke from the ice bucket.

“You’re Mated, Michael. That settles most wild O’s like you. I’ll bet you that alpha had a belt to your ass within 24 hours of biting you, and he settled you right down. What’s more,” Jerry continued, full of arrogant confidence, “I’ll wager the big Alpha’s laid you raw as well, hasn’t he? And what about that tall fellow from dinner last night? He’s something like a Top, right? You get strapped by him yet? That’s all it is, son. They whip you into submission whether you’re obedient or not and then brainwash you to make you think it’s for your own good. You’re not better, son. You’re whipped.”

“Right, Pop. That’s all it is. I’m brainwashed. Doesn’t have fuck-all to do with how they actually listen to what I have to say and let me make decisions for myself, speak for myself, give me responsibilities that really mean something. Couldn’t have anything to do with any of that, could it? No, it’s all because my ass is bright red all the time! You know what?!” Michael began to work himself up to shouting, but managed to take hold of his temper and rein it back down. He had a point to make, but he could do it without turning into an asshole. “You know what?” he said again more calmly. “I’ve spanked Dean way more times than he’s spanked me. We’re good for each other, but discipline is something I don’t need very much of, while he really does. Like last night. Pop, you were there. Did that look like brainwashing to you?”

“All I know’s it’s not right for an alpha to bend over and take it like that. There’s some weird-ass shit going on in this house, and I don’t much like that my son’s right there in the thick of it like I didn’t raise you better.”

Michael sighed and looked to Rachel, catching her eyes, but she had no idea what to say. “Pop, look. It’s really not that complicated. Dean’s a Secondary Top but a Tertiary Bottom, and I’m just the opposite. We fit. He gives me what I need, and I do the same for him. Why is this so hard to accept? Are you being deliberately obtuse? Don’t give me that shit. Don’t tell me you don’t spank Mom. I’ve seen the same thing out of her that I see from Dean when he needs a certain reaction from me. It’s got nothing to do with alphas and Omegas. Don’t tell me it’s only when she breaks some stupid rule. She doesn’t ever break your rules. When’s the last time she broke any rule at all? I’ve strapped the shit out of Dean when he needs me to, and you do the same for her. Don’t stand there and pretend you don’t. That house doesn’t have soundproof walls. You do it just like we do because it’s what she needs, not just as an Omega, but as a Sub. You know she is, but you hide it behind closed doors and act like you don’t do it at all. You’re the worst kind of fucking hypocrite. Mommy’s a Tertiary Submissive, and you KNOW IT!”

“This Tertiary bullshit is all a mindfuck, Michael! It’s fucking bullshit! You are a fucking OMEGA, goddamnit. I won’t be spoken to like that by my own Omega son! You’ll watch your tone with me, or by God, I’ll…”

Michael interrupted him with a finger in his face. “You’re not going to touch a hair on my head, Alpha!” He imbued the word with as much venom as he could. “You have no authority here whatsoever, and I’m NOT GONNA LISTEN TO IT!”
“Is that right?” Jerry went quieter, but his intensity didn’t wane. “Your alphas give you rules, right? That’s one thing we all have in common. The alphas make the rules. Tell me, Michael – your alphas have any rules that you gotta talk to folks with respect?”

Michael blinked. He had rules to that effect separately from Dean and Castiel both. He didn’t feel wrong though, and he was certain that if either alpha were here they would back him up. “Yes, sir,” he said coldly. “But our rules about respect go both ways. I don’t have to stand here and take it when you call me a fucking Omega and listen when you tell me I’ve been brainwashed. I get to expect others in the house to respect me too, Pop. That’s the difference.” Michael looked over at Rachel and his mother, frozen on the couch. He prayed they both stayed out of it, and he nodded when Rachel cautiously took their mother’s hand.

“Oh really? You willing to bet the color of your ass on that? I’ll call those fellas up right now and tell them their Omega boy is sassing the hell outta his own father. You willing to risk that? I swear I’ll call right now.”

Michael felt achingly sad for his father all of a sudden. Reaching into his bag of bias and coming up empty handed had to be terrifying for him. “Go ahead and call, sir. I’ll accept the consequences for my words, whatever they are. Will you?”

“Don’t you threaten me, boy. I can have you laid over my knee faster than you can blink, and I’ll see that you don’t sit for a month.” Alpha Lancet had nowhere left to go, and he fell back on the only thing that had ever given his son pause.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Michael said sadly. He’d hoped to have made more progress today, but it seemed the more evidence the Alpha was presented with, the harder he dug his heels in. “The golf cart in the garage has the key in it. You can take that back down to the guest house whenever you’re ready. Dinner is at 6:30. Please be on time. Bye, Rache. Mommy.” He kissed his sister and then his mother before sliding out the door.

Rachel watched him go with wonder on her face.

When had her brother grown into a man?

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Castiel pulled April out of class at three and the three wolves headed home in Dean’s car. No one had very much to say. There was an air of trepidation about the evening, that is, until Dean parked his Baby in the garage and started to get out. Cas’ hand on his wrist stopped him, and he turned to his Alpha with a questioning look. Cas silently handed him a piece of printer paper, folded in half. Dean took it, and April leaned over the seat to read over his shoulder. She put a hand over her mouth when she realized what it said.

“Cas…” Dean started, then stopped, re-reading the form letter. “Why now? It’s months from now. I don’t…”

“We filed the Pack under the name Winchester,” Castiel explained patiently, leaning across the bench seat to create an intimate space with his fiancé, their faces close together. “And we listed my name on that application as Castiel… James… Winchester.” Cas kissed Dean’s lips between each name. “Legally, I was required to change my name to avoid a discrepancy and have the Pack
application rejected. They accepted the application on the receipt I filed a week later showing I’d filed for a name change. The name change took longer than I expected, but I received this today. Legally, as of now, I’m a Winchester.”

“Does this mean you’re married now?” April asked naively.

“No, Kitten. There’s nothing about the name change that ties Dean to me legally, or vice versa. As far as the state knows, we’re unrelated but share the same surname. We won’t be married until the wedding. The wedding process is still designed for heterosexual couples with the expectation that the woman will change her name but not the man. For a man to take his husband’s name is a completely separate process that doesn’t have to coincide with the date of the wedding.”

“So, what you’re saying with all those words is you’re mine, right?” Dean was reading and re-reading the form, trying to make heads or tails of it.

“That’s right, Dean. I’m yours. I always have been.”

“Fucking sap,” said Dean with a bit of extra garage dust in his eye. He leaned in for one more kiss, and then ruffled April’s hair before getting out of the car, the form letter clutched tightly. “Where’s this Congresswoman bitch, Cas? Let’s fuckin’ do this shit!”

Cas sighed. “He always talks like a truck driver when my mother comes to visit, April. Try not to emulate him, please.”

“Yes, Alpha,” she responded with a smile. The evening didn’t seem quite so dark to April any longer.

The Lancets all arrived at the house at 6:00 wearing their finest and looking every bit a high society family. “Y’all clean up pretty good,” Dean told them, affecting his best Texas impression. It wasn’t very good if Michael’s eye roll was anything to go by.

“If I hear you try to use the phrase, ‘fixin’ to’ you’re in big trouble, Dean. Don’t even go there. You’re not ready yet,” Michael warned, as if speaking Texan was a dangerous pastime.

“Have y’all started drinking yet?” Rachel whispered to Dean as she let him take her shawl.

“Hell yes,” Dean responded. “I’m going for three sheets by the time they serve the soup.” Rachel snickered and went to join April to admire her dress and compare nail polish colors. Michael avoided his father’s conversation, letting the Alphas confer together about whatever it was Alphas talked about when they were alone. They both looked very serious. Michael headed for Dean instead.

“Why are we doing this again?” he asked his mate.

“Long version or short?” Dean answered his question with a question.

“Give me the short version,” said Michael distractedly checking that the room had been configured as he’d specified.

“Short version is that Naomi deserves to meet her new daughter-in-law and son-in-law…-in-law.
Also, something about announcing an engagement. I don’t really know.” Dean didn’t hide his annoyance at not having been consulted about this evening. If he had been, he’d have managed to arrange a critical seminar in Detroit for this evening and would’ve gotten out of it with sincerest apologies. He took a swig from his bottle.

“You know she’ll probably take offense at seeing you drinking from a beer bottle at a formal dinner, don’t you?’”

“I know,” Dean confirmed. “Naomi and I have this little dance we do whenever we meet. It’s got certain steps. Watch and learn, my friend. Watch and learn.”

“Please don’t embarrass me, Dean,” Michael said, surprising his mate. Why would Michael care about impressing Naomi? Dean narrowed his eyes at the Omega, but the doorbell stopped him from following up.

Dean sank into the couch between Rachel and April and leaned back, killing his beer. Castiel cleared his throat and straightened his dinner jacket. Gabriel rested an arm along the fireplace mantle and leaned casually, his face a perfect picture of classic Omega forbearance.

Fred led Naomi Novak into the parlor, and Dean was astounded as always at the presence she brought with her. Naomi was a force of intangible energy that moved with her and pulled every eye to her like a single candle flame in a deep cavern. She also sucked all the oxygen out of the room in exactly the same way.

“Oh, Castiel! It’s been far too long.” Cas glided to her and took both her hands in his, kissing them graciously.

“Mother. Thank you for coming. I agree. It’s been too long. I’d like you to meet some people, and I think this is just the place to do that. Gabe, would you…?” Castiel began to turn to try to pull Gabriel into their mother’s space as well, but Naomi interrupted his motion.

“Wait a moment, please, son. I’d like to get something cleared up first. I’m a little confused, and I’m sure it’s a mistake. Can you please, by chance, tell me — what exactly is the meaning of this letter I received from your attorney?” Naomi dug into her handbag and pulled out the notice of Pack Establishment that had been sent to every Pack member’s home address. She handed it to Castiel.

He took it with a sigh. “Yes, Mother. I attempted to call you several times about this, but you haven’t returned my calls, nor my emails. I sent you a letter by post about a week prior to the date you would have received this notice, so you cannot have been surprised by it. This is notice that I’ve changed the registered name of the Pack that I head as Alpha, the Pack to which you belong by default. As I explained by voicemail, email, and postal letter, we are now Winchesters in name, although I have no intention of asking you or Gabriel to change your names. You may remain Novaks.”

“Oh, well, how very generous of you, son. This is utterly ridiculous. I had assumed it was a mistake. Whoever heard of such a thing? I wonder, Castiel, if it’s necessary for me to go into the first stages of dehydration before someone offers me a refreshment in my own home?”

April laughed loudly but then ceased abruptly when no one else did. She sat awkwardly beside Dean, her eyes wide. Should she still be sitting? Shouldn’t she either be on her feet or on her knees for an occasion this formal? April couldn’t remember, but she was certain that slouched into the couch wasn’t right. Dean put an arm across her shoulders and pulled her to him.

“What would you like to drink, Mother? I believe martinis are your drink of preference? Gabriel still
mixes the best martini.”

“Yes, that would be fine. Hello, Gabriel. How lovely to see you looking so well. How long has it been?”

“Ages, Mom,” he said. “It’s been ages. Vodka?”

“Yes, of course. Castiel, I’m interested that you’ve made such bold changes to the décor. Whatever possessed you to discard our family portrait for this…piece?” She studied the painting over the fireplace with obvious distaste.

“It’s an oil painting by a brilliant young Omega artist who is showing this year in Paris. I met her on my last trip, and fell in love with the textures and intimate colors she works into each piece, almost as if by accident. I could look at this painting for hours and still feel I’ve not seen it all.” Cas waxed lilting admiration as he stood before the huge canvas.

“Well, it looks like a kindergartner could have drawn it on poster board, to me,” she told him dismissively, accepting her drink from Gabriel without looking up.

“Charming as ever, Mother,” Cas said, closing his eyes and taking a strengthening breath. He realized that the room was full of people but none of them were talking or moving. Everyone was watching the train wreck unfold in slow motion, frozen in fascination or something more extreme.

“May I introduce you to our other guests?” he tried. Maybe she could be distracted.

“Well, of course. I was wondering if you’d forgotten all of your manners entirely, son.”

“Mother, this is Alpha Jerry Lancet, his mate Beatrice, and their daughter, Rachel. The Lancets are visiting from Texas.” Alpha Lancet shook her hand firmly and told her he was an admirer of her work in Congress. Beatrice did a kind of awkward curtsy-thing, blushing, and Naomi’s eyebrows went up. Rachel shook her hand coolly, saying nothing at all.

“This is their son, Michael.” Naomi smiled warmly at Michael and shook his hand for a little too long, wrapping her other hand around to keep him in place after practically dumping her drink at Rachel to hold. Rachel caught it in surprise. Dean sat forward on the couch, suddenly much less ready to slouch his way through the evening. “Michael is Dean’s new mate. They’ve only been Mated for about a month.”

“It’s lovely to meet you, Michael. Aren’t you a handsome young man? Yes, I’d heard that Castiel’s friend had finally Mated. Of course, it must be so very awkward to come across your True-Mate only to discover it’s another man. These things can’t be helped, though can they? Biology is such a bitch sometimes. Still, I suppose there are ways to cope, are there not?” Naomi smiled at him in sincere sympathy, tightly holding his hand. Dean could feel Michael becoming more and more alarmed as she spoke.

“Good evening, Naomi,” said Dean icily, standing next to Michael where he hadn’t been only a moment before. “Welcome to our home. I hope you enjoy the evening. You’ve met my mate, I see. Can I interest you in another drink?”

“Oh, hello, Dean. I must say, I’m a little surprised to see you here tonight. Castiel’s invitation mentioned something about an announcement. I’m hoping the announcement isn’t simply that he’s abandoned generations of Novaks and all they’ve accomplished to change the name of this historic Pack to that of some pedestrian English wayfarer.”

“Wayfarer. Huh. You know, incidentally my surname happens to be Winchester. Sam’s too. You
remember Sam, don’t you Naomi?” Dean gestured to Sam all the way across the room and began to escort her away from Michael. “And congratulations are in order for Sam. He’s only just Mated as well. Naomi Novak, this is our newest Packmate, Jessica Winchester.”

“Actually, Congresswoman Novak,” Jess stated, extending her hand and sounding like a lawyer. “The name Winchester is locational. It’s a regional title for an ancient military fort, so it’s kind of the opposite from wayfarer. I’ve been dabbling in the historic significance of my new name. It’s fascinating. It’s an honor to meet you, Ma’am.”

“Don’t bother with the history,” Naomi rebutted rudely. “Most wolves stole their names from anyone living close by when they crawled out of the wilderness. Few of us carry meaningful names. Jessica, is it?” Naomi clarified, looking at Jess as if she’d never seen another professional woman before and didn’t quite know what to make of her. “What brings you and Sam out of isolation tonight? If you’ve recently Mated, shouldn’t you be in seclusion?”

“I’m afraid I’ve had to work straight through, Ma’am. You understand. Professional responsibilities sometimes have to take precedence over personal ‘druthers. We balance how we must, don’t we?” Jess’ attempt to find a way to relate to the older woman fell flat as Naomi lost interest before she’d finished speaking.

Turning to Sam and beaming, Naomi took his hand in both of hers as she had done with Michael, and she shone up at him. “Congratulations, Samuel. It’s nice to see you settled at last. I wish you many, many pups and years of rowdy chaos.”

Sam faltered, and Jess closed her eyes. He couldn’t extract his hand without appearing rude. “Um, uh, I…Yes, thank you, Ma’am.” Sam pulled his hand back as soon as he could and wrapped it around his mate who trembled slightly.

It was a standard well-wishing sentiment, but it was also so very Naomi. Dean didn’t know how, but he was lowkey positive she already knew about Jess’ infertility. His jaw set, and he shot a fierce look at Castiel. She’d hurt Sam, and her being here was Castiel’s fault. Dean’s look told Cas he had a very short time limit before Dean chucked the Congresswoman out the door on her pointy ass. And the clock was ticking.

Cas looked appalled. He cleared his throat again and intercepted Naomi before she could do any more damage. Michael had recovered her drink from Rachel and handed it back to her for all the world like a fully-trained Omega. She smiled gratefully at him, seemingly unaware of the damage she’d done. “Such a polite young man. Thank you, Michael.”

Cas took a deep breath. “And this lovely young woman right here, is my mate, April. April, this is my mother, Congresswoman Naomi Novak.”

April presented herself to Naomi as she would do to an Alpha. She’d decided that being a Congresswoman put the beta on par at the very least with a Pack Alpha, and she wanted to make a good impression.

“Oh, my. You’re quite pretty, my dear.” Naomi blinked. “Castiel, surely this girl is too young to Mate. Please tell me you’re joking. I know you have a number of unsavory sexual practices, but I must draw the line a child molestation. Really, Castiel! This is an awful prank to play on your aging mother.”

Castiel didn’t correct her or attempt to justify himself. He kissed April chastely, sweetly, and squeezed her arm in support, then he sent her to Gabriel with a flick of his eyes and a wink.
“We’ll eat in a few minutes, Mother. Michael has arranged a wonderful seven-course meal, but I need to speak to you first. Would you mind coming into my office? Dean?”

Naomi patted Michael on the arm as she passed, but she made no protest as she followed Cas from the room. Dean whispered at Michael as he went along behind, but he couldn’t change the surprised look that was frozen on Michael’s face. Michael was stuck in the quicksand of Naomi Novak’s regard, just as Sam had always been. How she chose whom she liked and whom she despised had always been a mystery to Dean, but he much preferred his present spot over Sam’s.

Castiel closed the door behind Dean and indicated that his mother should sit on the leather couch. She perched like a songbird prepared to take flight. Dean sat on the arm, sprawling in an ugly slouch as he was wont to do in her presence out of sheer spite.

“What is this about, Castiel?” she asked despite the fact he was clearly prepared to tell her.

“I need to warn you that I’ve got sources that are telling me you and your staff as well as some of your more dedicated donors are being investigated for ties to the explosion at OLS outside of Oklahoma City. You need to be prepared to answer questions and defend yourself. I’m offering you full Pack support if you want or need it.”

“Oh, Castiel, don’t be dramatic. You can’t possibly believe I had anything to do with that nightmare.”

“I don’t. I know you wouldn’t, but that’s not going to make paying for a good defense any cheaper. You need to be prepared. I’m being investigated as well. It looks as if the FBI is casting a very wide net, and I don’t hold very much confidence in their competence in this area. They know nothing of Lupin matters, and they may not care whether they apprehend the culprit or whomever happens to be standing too close. Your rhetoric of late may seem to the Feds as bombastic enough to be considered incendiary. You’re a suspect, Mother.”

Naomi broke into gales of laughter. She struggled for a minute to control herself and then finally managed to collect herself so she could speak. “I understand now. Castiel, you do play a fine game of chess. My word! All of this subterfuge just to convince me to submarine my own political agenda. Oh, son. Do you not know me better than that by now? That was truly a very clumsy effort, Castiel. No, I’m sorry. I’m afraid the bill and the ‘rhetoric,’ as you call it, stays. I love you, son, as only a mother can, but I remain committed to blocking your obscenities everywhere they pop up.”

Her laughter well and truly gone, Naomi went cold. “I had nothing whatsoever to do with that clusterfuck in Oklahoma, but by God, I wish it had been me, and if it turns out to have been someone who supports my message, I will honor him as the hero that he is. Good riddance to the likes of that monster, and may God have mercy on his twisted soul.”

“Accept the legal assistance from the Pack, or don’t. It’s yours if you want it.” Castiel sounded tired in a way only his mother could draw from him. He’d stopped arguing with her years ago. These days he stuck to presenting information once and then leaving it alone.

Dean’s anger simmered just under the surface. No one. No one else in the goddamned world was allowed to talk to Cas like that. Why the fuck did he still take it from her?

Cas stood to escort her back to the others, but she stopped him. “Please excuse my confusion, Castiel. I’m…baffled. Why, and no offense Dean…” Dean shrugged as if he couldn’t imagine taking offense at anything she had to say. “…Why have Dean and his family join us tonight just to tell me to watch out for the FBI?” She blinked at him innocently.
No. She couldn’t be that daft. Obtuse. Delusional. What exactly was the word? Stupid? No, Naomi was many things, but she wasn’t stupid. Maybe she had a rapid onset dementia. That would explain a lot.

Castiel cleared his throat once again and worked his jaw. She had no intention of making any part of this easy on her youngest son, and he couldn’t remember why inviting her had seemed like the responsible thing to do anymore. At least her question served to move his announcement from the dinner table to a more private place. Castiel should have made the entire thing private, he realized, but it was too late now.

“Rules for tonight’s meal, Mother,” he said unexpectedly. Dean almost smiled. He always liked this part. She rolled her eyes. “You are to show respect to everyone in attendance. Don’t be rude, not even obliquely, and yes, we can tell when you’re insulting someone and couching it as a compliment. You get two chances, Mother. One word or look that I don’t like and you’ll be warned. One more, and your evening is over. You will be escorted back to the guard house where you are welcome to stay the night as long as you stay there. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Alpha.” No one had ever made that phrase sound as ludicrous as she did. Dean had spent several minutes once staring at himself in the mirror, trying to get the timbre and inflection just like she did it, but he couldn’t even come close. Naomi Novak was a singular work of art.

“That said, and remembering that I’m completely serious…” Cas held his hand out to Dean. Dean shook his head minutely, eyes wide, sitting on his hands. Cas tilted his head and his face flattened. He’d taken enough shit this evening, and he wasn’t about to take it from Dean too. As unfair as that was, Dean caved and slid off the end of the couch, but he narrowed his eyes at Cas in promise. Dean took Cas’ hand and let the Alpha turn him to face the Dragon Lady still perched on the couch. Not a songbird; more like a vulture who’s spotted a carcass rotting in the mud and has begun to salivate.

“Mother, it is my honor, although I know that you already know this…it is my honor to announce that Dean and I are engaged to be married this September.”

Naomi’s face could have been carved from marble. She seemed not to be breathing. It was only when she didn’t laugh that Dean realized he had expected her to. She flicked her eyes to Dean, down to the ring on his finger, and then up to Castiel’s face.

“Not engaged to young Michael then?” she said in clipped tones just this side of being over Castiel’s line.

“Nope.” Dean popped the ‘P’. “Should I call you Mom?”

Cas elbowed him. “If she doesn’t get to be rude, Dean, neither do you. Please be nice.” Dean could hear the desperation in Cas’ voice. He wasn’t scolding Dean, he was begging for his fiancé’s help to get out of the mess that Cas had put them all in. Dean turned and looked at him a little coldly. Oh, so now he needed Dean’s input?

“Apologies, Alpha,” Dean said, watching Castiel flinch. The Alpha was realizing not only that he’d screwed up by inviting her here tonight, but precisely how badly. “What I meant to ask was how she’d like to be addressed now that we’ll be close family. Was that out of line?” Dean blinked, taking a page out of Naomi’s book.

“Calling me Naomi will be fine, as always, Dean. I am thrilled to welcome you to the Novak Pack. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to make your transition more comfortable. I know there may be a bit of a culture shock from what you’re accustomed to.”
“And that’s your warning!” Cas broke in, opening the door and ushering Dean out with a hand at the small of his back. Naomi could follow or not. He didn’t care anymore. “One more. I swear.”

“What did I say?” she followed like a lost puppy, looking injured.

Dean pulled Cas aside in the foyer after ushering Naomi back into the parlor. “What the fuck are you doing?!” he hissed. “She’s not fucking worth it! Goddamnit, when are you gonna realize she’s never going to approve of you or anything you ever do, and who gives a flying flat of buffalo shit? She’s not fucking worth it, Castiel!” Dean was whispering as loudly as he could and still call it whispering. “Did you seriously bring her here to try to impress her with your new pack? Your mate? Your fucking fiancé? Cas, have you even MET the woman? She’s a fucking monster, she doesn’t belong here, and she’s not ever going to be impressed, not by anything you do - certainly not by hearing you’re planning to marry me.”

“She’s family, Dean!”

“No. No, she’s fucking not, Cas! Family doesn’t do this. Do you know how many times since she arrived she’s said your name? More than twenty. More than twenty, Cas. How many times has she said Gabe’s? Once. Fucking once, and she barely even looked at him. You’re hurting everyone by bringing her here just to try one more pathetic fucking time to see if you can get her to love you, aren’t you? Tell me that’s not what this is. Goddamn, son of a bitch, motherfucker, shit, damn, fuck, son-of-a-FUCKING-BITCH!” Dean paced and lost it. He grabbed Castiel’s coat lapels and shook him. “She’s NOT FAMILY, CASTIEL! There’s a point. You keep saying there’s not a point ‘cause family is forever and nothing can be so bad that it’s worth being abandoned by your own family, but there is by God a fucking point where you can go too far and not be able to crawl your way back. She’s gone too far! And I’m not talking about me, dammit! I’m not talking about Sam or April or Michael – God help him since she seems to like the sorry son of a bitch – I’m talking about Gabriel and I’m talking about you! You don’t take that shit from anyone, Castiel! Why the fuck would you take it from her!? She’s poison, Cas!”

“Are you finished?”

Dean steeled himself to stop the trembling. He let go of Castiel’s jacket and smoothed the lapels back down. He smacked his lips as he opened his mouth. “Yep. I’m done. You ready to eat? Michael did a lot of work on this meal. We should enjoy it.”

Cas took hold of Dean’s jaw and brought his mouth in for a bruising kiss, more frustration and aggression than kiss. He breathed heavily through his nose as he rested his forehead against Dean’s. “I fucked up, Dean. I’m so sorry.”

“I know. I’m pissed as hell about it too. All you had to do is ask me, and I’ll lead you right every time. Stop fucking planning shit without me, man. You suck at it. Now, straighten up, and get in there and rescue my mate before she puts him through college and signs him up as a congressional intern.”

“She probably heard most of that, you know. You whisper very loudly, Dean.”

“Fuck her, Cas,” said Dean in his normal voice. It echoed in the foyer. Blue eyes held green.

“Come on. Let me see if I can pull anything positive out of this fiasco.” Cas took his hand and pulled him into the parlor.

They found it empty, as dinner had been announced, and Naomi took it upon herself to claim that her grandfathered status as Pack Alpha widow allowed her the right to play hostess. No one had argued,
and Dean and Cas found them all seated according to Michael’s calligraphy placards, awaiting the first course.

“Trouble, boys?” Naomi asked demurely. “I didn’t hear shouting, did I?”

Dean had ‘Fuck you, Naomi’ on the tip of his tongue, but a look from Michael and Cas in stereo stayed him.

Dinner was torture for Dean in a way he had never quite been able to explain to Castiel. Cas, who came from money, born into power and privilege, only thought he understood Dean’s pain. But it was the tiny little nuances that Cas had taken in with mother’s milk on his silver spoon, but that Dean could never catch up on that tore him up. So self-assured most of the time, Dean began to doubt every decision as he ate, even the smallest, like how often to use his napkin, and whether to set it in his lap or beside his plate.

He didn’t care, truth be told, not when he was himself, but he’d been irreversibly triggered by Naomi’s cold, hard, disgusted reaction back in Castiel’s office, and he was close to tears. Cas, who claimed to have loved Dean from the first time he set eyes on the boy, but who’d never, even after all those years, loved him enough to take him for his own until a tiny girl, barely legal, bullied him into it for her own ends, who belonged in this beautiful house as if he’d oozed from the golden woodwork rather than from his mother’s pained body, was too good for Dean. Try as he might, and God was he trying, Dean could never make up the difference between them.

Cas despised Naomi, but he kept fighting for her love despite how toxic she was to him. Was he not doing the same thing with Dean? Dean could NEVER be enough for Cas. Cas was polish and breeding down to the marrow of his bones. Dean was a jumped-up grease monkey who’d had to share a bedroom his whole childhood because there wasn’t enough money for a bigger house.

Dean heard the disdain in Castiel’s voice when he spoke to his mother after she said anything particularly ignorant or blatantly false, and in Dean’s mind, that tone seemed to overlay the words he spoke to Dean as well. They were the same, Dean and Naomi – Naomi by choice and behavior, but Dean simply through birth and existence. He simply wasn’t enough; would never, could never be good enough.

Michael shot him repeated looks but was stuck under Naomi’s thumb. Jerry asked her question after deeply-thought question, and she answered in dime store platitudes with a sickening simper plastered on her face.

‘It’s a mask’, thought Dean, ‘like the one I wear when I’m selling. She’s selling snake oil to the plebes right now. I do that. Is that what I look like? It has to be. People can spot fake, and that’s fake. I’m fake. I don’t belong here. God, what the fuck am I doing here?’

Dean felt filthy. He felt as if he had motor oil and road soot under his fingernails and had come to the table in his garage coveralls. He had to get out. He needed to clear out before he contaminated everything. He tried to suck in a breath, but the soot clogged his mouth and nose. There was black smoke filling his mind and his heart, seeping from his very soul, his black and broken and damaged soul. Dean couldn’t breathe. His chest hurt. His eyes blinked and watered. He swayed where he sat, and his knife clattered on his plate then fell to the beautiful ivory rug, soiling it with an ugly red stain – sauce, not blood, but what difference did it make? It was all the same base, false, dirty, worthless smudge of existence on an otherwise pristine perfection.

“DEAN!”

Michael’s shout startled Dean, and he jumped. Scared faces, frozen around the table swam in front of
his blurry eyes. Dean blinked, not sure he remembered how breathing worked. His eyes closed again, and he fell sideways, his arms cold.

“Cas, help me! Get him up, he can’t breathe!”

“What’s happening?”

“Is he allergic?”

“Back off a little and give him some air!”

“Sam, call an ambulance, he’s losing consciousness.”

Cas cradled him in his lap as everything swam incomprehensibly. “Dean! Stay with me, baby! Breathe like Michael’s doing. Can you see him? Just feel him, okay? We’re not going to leave you! I’m going to keep talking. Listen to my voice and watch Michael breathe. Try to breathe with him. Hang in there Dean, we’ve got you. You’re going to be okay. Baby, I love you so much. Michael loves you. We’ve got you. Just breathe for me, real slow and easy. That’s it, slow it down. It’s okay to close your eyes. Keep your hand where it is so you can feel him breathing, and hold onto him in your head. Don’t go to sleep quite yet. Keep listening to my voice.”

Dean registered far too many people, and a white-sheeted cot. He saw the dark night split by twirling blue and red lights. Faces appeared above him and questioning voices said things he didn’t understand.

He wanted to tell them.

Stop.

Just stop.

Not worth all this fuss. You’ve got the wrong guy. I’m just Dean. Not worth it. Let me sleep and go save someone who matters. Anyone else. Just let me sleep. Wrong guy.

“Ride with him, Michael. I’ll follow with Sam.”

Dean didn’t hear anything more. He let go and fell into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

So, uh, there's a cliff-hanger in this chapter. Did I forget to mention? See y'all next week. I'm fixin' to go to bed.
Chapter Summary

Little bit more about how awful Naomi is before we leave her. Michael gets delivered for his big day. Dean and Cas discuss last Friday. (Is it a spoiler to say that? Sorry.)

Chapter Notes

This THEN section has been a long time in coming. It's necessary for a lot of reasons, and I'll let you guys just chew on what those are. Book reports are due by Tuesday.

Also, this is a crappy next segment to follow a cliff-hanger, but I'm following the style of the show we all love. If they can do it, so can I.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THEN:

Gabriel moaned louder, rocking back and forth, and Castiel couldn’t take it anymore. At fourteen, he wasn’t nearly old enough to help. His virgin knot wouldn’t be capable of giving his older brother what he needed anyway. But the adults weren’t doing anything, and the stout walls and doors did nothing to keep the pained cries from echoing down the hall. Cas had hoped that just sitting with his brother and bringing him the scent of alpha, even an immature alpha, would help at least a little, but it wasn’t helping. Cas’ erection hurt, but if Gabe wasn’t getting any relief, Cas wouldn’t allow any for himself either. Sibling taboo be damned, the smell of Omega in Heat sent Castiel’s head spinning and his cock into a new dimension of stiff. It left him fighting against urges he’d never experienced before, and it was a heady struggle.

Cas touched his brother’s sweaty forehead. He was too hot – much too hot, hotter than last time Cas had checked, and that scared him. This was unreal. Where was Mother? She said she’d take care of Gabe, but then she’d left and not come back. Castiel’s knee bounced in anxious indecision, then he shot out of the chair, cupping his erection to keep it from grinding against the fabric of his pants and left the room.

Castiel found his mother on the back porch with a book and a chilled glass of white wine.

“You have to do something! This isn’t normal. He needs help!” Cas spat at his mother. He’d seen her callous before, but never to this degree. Naomi Novak regarded her younger son with tired disdain, frustrated at being interrupted during the good part.

“He’s Omega, Castiel,” she explained again. “He’s going to have Heats. It comes with the territory. If you like, you can get Fred to drive you down to the store to buy him a Heat-kit, but I promise you, the best thing we can do for Gabriel is to give him some privacy and let it run its course.” She sipped her wine.
“He’s too hot, and it’s been five days. He is supposed to be trailing off by now, but he’s getting worse. Put your fucking book down and call the fucking doctor! Call an alpha over. Call ANYBODY who will actually DO SOMETHING! OMEGAS FUCKING DIE FROM HEAT-DISTRESS!” Cas started off calm and rational, trying to hold himself in check because losing his shit had never worked with his mother, but he couldn’t do it. In the end, he was shouting and cursing, and he knew he’d lost.

“Go to your room, Castiel, and stay there. Don’t come out until morning. You know I don’t accept being spoken to in that manner. Show some class. You’ve been taught better. What would your father have said?” She dismissed him coldly and went right back to her book. Cas stood still for a moment, shocked. He didn’t care if she punished him, but surely, she had to know that her nonchalance was putting her oldest son at risk. She was going to act, wasn’t she? Eventually?

Only, Gabe didn’t have time for eventually.

Castiel growled to himself, spun on his heel, and walked furiously back through the house. He found Fred in the kitchen, his face close to Nancy’s, whispering urgently, a worried wrinkle in his brow. Fred stopped abruptly upon spying Castiel and stood up straight with worried eyes trained on the boy.

“He needs help,” Cas told him with all the alpha authority he could muster. “Call Doctor Singer. Tell him it’s an emergency, and tell him to get here as fast as he can. I’ll be with Gabriel. Don’t tell mother. She’s inebriated and not in full capacity at the moment. I’m assuming command as Pack Alpha from this moment. Do it.” Cas’ eyes burned with fervor. “NOW!”

Fred jumped. “Yes, Alpha. Right away, sir.” It was the first time he heard a capital letter ascribed to the honorific in his title, but there was no mistaking. Castiel was Alpha. He nodded, appreciating minutely how the title felt right to him, and he turned and left the kitchen, calling over his shoulder, “Give him my mobile phone number and tell him to call me with any questions if he needs to…” Cas’ voice trailed back into the kitchen, although he was already gone, and he heard the faint ‘yes, Alpha’ that followed his impromptu instruction.

Cas found Gabriel crying in pain and humping the bed again, all of his fingers and his thumb pressed as high into his channel as he could get them. He climbed onto the bed without thinking twice and draped his clothed body over his brother’s, moving with him, simulating the feel of an alpha, mid-coitus. Cas’ cock perked right back up, but he ignored it, leaving his fly zipped in place. He couldn’t help. He knew he couldn’t help. His adolescent body didn’t know that, and he quickly broke a sweat, demanding the alpha claim the Omega beneath him. Cas clamped his mouth shut, afraid to speak, falling back on gentle, comforting humming. He couldn’t risk parting his lips, unsure if an adolescent bite could spark a Mating-bond.

God, the scandal that would cause.

His mobile phone rang. Cas scrambled off his brother, who whimpered loudly at the loss. “Dr. Singer?” he said desperately. “Yes, Sir, he’s been in Heat for five days now, and his fever’s only going higher. He can’t talk at all. He’s not responding to anything. I think he’s hurting himself. Can you come? He needs help.”

Cas listened to the doctor’s question. “No, sir. He’s never had anyone here during his Heats. Mother makes him go through it alone. I don’t know for sure, but I think he’s a virgin.” Another pause. “Yes, sir, sixteen.” Cas listened impatiently. “Thank you, sir. I’ll be here. And, Dr. Singer? Mother doesn’t know we called you. She doesn’t believe he needs help. I suppose you should know that before you get here.”
Dr. Singer slipped in the garage door that Fred held open for him and ushered him through. He followed the butler up the stairs and down the corridor, quickening his own pace when the cries of pain reached him. Once he’d pushed the door open and saw the young, frenzied Omega, naked and prone on the bed, his ass shoved in the air, rocking lasciviously and beginning to bleed where his fingers had torn the tight raw flesh of his anus, Bobby paled and rushed to his side. Castiel stood up from the cushioned chair pulled up close to the bed.

Bobby put a warm hand to Gabriel’s back, feeling his damp skin. “Castiel, get a basin of cool water and a cloth. I want you to rub him down. I’m going to inspect the damage. Go on, get busy, son.” The doctor’s voice was calm but commanding. He was accustomed to being obeyed. Cas nodded and dashed out the door.

The doctor set his bag on the floor and knelt to open it. “Fred,” he called to the butler who remained by the door, his eyes wide and scared. “He’s going to be fine, but I need to work in here for a time without being disturbed. Let Castiel back in but no one else…not even his mother…especially not his mother. Can you take care of that for me?” Bobby turned and met the Simian’s grey eyes.

“Yes, alpha,” he whispered. Bobby nodded, thanked him, and then went back to his bag, digging out his gloves, lube, a syringe, and a speculum. Gabriel didn’t seem to know he was present. He continued to roll and cry, pumping his hips futilely.

Bobby was finishing up his brief exam as Cas slipped back in. He was directed to the other side of the bed and put to work cooling the Omega’s heated body with long strokes from the wet cloth. “Just keep it up, Cas. Touch him with your hand and talk to him. He may not respond, but he can hear you. Once you get to his feet, just start over at his head. Keep going.” Bobby grimaced, and adjusted his cock in his trousers.

“What are you going to do?” Castiel asked him, bringing the washcloth to Gabriel’s hair, and letting the cool water run over his ears.

“I’m going to give him a suppressant and a pain killer by injection, and then I’m going to knot him. Do you want to stay for that?” Bobby began to prepare his syringe, filling it from a small vial and then flicking it to dislodge the air bubble.

“Is he in danger, alpha?” Cas asked rather than answer the question.

“He’ll be fine once he gets what he needs, but yeah, he’s close to the danger point. You did good to call me, boy. This might’ve gone bad real quick if you had just let him tough it out.”

“I’ll stay, sir. I’m not leaving him until he asks me to.” Cas went to work cooling his brother’s skin. He suspected it was a pointless job, just something to make the young alpha feel useful, but Gabe seemed to be leaning into the touch, and it did make Cas feel like he was doing something useful. Bobby nodded, and cleaned a spot high up on Gabe’s backside with an alcohol wipe as Cas soothed his brother’s back with cool water. He injected the fluid in, and then rubbed the bump left behind, capping the syringe without really looking at it and stowing it in a small case in his bag to discard later.

Bobby ran his thumb across Gabe’s asshole. The tearing was going to sting, but all in all, the pain from inside Gabriel’s body was much more severe than the sting of penetration was going to be. The Omega hadn’t damaged himself very badly, and Bobby needed to deal with him quickly. He pushed the disposable tip of his lube bottle into Gabe’s ass and squeezed just to be sure, although a wet smear of slick already coated both thighs.
Not looking at Castiel, who seemed as determined not to meet the doctor’s eye, Bobby unbuckled his pants, and pushed everything down in one motion. His cock sprang free, fully erect and purple in its need. He stepped out of his pants. He stripped his shirt over his head and tossed it aside. Bobby ran a lube-covered hand over himself, pumping twice. He knelt up onto the bed and let his weight fall over the Omega’s back, making soothing noises. Castiel was beside Gabe’s head, whispering calming words to his brother. Gabriel wasn’t crying out anymore, and his body had gone supremely still, waiting. His ass pushed slowly, almost imperceptibly up and back toward the alpha cock poised above him.

Bobby aimed the head of his cock and pushed slowly in, letting Gabe’s channel accept him. He was tight, but not dangerously so after so many hours of taking his own fingers. Gabriel whined piteously and shoved backward with no warning, bottoming Bobby out, and they both groaned deep and long. Castiel’s grip tightened on Gabe’s shoulder, holding him still, trying to calm him so Bobby could do whatever he needed to, but the doctor brushed him gently off.

“Let him take what he needs, pup. Don’t hold him down like that.” Castiel moved back, looking worried. He wasn’t a complete prude, and even at fourteen, he’d seen things. Lewd things. But this was his own brother, who was bleeding and in pain, overheated and overwrought and exhausted. The alpha who was pressing his cock deep into his brother was a trusted family friend. It wasn’t that Castiel thought he was going to harm Gabriel, but he knew the contact had to hurt. He just wanted it all over. He didn’t like that Gabe’s face registered intense pain even as he got his arms beneath him and pressed his body back into deeper contact with the alpha, but he pulled away and let them be.

Gabriel began to move in a slow rock, pressing in hard and then pulling back just enough to grind back in again, groaning to himself, his eyes tightly shut, and a steady drip of perspiration falling from the tip of his nose. He didn’t seem to be fully aware that anyone else was present. He mumbled nonsense words to himself and cried out every now and then. Bobby rocked into him, meeting him at the apex of his pushes, and making soothing noises into his ear. Reaching around Gabe’s body, he wrapped a hand around his worn and raw cock without much pressure, feeling Gabriel out, letting him know that the touch was there if he wanted it.

Gabe flinched and twisted away, yelping in pain, so Bobby released him. He put a firm hand on his flank and began to thrust in a little harder, more rhythmically, more intentionally. “Put a hand on him, boy,” Bobby grunted at Castiel, who had stopped wiping his cloth across his brother or touching him at all after his last admonishment, and instead stood transfixed, staring at Gabriel’s face as it changed. “Even just on his arm there. He needs to feel that you’re here for him. Come on, pup, listen to me! Do it!”

Bobby’s stern voice broke Cas out of his trance, and he leaned back in close to Gabe’s head, stroking his hair, wiping the tears from his eyes, kissing his forehead, and whispering praise and approval to him. He abandoned the cool cloth in favor of skin on skin. Gabriel whined and leaned in to Castiel’s hands. He opened his eyes and seemed to really see his brother for the first time in days.

“Hurts, Cas…” he whispered gravely, his voice rough from crying instead of speaking.

“You’ll feel better soon, Gabe. Doctor Singer gave you some medicine to help with the pain, and that’s him right now behind you.” Cas began a slow, easy ramble so Gabe wouldn’t feel the need to talk. “He’s going to knot you soon, and it’s gonna really help. You’ll feel so much better. God, I’m proud of you. You’ve been so brave. You’re strong, Gabe. Just let Doctor Singer help you now. Just relax. You’re going to be okay. I won’t leave you.”

Gabe let his eyes close as he concentrated on the soothing strokes inside him that touched everything he hadn’t been able to reach on his own, even with his secret stash of toys. He clung to his brother’s
hand and let the rhythm of Bobby’s too gentle thrusting ease him down until his chest was flat to the bed again, his face turned toward Castiel.

“You with us, Omega?” Bobby asked him from above his shoulder blades, poised up on his arms and still moving slowly with intention and pressing in deep.

“Yeah. I’m… I’m okay. Feels good, Doc. Can you…? Oh, please… Feels… Oh, fuck, I need…” Gabe didn’t manage to finish any of his requests, but he didn’t need to. Doctor Singer wasn’t new to Omegas in Heat-distress. He knew what to do.

“I know, boy. Just hang in there. It’s coming in a minute. Gotta go slow. You tore your ass up back here, and I don’t want to hurt you more than I have to.” Despite his words, Bobby began to move faster, letting his body touch Gabe’s along the length of their torsos as he pushed in. He began to grunt with the effort as he forced his cock in as far as he could shove it on each pass as if the spot he needed to reach was always just a little bit further in.

“Faster, alpha. Please. I can take it. Need it.” Gabe’s voice was a mess as he whined at the alpha. Bobby growled in determination, re-set the spread of his knees for stability, and began to fuck Gabriel fast, hard, and deep. The alpha’s face contorted with concentration and sensation, breaking into a sweat. Gabriel moaned and grabbed onto Castiel for support as his body was shoved back and forth in a repeating pattern that was beyond his control and better than anything he’d imagined.

The powerful thrusts sent pain and pleasure sparking through Gabriel’s body, reawakening his sore dick where it rubbed against the mattress, tingling through the gland at his center and stroking constantly against the other little electric gland deep inside his ass that made him clench around the driving cock and moan out loud. Gabe was so turned on he thought he might explode his eyeballs through his penis, and an irrelevant part of him knew he would eventually feel embarrassment at having his brother here for this, but he didn’t give a fuck right in that moment. Everything both hurt so badly and felt so deliciously good at the same time that Gabe didn’t know which way up was anymore.

Bobby’s knot began to swell, so the doctor shoved it in deep before it grew big enough to stretch at his abused rim, and he didn’t pull it out again. He began to grind his cock into the Omega in a rotation that felt entirely different to the young man, but was no less perfect.

“Yeah, oh fuck, yeah. Oh, Jesus. Alpha, I’m… oh FUCK! OH, OH, UNNNGGH!…” Gabriel came hard, rutting into his bed and then pushing back into the alpha’s cock. He cried out as he released just after his orgasm, and began to shake and weep uncontrollably at the relief. His channel clenched around the alpha, and that was all the doctor needed to let go too. Bobby grunted loudly, a low sound that turned into a long moan and then a yell. He filled the Omega’s channel with thick volumes of come. Alpha semen. It shot up into Gabe’s channel and spread everywhere, coating every surface with its sticky, soothing, ameliorative properties, and putting an immediate stop to the burning pain that Gabe couldn’t have handled for much longer.

Gabe continued to weep and shake, overcome with exhaustion and relief. Bobby kissed the back of his neck easily, keeping the contact chaste, comforting, even while the contact between them further down was anything but chaste.

“Roll with me, kid,” he told Gabe after a few minutes of panting himself back down from his high, putting a hand to his hip to let him know which way they were moving. Bobby rolled them carefully so that Gabriel faced his brother whose eyes had not stayed dry once he saw his Gabe crying.

“Christ, Castiel,” Gabe teased. “What the fuck are you crying about? You’re not the one who got his cherry popped by an old fat man with a stethoscope.” Gabe sniffled and clung to Cas’ hand, letting
his brother know the words weren’t meant to hide his appreciation for everything Cas had done for him. He just needed an emotional break.

“M’not old, you little prick,” Bobby mumbled sleepily behind him, stroking his back in long, light swipes to keep up a steady regimen of skin-to-skin contact, and because it felt good to touch the Omega. “Cas, run get us both some water. We need to get some sleep, and then we’ll do all that again. Probably a few times before he’s done with the Heat. Don’t let your mother in, whatever you do.”

“Dr. Singer, how bad was he? I need to know. How bad was he really?” Cas didn’t move from his spot, kneeling by the bed. Gabe cracked a sleepy eye open.

“He would’ve been dead by morning, son. You saved his life. Now go on and get me some fucking water. Go on, scoot!”

“Sir, I…YOU saved his life, not me. Thank you so much. God, I owe you everything.” Castiel babbled.

“AGUA!” Gabriel whispered hoarsely, shoving his brother. He didn’t want a scene like this unfolding at a time he couldn’t make an escape. Cas struggled awkwardly up off his knees by the bed and stumbled to the door. “With ice chips, Cas!” Gabriel called.

The fallout had not been fun. Bobby Singer stayed with Gabe for a full twenty-four hours, knotting him four more times until Gabriel’s hole was so sore, he wept through the pain the last time. They had no choice though. Jacking off over his hole and then shoving the come up into him with careful thumbs, even a syringe, hadn’t worked at all. He needed the whole package.

Cas hovered outside the door while they fucked, but otherwise didn’t leave Gabriel’s side. He brought them food and water, changed the sheets under them, massaged Gabe’s tired shoulders, and sponged him off several times.

Bobby refused to let Gabe bathe, wanting the hormones he was smearing all over the Omega’s skin a chance to really settle in. He let Cas wipe him down with a damp cloth, but that was all, and Gabriel reeked.

Naomi discovered the subterfuge at dinnertime when she came looking for Castiel. At first, she was livid, mortified by both of her sons, but after Dr. Singer pulled her into a side room by her arm and laid into her with a fierce and brutal tongue, threatening prosecution on grounds of endangerment to an Omega, her eyes widened comically, and she changed her tune. She switched from, “How dare you?” to “Oh, my poor, poor Gabriel, I didn’t realize!” so fast Castiel thought she might get whiplash.

He watched his mother’s reaction with a judgmental eye. Was she genuine? Was it affectation? His trust in her parental judgment shaken badly, Cas thought she deserved the benefit of the doubt, but he wasn’t about to grant her pardon on her acting abilities alone. She was going to have to prove to him that her behavior had been simple bad judgment and not something colder and darker. After all, what possible reason could there be for a mother to deny medical care to her own son? Surely, she simply hadn’t realized how dire the situation was. In her mind, Omegas have Heats all the time, and they come out the other side tired, moist, and stinky, but otherwise healthy. The difference this time over the last was Gabriel’s age. He’d suffered through Heats alone for four years between when he Presented at twelve and now at sixteen when his body had fully matured and demanded an alpha. Sixteen was a magic number, and everyone knew that. Naomi knew that.

Naomi should have known and responded to that. Cas wasn’t ready to trust his mother with his
brother yet, so he didn’t rescind his declaration to claim the Pack Alpha position. He was too young, legally, but he talked to Bobby about it before Bobby left and received the older alpha’s support. Bobby would contact their nominal familial Alpha, a cousin of Castiel’s father who lived in Minneapolis, and ask for an exchange of custody so that Bobby could keep watch over them while Castiel learned the ropes and came of age. They’d have to wait two years until Cas was sixteen himself to transfer the title to him officially, but Bobby said he didn’t mind covering the difference at all. As a beta, Naomi didn’t get a say over the word of the young alpha once he came of age, but she could block the transfer of custody to Bobby if she wanted to. If she knew about it.

“Leave it to me, kid,” Bobby assured him in a voice that made it clear he was accustomed to underhand maneuvers like this already. “I’ll get the papers signed and sealed before she even knows I’m in the room. Once it’s done, it’s immutable, so your mom can throw as big a hissy fit as she wants, and it ain’t gonna change nothing.”

“Are we doing the right thing, alpha?” Castiel asked him seriously.

“From what I saw of your brother and your mom yesterday,” Bobby was gathering his supplies to leave, repacking his black bag, “You’re the one who should be in charge here, not Naomi. Son, I think your Papa’s death cracked her. I’ve known Naomi Novak from back when she was Naomi Leaven, and I ain’t never seen her act like this. I don’t know what else to tell you. She’s not fit to be raising two boys, I know that much.”

“But am I ready?” Cas needed to know what the man really thought. He needed an alpha to ask. His blue eyes were wide with worry. Bobby sat down in a chair and looked into those eyes without flinching. They were face-to-face, alpha-to-alpha, and he gave Castiel his full focus.

“No, you’re not ready, Castiel. You’re too young. You’re still a pup yourself, but your brother needs you, and it’s time you step up for him whether you’re ready or not. It ain’t fair, and it ain’t right. You lost your papa and your mom both when he died. You’re a perceptive kid. You know she ain’t whole anymore, and she can’t be the parent you and your brother need. I’m gonna help out as much as I can. You need anything at all, you send me word – any time day or night. Keep your eye on what’s going on around you two, and the rest will sort itself out. Got it? You can do this, Castiel. You’re strong like I ain’t seen before. You are about to grow into something bigger than all of us. I can feel it. But you just take it day by day, all right? Don’t carry everybody yet,” he said ruffling Cas’ hair. “Boy, that day is coming, but it’s not today. Just take care of you and Gabe. Let me deal with Naomi. And ask me for help when you need it.”

“Do I have any choice, Bobby?” Cas asked. He wasn’t bitter; it was an honest question. What other options were available.

“It’s either this or I pack you both off to Minneapolis,” Bobby said with a sigh. “Kid, if you hadn’t just come to me asking for help with a coup, I would’ve come to you. I’m not leaving Gabriel under that woman’s care. She’s unfit, and since I know that firsthand now, I’d be in malpractice if I didn’t act. If I do that…” Bobby stopped moving to make sure Cas understood the gravity of his words. “I have to give cause, and that means pressing charges for negligence against your mom. Now, Castiel, you need to understand – that’s not on you, son. If I were to do that, it would be because I saw no other way, but you, you, are not the deciding factor here. You do what feels right to you, and you do your best, and you’re going to have to let your mother make her own choices. If she self-destructs, that’s not your responsibility. Am I makin’ sense here?”

“Yes, sir. I understand.” Castiel straightened his shoulders and stood resolute before the older alpha, pulling strength from a deep place he felt in his gut, his wolf taking up all the space inside his head. Bobby could say it wasn’t all on his shoulders, but it was. If he couldn’t handle the responsibility, he
and Gabriel would be pulled out of their home. “I’ll take care of him, sir. You can count on me.”

“That’s what I thought, Castiel.”

NOW:

Dean put the car in park, but they both sat still and silent. The morning sun had broken over the horizon behind them. Neither of them seemed willing to break the silence. It had been too short a weekend, and so much drama made both of them feel squeezed through a wring-dryer. Finally, Dean took a deep breath and looked at his mate across the bench. “Still sticking with ‘Size’ as your, uh, defining kink? Now would be the time to come clean if you’re gonna.”

Michael snickered, glad to have Dean back in a joking mood, but he was too nervous to find much humor. “Am I really as much of an outlier as everyone says?” He was still gazing out the windshield at the four-story building before them, his body held stiffly. “Why am I such a big deal around here? Last time I went in there, people were elbowing each other and sneaking out into the halls to get a look at me. What’s the big deal?”

“You’re just you, man. Just be you. You don’t have anything to prove to any of those fuck-heads. I wish I could stay with you, but Alpha’s orders, I have to get lost. I guess they think I’ll go all red-eyed fury. I’ll walk in with you though, stay with you as long as they’ll let me.”

Michael didn’t answer. He didn’t move either. He blinked every now and then, so Dean stroked him gently with both bonds and tried to comfort him, calm him.

“Look, Michael, you’re unique, or close enough. It’s a research facility that studies all kinds of Lupin issues. You’re kind of an issue all by yourself, just like me, just like Cas. It’s a big deal to them, but all you have to do is be yourself. Let them work themselves into whatever they’re going to do, and you ignore all of it. Be you, Michael.”

“That’s what you did during your test?” Michael squinted at the sign above the door.

“Me? No, man, I practically shit myself, but it turned out fine anyway. Once you get in there and you’re face-to-face with someone, you just let go and let your wolf do whatever he’s going to do. It all shakes out. You don’t have to try. In fact, it works better if you don’t try. Just listen to the wolf and go with it. The testers are going to take care of you. They’re well-trained for this.” Dean turned sideways on the seat, pulling his right knee up onto the seat.

“The way they do it, each one is in tune with their own wolf. They practice listening to all those subtle signals, and when they’re Topped, they feel it, and they give. You don’t have to fight for it harder than what your wolf throws out there because they are going to give if you’ve got it over them. If you can do the same, it’s easy. If you feel like rolling, man, just roll. No one’s going to think less of you. Everybody rolls for someone – everyone but Cas, but whatever. You’ll totally own Adam. Everyone knows that. Play that one however you want. They just need the data for a baseline. You’ll Top Jody too. I know her well. Never worked with her like…that, but I’ve been able to read her a few times over the years, and you are going to take her. Try not to hurt her, but don’t go too easy if she wants to give you a challenge. She might do that just to see what you’ve got under the hood.”

Dean leaned over and brushed Michael’s hair off his forehead. Michael still hadn’t moved other than
to focus on his own hands in his lap. “I don’t know how your run with Raphael is going to go. Just do what you want to do. Listen to the wolf. It’s that easy, man. It’s a whole day of free sex. No questions asked. No obligations afterward. Try just having fun and let it take its course.”

“Raphael is alpha. Dean. I don’t want his knot. I don’t care what my wolf says, he’s not taking me. He’s not.”

“Shh, it’s not going to be the big deal it seems like now. You’ll see. It’s going to be fine. Look, you’ll hear it all day today…if you want out, no matter what, you just say the word and everything stops. They’re really good at putting on the brakes. I promise, you call Red, and even if you’re seconds away from tying, it all stops. They’ll pull away so fast, you’ll get frostbite.” Dean pulled Michael’s chin to bring the Omega’s eyes to his.

“The thing is,” Dean continued. “No one ever calls Red, Michael. It doesn’t happen. It’s always there as an option, but people get in the room, and it all falls into place. It’s kind of awesome to watch…and be a part of.”

Michael sighed and nodded. “Okay. I’m ready.” He paused. “You’re sure no one’s going to get pregnant? What if I knock up Adam? What would they do?”

“They’ll give him a morning-after, and they’ll fine us. It’s a misdemeanor to knowingly enter a test event while fully fertile unless there are extenuating circumstances. A pregnancy’s not gonna happen though. Adam’s on the good stuff. So are Jody and Raphael. You’re not going to catch even if Raphe does knot you. He’s shooting blanks, Michael. If it would make you feel better, I’ll get hold of the morning-after stuff for you too.”

“And what do I say if they ask me whether I’ve been taking the BC?”

“That’s up to you. If they ask and you tell the truth, they’ll cancel the test. If they don’t ask, you don’t have to say anything. The hard part’s going to be if they ask, and you lie to them. How’s that going to sit with you?” Dean let Michael think about it for a minute. “Look, I’m not going to be mad at you if you can’t go through with it. It’s a lot of weight on your shoulders. It’s not gonna make any difference in the long run. We just end up putting your Keller off a couple more years…catch you between pups, you know? I can live with that.”

“It’s not up to us though. Castiel will put me right back on the meds if he finds out, so I can get tested before we start a family. He’ll use it as leverage to prove we’re not ready for pups.”

“Yeah, probably,” Dean said as if it didn’t matter one way or the other to him. He needed Michael to see there was no way through their plan but to lie baldly, and he needed Michael to be okay with that or call it off now.

After his mortifying panic attack that led to several humiliating hours in the emergency room, followed by a long silent drive home, Dean wasn’t sure anymore that what he was doing made any sense at all. He had been so certain when the plan came together that he could kill a flock of birds with one stone, but now he didn’t remember which birds he was aiming at. He’d talked it all over with Michael late into Saturday night, but he couldn’t quite wrap his head around why he was pushing so hard, other than that it was what his mate wanted. If Michael was having second thoughts too…? Third thoughts? Initially, Michael was dead set on having Dean all to himself, but he seemed to have changed his mind now. Did that change things?

“We’re late showing up this morning to see if we can get them too flustered to follow through with all the pre-start checks,” Dean told him calmly. “I’m escorting you past Becky to distract her from getting a spit and urine sample. I’ll tell her we arranged to do it with Charlie, and I’ll tell Charlie that
Becky grabbed it. I’m taking that one on myself. You don’t know any better, you hear me?” Dean’s ass twitched in premonition. There was going to be hell to pay off the flesh of his backside once it all shook out, but he’d known that all along. He had to protect Becky and Charlie as well as he could. He needed a strong story.

Michael took another deep breath and nodded. “I want a pup, Dean. I’ll do almost anything as long as it doesn’t hurt someone else. Let’s go.”

‘Well, it’s gonna hurt my ass pretty badly’, thought Dean. He was still all in with his mate. He just wished he had the same confidence about the rest of it.

Finally, Michael cracked his door open and got out into the hot Kansas morning. It was early, but already the heat made his body break out into a sweat. Dean stepped out too and met him at the front of the car, pulling him in by the waist and matching his stride. “You never told me your prediction about my numbers,” Michael said quietly.

“I don’t give a shit about your numbers, man. You’re mine, and you’re perfect for me. That’s all I care about.”

They stepped into the lobby, which was cool and empty other than Becky behind the desk. “Oh, oh, they just walked in…” she said into the phone on her shoulder. “Yes, Alpha. Right away. Yes, Sir.”

Becky hung the phone up. “He says to get your asses down the hall to Charlie. Everyone’s waiting, and Alpha’s pissed that you’re late.” She started to dig for the sample cups in a box near her feet, but Dean was already escorting Michael to the door.

“Nix on the samples, Becky. I’ll take care of it. Charlie’s got all the prelim stuff in the changing room. We’ll do it there. Sorry we’re late. Michael’s nervous.”

“Oh, oh no. It’s okay, Michael, you’ll be fine. Everyone gets nervous. Oh, here! Sign in. I need your name on the entrance list!” She was so excitable that she skipped right past all the usual steps like a rookie. Michael walked up to the desk to sign in while Dean held the door. “Good luck!” Then they waltzed right in. Dean felt a pang. Becky would be punished even if he’d lied to her. There were protocols to follow, and she knew them.

Dean held Michael’s hand tightly as he led the way to the men’s side of the Omega changing room. He walked slowly. If they arrived only moments after Becky announced they were on campus, it would be obvious they hadn’t taken care of the check-in samples yet.

Castiel emerged from the changing room just as the two arrived. “What on earth?” he asked vaguely. “You said you were right behind me this morning. That was over an hour ago. What took you two so long?” Cas didn’t seem angry so much as just stressed. He’d been worried. Dean leaned in and kissed him on the lips.

“I’m really sorry, Cas. Michael got nervous, and I took some time to help him relax a little, that’s all.”

“You didn’t fuck, did you? You know we have to start with a clean slate.” Cas was looking at Michael as if he would be able to tell how recently he’d had sex by eye contact alone, never mind scent. Well, it was Cas. He probably could.

“No, babe. We just talked. I know the rules.”

“All right. Go on and get him situated. Charlie’s already in there, and she’s waiting for you. Stop by my office before you leave, please, Dean.” Dean nodded, kissed his cheek, and then pushed through the door and took Michael into the dark changing room. That had sounded like he had a spanking
coming. He hoped that’s all it was. After his round at the E.R., Cas had sat Dean down and made him talk frankly about what set it all off, and that had not been fun. They had more to cover, and Dean knew it was necessary, but he felt so turned around that nothing he said seemed right, and he didn’t know what to do about it. He needed some time to think it all through before he dumped his crap on Cas. A swift physical reprimand for showing up late was far preferable to a sit down grilling.

“Finally!” Charlie shouted at them, the sound echoing through the room. She took custody of Michael and sat him on a high cushioned bench, like a medical exam table, but softer. “Everything check out at the front door?” she asked Dean, her pen poised above the clipboard.

“We’re good to go, Charlie, but cool it down a little, will you? He’s really nervous.” Dean pulled himself up to sit beside Michael.

“Oh, shit! I’m sorry. Yeah, no problem. Um, okay.” She fumbled past a lot of the paperwork until she was three pages in. “Look, you and I can go through these first few later, right Dean? It’s all medical history and basic stats. I’ll get that from you. Let’s skip on to the vitals. Cas wanted to do the exam, but you guys were late, and he has another appointment he has to get to. You okay with just me?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” Dean told her, rubbing a hand along Michael’s back. He really was nervous. That wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the reason they were late, exactly.

“Okay, so, questions first. Are you feeling well today, Michael?”

She went through all the standard questions. Neither Dean nor Michael faltered when Michael confirmed that, yes, he was current on all his prescribed medications. She checked the box off on her list and moved on. When she asked him if he was due for a Release, Dean answered for him.

“He’s due, according to the calendar, but we don’t really know his pattern yet. I’m not seeing any signs he needs it. I’d like to wait a bit longer if it doesn’t happen here today just because…you know.” Charlie nodded and made a note that a Release was likely to occur organically, but that it shouldn’t be sought intentionally, per the Omega’s mate.

Charlie clicked her pen and addressed Michael again. “All right. Go ahead and take your clothes off. There are lockers right over there. You don’t need to keep anything with you. Give all of your stuff to Dean or shove it in a locker. Then go grab a good, long shower. Dean, are you staying through the exam? You can do the clean out if you want.”

“Yeah, I want to stay with him as long as you’ll let me. Can I do the fluffing?”

“No. Alpha wants you out before anything intentionally stimulating happens. That’s when alphas start getting growly and possessive, but I don’t mind if you stay through all the prelims.” She ignored Michael as he stood up and began to undress. Dean joined him, stripping down so they could shower together.

“Hands to yourselves in there, guys!” she called out when they disappeared behind the tiled wall.

“Yes, ma’am!” Dean called back, but he arranged himself under the hot spray in a presentation position with his ass out and his hands braced against the wall.

“Wash me, Sir?” he asked over his shoulder. “Please?”

Michael growled, and his voice went deep and authoritative. “Spread your feet, Sub. Let me in.” Michael took the spray hose from its hook against the wall and pulled a new disposable nozzle from the dispenser on the wall, fitting it onto the end. Ignoring the lube dispenser, he collected his own
slick to prepare the nozzle and Dean’s hole before slipping the hose in place and redirecting the water from the high wall spigot down through the hose and into Dean’s body. Dean hummed as the warm water began to fill his gut, and he pressed into Michael’s hand on his ass.

“So good for me,” Michael whispered as he kissed the side of Dean’s face. “But we’re supposed to be cleaning me.”

“We can do both,” Dean told him. “She’s going to give us time. I know Charlie. As long as I don’t actually get you off or fuck you, she’ll let us play a little.” Dean groaned as a wave of cramps pulled his face into a grimace. Michael pulled out the hose and took off the nozzle, looking around until he spotted the small trash bin well clear of the water spray.

“Hold it in until I tell you to let go. Don’t you spill a drop, Dean. I’m going to take care of me now. Don’t move.”

“I wanna watch,” Dean pleaded, turning his head.

“I told you not to move!” Michael used his free hand to smack Dean’s wet ass, loving the perfect handprint that appeared on his flank. Dean returned to his position, but he moaned, bending his knees just a little to work through the cramps and whining at his restricted view.

Michael worked clinically to clean himself. It wasn’t strictly necessary, but muscles down there were going to be spasming uncontrollably over the course of the day, and it was better for everyone involved if there was no chance for…leakage. One of the questions on Michael’s original questionnaire from three months ago, the one that asked about kinks, mentioned preferences for scat-play. Michael wondered if they had a testing panel that could accommodate that kink during the test. Would they still go through this portion of the prep? It didn’t really matter to Michael. He couldn’t imagine being turned on by that. The very idea was repulsive.

“Are you all right, Dean? Still holding it in?” Michael soaped both of them up while he held the water tightly inside himself.

“Yes, Sir. I’m okay.” Dean was uncomfortable, but Michael let him stay that way for a little longer. The wide shower space was open to several shower heads, and each had a toilet-like basin outside the range of the spray. Michael used it to empty himself, but he let Dean suffer a little bit longer, rinsing them both down well with the hot water. Dean whined, his lips pressed together in concentration, his head ducked between his arms.

“So good for me,” Michael repeated. “All right. Go let it all out. You did well, Submissive. I could feel how much you hated that, but you did it for me. Thank you. You made me very happy.” Dean pushed off the wall and Michael turned in to the tiles to finish cleaning his face and to give Dean a bit of privacy. It was an illusion of course, as Michael felt Dean’s relief rush through their bonds.

“I want you in my head today, Dean. Will they allow that?” Michael asked as the thought occurred to him, absentmindedly dropping his Dom persona.

Dean was back and rinsing off a final time. “They can’t really stop us, can they? Usually they ask mates to at least mute the bond, but it’s not something they can enforce. If you want me to stay with you, I’ll try. Are you sure? Will it change what you might need to do?”

“Will you judge me for what I might need to do?” Michael asked him, pulling Dean around and pressing him against the wet blue tiles. “I’d hate for your wolf to think less of me as a man, alpha, if I roll.”
“Pssshhh! Dude, I nearly rolled during my test with an Ozzie. Hell, I nearly rolled for April. You think I’m going to think less of you for anything that happens in your test? Fuck, Michael. Do I look like any less of a man to you? …Just because I’m a Sub? You think I’m not a man? I got your ‘Man’ right here!” Dean grabbed hold of his junk and shook himself in affirmation.

Michael laughed. “All right, all right. I get it. No judging going on for either of us.” Michael kissed him harder and deeper than Charlie would have permitted had she been present, but he kept their groins separated.

“Come on. Exam time. You got a medical kink, Michael? This could be fun.” Dean cut the water off and pulled Michael after him.

“No, I don’t. Do you? What kind of fun, Dean?” Michael stumbled but caught up.

Charlie was waiting for them by the bench, tapping her pen against her lips and checking her watch. They hadn’t realized how long they were in there until they came stumbling back out. “Really, guys? Like we’re not already running late. I said a long shower, not a fermentation.” She squinted her eyes at Michael. “You didn’t do any fucking, did you?”

“We were good, Charlie. I swear.” Michael put his hands up in supplication and then accepted a towel from his mate.

“Up on the table. Let me get a BP and temp, then we’ll do the exam.” Charlie was quick and professional. She explained what her touches were going to feel like, and she didn’t do anything that wasn’t strictly necessary. Michael was surprised at how relieved he felt at that. He was about to undergo so much touching that was only partially under his control that to have her make the difference between what was required and what wasn’t so stark a thing gave him reassurance that he was really safe here. It made much more of a difference than Michael expected it to.

Dean stayed beside him, helping Charlie to explain the process and what she was doing as her fingers probed inside him. Michael realized that he would have preferred to have Castiel here rather than Charlie in spite of her professional demeanor, and that surprised him too.

“All right,” she said with a light smack to his outer thigh. “Sit on up for me. Everything looks great. I think you’re as ready as you’re going to be. So, what happens next is we kick your mate out and we bring in the fluffers. We got a boy and two girls lined up. Is that okay with you, Michael? Everything we’re doing here today is for you. If you don’t like something just call out a stoplight, and it all stops. I can switch folks around if you need me to.”

“No, that’s fine. How…What are they going to do?” Michael caught Dean’s eye, not ready to lose sight of his mate.

“They’re going to play with you and get you as hot and bothered as they can without tipping you over. They’ll do whatever you ask, so go ahead and talk to them. No penetration is allowed though. Well, not for you. If you want to see them fuck each other, go ahead and tell them that. This is our contract-workers’ favorite rotation because it’s all play. They’re really game for just about anything, but you gotta speak up if you get close to coming. Don’t let that happen, Michael. We can re-set the clock if we need to, but we’re already late, and that throws off everyone. You ready? I’m going to go get them.”


Dean let his kiss go deep and searching, then he pulled back and ran a thumb across Michael’s lower
“Get your wolf out on the fluffers, Michael. Order them around. Make them do something, anything. It’ll help you get ready for the test. They know how it works and they’ll go with it. Keep hold of me in your gut as long as you want, but Baby, if I’m a distraction and you need to close it off, I’ll understand. You’re not gonna hurt my feelings. It’s just a test, okay? Whatever happens in there, it’s just a test. You be yourself. I’ll see you tonight, and we’ll see if we can make you remember who you really belong with. All right? Color, Michael?”

“I’m green. I’m okay, Dean. Thank you.” Michael shoved his tongue into Dean’s mouth, and Dean went slack in his arms.

“Jesus! That’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen!” said a voice from behind them as Michael took ownership of Dean’s mouth. It was Margot. She wasn’t Dean’s favorite, but it didn’t matter. She had a job to do, and she was here to do it.

“Spank my ass before I go, Michael. Give me five or six good ones.” Dean was still nude, and Michael didn’t need to be told twice. Margot, Lily, Charlie, and Jeff watched Michael rear up off the table and bend Dean over it. He hauled back and let his hand fly in hard, rapid succession, running on past six, on past ten, up near twenty swats before he stopped, panting, and pulled Dean back into a blazing, turned on to his toenails that Dean let himself be seen like this.

Dean’s knees went weak, but he rested his hot ass against the edge of the bench and let Michael do whatever he wanted. Both of them were hard enough to drive nails. Charlie cleared her throat.

“Get your ass back home, Dean, and wait for me there. There’s more where that came from.” Michael’s voice was commanding, and his look was all Dominant. Dean shivered.

“Yes, Sir,” he said and collected his clothes but exited the changing room without putting them on, allowing his red ass to show off for him just how owned he was by his kick-ass mate. The wounds on his neck from Michael’s teeth on one side and Castiel’s on the other needed to be renewed soon. Tonight maybe. Yeah, tonight would be good.

Dean collected more than one wolf whistle as he strutted down the hall, still erect, his ass stinging. He smirked at each of them, but he added a middle finger just for Meg as she passed him. She returned the gesture good-naturedly. “Eat your heart out, Winchester!” she mocked. “It goes around, Meg!” he shouted down the hall. “And then it comes back! Careful, beta, Karma’s a bitch!” She laughed heartily and turned the corner.

Then Dean was standing naked outside Castiel’s office door. His backside gave another uncontrollable twitch as he knocked on the door.

“Come in!” Cas shouted, sounding muffled. Dean pushed the door open to find Cas with his face buried in April’s trimmed pubic hair. She writhed miserably on his desk, naked on her back, moaning like she was very close. Cas knelt before her with her legs draped over his shoulders, working her over with his tongue and lips, assaulting her vigorously as she fought the rising tide.

“This is your big important appointment?” Dean said, dropping into the visitor’s chair. “No offense, but Michael’s doing his test today. It’s nice to see where we rate in the scheme of things.”

Cas growled and it made April yelp and clutch the desk. “Dean, please! I can’t come for another three minutes! I’m not going to make it!” She ended on a high squeal as Cas began to suck on her clit.
while working it furiously with his tongue.

“You got a timer going?” Dean asked her, standing up and checking the desk. He spotted it next to Cas’ knee and walked around to scoop it up. “You can do it, sweetheart. It’s not three minutes. It’s not that long. Hang on for me a little bit longer. Think about dryer lint and dog vomit.” She pulled her knees up high to her chest and moaned as if in pain, but Dean knew she wasn’t hurting. “You want me to tell you how to replace a carburetor?” he asked, trying to keep his voice dull and even.

“Why are you naked?” she ground out, trying to focus on Dean instead of herself.

“Oh, yeah, look at my bum. Wanted to show it off a little bit. Michael pinked me up.” Dean turned to show her, and he looked over his own shoulder to get a good view too.

“Stop talking to her, Dean!” Cas commanded, pulling away for just that long. Dean gave her an ‘Oops!’ look and sank back into the chair, still nude and enjoying the pressure to his pink cheeks. The timer chirped, and she panted heavily.

“Please, Sir! May I? Oh God, please?” Cas kept his face buried, but he tapped out the code on her leg with his fingers, and she didn’t need further encouragement. She yelled shrilly, and she used her grip on the table to grind her clit against his face and came hard in joyous waves. Cas pulled back when she’d finished and then flattened his tongue to pull wide swipes from her asshole, up across her sensitive cunt and then over her oversensitive clit, making her scream and fight to resist pulling away.

“Very good,” he told her blandly. “Again.” And he licked her all the way up once more, reaching up to tweak a nipple hard.

“SIR!” she protested. “It’s too much!” She started to clamp her legs together as if to shut him out.

“What’s that April? Is that a no?” he mocked. Dean licked his lips.

She sobbed and then slowly let her legs fall open again, baring herself and trembling. She didn’t want him to do it again, but she knew he was going to. She fought with herself to stay open and compliant, even in her head. He’d told her this one would be harder mentally than it was physically, and she had thought she was ready, but she wasn’t. It didn’t hurt, but she was too sensitive. Remaining still took everything she had. Pain was so much easier to handle than this too-intense pleasure. His tongue made another slow swipe, touching everywhere, putting pressure in just the hardest-to-handle places, and she failed. April jerked her knees up and rolled over on the desk onto her side, moaning and panting, fleeing his touch, knowing she’d screwed up, but unable to stop herself.

Cas growled fiercely at her and bared his teeth. He flipped her and spanked her, but he stopped too soon for it to have been much of a punishment. He set his hand on her ass and let her catch her breath.

“To help you remember to be good for me, and to help you learn, you will receive the same training regimen as this one every day for the next week, but you’re not allowed to come. At the end of the week, April, if you’ve performed well and pleased me, I will grant you an orgasm and I will give you a new set of bruises wherever you want them. If you perform poorly, we will extend the training by another week.”

“Yes, sir,” she said submissively.

“Good. Get dressed and go back to class. It’s time. Take this note to alpha Jo so she knows you’re
on orgasm restriction.” He scratched out a quick note, signed it, and handed it to her. “Off you go, beautiful. I’ll see you this afternoon. I love you.”

“Love you too, Sir. Bye, Dean,” she said as she left, her tunic slung over her shoulder, not exactly sullen, but not her normal cheerful self either.

“Bye, kid.”

“What’s that all about, Cas? That’s not part of the regular training class. You set the timer for 45 minutes. Seriously?”

“She asked me if I could help her with full orgasm control. She wants to be able to hold it off or just fall into it at the drop of a hat. This is all April, Dean, not me. I’m going to try. We’ll see what she can do.” Cas took the timer back and began to set his desk up again. Things were strewn everywhere.

“All righty, then. Whatever floats your boats, man. Look, I’m going to get out of here. Wanna meet for lunch or anything?”

“I need to stay close for Michael. He should be starting up in about thirty minutes. I’ve got his countdown clock up right here, and Charlie’s keeping me updated.”

“I meant here, Cas. I can swing back up here for lunch in your suite.” Dean settled himself against Cas who was still fidgeting with his desk accessories, laying his chin on Cas’ shoulder.

“I really need you to clear out for the rest of the day, Dean. Michael can feel when you’re close. I suppose it’s too much to ask for you to cut him out of your head for the duration.”

“Would you be able to do that? If it was your mate in there?” Dean asked, putting his hands on Castiel’s narrow hips.

“Not really. I just thought I’d ask. Try not to focus on him though.” Castiel grimaced and then shook his head. “Yeah, never mind. That’s stupid. Forget I said anything. Stay at home, Dean. That’s all I can ask of you.” Cas turned in Dean’s arms and touched their foreheads together. They breathed each other in and each closed his eyes independent of the other.

“I’m worried about you, Dean…about us,” Castiel admitted quietly. “What happened on Friday…you haven’t told me everything. We still need to talk. I blame myself. If I hadn’t so callously made the invitation to my mother, you wouldn’t have had to face her contempt like you did. I can’t believe I did that to you. I feel terrible.”

“It’s not on you, Cas. You’ve said over and over; Naomi’s choices are her own. She’s the nightmare here, not you. I don’t know why I even still care what she thinks. I thought I was over that. Usually, I can slouch around and piss her off and then laugh over everything later.”

“I don’t think that’s completely true.” Cas pulled Dean down to straddle his lap, sitting in Castiel’s desk chair. “I’ve been looking over our scening logs and comparing your unexpected Sub-drops with my personal calendar that shows when you’ve met with Naomi for whatever reason, and there’s a correlation I never noticed before. Looks like there’s usually a lag of three or four days after she visits that you crash. Can you tell me anything about that?”

“Jesus, Cas. I only see her a couple of times a year. How am I supposed to remember whether I crashed half a week later from two or three years in the past?”

“Do you feel like what happened on Friday follows a pattern you’ve felt before? Dean, has my
mother caused you a panic attack in the past that you hid from me? I need to know the truth.”

Dean rested his forehead against Castiel’s chest. “Yeah, maybe. I think so,” he admitted quietly. “I don’t know, I guess. I mean, I know she hates me, but why should I care? I’m sure she doesn’t go dark every time she meets me, and I hate her right back.”

“Hey, look up at me, love.” Cas tapped Dean’s back, and Dean pulled his head up. The constant waves of powerful emotion were beginning to wear him out.

“You don’t ever have to see her again. I’ve been thinking about it, and you’re right. I’m through trying to make her family. I’m done, and she’s out. I’ll strike her name from the Pack roster. She doesn’t need it, and she’s certainly not earned it. Will that help? You’re so much more important to me than my mother ever was. I can walk away from her and never look back, and never even miss it.”

“Liar,” Dean accused, narrowing his eyes. “You can do it, I believe you, but it’s going to hurt like cauterizing a wound. I know you better than that, Cas. You need her, or at least the thought of her.”

“I need you more, and you scared the shit out of me on Friday.”

“Yeah, about that…” Dean climbed off Castiel’s lap and began to get dressed again. “I’m pissed you called a fucking ambulance, man. That was monumentally embarrassing. An ambulance? Over a fucking panic attack? Really? I think if you’d tried your hardest you couldn’t have embarrassed me more.”

Cas huffed a humorless laugh. “Be angry at me if you need to be, Dean, but I don’t regret taking you to the hospital even a little. I will make the same call any time, every time you stop breathing and pass out. Are you kidding me? I had no idea what was wrong with you. You could’ve died. You think I’m going to let you die just to save you some embarrassment?”

“So bring me here, man! We’ve got a full medical staff! You’re a fucking doctor!”

Cas stood up and stuck a finger in Dean’s face. “We don’t have an emergency staff on shift twenty-four seven here, Dean! Being a doctor doesn’t make me omniscient! It could have been your heart, an embolism; it could have been a stroke. It could have been anaphylactic shock! I didn’t fucking know! I’m NOT LOSING YOU, DAMNIT! GET OVER YOURSELF AND STOP ACTING LIKE NO ONE MATTERS BUT YOU!”

“He fuck?!” protested Dean, shocked. “All I do is take care of other people. Where are you even getting that?! I’m sitting here, pissed that I got too much attention, and you’re accusing me of being greedy for it?!”

Cas took a deep breath. “People need you, Dean – more people than you realize, but especially your family; Michael, Sam, Gabe, April, and me, Me, Dean. I need you. We need you to be healthy and stable, and if you aren’t, we all hurt. Let us help you. If you fucking fall sideways off your fucking chair in the middle of dinner, let us fucking take you to the fucking hospital, and just fucking SAY THANKS FOR GIVING A SHIT ABOUT ME! BECAUSE WE DO, AND YOU CAN’T STOP US!” He stared hard at Dean, not giving an inch when Dean frowned at him. “And you, by God, better do the same for me! If I drop, you call an ambulance. Is this a difficult rule? Seems pretty fucking simple to me. I love you, Dean Winchester. What do I have to do or say to drive that through your thick fucking skull?! I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to raise a family with you. I want EVERYTHING with you. Why can’t you believe that?!”

“Who says I don’t believe that?” Dean asked quietly. How much did Castiel know? Dean could feel
Michael’s arousal peaking repeatedly and then pulling back. Dean feared his mate would feel the wrong things through the bonds and get too worried about his mate to keep his focus, so Dean sadly, slowly closed Michael out.

Cas didn’t give him a chance to think for long. “You’re constantly looking for ways to push me away or sabotage something about us. It’s your nature. You’ve done the same thing since I met you, and the steps to this dance don’t ever vary. You said yourself that you feel something coming and you may not be able to stop yourself. I need to know, Dean. Do you believe that I love you enough for us to get married? Do you worry that loving each other isn’t going to be enough? Are you planning or doing anything that might hurt us? Please don’t lie to me! Please, trust me. I need to see you try. I need…”

Dean swooped in and kissed Cas, egging the Alpha into owning the kiss by teasing him with a swipe of tongue across his lips. Cas moaned and pressed him aggressively up against the wall beside his bookcase. They lost themselves, hands in hair, on waists, gripping wounded teeth marks and the backs of necks. At last they broke apart.

“I love you, Cas. I’m sorry I scare you. I’m trying. God, I’m trying so hard, but you just can’t see it.” Dean whispered into his ear, breathless.

“Tell me what’s going on. Dean, please.”

“I don’t know, Alpha. I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

“Baby, will you go sit with Pamela? Talk to her. See if she can help or find you someone who can. God, Dean. I watched my father unravel before he lost it completely. I watched my mother do the same. They both killed themselves in their own way. I watched my brother go the same way and then pull himself, hand-over-fucking-hand, back out of that crevasse by himself on nothing but his own willpower. You watched it happen to your father too. You know how this goes; how it ends. Please, Dean. Fucking please don’t make me watch it happen to you, too. I’ll do anything. I’ll be anything you need me to be, but I can’t watch you fall apart. It will destroy me. I know that’s selfish. Everything about me is selfish, but I can’t do it. I can’t just sit here and watch you crumble. Tell me what’s in your head, baby. Please. You’re not alone.”

Dean closed his eyes. His urge to bolt was so strong, he quivered where he stood, but Castiel kept a grounding hand on his hip. “I can’t talk about it, Cas – not even to you. I don’t know what to do. If I crash again, will you catch me?” Dean’s voice was quiet but not submissive.

“What if I can’t?” Cas whispered back. “What if I don’t see it coming in time? You know I’ll do my best, but I’m human. Dean, go talk to Pam. You don’t have to tell me, if you can’t, but you have to talk to someone. There’s nothing about you or anything you’ve ever done or could do that makes you unlovable. You need to believe that. I love you. I love you more than anyone or anything, and I know you from the inside out. Whatever you’re thinking that’s making you feel like you can’t trust me or that makes you doubt what I feel for you, it’s wrong. I love you.”

Dean nodded. Could Pamela help? Probably not, but would it really hurt to try? “I’ll go see Pam tomorrow, Cas. I hate hurting you. I know I’m scaring the shit outta you, and I hate it.”

“Thank you, Dean.” Cas sighed. “I’d better go, and you should too. Will you be okay at home?”

“If I say no, do I get to stay here?” Dean asked hopefully.

“No, but I can send someone home with you so you’re not waiting alone. Sam doesn’t have any appointments today. You and he can work from home together.”
“Um…do you think he would mind? That actually sounds like a good idea.” Cas picked up his phone and arranged it without any hesitation. He kissed Dean until Sam swung by with his laptop tucked into a satchel over his shoulder and took custody of his big brother.

“I’ll be home as soon as I can,” Castiel told them. “Behave yourselves. I love you, Dean.”

“Love you too, Cas.”

Chapter End Notes

It's like they just keep taking baby steps, isn't it? How frustrating is that?

I don't know if I'll get the next one out this week. I want to do it right. I promise you'll get the Keller test in full technicolor in the next chapter. I hope it's worth the long-ass wait.

Love to all y'all.
Monday, June 19, 2017

Chapter Summary

It's Michael's big day and things go weird. Also, how much should Cas tell Benny?

Chapter Notes

Warnings for some threats of Non-con and an uncomfortable stand-off. There's a Daddy-kink thing that happens as well, but those are two separate instances.

The down-side of building an AU in which everyone has sex with everyone else, is that sometimes the pairings get less-than-pleasant if you're looking for standard shipping.

I'm hoping that's not driving readers away, but it is what it is.

I hope the test lives up to all y'all's expectations. I'm not sure about it myself, but it's what I managed to do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NOW:

Michael’s balls ached with need as the light above the door turned green and the locking mechanism clicked. This is how they get people to go through with it despite their nerves, he surmised. Get them so turned on they will literally fuck anyone or anything on the other side of that door, and then let
them loose. Dean could have told him that, could have explained better. Would’ve calmed him right
down. He’d been imagining entering the room from a cold dead standstill and confronting someone
who didn’t do it for him at all. And then what? But right now, he didn’t care if Mother Theresa was
in that room. If she was, she was about to get plowed. Michael thrummed with need.

He stepped into the room and paused by the door as it closed, every fiber on alert – focused, driven,
attuned. He liked to take a minute to size up his partner, and he always found this little pause before a
scene told him everything he needed to know about their headspace by scent and eye contact alone.
Michael had to grab the base of his dick and squeeze for a moment. The boy was beautiful and so
ready. Whimpering and squirming on the low, narrow bed, Adam met the Omega’s eyes and then
instantly lowered his. He licked his lower lip then sucked it between his teeth in a classic Omega
seduction move. He angled his head to bare his throat.

“Oh no you don’t,” Michael admonished him. “You’re not in charge here, and I know all those
tricks, little boy.” His cock throbbed anyway. The supine Omega on the bed might not be in charge,
but he was good, and Michael responded physically just as he was conditioned to do in the face of
submissive posturing. Adam released his lip and went still, waiting.

“Better,” Michael praised, pushing away from the door and beginning a slow approach. “Here’s how
this is going to work, little one.” Adam whined at the name, and Michael noted his response
mentally. “You’re going to tell me what you want me to do to you, and if I believe you, you’ll get it.
All of it. You hear me, son? Whatever you want. Anything…” Michael began slowly to circle the
bed, making Adam track him without looking at him. Michael estimated he was probably no more
than two years older than Adam, but he wanted a significant and notable power dynamic established
right off the bat.

Adam’s eyes shot to the two-way mirror, and he bit his lip again, this time in hesitation. “They’re all
watching you, Adam. You’re here for me though, not them. Your instructions, unless I’m mistaken,
are to follow the instincts of your wolf in this room so they can track mine. Is that right, kid?”

“Yes,” Adam whispered.

“Yes?” Michael stopped beside the bed, looking straight ahead, not at Adam, appearing confused as
if he didn’t understand the word. “Yes…” He tasted the word in his mouth.

“Yes, Sir,” Adam corrected, coming up on one elbow.

Michael frowned and pursed his lips as if looking for something else. He shook his head just a little,
still not looking at the Omega or touching him. Adam whined, not knowing what the man wanted
from him.

“Make me believe it’s what you really want to say, Adam. I’ll give you anything you want, but only
if it’s truly what you want.” He paused and turned to look the boy in the eye. “Do you want to call
me Sir?”

Adam looked at the mirror again. His chest heaved. This was not how Keller tests worked, but
they’d warned him that Michael might be unpredictable. “Think of what you’re here for, lad. It’s not
about you, except I’m making it about you, and that makes it about me. What do you want?”
Michael rounded on him confrontationally, and Adam jolted backward.

He took a deep breath. “I want to call you Daddy, Sir. Would that be all right?” His words were
clear but uncertain. They really were outside the pages of standard play now, and Adam was fast
sinking under Michael’s spell.
Michael knelt beside the bed and kissed Adam’s mouth, lips-to-lips, and then he pulled away. “Very good,” he whispered. “Just like that. Yes, you can do that, if it’s what you want. Be good for me now, and tell me something else.” Adam hesitated, thinking. His heart rate increased as he was suddenly put on the spot where he’d anticipated passivity.

“You’ve been fucked by Omegas before, son. You’ve taken direction from a Dom. You’ve moaned on an alpha’s knot, and you’ve come untouched. Don’t lie there and pretend you don’t know what you like.” Michael put stern judgment into his voice as he stood back up, retreating and denying the Omega his warmth.

“I like to be tied up, Daddy.” he said with more confidence. “Will you bind me?”

Michael nodded, his eyes alight. Oh, this was fun… Michael looked around quickly, searching, but the room didn’t seem to have a toybox. He took hold of the bedsheets and practically tumbled Adam in his haste to remove it. He used his powerful arms and his teeth to rip the sheet into wide strips, and in no time, he had Adam on his belly on the moisture-proof liner with his wrists bound securely to the bedframe.

“You don’t know me, kid. You don’t know what I might do to you, and I’ve got you tied. You know good and well that I could do anything I want right now, and if I’m fast enough, no one would be able to stop me before I hurt you. Do you trust me? Do you?” Michael imbued his words with a harmonic from his wolf that always sent shivers up his spine.

“Yes, Daddy,” Adam said, sure of himself. “You’re not going to hurt me. I trust you.”

He ran a warm hand down Adam’s back, massaging the muscles under his skin. He really was beautiful, with long, lean lines and powerful muscles. This was no wallflower. Adam took care of himself and he obviously worked out.

“You are incredible, little Ozzie. I’d love to take you home and keep you for my pet. Would you like that? Want to be Daddy’s little Ozzie pet?”

Adam moaned and squirmed in the ties, pulling on them because it felt good to tug.

In the Control room, an argument had broken out. “I don’t want him tied! Michael’s right, he could do real damage before our alphas can get in there! What the fuck, Cas?!” Maybe it’s a hollow threat, but what if it’s not!” Benny had his hand on the door, ready to call a halt.

Castiel held his hand up. “He’s not going to hurt Adam. Just let it play out. We can stop it if it gets dangerous, but as long as he keeps Adam safe, we’re going to let him run the test his way. Anything less alters the data. Relax, Benny. Trust me.”

“We’re outside of approved protocol, Castiel. How far do we let it go before we step in?”

Ellen spoke up. “We let it go as long as Adam’s not in distress, alpha. He looks good right now, so I say we sit back and stay out of it; keep doing our job.”

“Adam’s mirroring,” Jo announced. “Jeez, they haven’t even touched yet, and he’s responding like he’s got a Claim on him.” She pressed her face so close to the window, she fogged it up. She jotted
down a note and marked the time so they could double check with the video later.

“It’s a fluke,” said Benny pressing in close to the glass himself. “People flinch at the same time sometimes.”

“See for yourself,” sassed Jo with a gesture to the couple in the testing room. “Watch Adam’s left hand. I’m telling you, he’s mirroring.”

“Holy fuck, she’s right…” breathed Meg. “God, I’m gonna come in my pants.”

“What now, little boy?” Michael asked. “Want to be spanked? Have you been bad?” Michael ran a hand all the way down Adam’s back, over his ass, and down to the back of his knee. “Talk to me, son.”

“I’ve been good, Daddy. So good. I wanna get fucked. Please, Sir. I need it, and I’ve been so good.”

Adam was floating. He was gone; lost in his happy place where the ropes held him suspended safely up in the clouds.

“Yes, I believe you. You are SO good for me, little one, and I want to see your nasty hole take a big cock. I want you to beg for me. Will you beg to be allowed to come once you’ve got a cock shoved up your ass? Will you beg, Adam?”

“Please, Daddy!”

“Hmm. Needy little thing, aren’t you? Only, I don’t think an Omega cock is going to be enough for you. It’s too bad that’s all I have. It isn’t very big, and I’m awfully close to coming myself. We can’t short change my little boy if he needs to be fucked good and hard. You need to be split open, don’t you, son? Filled up much more than an Omega dick can do for you. I want that for you too. Tell me, little boy!”

“Yes, Daddy! Please! I need a big cock to fuck me open! Oh, fuck, please!”

Michael stood and approached the two-way mirror, unsure of where to focus, but positive there were enough people in there to give him what he wanted. “You heard him! Send in a big cock for my boy! I promised him someone to split him open, and I always keep my promises. You got a good, solid beta in there? Hello?! Fucking answer me, damnit! We’re waiting! We need size, you assholes!”

“Because it’s HIS test, that’s why! We’re supposed to be testing how Michael fucks, not someone playing proxy. How are we supposed to track his numbers if he throws an alternate into the mix? Cas, come on! He’s fucking with you, man. It’s a brat play. He’s just pushing your goddamn buttons. Don’t do it!” Benny was pissed.

Castiel shook his head. “It’s not a brat move. It’s just Michael. This is who he is, and we told him to follow his wolf. Benny, meet Michael’s wolf.” Cas turned to Garth. “Garth, are you interested in
playing this through and seeing where it goes? Are you prepped?’’

“Yes, Sir. I’ve got a Bridge to do later, but that’s after lunch. I can do both. You think I’ll do? He’s asking for size, Alpha.”

“Nonsense!” Benny broke in, interrupting Garth. “If he wants another player, I say give him an alpha. Let’s put a stop to this bullshit. I’m going in myself.”

“No, you’re not!” Cas told him firmly, Alpha tone fully engaged. “This is Michael’s test. He asked for a beta, and throwing him someone who might challenge him now would change the dynamic between him and Adam. That’s what we’re tracking. The beta’s just going to be there as a prop. I’m not going to give him everything he wants. We’re not going to scour The Facility for a ten-inch hero. He gets what’s available. More than size, he needs compliance. We need a beta-Sub, and that means Garth. Sit your ass back down in that chair, Benedict, or get out. You are overruled.” Benny sank back down and turned back to the monitor he was in charge of, sulking.

“Do I need electrodes?” Garth asked. It would take time to get him wired up.

“No. Just go right on in and see what happens,” Cas told him. “Stay as neutral as you can, and listen to your wolf. Remember the purpose is to understand Michael and his effect on people. We need to see your innate responses. I need you to go with it.”

“Yes, Sir. I understand.”

Michael was still posturing at the mirror issuing his demand when the door opened and Garth stepped in, fully dressed. Michael eyed him and then smiled seductively, predator to prey.

“Strip.”

“Yes, Michael.” Garth was surprised to feel an immediate attraction to the tone of Michael’s voice. It hadn’t affected him from inside the Control room, but here with no wall separating them, he was struck by the immediate desire to fall to his knees and offer himself up. He divested himself quickly of all his clothing.

Michael took his hand and settled him on the edge of the bed next to Adam. Adam trembled. “What I need from you,” Michael said conversationally to Garth and taking Garth’s cock in his hand, starting to work him with a firm touch. “…Is for you to fuck this beautiful boy of mine. Now, be careful with what you’re doing. He belongs to me, not you, so don’t do anything I haven’t told you to do.”

“Yes, Michael,” Garth repeated, starting to roll his hips into the strokes from Michael’s hand.

“He’s a good boy, so we’re going to make him feel good, aren’t we? Adam, love, how are your wrists doing?”

“I’m good, Daddy. I feel really good. Do I get to be fucked now?” Adam’s face was rocking into his pillow, so some of his words were muffled. Michael chuckled and patted his ass.

“Up on your knees, boy. Get him on his knees, beta. Good. Like that.”

“Sir, my name’s…”

“I don’t give a fuck what your name is, beta!” Michael shot viciously. “This isn’t about you. It’s about my good boy, Adam, here. You’re just the cock he needs to split him open like he deserves, so
shut the fuck up and get up on your knees.” Michael manhandled Garth around until he liked where he was placed.

“Get down there and lick him open, beta. Get your tongue way up in his ass and make him squirm for me. Do it!” Garth made a strangled noise of lust and dropped his face down to eat Adam out, letting the slick coat his tongue, thrusting into his tight muscle and sucking out the sweet, musky slick.

Adam keened and rocked back into Garth’s face. “How’s my good boy doing? This what you wanted, son? Oh, fuck you look hot right now. I’m gonna fucking come just watching you. So good for me. Take that beta tongue and fucking moan on it.”

“So good, Daddy!” Adam panted.

Michael thrust his chest out bluntly toward the mirror. “You getting this in there? Whatever you people pay this boy, it’s not enough. Look at him, damnit! Fucking look at him!” To Adam he murmured, “Don’t come yet, boy. You’re not going to come until I say so. You tell Daddy if you’re close, and I’ll take care of you.”

Michael stroked himself slowly, standing beside the bed and watching as the beta who was never supposed to be here ate out the beautiful Omega boy Michael had been given control over. The two of them moved together and moaned together, but it was all for Michael. The power he wielded made him dizzy.

“DADDY! Help! I’m close!” Adam was trying to pull away, but Garth in his enthusiasm was following, and Adam couldn’t move far with his wrists tied like they were. Michael spanked Garth hard on the flank, and he yelped, pulling back and up onto his knees.

“Pay attention! No one told you to make him come.” Michael was none too pleased with Garth. Surely, they had better trained betas back there somewhere. He ran a soothing hand over Adam’s quivering skin, and he squeezed the base of his cock for him, allowing him to settle.

“Adam,” Michael soothed. His voice was silken and gentle, a caress that reached inside the Omega and held him close, cherished. “You’re beautiful and so, so good. Are you ready, my boy? You deserve to feel so good. You don’t have to do anything at all. You can’t do anything, can you? I’ve tied you up, and made you take it, haven’t I? That means you don’t have to do anything in return.” Michael stroked Adam’s body lovingly. “You can let go and feel. No guilt. No actions. Just feel and don’t come until I’m ready for you to. It’s going to be a good one, son. I promise.”

Michael paid no attention to Garth as he built Adam up to a quivering, whining mess. Garth let the feeling of being nothing more than a prop carry him, and he rocked in place to keep from moaning along with Adam. He was so fucking needy, and he wanted to be used and degraded. He wanted to be shoved in there, and then jerked right back out as if he weren’t a person at all, but just another toy out of the toybox. How did Michael know? Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he didn’t care one way or the other about Garth, and that made the moan he’d been suppressing break free.

Michael’s gentle, adoring visage changed to cold instructor when he looked from Adam to Garth. “On your knees, beta. Get to fucking him. I want him moaning on your cock but keep your goddamn hands off my property.”

“Yes, Sir!” Garth took his place behind the Omega and rested his hands on either side of his body, curling over his back. Michael guided his cock as he sank down into the wetness of Adam’s channel.

“Go slow, beta. Get him warmed up. Keep it mechanical for me. I’d use a fucking-machine if I had
one, but I don’t, so you’ll have to do.” Michael stroked Adam’s cock a couple of times but didn’t want to push him too far yet.

“Kiss Daddy,” he commanded, moving down to where Adam could reach his lips without straining, and claiming his mouth with his tongue. Adam moaned and grunted into the kiss, straining at the ties holding his wrists. “Wanna take you home and play with you, little one. My mate and I can make you feel so fucking good. Jesus, Adam. You’re fucking beautiful. Look at you.” Michael wanted to kiss him, but he couldn’t shut up. “Have you ever fucked Dean? He’s not a good boy like you are. He’s naughty, and I have to spank him a lot. Would you like to help Daddy spank his mate someday?”

Adam groaned and bucked into the cock thrusting into his ass. “Watch it, beta! If he comes, it’s on you!” Michael told him. Garth didn’t get a chance to correct his stroke. Michael intervened.

“Jesus, can’t you do anything right?” Michael climbed up behind the beta and took hold of his hips, changing the pace to a slower, steadier rhythm. Garth nearly came on the spot. Michael moved with him, keeping his movements easy and slow. “I don’t have any of that shitty synthetic slick that you betas use when your asses need plowing, so we’re gonna use the good stuff.” Michael whispered filthily into Garth’s ear. “Get down there and suck that boy’s slick into your mouth. Don’t you dare swallow it. Bring it back up to me in your mouth.” He shoved gently at Garth’s shoulder to get him moving and watched as Garth pulled his cock out, leaning over and sealing his lips around Adam’s hole and sucking the copious flow of slick into his mouth.

The sound alone had Meg shoving her hands down her pants in the Control room. She would get punished for it later, but it was so, so worth it. Meg loved her job. “Those are straight boys,” she muttered to Jo, who nodded vaguely, her eyes glued to the trio.

“Not right now, they’re not,” Jo murmured back as her fingers moved over her keyboard.

Garth came back up, his lips pursed, his eyes wide. “Give it to me, beta. Right in my mouth.” Michael was whispering again, and he leaned forward to kiss Garth and let the sweet slick fill his mouth. Adam cried out in alarm, looking back over his shoulder, afraid he was about to come.

Michael reached around and squeezed his balls, pulling down hard enough to cause a little pain and halt his orgasm. “Not yet,” he hissed. Pressed up against Garth, he swiftly backed off and resituated the beta back to fucking the Omega and got the two of them back to work without losing a drop that he held in his mouth. It tasted divine, but he had important uses for the slick and the longer it had in his mouth, mixing with his saliva, the less effectively it would work as a lubricant.

Michael bent low over Garth’s ass and he sealed his own lips over the beta’s hole, blowing out his load into Garth’s ass. It was messy and not especially effective, but it looked and sounded filthy, so he was pleased. Garth agreed with a pitiful whine. Michael collected slick from his own weeping hole to supplement and spread it liberally on his cock, then he matched pace with the beta, in counterpoint, and let Garth impale himself on his outward stroke. Garth gasped as Michael’s cock breached him unexpectedly, then pulled most of the way out. He faltered in his pace and took another swat from Michael’s hand for it.

“Keep going, beta. Remember who’s in charge. I’m going to fuck my Omega boy with your cock, so just let me drive.” Michael thrust powerfully into the beta, driving right in, not giving him time to adjust, and gripped his hips to direct him into fucking Adam. Garth let himself go slack, giving over completely to the direction of the Omega behind him. He felt rapturous with his cock buried in the tight slickness of Adam’s channel while taking Michael’s cock from behind. Garth was glad he’d prepped early for his round after lunch. He started to float, releasing all of his own intent and desire, trusting Michael to deliver him, and loving every second of it. His spot between the two sweaty
bodies had become everything he’d ever wanted but didn’t know he needed.

Michael picked up the pace. Garth’s cock didn’t travel very far inside Adam as Michael plowed the beta from behind. He needed to be a conduit, and too much in-and-out play would cause him to spring free, but Adam could feel the power behind the movements, and he panted into it and began to beg for release.

“Fuck me, Daddy! Fuck me with that beta cock! God, it feels so good. Wanna come! Please, Daddy, I need to come. Been good. So good. Please touch me. Daddy, please!” Michael stretched around Garth’s hips and got a hand on Adam’s cock. He held on tight, letting the motion of his thrusting move his grip.

“Fuck my hand, baby boy. Fuck your daddy’s hand and come for me. Such a good boy!” Adam cried out as his cock spurted ropes of come onto the mattress liner and his own belly. His ass clenched around Garth’s cock, and Garth tumbled right behind him, shooting his load high up into the Omega, and going still as he pulsed, veins standing out in his neck, fingers flinching to resist taking him by his hips. Michael kissed his shoulder when Garth finished and then pulled out of the beta. He eased Garth to the side, letting him fall onto his back on the edge of the bed, and Michael took his place.

“Adam, love. Who owns your ass?” Michael spoke gently but with command.

“You do, Daddy,” he said tiredly.

“Submit to me now, Omega.” Michael entered his gaping hole slowly, leaned over Adam’s back and stretched to pull the quick release loop of Adam’s ties. “Not because I’m making you, but because you want to. Because it’s the right thing to do. Give me yourself in this moment right now, Omega.” Michael fucked slowly into him, pulling him back with a grip against his shoulder and his hip, growling ferally into the movement.

Adam was loose in muscle, tension, and intent. He’d submitted ages ago, but he felt Michael Claim him, and it wasn’t the usual percussive pop, but an easy blanket that fell over his body and settled in. It was like pulling into your own cool, shaded garage after ages on the road in the hot sun. He sighed and closed his eyes, and when Michael’s come filled him, displacing the beta’s, Adam came too, because Michael wanted him to.

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“Castiel, wait!” Benny caught up quickly and walked beside the man. “I need to apologize. I was out of line back there.”

“Since when is disagreeing with me out of line?” Cas parried without looking at him or slowing his pace.

“You know Michael better than I do. I should have trusted your judgement. I’m sorry for my actions, Sir.”

“Sir?” Cas pulled up and turned to Benny in exasperation. “Benny, do you need something from me? I’m not upset you argued. It’s your job to watch over the proceedings and speak up if something bothers you. Michael’s a wild card, and there’s a lot about what just happened to find bothersome. You spoke up, I overruled you, and you backed off. Do you need any closure over it? Because I
“Cas, what’s wrong? You’re carrying the weight of the world, and I can tell something’s eating you. Come on, we’ve known each other a long time. Talk to me.” Benny put his hand on Castiel’s shoulder, keeping him from moving off. Cas didn’t answer. He just sighed. He really didn’t have time for this.

“Is it Michael? Brother, please.”

Castiel turned and opened a door into an empty classroom behind him, holding it open for Benny and following him in. “What do you want to know?” he asked in defeat.

“For starters, what’s going on between you and Bobby? I’ve never seen you two at odds like this before. It’s starting to freak people out.” Benny leaned against the teacher’s desk like he owned the room.

Cas took up a spot against the wall by the door. He thought for a moment about how much to tell his friend. “He broke my trust, Benny. He fucked up, and I’m having trouble getting past it. It’ll get better over time. We’ve got a lot of history, and this will eventually wash under the bridge.”

“What happened?”

“I’m not going to tell you that.” Cas kept his eyes on Benny’s.

“Cas.”

“No, Benny.”

“Would you accept that answer if it was between me and Bobby? I’ll answer that for you: No, you wouldn’t. You’d tell me to get over myself and spill.”

Cas continued to look at Benny, his face flat.

“Get over yourself, Castiel Novak, and spill,” Benny demanded.

Cas sighed and went slack against the wall, breaking eye contact and choosing to look at the ceiling instead. “He hurt Gabriel. Badly. I’m not ready to forgive him yet, Ben. Gabe could’ve been killed, and it was Bobby’s doing. And it’s the same wild west frontier bullshit Bobby always pulls, but this time he tangled my brother up right in the middle of it.”

Benny’s mind spun forward and back, connecting the pieces rapidly. “Gabe got hurt in Walker’s place, pulling an Omega out of the basement…you telling me Bobby put him there? I thought Gabe went rogue and did that by himself.”

Cas frowned and reversed his view, studying his shoes. “It’s complicated. He didn’t have permission to go, but Bobby was supposed to be keeping track of him. Instead, he kept Gabe in the dark about something he should’ve been in on, and then when Gabe unearthed a part of it – like we all know he does – he went off half-cocked and fucked up Bobby’s mission, getting himself beat near to death in the process.”

“Hold up! Hold up, Cas! Are you telling me that Bobby was working on something in OKC too?” Benny’s mind made the big jump along the next part of the timeline. It was a jump, but it suddenly made sense to Benny in a way he hadn’t considered before. “Shit, did we do OKC?! The explosion. Was that Bobby? Cas, fuck! Was that YOU?!”
Castiel didn’t answer him, but bravely he met his eyes.

“Does Dean know?” Benny’s world tilted.

“No. Dean doesn’t know. Benny, God help me, I wanted that fucker dead so badly I nearly went down there and ripped his goddamn head off his shoulders myself. Instead, all I had to do was say the word, and a quiet team of good people ran a line of explosives into the basement and blew it up along with Gordon and that fucking piece of shit who dared to put whip stripes ON MY BROTHER!”

“Shhh! Cas, man, you can’t yell that here. Fuck, calm down, Alpha.” Benny ran a hand over his face and through his hair, letting it all sink in. “And you kept this from Dean and me. Who else knows?”

“Billie knows.”

“Jesus, so now we’re murderers.” He turned his back on Cas and leaned on the desk. “This is going to ruin everything. You know that. Eventually, it’ll tear everything down. Man, when you go over to the dark side, you go whole hog. You stupid son of a bitch. Do you know what you’ve done?”

“Yes, I know.”

“All you had to do was take it to Dean, and he would’ve come up with a miracle solution from that crazy brain of his, like he always does, and you would’ve had your revenge, somehow, right out in the sunlight. Did you ever think of that? We would’ve been victorious and righteous and walk away Scot-free. All you had to do is talk to me; talk to Dean. How many times has that man saved our asses with some insane idea that no one could imagine would work until he makes it work? Shit, Cas! Shit!” He stilled and held Castiel with a cold stare. “You don’t deserve him.”

“That’s none of your business, alpha,” Castiel told him with a chill in his voice. And then he wilted visibly, shaking his head at his own internal monologue. “I know, Benny.” He ran a hand through his hair and huffed in frustration. “I’ve thought about it so many times since it happened, and I knew what I was doing when I did it, but I listened to this fucking beast in my gut, and I wanted blood, not justice. I can’t fix this, Benny. If it gets out, it’s going to destroy me, my marriage, all of our work here. I don’t deserve Dean, and the insane thing is that he believes I’m too good for him. What am I going to do?”

“You don’t get to feel sorry for yourself, you fucking idiot. You don’t get pity. I was just about to apply for a pack of my own. You know that? I’ve got pups on the way. My mate fucking trusts me, Alpha, and she believes in what we’re doing here. Now I have to keep your fucking secret from my mate, from everyone, and act like I don’t know it’s all a fucking sham! What are you going to do? Who gives a shit! What gives you the right to rule the Universe over all of us? You’re the engine on this whole effing train, and we all go where you go. You choose to drive yourself over a cliff, and guess what happens to everyone who’s hooked to you?

“Goddamnit, Castiel! You don’t get to give in to your wolf! I thought you knew that. You aren’t like the rest of us. Jesus, people fucking died!” Benny turned on Cas, furious, but then he dropped his voice and went deathly cold. “I should turn you in; you and Bobby both. I should let you stand in front of a court and make the case that it’s your wolf who pulled the trigger, not you, see if that defense stands up. FUCK!” Castiel let Benny rant. He wasn’t hearing anything he hadn’t already thought over and over himself. Benny would get there on his own. Castiel waited him out.

“I can’t turn you in.” Benny decided at last with a note of defeat, strolling right up into his friend’s space. “Too many programs depend on your good reputation, even if it’s a lie. Where’s the justice in letting tens of thousands of people lose the benefits they depend on? Everything they have depends
on the population’s trust in you. If this gets out, it all crumbles. So now I have to live with it too, don’t I?” Benny’s posture matched Castiel’s; he wilted in defeat.

“I fucked up, Benny. I can’t fix it. All I can do is shake myself up, learn from it, apologize to everyone as if that could make any difference, and try to move on and be a better man. I wish I could turn myself in, take responsibility for what I did, but I can’t do that. As you say, everything depends on me. I’m so sorry.” Cas leaned against the wall, letting it hold him up.

Benny went quiet, thinking. The pain in his friend’s eyes was brutal to witness, but he’d done it all to himself.

“You have to tell Dean.”

“Benny, I can’t.” Cas’ voice held so much pain Benny almost felt for him.

“Don’t you dare go through with this wedding to him with this under the rug. Man, you have to.” Benny didn’t let up. His gaze was relentless. “You need to come clean to your whole pack, but especially Dean. He deserves to know.”

“What are you going to do?” Cas asked his friend. Former friend? Benny was no saint, and he’d played political games right up to the line of corruption before, right up to it and over it more than once, but they both knew Benny’s line stopped well short of ending peoples’ lives. This was beyond the pale for him, and the strain between them was palpable.

“I have no idea,” Benny admitted wearily. “I’m too angry to think. I’m going to go confront that bastard who runs us all around like a pinball machine. I need to hear it from him. Just tell me this: Is it over now? Are there any other revelations I need to be prepared for? Is there more you haven’t told me?”

“There’s nothing more, except they’ve finally completed the mission they were working when it all went sideways. They saved thirteen people from a life of torture and slavery. Two died, but they saved thirteen. Do we get any credit for that, Ben? Six people dead, four of those utter villains, and thirteen alive and safe. We only lost two. Does the total mean anything?”

“Do the ends justify the means, Castiel? I used to believe you and I had the same answer to that, but I guess we don’t.”

“I’ll accept your resignation if you need to leave, but I still want you here.” Cas couldn’t look at him anymore.

“Shut up, Cas.” Benny left the room and slammed the door behind him. Cas sighed. Telling Benny should have felt like a relief, but instead it added another brick to the weight on his shoulders. How much more could he carry before he gave out? What was it going to feel like to tell Dean?

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Jody refused to let anyone tell her anything about Michael’s leadoff round with Adam, but she knew it had been notable just by the looks on their faces as they came through.

“All right then, Jody. Let’s get you ready,” said Charlie in a too-chipper voice. Maybe she was reading into things. Charlie was always chipper. “You had a good lunch? Feeling good? You all
clean downstairs and ready to go?”

“I’m all set, Charlie. Ready to get this damned plug out, though. Help me out?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Charlie took care of everything. Jody was still relatively new to testing, so the preliminary steps didn’t go as quickly or as smoothly as they did with the veterans, but between them both, they got her there.

“Do you want to carry a toy in with you?” Charlie asked. “It’s up to you, of course.”

“You want to know if I think my beta-Neutral status has any chance of Topping his Dominant wolf. Tell you what: I’m going to go in empty-handed, and if that bites me on the ass, I’ll pull the ol’ Topping-from-the-Bottom play. Apparently, that works too. Honestly, I’m not seeing it. Are you? Michael and I are probably really close together between his Omega and my beta. That means the variable is the Neutral-Dom connection, and that’s the whole point, isn’t it? Everyone’s convinced that Omega-Doms are a myth, but here we are, Charlie.”

“This is the first time Ellen’s put you with a man for testing. Are you sure you’re fine with that? It can get weird sometimes if you don’t swing that way and you’re not quite prepared for it.” Charlie wrapped the blood pressure cuff around Jody’s upper arm. “I remember the first time I got matched with a dude. Awkwardsville….” she sung and then faded.

“It’s fine, Charlie. This is not my first rodeo. I did contract scening for the county for years. I can handle dick. It’s just not my thing in private.” Charlie nodded.

It had only been in the last ten years that Lupin researchers, and Castiel in particular, had discovered that beta women could produce solid Claims too, even without a penis. Society still believed otherwise, but they’d proven their case in quantity at this point. Nature didn’t help though. A vastly disproportionate number of women grew to be Omegas and Subs, while men were terribly overrepresented as alphas and Dominants, but there was nothing they could do to explain to Mother Nature that it was time for gender equity in these things. The cultural norms were shifting slowly, but it took a deliberate study to highlight that if two beta women could produce a Mating-bond together, and they could, then beta women should also be expected to have the capability to produce a hierarchical Claim as well.

It took practice and some creativity, but they got there.

The Facility began to work beta women into the panel of testers and give them a solid shot at Topping. Most women who expected to have a chance brought along a dildo or other toy to assist in the clarity of the test results. It was a test designed around the misogynistic view that Topping and Claiming meant penetrative sex, and the readings were sometimes inconclusive without an act of penetration. Claims could be made without it, but the test data weren’t nearly as definitive. It was a weakness that they wanted desperately to correct, but no one had produced a reliable solution yet.

Jody really didn’t expect it to be an issue. She’d sized up Michael intentionally in their first couple of meetings, brief as they were, and she honestly expected her wolf to roll pretty quickly. She saw how Dean was with Michael, and even if he was a Sub, he was also Deeply alpha. Dean nearly crawled on his belly around Michael at times. Jody didn’t stand a chance.

“We want you to be in the room when he enters, but stay on your feet, kay?” Charlie led Jody in and took her robe, checking the contact points of the electrodes on her chest and belly. “You know the rules. Work through your wolf and let it have what it wants. If you need to challenge or fight, go
ahead and do it. We won’t let it go too far. Draw him out a little if you think you can. Just be super aware of what your wolf wants to do and don’t get caught up in fighting just from your ego. It’s not about you.”

“Gotcha,” said Jody. She stood awkwardly, shuffling her bare feet. The anticipation beforehand was always the hardest part.

“Need anything?” Charlie asked, her hand on the door handle.

“Nope.”

Charlie nodded and disappeared.

Jody only had time to blink a couple of times before the far door opened and Michael slithered in like a serpent. He stopped by the door and leaned casually against it, smirking rudely at her, looking her up and down like a piece of meat. Jody’s wolf bristled slightly. He blinked but didn’t say anything or move for some time. She could tell he was scenting the air without wanting to appear obvious, and she smiled.

She considered making a move, but this wasn’t her test, and she suspected Michael was playing with her; playing with her base dislike of men and her inexperience at Keller testing. He wanted her off balance. She stood still, smirking into his pretty green eyes and waited. She took a moment to check in with her wolf. She found the bitch’s head low and wary, but still indecisive, a frisson of an itch running down its spine. The bitch perceived Omega, but hadn’t chosen an action yet.

There was tension there though, and it was mounting steadily as they each waited on the other.

“You don’t like dick. Why are you even here?” It was a rude question, and Jody’s eyebrows went up.

“Maybe I just wanted to see for myself what all the fuss is about.”

Michael laughed, stepping away from the door. “That’s a lie, and we both know it.” He slunk toward her, all rude cocky posturing and show. He was every woman’s worst image of a male chauvinist who thinks himself God’s gift. He took hold of his cock and stroked himself while he licked his lips and took in her body. He was testing the limits of her revulsion, but Jody was a professional, and she wasn’t going to be provoked so easily.

“No, you don’t get dinner. You don’t mean anything to me whatsoever, so I’m not spending a damn dime on you.” He stalked around her in a circle, and having him behind her where she couldn’t see him without craning her neck made a shiver run up her spine. He noticed, and he followed the line of the tremor up her back with a single finger. She felt horribly uncomfortable all of a sudden. This was wrong. All wrong. Terribly, terribly wrong. Then he ran the same finger down the other way over the small of her back and down the crack of her ass, making her gasp as he was suddenly right up against her from behind.
“He’s a psychopath,” breathed Bobby.

“Yes, he is,” Castiel confirmed. “But then, so am I. Remember when you told me we had a lot in common. Looks like you were right.”

Bobby shot the Alpha a worried glance.

Jody began to sweat. Her wolf had gone completely still, not sure how to read the threat, but feeling extremely vulnerable. She wanted to bare her teeth and snap at his face which was far too close to her ear. He was predatory in a way she’d never seen before in an institutional setting. She flinched when he ran a hand, fingernails trailing, down her side and over her ticklish ribs. She breathed heavily through her nose without moving a muscle. He whispered sweetly into her ear, sending chill bumps down her entire body. “Get down on your fucking knees, bitch, or I’ll put you there.” He kissed her temple. She sank down to the floor, trembling with something that wasn’t remotely what she ever looked for in sex. It wasn’t what anyone sane looked for in sex. Still she couldn’t tell if the danger was real or simply a very realistic roleplay.

“Good girl,” he whispered again, pulling her mouth open by pressing down on her chin.

“Distress levels, Ellen? Is she okay?” Benny stood beside her chair. He didn’t like how this was going at all.

“She’s okay for the moment, but it could go either way. Be ready.”

“Cas?” Benny prompted. “You know him best. Is he going to hurt her?”

“I don’t know. Let them keep going, but if it gets rough, call it if you need to. Don’t wait for me if you feel like he’s pushed too far. This isn’t a side of Michael I know how to read.”

Michael pushed his fingers deep into her mouth, making her gag just a little, then he ran his wet hands over his erection and pumped it hard and aggressively right in her face. She closed her eyes. She wasn’t in her wolf, she was still front-brain, and he seemed to know it and be exploiting it in a horrible way. Jody was on the verge of calling it when he bolted rapidly away and plunked heavily onto the bed, talking to himself quietly.

“Michael?” she asked, getting to her feet. “Are you okay?” Jody approached him cautiously, waving her wolf back into the background.

“I can’t do it. My wolf wants me to, but I can’t. It’s not right.”
“The wolf wants you to what, assault me?” Jody knelt down at his knee. There was no point pretending they hadn’t both felt what the wolf was doing. Michael nodded and swallowed hard.

“Let’s do it differently then. I’m not afraid of you, Michael, and I’m no match for your wolf. Just sit there and let me…” Jody took him into her mouth slowly and began to suck and pulse her mouth around his cock. He closed his eyes. Was this a submission? On whose part? She was giving to him, but she was also in control.

Michael’s hands tangled in her hair as she moved, not pressing exactly, but guiding. He felt the wolf nudge back from where he’d just shoved it, but he didn’t allow it back in yet. The wolf was offended at lesbians in a way he wasn’t with straight men, although he’d never understood the difference. It was different to his wolf though. Women were different. Who were they to cast aside one such as Michael? That was the wolf though. It wasn’t Michael himself. Like Castiel, Michael had known his wolf had a dark side for some time, and he had learned to control when and where that side got to see the light of day.

His testing instruction to relax and go where the wolf led him didn’t take into account his wolf’s ugly side. If left to his devices, the wolf would have thrown the bitch to the ground and raped her brutally, not in line with the purposes of pack life or hierarchy, but purely from a base desire to destroy any woman who couldn’t or wouldn’t appreciate the majesty of Michael. His wolf might appear young, thin, and scrappy, but he had a sense of himself that was bigger than any four wolves put together.

Michael moaned at the beta’s mouth on his cock. It was simple and uncomplicated, and it shook him out of his stagnant pause.

Michael stood up abruptly, pulling out of her mouth, and he helped her rise too. He kept his words simple, clipped. “On the bed. On your belly. Let’s just get through this. I can’t hold him for long, and I don’t wanna do it twice. Do you yield?”

“I yield,” she confirmed, climbing up on the bed and laying out facedown.

Michael jerked her hips back and speared her ass on his cock. He closed his eyes and growled, more at himself than at the beta. She didn’t resist at all, going lax out of self-preservation, an old fashioned true submission centered on the knowledge that the wolf at her back could kill her if he so chose, would kill her if she moved against him in the slightest. She let Michael take her hard and fast with no pleasure whatsoever. His body responded to friction and need alone, and as his orgasm pulsed out, he was already pulling out, dripping across the floor, and fleeing back through the door from whence he’d come. The Claim-bond sparked, vibrated, stretched, and then popped like a bubble, unfulfilled.

Charlie was at her side in a moment, as was Meg. They checked her and soothed her, but she wasn’t distraught. She was fine. “I’m okay, guys. It goes that way sometimes. He didn’t hurt me. Come on, back off. I’m fine.” Charlie took some readings, and handed her a bottle of water, but Jody didn’t need it. The whole event hadn’t taken more than a few minutes.

Benny corralled Michael in the Green room and ran his readings with Castiel’s Peliomometer. Michael tried valiantly to push past him and bolt for the door. “Calm down, Michael. Everything’s fine.” Castiel told him from the doorway. He kept his distance to give Michael a chance to find his equilibrium without needing to contend with Cas’ wolf on top of everything. “Let alpha Benny get the meter over you or the test is useless. Be still, Omega!” Michael froze. He whined, and then he looked to Castiel.

“What did I do? Did you see that? Did you see what I almost did?” He pleaded for Cas to understand him, to grant him forgiveness, or to condemn him as disgusting.
“You didn’t do anything wrong, Michael. This is how the test works. Sometimes it gets uncomfortable, but we weren’t going to let anything happen to either of you. You can’t learn to deal with that side of your wolf if you don’t know it’s there. We have to draw it all out, so we can help you learn how to live with it. Don’t you understand? You can’t control what you can’t predict.” Castiel picked up a blanket and approached the trembling boy with it. “What happened here with lots of protection for you both could easily happen someday out in the real world where you would be on your own. Don’t you see how important it is to learn how to control it before it takes you by surprise someday? You’re not bad or evil, Michael. You’re human, and you have a dark side inside of you that is going to be there whether you learn about it or not. What happened today is a good thing.”

He spread the blanket over Michael’s shoulders and settled him on the long hard bench. “Jody’s not hurt. You didn’t do anything we haven’t seen before. It doesn’t mean anything bad. It just is.”

“You’re saying it’s okay if I assault someone?”

“No, I’m not, but you didn’t. You stopped yourself. This was an artificial environment with a trained guide where we deliberately bring out the extreme nature of people’s wolves. Some people find it sexy and fun because they don’t live way out on the edges of the wolves’ limits. But you do. Your Dominance is not playacting. It’s a real thing, and you need to learn how to control it. We can manage it now that we know.”

“I already knew, Alpha. I know what he’s like when someone he dislikes challenges him. Why do you think I got kicked out of college? You don’t know what happened there.”

“Yes, I do. Don’t you know me by now? I know all about it, my friend. That’s why I picked Jody for this part of the test. She already had an idea what to expect, and now we can learn what’s going on inside your brain and your body to make you react like that. We can manage it. Come on, Michael. This is a good thing.”

“Don’t you worry about what I might do to Dean?” Michael put his cheek in his hand and rested his elbow on his knee.

“Not a bit; no more than I worry about my own wolf around Dean.”

The door into the Processing room opened and Jody came through, wearing her bathrobe and carrying her water bottle.

“You left in kind of a hurry, Michael. Are you all right?” Jody had her signature smirk back in place.

“Jody! I’m so sorry. I had no idea it would go like that.” Michael shot to his feet, his blanket falling to the floor.

“You didn’t? That’s weird. I kind of expected it. Hey, no apology necessary. These guys know when to turn the hose on an unruly pup. You weren’t gonna lay a finger on me that we didn’t allow you to do. Look, I probably shouldn’t have played with you like I did. It’s not my test. I could’ve just rolled from the jump, and you wouldn’t have felt challenged.”

“You’re apologizing for almost getting yourself raped?” he said coldly. He didn’t need her running interference on his fuckups.

Jody gave him an ironic look and shrugged. “If you put it like that, no. Screw you.” She put no heat in the words and she put an arm around his shoulders to show there were no hard feelings. “Hang in there, pup. Get the training they’re going to offer you, and work hard. You can tame that mutt if you try hard enough, but it’s not going to be easy. Yours isn’t the first monster in the pack, Michael. You,
uh, you might wanna talk it over with this guy.” She indicated Castiel with her thumb and winked.

“Thank you, Jody.”

Castiel clapped him on the back. “Go get cleaned up and rest. One more to go, and then it’s all over.” He handed Michael off to Charlie. “Call me if he drops,” he told her.

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Castiel called Dean from his office.

“Hey there, stranger! What’s happening out in the real world?” Dean spouted cheerfully.

Castiel smiled into the phone. “Two down, Dean. One to go.”

“You sound tired, man. Is it that bad?”

“It isn’t bad. Just... unpredictable. Do you want to hear it now or wait until we get home?”

“Now, of course. I’m going crazy sitting here on my ass, just waiting. What’s he done?”

“Well, we nearly had a mutiny in the Control room on the first round.”

Cas ran through what he’d witnessed so far, and then the phone went quiet.

“Dean?”

“Can I call him? He’s probably freaking out right now.”

“Don’t call him. Look, Charlie’s with him. She’s going to try to get him to rest a little bit before Raphael’s turn.”

“Put the pup down for a nap?”

“Something like that. More to try to let the stress fade a bit. He took it to heart, and he’s going to need some closure after this.”

More silence.

“Dean, I know you don’t want to do it, but he’s Omega, and he needs you to be his alpha.”

“I never said I didn’t want to do it. I’m just trying to figure out the best approach. I’ll talk to him tonight. If he needs a scene, we’ll do it. I’ll take care of my mate, Cas.”

“Thank you, Dean. I’ll text you before we leave.”

“Good luck on the last round. Talk to you soon, Alpha. Love you.”

“I love you, too.” Castiel hung up and sat staring out the window of his office wondering if he’d ever managed to get anything right in his life, and if he was leading them all into a whirlpool of destruction.
Michael paced in the small room, fluffed and ready, fully prepared for any contingency. On Charlie’s firm assurance, he had allowed the wolf back up front, but he fixed the bastard with a steely gaze and made sure the mutt understood it was in the doghouse for a good long time after that last fiasco.

The wolf didn’t care one way or the other. He just wanted to go again.

“We’re opening both doors at once this time, so you and Raphael will be on equal footing from the beginning.” Charlie took his water bottle away, and then shooed the fluffers out. He’d come to really appreciate Lily and her magic tongue over the course of the day. She winked at him on her way out. Michael checked for Dean one more time, but the bonds were still closed. That was probably for the best. He’d felt Dean’s anger and hurt cascading down on him earlier, and then it all went quiet. He hoped Dean was all right, but he needed to focus right now.

“Let everything go, Michael. New scene, new you. Take each round as it comes to you.” What would he have done without Charlie?

Michael nodded, breathing deeply and swinging his arms around his body like a swimmer preparing to race. Charlie kissed his cheek, whacked his ass, and then slipped out through the side door. Michael continued pacing, eyeing the light above the door. For as much as Michael chose to live in his wolf, the bugger had really let him down today. He’d never cared about this stupid test anyway, and now he felt like carved shit after what he did to Jody.

The light went green, and he heard the door catch unlock again. He tried to follow Charlie’s advice and put Jody out of his mind. Michael opened the door and stepped in to find Raphael entering from the other side. Michael didn’t say a word to Raphael. He simply went to the bed and lay down on his side, facing the alpha, laying on his hip and elbow, one brow up in invitation.

Michael was hard from all the play and fluffing, and he liked what he saw in the tall, stately alpha, but he still didn’t know how it would play out, and he didn’t want to show his hand just yet. He knew the Anchor round was often the most intense, but Michael wasn’t interested in what was normal. He watched the alpha move very slowly, cautiously toward him, so he patted the bed next to his hip and lowered his gaze to look coyly through his lashes.

Raphael narrowed his eyes. He wasn’t falling for it, but he did finally get to the bed, and he put a knee up on it.

“On your back, Omega. I’m going to take you face-to-face. I want to see what your face looks like when you take my knot and my Claim.” Michael moved onto the flat of his back and scooted into the middle of the bed. He was close enough to the alpha to feel the power of his wolf, and he wasn’t impressed. Michael could tell his own was bigger, so to speak. The question of power would come down to the relative difference between alpha and Omega. That could only be determined in a one-on-one challenge. Michael just wasn’t sure he cared enough to do battle with this man. He could take a quick knot and be done. He could be on his way home to Dean in forty minutes. He liked Bottoming for an alpha knot anyway. It felt good. Really good. Fantastic, even. He’d just about forgotten about his conversation this morning with his mate and couldn’t remember why the idea of being knotted by the alpha had seemed so distasteful. He felt utterly indifferent to the test or its results now.

Then Raphael put a hand on his hip to align his body as the alpha climbed up over him. Michael closed his eyes and let the sensation rock through him. It wasn’t indecision. It was a moment of
absolute clarity that resolved into a smile that spread over Michael’s face.

No, he wasn’t taking any knots today.

He reared up and kissed Raphael aggressively, plunging his tongue into his mouth, and gripping the alpha’s ass and shoulder.

Taken by surprise, Raphael mumbled into the kiss. He tried to take control of it and failed. He pulled his head back roughly, breaking the kiss with a snarl. Michael smiled at him, caught the alpha’s feet and knees between his own, braced his hands on Raphael’s hips, and flipped them, landing belly-to-belly on the alpha and diving right back in for another kiss.

“You taste good, alpha,” he bragged. “I do like me some alpha. Give me another one.” Michael kissed him hard, letting their teeth clash and holding onto the side of his face. He dug one finger into the outside of Raphael’s cheek so he could feel his own tongue slide around inside the alpha’s mouth. Raphael bucked up with his hips to dislodge the Omega but Michael was ready for him. He took the movement and used their falling weight to jam his hips back in hard against Raphael’s erection, grinding down even harder once he had his balance and a new grip on his hip.

“You feel it, don’t you, alpha? You feel that? That’s me. That’s my wolf, owning yours. You wanna roll, don’t you? But you’re afraid they’re all going to think you’re weak. It’s pride making you struggle right now, isn’t it? You don’t want to be the alpha who rolled over and took a pounding from an Omega.”

Michael wasn’t exaggerating. He could feel the domination taking hold of its prey. Raphael whimpered, and his eyes fluttered. He grimaced in frustration, struggling desperately. Raphael rolled over and took Michael with him, roaring in defiance. Michael relaxed into the bed. He didn’t need to fight. He winked at Raphael who growled at him.

“What are your instructions, alpha? You supposed to keep struggling when you’re Topped?” Raphael didn’t give, but his glance flashed at the mirror.

“It’s okay. They know. They already know. Hey, it’s no shame. Everybody gets Topped by somebody, right? Well, everyone but Castiel. That’s how I heard it, anyway.” Michael slid out from under Raphael who didn’t fight him. Raphael went limp and lay down on the bed on his belly. Michael turned the alpha over gingerly and resettled himself between Raphael’s knees. “You wanted face-to-face, right? Hey, I can do that for you. I’m usually a doggy-style man myself, but I’m pretty easy once you get to know me.”

Raphael lunged suddenly upward, grabbing Michael’s hips and dragging them back down onto his cock, hoping to knot the Omega before he could break free, hoping against all evidence that getting a knot in him would alter the outcome. Michael moved fast and got his knees under him, holding himself up too high for Raphael to reach.

“Shh. It’s okay, man. I know this is hard for you. Look, I get it. Omegas take the fucking. Alphas DO the fucking. I know. But that’s not how this is gonna go and you know it. Look me in the eye and tell me who owns who right now. It’ll be easier after you say it. Come on, alpha, say it. I know the answer. You know the answer.”

Michael was slowly working himself forward and down, maneuvering Raphael’s legs up and around his hips. “They all know the answer. Just say it, and then I’ll Claim you, and then you can go home exactly the same man you were when you came to work today.” Raphael closed his eyes and frowned as the head of Michael’s cock nudged up against his prepped hole. He had synthetic slick dripping out and down onto the sheets. He held his breath and whined. Michael stilled, poised above
him. “Say it,” he whispered.

“You own me…” Raphael said softly. Michael lowered himself and entered the alpha, moving with gentle surety. He honored the strength of the alpha and had no reason to humiliate him, but truth was truth, and he had a Claim to stake. It was pack dynamics, and it felt right. Michael picked up the pace. He ignored Raphael’s dripping cock, hard and heavy between them, just a bulge where his knot would be.

“You can take it, right, Raphael? Tell me if it’s too much, but I’m not very big, and I know they prepped you for this.”

“Just do it already!” Raphael snapped. But he began to move with Michael, granting the Omega his prize, bending his head up to display his throat. Michael reached down and pulled Raphael’s legs over his shoulders, first one, and then the other so he could get his knees braced and really fuck into his hole furiously, like he meant it, like he owned it, because he did. Own it, that is.

Raphael panted and whined. “Never been…fucked…by…a…Omega before. Oh, Fuck!”

“Get your head back! Show me that throat! Take it, damn you!” Michael rutted. Sweat began to drip off of him as he took ownership of what was his. He put his teeth on the pulse point of Raphael’s throat, biting down hard enough to be a threat and to pull with the force of his motion, but not close to breaking skin. He drove his cock into the alpha again and again until his body burned with the need for release, and he squeezed his eyes as his balls pulled up tight, and his jaw clamped tight enough onto Raphael’s throat that several alphas on the monitors outside stood up in alarm, seconds away from bursting in.

Michael came with a scream, releasing his hold on Raphael’s throat, his orgasm, and his Omega gland simultaneously. He ground down hard, pulsing his cock into Raphael’s clenched ass as he let go. Michael felt his Claim slam into place, and Raphael gasped and then cried out, holding onto Michael’s hips and trying to gain enough friction between their bellies to join the release, but he couldn’t do it, and he let go, slumping into the bed in defeat and disgrace.

They panted together for a minute, then Michael wormed a hand between them and stroked Raphael as his own cock slipped messily out, spent and softening. “You want some help with this?”

“Leave it. I don’t need it. This is your test, man. And that was something.” Raphael shifted, letting Michael slide off of him and pulling away from Michael’s grip. “Never thought I’d get Topped by an Omega, but you had me all the way. That was something else…” he repeated. He trailed off as if tempted to add a ‘Sir’ to his statement but prevented by pride and station. He could tell Michael heard the word anyway, and Raphael swallowed in shame before looking away.

Charlie slipped in and ran the readings on Michael. She worked quickly to get them both cared for, but since there was no knotting involved, she let Raphael go with a nod and a tossed bathrobe.

“Is he going to be all right? Big blow to his ego or something?” Michael asked, crunching through a granola bar on his side on the bed and up on his elbow.

“Don’t be a dick, Michael. He’s fine. This is his job, and he knows how it works.”

“Didn’t seem like that to me. Seemed like he wanted to keep fighting after we both knew where we stood. You guys might want to reissue that memo about calling uncle when you’re Topped. I’m just saying.”

“What happened to remorseful Michael? I liked him better.” She helped pull him to his feet, and
rubbed his body down with a warm wet cloth.

“So, what happens next?” he asked her, spreading his feet apart when she nudged him so she could clean behind his balls.

“You go home. We’ll evaluate all the tests and let your Alpha know when the results are ready. Next, you’ll have a sit down meeting to discuss our findings. They’ll incorporate everything into your training, and it all builds from there. Hey, Michael, I just wanted to say, what happened with Jody? Dude, that kind of thing happens all the time with powerful Doms, especially the ones who haven’t had any training yet. It’s not a sign that you’re going to hurt someone or that there’s anything wrong with you. Ask Castiel about his Keller test if you don’t believe me. It’s fine, man. I mean it.”

Michael thought about everything his father worried about and how Naomi had mumbled quietly about hedonists before she left in a swirl of perfume-scented air on Saturday morning after breakfast. Naomi: now SHE was a wolf who was out of control. He wasn’t proud of himself, but he let himself hope that Charlie was right. After all, what kind of a mother was he going to be if he couldn’t control the dark side of his wolf?

“Hey, Charlie?” he asked her as she wrapped his robe around him and sought his arms to feed through, “If it takes a powerful alpha to control Castiel’s Dominant wolf, then where does my control come from? Surely it doesn’t mean I have a powerful Omega. That wouldn’t make sense.”

“I dunno, Michael. There’s a lot we don’t understand yet about how Omega power works. We’ll have to wait on the data to fall into place, and then we’ll know more. Go get a shower and get dressed. We’ll get you taken care of. Hang in there a little bit longer.”

Michael nodded and followed her out through the Green room door. Castiel fell into step with him and they headed to the changing room together silently, Michael basking in the comforting acceptance of knowing that even after everything that had happened today, Castiel was still beside him.

Chapter End Notes

Um, yeah. Sorry.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Backtracking just a little to clarify what happened the morning after. Also, Dean and Sam spend the day at home, waiting.

Chapter Notes

Getting this one out later than I'd intended. Life happened. I only managed to proof-read half of it.

I have no idea whatsoever whether there will be two chapters this week or just the one. On the plus side, I've gone two rounds now without a bad migraine. Total win!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 43 – Monday, June 19, 2017

THEN:

Michael’s mate slid sideways off his chair, his face ashen and his eyes rolled back in his head. Michael caught him before he hit the ground and helped him settle with his head in the Omega’s lap. Everyone was in motion. Everyone was shouting. Sam was dispatched to call for an ambulance, April sent for a cool, damp cloth for Dean’s face. Rachel stayed seated, but perched on the edge of her chair. She couldn’t be anything to Dean except in the way right now. Pop volunteered to go outside to help direct the EMTs, but the butler assured him a housekeeper had already been sent, and Pop looked lost with no way to assist. His jaw was set, twitching, grinding. Alphas with no job during a crisis were a nuisance more than a help.

Rachel was about to go to him when little April, having handed over the wet cloth to Michael approached him, seemingly by chance, and stood close enough for their bodies to touch. She was trembling as she watched her mate leaning over Dean, trying to get a response. Pop put an arm around April absentmindedly and pulled her in to lean into him. He made shushing noises and whispered into her ear, words that Rachel assumed were comforting. April put her head on his shoulder.

Movement caught Rachel’s eye and she glanced from the floor at the far end of the table, to the woman seated opposite her. Naomi put another shrimp into her stupid fat face, and watched the chaos with a judgmental air. Rachel watched her for a minute. Naomi was very calm. The flurry of activity around her had no effect on the beta. She just went on with the meal, as if there was any chance another course would be served soon.
Rachel’s own mother, unable to resist, was squatting low to the ground over Michael’s shoulder, leaning into him, offering him touch and advice. Occasionally, she reached past him and stroked Dean’s hair or down his cheek. Beatrice had her Mother face on; the one that she used when anyone in the pack was in a state of crisis and she was scared as shit, but needed to remain collected. She would tremble and fall apart later, but not now.

Michael rocked Dean subtly, clutched Dean’s hand to his chest, and breathed in deep, regular cycles. He had a look of intense concentration on his face, as if he could bring Dean back around by will-power alone.

Across the table, Naomi took a sip of her wine. Rachel’s disgust peaked.

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” she spat. No one was listening to her but Naomi.

“I beg your pardon?” The Congresswoman raised an eyebrow at her, but didn’t look especially perturbed.

“I watched you paw at my brother all through dinner, and now you can’t be bothered to care a whit that his mate’s on the floor. What the fuck is wrong with you, lady? Do you have any idea how much damage you do to the people around you?”

Naomi took the next moment to dab at her mouth with her napkin. “In my day,” she started, “young betas honored their elders. It’s extremely disappointing to see what a sad state of disorder my sons have allowed this household to fall into. Charity and compassion for the lower classes are one thing,” Naomi cast a glance up as EMTs rushed into the room with their gurney. Rachel stood up in spite of herself. Sitting at the dinner table felt wrong. Naomi simply arched an elegant brow and continued with her thought. No one mattered to her but herself, Rachel realized. “But to fill this magnificent house with drifters and freeloaders is a step too far. I shall make my displeasure abundantly clear to my sons once this fiasco has come to an end.” Naomi looked around her. “Where has Gabriel gone off to?”

Rachel was speechless. ‘Drifters and freeloaders’ could only mean Dean, Michael, maybe even April too. Did she mean the Lancets as well? Probably.

“Don’t get me wrong, Dear,” Naomi went on, setting her wine glass back down. “Your brother and his like serve a very valuable purpose in the world. It’s important to inject some new blood into the established lines on occasion, or we get a little stymied in our breeding.”

Rachel had no idea what to say to that. Her mouth pulled into an unwitting expression of disgust. She leaned across the table on her fists. “Stay the fuck away from my brother, you bitch. I’d throw your ass straight out of this house right now if I could. You’re pure poison. Stay away from my family, or I swear I will destroy you.”

Naomi stood up calmly, setting her napkin beside her plate. “My goodness, such passion. Don’t be alarmed, little beta. I have no designs on your brother. He’s a very handsome man, but too soiled and a trifle too unpolished, I think, for me to find him attractive.”

“Rachel!” Michael called, practically running up to her just as his sister was about to dive across the table and throttle the woman. “We’re going to the hospital. I need you and Mommy to watch out for April. Cas won’t let her go along, and she’s pissed about it. See if you can distract her while we get out of here.”

“I’ll take care of everything, Mike. Is Dean going to be okay?” Rachel put her hand on his arm.
“Yes. It looks like he is having a panic-attack, but we can’t be sure until he gets to the E.R. Alpha doesn’t want to take any chances. Oh, they’re moving. Gotta go. Thanks, Rache!”

Soon, Jess guided a weeping April, held tightly in her arms, and Rachel was explaining to her Pop what a panic-attack was as she walked her mother back into the parlor and got her a glass of water. Naomi followed calmly as if the dinner-party had simply moved from the dining-table phase to the drinks-after-dinner-phase, and she settled into a parlor chair with her wine glass. Initially, they all ignored her, but after the Congresswoman’s two failed attempts to start a conversation that had nothing to do with anything whatsoever, Jess had enough.

“Mrs. Novak,” she said, pulling April in a little closer. “I believe it’s getting late, and it’s time for you to go. Please leave. Right now.” She spoke in her professional voice. It was clear and blunt without carrying any of the venom that Rachel would have used. Naomi froze. This pretentious up-start of a beta didn’t have the authority to order her out of her own home, but the chill coming from the others gave her pause.

“Hey, Oi! You at the door!” Jerry called to Fred. “The Congresswoman is leaving. Mind grabbing her bag for her and walking her to the door? I’ll help with the escort.” Jerry stood up and hovered over Naomi, making it clear that protesting would be a bad idea. Fred nodded, disappearing only to return a moment later with an expensive black leather clutch. The two men escorted her to the door without further comment, although her mouth was a thin, pressed line. Fred continued on with her so he could drive her down to the Guard house where she had been invited to spend the night.

“Wow, Pop,” Rachel teased him. “That was a surprise. Are you starting to change your mind a little bit about…oh, anything at all?”

Four women turned their eyes on the Alpha. He shifted uncomfortably in the doorway. “I guess a man can still learn a few things as he gets older.” Jerry put his focus on the floor and rocked back onto his heels. “That woman isn’t what I expected. Kinda gave me the creeps.” April huffed a humorless laugh at his choice of words.

April turned to Jess. “Will we be in trouble for throwing her out? It looked like she wanted to stay.”

“I don’t care if we are, little one,” Jess told her. “If the Alpha won’t do it, I will. She’s a monster. Aaaand, you’re going to bed now. You look wiped out. Up you go.”

“What? No. I’m staying up to hear about Dean!” April resisted Jess’ effort to pull her to her feet.

“Dean’s going to be fine. You’ll hear about it in the morning. In the meantime, Alpha’s not going to be happy with either one of us if he comes home to find you still up.” Jess remained firm, although not unkind.

Rachel held her hand out to the Omega. “Come on. I’ll take you up. If you want, I’ll stay with you for a little while, April. I know it’s going to be hard to sleep.”

“It’s Friday!” April insisted. “I get a later bedtime, and because we had a party. It’s not time. I want to stay up. I’m not going! I can’t sleep before I know what’s happened to Dean!”

“Enough!” Jerry barked. “You were given an instruction, Omega. Now get your ass to bed.” He looked like he meant it. He looked like he was accustomed to issuing orders like that, but April’s Omega training was fresh in her mind. She didn’t answer to Jerry Lancet. Her instincts nearly moved her feet for her, but her training held firm. Everyone, it seemed had turned their worry and helplessness over Dean into focus on taking care of the Omega, but April settled deeper into the cushion, pulled away from Jess, and set her stubborn eyes on the floor.
“I’m waiting for news about Dean,” she announced.

Just at that moment, Benny bustled in. He scoped the room, introduced himself, explained that Castiel had called him to let him know what was happening with Dean. He spotted April sitting beside Jess, and he squatted in front of her.

“You all right, Cher?” Benny put his hands on her arms and squeezed just a little. She nodded, fighting the urge to tear up in relief at seeing an alpha she knew and trusted. “How’d your first introduction with the Dragon-Lady go?” he teased. “Never mind. Come on, Kiddo. Let’s get you to bed.” Benny swept her up into his strong arms in a bridal carry before she could speak. She didn’t know if he had heard her protesting before he came in, but it looked like a done-deal now. If he had heard her whining about being sent to bed, he was sure to spank her once they were upstairs.

Rachel hugged her mother quickly, kissed her Pop on the cheek with a whispered, “I’m proud of you” which he acknowledged with a squeeze to her forearm, and then she followed the alpha up the stairs to help get April settled.

She didn’t stay long – long enough to strip out of her dress and change into a borrowed pair of pajamas from April’s bureau, and climb in beside the Omega. Benny nodded at her and clicked the light off, closing the door behind him. April breathed a little sigh of relief. Rachel snuggled with April in the warm bed, and they whispered together like sisters for a few minutes before Rachel shushed her and told her to relax and sleep. Rachel stroked her hair and her back to help her fade off. It didn’t take long.

Rachel used the quiet time in the dark to process what the evening had turned into. Everything that she’d been trying to explain to her Pop for years to no avail, Naomi did in one night. She saw it in her Alpha’s eyes as he sent the woman packing. It had finally clicked, and he had switched tracks. Just like that. For all Naomi’s talk of Family Values and old-fashioned morals, the woman had no heart at all, and Jerry was as repulsed now as Rachel had always been.

Rachel stayed a few more minutes, then slipped out of the bed, gathered her dinner clothes, and closed the door behind her. God, April was adorable. No wonder Michael couldn’t resist hovering over her protectively. She practically oozed ‘defenseless waif’ although Rachel had also seen a core of steel beneath those delicate blue eyes. Her brother had his work cut out for him if he wanted to be April’s knight-in-shining-armor.

For all she seemed defenseless, she wasn’t. This little kitten had claws hidden beneath the surface. Michael had always been a sucker for Subs who needed someone to watch over them. Rachel knew he liked to play around in the counter-culture where a dominant Omega was a hot commodity. Every now and then, Michael would find a real submissive who responded to his care like he mattered, and Michael always fell hard and fast, only to lose out to an alpha at some point along the way. Michael never advertised these relationships to his parents, but he told Rachel everything. April already had someone watching over her though, and an Alpha at that, and Michael could get himself into real trouble if he wasn’t careful.

Rachel found that the group had moved into the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. The Tops at the hospital had not checked in yet, but it hadn’t been very long, truth to tell. It seemed like hours. Rachel stretched and yawned, finding a seat next to her mother. Benny was deep in discussion with Jess and Jerry about what might have triggered Dean to react like he did. Jess still thought he might be allergic to the shrimp, but it hadn’t looked like allergy to Rachel. She wrapped her arm around her mother. “Let’s give it another fifteen minutes, Mommy,” she whispered. “If they haven’t called by then, we’ll go on back to the house and go to bed. Sitting up all night isn’t going to help Dean.”

“Okay,” Mommy said placidly. “I really like that young man, Rachel. Don’t you think he’s really
good for Michael? I hope he’s okay. He looked just awful.”

“He’ll be fine. Michael will take care of him, like Michael always does for people he loves.” The discussion at the other end of the table continued, but Rachel preferred to distract her mother with calming words.

“You think Michael loves him?” Beatrice asked Rachel, and Rachel nodded firmly, smiling a little, happy for her brother and for the relief that passed through her mother’s eyes.

Benny’s cell phone rang, and they all quieted while he answered, switching it to speaker mode and setting it on the table. “You’re on speaker, Sam. How is he?”

“He’s just fine, guys. Had a panic-attack and lost consciousness because of the hyperventilating. They’re wrapping up the test results now and giving him one more look-over, and then we’ll be heading home.”

“That’s great news.” The tension melted around the table. Benny spoke for all of them in a relieved voice. “You want me to hang out here?”

“No, Benny. Go on back home. Thanks for swinging by. We worried about leaving…Uh, who’s still…?”

“Naomi’s not here, beta. Looks like she packed up and headed out. It’s just Michael’s family, Jess, and Gabriel. Oh, fuck, hey Gabe. When did you sit down?” Benny startled when he noticed the Omega two seats down from him, sipping a cup of coffee that was half-drained already. How long had he been there?

Gabriel leaned forward to address the cell phone. “My lovely mother was escorted back to her lodgings, and the security team has been informed that she’s not to come back to the main house until breakfast. I’m hoping she tries.”

Sam said nothing to that. “So, anyway, yeah, go on home, Ben. Thanks everyone. Jess, I’ll be back as soon as I can, but I know you have to get to the office in the morning. If you want to beg a ride home from Benny before I get there, that would be fine. You can go on to bed, and I’ll see you later.”

“I’m fine here, Sam,” she responded quickly. “If it’s okay with you, I’ll just sleep here tonight and swing by the house for a change of clothes in the morning. I don’t need to be in early. It’s not on the clock.”

“All right. It’s getting late, and Dean’s fine, so go on to bed. Uh, Cas is asking if someone thought to send April to bed too.”

“Got her all tucked in, Sam. Not our first rodeo here. Tell the Alpha to chill out a little.” Benny snarked.

“I’m not saying that to him, Benny.”

“Anything else?” Sam asked after a moment.

“Nope. Good night Sam,” said Benny, and he accepted Sam’s response before hanging up the phone.
The house was quiet as the four men came in through the garage entrance and into the kitchen. “Straight up to bed, all of you,” said Castiel unnecessarily. Dean had been silent for a couple of hours now. Cas would have poked him just a little to assess his state-of-mind, but he had Michael now. Michael looked tired and sad, but not alarmed, so Cas left Dean alone. It was very late.

They all made their way upstairs, Sam peeling off for his own room, and the other three slipping into the master bedroom. Michael didn’t ask permission to stay, but Castiel didn’t protest as he stripped first Dean and then himself. Michael arranged Dean near the center of the enormous bed and spooned up behind him on the far side. Castiel stripped all the way down too, and went quietly through the hallway to check on April before returning and taking his place on Dean’s other side, pulling in close to allow their breath to mingle.

Dean whimpered sadly just once, and then went quiet again. “Shhh, Dean. We’ll figure it out in the morning,” Cas told him quietly, working one knee up between Dean’s knees where he lay out on his side, facing Cas.

Sometime in the night, April found her way into the bed as well. Cas woke to a supreme feeling of perfect rightness, laying out on his back with his mate’s head on his right shoulder and his fiancé’s back pressed tightly against his left side. Morning light leaked through the sheer curtains. It was a gentle light, telling Castiel that the morning was still new. He turned his head and kissed April’s forehead, then turned the other way and scented Dean’s hair.

Cuddled up close to Dean, and hours after he’d last bathed, Castiel could smell Dean’s fertility as plainly as if Dean said the words out loud. Strange that Dean and Michael had both missed that tell. It seemed ludicrous to continue to pretend he didn’t know what they were planning. Obviously the only one awake, if the gentle rhythm of the soft snoring around him was anything to go by, Cas breathed in the scent of pack and let his thoughts delve.

Maybe he was over-reacting. Maybe Dean wasn’t really on a destructive track, heading for deliberate sabotage. But then, if not, what had last night been about? He was obviously in a bad place in his head. It had to have been Naomi. It had to be. She’d been in fine form last night, all her spiteful and carefully worded contempt honed to a razor’s edge and delivered to have the greatest impact. Cas needed to check on Gabe. He needed to talk to Dean. Neither would answer any questions last night. Gabe let his phone go to voicemail, and Dean had shut down entirely.

Castiel took a deep breath. He’d made mistakes before, and he would make them again, but this mistake was a monumental, catastrophic failure, and it was on him. Why had he insisted on keeping up the “niceties” of high society? A formal introduction of his new life partners to his mother by way of a dinner party was what cultured people did. It was expected. Cas felt a punch to his gut. He was still responding unconsciously to the pull of his upbringing, and it had hurt everyone he loved. Dean was right. Jesus, Dean was always right…except when he was very, very wrong.

Cas looked uncomfortably to his left and right, clenching the muscles in his groin. He needed a toilet, and the down-side of sleeping in a puppy-pile became rapidly evident. He couldn’t get out without disturbing his sleeping pack. Cas carefully worked an arm fully beneath and around his mate and then pulled her body up and over his own. She woke up when she was fully on top of him enough to respond to the straddle of her legs with a grind down on his full bladder that had him hissing.

“Be still, Kitten. Not yet. Just sleep a little longer. I need to get up.” He rolled her into Dean’s back where she immediately turned in and clutched on, fading back to sleep. Dean grunted through his snores and reacted to the scent of pack Omega by rolling onto his back and wrapping an arm around her. He squinted one eye at Cas without lifting his head.

“Are we doing the pack-bed thing now, Alpha?”
“Just this once, Dean. Everyone was unsettled last night. Go back to sleep. I’ll be right back.” Cas was up on the bed now with a foot on the floor and a knee on the mattress. He leaned over and kissed the two temples he could reach and settled for running a hand through Michael’s messy black hair. Dean mumbled, pulled both Omegas in closer and went back to snoring as if he’d never woken at all.

Cas relieved himself and then took the world’s fastest shower. He dried off and returned to the room to find something to wear. April still had her eyes closed and her head resting on Dean’s chest, but she wasn’t sleeping. Dean was sitting up higher against the pillows with his head back, face toward the ceiling, and his straight legs spread wide, taking up most of the bed. Michael’s hand, under the comforter was in motion in a slow, repetitive circle over Dean’s center, creating an obscene bulge at his crotch. Dean’s eyes were closed in bliss. Michael still had his own head up on Dean’s mid-section, just below April’s, and his own eyes were closed and relaxed as well. It made a very peaceful picture. Castiel stood naked in the middle of the room and watched his pack for a minute.

“Mmm.” Dean seemed lost in the simple pleasure. Slowly, he put a hand on top of Michael’s head and applied enough pressure to communicate from alpha to Omega, and Michael responded by slowly squirming his way under the covers to cover Dean with his mouth.

“Ohhh, fuck, yeah. God, Baby. Just like that.”

Cas stepped forward and pulled the comforter back to allow the Omega some air (and frankly, so that Cas could watch the erotic show), and then he dug through his dresser for something comfortable to wear. Stepping into a pair of underwear and sweat-pants, Cas noticed that April was fully awake and watching. Cas felt her arousal spark, but she only watched without moving to join. She wasn’t going to get an invitation, and she knew it.

Michael’s hand disappeared beneath the covers to begin working himself while he bobbed slowly onto Dean’s rock-hard erection. “Hands where I can see them, Michael,” Dean interrupted. This was an interesting turn of events. Not that it was any of Castiel’s business directly, but he’d been wondering what kind of balance the two had found between their crazy designations where love-making was concerned. Cas knew Dean usually Bottomed, but there was so much complexity to account for.

Michael whined and released his own cock. He gripped Dean’s hips with both of his hands and picked up the pace with his mouth.

“Make me come down your throat, Omega.” Dean’s voice was all alpha-assurance. There was command there that Cas hadn’t heard from him in quite some time. “Take me as deep as you can. I wanna see my knot disappear behind your lips. Get down there…come on, Michael, take it all down.” Dean thrust up into Michael’s mouth slightly, choking him and bringing tears to his eyes. Spit leaked out around his lips as he gagged, but then he got control.

Michael re-centered his body and re-focused on his work. He cocked his head forward to straighten out his throat and slowly worked Dean’s length down past the ring of his throat, holding his breath, suppressing his gag reflex, until his face turned red, and he had to pull back.

“Almost, Michael,” Dean goaded him, thrusting in tiny pulses again. “Try again. You can do better.”

Michael growled at him, and Dean responded by tangling his fingers up in Michael’s hair and shoving his face back down. “Don’t make that noise at me, Omega! Not when we’re here, like this. This is MY time, and you’ll do as you’re told.” Dean fucked into Michael’s throat, holding the Omega in place by his hair.
It was hot, and April whined. She was beginning to leak slick onto the bed and squirm in discomfort. “Control yourself, April. If you can’t watch without losing it, you can’t watch,” Cas told her. She turned lust-blown, golden-rimmed eyes on him, and Cas knew she was about to lose control. She really was spoiled. April had never been told no on any kind of regular basis, so she had too little self-control. She was horny, so she expected to be granted relief, but Cas knew she needed a challenge instead.

“It’s okay, April,” he told her, pulling her covers back and hauling her to her feet. “Go on into the bathroom and get yourself put together for the day. You’re not ready to witness this with control yet. Let’s just get you out of here for now. We’ll work on control more some other time.” Cas smacked her on the ass to get her moving, and he saw and felt her pout. Leaving is not what she wanted. Enemas and showers were not what she wanted. Castiel loved the simplicity of April, and he had her training held by the reins with both hands. She hesitated, looking back over her shoulder at the moaning, writhing couple on the bed.

“One,” he said.

She squeaked and jump-started forward, toward the bathroom. Cas watched her go, thinking. She’d been back-sliding a little bit lately, almost as if she was deliberately trying out a bratty demeanor to see if it fit. No matter. Cas knew how to handle April, brat or otherwise.

Dean groaned again, still moving Michael’s head for him. Every pass along Dean’s length was met with an “Mmm,” or an “Ahhh,” from Dean and a corresponding, “Mmmph!” from Michael. Dean had his feet planted flat on the bed to give him firm leverage to thrust harshly into the Omega’s throat. Spit leaked all over Dean’s balls and down between his ass crack to wet his hole. His face was flushed and beautiful, his eyes shut tightly. Dean began to move at a faster pace, adding a deeper growl to the incredible sounds coming out of his mouth, and Castiel watched him face-fuck his mate with a hungry look of his own. Here in this room, Dean had no problem being genuine as himself, whether alpha or Submissive. They still needed to test where the line was drawn in Dean’s head between ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ to be himself, but Cas didn’t expect any complications for him to arise with just the four of them present.

Right now, though, Dean was fully alpha, and so it wouldn’t have triggered his Sub insecurities anyway. Michael struggled to keep his balance and his suction as Dean shoved his knot ruthlessly into his mate’s mouth, his cock making a bulge in Michael’s throat. He writhed uncomfortably on the alpha’s dick, kicking out and sucking in deep breaths whenever the alpha let him. Castiel watched dispassionately to an extent. It was a very hot scene, and he was hard and leaking pre-come, but he kept his hands off himself, choosing to observe only. Cas wasn’t worried about the rough treatment. The two mates, as violent as they appeared on the outside, were communicating intimately through their double-bond. Michael was hard, up on his knees, the comforter having slid off his hips some time ago. He hadn’t growled at Dean again, but was morphling a stream of incoherent sounds around the dribbles of bubbling spit and pre-come that drooled out of his mouth.

Dean’s two hands clenched into Michael’s hair painfully tight and his rhythm stuttered. He shoved up hard and held there for a beat, completely still while Michael struggled against the hold. Then Dean groaned low and long. Cas could see the veins along his cock and his knot pulse into Michael’s face as Dean came down his mate’s throat.

Michael gagged spectacularly, wrenching himself free, and coughing up all the viscous fluid onto Dean’s belly. He struggled to take a breath for a moment, then braced his hands on Dean’s flattened thighs and panted. Dean smirked at him in a very iconically Dean way. He looked over at Cas, still just standing beside the bed in a pair of sweat pants.
“Think we need to work on that one, huh Cas?” Dean pulled Michael up and wrapped an arm around his body.

“Maybe a little, but that was damn hot. Well done, Omega.”

Michael blushed at the praise. He’d been expecting admonishment for the mess, for failing to keep it all down. Instead, Dean rolled him onto his back and lined himself up over Michael’s cock, sinking down slowly. The mess on Dean’s belly and all over his crotch dribbled onto Michael, so Dean ran his hands through it, and used it all to lubricate his mate, running a hand up the length of Michael’s cock as he pushed himself down. It hurt, the stretch and the burn sharper because he’d had no prep, but he snarled at Michael’s reticence.

“Dean, you’re not…”

“Finish that sentence, Omega, and I’ll lay you over my knee for insubordination.” Dean grimaced as he bottomed out, but he didn’t abort. Michael groaned at the tightness.

“But alpha, I failed. I choked and retched it back out. I don’t deserve this.” Michael’s voice was stretched with his effort to keep still. The tight, wet tunnel around his dick felt like heaven. Dean squeezed, and Michael made a noise of raw lust from the back of his throat.

“I decide whether you failed or not, kid, not you. You tried for me, and you did your best.” Dean pulled his body up, getting his knees beneath him to give power to his movements as he began to rock down onto Michael’s cock, filling himself the way he loved. “Unless I’m mistaken, you’ve never done that from that angle before…not for me at least. I never said you had to be perfect all the time.”

Dean left it at that, driving himself hard onto Michael again and again. His mate wasn’t going to last long, especially not with Dean keyed in to the pleasure Michael was feeling, and playing him like a fiddle. Michael held onto Dean’s hips, but he didn’t direct the motion. Dean bent over and took Michael’s right nipple in his mouth, biting gently, but then he spotted the Mating-scar on Michael’s shoulder and went for that instead. All it took was for Dean to put minimal pressure on the scar with his teeth, and combined with the pleasure coming through his dick, it was too much. Michael threw his head back, tightened his grip, and came inside his mate’s ass, grinding up hard in miniscule pulses of his hips.

“God, you two are beautiful together,” Cas breathed as they collapsed on the bed, sweaty and sticky, ready for a nap. Dean chuckled. Michael groaned at the uncomfortable wetness between their lower halves as his dick slid free.

“I do hope, Dean, that you aren’t planning to use this as a distraction to try to avoid talking with me about last night.” Cas sat on the side of the bed, his face serious. “We need to figure it out, so we can keep it from happening again.”

Dean started to roll away, but he stopped himself. He could do this – needed to do this. Running away wasn’t going to help. Dean swatted Michael’s thigh to get him moving. “Go get cleaned up.”

“I want to stay and talk it over too, Dean. Please don’t cut me out of this.” Michael rolled off his mate, but he stayed on the bed and kissed his mate’s chest.

“Go get a quick shower,” Dean told him. “We will still be here when you get back. I’m not hiding anything... But you stink.”

“Me? What about you?” Michael protested, but Dean was still alpha, and Michael didn’t need
Cas stepped into the rest room, passing Michael on the way back, a warm cloth in his hand. Cas cleaned Dean carefully. Tenderly. As if Dean meant the world to the Alpha.

Dean sighed and put his elbow across his face, resisting the urge to bolt again.

“My mother will be coming up to the house for breakfast, Dean. I want you and April to stay here. I’ll have Fred deliver your breakfast.”

“What about Michael? She had her claws pretty tight in him last night. Shouldn’t we be protecting him as well?” Dean pulled his arm away. (Man up, Winchester!)

“Michael is going to want to face her this morning, and I mean to allow that. She needs to see and feel the damage she’s caused.” Cas put the cloth into the waste bin beside the bed for the time-being. He’d retrieve it later.

“She’s sick in the head, Babe. She won’t have any idea what you two are going on about. Just…just feed her breakfast and send her away.” Dean rolled over a little to let Cas strip the bed around him, but he didn’t get up to help. They’d done this many times before. Dean knew to stay lying down. Cas was a master at changing sheets with an occupant still in the bed. “Cas, I’m sorry, but your mom is gone. There’s nothing left but bitterness and denial. It’s like my dad. Whatever used to be there is gone. We can’t fix it no matter how hard we try.”

Cas sighed and let his eyes close. He held the crumpled, soiled sheets in his hands, and the weight of his responsibilities on his shoulders. “I have to believe there’s a way, Dean. I can’t let you get hurt anymore, but I can’t give up… I don’t know. I need to talk to her. I need to talk to Gabe.” He sighed dramatically again. “I need to talk to Jerry, and Sam, and Jess. I need to make sure April wasn’t hurt. I have to check in with Michael, and Benny.” Cas sat down on the mattress-liner and let the sheets fall to the floor. “Bobby came to the hospital last night, but I didn’t let him in to see you. I’m still so angry with him, just being in the same room brings my wolf out. I guess Benny called him. I don’t know… I have to work things out with him, too. It can’t go on like this.”

Cas looked so tired and Dean saw through to the core of the man he loved. Cas was carrying everyone. By himself. A wave of remorse and sadness hit Dean in the chest, and he reached for Cas. “You don’t have to do everything by yourself, Cas. I’m not going to fall apart if you talk to me. Let me help. Please.”

Cas put his body as close to Dean’s as he could. “We need to know what brought on the panic-attack last night. I’m not risking another one. That scared me to death.”

“So, you’re going to wrap me up in bubble-wrap?” Dean pulled his face back far enough to look Cas in the eyes. “You can’t keep me safe like that, Alpha.”

“Maybe not, but it gives me one less thing to have to worry about if I know you’re safe.” Cas said it carefully. He knew it wouldn’t sit well. He was right.

“It can’t work like that, Castiel James.” Dean usually only used his full name when he had a strong point to make. “Marriage, not Mating, remember?” Dean ignored the nigglng discomfort that told him Cas had hit the nail on the head, and Dean really did need wrapping in bubble-wrap.

“I’m trying Dean, but I don’t know what to do about last night.”

April came back out of the bathroom, nude and still damp from her shower. She noticed the bed had
been abandoned mid-change and went to the closet for fresh linens. Cas held Dean’s eye a moment more, then stood to help her change the sheets. By the time the new ones were in place and a fresh, white comforter thrown over, Michael was back too. Cas told them all the breakfast plan, and no one but Dean protested. The set of Michael’s jaw told Cas he welcomed the chance to share another meal with Naomi. This time, Cas knew, she wouldn’t find a compliant Omega, but a pissed-off, flinty Dominant.

It was still early. Breakfast wouldn’t be for another hour or so. There was time to talk, no matter how much Dean wished there wasn’t. He picked at his cuticles as April and Michael both took their places cuddled in next to him again, and Cas sat at the foot of the bed, looking calmly into Dean’s eyes, unsure of where to start.

“You dropped?...and then you panicked?” He wanted Dean to just talk, not answer a barrage of questions.

Dean bit his lip. April had questioned whether she should stay for this, and his arm tightly holding her waist was answer enough. Finally, Dean nodded. “She hates me, Cas. She’s always hated me, and however much she criticizes you, the truth is, she thinks the sun shines out of your ass. She just wishes you had followed in her footsteps, that’s all. You’re still her golden boy, and Gabe’s still the family disappointment, and I’m always going to be the dog shit stuck to the bottom of her shoe. I dunno. She just…I guess it hit me harder than I expected when you told her we were engaged. I could see all her dreams for you just come crashing out in this massive wave of disappointment.”

“None of that is new, though, Dean. She’s always been like that since you’ve known her. Why now?”

“Because we’re engaged, you dolt! It’s bigger and more permanent now than it’s ever been. You and me…we were never together before. She probably thought I was just some pathetic charity case you picked up along the way at some point and couldn’t shake off.”

Michael growled softly, and pulled Dean in to his side.

“The thing is, man, I mean, she’s right, isn’t she? I’m not even close to anywhere near your league. You’ve got all this breeding and high society culture and shit, and I’m just a grease-monkey from the wrong side of the tracks. I’m not good enough for you, Cas. I’m sorry I freaked out and ruined dinner, but it kind of hit me in the face, I guess.”

“Dean, where is this even coming from? Where did you ever get an idea like that? That’s complete nonsense.” Cas didn’t leave his place at the foot of the bed, but he longed to wrap his beloved up in his arms and block out all of this. Instead, he let April and Michael hold onto him. Dean rested his head against April’s and clutched Michael’s waist until his fingers turned white with the pressure.

“I know,” said Dean softly. “I know. But knowing it in my head doesn’t change the feeling.”

“I don’t give a damn about the world I was born into,” Cas said fiercely. “Good breeding just means they select whom to knock up based on wealth and power instead of love. Society rules are built around keeping people out and maintaining the status quo. Don’t you dare buy into that crap, Dean. It’s bullshit! That’s not what makes a man worthy. What makes a man worthy is how he gives of himself for others, how people love him, trust him, depend on him…It’s the sacrifices he makes for those who need him. God, Dean! Fuck! You’ve got it all backward! You’re so far out of my league that if anyone’s not worthy here, it’s me!”

“Cas, stop. Please. This is not helping.” Dean was visibly cringing under the weight of the words.
He wanted to believe, but he didn’t have the capacity. Castiel stopped ranting at him and regarded him sadly.

“I love you, Dean. Please don’t give up on us. I’m not ever going to walk away. That’s a promise.” Cas leaned forward and put pressure on Dean’s leg through the bedding. “Not ever.”

“What do we do now?” Michael asked the Alpha. Things were still unsettled, but pushing further didn’t seem like a good idea.

Castiel took a deep breath. “I’m going to go down and speak with my mother and my brother. You’re welcome to join me, Michael, but I’d like Dean and April to stay out of sight until she’s gone. She’s done enough damage for one visit.”

“And then?” he prompted.

“Go spend time with your family before they have to leave. I want another chance to speak with your father before he goes, but I promise to keep that brief.”

“You know what I mean, Alpha.” Michael was getting irritated. “What does all this mean in the long term? Are you two going to be okay? Is the pack okay? Should April and I be worried?”

Dean pulled Michael in and kissed him. “We’re gonna be okay, Babe. It’s a rough patch, and we don’t know what the fuck we’re doing, but we’ll muddle through. Right, Alpha?”

Cas was about to answer in the affirmative when Michael huffed. “That’s a bullshit answer if I ever heard one, Dean Winchester.”

“Careful with the attitude, Omega,” Dean chided, but there was no real heat in the words.

Breakfast went quickly. Cas didn’t have a heart-to-heart with his mother so much as he and Michael explained in small words that she’d be sure to understand how badly she’d fucked up, how she wasn’t welcome to visit again, and how if she ever showed the slightest degree of contempt concerning Dean ever again, she could expect to be laid flat. That last one came from Michael.

Naomi, in typical fashion, heard only what she wanted to hear. “I’m terribly sorry that the dinner party was cut short, boys. These things happen sometimes. Perhaps next time.” She dabbed her mouth with the napkin in delusional delicacy. “Michael, dear, it was lovely to meet you. You do have a wonderful name. You know, I gave both of my boys angelic names too. It’s a sign of strength to carry the name of a warrior angel, and you dear, are named after the strongest archangel of all. I expect great things of you.”

Michael had no idea what to say to that. Sam, who’d heard the same speech from her ages ago, shook his head faintly as he played with his eggs. Let it go, Michael, he seemed to be saying. Was that her only beef against Dean? He didn’t have the name of an angel? The woman was mentally ill.

“Castiel,” she said, standing up, “I hope your friend is feeling better.”

“My fiancé, Mother. And Dean is fine.”

“I really have to go. Thank you for dinner and for breakfast. You might want to look into replacing the décor in the Guard House. It’s become quite dated, and it doesn’t reflect well on the Pack.”

“Goodbye, Mother. Please let me know if you wish to engage the services of our Pack council. They
Jess pulled Castiel aside after he’d ushered his mother out the door. “I feel weird about this, Alpha. You and I don’t know each other very well yet, but Sam said to tell you whenever your mate did something…you know.”

“April? What happened, Jess?” Cas frowned in confusion. April usually confessed her misdeeds herself before anyone else had a chance to turn her in, but she’d said nothing this morning.

“It’s not a big deal, Sir. At least not to me, but last night, I tried to send her to bed, and she refused to go. It was only about 8:30, so maybe I was wrong to send her so early. She seemed wiped out and stressed to me, and I was trying to help. Rachel and alpha Lancet backed me up, but she refused all of them. It’s only, um, it was only when alpha Benny came in a few minutes later and just picked her up that she went on to bed.” Jess bit her lip. She didn’t have a handle on the dynamic of this pack quite yet, and she didn’t know how it would look for a beta-Sub to be taking an authority role with the Alpha’s mate. “Sir, I’m sorry if I’ve over-stepped.”

“No, Jess. You haven’t. Thank you for telling me. I’d like to confirm with you for the future that you are well within your rights, when you are the highest-ranking pack member present, that you have full authority to read the situation and make your best judgment call. I appreciate that you tried to look after April. She should have obeyed you. I’ll see to it. Please let me know if it happens again.” Cas put a hand at her back to guide her into the kitchen with the others, where dishes were being cleaned.

“You may feel a lesser connection to the pack since you and Sam Mated simply because you both live away from the manor and you don’t work with any of us. I apologize if we’ve allowed you to feel like that, Jessica. Let’s figure out some ways to bring you more fully into the fold. I want you to understand how much we value your contributions.”

“Oh, um…thank you, Alpha.” Jess blushed. Sam turned from the sink and smiled at her. That wasn’t really the reaction she’d expected.

“Here, Jess,” Sam tossed her his wash-rag. “I know one way to get you to feel like family.” He gestured her over to the sink, and nodded toward the dirty dishes. Jess thought about digging in and refusing, but a look from Sam and the realization of how that would look to Cas after she just threw his mate under the bus put her to work quickly. “Good girl,” Sam whispered darkly, with a stinging smack to her ass.

NOW:

Dean hung up the phone and caught Sam staring. He suspected Sam could hear Cas’ voice through the line, so he didn’t try to hide anything.

“Michael went postal on Jody. He’s probably beating himself up right now, but I’m not supposed to talk to him. This sucks!” Dean began pacing again.

“Let’s get some lunch and try to get some work done,” Sam suggested. “Cas will look after him, and
Michael’s phone is in his locker anyway. You wouldn’t be able to get through.”

Sam stood up, closing his laptop. “Don’t you have your bond open? You can tell how he’s doing, can’t you?”

“No, I closed it. I don’t know if I should open it up again or not. Cas and I had a fight…or well, a little bit of a fight. Anyway, I didn’t want it to distract Michael, so I closed it off. I’m feeling a poke every now and then from him, but nothing demanding. Thought it might be best to just leave it alone.” Dean followed Sam into the kitchen and pulled a small pot of left-over tomato soup from the fridge.

“He asked me to leave it open, though. This morning. He said he wanted me to stay with him. And then I closed it.”

Sam didn’t look worried. “It was nerves, Dean. Everyone gets nervous until the test gets going. He’ll do better without you in his head. Just leave it closed. If you have to, just apologize later. Look, if it was important to him, he would be doing more than just poking at you, wouldn’t he?” Sam pulled a couple of beers from the butler’s pantry and popped their tops. He handed one to Dean. “He’s fine, alpha. It’s a scary day, but he’ll get through it just like the rest of us did.”

“Did you ever make a guess, Sam? About his ratings, I mean.” Dean started heating the soup and digging out sandwich fixings.

“No. I guess I’ll just wait on the outcome. I know he’s got the experts all jizzing in their pants. Cas seems to think he’s a Profound. I don’t see how that’s possible. Has there EVER been a Profoundly Dominant Omega? I mean, ODs are rare enough just in general. Like one-in-a-billion kind of rare, right? But a Profound? What do you think, Dean? You have to know by now. At least ball-park.”

“Dude. You spanked him. You went up against his wolf head-to-head. What did you feel? Where did you match up against him?” Dean stirred the soup and then returned to slicing tomatoes.

“That was weeks ago; more than a month ago. I wasn’t thinking about it at the time.” Sam protested.

Dean pounced. “I don’t believe what I’m hearin’. You’re supposed to be a professional, Sammy. Man, you have to rate the other guy and get a read on him to know how to apply a proper punishment.”

“I was pretty pissed that day, Dean. I just handed it to my wolf, and he took care of the whole thing.” Sam took his beer and a couple of napkins and spoons to the table.

“Well there you go, then. Your wolf Topped his. Simple enough, right?” Dean served up two bowls and set them on the plates beside the sandwiches that he had halved.

“You really think so? Really?” Sam picked up his spoon and stirred the soup.

Dean took his sandwich, leaning back in his chair. “No, I don’t.” Dean took a big bite and chewed it slowly.

“Dean.”

“You just have to wait like everybody else.” Dean took another bite.

“Jerk,” mumbled Sam.

“Bitch,” Dean replied.
They ate quietly and quickly. Dean knew Sam was building up to the next topic, and he wracked his brain to throw something else on the table before his brother got the nerve to bring it up.

He didn’t make it.

“Are we going to talk about Friday night?” Sam was focused on his soup, not Dean’s face.

“And there it is…” Dean dropped his spoon and stood, collecting his dishes, heading toward the sink.

“I gave you plenty of time, but I want to hear about it from you.” Sam leaned back so he could see his brother. “Don’t make me ask Castiel or Michael. What happened to throw you into that state?” Dean didn’t answer. “Look, I know it’s embarrassing to you. I saw your face when they said panic-attack. Don’t forget, I know you, Dean. You have nothing to feel embarrassed about around me. Come on.”

“Fine. It was fucking Naomi and her stupid, shitty, sneering condescension. Cas told her we were engaged. Wanna know what she said? She fucking welcomed me into the family, like it was still her family, and she told me I could count on her to help me adjust to the culture shock. Fuck that bitch, Sam. Right up her clenched asshole!” Dean stepped away from the sink where the breakable dishes were tempting him.

“Didn’t Michael notice you dropping?” Sam spoke quietly, but he was careful to keep any sign of pity out of his voice. He didn’t want to pick a fight. But Dean didn’t seem pissed anymore. He sighed, letting the anger out with his next breath. He rubbed his face.

“It’s not Michael’s fault. We both tried something new at the same time, and I think that’s what submarined us. I shouldn’t have tried it on the night when the Witch of the West came to dinner. It was stupid of me. Stupid of Michael too, but he doesn’t know her like I do.”

“What was stupid?” Sam finished eating and cleared his place.

Dean collected two more beers. They were supposed to be working from home, but no one really expected any work out of Dean today, and Sam was baby-sitting. When in Rome, right?

“You know how I act when I’m in public or with people I’m not absolutely sure I can trust? It’s a defense-mechanism thing. Nothing new.”

“Yes. I know. And?”

“Well, Michael’s been helping me come to terms lately with maybe not needing to do that all the time. I mean, you know about the public sex thing, but it’s deeper than that. I wanted to try just being myself without the mask in a situation where I normally felt like I needed it, so I tried just a little. Not a lot. I did it way bigger on Thursday night with Michael’s family, and even that was fucking hard. I almost dropped then, but Michael caught me with a redirect. Jesus, he was awesome that night. My fucking hero and all that shit.”

“So, if you barely made it on Thursday, what made you think it would be a good idea to try it in front of Naomi at the announcement of your engagement? You had to know she would react like that.”

“Because I’m a fucking idiot, Sam! I don’t know. It seemed like a brave step forward or some such crap. I feel like a moron now, though. And to top it off, Michael went and pulled the same shit at the same time. He’s never willingly occupied his Omega in front of strangers in his whole fucking life, and he picked THAT DINNER to give it a try.”
Sam whistled lowly.

“Naomi likes him, same as she likes you, God help him.” Sam raised his brow at that but didn’t interrupt his brother. “She sat beside him at dinner and kept a hand on him the whole time. He was literally under her thumb, and it creeped him out so bad, he was too distracted to notice me going under until I couldn’t breathe.”

“Did you talk it over with him yet?”

“Mm-hm. We’ve turned into a fucking soap opera. It’s all drama, all the time around here, and we can’t go four hours without someone boxing me in to talk about my feelings. I’m telling you, Sam, there’s not enough beer in the world.”

Sam rinsed dishes and loaded the dishwasher without pressing Dean for more until a thought occurred to him. “Is that what you and Cas fought about this morning?”

“He thinks I need to go see Pamela.” Dean leaned on the counter and took a drink.

“Are you going to?”

“We’re done here, Sam. Lunch is over. Go back to work.”

Chapter End Notes

Please tell me what you think. Comments are my favorite thing ever. Love all y’all.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Nothing here but spankings and smut. All three of Castiel's wayward waifs need a tighter leash.

Chapter Notes

I felt so bad that what was intended to be just an intro to the chapter turned into 10000+ words of no plot at all, so I wrote the next chapter too. You're getting a twofer today. If you like the raunchy stuff, stay here and read 44. If you want plot, skip it and jump straight to 45. Maybe read them in backwards order. I don't know why you would do that, but it's a free country, right?

Hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 44 – Monday, June 19, 2017

NOW:

Dean managed more work that afternoon than he expected to, primarily due to sheer boredom and frustrated anticipation. The clock had never ticked so slowly in the hallway before. Sam reminded him it was time to get teaching assignments arranged for the next round of classes, so they spent an
hour, heads close together trying to work Dean in around Michael’s restriction.

“Put a couple of new-hires on the docket with you – make it a full tag-team. You would be able to lead things, give them good experience with a seasoned veteran, and by the time your honeymoon rolls around, they’ll be ready to take over for you for a while.” Sam pointed out two of the newer trainers in the roster.

Dean sat back. “I forgot about the honeymoon.”

“You forgot you’re getting married?” Sam teased.

Dean huffed. “I just hadn’t tied those dates in with these in my mind. I didn’t forget I’m getting married.” He rolled his eyes. There was a deep discomfort in the way he said it that made Sam perk up and pay attention.

Dean leaned back in to study the options he had to choose from. He wanted to lead a class, but he couldn’t do it alone anymore. “Do the next one with me, Sam. You and me. Wouldn’t that be awesome? Put in a rookie too if you think we need a threesome, but do this round together with your big brother.”

Sam thought about it. The responsible thing to do would be to scatter the most experienced teachers out amongst the newbies to give all of them a firm source of learning, but the draw to selfishly work with his brother was strong. They hadn’t run a class together in years.

“That leaves the rest of the pool pretty shallow in terms of experience. Jo would have to take two classes on top of her new duties as your assistant.”

“Cry me a river, man. I did all that shit by myself for years. She’s getting the big bucks now. It comes with the paycheck.” Dean was trying to decide between two newly certified teachers, running a finger down the screen.

Sam chuckled. “I’m glad I don’t work for you. Benny’s tight, but he’s not completely unfeeling. Have some compassion, Dude.”

Dean cocked an eyebrow. “I have an assistant now, man. If you think I’m not gonna milk this, you sir, are sadly mistaken. Plus…it’s Jo. I owe her so bad for all the pranks and shit she’s pulled on me my whole life. I’m telling you, Sam – this is going to be fun.”

Sam shook his head in sympathy for Jo. “I’m glad you finally got an assistant. You were too stretched. Everyone else took on an extra hand ages ago. Go easy on her, though Dean. Delegate a lot out to her, but she’s not your slave.”

Dean was about to respond when he felt an insistent push in his head. “Oh, it’s Michael. Give me a sec, Sam. Hey, just pick a newbie to fill out our set for the next round, okay? Do this with me,” he pleaded, letting his eyes go wide and pup-like. Dean stood and walked into the next room, pulling his phone from his pocket as he opened his bond to welcome his mate back. He hit Michael’s speed-dial code. Sam began to type into the computer to finalize the assignments.

“Michael! Buddy! God, I missed you today! Talk to me, man. All finished? Still alive? Oh, hey, I’m sorry I shut you out today. I said I wasn’t going to do that, then I did.” Dean’s nerves came from nowhere and set his mouth into motion. Michael couldn’t get a word in through the line. “Are you pissed at me? I’m really sorry. See, Cas and I had this thing that happened, and you were smack in the middle of fluffing for the first round…”

“DEAN!”
“What?”

“I’m fine. I’m not pissed. I’m tired, and relieved it’s over, and I just want to get home and wrap myself around you.”

“Oh.” Dean rubbed the back of his neck. He could feel Michael’s exasperated amusement, and he felt a little chagrined. “When will you be home?”

“‘Bout ten minutes. We’re on the road now.”

“I’ll be here. And Jess is picking up Chinese takeout tonight in celebration of getting you through the Keller test with minimal bleeding and loss of limbs.” Dean paused. “So, you’re okay? Cas told me about Jody.”

“Can we talk about that in private? I’m not happy about what happened. It shook me up a bit. I’m not proud of myself…at all.” Michael’s voice went quiet, and Dean could practically see his eyes lower.

“Hey, hey…yeah. Whatever you want. I want to hear everything. I’m here for you, Michael. It’s sort of my job now, you know?”

Sam and Dean were both in the kitchen anxiously awaiting their arrival when the garage door opened to admit the three wolves.

“…ot just supposedly impossible, Michael. It’s never been recorded before anywhere. I haven’t even heard anecdotal evidence from the wild packs that a Claim can be made without sexual contact and aggression before.” Cas’ voice was loud, still tempered for the noisy highway. He seemed to be explaining impatiently. Maybe he’d already said it a few times, and was frustrated that Michael just wasn’t getting it. They moved through into the kitchen. Dean stood, and Michael moved into his embrace magnetically. He trembled a little into the hug and rubbed his face along Dean’s throat, scenting him.

Dean raised a brow at Cas over Michael’s shoulder. “He did it again?”

Cas held up a small flash drive, offering it to Dean. Dean lunged for it, pulling Michael off-balance, but they both recovered.

“He didn’t just Claim without aggression, Dean. This time, it appears he did it without touching.”

“I don’t know what the big deal is.” Michael pulled away from Dean, but kept an arm around his waist. “I did that all the time before I met Dean. Maybe it’s just an O/D thing that y’all don’t know about because you’ve never seen O/D’s before.”

“So, we’re calling you ‘Odie’ now?” Dean snarked quietly into Michael’s ear. “Like the dog in Garfield?”

“Don’t you fucking dare, Winchester.” Michael said darkly, gripping Dean’s ass in threat. Dean snickered, but Michael’s eyes remained dark, somewhat lost.

“Oh, and he Released himself as well.” Cas said it casually, leaning into the counter and wrapping April up from behind in his arms. She fit perfectly just below his chin.

“Go put the video on, and we’ll talk it through. I’ve got my notes, so I should be able to pinpoint the different significant moments.” Cas hugged April, and then released her. “Go get changed and get to the piano. You need at least an hour of practice before dinner,” Cas told her. It took him a moment to register her hesitation.

“April?”

“I’m staying to watch the video too. And then I need a bath. That asshole Saleem wiped his jizz on my leg again today, and I didn’t get a chance to clean it off.”

“You can wipe yourself down in the bathroom when you change clothes, and then you’re going to the Conservatory to practice. Do I need to follow up with alpha Jo about what’s going on in her class?” Cas was speaking carefully, calmly. He didn’t like issuing instructions twice, but his mate still wasn’t moving.

April faced him, her face a stubborn block. “No, Sir. I want to watch the video with the rest of you. I’ll practice after dinner.”

Cas blinked at her, and then turned around to pull a water glass out of the cabinet above his head. April glanced back at Dean with her bottom lip between her teeth, and she winked at him. Oh, fuck! Oh no! She thought she was taking Dean’s advice. This was April’s version of playful bratting? Fuck. The kid had no instincts at all. Cas was playing it cool, but that didn’t mean the small Omega wasn’t about to find her ass glowing. Dean stepped up and tugged her to him.

“Go on, little girl. I’ll watch it again with you later. You’re not missing anything. Go get your practice in. You’ve been working so hard.” Dean tugged her toward the doorway, and he used the fierceness of his eyes to try to communicate ‘Danger, Will Robinson! Abort, abort!’ but April pulled back away, shaking her head.

“No. I’m sick of being treated like a puppy all the time! I’m a member of this pack too!” She crossed her arms, and seemed to be resisting the iconic tantrum-foot-stamp with great effort.

Cas filled the glass with water and took a long drink, leaning against the sink. He didn’t say anything yet, but he calmly set his glass down and then added three marks to the whiteboard on the wall. “Stay out of it, Dean.” Cas needed to think. He could feel April’s nerves in his head. She was pulling something that he didn’t understand, and while she would need a correction, how he couched it would depend on what she was really up to. He had heard Dean’s words, but hadn’t seen the desperate interaction of his eyes.

“Can you clarify something for me, April? I seem to be confused. Since when did your membership in the pack come into question, and how is that relevant to what you’ve been instructed to do?” Cas let his eyes go cold, raised his chin, and drenched his mate in stony disapproval. She faltered just a little, glancing between Castiel and Dean rapidly. “Um, I just thought I could stay and be a part of everything for once. There’s time after dinner for me to practice. Can’t I? Just this once? It’s Michael’s test. I want to hear too. May I please stay?”

“Interesting. Had you put it like that in the first place, I might have agreed, although I don’t know what you mean by ‘for once’. You have been present for every significant event we’ve enjoyed as a pack. However.” Cas finally moved toward his mate slowly, and she sucked in a breath but didn’t back away. “Since you were blatantly disobedient, the answer remains no. In addition, you’ll be
punished before you go.” He took her chin in his hand and forced her to look up at him. “What’s this all about, Kitten? This isn’t like you.”

Dean tried another interference, pulling Castiel’s eyes away from boring into the Omega’s. “Come on, man. She wasn’t trying to be disobedient. She just wants to stay with you a bit longer.” Dean felt crappy for putting the girl up to this. It wasn’t what he meant for her to do, but he felt responsible. “April, you didn’t mean it like that, did you?” Dean slowly shook his head to encourage her to play along. Maybe they could still get her out of it.

“I don’t understand,” she said miserably to Dean around the hold of her Alpha’s grip. “You said he would like it if I was a little bit bratty. I’ve been trying to do what you said, but he hates it, and I always get in trouble. What am I doing wrong? You said it would be fun.”

Well, fuck.

“Dean?” Cas released April and turned his Alpha look on the Submissive. Dean took a step back.

“It’s not what it sounds like Cas. I didn’t mean for her to do stuff like this. It’s a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding? Did you suggest to my mate that it would be fun to disobey me? A simple yes or no will suffice.” Sam was on his feet now, reacting unconsciously to the tension in the air, and Michael stood wide-eyed and straight. Dean could sense him running through a variety of options about how to respond. Maybe the Alpha would think Michael wasn’t doing his job keeping Dean in line.

“Not like that,” Dean deferred. “I meant while you’re playing. You know, the way I do when you want some reason to let the big dog hunt during a scene. Not like this. Not during the daytime and stuff. I didn’t mean for her to do this. You’re jumping to conclusions. I was trying to mentor her on how to pull the good stuff out of your Dominant. You know…”

“Are you under the impression that my mate isn’t already receiving the ‘good stuff’ as you call it? Is our sex-life any of your business?” Castiel crossed his arms across his chest. How did they keep ending up back here again? Cas wanted to focus on Michael tonight. He had another long edging session planned after dinner with April, but he didn’t want her to know about it yet. Somehow, Dean’s brat had thrown a wrench into the works again. He looked into Dean’s green eyes, trying to understand where his mind was.

“Sir, may I speak with you alone?” Michael broke in. Cas turned to the Omega, ready to bite his head off for the interruption, but the look in Michael’s eye brought him back to earth.

“Of course.” Cas turned to the two Subs. “Stay here, Dean. We aren’t finished with this yet. April, get your ass upstairs and change your clothes. Then come right back to the kitchen. You’re both in hot water. I will return in a few minutes.” He practically stalked out the door. “Coming Michael?” he hollered over his shoulder.

“Michael?” Dean tried. “What are you going to say to him?” Michael cast Dean a withering look and followed the Alpha. “Michael?”

In the empty that remained, Sam cleared his throat and twitched his head toward the door, reminding April she was supposed to be moving. She threw her bag angrily onto the counter and left in a huff.

“What was that all about?” Sam asked. “You just really in need of an ass-strapping? I mean, I’ve been here all day. We could’ve taken care of that at any point this afternoon.”

“Don’t start, Sam. I’m ‘bout to have two Doms on my ass. I don’t need a third.” Dean dropped into a
chair and fiddled unhappily with the flash drive in his hand. “Here,” he said holding it out to Sam. “Why don’t you do something useful and go get this cued up in the game room. We won’t be long.”

Sam took it from him and nodded. “I’ve still got some work I need to finish up anyway. You do pick some shitty times to get into trouble. Can’t believe you told her that. What were you thinking?”

“Mind your own business, beta.” Dean tucked his head into his arms to escape Sam’s bitchface, and Sam left. It was as if a puppet-master held Dean’s strings these days, and he couldn’t get enough traction going for any length of time to stay up front. Something kept sucking him back down deep under. He knew why he had made that suggestion to the young Ozzie, but he didn’t know anymore whether it would be useful or not. Was he staying? Dean’s head spun so fast these days, he couldn’t tell anything for sure anymore.

“All right, Michael. I’m listening.” Castiel turned on the Omega without closing the parlor door. Michael rubbed his face. He didn’t really know what he was doing.

“Look, Sir, it may be an unusual request, but I want to ask you to…uh…spank me instead of Dean.” Castiel rolled his eyes and moved toward the door.

“Request denied,” he said sharply.

“Wait. Sir, please. It’s my fault he’s acting like this. You put his balance in my hands, and I’m not keeping him there. It’s my fault. Punish me, not him. I’ll do better, Alpha. I promise.” Michael entreated Cas with wide green, imploring eyes.

“Dean’s trying to protect April, and you’re protecting Dean. Is Sam going to step in next and try to save your skin? At what point would each of you take responsibility for yourselves if I allowed you to step in front of the strap for each other?” Cas faced Michael squarely, and it was a question Michael couldn’t answer. “You’re wasting my time, Michael. I thought you had something relevant to tell me. This? This is just a deflection. I won’t be played by my Subs conspiring behind my back. I’ve worked very hard to get April where I wanted her, and he’s just casually stepped in and fucked up months of work. That’s not okay with me, Michael, no matter what drove him to do it.”

“Sir, I’m really worried about you two and your…relationship. Truth is, I like it here. I like my life now and the role I play in this pack. I want to keep it. It seems like you and Dean never get a chance to just be together as husbands because you always have to keep stepping up as his Alpha and his Dom. Please let me take more of that. I fucked up and let him get off-balance again. We’ve been pushing me the other way for a couple of weeks now, and I think we stumbled out of our balance point. Give me a chance to get us back upright. I won’t let you down. I want your marriage to work. It’s for purely selfish reasons at this point, I know, but you aren’t going to get there if you have to keep putting him back down all the time. This is my fault. Please reprimand me, and let me deal with Dean. Please, sir?”

Cas frowned at him. It wasn’t the same request Michael had made initially. Back then, it was ‘keep your grimy hands off my mate’. Now it was more, ‘let me take some of your burden so you can have a different relationship with your spouse-to-be’. It was categorically different, but it was the same end.
“I appreciate the offer, Michael, and I’ll accept to some degree. Take all the actions you need to to keep Dean balanced, but this incident needs my involvement. He sabotaged my mate, and he did it intentionally. I take that as a personal affront. I AM going to spank him for it.”

“You don’t believe him when he said he meant for her only to do it at playtime? Doesn’t that change things a little bit? I mean, if it’s true?” Michael didn’t really know why he was so desperate to save Dean’s ass, but he was.

“It changes nothing. I have no desire to see a bratty side of April. She’s spoiled, and we’re working on that, but she’s compliant in the bedroom, and that’s exactly how I want her. Dean’s got no business trying to change that. And you have no business interfering in his consequences. Are we through here?”

“Yes, Alpha. I guess so.” Michael gave up. For as reasonable as Castiel could be most of the time, he was immovable when it came down to his Subs.

April was back in the kitchen when the Dominants approached. The Subs were seated at the table on opposite sides, and Cas could hear them arguing before he even turned the corner.

“I never said you should do it in a way that would piss him off, April. I said the opposite, in fact. I said DON’T piss him off. I said to play with him, not blatantly defy the man. God, I can’t believe you did that. I can’t believe you dragged me into it.”

“Why not? It’s your fault. Do you know how many spankings I’ve had in the last couple of weeks over your shitty advice?”

“I never told you to do that! I’m supposed to be the brat here, and even I don’t do that. Do you ever hear me say, ‘Nope, Alpha, go screw yourself. I don’t feel like obeying you right now’?”

“Enough,” Cas broke between them as he came in and found that Sam was gone. “Don’t turn on each other. You’re both at fault here. And for future reference, I don’t have a problem if the two of you want to compare notes. I appreciate that you might enjoy a certain camaraderie between you, but each of you is to take direction about your behavior for me as my Submissives from me alone. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Alpha.” It came to him in stereo.

“April, if I wanted you to misbehave, you would have known it by now. Dean, you are already perfectly trained for me, but that doesn’t mean I desire the same behavior from her. You each give me something different, and I value you both. There’s no need for either of you to change into something you’re not in an effort to please me. As always, as Submissives, ask for what you want, and tell me what you like, but do as you’re told when you’re told. No back-talk. No arguing. Do you both understand?”

“Yes, Alpha.” They felt like school children in the Principal’s office.

“Michael, do you understand as well?”

“Who me? Why me?”

“Because you are Omega, and the rules apply to you too.”

“I guess.”
“You guess?” Castiel arched his signature brow.

“Well, so…I mean those rules sound mostly like bedroom rules to me, and we’re not sleeping together. What part of that applies to me?” Michael was still near the door. He felt safer there. He also felt like tugging back a little bit. It had been a long, trying day, and Michael had an itch under his skin that he didn’t try to identify.

“It’s about obedience and hierarchies. This is a traditional Pack discipline household, Michael. These are not just bedroom rules. You are to follow my instructions, or face consequences for failing to do so. The rules apply in the bedroom, at The Facility, around the house; they also apply in terms of your position as Pack Manager. Defy me in that role, and I’ll deal with you this same way. I’ve not seen alarming behavior from you in some time, and I thank you for that…” Dean mimicked Cas silently, ‘I thank you for that’, with a sarcastic expression, assuming the Alpha couldn’t see him, but Castiel snapped his fingers sharply in Dean’s face, and he stopped, pressing his lips together. “But right now is a perfect moment to reiterate expectations. You are part of this matrix, Omega. Do you understand?”

“I mean, so, if I screw up the budget, I’ll get a spanking?”

“Once I’m sure you understand your job and have demonstrated to me that you’re competent, yes, you will be held accountable to perform it correctly.” Cas was so cool in his delivery that a chill ran up Michael’s spine. Michael nodded solemnly. He felt a tingle wash outward from the center of his spine. It felt nice.

He didn’t understand why he felt a rush from the conversation he was having, but he pushed a bit further, wanting to know how much he could get out of it. “Would this be a good time to ask for something I want or tell you what I like? I like sleeping as a pack at night. I want more of that. All four of us in a bed together…maybe a little groping at night, maybe some hand-jobs under the covers? I could sleep really well that way.” Dean and April gaped at Michael. Had he lost his mind? This was so not the time for a request like that, and it would only serve to irritate the Alpha who was obviously trying to lead them all through this round of consequences with a minimum of fuss. It had to be a deliberate provocation, but why?

Cas ran a hand down his face, and he sighed. “Thank you for telling me that, Michael. I will consider your request. I know that you and April both seem to sleep better together when your mates are away than you do separately. I’d like to focus on the bigger picture right now though. Would you mind too terribly if we got back to the issues at hand?”

Michael was alarmed suddenly. “You knew about that? About April and me sharing a bed? It’s only happened a few times. I didn’t invite her, Alpha. I didn’t. She just came in in the middle of the night. I didn’t fuck her, I swear. We just cuddled…I mean, I comforted her. Am I?...Am I in trouble for that?”

Cas tried to hide his laughter by closing his eyes and covering his face with a hand until he could control his expression. He suspected Michael had no idea how his flip-flopping between austere, confident Dom and intimidated Omega endeared him to the Alpha. Cas needed to get a grip.

“Yes, of course I know about it. You’ll never be in trouble for taking care of one of our pack members when they need you. No, I don’t mind if you sleep Omega-style when you’re on your own. Just don’t touch her sexually, and you’ll be fine.”

Michael took a relieved breath, but he immediately thought of another point and voiced it before he had a chance to weigh the dangers.
“Thank you, Sir. But…I wanted to ask, I guess I don’t understand. Why can’t I fuck her, exactly? I mean, she’s kind of annoying, and I’m not saying I want to, but she’s here, and she’s pack. Would it be so terrible if we just…? I mean, I’m sharing my mate with you. Seems only fair you did the same. I won’t knock her up.”

Dean was on his feet between the two Doms in an instant, his arms out to Castiel’s wolf in supplication, his back to Michael. “He didn’t mean it Alpha. I’ll talk to him. Give me ten minutes alone with him, and I’ll make sure he understands. Michael, goddammit, shut the fuck up. Whatever you think you’re doing, stop it! You remember that wolf who made you shit your pants? He’s still in there, you moron, and you just flipped him off. The fuck is wrong with you?”

Castiel’s eyes were red as he took in the scene in his kitchen. Blatant disobedience and defiance from one of them, manipulation and scheming from another, and the third…God protect the third one if Castiel got hold of him before he muzzled the wolf. He’d lost control, and his upper lip twitched as he vowed to get it back. He didn’t find Michael cute anymore. The Omega was obviously begging to be lined up in the firing range with the other two. Castiel didn’t know why, but if that’s what he wanted, that’s what he would get.

“No one touches my mate but me, Omega. If you need it spelled out more clearly, that scar on her neck says, ‘Property of the Alpha’. DO. NOT. TOUCH. HER!”

Michael shook out the cobwebs and dusted his smart-mouth off. “I tried that with you about my mate, and you told me to fuck myself. Why…”

“Because I said so!” Castiel was shaking. “I’m the Alpha, and you’ll follow my rules. I’m going to drive that point home for you because I don’t appreciate your smart-assed tone, and you’re evidently not listening to me. All three of you, line up and face the wall. Side by side. THAT WALL. MOVE!”

April and Dean scrambled, standing side-by-side. Michael sauntered, frowning. He couldn’t figure out what he was doing, but he couldn’t stop doing it now that he’d started. It had been weeks since Michael felt a need to poke at the Alpha’s authority. He wasn’t interested in fucking April. She was a mosquito buzzing around his head, always looking for a stroke from him, a gentle touch, needing him to fetch her something or take care of something. His wolf had taken her in at sight. She was pack, and that meant she was his to care for, but Michael hadn’t even considered pursuing her. It wasn’t because she was Castiel’s. It was because she wasn’t his type at all. She was submissive enough, but so milk-toast compliant that she made him vaguely nauseated. Michael faced the wall beside Dean, avoiding the probing nudges from his mate through the bond.

This evening went off the rails so fast.

“Shoes off. Socks off. Shirts off. Pants off. I want all of you in nothing but your underwear.” April and Dean both blushed and dropped their pants to reveal neither was wearing any underwear. Cas shook his head at the two peas-in-a-pod. Michael noticed too, and he rolled his eyes.

“First thing’s first. Dean, do you owe your mate anything based upon your own rules with him?” Cas paced behind the three miscreants.

“You mean am I planning to spank him for being disrespectful to you?” Dean looked back over his shoulder.

“That’s what I mean, yes.”

“Oh, um, yes, Sir. He knows better, and I promised him that I would. I guess I figured to just let you take care of this one, though.”
“Think again, alpha. Michael walked in that door needing you to take him over your knee, and if you’d been paying attention, he wouldn’t be here right now like this. Now, take his belt out of his pants, and take care of your mate!”

“What?! That’s totally unfair! I take care of my mate, Castiel.”

“You know what’s unfair, Dean? What’s unfair is that Michael couldn’t get you to do it, so he had to pull me into it. THAT’s unfair.”

“He just Released! He doesn’t need it. Shit. Strap him if you want to, but I’m not seeing it.”

“Dean turned back to the wall. April sniffled.

“There is more to caring for an Omega than Releasing him on schedule, Dean. He needs this, and he needs it from you. Do it. And do it right. We’ll wait.” Cas stepped back to lean against the kitchen table, crossing his arms again. April looked down the line at Michael, her hands clasped behind her back. At least she wasn’t at the piano right now playing that God-awful piece again.

“What do you need from me, Michael?” Dean said it very quietly. It was for Michael only. “Is he right? Did I miss it? You’ve been right there in that headspace for days now. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Michael didn’t look at him. “I nearly raped a woman today, alpha.” Michael could tell Dean was about to remind him that he would’ve been stopped before it happened. “It doesn’t matter if they would’ve pulled me out in time, I was right there, intending to do it. Dean, I have to pay for that.”

Michael’s hands began to rub over his ass in anticipation and anxiety. There it was. Castiel was right. Had been right all along. It didn’t make Dean feel any warmer toward Cas though.

“All right. I hear you. Here’s what I’m going to do.” Dean bent down and tugged Michael’s belt free, and then he worked the Omega’s boxer briefs down his legs. “The hand strokes are for the disrespect you showed to Castiel. You remember we agreed to a rule about that?” Michael nodded. “Then the first ten strokes of the belt are for deliberately tweaking him into spanking you instead of just telling me. The last twenty are just for you. Take from them whatever you need. If you feel like you owe something for what happened with Jody today, that’s what they’re for.” Dean looked daggers at Castiel, but Cas just watched stoically. This was supposed to happen in private, not in the middle of the fucking kitchen.

Dean didn’t ask him if he was ready, he just waited for Michael to settle against the wall on his elbows, hands clasped, and he spanked him across the full expanse of his backside with a hardened hand. Dean kept it fairly short, but powerful, and Michael took it without flinching or crying out.

The first blow of the belt made him grunt and resettled against the wall as his pink ass immediately developed a thick line across it. Dean strapped him hard, at a slow pace, leaning into it and counting in his head. After ten, Michael was panting and moaning quietly, his cheeks and the backs of his thighs clenched. Dean felt ridiculous applying a stiff punishment while naked and awaiting his own turn, but he had known within a week of Mating Michael that a strange event like this was bound to happen. He fully expected Cas to turn Michael onto him next.

Dean let Michael re-set. He ran a light hand across the hot red flesh to soothe him. “You didn’t do anything wrong in your test today, Michael. Your angst is misplaced. You aren’t a monkey, and you don’t live by their rules anymore. You live by mine, and I say you didn’t do anything wrong. Jody knew what she was getting into, and you did what they told you to do. Let it go, Omega. Go ahead and take the pain, and just let it go. Hear me?” Dean stepped back into place as Michael nodded. A teardrop broke free from the tip of his nose, but he made no sound.
“Count them out loud.”

Dean struck hard – harder than before. He knew from experience that a sense of guilt from within was much more powerful than any that someone else tried to lay on you, and Michael’s needed purging.

“ONE!” April shifted uncomfortably, the smell of Omega slick wafted into the kitchen. She had her eyes closed. Dean swung again. “TWO!”

He moved quickly to get through the count and to make sure the sting built up without failing in Michael’s body. Michael’s count kept up, but by nineteen, his thighs were trembling, and his body was red and sweating. Dean threw down the last stroke, waited until Michael cried out, “Twenty!” and then he dropped the belt, and crowded up close to his mate, rubbing his ass for him and kissing his neck.

Castiel gave them a minute or two to cuddle and whisper, and then he broke in. “Back into place, Dean. That’s just step one. For the next phase, Michael. Do you owe your mate anything for his behavior that came to light this evening?”

“No Sir,” Michael responded with confidence, although his voice was muffled from his stuffy sinuses. “Dean didn’t break any rules of mine. He accounts to me for his behavior only when it’s not covered by someone else in the pack. You told me you intend to spank him, and that meets my requirements. We’re square, Sir.” Dean leaned into his mate from his place on the wall. Now he really felt like shit. Michael was going to get it twice, and Dean only once. Michael leaned back, running his scruffy cheek over Dean’s head to reassure his mate that he held no grudges.

“Very well. Moving on. April, are you aroused, Kitten?”

April squirmed uncomfortably. “Yes, Alpha. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Let me help you a little.” Cas unfastened his pants, and freed his cock, stroking himself to hardness as he approached his mate. “You don’t get to come this week, so now is a perfect time to add a teasing kicker to your punishment. Widen your stance, please, and lean into the wall.” Cas pressed up against her from behind and sank into her channel. April moaned and angled her hips to thrust her ass out for him. He put his lips over her Mating-bite, but didn’t bite down, and he tweaked both nipples as he fucked into her slowly.

“Moan for me Omega,” he encouraged, kissing along her shoulders and neck. “Be a good girl, like I taught you, and forget everything you were told about defying me. I don’t like it, Kitten; not from you. I told you that the day I Claimed you, and it’s been true since then. It’s not going to change. Does that feel good?” Cas moved in a serpentine wave over her, pressed up close against her back. “You want more of this?” She nodded vigorously and matched the rhythm of his hips. “You’re going to tell me when you’re close to coming, aren’t you, good girl?” He tweaked a nipple harder and she gasped.

“Yes, Alpha. Oh please. Please let me come. Fuck that feels good. Please knot me. I’ll be so good for you. I’ll never defy you again. Fuck. I wanna… I’m gonna! Alpha! I need to come! Oh, FUCK!”

Cas pulled out and away, leaving her panting and whimpering, her body still in motion against nothing. She pressed a clenched fist into the wall, and closed her eyes.

“You don’t get to come, April. I keep my promises to you, and I always will. Go get your slipper. Run and hurry back.” She wailed in frustration, but she did as he instructed. “Dean, you too. I want you back here with your hairbrush. Take Michael and explain what I want. He has two minutes to
select something. You don’t need to wait for him. Go.” Cas began methodically removing his clothing, not bothering to watch the three miscreants remove themselves from where their Alpha had them penned.

Dean took Michael’s hand and pulled him out of the kitchen without a backward glance. “Think of something that you own and you will continue to use for its intended purpose, but that can be used for…you know.” Climbing up the stairs together, they allowed April to dash back past, clutching her slipper.

“My belt? I guess.” Michael was rubbing a hand over his own ass absently.

“He likes it to be something special, not a belt. What else have you got? Be careful though. Once you present it to him, he’s not going to let you change it.” Dean opened the door to the room they shared. “Hey, are you all right? Look, I don’t know what happened back there. It all went sideways so fast. Are you pissed at me? I should’ve tried harder to avoid it.”

Michael shoved Dean up against the wall and plundered his mouth, digging deeply with his tongue and pressing their hips together. “Does it feel like I’m pissed at you?” Michael ground his erection into Dean’s hip, and Dean groaned, feeling himself start to fill up alongside his mate. “Want you, alpha. Want your knot. Want it right now.” Michael thrust into Dean’s groin, and Dean was lost to the sensation as his mate seemed to be both of his designations at once.

“Can’t…We can’t Michael. Not yet.” Dean reached out and pulled Michael’s head in to kiss him again brutally. The smell of slick that Dean assumed was all April had followed them. Now that he was concentrating on his mate, he could feel Michael’s arousal in his head. “Gotta go back down.”

“Going down sounds like a great idea.” Michael reached between them and stroked his mate.

“What the…? God, please. That feels… Shit. No. You have to stop. Stop, Michael.” Dean pushed him away. “What’s gotten into you? First, you’re all weird and wanting to talk to Cas in private. I thought you were about to spill the beans. Honestly. Then you goad him into a punishment for no apparent reason, then ask me for one that you don’t deserve, and now you’re all hot and horny. Christ, what happened to you today?”

“Okay then, so not my belt.” Michael stood in the middle of the room for a moment, then dug idly through his dresser. “Oh, I know. How about my shower brush? It’s heavy and wooden. I think the handle’s strong enough. The back is really flat. Will that work?” Michael was in the restroom, calling back out to Dean.

“Um, yeah. That’ll do.” Dean was getting dizzy with the rapid switching in Michael’s state.

“You need to grab yours too, so we can go back down. Wouldn’t wanna miss out now, would we?” His erection hadn’t flagged. It bobbed up and down as he walked, striking his stomach occasionally. He also had a tell-tale streak of wetness forming between his thighs. Dean turned and pulled the brush from its home in the top drawer of his dresser.

“Seriously. Omega! Look at me! Are you all right? You’re starting to freak me out.” Dean held his brush, but he refused to let Michael pass him.

“I’m fine, Dean. I really get it now. I felt like so much shit after the Bridge with Jody, and I was ready to just soldier past it like I always do, but then when you strapped me, fuck, it worked! It fucking worked. My ass is on fire, but I feel so much better. I’m not even embarrassed about what I did or being strapped for it. I can’t even tell you. Never had that happen like that before, not even after I’ve been here with you. Not like that. I’m ready now to finish it up. I’ll even bend over if he
wants me to, I’m actually excited about this.” Michael was giddy, and he pulled Dean out of the room behind him.

“You’ve lost your fucking mind, man. Who are you and what have you done with my mate?”

April was in place facing the wall with her slipper in her hands behind her back. Castiel was leaning naked against the kitchen table, and Jess was just pushing through the door with two large bags in her hands and her briefcase clutched between her teeth. When he spotted her, Cas jumped up and took hold of the case and led her in to unburden herself.

“Thanks for bringing dinner. It smells delicious.” Cas helped her begin to unpack a little.

“No problem, Alpha. It’s a big day. I remember when I did the…Oh. Am I interrupting?” Jess noticed the charged air and all the bare skin. Dean was pointing Michael back into place before taking his own. None of them looked at the beta or acknowledged her presence.

“Just clearing up a little bit of business before we eat. We won’t be long. Sam’s in the house somewhere, I believe.” Cas kissed her cheek in thanks and welcome and then went back to his unruly pack.

“Should I go find him?” Jess looked uncomfortable.

“Suit yourself, beta. Stay and watch if you like. It might be a good idea to get a feel for our version on Pack discipline.”

“Um, no thanks. I’ll just go see if I can find Sam.” Jess left the food still mostly packed up and headed past the three and into the hallway in haste. Michael snickered.

Cas smacked his lips. “All right. Back to business. You two took longer than I allowed by, oh let’s see, about five minutes. Michael had an excuse, but I told you to come right back, Dean. I’ll add on to your total for keeping us waiting.” Cas turned Dean’s head and examined his swollen lips. “You spent that extra five minutes kissing? Really?”

“Sorry, Alpha.” Dean wanted to lean in and kiss Cas too. Fully awakened to the erotic sensation of “Punishment Barbie Castiel,” Dean was hard and horny now too. Thanks to Michael.

“You’re not a bit sorry, Dean.” Cas casually ran two of his fingers through the slick beneath April’s ass and plunged them into Dean’s hole without a by-your-leave. “You get the same instruction that she got. You’re going to tell me when you’re close. I’m not going to make you come, but you are going to stay hard the whole time you’re taking your punishment. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir! Oh fuck!” This is a punishment? Dean ground his ass backward onto Castiel’s fingers and shared the feeling with his mate.

“Eyes on the wall, Omegas!” Cas put them back in place and focused back on Dean, rubbing fiercely over his prostate and sending electric volts through to his toes. It was too much, and Dean had always been a quick builder. Cas had a hand around Dean’s belly to hold the far hip still as he drove a third finger in roughly.

“I’m close, Alpha. So fucking close…oh fuck, please!” Cas pulled his fingers out and fed them to Dean who slobbered on them messily in effort to suck them clean.

“Good boy. Well done, Pet. I’ll come back to you in a minute.” Cas stepped up behind Michael and
looked at his swollen, striped ass and the streaks of slick now running in thick rivulets down his inner thighs and the back of his knees. “You too?” the Alpha nearly whispered when he realized all three of them were turned on ready to burst. “Dean, permission to fondle your mate? Oh, hell, permission to fuck your mate?” Cas took hold of Michael’s left hip and pressed his right shoulder to bend him into leaning on the wall and presenting his ass.

“Michael?” Dean croaked. “It’s your call, man. He won’t if I say no, but I’m leaving it up to you.”

Michael whined and buried his face in his arms. He heard Sam and Jess come back in, talking softly. “…really should go ahead and watch. I want you to see how it goes in this pack. I have no doubt it’ll be you someday for some infraction or other. Sit right there, and stay there. Eyes on the action. I’ll answer your questions later.” Sam settled them both in. Castiel ignored them. He had his chest against Michael’s back and was licking obscenely along his ear awaiting Michael’s response.

Cas breathed out a very quiet, “Good boy” and buried his cock slowly in Michael’s channel. The couple groaned in unison, and Dean and April both breathed a quiet mimic as the bonds all lit up at once. “Don’t come, Michael. It’s still a punishment, and I’m going to light your ass back up when I’m through here. This is for me, not for you. Don’t come.”

Michael gripped the long handle of his shower brush in his teeth and whimpered in distress as the heat built in his belly. Cas fucked him deep and sweet, striking against his prostate, pulling the Omega’s hips back against him. He reached a hand around Michael and stroked his cock which was dripping pre-come by this point. Jess whispered furiously behind him, but Michael didn’t care about anything except holding his orgasm off just a little longer so he could hold onto this feeling.

“SIR! STOP! I’m…oh Jesus FUCK!” Michael painted the wall with his come as Cas caught on and pulled away from him, leaving him bereft for the last few pulses. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

“Shhh. I’ll be right back to collect your debt, Omega.” Cas left him with a pop to the ass on top of the bright red damage that was already there, and Michael yelped.

Still hard, still well-lubed on Michael’s slick, Cas drove his cock deep into Dean. “So fucking good for me, aren’t you Pet? You shared your mate with me, and he wanted it. I’m the luckiest Alpha in the world.” Cas pounded into Dean for a few moments. Dean struggled to keep his ass stuck out away from the wall with the force. He squeezed his eyes, pushed back with his arms, and gritted his teeth. It hurt. He loved it when it hurt to take Cas’ cock. As big around as a soda can up near the base before the bulge of his knot, Castiel’s girth was enough to frighten many young Omegas, but it made Dean’s mouth water. Apparently, it did the same for Michael who was still gyrating his hips as he watched out of the corner of his eye.

“Tell your mate why I get to fuck him, and I get to fuck you, and no one but me gets to fuck April. Tell him, Dean! Look at him, and take your pounding and tell him!” Cas barely let up. Dean had to struggle to turn his head without losing his positioning.

“He’s the Alpha, Michael. You’re Omega, and he’s Alpha. He owns you. I’m his…fiancé, and his Submissive. He owns me too. No one but the Alpha owns April. We don’t get to touch her unless he tells us to. Fucking-rights run downhill, man. That’s all I can tell you.” His voice jumped and pulsed with the movement, but he got it all out. “MMMMM! Alpha, yeah! Fuck! FUCK!”

Cas pumped in harder as his knot swelled. He didn’t press it in. “Don’t come, Dean! Show your untrained Omega mate how it’s done. Take it, and don’t you dare come!” Cas let it all wash over him: the power, the physical sensation, the heat, the eyes on his back, the smells, the acquiescence,
and it pushed him over the top. He came with a shout and then he clamped down onto his place on Dean’s shoulder where his mark belonged. Claiming Dean was such a regular occurrence, that neither wolf registered as it renewed once again.

“Oh, good! Chinese take-out!” Gabriel wandered in, but picked up the pace when he spotted the food and began to dig into the bags, looking for orange chicken.

Cas chuckled at his brother around the grip of his teeth. Dean’s head rested against his. Dean was breathing hard, trying to hold himself together. He could do this. He wanted to come so bad, but he’d been told not to by his Dom. Michael watched him reverently, and Dean let the knowledge that they both thought he was a good boy soothe him back to earth.

“Such a good boy,” Cas crooned at him. Over his shoulder, the Alpha called, “Save me some cashew chicken!”

Cas stepped back, letting his cock pull free and enjoying the gape of Dean’s asshole. All three of them were a mess, and it was all due to Castiel and his attentions. Now it was time to turn some asses red.

“That was fun. Thank you. Go ahead and eat, folks. Don’t wait for us. We’ll finish up quickly now.” Gabe had the food transferred to the table where he and Sam were digging through the options. Jess sat frozen in place, her eyes still on Dean’s hole which hadn’t yet closed up. It had started weeping thick ropes of white fluid. Her cheeks were flushed and her pupils blown. Sam stopped digging through the food as he caught on. In no time, she was bare and seated on his lap. His cargo pants at his knees and his cock buried in her pussy. He whispered sternly to her, and she startled, whined, beginning to move on his lap and reach for food at the same time.

“Hand those to me,” Cas directed, reaching for their spanking implements from them one-by-one. He laid the two he knew on the table and carefully inspected Michael’s selection, swinging it, trying to bend it, striking his inner arm hard with it. Satisfied at last, Cas nodded and laid it down with the others.

“Why did I do that just now? Anyone? You’re all in trouble with me, but instead of just punishing you, I pleasured you first. Any ideas why?”

“Because you can?” offered Jess.

“Ah ha! Three points to the gallery. Yes, indeed. Because I can. I am your Alpha!” Cas walked past each of the three and smacked them four times with his hand. “I decide when Omegas practice their audition pieces. I decide how my Submissives are to behave for me. I decide whether ANYONE fucks my mate. I decide. And if I feel like fucking you…any of you…then I’ll do it, because I am Alpha. Is any of that still confusing to you three?”

“No Alpha,” came from the wall in a chorus.

“You in the gallery? Any confusion over here?”

“No Alpha.” It was chorused from the table as well. “Do you want duck sauce, Alpha?”

“Yes, Gabriel. Please save me some duck sauce and an egg roll. Thank you.” Cas turned back to the wall. Michael’s erection had faded with his orgasm, but Dean and April were still miserably aroused and squirming. “Hands on the wall. Push those asses out. Fucking PRESENT!” They all jumped to obey.

Castiel picked up Michael’s brush first. He positioned himself and rubbed the bristled side over
Michael’s ass. Michael moaned and pressed into it. At the height of Michael’s moan, Cas spun the brush, whipped it back, and brought it down with a resounding crack beneath the curve of Michael’s ass, right in the middle. Slick spattered outward. Michael cried out in a sound he would forever deny was a squeal, and he tucked his hips under.

“Ass back out, Omega. Spread your feet apart. I’m aiming for the tender places that your mate avoids when he spanks you.” Michael complied, but Cas kicked his feet even further. “Bend down more and let me in. I’m not aiming for your boys, so don’t move.” Michael lowered his body, bending at the waist. He turned his head to look at Dean and left their bond wide open. He could feel Dean’s trust and worry; trust in the Alpha and his methods, worry that it would be too much for Michael. Michael winked at him, but immediately shut his eyes as the brush came down again, right on his sit spots. Fuck, that man could wield a shower brush!

Cas growled as Michael tucked under again. He man-handled him back out and then began a heavy barrage into every tender place Michael had. It was a rain of fire, burning him from below, and he danced on the spot, trying hard to stay still, but unable to do it. He grunted and yelped, squealing again every now and then. Finally, the blows stopped. Castiel panted behind him.

“Ten more for coming against explicit instruction, and ten for stopping upstairs to make out with your mate when I told you to hurry. Say ‘Yes, Sir!’”

“yessir,” Michael mumbled. Cas took a moment to marvel at the difference between this Michael and the one who had Topped four wolves in his test today. Michael was a miracle on two legs, and Cas was elated at him, for him.

Cas massaged his right shoulder and then choked up a little on the brush and delivered the promised blows as hard as he felt safe to do. Michael howled, tucked under, and brought a hand around to cover himself. One blow from the brush to his knuckles sent that hand right back where it belonged, and in no time, it was over.

Cas turned the Omega around and kissed his face, wiping his tears with his thumbs and praising him roundly. Cas took Michael’s hand in his and used it to soothe the man’s pained butt. “You did so good, Sweetheart. It’s all over now. Get a sponge and clean up your mess off the wall, then go and sit down. Get some dinner. Lean on Sam if you want. I’m proud of you, and I’m not angry. You’re forgiven. We’ll talk more about it tomorrow. I know this was something new for you, and I need to be sure you understand.”

Michael nodded, leaning into the Alpha for the peace and security his touch offered before whispering, “Yes, Alpha. Thank you, Sir,” and stumbling to the sink for a damp sponge. The splooge washed off easily, then Michael stuttered to where Sam held out an arm to welcome him in close. Gabriel got up and dug through the discarded clothing. He collected what mostly looked Michaelish and dropped it all in his lap, ruffling the man’s hair in passing. Michael just held it all in his lap.

He leaned into Sam’s side and enjoyed the feeling of their movement as Jess continued to rock back onto her mate’s dick. She had begun to sweat into it, and she kept her eyes on Cas. Sam didn’t seem to mind at all. He took the plate Gabriel offered him and started serving Michael’s dinner, letting Jess do all the work. Every now and then, Sam grunted softly. Michael admired his stamina.

Cas picked up April’s slipper, bent it in half a couple of times, and set his feet, placing a hand on her back and pushing her into position. “I feel like you started this whole snowball rolling tonight, my dear. It was a straightforward instruction, wasn’t it?” She hummed at him, but she knew a rhetorical question when she heard one. “I spanked you only two nights ago for failing to follow simple directions, and I thought you understood where I stand on the matter, but I was wrong. Tell me,
Omega, what did I say would happen to you the next time you refused a legitimate instruction from a superior?” Cas tapped the slipper against her ass over and over again, just little taps; enough to awaken the blood right under the skin, but not enough to hurt at all.

“You said I’d get another spanking and another two weeks of you doing my enema again.”

“That’s exactly what we’ll be doing then. I always keep my promises. So, listen closely. If I have to revisit this issue again with you in the next two months, you’ll go over my knee, you’ll go into chastity for two weeks, and I’ll administer two enemas every day for a month. I’m not fucking around, April. Whatever you thought this was about, fucking stop it. Any questions?”

“No Sir.” She sniffled against the wall.

“Ass out for me, Kitten.” She complied wordlessly, presenting her dripping hole to her Alpha and everyone at the table. Jess groaned as she pressed down onto her mate’s lap. Michael lowered his head and watched through his lashes. It was what pornos tried to be, and it was fucking hard to watch. Impossible not to watch. Dean squirmed against the wall, bending his knees a little and rubbing his face against his folded arms. His erection looked painful.

“When we’re through here. Get dressed and get your sore ass to the Conservatory. You owe me an hour of practice before you eat.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“ASS OUT!”

April hyper-flexed her knees and bowed her back, starting to whimper before he’d even hit her. Castiel used the rubber sole of her slipper to build a solid sting in just two spots, on the underside of either cheek, alternating back and forth very hard and very fast. She began to cry almost immediately, but didn’t move her body or her hands. Her ass turned pink, then red, then the skin began to tear a little. Cas growled into his work. The others couldn’t see the interplay between them inside their bonds. He glori ed at her immediate and full submission, and she stood in awe of his power.

The growling may have sounded aggressive, but it was affectionate. He wanted to take a bite out of that blazing ass, carry her upstairs, knot her, pet her, and fill her up with squirming pups. Cas doubled the speed for the last few rounds, his biceps burning, and she kicked up her right foot in the adorable way she always did when overwhelmed. Cas flung the slipper away and wrapped himself around his mate, kissing her all over her face.

He rocked her in place and rubbed her ass. She hissed. She squirmed. “Do you think I like to punish you, Omega? You think I want to do that to you?”

She giggled through her slowing tears. “Yes, Sir. You love it!”

“That’s right. I do. I love it, so keep that in mind. I’ll take any opportunity you throw out there, and that’s a promise.”

“My Alpha always keeps his promises.” She snuggled in and wiped the moisture from her face on his shirt.

“HEY!” He jumped back in jest, pretending to be disgusted. They had found their balance between them, and it let them both revel in the after-effects of the endorphins coursing through their bodies. It made them both giddy.
“Fuck, SAM! I’m close. Touch me, Baby, please! I need to come!” Jess slammed herself down on his cock, using the edge of the table for leverage. Sam didn’t. He continued to eat and watch her as if uninterested, but when she gave up on him and put her own fingers to work, her climax triggered his. He closed his eyes and grabbed her hips, holding her down tight while he shot hot come into her.

Meanwhile, back at the wall, April was dressing, and Castiel had Dean’s brush in his hands. He brushed Dean’s hair for him lovingly. Dean moved into the brush, closing his eyes in wonder at how having Cas hold it could make the sensation so much better. It didn’t feel like that when Dean did it.

“Enjoying yourself?” Castiel teased. April kissed his lips gently, waved to the table and slipped out.

“Mmm-hmm,” Dean hummed distractedly.

WHACK!

“I mean, Yes Alpha! God, I’m sorry! Yes, Alpha!”

“Dean, do you need a lecture from me about what you did or why you’re in this position?”

“I fucked up, sir. Please set me straight.” Dean’s ass was already in full presentation, his legs quivering with how long he had stood there leaning into the wall, Castiel’s spunk dribbling down his legs.

“Mmm-hmm,” Cas mimicked him and set right to work. Cas whacked him all over his backside with the brush, stopping every now and then to rub the bristles over the red flesh. It went on and on. Sam, Jess, and Gabe finished up their meal, but they stayed on as Michael ate what he could. Dean’s deep voice was a staccato series of grunts and yelps. In a baritone, it sounded all the louder. He didn’t move a muscle, though. Michael watched his butt blister and change color, turning purple as the bruises formed deep inside the tissue of his muscles.

It was so hard to believe they didn’t have a Mating-bond between them. The level of trust on display was impossible to grasp. Dean didn’t fucking move, and Castiel never hesitated in the power or placement of his strokes. Somehow, they both knew when it was over. Even before he lowered his hand after the last stroke, Cas felt Dean’s muscles begin to give out. He reached out and eased Dean to the floor.

“…was incredible, Cas…” Dean mumbled, high on endorphins and adrenalin. Michael hurried over, working his way beneath Dean’s slumping chest and letting his mate put all of his weight on the Omega. Michael’s backside throbbed with bruising of its own, but he wasn’t an alpha, and he hadn’t had near the punishment Dean did.

“How do you know how much to give us all?” Michael asked him, genuinely curious.

“Years of practice, training and research, and a good solid gut-feeling,” Cas explained, holding on to Michael’s scruffy neck like a pup. He looked into Michael’s eyes. “Are you all right now?”

“Yes, Alpha. I’m fine. I’m very tired though. I don’t want to watch the video tonight. Can we do it tomorrow instead?”

“Get Dean fed and bathed and tucked into bed. We’ll do everything else tomorrow.” Cas kissed his forehead and checked on Dean. Dean was lost in Subspace.

“Sir, I’ve eaten. I’ll sit with him while you get some dinner.” Michael kept a hand running through Dean’s hair.
“I’m not leaving him just yet, Omega. I’m really not that hungry anyway.” Cas settled on the floor next to Michael and rubbed Dean’s back tenderly.

“Well if you two jokers aren’t going to watch it, you mind if I do?” Gabe asked cheekily. Michael noticed that Sam and Jess both looked interested as well.

“Knock yourselves out,” Michael muttered. He didn’t care. Except for Jody, Michael’s wolf was damned proud of the day’s work he’d done. And of course, the wolf had never been ashamed of its run-in with Jody either. It was Michael – Michael in his authentic human self who had been appalled, but that Michael didn’t care if they saw him fuck four wolves either. Michael laid his head on Castiel’s chest, held onto his mate, listened to the complicated strains of piano wafting in from the far side of the house and let all of his care go.

“Hey, Babe?” Dean muttered, barely audible. His voice was gruff from shouting again. “Did’ja Top Raphael?”

“Yes, Dean. I did.”

“That’s my boy.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't know what made me think I could fit that into an intro. When have I ever been able to shorten anything?
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Dean gets the skinny on Michael's test, and then Michael gets a good hard look inside Dean's demons. Also, the Omega and the Alpha clear the air a little, but they don't quite see eye-to-eye.

Chapter Notes

Second of two, as promised. I feel like this one gets deeper into where their heads are. They're finally really talking to each other, but that only shows them how far from shore they've drifted. There may be no way to paddle back in against the riptides.

WHAT?!?! On a Wednesday? WTH? Yeah, my work schedule is all kinds of fucked up now, so I'll be posting sort of randomly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 45 – Tuesday, June 20, 2017

NOW:

“You’re not listening to me! I don’t have a fucking Daddy-kink!” Michael threw one of the apple slices from his breakfast plate across the couch and hit Dean squarely in the forehead. Dean just laughed.

“Oh, hey, after I get home from school today, can we go out back and play catch?”

“I’ll fucking take you out back, young man, if you really want me to! Knock it off!” Michael balanced his plate on his legs and continued to grumble. Dean just snickered happily and refocused on the TV screen.

Unable to resist the call of the video, they both mutually slipped out of bed at 4:00 in the morning, put together a hasty plate of finger foods and crept quietly to the game room where Sam had mounted Castiel’s recording into the side of the monitor and left it there.

Fred found them on his usual 4:30 rounds, and he delivered coffee to them shortly after, refreshing their depleted and cooled cups. “You’re a Godsend, my friend,” Dean gushed as the butler topped off his cup. “Hey, Fred, did you see any of this last night? Is my mate hot, or what?”

“Yes, on both counts, alpha Winchester. I’m happy to agree with you about his attributes. Coffee, Omega? Can I get you anything else?”

“Thanks, Fred.” Michael held out his cup. “Don’t bother about us. I know you have more important
things to be doing this early. We’ll take care of ourselves from here.”

“Very good, Omega. I will see you at 9:00 for our schedule review. And, sir, if I may be so bold, I enjoyed very much watching you work. It was extremely…stimulating.” Fred blushed, eyeing the screen where Dean had it paused at Garth tonguing Adam while Michael’s hands froze on Garth’s hips.

“No jizz-stains on the carpet, Fred, you dirty old man!” Dean called back to him, the butler already in the doorway.

“No, Sir. I clean up after myself. Please have a good morning, gentlemen.”

Dean smiled radiantly at Michael, but he grunted as he shifted further up onto his hip to sip the hot drink.

Michael sighed. “It’s not MY kink, Dean. It’s Adam’s. I played it that way so I could see how deep he would let me take him on a first meeting. Evidently, that’s pretty fucking deep.”

“I’ll say. Garth’s got half his tongue up the boy’s asshole, and Garth’s not even part of the panel. But you’re not answering the question. How did you know he would respond that way? Adam, I mean. Were you just going to throw out random kinks until you hit on one he liked? Got lucky on the first swing?”

Michael looked down at his plate and began to slowly peel the skin off a grape. “It wasn’t a guess. I can tell what people want – Subs especially. I can kinda smell it on them. It’s in the eyes and the scent. Well, I mean, there’s a little bit of feeling it out right at first, but I know what I’m looking for, and I know the instant I hit the target. Daddy-kink has a kind of signature body positioning, and Adam was classic. I suspected it the minute I saw him. That’s why I started out with ‘Son,’ and he fell right in line. Hit every marker right on the head.” Michael was blushing and didn’t look up to meet Dean’s eye.

“And the beta? Where did he fit in?”

“That was me. I really do have a size-kink, Dean. I would have loved to watch Adam take an alpha cock, but I didn’t want an alpha in the room for this. Thought it would throw off my test. That scrappy dude is pretty hung for such a little guy. I liked him a lot. Start it back up again. You know this guy?”

Dean hit play, and the action jolted back into movement. Dean’s cock twitched on his thigh. “Yeah, you’ve met Garth. He’s a good friend. He was at Sam and Jess’ after-Mating party. He brought the beer. Didn’t know he had a Use-and-abuse kink though. I’m not sure that’s listed in his profile, but it’s public knowledge now, isn’t it?” Dean’s eyes glazed over as he watched his mate take the two Subs apart in neat, quick little slices.

“Did I just Out someone?” Michael asked, startled.

“It’s fine, man. It’s part of the world we live in. Keller testers know going in that all kinds of embarrassing shit can happen. I can’t believe they let you tie him up. That’s got ‘Cas’ written all over it. So, where’s the point that you slipped a Claim over him? I’m not seeing it. Is it before or after Garth came in?”

Michael glanced up at the screen from his plate. “It’s not a full Claim until I fuck him at the end, but there’s this thing that always happens when somebody rolls for me; when they completely roll. It’s like an endorphin rush in my body. It, uh…back it up a bit. Before the beta, just before I went stupid
and started shouting into the mirror, I think. Adam was already tied, and I had played with him a little. I asked him if he trusted me. You remember that part? Yeah, I think it was right when he answered me. Shit, yes, play that bit again. Watch. There’s this little shiver that goes down my body…you see it? It’s right there.”

Michael talked it through, Dean played the section over and over again. Michael’s voice was clear on the recording: “…if I’m fast enough, no one would be able to stop me before I hurt you. Do you trust me? Do you?” Followed by, “Yes, Daddy. You’re not going to hurt me. I trust you.” Adam’s eyes were wide open and transparent in his need. Adam wasn’t playing tester anymore, he was lost in the moment, and Dean suspected that Michael had just imprinted himself a little pet duckling. They were going to be shooing the Ozzie off the porch every morning.

True to his description, Michael’s body shivered onscreen. Dean kept the playback moving, but he muted the sound to keep himself from getting distracted while he watched carefully for the signs. Sure enough, Adam’s body moved in sync with Michael’s in an unconscious mirror of the Dominant, even when Adam’s eyes weren’t on the man who controlled him.

As Garth appeared in the scene, Dean noted the differences. Garth responded sexually. He was hard. His pupils were huge. His cheeks were flushed, and his breathing shallow and rapid. He wasn’t mirroring though. Garth was a prop, which evidently suited the beta just fine. Dean turned the sound back on and watched his friend turn into putty for the Omega-Dom, all the more so when Michael turned harsher in his words or manhandled him into position.

“So, at what point did the Claim solidify? I haven’t seen anything like this before.”

“At the end, when I fucked him. I’m telling you, Dean. It goes this way for me all the time.” Michael watched himself, his own cheeks beginning to flush, and his penis rising slowly over his bare belly there on the couch. They watched it play out in silence. Dean stretched and set his plate on the coffee table, and after a moment, Michael did too.

Dean groaned when Michael sucked Adam’s slick straight out of Garth’s mouth. They lost quite a bit in the exchange, and it dripped off both of their chins.

“Fuck, Baby. Can I? Come on, please. Just this once?” Dean’s hand hovered over his dick which twitched as if trying to stretch up into his hold.

Michael arched an eyebrow at him. “No.”

“Michael.”

“Here, sit in the middle, and I’ll ride you. We can keep watching that way.” Michael shoved Dean’s feet off his lap.

“I’m too sore for sitting. Ass hurts, man,” Dean whined.

“It’s this or nothing.” Michael was stroking himself slowly, his eyes still on the screen where he had just mounted the beta, driving into him to get to the Omega up on his knees. Dean grimaced and reconsidered whether his Omega mate needed a ‘No touching’ rule of his own, but he carefully shifted upright into a sitting position in the center of the couch. The leather tugged at his swollen skin, and he hissed.

Michael smiled at him and stood up to get in place. He faced the screen and lowered himself slowly onto his mate’s lap, reaching around to hold his alpha’s cock upright. Dean pulled each of Michael’s legs out and over his own knees, spreading him wide open so that Dean could snake a hand in
between their thighs to rub gently over the rim where his own cock disappeared into the Omega’s body. They both moaned and rolled a little before Michael stilled.

“Eyes on the screen, alpha. We don’t have a lot of time to get through this.” Michael wrapped his own hand around himself and stroked lazily, not looking for completion yet while Dean kept pressure on his perineum and rim. Dean watched his mate finalize his Claim over the Ozzie while ignoring the panting, sated beta. Yep, no one could begin to doubt that Michael owned that pert ass. All he would have to do is snap his fingers at Adam from now on, and the Omega would instantly present, begging.

Statistical data rolled up the screen like credits, a record of the readings obtained from the various instruments. Dean paused the video at a couple of key points to check on the numbers he was most interested in. Michael didn’t ask him what he was looking for. Michael didn’t care.

The Bridging round began, and Dean watched his mate’s dark side come out. Knowing that he hadn’t gone through with the intangible threat his wolf threw down made all the difference to Dean. He sympathized with Michael, but it didn’t mean that he wasn’t turned on by the power of the wolf in that room. Dean poked at it with his mind, and received a sharp growling reprimand from the wolf inside his mate. It made him whimper and thrust up into Michael’s channel.

If the amount of slick leaking out was any indication, the Omega had well and truly released his guilt over the scene and was now able to enjoy it for the pure porn that it had become. The end of the scene was anticlimactic, with both participants dimming their wolves and finishing up just for the readings, but Dean watched through to the end.

“How do you guys, your researchers, ever get through these videos without dehydrating yourselves?” Michael asked as he shifted his weight forward onto his hands braced against Dean’s knees and rocked up and back on the large cock up his channel.

Dean laughed, which pulled a delicious squawk from Michael at the vibrations. “It’s difficult sometimes. Most of the videos are fairly mundane, and they’ve seen a lot of fucking. It’s not that it gets old, exactly, but eventually, you learn to look past the eroticism of what you’re watching and focus on the people you’re there to rate. Yours, Michael, is going to raise a lot of eyebrows and fill up a lot of spank-banks out there. Everyone’s going to watch it. You know that, right? The Keller Institute owns the videos, and they can use them for research all they want. It’s part of the statement of custody you signed when you applied for the test.”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t care who sees it. It’s not like having a doctor shoving a probe up my ass to figure out what makes me tick. I’m not crazy about that idea, but once the video is out there, they can do whatever they want with it.”

Dean paused the video again, stopping it in the middle of the Bridge statistics. “About that. Your psych Eval is tomorrow. There’s going to be a full physical exam as part of that, and they’ll be doing an arousal study too. It ties the behaviors they observed from your Keller test to the way they see your brain light up under different scenarios they’ll be showing on a screen. You’re, uh, going to have a probe up your ass for that. Actually, it’s mounted on the base of a chair and you have to sit down on this uncomfortable metal dildo that has no give at all and always seems to be colder than body temp. I hate that fucking chair.”

“Well, great. Sounds like just the thing to get me aroused. How does the test work if it’s so uncomfortable? Doesn’t it kill the mood and negate the readings?”

“I asked Pam that once, and she just laughed at me and said no. Apparently, your reptile brain and your parasympathetic whatever don’t care if you’re uncomfortable. They respond anyway.”
“Parasympathetic whatever? What kind of a doctor are you, anyway?” Michael teased, and Dean pinched his rim. He soothed his mate immediately with a few deep thrusts that had Michael holding tight to Dean’s arms. It shut him up, though.

“Ready?” Dean asked, holding the remote up to start into the Anchor round.

“Hit it,” Michael confirmed. “I have to warn you, Dean. I don’t know if he’s a friend of yours, but I was a bit of a prick to Raphael. I had him Topped from the start. I could feel it, but he didn’t roll right away, and that pissed me off.”

“What did you do?” Dean hit play, and reviewed the last of the data points scrolling past.

“You’ll see. It’s not bad. I just made it really clear from early on that there wasn’t any need for a fight. I wanted it on record that we both felt it right away. I get fucking sick of pretentious asshole alphas who think they own everybody.” Michael was barely moving on Dean as he talked about it, waiting until the action started.

Castiel spoke up from the doorway. “Raphael is a good man, Michael. He’s not pretentious. He was doing his job. He knows we need enough data points to get some wide readings, so he deliberately stretched it out for us. He wasn’t doing it to be a jerk or deny your dominance.” Dean and Michael both craned their necks to see him, and he moved in to sit on the couch beside them dressed in his bathrobe. The sound of piano music sneaked into the room behind him.

“Good morning, Alpha,” greeted Michael, lifting up to Cas’ prying fingers so the Alpha could get a look at the damage to his ass. It wasn’t bad. It would be back to normal in a couple of days. Cas patted his ass to let him know he could lower back down onto his mate’s cock.

“Morning, Michael. Sleep well?” They had slept as a pack again last night, and Cas had to admit, it felt good.

“I did, Sir. Thank you.”

“Dean?” Cas leaned in and kissed Dean hard enough to slick and swell his lips a little. Michael took the remote and pushed Pause again.

“Mmmmph!” explained Dean, rutting up. Cas dug in deep with his tongue, morning breath be damned. Finally breaking off the kiss, if you could call that assault a kiss, Dean greeted the Alpha. “Morning, man. Stay and watch with us. One more round to go. I thought you said he Released himself. I didn’t see any signs of that. Ooh, I saw the Claim though. That was incredible! My mate is a God!”

Cas laughed and patted the side of his thigh. “Yes, he is. Just like you are. I love this fucking pack. Keep watching, Dean. He Releases over Raphael, just as he’s coming. I need to study it some more. There may be something from the alpha that we missed, something that triggered the Release externally, but I haven’t seen anything yet that indicates it was anything but masturbatory.”

“You made that word up, Dude. That’s totally not a word.” Dean pushed play and settled his hands down on Michael’s hips.

“Turn the volume up, Dean,” Michael instructed. “I’m going to be doing some whispering, and I want to see if the mics picked it up.”

“10-4,” Dean replied, notching it up several pegs.

Dean chuckled at Michael’s nerve as he took first claim of the bed and then ‘come-hithered’ the
alpha to him. Raphael tried to save face, but it was clear through their eyes and their body language that they both knew where this was going.

Michael played with the alpha, kissing him and flipping him more for show than to claim a relative position, and Dean felt for the alpha. This was humiliating for any Dominant, but knowing just how many people would see his degradation over the next several years had Dean shaking his head.

“Poor Raphe. Sucks to be him right now. I feel for the guy.”

“He could’ve just rolled, Dean. Then I wouldn’t have been such a jerk. They said to follow my wolf, and this is what the wolf wanted.” The fact that Michael himself liked it too didn’t need to be said out loud. Michael enjoyed matching the pace of his hips above Dean to the pace at which his screen self took ownership of the alpha. He closed his eyes, pulled his lips tight, and shot several ropey spurts of come over Dean’s thigh, aiming to keep it on flesh where it would wipe off easily.

Dean moaned at the clenching in Michael’s channel. He moved forward for leverage and space, and finished up with a brutal pounding up into his mate, ignoring the screen Michael who was blowing his load and Releasing himself. Dean’s arms crisscrossing Michael’s mid-section, he grunted as he filled Michael’s channel, only realizing as he spilled, that he’d just injected fertile sperm into his fertile mate’s womb. Dean froze, then sank quietly back onto the couch, panting shallowly. Michael caught on and soothed his mate with a caress to his thighs.

Castiel picked up the remote and backed the video back to the point where he figured the two had lost focus. Cas handed the remote to Michael, patted his leg, and stood up. “I’ll go get breakfast for April and myself. You two let me know if you have any questions about this round. We’ll be talking about it more later anyway.”

He collected their dirty plates and coffee mugs and left the room.

“He knows,” said Dean. “Fuck, I can smell it myself. I don’t know why I didn’t think about our scents. We smell ripe as hell.” He let his head fall back on the couch. “Off, Michael. You’re sitting on my knot. Hurts.” Dean shoved his mate sideways, then he stood up, groaning as he engaged swollen muscles and peeled his sweaty skin off the couch. “I’m going to get a shower.”

Michael followed him. “He hasn’t said anything. You think he’s known for a while?”

“Fuck if I know, but he’s got a really good nose. Shit, he keeps asking me if I’m planning anything or doing anything under the table. He knows. I’m sure of it.” Dean ran a hand through his hair and pushed into their bedroom and on into the bathroom to start the water running. He couldn’t get the scent off him fast enough. He felt dirty. He felt his betrayal stab him in the chest. Dean stepped into the water as soon as it was flowing despite the chilling temperature.

“Fuck,” whispered Michael who had little choice but to follow him. Dean was dropping fast. Michael reached around him and adjusted the knobs on both sprayers to a reasonable temperature and turned Dean so that the cold water didn’t hit him directly. He wrapped his arms around his mate from behind and covered his broad back with his body.

“It’s okay, Dean. It’s still part of the plan. We knew he was going to find out eventually, but if he’s known for a while and not said anything, maybe we just keep up pretenses a bit longer. Whatever you want to do. It’s fine. Hey, I’m here with you. Keep your bond open and feel me there. I’m in love with you, man, because you’re perfect. You’re perfect for me and for him both.”

The water reached it’s setpoint, and Michael walked Dean underneath the sprayer, holding tightly to him, rubbing the soreness in his ass to remind Dean that Cas thinks him valuable enough to exhaust
his arm, drip with sweat, and mark his whole backside for his own. To a Dominant wolf, Dean’s ass was a gold crown, a perfectly framed portrait of valued Claim. Dean was loved, cherished, desired, owned. Michael fed all of that to him without words, steadying his breath so Dean had a grounding rhythm to cling to and mirror.

They stayed under the spray until Dean nodded into Michael’s neck. He turned around to embrace his Omega chest-to-chest and marveled again at how well they fit. “Did I just knock you up?”

Michael huffed. “Doubt it. It’s hard to get pregnant outside of Heat. I’m still two or three weeks away from that.” Michael squirted shampoo into his palm and began to wash Dean’s hair and his own, soaping each to a lather with the same foamy hands. “If you did, I’m keeping it. I hope you realize that.”

“Uh, yeah. I think I got the memo that you want a pup, like yesterday.” Dean leaned his head back into the spray as Michael tugged on his hair. Michael was relieved to feel Dean find his equilibrium again, and he rinsed the soap out of his own hair too.

Dean took a deep breath and straightened up after cleaning Michael’s legs. “I don’t really understand it either. I keep trying to figure out how to talk to him, you know, just be straight about what I’m feeling, but something stops me every damn time.”

“Just start with something small for me, Dean.” Michael crouched down to work on Dean’s legs. He stayed low while they talked, making himself small for the alpha. “Do you love Cas?”

“With all my heart, Michael. I’ve been totally gone on that guy since I was 19 years old.” Dean’s voice was muffled and it echoed, distorting the sound, but Michael heard every word. He tried not to let it bother him, but it was hard. He needed to do this though. For Dean.

“And do you believe that he loves you just as much?”

“I…I mean, I’m sure he does. He’s done so much for me. He’s given up all kinds of shit just to be with me. He dragged my ass back from Texas. He…” Dean began to tremble. “I don’t know, Michael. I don’t know. I can’t figure it out. I want to be able to see it and weigh it and put it in a fucking lead-lined box where I can lock it up and always know it’s there, safe. What if he doesn’t? What if he used to, but now I’m just this guy who takes a Dom-fucking well, who bruises up real good the way he wants? How do I know if he loves me enough?”

“Jesus, Baby. Is that where you keep going? That’s it, isn’t it? You think he’s leading you on. You think he’s going to dump you before the wedding? That’s why you want the Omega Claim at the wedding. It’s something sacred that he can’t disavow later. I knew you were torn up over something, but I thought it was something you two were fighting about or…hell, I don’t know. Dean, Babe. Castiel loves you like nothing I’ve ever seen before. You are his whole goddamned world. How can
you not know that? I’ve only been here six weeks, and I know it. Fuck, I caved for it. Like, I hated this whole thing when I met you both, but GOD, you two are so fucking perfect together.”

Michael stood up and crowded in close, letting his body sandwich the flow of hot water into a cascade down Dean’s back. “What’s it going to take for you to believe it?” he whispered. Dean shivered and sniffed.

“I dunno. It’s worse than that, Michael. It’s not just that I don’t believe him. I keep testing him. I go out and do something ludicrous and stupid that I know will piss him off crazy bad just to see how much he’ll take and still want me back. I crashed his fucking car on purpose once. Another time, I broke this dude’s arm in a bar fight, got my face smashed in, and he had to bail me out of jail and take me to the hospital. He sat with me in court and arranged everything.

“He came and found me drunk in a dumpster once back in grad school after I’d missed midterms and I’d just about thrown my whole career into that dumpster too. Once, I went into this total skanky dive, painted my ass with Omega slick and fucking presented myself over the pool table like a ten-dollar whore, there for a free fucking, and he came bursting in, all fire and wrath like a fucking guardian angel and beat the living shit out of everyone who looked like they wanted a piece of me. Then he took me home and beat the living shit outta me too.”

Michael whistled, but he didn’t interrupt. “I’m fucking garbage, man. You got strapped to a big fucking piece of garbage. I know it’s stupid. I know I should just be grateful he still wants me at all, and not worry whether he loves me or not. How many times have I run this stupid game? And he’s always there to pull my ass out, beat it black and blue, and set me on my feet again. How many times should he have to do that? Why does he keep doing it?”

“He keeps doing it because he loves you. You aren’t garbage, Dean. He keeps doing it because your soul is the brightest, most righteous thing any of us have ever seen. You are so beautiful, inside and out. You are so beautiful.” Michael mouthed Dean’s shoulder where his Mating-mark was healing again. He needed to put it back. Michael had eventually caught on to Castiel’s mark. Dean’s shoulder wasn’t going to scar. If it were, Cas would’ve marked him by now after having broken the skin hundreds, literally, hundreds of times. Cas’ newest bite stood red and irritated. Michael made a mental note to doctor it before they got dressed. In fact.

Michael turned off the water and pulled towels in for them both. Dean had gone quiet and still in his head. He had a mask pulled on, embarrassed at himself for sharing too much and for being so fucking weak. Michael dried himself and watched over Dean as the alpha went through the motions too.

“Dean,” he began tentatively as they left the shower, “are we doing this pup thing as another test? Are you trying to piss him off again? I thought you were just sick of taking his decisions about your life. That’s what you said. You said you didn’t want to be his bitch. Did you lie to me?” Michael hated himself, but he had to ask.

Dean stood naked in the room, his towel falling into a heap at his feet. He was naked in every sense, naked before Michael.

“I have to know,” was all Dean said.

Michael sat down hard on the bed and stared at him. The Omega’s swollen backside protested vigorously, but he ignored it. “I’m out, Dean. I’m not going to be a part of this. I didn’t know. I didn’t know what it was. I can’t do this.” Michael’s face crumpled in pain. “I can’t do this. Fuck! I CAN’T DO THIS!”
“I’m sorry,” Dean whimpered.

Michael dropped his face into his hands, breathing rage in through his nose. He was furious. Furious at Dean for fucking up their good thing just for a stupid reassurance poke, furious at Castiel for letting it go this far (Michael was positive now that Cas knew what they had planned), furious that he was going to have to be the grownup here and halt everything, meaning he wasn’t going to get the pup his body desperately needed.

“You’re sorry?” he said as he lifted his head back up. “Tell me why, Dean. Good people like you don’t just start believing they’re garbage out of the blue. What happened to you? Where did this come from? How do we make it stop?”

“You think I know? Shit, Michael, it didn’t come from anywhere. I’m just not fucking worth the effort any of you people put into me. I destroy everything. I hurt everyone I know, everyone who’s stupid enough to care about me. I’m so fucking sorry! I can’t be anything else. It’s all I am, and it’s shit! I’m so sorry!” Dean grabbed a random set of clothes from his closet and his dresser and bolted out of the room, locking himself in the master bathroom and ignoring Michael’s pounding.

Castiel met Michael on the stairs. “Alpha! Dean’s dropped again. He locked himself in the bathroom, and he won’t open the door.” Castiel hurried along the hallway, following the Omega.

“DEAN! OPEN IT NOW OR I’M BREAKING IT DOWN!” Cas bellowed. Deftly, though, he slipped the simple key out a drawer next to the locked door. Silence met him. April poked her head in, and then crept in to sit on the bed. “ONE!” The lock clicked, and Cas turned the knob, rushing to take Dean in his arms. “Here now. I’m here. It’s not that bad. Shhh.” Cas led him out and set him next to April. Dean had his pants on, but his shirt hung loose in his hand, and his face was a perfect 9-year-old waif, guiltily waiting to be taken over someone’s knee.

Cas sat beside him, April leaned into him, Michael squatted between his knees, and the pack surrounded him with their bodies, circling the wagons to keep the demons out.

“He was telling me about all the crap he’s pulled over the years to get your attention, Sir; to test you, and it was too much. He said…”

“Shh, not yet, Michael. Let’s not hit him with another round yet. Fighting as hard as he does for as long as he does drains him. He’s so fucking strong, but those damn voices always break through eventually, and he shatters. Let’s let him get some duct tape back in place before we hit him anymore.”

“Voices, Sir?” Michael asked. “Like, as in ‘the voices made me do it’?”

“Not that kind of voices. It’s a constant sense of inferiority that he’s had beating at him at least as long as I’ve known him. The voices tear him down again and again. You remember we talked about how fragile he is.” Cas rubbed Dean’s back. Michael nodded.

“He may be fragile,” Dean said gruffly, “but he can still hear you.”

“Apologies, Dean. Are you feeling better?”

“Can we just go to work? I need to think before I fuck anything else up today.” Dean leaned back on his hands and April slid her head down into his lap.
“Michael?” prompted Castiel. “I need your assessment. Pardon me, Dean for overriding you, but Michael’s view of your emotional state is more reliable right now.” Cas directed back to Michael. “Is he in acceptable shape to work?”

“He’s pretty shaken up, but he’s got it all masked again. I’m starting to realize how much he keeps buried deep down. If you’re asking if he’s stable enough, then yeah, he seems almost normal again. I think he’s stable for now. If you’re asking if he’s really okay, then I’d have to say no.”

“What time is your appointment with Pam?” Cas asked the alpha.

“Eight o’clock,” said Dean miserably. He hated the spotlight and the questions, but he soaked in the feel of pack all around him, touching him. Why was he so fucking weak? Weak like a newborn pup to need this much touch. He never saw anyone else pull a blanket of pack over their heads like this and just shake in personal condemnation.

“All right. Go on and get dressed. Michael, bring your laptop and work from Dean’s office today. I want you close to him.”

“Not gonna break, Cas,” Dean grumbled.

“It’s not negotiable, Dean. What’s the first rule of Sub-drop?” Cas stood Dean up and took the shirt out of his hands, pulling it over his head.

“Don’t leave the Sub alone,” Dean responded by rote. “But I’m not dropping. I’m not Sub right now. Maybe I just feel like shit because I fucking AM…”

“DO NOT FINISH THAT SENTENCE!” Cas took Dean’s face in his palms and looked fiercely into his eyes. “You are NOT SHIT, DEAN MICHAEL!”

“Sir, maybe refusing to ever let him say it is part of the problem,” Michael ventured. “Maybe he needs to get it out before he can let it go.”

Cas let go of Dean’s face and sighed deeply, collecting April and patting her back to get her off to her room to dress. “Maybe. I don’t know. I think we need help. God knows I can’t just listen to him talk about himself like that. It’s so fucking wrong! But maybe what’s best for me is hurting Dean. I don’t know.”

“Standing right here, guys!” Dean protested again.

Cas and Michael only glanced at him. “Let’s schedule a family thing with Pam,” Michael suggested. “I want to hear what a professional has to say. I can’t stand to see him tortured like this.”

“Don’t mind me! I’ll just be over here pretending I can’t hear you!” Dean squatted by the door, waiting for them to stop discussing him as if he weren’t there.

“All right. I’ll talk to her today,” Cas agreed. “Get your shoes, Dean. We’re leaving in ten.”

“Oh, were you talking to me?” Dean sassed as Castiel glided out of the room.

“Yes, I was,” he confirmed with a straight face.
“So, did you ever tell Michael about your big name change, Alpha?” Dean asked as he steered the Impala into the parking lot.

“So?” asked Michael from the back seat.

Cas turned halfway in his seat. “I received notification last Friday that I’m officially Alpha Dr. Castiel James Winchester now.”

“Oh. Right. Congratulations. And Novak?”

“I’ve already begun to cull out my letterheads and business cards. I’m going to transition slowly so that it becomes a full shift by the time we marry. Novak will be completely gone by September.”

“What does that do for April and me? Our Mating papers said Novak because you’re Alpha, even though we’ve both been going by Winchester.” As a details guy, Michael needed it spelled out for him, and Cas understood.

“You won’t need any clarifications. You are both Winchesters simply by your place as Omegas in the Winchester Pack. However, a rider will be filed by the state to your original Mating forms that tracks the name change and applies it to each of you personally. For you two, it’s automatic. For my brother, I have to file a stop-motion to prevent the rider so he can stay a Novak.”

“And Naomi?” asked Michael, ever the asshole.

“Naomi can fuck herself,” replied Castiel, stepping out of the car.

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“Have a seat, alpha.” Pam gestured to the couch, and Dean eyed it warily. Was he supposed to lie down? She’d said ‘seat’. At his hesitation, Pam chuckled. “Relax, Dean. I’ll try to make this painless for you. I don’t pull out the electro-shock or hypodermics until the second visit.”

“Very funny.” Dean was still standing near the door. Pam thought for a minute, then sat right down on the floor, and opened a deck of cards she had on the side table next to her couch. Wordlessly, she began to build with them. He watched her put two stories up before they all crashed down flat to the ground.

“You suck at that,” he stated fairly.

“And?” she asked him, not looking up.

“I know what you’re doing.”

“It’s not meant to be a secret, Dean. I’m not manipulating you. I’m just trying to ease you in to a comfortable place so we can talk.”

“So…manipulating me.” Dean was seconds away from walking right back out again. This was a bad idea.

“Call it whatever you want. You just do whatever over there, and keep your commentary about my architecture skills to yourself.” She got three stories standing, but the asshole by the door stomped his foot, and they fell flat again. “Seriously?” she asked him, looking up. “I’m not your enemy.”
“You told me to do whatever. I just kind of felt like stamping my foot. It happens. Don’t you ever get urges you kinda want to act on?” Dean said it before he could stop himself, and he wasn’t surprised that she zeroed in.

“Sometimes. What kind of urges, besides random stamping, do you feel like acting on, Dean?” Pam began patiently to put her cards together again.

“How do you know I’m not just going to knock them down again?” he asked, moving closer.

“I don’t, but I’m not going to let you run me. I run me.”

“Oh-ho! Big life lesson there for me. Nicely done, doc.” Dean sat on the couch.

Pam laughed. “Fuck you, Winchester.” She kicked her foot against his. They were friends, always had been, always would be. She was willing to wait him out. She put two more cards up and watched him surreptitiously. He rubbed the back of his neck and his face, breathing through his nose, working up his nerve.

“Close the bond, Dean. He’ll be fine without you for an hour.”

“How did you know?”

“It’s my job to know. Close the other one too. You’re not as sneaky as you like to believe.”

Dean slid off the couch onto the floor, but grimaced as his ass met hard wood, and he rolled down onto his hip instead.

“Had a big night?” she asked him without looking up.

“Got my ass fucked and beat black and blue for undermining the big dog’s authority with his mate.”

“Oh. That was pretty stupid. What made you do something that dumb?”

Dean sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“Good. I hate simple and shallow. It’s boring. Lay it on me, Winchester, and don’t skip the sticky parts.” Pam stretched out on her belly and the two of them began to build the house of cards from the ground up, talking as they worked.

“Alpha, do you have a few minutes? We need to talk.” Michael had waited until Dean snapped each of their bonds closed one-at-a-time, before edging across the hall and knocking on the Alpha’s office door.

“Come in, Michael. Make yourself comfortable. I’ve got an appointment soon, but I’ll postpone it if you need me to. Do you want to talk about what happened this morning?” Cas stood and rounded his desk to sit on the front edge.

Michael waited for a minute, thinking how best to begin. Finally, he said, “How long have you known?”

Cas blinked. Michael could tell he understood the question. His eyes went immediately alert, wary.

“Known what, Michael?”

Michael pressed his lips together. He wasn’t going to incriminate himself that easily. “That
Halloween is my favorite holiday, Sir.”

Cas laughed outright. “Halloween! Yep. It’s a great holiday! Minimal effort, maximum payout. Fun for all ages, no family visiting angst. I couldn’t agree more.”

Michael pressed. “I can’t wait until we have pups to take trick-or-treating. Won’t be all that long, will it? Just a few more years?” They looked into each other’s eyes solemnly. So much could go wrong. “So, how long have you known?” Michael repeated at last.

Cas wanted to avoid the conversation, but if the Omega was ready to go there, then so was Cas. “Your scents were already changing on the flight from Boston back to Kansas. I suspect you stopped your birth control just before we left for New York, or during the trip.”

“Why didn’t you say anything if you knew?” Michael asked the Alpha stoically.

“Why didn’t you?” Cas’ brows both went up.

Michael frowned. “It’s not much of a subterfuge if we talk about it.”

Cas rubbed his chin. The man had him there. Instead of answering the question though, Castiel asked another one. “Why did you agree to this? Behind my back?”

“Sir, I didn’t agree. I orchestrated. It was my idea. As to why…well, I want a pup. I’ve been waiting for a mate, and now I’ve got one. He’s smart, and funny, and kind, and strong. He works his ass off, he’s beautiful. He loves me. He’s wealthy. I’m not waiting on you to be ready. It’s my body. It’s my mate, and it’s my pup.”

“What about all that about wanting to pull a power trip over me? Was I reading that wrong?” Cas eyed him seriously.

“No, Sir. But that’s just icing on the cake. If you and April beat us to the delivery room, I wouldn’t care, as long as I’m right behind you. I want to be pregnant by the time you get married. I can’t even begin to explain how badly I want that. I don’t really think it’s a want, Sir. I need it. Doesn’t that mean anything?” Michael leaned forward in earnest. Cas was good at reading people, and his sense told him Michael was being as truthful as he’d ever been.

“I believe I’ve made a mistake where your needs are concerned, Omega, and I’m very sorry you had to go through it that way. You’re right. It’s really your choice. I withdraw my objections. If you and your mate feel it’s time, I won’t try to stand in your way.”

“Just like that?” Michael frowned angrily. “You could’ve said that weeks ago and saved us a lot of heartache.”

“It’s not that simple.” Cas objected. “There’s so much more going on than I think you knew about weeks ago. Plus, I maintain that all of my objections are still valid. You are both still acting irrationally. Our pack, our relationships are swinging wildly out of control. Dean’s never been this unstable in his life, at least not since I’ve known him, and I’ve seen him unstable, oh, many times. If you come out of the H/R room pregnant, Omega, we’ll have seven months to pull our shit together. Maybe we can do it, but what if we can’t? You think things are complicated now; add a baby to the mix and watch it get ten times harder.”

“I know all of that, Alpha, and I understand it in my head, but this need…it fucking burns. It’s a bonfire in my belly, and it gets worse with every passing Heat. Now that I’m Mated, God, it’s like being in Heat all the time. I can’t keep shoving it down. It hurts! FUCK! I hate being OMEGA!”
“Shhh, I know. I know.” Cas breathed carefully. It wasn’t fair to ask the man to bear this burden for all of them.

Michael began to rock a little in place. “But what if we have a newborn, and Dean loses his shit again? What if he does something reckless and destructive, and it hurts the pup? How would I be able to live with myself now that I know he does that? I can’t go through with this. Not until I know he’s better!”

“Michael, can you really imagine Dean harming a hair on his pup’s head? Can you?”

Michael stopped rocking and frowned again.

“The reason I let you two stumble your way through this terrible subterfuge is that in the end, I want it just as badly as you do, and I’m convinced that you’ll both make excellent parents. It’s a shitty device to use for the purpose, but it was either going to be this or it was going to be something else. I want this pup. Michael, I want it very badly. I can’t fucking wait for you to make me a Papa…if you’ll…have you thought about it any more? Sharing your pups into our foursome? Letting us all have a paw in the mix?”

Michael looked up at Cas, and a sob broke from his throat. “I…? You…? Do you mean it?”

“Michael, can I?”

It was a strange standoff with both of them seeking permission from the other and neither sure how to answer.

“What do we tell Dean?” Michael asked, wiping an escaped tear from his cheek.

“Tell him the truth. Tell him we’re going to go for it together as a pack.” Cas backtracked when Michael shot him a look. “Well, not all of us will be going for it, exactly. That’ll just be you and Dean. But all of us will be…? Damnit, Michael, I need to know what you’re feeling about this. I’m not going to risk making any assumptions. You have to tell me one way or the other.”

“And your decision to withdraw your objections doesn’t change with my answer? We have your blessing, even if it means that Dean and I are the sole parents?”

“And course.” Cas was trembling internally, but he didn’t let any of it show.

Michael’s eyes were cold and gauging. He took a long time in answering. In all his life, Michael Quentin had never willingly given up any degree of authority over anything. It had only ever been wrested from him by biology or circumstance. He recognized the singular moment of personal definition. Who did Michael want to be, now that it was his choice?

“Sir,” Michael breathed, “I would be honored to co-parent a pack of pups with you and your mate. I draw the line at wet-nursing, though. My pups take my milk, and her pups take hers. Other than that…I guess I’m, um, O-Pop, and you’re Papa.”

Cas beamed at him and stifled the tears that wanted to spring up. Now he just needed to get April lined out. She was trickier than Michael, and it would take a stiffer hand. In the meantime, they still had Dean to contend with; Dean and his tests.

“Thank you, Michael. I want you to know you have my utmost respect. That may sound pompous or cold to you, but…I need to be careful. He’s right on the surface these days, and it’s harder to hold his leash. This pack, all of our plans, they wouldn’t be successful without you. But we have a mountain to climb together, Omega. It’s going to be very hard, and we’ll need to work together, not against
each other.”

“Dean?”

“Dean.”

Cas went back around his desk and pulled two water bottles out of his mini fridge, tossing one to Michael. “Do you understand why Dean went along with your crazy plan?” Cas sat down and leaned way back, stretching out his lean torso. Michael never caught him at it, Dean swore the man was a runner. He definitely had the body for it.

“I only got a hint of that this morning. He lied to me at first. He fed my sense of injustice and fucking played me like a fiddle. I get it now. He lied to us both to keep us moving how he wanted us. And all of it was to set you up? To set up a scenario where he gets you so pissed off that you call off the wedding and throw his ass to the curb? Why? I don’t get it. He WANTS to be here with you. He’s happy here, when he’s not shooting his own foot.” Michael stood up and began to pace, draining his water bottle in three rounds. “Are you going to throw him to the curb?”

“No, I’m not. Not ever, but Michael, we have to be realistic. If Dean’s truly unstable, and not just going through a rough patch, we have to reevaluate if marriage is the best thing for him and me right now. Especially if you two are successful during your Heat, and there’s a baby on the way, we have to make wise choices. How much can we ask of Dean at once? I need you to understand, Michael. Dean fights these demons every moment of every day, whether you see him do it or not. We can’t always tell the effort just from the outcome.”

“What do you mean?” Michael stopped and fixed the Alpha with his eye.

“Imagine a scenario where two trench diggers are given the same shovel and the same length of day. One is set to work high up on the plateau and told to dig down eight feet and stop. The other is set to work in the muddy, silty riverfront. He has the same depth to reach. The first works for an hour and then takes a break. Works some more, and then stops to eat. After the third round, he’s finished. His trench is deep enough, wide enough, clean, smooth and dry, so he turns in his shovel and takes the rest of the day off. The second man never stops digging, not for hours and hours. He works straight through the day, exhausted, parched, famished, and his trench is still only three feet deep because as quickly as he can dig, the silt oozes right back in again. At the end of his shift, ten hours later, he’s fired for failure.” Cas sat well forward, making Michael hear every word. “That’s what I mean. Just because you don’t see any progress doesn’t mean he’s not working his ass off, as you said.”

“What do we do? Is it really that bad?”

“I don’t know. He’s never been like this before, but he’s never had to reconcile the self-loathing at his core with the obvious evidence that he’s valued and loved before, not like this. A wedding kind of makes you stand face-to-face with the idea that someone loves you, in a way that Mating doesn’t. We’re not built for marriage, Michael. I want him so badly, but I don’t know how to make him accept me.” Cas let his head fall into his hands for just a minute.

“Why does anything have to change? Alpha, I still don’t understand why you didn’t just tell us you knew what we were doing? Why pretend you didn’t?” Michael leaned against the wall.

Cas’ computer chirped his next appointment, and he typed a quick note that he would be late.

“Because I’m a selfish fucking bastard, Michael. I’m human, too, and I need to…Shit, how do I say this? No. No, you deserve to understand…” Cas visibly took hold of himself. He looked up at Michael and sighed. “It’s really not that complicated. If we’re going to make a marriage work, be
husbands for each other, and build a strong and stable pack, I can’t be the only one fighting for it. More than that, Michael, God I need you to understand… I NEED to know he’ll fight to keep me at some point, not just always try to throw me away and hope I fight to stay. I need him to show me he needs me at least enough to fight for it. It’s selfish, I know, but this isn’t a Mating-bond. It has to be at least a little balanced or it can’t work. I needed to let him go on and pull whatever stunt he was going to pull and see where it would take him, see if there’s any point along the way where he would be able to put on the brakes and stop himself for me, fight for what he wants.”

“And if he doesn’t? If he can’t? If the silt just keeps flowing back into the hole he built so that it looks like he’s not even trying?” Michael was livid. He was tired of all this shit. Dean yanked his chain, Cas put it all on Dean, Dean was sitting with the shrink right now trying to get his head on right.

“I don’t know. I’m only human, Michael. If I’m going to promise my troth to him, don’t I deserve the same promise? If he can’t do it, do we have any business getting married in the first place?” Cas’ expression bore out the pain in his voice. Michael could tell it was ripping the Alpha in two, but dammit, HE was the one who proposed!

“So, you were going to let us do this? Knowing full well what he was doing?”

“God help me. I was. I can’t tell you how relieved I am that it’s out in the open now, but all this does is shift him on down to the next thing. And I might not see that one coming.”

“What else do I not know that I need to?” Michael left off the honorific this time. He still couldn’t say the man’s name to his face, but Michael would be damned if he was going to give him another ‘Sir’ or ‘Alpha’ after that little speech.

Castiel paused long enough that Michael was sure there was something. “I need to talk to Dean about it first.” Michael rolled his eyes, pivoted, and punched the wall as hard as he could, bloodying his knuckles and putting a hole in the sheetrock.

“Get your fucking shit together, damnit! I trusted you! I put everything into the success of this pack. Don’t you DARE fuck it up, you fucking piece of SHIT!”

Cas was on him in a flash, pressing Michael down to his knees with a hand to the back of his neck. “Be pissed at me all you want, but you’re still going to show me some respect! I am your Alpha, and unless that changes, you DON’T talk to me like that. Do you understand me, OMEGA!? AM I CLEAR?!” It was a deeper voice than usual. That was the wolf talking. He’d slipped the leash and gone on a quick rampage right over Michael’s back. Michael quivered and went slack, submitting in body and mind as he let the rage seep out of him. Castiel held him firmly for about five long breaths, and then he shoved the Omega onto his side and stood upright again, growling at himself for his loss of control. They both waited, not moving, not speaking until the tension level, the hormones they could both smell in the air dissipated. It took a long time. Michael stayed on his side in a fetal position, barely daring to breathe. Cas stood facing the door. He’d put his desk between them and seemed reluctant to change that as he calmed down.

“You’re right, of course,” Castiel finally said without turning around. “You’re all depending on me to do my part, and my part is keeping everyone stable. That means Dean, and that means myself. I feel like it’s getting to the point where I have no choice but to postpone the wedding, maybe call it off entirely. But… I tried letting him go. We both tried, and it nearly destroyed us. Why can’t we just have this?”

Michael sat up slowly onto his butt and leaned against the bookcase behind him. “What’s stopping you? Just Dean and his need to test whether you still love him?”
“He doesn’t trust me, Michael. I don’t know what to do about that.” Cas still wasn’t turning to face the Omega.

“You’re hiding something from us. I don’t know if that’s what you referred to just now that you won’t tell me about until after you tell him. I don’t know if Dean can sense it, but I can. You’re keeping something ugly a secret.” Michael picked at his cuticle, ripping it painfully to the quick in one tug. “How about trying first to BE trustworthy, and then asking for his trust instead of the other way round? I mean, is Dean really the only one who’s made mistakes here?”

Castiel sighed again and rubbed his eyes, squeezing painfully into each socket until he saw stars. “I need to think, Michael. Can you give me a few days to think? I know I’m fucking it all up, but I don’t know what to change. It’s more complicated than I have a right to tell you. Not all of it is mine to tell, and there are people – good people – I need to protect. I need a few days…”

The door opened a little bit and Dean popped a subdued head in. “Oh, there you are. Hey, Cas. Ready for lunch?”

“Dean it’s only 9:15.” Cas checked the clock.

Dean came in and shut the door. “Coffee break then. I feel loads better, and I have some things you need to hear. Both of you. Can we go to Zeke’s? I feel like I need to get out of here for a little bit for this.”

Michael huffed at him. “Dean, Zeke’s isn’t open this early in the morning. Dive bars are kind of PM things.”

“What are you doing on the floor?” Dean asked him, stretching out a hand to pull him up.

“It’s complicated,” Michael told him.

“Yeah, I’ll bet. Come on, you two. This is important. Maurice’s then? Or that coffee shop two blocks down. I’ve got shit to tell you, and I need to spit it out before I lose my nerve.”

“Let’s go, then.” Cas opened the door without changing his computer status and ushered them out into the hallway. He could text Charlie, and she would do it for him. Cas took a deep breath and followed his fiancé and Michael along the corridor toward the turnstile. Dean made a grab for Michael’s hand, and their fingers locked instantly together.

Chapter End Notes

It's like ripping off a band-aid. You knew it needed to happen, but it hurts anyway.

One quick note: I've always been a self-proclaimed grammar-nerd, but I'm realizing as I write, just how hard it is to catch stuff that flies out of my fingers. Like 'past' and 'passed', how am I even getting those mixed up? Seriously? Okay, they drive me crazy, but I don't see them until it's all posted, and I don't always go back and fix them because I want to keep moving forward. Here's the thing - if you see a typo that irritates you, let me know, and I'll fix it. If you don't care, just sail on passed/past them like I'm starting to learn to do. It's a weird kind of growth, but I'm owning it.

Love to all you lovely people!
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

An entire chapter of flashback.

Chapter Notes

Now, before you get mad...I can explain. Those of you who asked for a full scene between these two, you know who you are, I finally got around to it, with one caveat. This is their first time ever, and they need to learn each other, so it's actually very tame by their current standards. In that light, it's really just another tease. Sorry. Couldn't help myself.

By the way, by word count, I think this is my longest chapter ever. Sometimes I just can't stop. Hope you enjoy the verbosity. (Is that a word?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 46 - Intermezzo

THEN:

Dean’s fingertips were cold and there was an annoying buzzing in his ear as he approached the front door to the massive manor house. He had his overnight bag in his hand, but he couldn’t feel his own grip on the leather handle. His breathing felt too shallow and uncertain – like if he forgot to inhale intentionally, his body wouldn’t remember either, and the blue-eyed Alpha would later discover his corpse sprawled on the front walk. A shiver passed across his shoulder blades.

Get a grip, Winchester. You’re an alpha, goddamnit, he chided himself, taking a really deep breath before stepping onto the entrance porch between two marble wolves standing guard. The wolves sat vigil, facing the world, arranged like Chinese lions: the Alpha’s paw resting on a stylized globe, and the bitch with hers rolling her own pup protectively. They bore matching snarls, warning away threats to the pack inside. Dean touched the Alpha’s cold head, and then stroked up its pointed ear before letting another breath out through his nose, closing his eyes for a moment, and then stepping forward to ring the bell.

He was ready. It had taken fucking months to get to this point from the time back in early June when Castiel propositioned him. It had been a hell of a lead in that put every other hookup Dean had ever had to shame. It wasn’t unusual for Dean to take his time, and feel the other guy out with a couple of drinks before agreeing to scene with someone new. He needed to be sure he wasn’t baring himself to
someone who might not be…trustworthy. But this wait of, what? Four months? It had made Dean’s knees quiver to try imagining what the Alpha had planned that took four months of vetting before he would be willing to give it a try between them.

Dean had done everything asked of him though. He couldn’t not. He was now the proud owner of a fully realized Keller report that revealed…oh fucking hell, what it said about Dean. He’d been shocked speechless and had shut himself in his room for three days to process the results, try to find the truth inside the words, try to recognize any semblance of self in the stark description. Was this him? These cold, dry words, did they really get to the heart of what made Dean tick? Was he really…?

He was about to find out.

Castiel had moved so slowly it’d been torture. He wanted everything in place. They had talked endlessly. Cas took Dean out to dinner three times in public places to work out the details. He requested secluded, private tables where they could talk without being overheard. He wanted Dean to feel the safety of having others around, and Dean appreciated the gesture even though it always felt like everyone was staring at them. It felt like everyone knew what they were up to and could read the report that sat in Dean’s house from their places in the restaurant, as if it ran like credits up Dean’s forehead. “Alpha-Submissive…Significant brat tendencies…Predisposition to self-destructive tactics…Profound Submission…Substantial masochism…Possible inability to self-regulate…Deeply empathic…Self-sacrificing to potentially injurious degree.

Where had they come up with that last one? How could they possibly determine Dean’s need to take care of the people he loved by watching him take a couple of dicks up his ass?

He rang the doorbell and waited.

The door opened to a medium sized middle aged Primate man with a balding head, and for a moment, Dean thought he had the wrong house. Then Castiel hurried up behind the man holding the door.

“Dean. Thank you for being on time. This is my butler, Fred. You’ll get to know him over the next few visits, I’m sure.” Cas clapped a hand to Fred’s shoulder and thanked him before ushering Dean in and past. “Fred is a good man, and you can trust him. He’s been with me forever, and he has my full confidence.”

Dean relinquished his bag to Fred uncertainly, but Cas simply nodded and ushered Dean into a formal-looking sitting room to the left of the entrance and set him on a couch. God, Dean was nervous. He knew what was coming. Cas had made him talk through everything twice before showing up today. Cas was adamant about there being no surprises at first. It helped, Dean supposed, that he knew what to expect. If he was this nervous with the whole script in his head, how would he be feeling if he didn’t know anything?

Castiel pressed a tumbler of water into Dean’s hand and then sat down opposite him, far enough away that his scent wasn’t predominant in Dean’s nostrils. Dean kind of regretted that. Cautious was one thing, but he craved the comfort of the confident, protective Alpha all of a sudden. Dean clutched his tumbler in both hands and closed his eyes.

“Look at me, please, Dean.”

The words were a lifeline tossed into the roiling waters of Dean’s drowning mind. His eyes opened and sought, finding the blue color they needed. He took a shaky breath. Castiel seemed to know where he’d gone to, and he left his chair to kneel in front of Dean.
“Don’t be nervous. It’s a big day for both of us, but we’re going to take care of each other as we promised. You can trust me Dean. Do you need a few minutes to settle before I take you in hand, or would you prefer to just let go?” Cas put a hand on Dean’s thigh and stroked him easily. It felt nice. It felt safe.

“I just wanna jump into it, I guess. I’m really nervous. Don’t know why. I trust you, Alpha. I do.” Dean’s voice was shaking with adrenalin. Cas smiled kindly at him. He nodded, patted Dean’s thigh, and stood up.

“Thank you for your trust, Submissive. We’ll get started. Please finish your drink slowly while I talk. Don’t interrupt. If you have any questions, save them for me. I will answer anything you ask me, but I want to finish speaking first.” Dean nodded and sipped his water. His hands still shook a little. Fred was nowhere to be seen. He’d taken Dean’s belongings somewhere deep into the house and disappeared.

“I’m going to keep things simple today, Dean. I will be following the plan we drew up together with no alterations. Consider this a full scene, but also a bit of a test run. I expect complete compliance from you. I expect your full submission, and I expect you to work hard for me. Don’t get lazy and think I’m going to do all of your work. It doesn’t work that way. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha.” Dean took another drink. He held Castiel’s gaze like it was his source of oxygen.

“To reiterate some important points: As my Submissive, you will not tell me ‘no’ except through the use of your safeword. Barring a safeword, you are expected at all times to comply. Sounds simple, doesn’t it?”

Dean nodded. It sounded simple enough. Do what you’re told to do. He could do that.

“Have you selected a safeword yet, Dean?”

Dean liked how often Castiel called him by name. He liked hearing the single syllable roll out of the Alpha’s lips like the chime of a bell. Castiel always said his name with a strange gravity that seemed to make it the most important syllable in whatever sentence he was speaking.

“I don’t plan to use anything, uh, unique, Sir. Can we do traffic light colors? I’m comfortable with that if you are.” Dean took another sip and noted the approval in Castiel’s eyes at his response, or maybe at the pace he was drinking. Whatever it was, it felt good that he was already pleasing his new Dom, and he felt a little bit of tension ease.

“That will be fine, Dean. If you feel like adding one at any point in the future, let me know. It’s important that you have a system you’re comfortable with and that you will use.” Cas lowered his head like he always did when he wanted a particular point to stick. “You WILL use your safewords, won’t you?”

“Oh, um, yes, Sir. I will.” Dean lied to Cas, and he bit his lip. It was a white lie. Cas wasn’t ever going to do anything to Dean that would require him to use a safeword. Dean knew it intrinsically, so in a sense, it wasn’t a lie at all. If the world turned upside-down, and Cas stopped being Cas and did something to Dean that hurt him, Dean felt confident he COULD use one of those words to stop the action. Wasn’t going to happen, but he supposed it could one day. Maybe if Cas had a stroke mid-scene or something.

Cas looked suspicious. “Dean, if I feel that you are allowing actions to be taken upon you that are unsafe, and that you accept them without protest, I will put a stop to all future planned activity between us. You understand that, don’t you? I need to be able to trust that you are keeping watch
over your own safety from a vantage point that I can’t see, from inside your head. Do not allow me to harm you.” Cas quirked up that damned brow and held Dean still with it, waiting for a response.

“I understand, Sir. I won’t let you harm me.” He didn’t feel like this one was a lie. Cas was never going to harm Dean, not because Dean would stop it, but because…Cas was never going to harm Dean.

“Finish your water. Are you hungry?” Cas turned away from him and sat back down on the chair that was too far away.

“No, Sir. I ate a couple of hours ago.” Dean drained his glass.

“Good. I want to remind you quickly that all activities between us are voluntary and consensual on both our parts.” Cas spoke in a very businesslike manner, working through what sounded like a standard list quickly, getting the disclaimers over with so they could play.

“We will be engaging in full, unfettered, sexual congress. I will fuck you bare as often as you’ve agreed to allow. I dislike the use of condoms, and so we’ve both agreed to a minimum of monthly testing, and we’ve agreed to openly share the results of those tests. I am tested much more frequently than that, but I will not require you to follow my rigorous schedule. You, in turn, have promised to seek testing after any new interactions that put you at risk, and to take responsibility for keeping me informed as to the risks to my health and safety. Are we still in agreement?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Have you any new information along those lines to share with me?”

“You mean have I fucked any strangers since we talked two days ago?”

“Watch your tone, Dean. Just answer the question.”

Ah, so that was the dreaded ‘Alpha-face’ Meg talked about. Dean didn’t like that face much at all. He felt very young suddenly. “No, Sir. No new information.”

“Good. Do you have any changes to make in your list of acceptable punishment implements?” Cas still had an authoritative air about him that made Dean squirm.

“No changes, Sir.”

“All right. I’d like to get started. Would you follow me, please?”

Fucking FINALLY! Dean stood up and followed him out of the large, high-ceilinged room, setting his tumbler on a tray near the door as he left. Cas led him through the wide corridor, around two turns and down a half flight of stairs. It felt like they were buried deep in the bowels of the stately home where no one would be able to find him for days if he went missing. Cas turned to him.

“This is my Heat/Rut room. It is sound and scent-proof. It can be locked from either side. It is wired for video, audio, and hormone sensors. It’s stocked with a kitchenette and a full bathroom.” Cas opened the heavy door and preceded Dean into the room. “Any time you or I are Rutting, we will most likely work from here to ensure everyone’s safety. For now, I’m offering you the use of this room as your guest room. I will not be using the monitoring equipment, of course. Your privacy is secure, and I don’t expect you to be making much use of the room anyway. We will most likely be sleeping together next door, but I want you to be comfortable, and I want you to know you have a space of your own while you’re here.”
Dean’s bag was in the middle of the bed. It looked unmolested. Dean walked around the spacious room, noting the ceiling rings and the cabinets along the far wall. “Next door?” he asked, sticking his head into the dark gray marbled bathroom. The tub was padded and had a nozzled sprayer hose. Dean wrinkled his nose.

“Next door is my play room. That’s where we’re going next. Do you need any time to yourself to finish prepping for me?”

“No, Sir. I’m good.” Dean stepped out of the restroom where he’d tested the shower’s water pressure and accidentally doused his head a little.

“You need to use the toilet?”

Dean blushed a pale pink. “Oh, um. Yeah, I should pee, I guess. I had some water before I came in.” Castiel nodded, and stepped into the hallway. “I’ll wait for you here. Please be quick, Dean.”

“Yes. Sir.” Dean closed the bathroom door, feeling like a little boy. It wasn’t an uncomfortable sensation. It happened sometimes to him during some of the really good scenes with experienced Doms, and when he let himself accept the feeling, he liked it. He took care of his bladder quickly, noting that he wasn’t shaking anymore. That made aiming much easier. He shook off, and zipped up. He took another deep grounding breath while he washed his hands, inspecting himself in the mirror. He felt ready. The plug in his ass was comfortable. His eyes had lost their deer-in-the-headlights look. His fingertips felt warm once again. Four months of waiting, wondering, fantasizing, and dreading. Today was the day, and he was ready.

Dean rejoined Cas in the hallway and put his hand into the Alpha’s when Cas held his out.

“This way, Dean.”

The room across the hall was massive. It was clean and bright and…just wow. You could run a whole BDSM nightclub from in here. There was even a bar to one side, which was strange considering Cas had explained to Dean that he never allowed alcohol while they played. Cas saw him frowning at it and chuckled. “That’s a holdover from when this room was a den, of sorts. I don’t really use it, but I can’t keep Fred from stocking it. I guess he figures, where there’s a bar, there should be booze.” Cas moved deeper into the room and kept talking. “It might be fun to hold parties in here at some point. If you ever wanted to play exhibitionist games with me, we could invite guests to watch us demonstrate your skills at control. They would be free to make use of the bar since no one but me will be touching you under our scening contract.”

Dean didn’t answer. He simply nodded, poking into a corner and beginning to open drawers. Cas let him wander for a couple of minutes, standing in the middle of the room silently. After Dean had made a slow circuit of the space, Cas cleared his throat. Dean’s eyes snapped to him, and he squared his body to his Dom instinctively.

“Are you ready?”

“I’m ready, Sir.”

“Please undress. Hang or fold your clothes on the rack to your left. Once you’re bare, take the position I showed you right here on this square. This is your mark, Dean. This will always be your starting location. It is a place of safety and peace. You will never be punished in this space. Every time you arrive here for a scene, I want to find you kneeling right here, naked, breathing evenly. I
want you watchful, but not stressed. Keep your eyes on the door until I come for you, and then track me.” Cas spoke as Dean worked efficiently to take his spot. There was a blue square, a little larger than a foot across taped onto the floor. Maybe it was paint. Whatever. Dean liked blue. It felt like a good start.

Dean left the plug in place as he knelt down. The position was easy and relaxing. His toes would get used to the effort of holding his weight. Cas had explained the necessity of keeping him literally on his toes at the start, and Dean had no issue with it.

Being asked to look directly into the Dom’s eyes was weird, though. Dean hated to have someone’s eyes on his while he played that role, as alpha or Dom for an Omega. He always made them avoid his eyes. He was accustomed to the same treatment from other Doms. Castiel’s forced intimacy was odd. Dean wasn’t sure about it, but it wasn’t his choice right now, so he simply followed the Alpha with his head and his eyes as Cas moved around before him, pacing slowly.

“You look lovely there, Dean. I appreciate a well-formed body, as I know you do. You please me very much. Take a deep breath for me now, Dean.” Cas squatted before him, still fully dressed, knees wide, up on the balls of his feet, more than an arm’s reach away.

Dean obeyed, and Castiel smiled. “You’re beautiful.” He watched Dean breathe for a long moment, staring in an intensely intimate way, not looking at Dean’s body the way Dean was accustomed to Doms doing. Cas stared into his eyes and watched him breathe. Dean blinked slowly, calming down, letting the hypnosis from Cas’ blue eyes sink him further into a sense of intimate, quiet safety.

“Very beautiful. Very good. Good boy, Dean. Breathe nice and slowly for me.” Cas sat down on his butt, settling in to watch. “Now reach up with both hands and touch your lips. Just run your fingertips over them. Good boy. Slow and easy. Your fingers are my fingers right now. Let me feel your lips. Good. Now put a finger between those gorgeous lips and suck very gently on it.”

Dean wanted to close his eyes, but he didn’t. He kept them on the Alpha as he sucked on his index finger, pulling it easily most of the way into his mouth. Knowing that Cas wouldn’t punish him here meant that if Dean earned a reprimand by closing his eyes, Cas would have to stop the activity and move him elsewhere before he could deal with the disobedience. It was strangely effective to make sure Dean kept himself focused. He knew Cas wouldn’t let any disobedience go without addressing it, so he knew that keeping things on track was his responsibility as much as the Dom’s.

“Mmm, very good. Now switch hands. Use the wet finger to massage your nipple while you get the other one wet for me. Shit. You’re so pretty. I’m getting hard merely from watching you, Dean. Now both nipples. Little circles for me, please. Press in a little bit harder.”

Dean saw Cas’ eyes flick down to his groin where his dick was starting to thicken and twitch. “You like the way that feels. That’s good to know. I’m going to enjoy playing with your nipples, Dean. They tested as extremely sensitive, and I intend to exploit that. Keep going. Pinch them harder and keep rolling them. I want them over sensitized and sore before we get the clamps out.”

Dean whimpered as he struggled to maintain eye contact while the sensations from his chest pulled his cock to full attention. It felt so good, but what he wanted was to feel the Dom’s touch and be allowed to close his eyes and sink. How long could a blink reasonably last and still be considered a
blink? That question was worth testing.

“Eyes open, Submissive. That’s a warning. You’ll only get one. Please don’t test me today. We have other tasks to get through, and you agreed to work hard for me.” Dean whined, but he opened his eyes.

“Re-wet your fingers now, one at a time. Then right back to work. You’re going to get your pretty chest ready for me. Good boy.” Cas stood up, and began to undress. Oh, hell yeah. Dean remembered his body, but it had been much too long since he’d seen it. Cas took pity on him, knowing how hard it was going to be for the Sub to keep his eyes on Castiel’s face once his clothes were off and that beautiful body stood bare before him.

“Look at me, Dean. I want to feel your eyes all over me now. I want to feel you caress my skin with your eyes. Take me in. I hope you like what you see. I am as much for you as you are for me.” Cas finished stripping, leaving his clothes in a messy pile, then he stood back up and fondled himself gently. Dean kept working his own nipples into sore pert points. A dribble of pre-come ran down the underside of his cock and lodged beneath his knot. He shivered as he took in the Dom, although the room was quite warm. Cas was fully erect, and his cock was…frankly, it was enormous.

Penis size generally followed the secondary gender, and the more deeply extreme, the more substantial the correlation. Deep Omega men had the smallest penises. Deep alphas had the largest, statistically. Dean was no wallflower himself, but Castiel… Castiel had both length and girth to his credit, and a little bit of a left-leaning curve. He stroked himself very slowly, smirking at Dean’s fixation. A single line of drool escaped Dean’s lips, but he couldn’t wipe it off because his hands weren’t his own, and Castiel had put them to work elsewhere. Dean decided the drool was appropriate anyway, and let it just… whatever. Cas was hot, and he didn’t care if his appreciation showed.

“Are you sore yet, Dean? Pinch harder for me. I want you to feel it when I put these clamps on you.”

Dean nodded. He was beginning to feel the ache from his chest, but he increased his pressure anyway. It felt so good, and the dribble from his dick spurted again, driving the line down along the cleft of his balls to drip onto the floor. Cas watched him work for far too long, and Dean began to realize that long teases were probably going to be a thing. Both men stayed hard and began to pant a little. Somehow, Cas pulled Dean’s eyes back up to his own without speaking. Dean wasn’t sure how he’d communicated the demand, but he was sure it had come from Cas.

“You’re a work of art, Dean. Your whole body has gone flushed, and you have lovely pink circles on your cheeks beneath your green eyes. I could look at you like this all day, but I would like to move on. Lean back onto your hands for me. Flatten your toes so you don’t strain them. Get that chest opened up wide. Show off your work, and let me see those pretty nipples.

Cas released himself and stepped up before Dean as Dean leaned back onto his flat palms. Going down onto one knee, Cas put a hand under Dean’s scrotum and worked him easily in his palm like Chinese meditative chime balls. His other hand reached forward and flicked first one nipple, and then the other, causing Dean to gasp at the sudden sharp tang of pain.

“I think you’re ready. Well done, my Pet. I’m very pleased.” Cas slapped Dean’s nipples one at a time with flat fingers hard enough to redden the skin around them. Dean bit his upper lip, but didn’t respond otherwise. Wearing a shirt might be a problem when this was over. Cas’ thumb found the wet streak between his balls and rubbed it in tenderly.

He stood up and retrieved the nipple clamps from the cabinet by the wall and worked quickly to get them affixed, clipping the chains between them together to form a loop that he held like a handle.
Cas tugged on the lead, working Dean upright again, and beginning to lead him forward into a crawl or risk the pain of popping one of them off.

“This way, Pet. Up onto the mattress for me. On your knees and facing the headboard.” Cas got him placed, and he hooked the loop over the end of the headboard’s wrought iron pole, right in the middle. “Don’t remove that from where I’ve put it. Don’t move in a way that will release you from your clamps. You are bound, and I’ll have you remain in place until I move you or release you. Do you understand?”

“yessir.”

“Are you comfortable?”

That was a harder question. His knees were fine. His ass hugged the plug like a pacifier, and that was fine. His nipples ached though, and they had begun to throb. “Mostly, sir,” he managed.

Cas chuckled. “Hold on to the headboard and stay up on your knees. Don’t buckle. We’re going to start simply. I’m going to strike your ass with my hand, and then I’m going to tell you something or ask you something in between strikes. All you have to do is listen and respond appropriately. Oh, and don’t allow the clamps to pull loose from your chest. If you perform well, I will let you come today. I want you to succeed Dean. We’re a team here today, you and me. Let me know if you need something changed. I won’t promise I can alter what I’m doing, but for right now, I want to know what you’re feeling.

Dean didn’t have a chance to respond before Castiel struck his left cheek with his flat hand. Dean flinched at the unexpected blow, nearly pulling too hard away from the headboard, but catching his motion in time.

“Very good. Dean, I want you to know how much I appreciate the trust you’ve shown me already. I have a great deal of respect and admiration for the strength it takes to be a willing Submissive, and I promise you never to take that for granted. I don’t need you to respond.” Cas hit him hard on his right cheek, and this time, Dean was ready. He held still as he felt the heat spread, knowing Castiel’s perfect handprint was developing on his flesh, a Polaroid on his ass recorded in blood flow beneath his skin. He wished he could see it.

“Beautiful. I consider you my pet Submissive while you’re here with me Dean. You will hear me refer to you as such, and you will answer to that when prompted. Do you understand, Pet?” Dean smirked where the Dom couldn’t see him. He liked the name. It felt right and just this side of a humiliation. The way Cas said it was affectionate, and it made Dean’s middle light up with warmth.

“I understand, Sir.”

Another smack landed immediately, directly over the plug, and Dean yiped at the vibrations that ran up to his prostate. “I’m going to be training you diligently over the next many sessions, Pet. You are expected to do your part. I will make my expectations clear to you, and I’m going to mold you into exactly what I want in a Sub.” Cas spanked him five more times rapidly, throwing Dean’s equilibrium off so that he needed to regrip the headboard and grimace into it.

“Don’t ever refuse to follow my instructions. Don’t say no to me unless you are prepared to activate a safeword. Use them liberally as you need to, but outside of that, I expect your full Submission. Say ‘Yes, Sir!’”

“yessir...”
“No, Dean. Say, Yes, Sir!” Cas hit him again, even harder.

“YES SIR! FUCK!”

“Better.” Another rain of smacks reddened the back of Dean’s thighs. “While we are working out on the project together, I am your boss, and the policies of the college determine our interactions, but when we scene, I am your Master and your God. Every pleasure or pain you experience is mine to deliver, not yours to take. If I want to hear your opinions, I’ll ask for them, and I’ll expect an honest response. Mid-scene, if I don’t ask, you can assume I don’t want to know. Once the scene ends, I always want to know what you felt and thought. Clear?”

“Yes, Sir.” Dean squeezed his eyes as Cas struck him again and again. He loved that rule. It freed him to let go and feel. His ass was hot now, and pulsing. The plug in his ass was beginning to make its presence felt, and his nipples pulled painfully as his body flinched. Dean’s cock bobbed up and down at his belly, nudging up against the iron headboard on occasion, neglected and swollen. His balls ached. He whined as Cas went silent and worked him over for a little while.

“I enjoy the sounds you make when you’re lost in your wolf, Dean. Don’t hide your moans from me. They belong to me. Whimper for me, Pet.” Cas hit him over the plug again several times.

Dean complied without hesitation. He was so turned on, he felt like begging, but Cas had told him to wait and be asked for his opinions, and he hadn’t asked. Dean wanted so badly to be good. Cas hummed happily.

“You look very hot right now, Pet. Your ass is bright red. Your shoulders are broad and strong. If you wanted to, you could let go of the bars, take those clamps off your nipples, and stand up and walk out. I wouldn’t try to stop you. You’re still here, letting me cause you pain because I want you to stay, because I told you to stay. You are still here because YOU want to stay. You want this from me, and I want to give it to you. If the sting in my hand is anything to go by, you must be hurting by now. Tell me, Pet, are you in pain?”

“Yes, Alpha. It hurts.”

“What hurts?” Cas spanked him again. Dean waited to answer until the strikes slowed and stopped.

“My ass hurts, Sir. My chest hurts. My balls are really sore, and my dick is throbbing. I wanna…shit, can I ask?”

“Very good boy, yes, you may. This time. It’s our first time. You’re doing so well for me. Ask me.” Cas put a warm hand, actually a hot hand, it must’ve been the one he had used to spank Dean, on Dean’s lower back and held it there.

“I want to come, Sir. Will you touch me? Please?” Dean rocked a little against his arms. He couldn’t move far. He’d settled very close to the bars of the headboard to avoid any more accidental tugs against the clamps. The one on his right nipple felt a little off, and he was afraid it might slip off if he tugged on it again. He wanted to be good.

“No, Pet, but I’ll fuck you. How about that? You ready to move on now?”

“Please, Sir! God, yes!” Dean was an incoherent mess. The spanking was intense enough to really hurt, and he was hot all over from the spreading adrenalin and endorphins. It felt so much better than he had expected it to, but he could only wait so long before getting to the main event. Later, he might question why he’d allowed himself to be hurt like this, but right now, it felt perfect. Right now, there was no shame.
Castiel reached around and pulled the looped chain off the end of the middle post and helped turn Dean around. “Sit down, Dean, right on your bottom.” Dean moaned as he settled, but he didn’t resist the instruction. It was an unexpectedly intense feeling, driving the heat and pain up into his body. “Lean back on your tailbone and let me get the plug out. Oh, fuck that’s a pretty sight. Can you see, Pet? Look down and see how red your thighs are, how the color has spread to your whole lower half.” Cas lifted Dean’s balls out of the way so Dean could see the color. He was flushed and swollen. Had he been Omega, he would be dripping with slick.

“Watch, Dean.”

Cas took hold of the blue plug and turned it, pulling gently but insistently, working the wide bulge out and stretching Dean’s rim obscenely. He continued to twist it, but began to rock it back and forth as well. Dean whimpered, tightening up as the widest part of the plug began slowly to emerge.

“Relax, Pet. Let me.” Dean shot his eyes up to Castiel’s face in quickly suppressed alarm. He didn’t remember the sensation being this powerful when he had inserted to plug hours ago. Now it seemed too big. It wasn’t going to come out. He panted and gripped Cas’ shoulders, squeezing his asshole and squeaking in protest. “Dean, relax. I’m not going to hurt you. You can do this. Take a breath and relax. Eyes on your plug, Pet. I want you to see how magnificent your body is. Watch what it can do, alpha. Fuck, just like an Omega. Look at you…”

Castiel’s voice held Dean, and slowly, so slowly, Dean relaxed his muscles, watching as the thickly bulging silicone plug finally capped and slipped free. He’d played with plugs before, but never one this wide. His moan was an unearthly sound of relief and pleasure, and it made Cas’ cock twitch in recognition. Cas knew that sound. That was the sound of a fully submerged Submissive. Dean was ready. Cas moved fast. He slicked himself up, applied a generous portion to Dean’s hole, pressing some of the synthetic slick up into Dean, enjoying the delicious grip of his rim over the Alpha’s knuckle.

Cas sat back on his heels and pulled Dean up chest to chest with him. “Sit down on me, Pet. Let me guide you. Yep, that’s it. Lower right down. You’re ready, aren’t you? All the way down, Dean.” Cas supported Dean’s thighs as Dean let his body impale itself on Castiel’s stiff cock. The feeling was indescribable. He felt so full, so wet, split right in two, stretched impossibly wide, and he groaned in both pain and pleasure, his prostate lighting up and his rim hot and burning hotter by the inch.

“You’re going to come on my cock, Dean. Fuck yourself on me, Pet.” Cas took hold of the chain connecting Dean’s nipple clamps and put a tiny bit of tension on it as Dean began to move. He held onto the Alpha’s shoulders and thrust his body down onto the cock in his ass. At its base, it was wider than the plug had been, and Dean couldn’t quite make himself push all the way down. He remembered in a flash that not only had his ass already taken the full girth once before, he had actually managed to accept the bulging knot at the very base of this cock…and lived. The thought made him groan even harder and begin moving faster. Cas stayed still, watching him, and after a few pulses, Dean remembered he was supposed to be looking the Alpha in his eyes.

Dean took his time getting there. Overstimulated already, a part of him dreaded what he was going to find in the depths of those eyes from this close, and God they were close. Cas had one hand supporting the chain, and the other bracing Dean’s shoulder. He had his hips canted to give Dean as much access to his dick as he could in a kneeling position, but upright as they were, face-to-face, their eyes were less than a foot apart. It was unbelievably intimate, everything considered. Dean was raw and naked. He knew what he wanted, and he knew Cas could see it in his eyes. They pleaded for the Dom to accept the need and to provide. Cas growled and tugged the chain a little harder, and Dean whined again, picking up his pace.
Cas already knew, Dean reminded himself. They had spoken very frankly about Dean’s test report, and Dean had confessed how badly he wanted to be owned and directed in bed. Castiel assured him over and over that it was fine to want what he wanted, alpha or not. There was no hiding from the Profound Submissive, and Cas wanted to give him that.

This is fine, Dean reminded himself as he looked deeply into the blue eyes that watched him in awe. It’s fine. I can want this. I can… “Oh, fuck! Sir, I’m close. What do I do? Should I…? I wanna come! FUCK!” Dean ground down, grinding his sore, hot ass in a circle over the bulge in Cas’ cock, searching for just the right pressure against his prostate. The blue was so intense, and a bit of a ring of red began to emerge around the edges. Dean stared hard, lost inside himself and in that endless blue together at the same time. Dean could see into Castiel’s need. He realized in a flash that Cas was right there with him. Dean had been working so hard to be good for Cas without ever quite realizing that Cas wanted those things from Dean to feed both of them.

Castiel was so close to coming, he grimaced, but he was obviously holding out for Dean. The very idea of the Dom needing Dean like this as badly as Dean needed to be this drove his muscles to clench down harder. Dean pulsed onto Cas’ cock, not enough to tie himself – Cas’ knot had grown huge and forbidding. At this point, it would take a massive effort to drive it past Dean’s rim, and as an alpha, Dean assumed Cas might not be ready to accept him acting that much like an Omega. This was enough. More than enough. Dean felt owned and cherished. He felt powerful and weak at the same time. Castiel watched him with a certain level of awe and smugness. Dean growled at him, and Cas snarled, tugging harder on the chain. That did it.

Dean grabbed Castiel’s hips, and moved his own in a tight, fast grind. Keeping his eyes open took everything he had, and for a moment before he lost it completely, Dean saw the wolf slip into place in Castiel’s eyes. He saw the essence of Castiel’s Dominant right there less than a foot from his face. Dean clenched his ass down hard, grunting loudly, then stillled as his orgasm sent warm, tingly pulses along the length of his cock. Cas ripped the clamps off his nipples, and Dean screamed, spurting hot white fluid over his Dom’s abs.

Cas flung the chain over his head, growled deeply, and shoved his cock back into motion, seeking his orgasm inside Dean’s body. He went up onto knees and thrust hard, letting Dean fall onto his back on the bed, and following his body as he tumbled. Cas pounded into him hard, fucking him into the mattress, enjoying the feeling of sated, boneless Submissive beneath him. Dean moaned, and clutched at the Alpha, who only lasted another few thrusts before he locked up and spilled, shooting his thick come deep into Dean’s gut. Cas bit down onto Dean’s left nipple, and Dean wrapped his body around Castiel, screaming again.

In the aftermath, they lay together on the big bed. Castiel’s hands were everywhere on Dean’s body, a soft, incessant worship of the man’s beautiful flesh. He kept up a litany of quiet praise as Dean came slowly back to himself.

“You were so good for me, Dean. Thank you. That was wonderful. God, you’re perfect.” Dean dozed under the Alpha’s ministrations, letting his hands and his words do their simple but complex work of catching the Sub and easing his descent back to the ground. Then they both slept.

Hours later, in Castiel’s kitchen, they talked. Cas wanted to know everything Dean could tell him about how he felt the scene went. What he liked. What he disliked. How he felt he fared through his first spanking, his first real spanking since he’d been a pup. Dean blushed his way through it, but he answered honestly.
Dean dug through the pantry and the refrigerator, and Castiel was astonished when he produced actual food from raw groceries. Did people really know how to do that? Would he teach Cas if the Alpha asked?

It was a simple red sauce with pasta and a salad. It was delicious, and Dean glowed at the praise. Cas added “Praise kink” under his mental list for Dean’s predilections, although, in truth, who doesn’t appreciate being praised for something they’ve done well? The pasta was really good.

“No, I mean, yeah, it was good…the spanking, I mean,” Dean stumbled. “You know I said I wanted to try it and see if I was just, you know, imagining that I might like it, but I guess I was right all along. It was…good. I liked it…a lot. We can do that again sometime.”

Cas let him tumble through the self-discovery that erotic spanking might turn out to be his favorite thing ever. Fantasies are one thing. Without the actual pain of impact, a spanking fantasy can be wildly deceiving, but Cas had known Dean was going to enjoy the real thing. He knew it long before Dean was sure. Cas feigned simple interest a bit so as not to frighten the Submissive man. If Dean knew how badly Cas and his wolf wanted to take him apart stroke-by-stroke, lash-by-lash, Dean might run away screaming.

“We most certainly can do that again, Dean. I would enjoy that. Impact play is, as I’ve said, a favorite of mine as well. If you like, when you’re ready, we can move on to other implements. And what about the clamps? How would you rate them? How uncomfortable are you right now?”

Dean bowed his back at the reminder and looked down at his shirt. “I’m sore. This shirt isn’t so bad. It doesn’t rub a lot. I dunno, man. The clamps…I guess I liked that part too. I was expecting them to come off a little sooner. I think maybe we missed the best moment. Not sure if you noticed…I was kinda already over the top when they came off. A couple of seconds sooner, and it would’ve been perfect. Not your fault. You couldn’t have known.”

Cas castigated himself internally. He had known. He did it on purpose because he wanted to know how honest Dean would be with his appraisal afterward. Holy fuck, the man was perfect. “Dean, I owe you an apology.”

“What? No, you don’t. It was good. I still liked it. Maybe next time you could let me just, I don’t know, pull away from the headboard and pop ‘em off myself?”

“You misunderstand, Dean. I’ve been dishonest with you in this instance, and I need to explain myself so that you can understand. So much depends on trust, and I had to know that I can trust you. In order to do that, I was disingenuous myself. Dean, I can tell how close a Submissive is to orgasm, and I am fully aware of the full purpose and use of nipple clamps. I didn’t remove them late by accident. I did it intentionally. I needed more than your promise to tell me what works and what doesn’t. I need to be sure I’ll get the truth from you. It was a one-time test that I am entirely unjustified in putting you through considering how much trust I demand from you and how much I need to be trustworthy, but in all my years of playing, I’ve never discovered a better way to proceed. Please forgive me, but I needed to know.”

Dean stared at him. “On purpose? Just to see if I would mention it or let it go?”

“It won’t ever happen again.”

They stared at each other weighing the issue. Then Dean laughed. Cas relaxed.

“Wow. Gotta stay on my toes with you, don’t I? So, are you gonna make it up to me? Do it right next time?” Dean took a bite of salad, most of the lettuce falling back into the bowl, and he had to
stab back into it with his fork.

“Will there be a next time, Dean?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I thought you wanted, like three rounds tonight. You going to quit on me after just one?”

“Dean, please take this seriously. Trust is enormously important. I can’t have you blow it off now, only to have you panic mid-scene later if it hits you hard then.”

“Relax, man. I’m not freaked out. I get it. I think it’s a little bit stupid that you felt like it was necessary, but I’m not pissed off or anything. I trust you. I’m not hurt. You made an awesome, mind-blowing orgasm very slightly less mind-blowing, that’s all. Thing is, I almost didn’t mention it because it wasn’t a big deal. Would’ve sucked if you thought I was hiding shit from you just because I was so satisfied I barely noticed you weren’t completely goddamned perfect. Eat your pasta. It’s getting cold.”

Castiel’s mouth hung open as he stared at Dean. He blinked a couple of times, unsure how to respond. Dean was either too good to be true, or he was…perfect. They’d been working together for a couple of months already, designing, planning, getting ready to begin implementing their project on campus. Cas knew he and Dean got on like eggs on toast in the project setting. But also, Dean fell right in with Castiel’s partner, Benny, a friend from undergrad who had moved straight on through in lockstep with Castiel into graduate school. They had partnered together on so many studies now that the administration considered Castiel and Benedict to be one and the same person. Every proposal that bore one of their names had the other on it too somewhere. It was a running joke in the department that Casandbenny was all one word.

Dean slid into their small community as if he had always been there. Benny liked him, and what’s more important, Benny trusted him enough to start assigning Dean important tasks, and leaving him to achieve them. A high achiever himself, for Benny to allow a young man like Dean to take ownership of critical pieces of their project without hovering all the time spoke volumes. Already, more than Charlie, more than Meg, Dean was in.

Castiel knew what he wanted his team to be and how he wanted it filled out, and Dean, exactly as he was, filled in one quarter of that matrix. Benny and Cas took two other slots each, and that left only one spot unclaimed. Castiel still needed to convince Bobby. It would be a hard sell. The old doctor was getting cranky as he aged, and his practice meant a great deal to him, but he could do so much more for the Lupin community if he joined Castiel. Cas knew it. Benny knew it. They just needed to convince Bobby, and the stage would be set for something the world had been pining for for decades, although it didn’t yet know it. They were so close Cas could taste it.

“Castiel? Man, are you in there? I think you just dropped some penne in your lap. You want me to get that for you? I could, uh, use my teeth if you like,” Dean flirted. Cas snapped his mouth closed and looked down. The pasta had left a red streak across his leg, then fallen onto the floor. He considered making Dean clean it up off the tiles with his tongue, but only briefly. They weren’t there yet, and they weren’t officially in-scene at the moment.

“I’m sorry, Dean. I was distracted for a moment. This is very good. Where did you learn to cook?”

“Oh. Uh, my mom died when I was a teenager. My brother Sam and I had to look after ourselves a lot. I mean, Dad was around, but he had to work pretty hard, and we were old enough to help out. Sam got really studious so he could try to earn a scholarship, and I sort of stepped into Mom’s shoes a little. I like cooking. It’s very Zen, you know?”
“You’re good at it. I noticed you didn’t use a recipe or any canned ingredients. You know that’s impressive, right?”

“It’s pretty basic stuff, Alpha. It’s just red sauce. If you have garlic, tomatoes, and oregano, you can make a pasta dish.”

“Would you teach me some time?”

“How to make red sauce?”

“I would love to learn from you.” Cas finally took another bite.

“Um, sure. I guess so. We’re not cooking naked though. Don’t try to turn this into some kinky scene. If I’m going to get sexy burns, I want them to be from those wax candles you get from the erotic websites, not from olive oil popping out of a skillet while I’m sautéing garlic.”

Cas smiled at the image of trying to get Dean off while he cooked. “Agreed. No cooking kinks. Are you interested in wax, Dean?”

“Man, you don’t miss a thing, do you? Fuck. Sure, whatever. I’ll try just about anything, I guess. Not today, though. You said second round’s about edging? Let’s stick to that. That’s something I already know I enjoy.”

“Yes, let’s stick to the plan. Edging is round two, and we’re doing fellatio for the last round. Honestly, Dean, I expect round three to happen tomorrow morning. Is that all right with you?”

“You’re the boss, Sir,” Dean replied.

“You get a vote in the planning and scheduling Dean, and please call me Cas. ‘Sir’ is for while we’re scening.”

“Tell that to my wolf. He’s very uncomfortable with calling you by name right now. You know we got to see yours a little bit ago. God, man, he’s massive. How do you manage to walk around like a normal person with that inside you?”

Cas laughed. He’d seen many reactions over the years when he allowed people to glimpse his wolf in person, but this one was a first. Dean made it sound like he had a cock so large it should impede his ability to walk. “He answers to me, Dean. He’s big, and he’s dominant, but I’m in charge, and he follows my instructions.”

“You direct THAT? Fuck. What if he slips his leash? Has he ever hurt someone?” It was academic from a personal perspective. The wolf wasn’t going to hurt Dean. In the very brief moment that Dean had access to see him, the first thing Dean noted after his sheer size, was the vast affection the wolf already had for Dean. The huge beast looked on Dean like a favored and cherished teddy bear, his eyes going soft around the edges, and Dean knew. It helped to know that the wolf had tried to mate him during Dean’s Keller test. Tertiary wolves didn’t normally do that alpha-to-alpha, but Cas’ had. Dean knew he was safer between those big paws, with affectionate drool dribbling over his head than he would be anywhere else on Earth.

“He’s never hurt anyone without my permission, and he never will. As I said, I’m in charge.”

“You didn’t let him out all the way just now though. Don’t you trust him with me?”

“I do. He’s not going to harm you, Dean. Frankly, he adores you more than I can account for. Not that you aren’t adorable, of course, but he seems to have fallen paws over tail. No, but he has to earn
the right to a turn playing with you, and you need a chance to consent to it. He’s not shown me he deserves it yet.”

Dean cleared his throat and set his fork down. “You’re using me to bribe good behavior from your wolf? That’s fucked up, Cas.”

Cas sat back, startled. Was that what he was doing? Did he think of the wolf as an unruly child in need of behavior modification? Jesus, Dean was right. He laughed again and raised his juice glass in toast. “Dean, I believe you and I are going to be very, very good for each other. Here’s to us. And any time you feel ready to play with my wolf, let me know.” Dean clinked his glass and started to speak, but Cas held up a quick finger to forestall him, thinking fast. “After we’ve played at least five times without him. I need to get to know you before I even consider unleashing him.” Dean smirked. He could do that, but this day and night was going to count for three of those five, even if the last round was just trading BJ’s.

“I have a question, while we’re on the topic and outside the scene,” Dean sipped his juice and set his glass down. “I tested super high for brattiness. I know you explained it, and I don’t want a full treatise again, but how does that fit in here? You said you want me fully compliant, but how is that going to work if I’m a brat? I mean, I know I like to tweak people when I play, but is that gonna piss you off? Like, how does it fit together?”

Cas’ eye sparkled across the table at Dean. “How does it work? Tell you what, Dean, if you feel like being a brat while we play, and you think you can handle the consequences, bring it on. I’ve tamed my share of brats, and I believe I can take you too. You aren’t going to make me angry. I understand what you need, and I’m fully capable, willing, and fucking ready to dole it out to you. Just be sure, before you call down the thunder, that it’s really what you want. Capiche?”

“Fuck.” Dean blushed and found he couldn’t hold Castiel’s eye. Deep alpha. That’s what Dean’s test report had said. Not just alpha, but Deep fucking alpha. Where did that shit go at times like this? Dean was right back inside the little boy who craved being dragged off by his pointy ear to someone’s office, flung over a desk, and caned.

“Dean?”

“Yes, Alpha. I capiche.”

Cas huffed a laugh. This was such a good idea. Every moment he spent with the nineteen-year-old alpha strengthened his initial notion. This was the Submissive he had searched for so long. He needed to find a way to make Dean so happy, he never considered leaving. “Ready to get back to it?” Cas lowered his chin and dropped his voice. Dean rewarded him with a shiver.

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” Dean agreed, pushing his chair back.

“Good. I’m going to clean up in here. You go back to the playroom. Get a quick shower and use the toilet. Settle into your space on the blue mark and wait for me.”

“Yes, Sir,” Dean responded with enthusiasm, and he was gone. Cas watched him dash away with a shake of his head. That boy was going to be the death of him. He’d fallen too hard, too fast, and all his fantasies about Dean were proving true. It couldn’t last. No one was that perfect for someone else, and Castiel’s life had never worked out that way. Not once. Overflowing with material goods and wealth, power and status, all Cas cared about was finding a strong connection with people, but they disappointed him, betrayed him, used him, left him, and hurt him again and again. (Everyone except Gabriel) He was never enough, or they weren’t. Always. (Except for Gabriel) What he had, he didn’t want, and what he wanted, he couldn’t have.
Was Dean the answer? Could Dean be something more? Was Castiel a fool to hope that an alpha who seemed to bear the promise to fill every aching chasm in his psyche could stick around for the long haul? Could their budding friendship and their natural chemistry in the bedroom blossom into something more? Jesus Fucking Christ, Dean hit every one of Castiel’s hot buttons. He wanted to Claim him as a mate, disappear with him for months and come home sated and stable. He’d tried to mate him already though. Tried and failed. Of course he failed, they were both alpha. Cas had taken good natured ribbing from the staff over his bite during the Keller test. They didn’t know the ache that had begun to fester in his gut when his wolf realized his moment of triumph was empty. How could they know? He hadn’t told anyone, not even Benny, and Cas generally told Benny everything.

He cleaned the kitchen up slowly, letting Dean have time alone to settle and wait. Waiting was what this round was all about after all.

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“Calm down, alpha. You’re all right. Breathe for me. Look at me. You’re all right. It’s a marathon, not a sprint. Fuck, you’re beautiful like this.” Cas soothed the man with a hand holding tightly around his ribs. Dean panted and struggled in the ropes. The ropes weren’t going to give, and Dean didn’t want them to. His head rested on the soft pillow, and his shoulders bore much of his weight. His knees tied to his chest, wide apart, and his arms wrapped around his knees and bound, Dean couldn’t move much except his head and his spine. His ass was up in the air, his hole toward the ceiling and open to the world. His cock lay purple and angry against the ropes crisscrossing his belly. He had three tight coils of fine rope around the base of his knot in a pseudo-cock ring. Dean was sweating. He couldn’t keep his eyes open for more than a few seconds, and every few breaths, he begged out loud.

“Please, Sir. God…fucking please. I can’t do it. I need to come.”

“Color, Dean?”

Dean cried out as tears leaked from his eyes and his cock spurted another slow streak of pre-come. Cas kept up the massage to Dean’s prostate. “Yellow, I fucking guess. Just let me come, Sir! I’ll be green as fuck if you put a fucking hand on my fucking dick and just fucking let me come already!”

“Your language degenerates when you’re anxious, Dean,” Cas explained as if Dean cared.

“ALPHA! I can’t!”

“Hold out for me, Pet. You’re doing so well. Can you tell me what you’re feeling right now?” Cas jabbed Dean’s prostate brutally two or three times. Dean gasped in a surprised breath, and his struggles kicked up a notch.

“I’m feeling like I’m going to fucking tear your fucking nuts off! Jesus Christ! You’re an asshole!” Dean squirmed in the ropes, and then he shrieked when Castiel spanked his suspended ass very hard right over the top of his previous strikes.

“You might want to rethink your word choice, Pet. That wasn’t very nice. You could say something like, ‘I’m feeling overstimulated and frustrated,’ or ‘This is a very difficult task for me right now.’ Would you like to try that again?
Dean’s tears were flowing openly, but he clamped his lips closed and shook his head, ‘no.’ He didn’t trust himself to speak. He’d only get spanked again, or worse, Cas might decide to end the torture and not let Dean finish. He sobbed openly instead.

Cas took hold of Dean’s dick, but he only got a few strokes in before Dean was on the cusp of coming again. He was so close to the edge that a stray breeze would blow him over, but dear God in heaven he was beautiful. Cas kept his fingers pressing rudely against that magical gland for a few more strokes. They had already been at this for two hours now, much longer than the advice books on Lupin sexuality indicated was sustainable, but Dean was exceptional, and Cas wanted to let him shine.

At last, as Dean panted, sobbed, sweated, writhed, and begged, as he shone like the sun in his strength and passion, in full astonishing submission, Castiel deemed him ready. Cas pulled his fingers out slowly, and Dean’s breath of feral relief made Cas smirk like a psychopath. He pulled the quick-release knot on the rope around Dean’s penis, then he stripped his own pants quickly to his knees, knelt awkwardly before the Sub, stroked the lubricant he’d been playing with onto his cock and thrust deeply into Dean in one go. The angle was wrong with Dean’s ass suspended several inches off the bed, and Cas found himself off of his knees, balancing against his feet and his hands, letting the ropes take his weight in addition to Dean’s as he began to fuck the man.

Cas had not intended to get himself off this time, but Dean was so beautiful and so needy, he couldn’t resist. Didn’t want to resist. Dean struggled a little, but managed to angle his hips a little for better depth, and he cried in relief and wonder.

“Yes, please. Fuck, Alpha. Please, Sir. God! Fuck! Yes! FUCK ME! FUCK!” Dean wasn’t home anymore. He was lost in the clouds, right where Castiel wanted him. Cas couldn’t get a hand on Dean’s angry cock from this position, so he pressed their bellies together as he pumped into Dean’s ass, hoping the pressure and movement would be enough after two hours of edging. It was. Dean’s eyes rolled back in his head, and his face went slack. Cas kept fucking, but Dean froze as his balls pulled up tight, and his cock finally, finally released two hours of pent up tension and pressure. Dean cried out as he emptied between their bellies in wave after glorious wave. Then he passed out, going completely slack in the ropes, nothing but white showing at the slit in his eyelids.

Cas pulled out slowly, and let the rope suspending him down. He pulled the quick releases to the significant knots, and then he selfishly finished himself off, adding his own semen to the mess on Dean’s belly and grunting loudly. Dean’s face remained passive and peaceful, tear-streaked but lax. Cas busied himself removing all the remaining rope, rubbing at the spots where tension made Dean’s flesh red or irritated. His struggling had meant bruising in a couple of places, but it was nothing of concern. Knowing Dean, he would probably be proud to have earned the bruises. Cas cleaned his belly off with a warm cloth from the bathroom, and wiped his face and body down with another, only turning the cloth on himself after he was sure Dean was cared for.

He climbed up on the bed and spooned into Dean from behind, arranging them to be comfortable, and pulling the comforter over them both. He would like to have managed to get a little more fluid into Dean before they slept, but Dean was out for the count, and it wasn’t worth waking him. In no time, both wolves were fast asleep, snoring and dreaming.

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In the morning, Dean woke to a strange bed. No, not strange. He knew this bed. He’d just never
slept here. That’s the cabinet the ropes came out of. Over there was where Cas kept the lube. That other one produced the nipple clamps. There were seven, count ‘em seven, paddles on the pegboard. Different sizes, weights, thicknesses, materials. A couple of them had holes all the way through them. Dean blinked at the wall, his head still on his pillow. He hadn’t moved yet. He could hear, feel, and smell Castiel at his back, still deeply asleep.

The paddles held Dean’s eye just as they had done the night before when Cas left him in here for half an hour waiting in position. Dean didn’t believe it was mere chance that his starting position happened to face the wall where the paddles hung ready. What was even more striking (ha!) was that the pegboard, mostly full further down, was noticeably empty just past those seven paddles, as if the collection weren’t yet complete. Dean stared at them with equal parts quivering anticipation and overarching dread.

He knew with certainty now that he wanted to be spanked again. Needed to be. But paddled? He’d fantasized about that just as often, as well as strapped, flogged, caned, switched, you name it, Dean had an entry in his spank-bank that covered it, but how much worse was that going to hurt? Would it still turn him into a gibbering mass of needy, hot flesh like Cas’ hand had done? Dean didn’t want to think about it too hard. He didn’t want to know where this need was coming from. He didn’t want to know what it might mean about him. Cas seemed fine not to explore the why’s, and Dean respected that.

Dean’s attention turned to the aches in his ass. Inside his ass, where the enormous Alpha had torn him in two, hurt like a deep and lasting wound, like muscle torn from its moorings. He clenched against the ache and moaned at the delicious sensation that rocked up along his spine. Christ, what was wrong with him that he liked to hurt like this?

Outside, the sting in his red, spanked ass was mostly a memory. The sting of embarrassment was far worse by the light of day than the remaining physical pain. Looks like he was a fast healer where hand-spankings were concerned. He wondered if there were bruises. He would check once he could talk himself into crawling out of the covers. Speaking of bruises, Dean pulled a hand out of the covers and slowly inspected his wrist, but the light was too dim to see anything. He certainly felt bruised where he’d fought against the ropes, and his chest ached like a motherfucker. The dungeon didn’t have any windows though, to let in the morning light. Dean realized slowly that the lighting around the ceiling rails was getting brighter very slowly. Fuck if Castiel hadn’t wired them to brighten with the rising sun. Dean sighed and shoved to his feet, in sudden need of a bathroom. He rejected the open toilet and shower at the back of the playroom, choosing instead, to stumble down the hall.

He found his way back to the H/R room where Fred had stowed his stuff. Dean breathed a sigh of comfortable relief when he remembered that Cas had set this room aside especially for his use. He wasn’t going to be in trouble for sneaking off. He already had permission. In Dean’s experience, overnight scenes could be fraught with miscommunications, and he realized he’d fallen into the easiest trap, namely, not getting clarity on whether the scene ended once participants fell asleep, or if it continued on into the morning. Doms usually assumed it would be one long scene, while in Dean’s mind, once he passed out, it was over. He should’ve asked.

Dean brushed his teeth and considered. Castiel didn’t seem the type to take a miscommunication too hard. He would understand Dean’s need for some privacy, some space this morning. If Cas went looking for Dean, he would either start here, or in the kitchen. Dean was fine. He cut the shower on and took a relaxing and very hot shower, examining the bruises he could see, and washing the sweaty coating from his skin. Overnight, it had turned into an oily film that felt, frankly, gross. Dean briefly considered what Castiel might say if Dean invited him into the shower, but then rejected the idea. Outside of scenes, they were work colleagues and friends. He had no reason to think Cas
would accept or welcome any propositions beyond what he’d asked of Dean.

Dean slipped into a pair of sweat pants and a clean t-shirt after his shower, and headed to the kitchen to get coffee started. He sipped his steaming cup – damn, Cas bought the good stuff – and waited for the Alpha to emerge, but he didn’t. Dean’s stomach rumbled a second time, and then a third, so Dean found eggs and a roll of instant-bake biscuits and made breakfast. He plated the food, and still no Castiel. He stood before the counter debating what to do, when Fred pushed through the far door, where the beer fridge was.

“Ah, good morning, alpha,” Fred greeted. “I see you’ve made breakfast for yourselves. Alpha will appreciate that, I’m sure. Let me get the trays out for you, and we can deliver you and your breakfast together, shall we? I’ll come back and get a fresh pot of coffee going for you both. Sir enjoys his coffee with a little cream and far too much sugar, as I’m sure you are aware already.” Fred winked at him, and Dean smiled back. The man was good.

Soon they had two trays loaded for bear, and were pushing through the door to the playroom. Cas blinked awake groggily, a little grumpy until he spotted the food and the coffee, and then he pushed himself to sitting and scooted back to make room for the tray. Dean set a tray across his lap and smirked smugly, then slipped around the bed and climbed back in so that Fred could arrange the other tray for Dean.

“You did this?” Cas asked in sleepy wonder. “You’re clean and dressed too. How long have you been up, Dean?”

“Long enough to have waited for your sleepy ass to get up, and then give up and make breakfast. Dude, you programmed the room to light up at dawn. That doesn’t wake you up?”

“Not after a night like last night,” Cas conceded, tucking into his food with gusto. “You wore me out, my friend.”

Dean scoffed at Castiel. “So, what’s on the agenda for this morning? You still up for another round?”

“Absolutely. How are you feeling this morning, Dean? How is the pace? Are we starting too slowly for you? Too fast? Last night was intense. I asked a lot of you, and you performed brilliantly. I hope you know how happy I am about how well we seem to be working together.”

“Jesus, Cas. Take a breath. Eat something. I’m fine. Yeah, the pace is fine. First round coulda been harder, but we didn’t know that until we did it. Second round was nearly too much.” Dean took a couple of bites while he tried to remember. “Did I pass out or something at the end? I can’t remember going to bed or anything. I don’t remember having the ropes removed. All I remember is a blazing hot climax, and then…nothing.”

Cas chuckled. “You did pass out, and you went right into a deep sleep, so I untied you, cleaned you up, checked your vitals, and went to bed.”

“Checked my vitals? You thought you might’ve fucked me to death? Geez, Big-head much, Alpha?” Dean hid his embarrassment about passing out in shoveling eggs into his mouth. Cas laughed happily.

He insisted on looking Dean over after breakfast, stripping him naked again and checking for damage. It was minimal, but they both agreed Dean’s rectum had taken all the pounding it should have to stand for a while. Didn’t matter. They weren’t fucking this morning anyway. Cas advised Dean to clean himself out for a couple of mornings since his muscles might struggle to tighten up
again right away. Dean quickly changed the subject.

“So how we gonna do this, man? You want to sixty-nine? Are we both in play, or what?” Dean spoke without thinking, and then blinked as he turned and met Castiel’s eye.

“Dean, are you confused about the purpose of your visit here with me? Are you under the impression that I asked you here as a hookup or a booty call?” Cas arched that eyebrow again, and Dean realized he’d fucked up. Already naked after his exam, Dean squeaked a quick apology and scrambled to his blue square, kneeling quickly, checking his positioning, and calling himself stupid again and again in his head.

“Better. Thank you. Please don’t let that kind of impertinence happen again. I will consider this instance part of your training and chalk it up as a warning, but be advised, from here out, if you speak to me like that in reference to a scene, I will assume you are requesting correction. Am I understood, Submissive?”

“Yes, Sir. I’m very sorry. I forgot myself.” Dean found himself fighting the urge to look down in abject submission. Castiel stood over him and held his gaze, obviously aware of how hard it was for Dean.

“Very good. You’re forgiven. I’m aware that we had a degree of blurriness about the starting point of this scene, but Dean, ‘how are we gonna do this’ is never an appropriate opening in any of my scenes.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“In answer to your very blunt question, I want your mouth on me. I will give you the option of staying down on your knees as you are or lying flat on your back on the bed with your head over the side. I warn you that if that isn’t a position you’ve tried before, you need to approach it with caution. It creates, by its very nature, a degree of breath-play that we haven’t discussed or agreed to. Once my penis is in your mouth, you will find breathing very difficult, even through your nose. It’s entirely up to you.”

“Sir, when you use the word ‘penis’ it kinda makes me…um, could you choose a different word?”

Cas looked at Dean for a minute, trying very hard not to laugh. “Fine,” he said at last. “Dean, where would you like to be to suck my cock?”

Dean pointed to the bed, and Cas enjoyed once again how instinctively Dean managed the role of Submissive, even untrained. Not a role, he reminded himself. Dean WAS submissive. It came naturally. Once trained, he would be completely irresistible.

“All right. Up you go. Get comfortable. Signal me when you’re ready. Do you remember the nonverbal safeword technique we discussed?”

Dean scrambled into place. “I tap your leg three times.”

“That’s right. Although, if you tap more than three or if you miss my leg, I’ll still get the message and stop. I’ll take care of you, Dean. Are you ready?”

Dean took a deep breath and lowered his head over the side so that he was upside down. Psshhhh, tried this position before…who did Castiel Novak think he was working with? Dean may only be nineteen and only now coming to terms with the degree of Submissiveness that was ascribable to him, but that didn’t mean he was a newbie. At all. Dean lost his virginity, hell, gave it away…threw it away as a burden…when he was fourteen, and he’d been riding and sucking dicks ever since.
This position, with a really big cock, messed with his ability to breathe in a deliciously dangerous way. More recently, as he grew older and less desperate, Dean realized how reckless he’d been to allow men to do this to him without any safeguards in place. Eventually, he learned enough about safe, sane, and consensual play to know how to tell another man what worried him and what to watch out for.

This morning? With Cas? Dreams coming true right there, is what this was. Dean signaled Cas to bring it, and he opened his mouth as Castiel pushed his enormous PENIS straight past Dean’s teeth and up against his hard palette. Dean began to chuckle as the word ran through his mouth, and his chuckle became a guffaw, until he tried to breathe back in and broke, laughing and choking, nearly vomiting as he gagged on his own saliva. Cas backed right up, and Dean sat up, still laughing, trying hard to get control, trying to breathe.

“What on Earth?” Cas started out concerned, but as he realized Dean was laughing, he became annoyed, and he went very still. He let Dean collect himself and catch his breath. The chuckles petered off to nothing as Dean caught the stony look on Castiel’s face. Dean’s face paled. The Alpha pointed, extending his whole arm like Crazy Horse’s memorial. “Get off that bed, and put yourself on that bench, Submissive. Do it. NOW!”

Dean whimpered and moved. He was in trouble, and it was his fault. He didn’t want to make it worse by seeming to dawdle now. He pressed his lips together and got situated on the bench the best he could. He didn’t know if he was doing it right. He’d seen benches in some of the clubs he visited, but he hadn’t stayed to watch, afraid it would be obvious that he wanted badly to try it out. He realized now that maybe it wasn’t where he wanted to be at all. Alpha was angry with him, and why wouldn’t he be. His Submissive had just laughed through a scene, laughed at his Dom. Bad move, moron. Can’t you do anything right, he thought.

Dean closed his eyes, wrinkling his brow in worry. “I’m going to paddle you, Pet. Your misbehavior is unacceptable, and you owe me twenty. We discussed punishment in our preliminary talks, and you agreed to accept whatever punishment I see fit. Well, this is what I see fit, and it’s what you’re getting. Hold onto the bars and don’t you dare move.” Dean didn’t know when Cas had time to select a paddle, but he certainly had one. He hit Dean hard enough to lurch his body forward a bit, and Dean groaned in surprise and pain.

“Yes, sir!” he squeezed out just as the paddle came down again in the same place. A third strike in exactly the same spot made Dean curl his toes. This felt nothing like what Cas had done to him last night. That spanking made his dick hard and drippy. That one sent volts of pleasure through his whole body. This one…FUCK!...this one fucking HURT! Oh, Christ! Dean couldn’t catch his breath. What number were they on? Jesus! Cas kept hitting the same fucking spot again and again. It was his left ass cheek, right where the crease stretched out with Dean’s ass curved over this shitty leather bench. GODDAMN THAT HURT! Dean kept trying to catch a good inhale, but the paddle would crack down again, and his ass was on fire. Just fucking move two inches up or down, left or right, not always in the SAME FUCKING, OH SHIT! Dean began to pant. His eyes teared up in anger and frustration that he couldn’t voice, shouldn’t voice. It was his own damned fault he was in this position, but SONOFABITCH!!!

At last, at long, long last, Castiel put the paddle down and stepped back, but he still seemed irritated. “Now. Explain yourself.”

Dean turned his head. Castiel’s eyes were fully red, and Dean guessed his own were the same. “It was that word, Sir. I’m sorry. It made me laugh. Won’t…won’t happen again.” Dean fought his alpha for control. The alpha was not accustomed to being punished, and he hadn’t liked it at all. Dean knew it was earned, and he needed the alpha to step back. He was still panting, and when he
blinked to clear his eyes, they overflowed. He sighed, and took another breath.

“Very well, Dean. I understand. You’re forgiven. Let’s put this behind us and move on. I want you on your knees, though. I’m not rewarding that kind of behavior. Be good for me, and we’ll try it again some other time.”

“Yes, Sir.” Dean climbed down. He had to pry his fingers apart to release the handles, but he did it without assistance. He looked to Cas for guidance and let the Dom direct him to his home base. This was good. The blue square was a safe place. Cas hadn’t promised not to play with him here, only not to punish him. It meant his punishment was truly over. Dean knelt down and drove his heel into the sore place on his ass harder than he needed to. He didn’t know why, but it felt right.

“Stop that right now!” Cas commanded, and it took Dean a moment to understand he was looking at the point of contact between Dean’s heel and the hot spanked flesh that pressed against it. “Are you the Dominant? Do you mete out punishments?”

“No, Sir.”

“You don’t, that’s right. I do. ONLY I do, and I said the punishment’s over. Don’t ever let me catch you doing that again, Dean. It’s not your place or your right.” Cas waited until Dean corrected his position, and then he stepped closer. “Open your mouth.”

Dean complied and let Cas feed his softened dick into Dean’s mouth. Dean sealed his lips around it and sucked, pulling a vacuum inside the cavity of his mouth, hollowing his cheeks. Cas cleaned the tear tracks off both cheeks with his thumbs as he thrust lazily into Dean’s mouth. “I did not enjoy that, Dean. I know it may be confusing to you, but there will be times when punishing you brings me great joy or revs up my libido, and there will be times when I find it a genuine chore. I will always give you what you need, regardless of how it impacts me. Please believe that you can trust me to train you well.”

Dean blinked in acknowledgement, looking up through his moist lashes. If the state of Cas’ cock was anything to go by, he was telling the truth about not enjoying himself. It was taking Dean a while to bring him back. He went decisively to work though, determined to make up for his error, determined that Cas would get what he deserved from a competent Submissive. Dean wrapped a hand around Castiel’s knot and squeezed precisely how Dean liked it. Cas groaned, and his cock thickened in Dean’s mouth. Dean was disappointed at his own reach. Even bottoming out with his throat opening up for Cas’ head, he couldn’t get enough in. He growled in frustration and spent a few moments working his throat around it and trying to inch further down.

Cas tapped Dean’s forehead to get his eyes back. “Don’t hurt yourself, Pet. We’ll work up to a bit more eventually, but if you make yourself throw up, we’re stopping. Do your best. I don’t require perfection.”

Dean whined. He should be able to do better. He wasn’t about to risk a punishment for disobedience on top of the one he just had for disrespect. If he guessed right, Cas would be spanking him in exactly the same fucking spot to make a point if Dean drove him to put him back on that bench. He whined again, but gave in, and went back to bobbing fast on Castiel’s dick, on the top third of it anyway. Dean put his other hand in place above the one squeezing his knot. He’d never had to double-fist a cock that was hitting the back of his throat before. It really put Castiel into perspective. Dean’s mouth watered as he worked, and it dribbled down his chin to drip onto his knees.

“Good boy,” moaned Castiel. Dean swiveled his tongue around as he drove in and out, catching it over the slit every now and then. He kept his hands moving, kept his tongue and his lips in constant motion, kept his cheeks hollowed as he pulled out, and let his throat relax and open as he buried his
Dean trusted Castiel not to push too deeply, and Cas made good on that promise. He was powerful, but completely controlled as he drove in again and again, his momentum building. Dean had sticky, stringy spit dripping in a constant flow off his chin. Suddenly, the Alpha flung his head back and buried his cock down Dean’s throat, coming fast and forcing Dean to swallow rapidly around him to avoid choking or spitting it back up. Dean’s eyes watered, and he snuffled indignantly, trying to get a breath in. It seemed to last forever, but Cas didn’t let go. Dean grabbed the Alpha’s hips for support and continued to struggle to swallow until at last, he stopped pulsing and pulled slowly out.

Dean slumped down in his place. Cas smirked and ran a hand down Dean’s arm, catching his hand as he reached it and pulling Dean unceremoniously to his feet. “If I let you stay here, I have to insist you hold your position. I don’t really feel like doing that, Dean. You’ve earned a chance to relax. Let’s get back in bed.”

Dean stumbled behind him and let Cas tuck him in. The Alpha grabbed a couple of waters from the fridge by the bar and tossed one to Dean, climbing into bed on the far side, and cuddling in close. “Well done, Dean. I believe we can pronounce this session a resounding success. I never really doubted that you would be perfect for me, but now I’m absolutely positive. I hope you agree, and that you’re feeling good about me as well.”

“Didn’t realize this was an audition, Sir. Kind of thought I already had the job.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Dean, and it’s not a job. Neither was this an interview. I truly enjoyed our time, and I’d like to continue scening with you.” Cas took a drink of water and looked away.

“Relax, Alpha, I’m not offended. I liked it too. And look, I’m sorry about all that with the laughing. I was wrong about that. I was disrespectful, and I’m really sor…”

Cas put a finger over Dean’s lips. “You apologized, you explained, you took your punishment. It’s over. I mean it, Dean. I don’t ever want to hear about it again. Don’t beat yourself up, I did that enough that you don’t have to. Let it go.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes, Dean. Just like that. Weren’t you raised in a traditional household? Didn’t your father do this for you and your brother, for your mother?” Cas took another drink, but this time he was looking right at Dean.

“I never thought about it like that. I was a pup, man. Who thinks this shit through when they’re just a kid?”

Castiel stared at him. “You’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen, Dean Winchester. The things I’d like to do to you… If you’ll let me.”

Dean blinked back at him. Those damned blue eyes. Dean was a sucker for them, and when they looked at him like that, he could almost believe Cas was falling for him. That was ridiculous, of course, but almost. Dean cleared his throat. “You can do whatever you wanna do to me, Castiel James, any time you choose. You call me up, and I’ll be there with bells on.”

Cas was taken aback at hearing his full name. Where had Dean learned his middle name? He stared a bit too long into Dean’s green eyes, but damned if they weren’t totally bottomless. It almost seemed for a moment like Dean was telling him something deeper. Cas knew Dean had problems setting his
own limits. Dean probably would let Cas do ANYTHING. He needed to be careful. Dean blinked again, and Cas took a shaky breath. He needed to be very, very careful. Beyond this shoal, there be dragons.

But damned if those eyes weren’t bottomless.

Chapter End Notes

Some stuff happened, and life got hectic, and I have to go somewhere to do a thing. Also, I'm switching to a rotating day-to-night 12-hour thing at work that's got me jacked up. Point is, the next chapter may be soon, or it may not be for quite a while. It depends upon how I cope with sleepless days that are supposed to be my nights.

I hope this one scratches an itch. It did for me, even though it could've really been placed anywhere.
Chapter Summary

Baby-steps forward, Castiel doesn’t like birthdays, Meg’s unhappy, and also Gabriel has somewhere he needs to be.

Chapter Notes

I don’t have much to say about this chapter. Hope you enjoy it.

Chapter 47 – Tuesday, June 20, 2017

NOW:

“I want to get Cas something nice for his birthday, something he wouldn’t think to get for himself, but I’m drawing blanks. He doesn’t care much about owning stuff, and he already owns everything he wants.” Dean spoke softly as he and Michael edged down the sidewalk just ahead of Castiel, who was distracted trying to text Charlie and keep up at the same time. Dean cast a furtive glance back. “Can you help me think of something? Anything.”

Michael gripped his hand tighter and swung it a little, not enough to affront Dean’s masculinity. “Not to be too sappy here, Dean, but I think he’s already getting the present he wants.”
“Oh God, Michael, he’s contaminated you with it! Really!? Never mind, I’ll think of something myself. Golf clubs, maybe? Do you think he’d like golf clubs?”

Michael laughed. “No.”

Dean continued to bitch quietly as he opened the coffeehouse door for Michael, and then held it as Cas caught up. Once they each had a drink, Dean shuffled back out into the hot sun again, feeling too compressed within the cool tight confines of the small air-conditioned space. He and Castiel were arguing over the relative body-cooling effects on a hot day of drinking a heated beverage over an iced one.

“Desert nomads drink hot teas during the day, Dean. It’s been thoroughly tested for generations. The heat of the tea creates an immediate cooling response in the body that counters the heat and overtops it. The end result is a cumulative cooling effect.”

“Bullshit. It’s simple fucking physics. You add heat to a system; the overall temperature of the system increases. Remove heat, and the temperature goes down. You keep sweating over there with your hundred-and-forty-degree coffee, and I’ll be nice and cool with my iced latte – me and Michael both, right Michael?”

“Seems like if you wanted to stay cool, uh, back inside the A/C would’ve been the way to go, if you’re asking me.” Michael took up the rear as Dean headed across the street to the open public dog park. The area wasn’t fenced or gated, but high hedges kept it isolated from public view.

“So, Cas… I was wondering. Have you thought about your birthday yet much? Is there anything special you want? It’s your first birthday now that we’re together. I’d like to make it special… if you want…” Dean noticed that Cas stopped walking just inside the hedge, and the younger alpha turned back, walking slowly toward him.

“It’s just a birthday, Cas. Doesn’t have to be huge. Charlie’s gonna do a thing, like she always does, but I asked her to keep it subdued. What I’m talking about is me and you. Is there anything special you want from me this year? Something to mark how things have changed between us?” Dean put his free hand on Castiel’s hip and pulled in close.

“I hadn’t thought about it. I forgot about my birthday. Can’t we skip it this year? Please, Dean?”

Michael, coming up behind them laughed. “Every middle-aged movie star on the planet would go for that if it was an option, Alpha. I don’t think it works that way.” Cas cast a sidelong glance at Michael and sighed.

“I know. But I hate the big fuss. It’s just a birthday. Everyone has one. Why does mine have to be a big deal every year?”

“There’s a joke in there somewhere about assholes and opinions too, man, but I’m only talking about us here. You and me, Cas. You and me.” Dean moved his hand to cup the side of Castiel’s neck, running a thumb along his jaw. “Let me get you something just for you, just from me. What’ll it be?” Dean whispered.

Castiel leaned in and kissed him, dirty and wet and affectionate. “You know what I want, Dean. No purchase required.” He pulled away with a lascivious smirk and an arched brow, then leaned back in.

“No purchase, my ass,” declared Dean, pulling loose and leaving Castiel reaching. “If you want this milk, it’s about time you bought the whole cow.”
Cas laughed, but Michael cocked his head and frowned. “You realize that you’re a cow in that statement, right Dean?”

“Uh, yeah, thanks, Michael. Thanks for pointing that out. Just, think about it Cas. We’ve got ten days. If you think of anything special between now and then, you let me know, and I’ll move heaven and earth to get it for you.” Dean walked backward, deeper into the park, heading for the shady trees, and the other two followed.

They let him lead, not sure what he was looking for, and at last, he settled on a bench beneath the shade of a willow tree overlooking the duck pond. Michael sat down beside him, but Cas stood.

“What did you need to tell us, Dean?” Cas prompted, cutting right past all the introductions. He knew that Dean would continue to deflect as long as he was allowed to, no matter how important the topic. “What did Pam have to say? Can she help?”

Dean sat with his elbows on his wide knees, leaning into them, picking at the label on his cup and looking out at the water. “I’m going to try therapy…for myself. Um, a few times, maybe. Pam’s going to get me a list of some therapists she knows. She thinks it might help me figure out where the drops and the panic attacks are coming from.” He sighed and shuffled his feet uncomfortably. “I mean, I already know a lot of it. I know what it is, but I can’t make it stop. I’m a little bit scared.”

Dean looked up at the tall man before him. “I’m scared, Cas.”

Castiel kept some space between them. Any wrong move right now would be disastrous. “I know, Dean. I know. I’m proud of you for making a decision like this. How can I help? How can WE help?” He quickly amended to include Michael.

Dean frowned and looked back at the dirt at his feet. “Don’t make me quit working. Don’t take my classes away from me. Please, Alpha. I need to keep working. I’m doing the next round with Sammy, so he can watch out for me if I have another…you know.”

“I hadn’t even considered pulling you off at work, Dean. You seem stable enough to me to keep going. Am I missing something? Is there more going on with you than you’ve told me? I thought it was all turmoil about issues over our marriage.”

Dean cocked his head to the side, and Michael put a hand firmly on the back of his neck and squeezed. Then he released his mate, moving his hand to Dean’s forearm. He could tell how hard Dean was fighting internally with all his different aspects to stay in control of who was in front. “Stay with us, alpha. We’ll talk to the wolf later. Keep your chin up and just talk.” Dean nodded minutely.

“Pam thinks its deeper than that, and I think she’s right. Getting engaged like we did…Babe, I love you. I’m going to marry you, but it really threw me. I wasn’t expecting any of this shit. I wasn’t prepared to handle it.” Dean paused for a couple of breaths and watched a few ducks swim hopefully toward them. He had nothing to offer them. “Cas, can you help me understand? Why did you come down there? Why did you propose to me like you did? Was it just because April wanted you to?”

Michael shifted on the bench, then patted Dean’s knee, kissed his cheek, and stood up. “You don’t need me here for this. I’m going to go for a walk. I’ll be right over there, Dean.” He gestured with his cup and left without another word. Dean watched him go with his lips pressed together. He knew Michael wasn’t leaving. He still had a firm hold of him in his head, but the loss of his body heat and the security of having him close was palpable. Dean’s alpha snarled as it struggled to stay in front.

“Is that what you think, Dean? You think I asked you to be my husband, my partner, simply because my mate wants a big, protective pack around her?”
“Didn’t you? You know what a mess I am. You weren’t taking any steps toward me before she told you to.”

Cas knelt in front of Dean, between his knees. He put his cup of the ground and took hold of Dean’s hips. “I needed her to open my eyes. I was a coward and a fool, and I hid behind the Mating-bond for years. I told myself over and over again that it wouldn’t be right to pursue you, claim you, make you mine, when there were unknowable mates on the horizon. But I ALWAYS wanted to. I wanted you so very badly. I’ve always wanted you. God, Dean, why won’t you believe me? I have loved you since the moment I saw you, but…Tell me you didn’t let the same thought stop you, too. Tell me that you weren’t thinking the same thing.” Cas’ eyes were searching Dean’s, looking for truth and understanding.

Dean nodded. He could concede that, but Dean wasn’t the Top. It had never really been his call. “I never expected to have a True-Mate. I’m pretty fucking strange, Cas, you have to admit…and the mate who could match me doesn’t exist. Can you even imagine? A Deep Omega who’s also a Profound Dominant? He’d explode before he ever made it through puberty. He’d be torn apart from the inside.”

“And yet we have Michael.” Cas glanced across the duck pond where Michael was strolling casually, sipping his coffee and trying to keep to the shade. “He’s astonishing, Dean. I don’t think he has any idea how extraordinary he is. He’s a bit like his mate that way.” He looked back at Dean significantly, and Dean met his eye and then dropped his gaze.

Cas pressed. “True-Mates aren’t perfect offsets from each other on the charts, Dean. They are perfect mirror images of each other from the perspective of the soul. They are soulmates in the deepest sense. If you ever need a reminder of how valuable and worthy YOU are, just look at your mate. I know you see it in him. I’ve seen how you look at him. He’s amazing, and so pure, so utterly untainted. He’s remarkable. Dean, he’s you in mirror image. You are everything he is, and I love you for it. The one thing I wish for you from your therapy sessions will be to gain an ability to see your own value. Just that one thing, and everything else is something we can handle together.”

“You don’t even believe in souls…” Dean murmured. Dean looked up at Michael. He and Cas watched as a young girl, no older than five approached the tall Omega, her face streaked with tears. Michael frowned and squatted down to speak with her. She pointed, and he looked, keeping a hand on her shoulder. They couldn’t hear what was said, but the child’s fear was obvious. It looked like she was lost. Michael nodded and looked earnestly into her eyes, talking calmly, being still and straightforward; being Michael. He stood and took her hand. He looked around, obviously thinking.

The girl tugged at his hand to get him moving, but he stilled her with a simple gesture and a word. She pointed again, and Dean could see him frown. Michael looked across the water and saw them watching him. He shrugged and started off with the girl in the way she pointed, but he kept swiveling his head.

Just then, a beta rounded the pond from the opposite direction than they were walking, breaking free of the tree line and spotting them. She called out and began to run. “Meghan!” Michael and the girl both turned. Meghan dropped Michael’s hand and dashed into her mother’s arms. The woman picked her up and hugged her closely. She regarded Michael over her daughter’s shoulder. After a moment of sizing him up, she realized he was Omega, and she approached, speaking too softly to be heard from across the pond. Michael extended his hand, talking. He ruffled the girl’s hair and pointed in the direction she’d pulled him. The two adults stood chatting as the girl, comforted, squirmed out of her mother’s hold and began to explore the pond’s edge.

Dean spoke very quietly. “I couldn’t tell him no, Cas. I couldn’t do it. He needs this. You know
about…?”

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry, Dean. I made a grave error in judgement. I shouldn’t have tried to stop you, even if my reasons were sound.” Castiel stood up and walked a couple of paces away before turning back to Dean. “The most dominant Omega I’ve ever known is Balthazar, and he doesn’t have any childbearing impulse at all. I made the assumption that the two were correlated, that dominance in an Omega would likely mean a lesser mandate toward motherhood. I was wrong, Dean. I thought Michael was acting simply from a need to stake his claim over you and score points off me. I was wrong, and I’m sorry.”

“Gabe’s on the same side of the line as Bal is, and he wanted pups. He wanted them as much as Michael does.” Dean let his face show that he was angry. He could’ve hidden it if he wanted, but Pam convinced him that Cas deserved his real emotions. He wanted to give it a shot.

“I fucked up, Dean, but I need you to trust that I’m doing my best.”

“You told me to tell you what I want. So, I told you, and you didn’t believe me. You thought we were playing some kind of stupid game, and you shut us down for no reason. You want me to trust you? How about it goes both ways, man? How about trusting me a little bit?”

Cas rubbed his eyes with his thumb and index finger, grimacing in frustration. Was it time? Was now the right time to do this?

“Dean, can you honestly say that the only reason you agreed to try for a pup, to stop taking birth control without telling me is that Michael wanted to? Is that the only reason?” Oh God, oh God, oh God, please, please, please…

“I want pups, too. I want to be a dad. I want to see you be a Papa. Shit, Cas. Why are you making this so hard?”

“You lied to me, Dean. Even after I asked you more than once. Why would you do that? You had to know I wouldn’t keep fighting you on it if you pressed me. You both agreed to wait with no intention in the slightest to follow through with that promise. That’s not like you – or, well, it is, but only when you’ve got an agenda outside of what you appear to be aiming for. How am I supposed to deal with that? Punish you? It’s a little bigger than that, don’t you think?”

“It was a stupid promise to be asked to make! Who are you to even think you have the right to try to make us give you a promise like that? You…” Dean stopped and pulled up, taking hold of himself visibly, and ignoring Castiel’s accusation of an ulterior motive. He stared at Castiel. “So, you’re on board now? You aren’t going to try to stop us?”

Cas huffed, but his laugh held no amusement. Cas was pissed too. “How would I stop you? I still think you’re irrational, but I want pups too. It’s amazing to me that you can suggest that I be your pup’s Papa in one breath, and then tell me I have no right to voice an opinion on the matter in the next. The truth is, if my opinion matters to you, I will be overjoyed if Michael catches. Like I said, I want pups. I want them with you, Dean. Fuck, I’d love to be able to have them with you naturally, but I’ll take what nature allows us. Don’t think for one second, though, that this is about our children. I’m not stupid. I know what you’re doing. Fuck, I’ve watched you do it for as long as I’ve known you.”

Dean stood up. “And what am I doing?” His eyes flashed alpha challenge.

Cas stepped in. His eyes streaked red. “I love you! You listen to me very, very carefully, Dean Michael. You mean everything to me. I’m not with you to make my mate happy. I can’t breathe
when we’re apart. I need you so badly, and it killed me when you left. I’m never going through that again, Dean, not if I can help it. So, push me all you want; I am NOT going to throw you out, no matter how hard you try to make me! I am NOT going to break it off with you! If you want out, you’re going to have to do it yourself, do you hear me?” Castiel advanced on him slowly. “You can test me however many times you need to, but I’m NOT walking away from you! FUCK! I LOVE YOU, GODDAMNIT!”

“WELL, I’M NOT WALKING AWAY EITHER!”

Cas’s eyes widened in surprise. He’d expected Dean to demur. He’d expected a Submissive response. The absurdity of the fight struck him, and he tried to stifle a laugh, but couldn’t. “I guess, we’re getting married…” he choked out between giggles. Why was he laughing? It wasn’t funny.

Dean shook his head in confusion and concern. HE was supposed to be the unstable one.

Eventually, Cas got a hold of himself, and they wound up side by side on the bench. Cas took Dean’s hand. “Is there ever going to be a point, do you think, when you no longer feel the need to jump off cliffs to see if I’ll come running to catch you? I’m always going to, or die trying, you know. Can we leave it at that, do you think? Just with the knowledge that I’ll do my best for you for the rest of my life without you having to keep poking at it? I really do love you, Dean.”

Dean pulled Cas’ knuckles up and kissed them. “Not a chance, Novak.”

“Winchester,” Cas corrected him, and sighed, leaning back. “It’s exhausting, Dean. I’m terrified I’m going to miss your next ploy, or the next one, or the next…Someday, I will get sidetracked, I’ll miss it, and you’ll fall flat on your face. Someone’s going to get hurt. You’ll get hurt. Michael’s going to get hurt.”

Michael was strolling slowly closer. He would reach them soon. Dean didn’t know how to respond. He’d never had to worry about collateral damage before.

Cas changed the subject. “Dean, I have something I need to tell you, something I don’t want to tell you, but you need to know about. We need to get back to work. Can we talk after lunch?”

“I’m reviewing resumes after lunch,” Dean told him, standing up to greet his mate. “Let’s talk tonight. If this is about how you ordered the bombing of Gordon’s shithole, we should probably do that at home, and we should probably include Gabriel.” He wrapped an arm around Michael’s waist and left Castiel gaping slack-jawed on the bench.

“That was pretty cold, you know,” Michael chastised quietly as they walked away.

“He deserved it. Asshole got on to ME for lying to HIM. Like I haven’t known about his little ‘mission’ all along. Who does he think he’s dealing with?” Dean leaned in as they walked and kissed Michael’s cheek.

“Fuck, Dean. You two don’t need a marriage counselor, you need a fucking referee. Don’t fuck this up, Winchester. I’ve finally got a home that makes sense to me. You get us kicked out, and I will fucking end you,” Michael growled.

“That’s a lot of ‘fucks’. You’re going to have to clean up your language before I let you mother my children.” Dean yelped as Michael pinched him hard on the ass. A look over their shoulders told them Castiel was following, shaking his head in wonder.

“We’re not finished with this conversation yet, Dean,” the Alpha called forward.
“Damn straight!” Dean hollered rudely back and kept walking.

They made it to the 10:30 staff meeting by the barest of margins. Dean sat smugly in his usual chair on the corner next to the Alpha, keeping his eyes focused down the length of the table, ignoring the nudges Cas gave his foot. He kept his update short and simple. The candidate search was on schedule. There were several likely options among the resumes. Next session’s classes could be covered with a bit of stretching, but they would need to expand soon. Demand was high as more and more families bought into the idea of having their pups tested and trained as they came of age.

Dean wanted to increase the number of conventions he and Sam committed to. They needed the money, and they needed it fast. Castiel cleared his throat. Dean could feel his disagreement through the three feet of space between their bodies, but he wasn’t giving in. Eventually, tuition fees would cover the costs of training, but there was a lag of several years before that could happen, and they needed funding now. Their donors were maxed out covering capital projects. The investors took care of operational expenses. Federal funds only covered healthcare, testing, and community services. If The Facility wanted to be able to keep the classroom doors welcoming to the ever increasing demand, they needed a fresh source. This was the way, and Dean knew it. He and Sam had already crunched numbers. They only needed five more conventions per year to cover the next three sessions at projected matriculation rates.

“It’s a paradox,” Benny concluded. “We need a bigger staff to service more clients and make more money, but we need the money to afford a bigger staff. Time for another brainstorming budget committee, sounds like. I’m in. Who else wants to volunteer? Dean?”

“Yep, count me in. I’ve got a couple of rough ideas to toss around. We can see what works, what doesn’t. Pam?”

“Sorry, Dean. I have to get back to Dallas with Rufus and Cole. Our first round of candidate interviews is next week. I only came back for a couple of weeks to help with Michael’s tests.” Pam smiled at him. Dean blushed and smiled back. He was touched that she put so much effort into helping with Michael. Michael deserved it. “By the way,” she turned to Benny. “Did Cole tell you he was considering requesting a permanent transfer? It may not be my place to bring it up, but you should know where his head is. He’s done really well down there, and he wants to stay. He may not get up the nerve to ask.”

“Yes, we’ve talked. If no one has an objection, I’m going to approve the transfer.” Benny clicked his pen and looked at Cas. “Means we’re short an E.O. for real. What say you, Alpha?” For all his initial ire in the face of Castiel’s confession, little strain showed in their working relationship. Benny was just Benny, as he had always been. Cas didn’t know what might’ve passed between the two partners at the far end of the table, but Benny seemed to feel no new stresses when he spoke to Bobby either. Maybe he had already processed his anger in a single white hot flareup, and now he was copacetic.

“Get him transferred and off our budget, so we can free up his salary and get busy replacing him. What’s next?” Cas wanted to move things along. He was unnerved by Dean’s casual announcement that he already knew the big secret, and the faster he pushed through the day, the faster he could confront him about it.

“That’s all I’ve got,” said Dean. “Billie, you’re up.”
“Two things, Alpha. The first is that I’m getting more and more requests from Primate organizations who want to contract E.O.s from us to discipline their members. The latest is a semi-professional baseball team in Topeka. Apparently, the young men on the team could use some good old-fashioned motivation to stop drinking and whoring and get to bed on time while they’re out on the road.”

“Absolutely not,” said Benny vehemently. “That’s not what we do. If they want a paddle swinger, it’s not rocket science. They can hire a Dominatrix from the internet.”

“Hold on, alpha.” Sam leaned forward. “This might be a good opportunity. We could at least train their folks to do it. Get us a new source of revenue and make Dean happy.” He nodded at his brother. “And build up some new connections in the ape community. Adult corporal punishment is one of our biggest consistently controversial misunderstandings with the apes. If we can help turn around the behavior of a couple of sports teams, that might give us an easy success that we can point to as an example of how it works from inside their own community. It’s something they can understand. As long as we can keep them from sexualizing it, this might be a way in. At least think about it.”

Benny grumbled but didn’t argue further. For him, that was tantamount to a near full capitulation. They were as good as contracted already if Dean’s guess meant anything. He bit his cheek to keep from smiling too wide.

“And the other?” prompted Cas.

“There’s a PhD candidate from KU who wants to do her thesis on comparative social development between apes and wolves. She’s requesting full access to The Facility for a twelve-week training session. She’s got an interesting perspective, Castiel. I think you should meet with her.”

Bobby scoffed, and Cas glared at him. “Oh, come on, Cas. You’re not seriously considering this? There’s a reason we don’t let apes past the north wing. They don’t understand. I don’t care if she was raised in the Canadian Rockies by wolves, she’s not going to understand, and then we’ll have villagers with pitch forks at our door once her thesis gets published. All it’s going to take will be to have one D.F. happen while she’s eating in the cafeteria.”

Cas turned to Billie. “Who’s her advisor?”

“Uh,” Billie checked her notes. “Karl Meyer.”

“I rest my case,” Bobby declared.

Cas leaned back and looked at the ceiling. “Maybe it’s time. He’s no friend of ours, it’s true, but that doesn’t mean this woman’s a protégé of his. Arrange a meeting, please Billie. I’ll talk with her. It’s not going to hurt anything to talk. We can’t keep trying to explain the violence in our packs away as simple Dom/sub interaction. Eventually, they’re going to have to see it for what it is, and accept it.”

Bobby huffed and tapped the table impatiently. Cas raised his eyebrows at Bobby down the length of the table, and every wolf in the room went still. “Do you have something to say, Singer?”

Bobby leaned forward, and his whole body screamed a desire to fight it out. His voice shook. “I want it noted in the record that this is a stupid idea.” Bobby didn’t back down, and he stressed the word ‘stupid’. He seemed to expect a reaction from Cas. His body tensed, and his eyes began to show red.

“Noted,” Cas clipped with flaring nostrils and quiet authority, holding his eyes, giving him a chance to spark up if he was going to. Then he turned away from Bobby, dismissing his objection. “Next.
Jo?” Bobby shoved back into his chair and worked visibly to bring his anger under control.

“I don’t have anything that Dean didn’t already cover, Alpha. Oh, except I need you to save us some blocks in your schedule for interviews next week. I think we’re bringing in six candidates.”

“Done. Next?”

Ellen cleared her throat and sat up straighter. “Alpha, I need permission to bring in a couple of experts from the Keller Foundation to look at Michael’s test log. There are enough anomalies that I don’t feel comfortable letting the computer numbers stand without review. We’ll know more after his Eval tomorrow, but I think where this particular Omega is concerned, we need to be careful. This case stands to see a great deal of scrutiny, and we need to get it right the first time.”

“Permission granted, Omega. Call in whomever you need, but please copy me in on any correspondence. I want to stay involved.”

“Me, too,” Dean interrupted. “I want in. And, uh, Ellen? What are the numbers looking like? Can you give us a preliminary?”

“He’s way out there, Dean. There’s no doubt he’s going to be pushing the limits, but I’m not sure how close to the line he really sits. I don’t want to make any statements before I speak to Carol and Jonathon with the Keller group.”

“Forget the legal statement, Ellen,” Dean tried again. “Which limits? Both of them, or just the ‘Y’?”

Ellen sighed and steeled herself. She had known Dean would push. “He’s Central O, Dean. The algorithm sets him as a solid 13. That fits with what we know of his hormone production and general anatomy. I really don’t have a question about his secondary ratings. Frankly, it’s the tertiary. I need to be sure.”

The tension in the room went noticeably higher. There was a sense of expectation. Dean wondered if it had been anything like this as they had worked to rate himself, or Cas.

“Ellen, just tell me.” Dean used his alpha voice, and he held her eye.

She swallowed. “The computer rates him as 18.4, but there are extenuating circumstances. Some of his behaviors have no precedent that the algorithm can account for. I need some advice from the community at large and the guidance committee on how to address these anomalies.”

No one spoke for a minute. No one moved. It wasn’t merely unprecedented, it should be impossible.

Finally, Dean tried again. “Cut the bullshit, Ellen. Is he a 19 or a 20, once it’s all said and done? Where’s he going to land once you CYA your way through all the paperwork?”

“He’s not a 20, Dean. There’s really no such thing unless they redraw the chart, thanks to our Alpha. Plus, Castiel Claimed him with no issue or any significant struggle. He’s nowhere near Castiel’s 20.” Dean licked his lips. “Are you telling me my mate is a tertiary 19? Is that what I’m hearing from you, Omega? Michael’s the most dominant wolf ever tested next to Castiel? He’s an Omega. Is that even possible?”

Ellen looked around the table, hoping for a way out of having to say this without all her ducks in a row. It wasn’t that she didn’t know the answer, but she had no way to defend her answer without following all of the protocols to validate an alteration of the computer’s determination. No one said a word.
“Dean, we still need to do some validation, please understand that, but, yes, once it’s all said and done, he’s a 19.”

Dean tuned out after that. Fuck his whole life. Tied heart, soul, and body, to two of them – not one, but the two highest ranked Dominants in the Whole. Fucking. World. He shook his head to dispel the buzzing sensation. He had the vague sense that people were still talking, but his world zoomed in on Ellen’s face. She looked apologetic.

Some distant part of him had known already. After all, he’d Topped Raphael. Raphe wasn’t super high on the chart, but he was solidly both alpha and Dominant. Solidly. And Michael took him down in moments without a fight. Dean felt movement around him, but he ignored it. If he needed to move, someone would let him know. The buzzing in his head coalesced slowly into urgent pounding through the bond from Michael. It felt like Michael was trying to climb through the metaphysical connection bodily in response to Dean’s state of mind. Dean’s lips were numb. He stroked them unconsciously with his fingertips. Were they still there?

“Dean. Dean! DEAN!” Benny’s voice broke through. “You all right, Brother? You look like you’re ‘bout to pass out.”

“I’m okay, Ben. I can’t…believe it. What? Where did he come from? What the fuck do we do?” Babbling was an old standby of Dean’s that let him filter through the rapid fire flingings of his brain out loud. Someone always caught the important stuff as it flowed past and let him reassemble it all later. “Can I tell him? Son of a bitch. I don’t even know what to say. He’s…he’s not even gonna care! Well, fuck, who won the goddamn betting pool?”

“Charlie’s got the list. You’ll have to ask her, but don’t do it yet,” Ellen told him. “We need to wait until it’s official. It’s going to take longer than usual. Don’t make me sorry I told you, Dean. This doesn’t change anything. He’s still the same man you Mated. Try not to go all weird on him. He’ll be under enough pressure as it is, poor bastard.”

Castiel took back over. “On that note, does anyone else have anything critical to bring up? I’m cutting this meeting short, so if you need to speak, do it now.” They murmured for a minute amongst themselves, but they all agreed everything remaining could wait. “Thank you everyone, get some lunch, let’s stay on track please. There are deadlines approaching. If you have one, you know who you are. By the way, as a quick personal announcement, I have recently changed my legal name, and all of the ACRI documents that bear my name need to be changed over the course of the next few months. Please don’t reorder anything without going through Donna first, but go ahead and use up what you have. Donna’ll have the new reorder numbers. You’re all dismissed.”

“You can’t just leave it like that, Alpha,” Meg protested from her seat beside Bobby. “What do you mean you changed your name? What do we call you now?”

“You may continue to call me, Alpha, Margaret,” he deadpanned, enjoying the taunt although his face registered his usual stoicism.

She was brave enough to bitchface him, and he gave her credit for pluck, his mouth quirking up on one side. He took pity and relented.

“You know that I’m engaged.” Meg nodded, looking rapidly between Dean and Cas in excitement. “Well, I’m taking my fiancé’s name. I’ve already filed for the name change, and it’s become official. You may begin to refer to me in correspondence as Alpha Dr. Winchester, despite the fact that we aren’t yet married. It’s a technicality that will be remedied as quickly as we can pull something together.” Meg squealed and clapped her hands. Jo grinned at Dean, mouthing something he didn’t catch, but that was probably obscene. Sam smiled gently.
“You are all invited to the wedding, of course,” Castiel continued. “If you are inclined to attend, please mark your calendars and save the date of September 9th.” He was speaking to the assembled staff, but his eyes stayed trained on Dean’s. Dean looked back at him. Castiel made everything look so easy. September 9th was their wedding day. After the ninth of September, they would be married. That’s all there was to it. It would be a done deal. He’d have a husband. He’d have a massively Dominant husband who got off on whipping bloody stripes up his back and down his thighs. Dean leaned into his palm and caressed Michael’s worried mind from the conference room. Dean let Cas do the same for him through their joined gaze, and everything was fine. Everything would be just fine. Castiel would see it so.

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Dean blew a long breath out and let his wide eyes communicate to Michael how intense a meeting that had been, but he didn’t tell the Omega anything of substance. He let Michael direct him to the lunchroom, and they sat at an empty table near the back. It didn’t stay empty for long. Michael ducked his head to avoid making eye contact with people he didn’t really want to get to know, but Dean drank in the comfort of the pack around him. Charlie was here, and Jody with her mate Donna. Michael greeted Jody as casually as he could, and she smiled maternally at him and pinched his cheek.

Adam approached cautiously with his tray, and Dean pulled him in to sit on Dean’s other side, one space removed from Michael. He didn’t know Adam well, but if Michael was going to be training here rather than at home, Dean suspected they were going to get to know each other. He suspected Adam was going to be a new mainstay.

“Eat fast, Winchester,” said Jo, squirming into the long bench between Adam and Dean. “We’ve got a buttload to get done this afternoon, and you’re not dumping it all on me again. I have to finalize the ceremony for the certifications in my Ozzie class. Fuck, I’m gonna miss those little squeakers.”

“Hey, Joanna Beth, remind me again?…who’s the boss, and who’s the peon here? You don’t get to tell me what to do. It’s the other way ’round, and by the way, you just fucking sat on Adam. Move your ass, Harvelle,” he bitched, but he shuffled Michael over so he could make more space.

“Fuck you, Dean. Sam told me what you said, about making my life hell just because you can. I dare you to fucking try it mister.”

“That’s Doctor, to you, Jo. Or you can call me alpha. I’ll also answer to Sir. Don’t forget, you wanted the job, and you begged me to come back and be your boss. Begged. Me.” He took a huge bite from his burger, and she groaned in disgust.

“Psst!” Charlie hissed at him across the table and got everyone’s attention. She gestured subtly at a table several rows over, nodding her head, and widening her eyes in significance. Dean looked, but all he saw was Meg eating with Sam. He frowned in confusion at Charlie, and shrugged his shoulders. Michael whistled long and low, very quietly, obviously catching on to what Dean was missing.

“What am I missing?” Dean asked him, realizing that everyone else at the table was side-eyeing the two from lowered eyes. He looked across at Sam again, flummoxed. Sam looked uncomfortable and sorry about something. Meg looked…hurt. Meg looked hurt? Meg wasn’t capable of being hurt.
Jo put him out of his misery. “Dean, Jesus, you’re blind. You know how you and Alpha both went to pieces when he Mated April and you took off? Yeah, well not everyone in that situation gets to ride home on a white horse and get wedding bells. Fuck. Poor Meg. I can’t believe they’re having ‘The Talk’ right here in front of everyone.”

Garth passed the couple on his way from collecting his lunch. They were alone at a table in a room where all of the tables were filling fast, but no one attempted to share their space. He scurried past and slipped in on Michael’s far side. “Are you guys seeing this?” he whispered. “Poor Sam. Right here in the open. Oh, hey Michael,” he greeted cheerfully as he noticed the Omega who had outed his deepest kink to the world.

Dean watched as surreptitiously as he could, and looking around, he realized the whole lunchroom was doing the same. The couple at the table didn’t appear to notice. Meg became animated, and her eyes teared up. Sam bowed his head. He looked like he wanted to hug her, but he didn’t think he should.

“Meg’s in love with Sam?” Dean asked, leaning in to Jo and speaking quietly.

“Oh, Holy Fuck, Dean! Are you the only person you think about? Meg’s been in love with Sam for four years.” Jo poked him in the ribs. “This has got to suck great big dicks for her. I mean, in another lifetime, in another place, she and Sam are probably compatible enough to Trigger with each other. They should’ve been True-Mates.”

“WHAT!? Meg and my brother!? Are you insane? They’re not a match! At…eww…all!”

“Keep your voice down, Dean,” Garth chided him, reaching an arm across Michael. “This is a really hard time for Meg. You don’t want to embarrass her more than necessary.”

“Embarrass her? Have you MET her?” But he lowered his voice. She did truly appear uncomfortable, maybe even embarrassed as she toyed with her food, seemingly needing something to do with her hands. Sam shook his head sadly, said something softly to her with a look of regret on his face, and then he stood up, cleared his tray, and left her at the table alone. Meg watched him go, and the only thing Dean could see on her face was heartbreak.

Shit.

Dean knew that feeling. His heart dropped out of his chest, and he was on his feet before he knew it, striding quickly between the rows. He came upon Meg from behind, sank down beside her and wrapped her up in his arms. He felt warm moisture on his shoulder as she realized who he was and what he meant to bring to her. She accepted him with her whole body, and her tears overflowed. For long, quiet minutes, he rocked her as she sobbed wordlessly, stroking her hair and letting her tuck her heart shaped face into his shoulder and his neck.

The cafeteria cleared out slowly, and everyone left them alone. Someone must’ve collected Michael and herded him along in their wake, for Michael was nowhere to be seen. Dean whispered to her every now and then.

Finally, she whispered back. “Why did you get to hear yes, and I got no, Dean? It’s not fair.”

“I know, Sweetheart. It’s not fair. I don’t know what to tell you. I’m really sorry. You don’t deserve this.”

“It’s not his fault, Dean. He doesn’t love me. I knew he didn’t, but I had to try. It’s not his fault he doesn’t love me. No one does. It’s just me. It’s just how I am.”
“Well fuck that, Meg! That’s bullshit. You know it doesn’t work like that. You just wait. You’ve seen it happen. It’s coming for you, too. Swear to God. You’re adorable, and you’re spunky, and you’re a hell of a lot of fun, and you’re fiercely loyal to your friends. You are so fucking lovable, I might try to Mate you myself.”

“Eww, gross! Wrong Winchester! Get off me, you creep!” She shoved away from him, and he laughed.

“Seriously, Meg.” He held her eyes with a patient and kind look. “You’re young, and you’re in the right place. It’s going to happen. I know it hurts, and I know you don’t want to hear this, but he’s not right for you. Trust me. I know him better than anyone on the planet. He smells bad. He never cooks or cleans up anything. He’s lazy as fuck, and he’ll bitch, whine, and moan until you want to brain him with a frying pan. He’s got no sense of humor to speak of. Besides, you only come up to his diaphragm. How exactly could you two make sex work if you can’t reach all his bits at once?”

She laughed at the image, but shook her head and sobered. “He’s really kind to me, and…I don’t know if you’ve ever had sex, alpha, but even if he’s an NBA forward and I’m a sideshow Thumbelina, all of our parts line up when it matters. Mechanics aren’t the issue here. You might be right about the rest of it, but the sex was never in question.” Her face crumpled again, but not as severely as before. “It just hurts so bad to want someone who doesn’t want me back.”

“I know.” He pulled her back in and rested his chin on her head.

“What do you know! You got your prince. Castiel fucking worships you, Dean. If he lost everything he owns and all his power and all his influence, but he got to keep you, Alpha would brush himself off, brew himself a cup of tea, and consider it an awesome fucking day. You’re literally ALL he cares about. Don’t go all, ‘I know’ on me, you asshole.”

Dean didn’t have a good answer to that one. “He likes April pretty well, you know.”

“Psshh! You moron. April’s his mate. She’s chicken soup and grilled cheese. She’s home and hearth, and all that shit. You know that’s not what Castiel wants, not in a partner. You think April’s going to fight with him about arcane History Channel crap or call him out for leaving his half empty cups all over the kitchen? You think April’s the one he fantasizes about when he chokes his chicken in the shower? God, you’re so stupid. Who does he look for whenever he needs to work through something complicated? Who fights with him endlessly about all the crap he doesn’t want to do around here but needs to? Who makes him think when he’d rather just wing it? Why do you think we run looking for you when his eyes go red? Whose shoulder has he been crying on for the past eight years when everything goes to shit?”

“Hey, now. Castiel doesn’t cry.”

“You know what I mean. I just…” she got much quieter, “I wish I could have that with someone. Even if I Mated, it wouldn’t be like that. I’m nearly as Sub as you are. No one’s going to want me for their fucking life partner. I’ll always just be a Sub, and I’m fucking jealous as hell of you and your Golden Alpha. Fuck! Why do all the pretty people have to congregate together?”

Dean’s phone buzzed. He read it, and sucked in a breath, showing it to Meg. The message was in all caps:

FROM: Jo Harvelle
TO: Dean Winchester
“You better go,” she told him. “Thanks for letting me fall apart all over your nice shirt. Sorry about the snot.”

“Snot!?” He twisted his neck and lowered his chin to try to get a look at his shoulder.

Meg snickered, and then sighed.

Dean stood up. “You’ll be all right?”

“No. I’m fucked. I’ll live, though. I’m tougher than I look.”

“You’re telling me. Remember the time we got caught sneaking Jell-O into the bathtub in the prep room because we wanted to see what a Jell-O bath felt like, and Benny lined us up side-by-side to beat both our asses? Fuck, you can take a hit. That was awesome.”

“Get out of here, Winchester, or Harvelle’s gonna recreate that moment just for you.”

“She’d need an army or two. I may not have much say over what happens to my ass at home, but I can take Joanna Beth. Don’t you worry.”

“Thanks, Dean. I mean it.” She was still sitting alone at the table near the back in the big room that had almost emptied of people.

He gave her a grim smile, waved a hand above his head, and turned to get back to work.

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“D’juno Meg’s nluv wi Sam?”

“Dean, for Pete’s sake, swallow the bite, and then speak. Yes, of course I did. They’ve been scening together since he first joined us, and she’s been, well, at least smitten since the beginning. You didn’t know?” Castiel poured his beer in a Pilsner glass, but Dean snatched his bottle away before it had to face such sacrilege. The alpha took another bite of his turkey sandwich, but this time he chewed it thoroughly and cleared his mouth before he spoke.

“Had no idea. She’s really broken up over his Mating. She pulled him over at lunch and asked him straight out if he loved her at all and if he would consider trying out something like what we’re doing. He turned her down flat. I feel so bad for her.” Dean followed Cas out of the kitchen. With a refrigerator full of leftovers and tidbits, Dean announced dinner was an ‘on-your-own’ smorgasbord buffet. He’d thrown a sandwich together for himself while Cas chose a slice of cold leftover quiche.

“Ours is not a bad prototype to follow, but Sam and Meg were never going to work together.” Cas pushed the game room door open with his back and held it for Dean.

“See, that’s what I said. They’re not compatible. Plus, Sam’s been in love with Jess since he was a tadpole in his Daddy’s scrotum.”
“That’s vivid, Dean,” Michael scolded.

“Bite me,” Dean sassed back, letting Michael swipe half of his sandwich. There was more turkey in the fridge. He could make another one. “Can you imagine Meg and Sam trying to pull a marriage out of their asses? God, what a nightmare that would be.”

“I don’t really know Meg at all,” Michael mused, his mouth full of turkey.

“Trust me. It’s a bad idea.”

Gabriel put his head in, realized he’d found where they were hiding, and came in. He was clean-shaven and very tidy. He looked…

“You’re leaving.” Dean startled himself as he realized it was true. Gabe was dressed down to his shoes, and he had a leather bag in his hand. He had a strange look on his face – guilt, buried beneath frustration, covered by determination.

“Can I talk to you, Castiel?” Gabe asked his brother in a muted voice. Cas put his quiche down on the poker table but held on to his beer.

“Gabriel, I can’t allow you to leave the grounds. I know it’s hard to stay put, and you’re going stir crazy, but I need you safe right now.” Cas Alpha’d his way through his standard answer every time Gabe pushed on this one, but his brother set his mouth and shook his head.

“You know you can’t keep me here if I decide to leave, and… I’ve got to…” He put his bag down and tried again. “Shit, this is harder than I thought with this damned chain holding me.” Cas blinked. That was the first time Gabriel had EVER acknowledged that Cas’ Claim over him was even noticeable from the inside, much less that it had any pull. Gabe swept a hand through his hair and began again.

“I found them, Cas. I need to be there, on the inside or I can’t get anything I need. I can’t do this from here. Whether you ‘allow’ it or not, I have to go.”

“Stop being mysterious. Found whom? What are you talking about?” Castiel was annoyed.

“Ruby and Alistair. They’re in Minnesota. They bought a failing Omega breeding shop together, and they’re beginning to work it into operation. I knew the bastards would stick their greasy heads back up eventually. Cas, I gotta go. You should see this place.” Gabriel stepped up close to his little brother and looked up into his face, entreatling. “My girl got some intel, even smuggled me a few pics.”

“No, Gabe. You can do it from here. You’re not going. It isn’t safe yet.”

“Bullshit. It’s never going to be safe for me, Castiel. We both know that, but I can’t stay here rotting. I CAN’T work from this house for the rest of my life. I need this, and you know damned well THEY need this. Fuck, Cas! There are people dying out there, or worse, and I can help them.”

Cas’ lips were a line across his face, and his nostrils flared. He turned away from Gabe and slammed the glass down on the table beside his food, ignoring the slosh.

Gabe steeled himself and went on. “The place was abandoned by the owner. Apparently, the guy thought the cops were on their way, so he jumped ship and left all those poor sons-a-bitches locked in their kennels to rot. Cops never showed, man. Nobody knew they were there, and by the time Ruby showed up, several of ‘em were already dead. The ones who were alive are in crap shape. The two of them, Alistair and Ruby, moved right in and started to get it running again. Dumped the
bodies, saved the ones who could be saved. They’ve already put a lot of work into it.”

“Breeding kennels are illegal!” said Michael, shocked.

“No shit, but they make a ton of money on the black market,” Gabe told him, looking older than his years and world weary.

“Gabe, how do you know any of this?” Dean asked.

“Got a girl on the inside. My network watches the underbelly for hints that anyone’s hiring for shady work, and they show up to apply for the job with all the right credentials. Ruby fell in love with her from the jump; took her right in, and told her everything. She’s been working there for a couple weeks now, smuggling me intel. But it’s time to move now. I have everything I need, and I did everything I can do from here.” He turned back to his brother. “Cas.” Castiel avoided his eye. “I’m leaving either way, but it will be so much easier on both of us if you tell me yes. I don’t need your fucking Claim pulling at my belly all the time, distracting me.”

“They know you, Gabriel. You can’t slip in with these two like you do everywhere else. They know your face and your voice.” Cas spoke through clenched teeth. “Talk to Bobby, and get someone else. Send someone else!”

“No.”

“NO, GABRIEL! I’M NOT LETTING YOU…!”

“I’m doing this, Castiel. You know why I have to. You know it has to be me. You can’t stop me. Please understand. Please, little brother. Say yes. There are innocent people suffering. Dying. I can help them. I can do this, Castiel. Fucking, let me.”

Castiel closed his eyes. Dean put a hand on his shoulder. Michael looked close to tears.

“Fuck, if you didn’t just make me turn this into a fucking soap opera. Damnit, Cas!” Gabriel rounded in front of his brother and took hold of his bicep. “It’s not about YOU! You don’t have the right to put your own needs in front of every other thing that goes on in the world! I’m all gooey inside that you love me this much, man, but you don’t get to tie everything you care about down so it can’t walk away from you. I’m not leaving YOU! But I HAVE to help these people! They are human people, Castiel, and they’re being tied down on breeding benches, gagged so they can’t scream, and raped over and over until they catch with some asshole’s mutt! They’re being forced to carry their own rapists’ pups and give birth with no pain meds, then have their pups ripped away from them, only to heal up and do it all over again! Fuck, Cas, are you so selfish you would leave them to that so you don’t have to risk losing me?”

“YES! Gabriel, you’re not the only one…”

“Yes, I am, Castiel. Listen to me. I am the ONLY one who can do this. If it’s not me, it won’t be anyone, and those people will stay in that shithole in Minnesota until their bodies give out on them and they die. Or until they fail to catch a couple of times and Alistair puts a hammer through the back of their heads.”

Gabriel stopped talking and glared daggers at his brother. Michael swallowed audibly, his Adam’s apple bobbing. Dean pressed himself against Castiel’s back and pushed his face into the Alpha’s neck, offering support and taking comfort both. April, who had been set to practice, but who had obviously felt her mate’s state of mind, came in and wrapped her arms around him, pushing Gabriel out of the way. Cas buried his face in her hair as his arms embraced her.
“Alpha?” she asked.

Cas swallowed and bit his lip as his head came back up. “Tell Gabriel goodbye, April. He’s leaving for a while. He has work to do.”
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Everything comes unglued. There's a bit of broken glass. The Omegas learn to see each other.

Chapter Notes

Wow, that solar eclipse was stellar (see what I did there?) We only got 70% here, but it was still amazing. Pictures from my folks who traveled to Missouri were amazing. Geeking out big-time.

I've been waiting to put this one out there for a really long time. I hope the pace isn't killing you - either the slowly moving plot (this one will help with that) or the massive word count. If you can't keep up for a while because, life, don't worry. We'll be here when you get back.

This chapter is my most satisfying in ages. I really hope it still feels right to me as it ages. One never knows.

Enjoy. There's tears again. Sorry, not sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 48 – Tuesday, June 20, 2017

THEN:

“Dean…come on, Baby, wake up. You’ll be late for breakfast, kiddo. Thought you wanted to help me with the French toast.” She had her head poked in, and her eyes went soft. There were moments, brief, fleeting moments, when parenthood lived up to the Hallmark card hype, and early Sunday mornings… well, Hallmark had a point sometimes. His head just barely showed above the covers that he had pulled up over his face, and his stringy body rustled the covers, seeking a comfortable warm nestled position.

“All right. Your loss. We can do French toast next Sunday if you like.” She started to pull her head back into the corridor. Sammy was already up and brushing his teeth in the shared bathroom, still wearing his pajamas. She had nearly closed the door on her oldest son when she heard his sleep-roughened voice, accusatory.

“I’m coming. You promised.” The bedclothes shifted at last, and Mary laughed at him.

“All right. I’ll meet you in the kitchen. Don’t dawdle. Your Dad gets very hungry in the morning.
We wouldn’t want to keep him waiting. Hurry up now, Dean.”

“Yes’m.”

Within eight minutes he was perched on the kitchen counter with a mixing bowl in one hand and a whisk in the other. His tongue caught between his teeth in concentration, the 10-year-old pup stirred diligently, trying not to spill the egg-mixture over the side of the bowl while getting vigorous enough with his stirring to get it to the consistency his mother would approve of.

“Let me see, Pup,” she checked. “Good. Okay, next we make sure the pan is hot enough. Get a drop or two of water and see if they dance on the skillet.” He followed her directions, and the droplets skittered violently, then evaporated, leaving nothing.

She guided him step-by-step into dredging the bread, greasing the pan, toasting it so that it browned deliciously without burning or going soggy. It was a delicate balance for the pup, but she didn’t touch a single tool. She directed, but he cooked, and when they finished, he presented his alpha with a warm platter of crisp, sweet toast.

“Sweet Jesus, Dean. That smells delicious. You’re a right fine cook,” John gushed, helping himself to maybe more than he needed from a healthy-eating perspective. Truth be told, he would’ve complimented anyone who put food in front of him this morning. He was starving. But it really did smell good, and he really was proud of his son. Dean tried to take the compliment coolly, thinking himself too old for such outright praise, but he couldn’t hide his eyes from his father. John tousled his hair, and served Sammy’s plate too.

“You know,” he told his boys. “I need to put some work in today on my old Chevy. Anyone want to help me with that? I sure could use an extra pair of hands out there. Some of those bolts are mighty hard to loosen without the extra help.”

Sam took a bite, and didn’t answer. He had hoped Mom would let him hang out today at Pete’s house next door. They were going to design a tree house. Of course, they’d done that many times over already, and the designs never left Pete’s bedroom floor, but they enjoyed their drawings and their dreams.

“Can I help with the car?” asked Dean. Sam thought he was crazy to imprison himself voluntarily for who knew how many hours in the hot garage handing Dad tools and listening to him go on and on about engine parts and function.

“I really appreciate it Dean. I won’t keep you all day. It’s just an oil change. We’ll get on it right after breakfast. Sammy, would you like to help?” John already knew his younger son’s answer.

“Can’t Daddy. Pete and me are building today. I promised.”

“All right,” John acquiesced. Sam’s turn would come. He wasn’t spoiled. Mary put both the boys to work doing a steady round of chores, but some things ought to be voluntary, at least while the boys were young, and he wanted them to enjoy the work they chose. There was nothing inherently less valuable in spending the day on your belly designing your dream tree house than in loosening the drainpan of his old car. Sam would get there eventually.

The family breakfasted until Dean’s platter was clean. Mary caught the back of Sam’s collar as he tried to disappear out the back door, handed him a dish-cloth and set him to cleaning up the kitchen.

Dean and his dad changed the oil, and then mutually decided she needed a bath as well. Before they were finished, the Impala sparkled in the cold March air, even her hubcaps spotless.
NOW:

Castiel went very quiet once Gabriel disappeared. He silently picked his plate and drink back up, stood undecided for a moment, and then left the room. Dean exchanged a look with April, each weighing their options, and then they both followed, leaving Michael to turn back to the television. He had YouTube linked in, and he’d been watching old Convention videos. Dean trailed after the Omega who tracked her Alpha’s path with her mind.

They found him on the back porch staring out at the duck pond, placidly eating his quiche. Each of them took a chair to either side of him. Castiel reached a hand into his mate’s lap and interlocked their fingers without looking away from the ducks or pausing his meal. They let him eat quietly, just sitting with him. Dean felt a curious nudge from his mate, but he shooed it away like a mosquito, then immediately wondered if he could manage to communicate a desire through their bonds to have Michael deliver his beer. He began to concentrate on feelings of thirst.

“Dean, if you’re constipated, I can prescribe a treatment that will help.”

“Thanks, Cas. I’m fine,” Dean told him flatly. “Look, you go through this every time he leaves, but you knew it was coming. He stayed much longer than usual, and you’ve been tracking Gordon’s assholes for weeks now with no sign that they’re still hunting him. You couldn’t keep him here. He’s right, man. Everything he said. He’s right.”

“Just because I can’t see them doesn’t mean they aren’t out there, Dean. I have to believe that the other side has at least a few operatives who are as sneaky and persistent as Gabriel is. If they do, then they’re still out there just waiting for him to stick his head out.” Cas set his fork down and turned his tortured blue eyes on Dean.

“Come on, Cas. There’s no reason Gabe would be their priority. To them, he’s just a small-fry. They don’t know he’s connected to the explosion. Do they? Does anyone? All they know is he was there two weeks earlier, and he rescued one girl. They may not even know that much. Don’t you think their goal right now is just to stay out of jail?” Dean bore into Castiel’s face with unblinking eyes.

Cas squeezed his mate’s hand. “April, would you please excuse us? See if Michael would help you put something together for your dinner. I need to speak with Dean alone.” He leaned over and kissed her temple sweetly.

“I can make my own plate, Alpha. Don’t worry about me.” She was gone before he could remind her to select something green to go along with the rest of it. He turned solemn eyes back on Dean. There seemed to be a number of elephants trundling about, waiting to be addressed, and neither man knew where to start.

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April shuffled back to the kitchen, tired of being treated like a child. She dug cold pizza out of the fridge, and plated it without reheating. She rejected returning to the game-room with Michael and his patronizing brow. Instead, she plunked down alone at the kitchen table and texted chatty nonsense to her mother in Oklahoma. Mom didn’t answer, and that made her sadder than it should’ve. April felt
unaccountably lonely. She had cut practice short to check on her mate when she felt his heart drop to
his shoes, and that meant that after eating, she’d need to log another hour and a half on the board
before bedtime. Tonight was Alpha’s night sleeping with Dean, so she’d either be sleeping alone or
with Michael who no longer even spooned with her once Castiel scared the crap out of him over
touching her.

Right. Like Michael would ever think of her that way. To Michael, she was a puppy despite there
being a mere four or five years between them. Hmm, when was his birthday, anyway? Were they
closer to four years apart than five? Didn’t matter. When she needed her proverbial diaper changed,
he was always there, but to actually get three words out of him was an impossible feat. Not that she
wanted to…exactly. Not that she ever would, but it was monumentally frustrating to be categorically
ignored or pigeonholed as ‘Alpha’s Mate’.

Oh, and what was with Michael’s sudden fascination with HER mate? Did he think he was scoring
points with the Alpha? Did he think it was going to buy him anything, the brown-noser? It was
almost funny to watch Michael panting after Castiel, hanging on his every word, offering to do his
bidding.

“Oh yes,” she mimicked harshly under her breath, “Please fuck me too, Alpha. I want your big, fat
cock up my ass too, and after that I want you to spank me hardest of all…” She heard him come in
and dropped the mimic and her eyes at the same time, hoping he hadn’t heard her.

Michael put his dishes in the dishwasher and poured a glass of water, drinking it with his back to the
counter. He noticed, evidently, that she was without a drink, so he fetched water for her as well.

“Thank you, Michael,” she responded sweetly.

“Is that all you’re eating? You need a vegetable. I could steam you some broccoli or make a salad or
something.” He hovered.

“Whatever you think is best. I’m really not very hungry tonight.” The bond flared up into rage and
hurt, and they both looked automatically toward the back porch.

“Fuck,” he said under his breath and headed to the refrigerator to see about something green for
Castiel’s young mate. He found raw baby carrots and broccoli, poured a small dipping cup with
Ranch dressing and set it all beside her plate.

She raised her eyebrows. Toddler food? Really?

He didn’t notice her reaction.

“It’s getting ugly out there,” he noted, his eyes back toward the rear of the house.

“Couples fight sometimes, Michael. I’m sure they’re just clearing the air.” She took a bite from one
of the carrots.

“That’s your takeaway? Clearing the air? I don’t know what you’re getting from your mate, but
Dean’s pissed. And I just booked the band and set the menu and contracted with a florist. Might end
up cancelling it all after this.” Michael stole a broccoli section, dipped it and chewed it up with his
mouth not quite closed all the way.

“Don’t be dramatic. They’re alphas. They’re bound to flare up like this. It’s good for their
relationship. It’s good for their sex-life too. Doesn’t Dean respond better in bed after a big fight?”

“Eww. I don’t even want to think about it.” Michael leaned his chair back on two feet and put his
hands over his face, rubbing hard. Then he clumped the chair back down again and leaned on his crossed arms. “This really doesn’t bother you? The constant bickering? The fighting?”

“They may do a little bickering, but I’ve never known them to really fight. Well, before now.” She couldn’t deny this one was a full-on fight. Castiel was furious. She considered damping the bond a little to give him privacy.

Michael scoffed. “You just take whatever they feed you, don’t you? Do you ever have a thought or an opinion of your own? Don’t you care about anything besides what he tells you to care about?”

She put the last slice back on her plate and took a sip of water. “You think I’m pathetic, don’t you? You think I’m just here to serve the Alpha, cater to his whims, take his knot, bear his pups. You think we’re a mismatched pair, don’t you? What could that great man ever see in a weak, pathetic, pitiful slip of a girl like me?” She smirked a knowing smile at him, but she didn’t continue.

“I didn’t say that. Frankly, I don’t know what you are. You never say anything but ‘yes Alpha’ and ‘no Alpha’. You never put up any kind of argument or anything interesting at all. Maybe the sex is just that good. Beats me. Maybe you’re a fucking Aristotle, and I just haven’t seen it, but to tell you the truth, I haven’t seen it.” Michael wasn’t looking at her while he cut her to ribbons. She wondered if he had any idea how devastating his words would be to someone less confident in themselves than she.

“Well, the sex is pretty good. Too bad you won’t get a chance to get in on it. You’ll get a taste of it every now and then, I suppose, whenever he feels like teaching you a lesson and putting you in your place. In fact, you like that, don’t you Michael? I’m interested to see, over the next few months, just how many times you pretend to be a brat so he can bend you over and you can take the Alpha’s cock. He’s not going to knot you again, of course. That’s something he saves just for me. And Dean. On occasion. Rare occasion, but still. And it’s a really big knot, Michael. Takes Dean days to recover.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “You really want to goad me?”

“You’re not going to punish me, Omega.” She slipped him a sly look and thought about it, realizing it was true. It was a flash of pure intuition, but she knew it was true. Whatever Michael was, and she hadn’t quite figured him out yet, that’s something he wasn’t. He wasn’t her prison-guard. Her babysitter maybe, but not her executioner. It made her want to provoke him just to watch him squirm uncomfortably trying to find a way out of having to spank her.

“Don’t bet on it. I take my oaths seriously, same as you do. I’ll do what I need to.” He tried, bless his heart. He really tried to make it stick, but it just wasn’t in him. She avoided laughing in his face out of the knowledge that they had years of sharing space yet to come, and she didn’t really need an enemy.

“Is there any reason we can’t be friends, Michael? I don’t take anything away from you except maybe your pride, which is massively over-inflated anyway.”

“Is that how you usually try to make friends with people? That work for you?” he asked her with narrowed eyes, and this time she did laugh.

“I’ll try it another way. We’re not in competition. There’s room here for both of us, and we’re going to be spending a lot of time together once you finish with your training. Hell, we might even be knocked up at the same time, and then where will we be if we haven’t formed an alliance yet?”

Michael got a shrewd look on his face, and he pulled back a little, studying her. “You’re planning to
be here? And pregnant? Thought you had plans to get into that music school, then join up with some philharmonic somewhere and spend months out of the year on tour. Has something changed that I don’t know about?"

April riveted her attention on her water glass, spinning it, trying to produce a stable vortex. He put a hand on hers, stilling the glass and bringing her eyes to his. Damn, they were nearly as green as Dean’s.

“April?”

“Yeah. My audition for Pembrandt is in a month. I’ll be as ready as I can be. Don’t know whether I’ll get in, though. Places like that don’t usually take Omegas. They say we’re a distraction to the serious students. I’ve heard it from every private tutor I ever had. Nicholas said the same thing – said they would politely decline to accept me for the good of everyone involved.” She chuckled. “He keeps texting me links to sheet music and openings in pit orchestras in New York, as if I would ever leave Castiel.”

Michael just looked at her flatly.

“What?”

“You have no intention of going to school, do you?” He meant it as a question, but she took it as an accusation, and she ruffled uncomfortably. “Did you ever?”

“Of course I do! I love the piano. Matt says I’ve got enough natural talent and if I put the work in…”

“They have no intention of going to school, do you?” he asked, probing, trying to figure out her logic. “You said yourself you aren’t leaving. You think there’s enough audience in Lawrence, Kansas to make a career for a concert pianist?”

“There’s Topeka and Kansas City both. They’ve both got an arts district. They’ve both got a symphony orchestra,” she defended.

“Mm-hm, and that’s your big dream? To join the Topeka Kansas Symphony Orchestra and spend your life there? Hey, I’m not judging. It’s good you have a dream.” Michael took a carrot, dipped it, and took tiny bites, re-dipping after each one and chewing with his mouth open.

“Are you repulsive on purpose, or is it a character flaw?” she asked him, watching him eat her carrot.

“Repulsive?” he said, turning his cheeky smile and his charm up to full volume. “I’m adorable.”

“God help us,” she deadpanned, charmed in spite of herself. He really was adorable.

“Here’s what I think.” He said, reaching for another carrot.

“Oh good. Tell me what you think.”

“I think you’re playing Alpha for some kind of fool. I don’t think you have any intention of going to music school, and in fact, I’d be willing to bet that if you even suspect they might let you in you’ll throw the audition. Claim it’s ‘Omega nerves’ or something.” He side-eyed her briefly, but his eyes were pulled once more to the back of the house.

Hers followed his. “And why would I do that? I thought I was nothing but ‘yes, Alpha’ and ‘no, Alpha’. Where would I suddenly come up with all of this random sneakiness?”
“S’a good question.” He thought about it, wagging a carrot stick at her in consideration.

Suddenly his eyes widened, and he gasped mildly. “He said no to you too, didn’t he? You asked him for pups, and he said you had to wait, just like us. Holy fuck! You’re good. God, you’re good. Oh shit. How? How are you going to play it?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, and he immediately lowered his voice and his head, becoming conspiratorial. “Just tell me how it plays out. You put in weeks, months of work on your audition piece just to throw the audition. Then what? Consolation prize for the devastated Ozzie who just saw her dream crushed by the man? By that time, I’ll have caught my first pup, right? So, he’ll figure, what the hell, in for a penny, in for a pound? Knock you up at your next Heat? Jesus. I take it back. You’re not just a pretty face, are you? You’re a fucking schemer to the bone.’” He looked at her with new respect, waiting for a response, but she just picked her last slice back up, dipped the corner into her Ranch dressing, and continued her dinner.

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“Are we okay, Cas?” Dean asked at last. “Is it fucked up, or can we dig back out? I don’t know where we are right now.”

“Well, that’s honest, at least,” Castiel sighed, rubbing his eyes. “Dean, I…”

“Look, I fucked up. I was pushing you. We both know that, but what were you doing lying to me for weeks? How did you think I wasn’t going to figure that out? Why would you hide something like this? Fuck, Cas, I needed know!”

“I needed you NOT to know. I have a responsibility to protect you, and we’re all going to have to answer questions soon. They’re coming, Dean, and now your plausible deniability is fucked. Besides,” he tossed the last of his crust onto the lawn where the ducks would eventually find it, “I didn’t know how to tell you, anyway.”

“How to tell me? What are you talking about!? Were you just going to keep it a secret forever? From me!? And you have the balls to talk to me about trust?! About lying?!”

“Dean, it’s not like that.”

“Yes, Cas. Yes, it is like that! You ordered the murder of four people, and you didn’t trust me enough to tell me about it. What did you think? That I would judge you? That I would be pissed? Fuck that! You stood up to those monster dicks who hurt OUR FAMILY, and you did what you had to do like the Alpha that you are, and I’ll tell you something, Alpha…no one’s gonna FUCK with you or this pack EVER AGAIN! You locked Gabe up for weeks in this compound, but he’s probably safer right now, standing at the crossroads between all four trafficking syndicates naked with his dingle flapping in the wind than he’s ever been in his life, and that’s because of you. You did that!”

“It’s NOT something to be proud of, Dean. We’re not the mafia. If this gets out…”

“It’s not mafia, you prick, it’s justice! It’s old fashioned pack-justice, and I don’t give a shit what the apes are going to think about it, there’s a time when an Alpha makes a stand and protects what’s his, Castiel!”
“THIS IS NOT WHO I WANT TO BE! FUCK PACK JUSTICE!” Cas couldn’t sit any longer. He erupted from his chair and paced across the flag-stoned patio. Then he rounded on Dean. “This is NOT who I want to be, Dean. You don’t get to turn it into some kind of a hero movie. I MURDERED four human beings! I had no right to make that choice, and I don’t want to live with this. And, GOD, FUCK! I didn’t want you to have to live with it. How did you find out? I thought I was so careful. Benny had no idea…”

“How I found out? I drove the fucking car, Cas. You think I didn’t know what was going through your mind for five fucking hours while you tried to patch him up? You think I couldn’t see your red eyes in the rearview mirror? You TOLD me that Bobby’s rescue mission fell apart because of Gabe, and that Gordon knew who ‘Maurice’ really was. You fucking TOLD me, Cas. You told me everything except the last part of the punchline. Fuck, how stupid do you think I am?!”

Cas turned his back on Dean.

“Gordon’s place explodes into little tiny scraps two weeks after YOUR brother comes home with half the blood volume he started with, and you think I’m not gonna figure that out? Fuck, you better pray the FBI never finds out Gabriel was in that building, because if they do, it’ll lead them straight to you!” Dean went silent after that. He wasn’t sure what needed to be said next, only that it wasn’t going to be fun.

“I don’t think you’re stupid, Dean,” said Cas quietly, fiddling with the ivy in a planter beside his hip. “You should have told me.”

“You feel so guilty about it, Dean, and I didn’t know how.”

“You should have trusted me. You say you love me, but you obviously don’t trust me. You and Bobby are always hiding shit from me like I’m the village idiot who can’t handle the grown-up stuff. Fuck, Castiel, I’m not going to break and I don’t need a pedestal!”

“Why aren’t you angry about this?” Cas asked him, turning back to face him.

“What the fuck are you talking about? Angry? I’m pissed as hell! YOU FUCKING LIED TO ME…FOR WEEKS!” Dean stood up too, alpha-red becoming the prevalent tone in his irises.

“I mean about what I did. Benny tore me a new one when he found out about me ‘playing God’. Said it’s not my decision to make, all that sort of…but you’re only angry that I kept it from you? I thought you would be livid. I expected you to…I don’t know, rain down fire and brimstone and damn me to hell.”

Dean stood up very straight and looked down his nose at his fiancé. “You thought I would leave you?” His eye was cold, merciless.

Castiel nodded. “I thought you would leave me. I’m a murderer, Dean. And you…You’re the most righteous man I’ve ever known. You are my conscience. It never occurred to me that you might not…I don’t know what to say. How can this?... How can what I did be okay?” Cas whispered the last part.

“What, you think that wolf’s only inside you to keep your dick from getting bored? You. Are. Our. ALPHA, Castiel. You get all the votes and all the say because you have to stand in front of all of us and take the hard hits. You have to make the tough decisions. I’m not about to judge you for ANYTHING you decide needs to be done to protect this family. Fuck, man, it’s your job. I’m your conscience? Really? Then why would you not tell me? Why don’t you trust me, man? Fuck!”
Castiel stood for a long time without answering. He looked out at the tree line and watched the sun sinking low toward the horizon. “It’s not who I want to be, Dean. I let him take over for just the few minutes it took for me to say yes, but that’s all he needed, and now I have to live with it.”

“You’re not a murderer. You executed justice. You’ve read what they found there. You know what Gordon and Peter were up to. And the other two slimeballs were right in there with them. They deserved what they got, and it went off clean. No one else got hurt. It was fucking surgical, Castiel. It was beautiful in its righteousness. You wanna call ME righteous? That was fucking biblical.”

“I’m not God. There’s a legal system we have no right to circumvent. If it comes to light, we’ll lose everything, and then all the people who count on what we do lose everything. I’m not sorry you know, but you’re not going to convince me this was justice. It was frontier vigilantism, and it was wrong. I was wrong, Dean.”

“Fine. You fucked up. What does a Top do when he fucks up? He brushes it off. He learns from it. He moves on. You don’t get to take it back (thank fuck, I’m glad those fuckers are dead), but you can use it to help you know who you are. I, for one, think you did the right thing, and I’ll stand beside you and fight off every asshole who dares to take a shot at MY PACK like they aren’t calling down the hand of God.”

Cas wiped his whole face with his hands and took a very deep breath. “It’s not that simple.”

“No, Cas. It is. It is that simple. No, what’s fucked up is you hiding it from me. THAT’S where you’re in big trouble. Don’t you EVER do that again.”

“How do you have any business calling me to heel for lying?” Cas asked him. “I may have screwed this whole cluster-fuck up and hid it from you, but I was trying to protect you. You were just…”

“You were trying to protect yourself, Castiel James. Don’t play the martyr with me. You just said so yourself. You were afraid I’d hit the road if I found out, so you tried to play close to your chest until it blew over.” Dean’s arms crossed his broad chest like deliverance of a verdict.

“And how is that worse than what you and Michael have been playing?” Cas frowned.

“All right. You wanna go there? Let’s go there. Hit me, Cas. What’ve you been wanting to say? Lay it all out there. C’mon.” Dean sneered the challenge.

“You used that man to get to me. You toyed with his drive for a family, and you played him like a fucking fiddle. You know that he thinks the whole thing was his ploy? Michael thinks he’s the choreographer of that little dance you two have been waltzing, but he’s not, is he? Is he, Dean?”

“And, uh, what dance is that, exactly? The one where he gets precisely what he wants? That dance?”

Castiel stared at him for quite a while. Then, at last, he broke, “He’s your mate, Dean. You used your own mate and your not-yet-conceived child to make a play at me. It’s the same waltz as always, with the same exact steps, only this time, you dragged two innocents into it with you. At least when I lied to you, it was because I was trying to hold onto what I didn’t want to lose. What you did was so you could…” Castiel’s voice broke on an unplanned and unwelcome sob.

Finally, he managed to continue. “How is that supposed to make me feel? I’ll do literally anything for you.”

“Anything but trust me.”

“ANYTHING for you, and you take every opportunity you can find to throw me out the window.
When we were scene-partners, it was aggravating. But now. Now we’re engaged to be married, Dean. Married! I want to be your husband, and I want you for mine, but you just can’t push me away hard enough. Do you have any idea how badly that hurts? How hard should I let myself be the only one fighting to hold us together?"

“Cas,” Dean sighed quietly.

“WHAT? Huh? What? Are you going to tell me that’s NOT why you pulled that stunt? Let me fast-forward for you. Somehow, I’m not supposed to realize you’re both fertile and every machination you pulled to avoid being tested at work was just incidental. By the way, I’m not stupid either. You and Michael make it to July and you cycle together and, TA-DA! He pops up pregnant. And then what? Was I supposed to be so incensed about your devious plan that I threw the best thing that ever happened to me as well as his mate, whom I adore, and his UNBORN CHILD out onto the street? Did you really think I would do that, just over something like this? You didn’t, did you? There’s more, isn’t there? What else?”

Castiel was panting fiercely, his eyes now completely red. “What else did you have planned, Dean? Phase one was the lie and the birth control. Phase two was going to be the pregnancy. What was phase three? Tell me.”

Dean looked away from him, his face an angry mask.

“I see,” Castiel concluded. “You’re holding that one in reserve, aren’t you? Might still be useful.”

“Fuck you,” Dean stated.

Castiel picked up his plate and flung it at the side of the stone facing of his house. Ceramic shards scattered noisily. He breathed heavily through his nose, and then he did the same thing with his glass. Dean didn’t flinch, and after breathing with his eyes clenched shut for a couple of minutes, Castiel tried again.

“You don’t get to abdicate all of your responsibility to help hold this relationship together. You don’t get to tear down the walls that I’m building with my bare hands, and then blame the destruction on me. Am I not worth fighting for, Dean? Don’t you love me? Don’t you want a life and a family with me?”

Dean just stared past Castiel’s shoulder.

“Damnit, Dean, answer me! Do you want this with me, or not? Am I not worth it to you?” Castiel took him by the upper arms and held him in a bruising grip.

When Dean finally spoke, it was in a much smaller voice; not simply quieter, but smaller. “It’s not you who’s not worth it, Cas. I don’t deserve to be here. I never did.”

“FUCK!!” screamed Castiel, shaking. “We can’t keep doing this! We can’t! I can’t do this by myself. Goddamnit! I love you, Dean Michael Winchester! I know you better than I know myself, and you are so fucking worth…You are worth so much more than me. I thought maybe, maybe once you Mated Michael, and you could see how incredible he is, maybe you’d be able to see it. Maybe you’d be able to see yourself in him, see how valuable you are. Where does this come from? Why do you fight me so fucking hard, and why can’t you just, for the love of God, trust me for once more than you trust those God-awful fucking voices in your head? Dean, WHY?”

“Why what? Why don’t I think a grease-monkey from the dump side of the tracks who killed his own mother deserves to live the plush life and get everything on a silver platter? I fucking destroy everything I touch, Castiel. I’m poison from the jump, and I’ll break this Pack of ours if I stay. Break it into shards just like that plate. Just you wait. Wait and see, if you’re stupid enough to keep me
around. Thing is, if I was any kind of man, any kind of alpha, I’d leave on my own. I’m keeping Michael. The Universe gave him to me, and I’m not giving him back, but I don’t have the right to sit there in this house and pretend I don’t soil everything I look at. Kick me out, Alpha. Please. I’m too weak to do it on my own.”

“Dean.” Castiel’s frown deepened.

“Fuck. Please. Don’t make me beg. I hate it when you make me beg.”

Castiel sobbed and wrapped his arms around the love of his life. “How could you…? What on earth are you talking about? Your mother died in an industrial fire. You were miles away, in school. Dean. I don’t… Can you tell me?”

Dean’s muffled and tear-streaked voice cut through the fabric of Castiel’s shirt. “She wasn’t supposed to be there. We didn’t need the money. Dad was pissed. She wasn’t supposed to be working, and he told her not to take the job, but…I wanted to upgrade to a mountain-bike. I wanted this black monstrosity with neon green trim for Christmas. What the fuck does a pup need with a mountain-bike in Kansas? Lawrence only has two hills. She put the damned thing on lay-away, and she worked straight through Christmas. Brought it home for my fucking birthday. She still had to pay it off. She was only in that fucking building because I’m a selfish child, and all I could think about was myself. Didn’t even let Sammy ride it. Thought it was my right and due, and never mind my Mom slaving away in a fucking sweat-shop to try to pay for my pathetic ass. She wasn’t supposed to be there, Cas. She died for nothing. I never touched that fucking bike again after that day. My dad, after the funeral, he asked me, he said, ‘was it worth it?’ And you know what? Wasn’t. I wasn’t worth it. Never have been.” Dean’s voice trailed off as his sobs took over.

“You didn’t kill your mother, Dean. An accidental fire did that. It wasn’t your fault even a little bit. Your mother did what she did from her own choices. She couldn’t have known what would happen, and neither could you. If you want to blame someone, blame the owner of the building who dismantled the fire-escape rather than repair it. God, Dean, have you been carrying this with you all this time? It’s not your fault.” Cas rocked Dean in his arms, his brow knit in thought.

“How much did the bike cost, Dean? A few hundred dollars? Your mother would have made enough to buy a mountain bike in a matter of days, even at a low wage job, if that’s all she was saving for. No, that doesn’t make sense. She may not have told you, but there was more going on than you knew if she worked through Christmas and well through another month after that. Dean, stand up and look at me.” Cas straightened his arms, and pulled Dean up. His face was a mess of tears and snot.

“Even if all of her efforts had been solely to procure you the bike you fancied, that’s what parents do sometimes, and any repercussions that might come out of an adult’s decision are NEVER the responsibility of the child they impact. But she wasn’t only working for you. Maybe they had other debts. Maybe she needed to pay off more Christmas bills than just the one gift. I don’t know, but whether you ever got your bike or not, Mary Winchester was in that building on that day by her choice, and not yours. What happened to her is awful, and painful, and tragic, but it was NOT YOUR FAULT!” Dean’s face crumpled, and he shook his head in denial.

“Listen to me! Was it worth it? Fuck no! I know you’d give anything in the world to trade what you had that day to get her back, but it doesn’t work like that. We don’t get to decide who lives and who dies. Don’t you understand? It’s not supposed to be our choice! You don’t get to claim responsibility for that, Dean. You aren’t that powerful.”

“I chased Jessica away from Sam when they were 15. I thought they were getting too close, and I was afraid they would wind up Mated one day if she stayed, so I told her dad about a rise in hiring
I’d heard about in California in tech, in the field he’d just been laid off in. Next thing I knew, the bastard up and moved the whole family, and Sam got left. She never called him again. Never wrote. Just dropped him flat. He was devastated. I did that. Now it turns out she almost died from the journey, so that’s on me too. If I hadn’t…”

“DEAN! Are you listening to me? Jesus! Everyone knows there was a tech boom in California. You didn’t MAKE them move. He was bound to figure that one out on his own anyway. People get very good research skills suddenly when they’re unemployed with a family to feed. You are not responsible for any of this. Broken hearts happen to people. They happen a lot to young people. It happens. It’s life. He lived. She lived. They’re Mated now anyway.”

“She’s barren, Cas. If they hadn’t flown half-way across the country…”

“Bad shit happens to people, Dean! Stop taking responsibility for all the bad things that happen. Fuck, by that logic, all of my brother’s pain, all his life, I could probably trace back to something I did or failed to do…something I missed. But I won’t do that, because it’s not on me to save everyone from everything, especially not when I was just a pup myself. None of this is on you. If that’s what makes you believe you’re not worth saving yourself, I can’t tell you enough.” Castiel cradled Dean’s face in his hands.

“Dean, I know you. You have to believe that after eight, going-on-nine years together, after seeing you torn completely apart, raw and naked and trembling to your bones before me, that I know you. If you weren’t worth every star in the sky, every diamond beneath the earth, every heartbeat that echoes in the dark, I would never cherish you as I do. I love you so much. Can you feel it? We’ve never had more than this weak and flimsy bond connecting us, where I wanted a real one, where I’ve tried so many times to bond with you so that you can climb inside my skin and soak in it like a hot bath that surrounds your very soul. I want you to feel how much I love you, but we have to take the hard road to get there. Well, so be it. I will walk that road if I have to. I will walk straight through the gates of hell, if that’s where you are, and I will fit all your broken pieces back together. I will rebuild you atom by atom and make you whole again, and then I will grip you tight and raise you from perdition. And I will never leave you. You belong to me. Dean Michael Winchester, because I deserve you, and you deserve to be loved to the greatest of my capacity to love, even though it isn’t enough.” Cas took a shaky breath, but he was on a roll. He wasn’t sure how they got here, but he wasn’t about to lose his momentum now that he had it.

“All you have to do from here until the day you die, Dean, is to hold on as tight as you can to me. That’s your new Rule Number One. It applies while we’re scening and out in the Pack. When you get scared, you come to me. When you’re weak, and you’re not sure what to do about it, you come to me. When those GOD. DAMNED. VOICES try to sneak in and tell you you’re no good, you better fucking come to me, Dean. I will take care of you.”

Cas caught his breath and realized how tightly he was holding Dean’s arms. He loosened his grip, closed his eyes. “This is where the Shareer ka Daava came from? This is what it’s all about?”

Dean nodded miserably.

“You want to move our scening out into the household. You want something strong to hold onto when it starts to break apart on you.”

Dean swallowed. “I don’t wanna scene 24/7. It’s more psychological than that. I just feel like, sometimes, even though I know you love me, like it would be too much of a burden for me to lean on you that much. I should be able to do this on my own. I should…”

“There’s no should. You know better than that, I’ve heard you tell your students countless times:
what you need is what you need, and you deserve someone who’ll give it to you. That’s a direct quote from your book, Dean. If you want me to Claim you publicly so that you have a mooring to cling to, by God that’s what I’m going to do, and fuck anyone who has anything to say about it. And you couldn’t be a burden to me if your life depended on it. You are the biggest blessing a man could ever have, and I’m so lucky you chose me.”

“Didn’t choose, Cas,” Dean grumbled. “It’s kinda the whole point. I fell for you. Hard. But I never had a choice. Didn’t choose you any more than I chose Michael. Doesn’t mean I don’t love you both, but still wasn’t my choice.”

“I get it. You don’t have to rub it in.” Cas kicked absently at a piece of broken glass.

“What do we do now?” Dean asked. It felt like the storm was passing and the villagers were beginning to poke their heads out to assess the damage. His ring felt heavy on his hand.

“I lied to you, Dean. I broke faith with you, I didn’t trust you, I tried to protect you from things you should have been allowed to know, and I tried to keep being your Alpha through it all. Now, granted, I’m not ashamed of that last part. I will always give you what you need no matter the consequences to me. That means that I feel justified in holding you to account for your lying despite the fact I wasn’t fully truthful myself. You need that accountability. You need it for yourself, so I won’t apologize for that.”

“Nice try, Alpha.”

“I’m serious. For all the rest, God, I’m sorry. As you said, I can’t take it back. All I can do is apologize, learn from it, let it make me a better man, and move on. But that doesn’t change the fact that you and Michael owe me for the lying and the conspiring. I understand why you tried to teach April how to brat. You were preparing us for the time after you’d left. You didn’t want to leave me bratless.”

“I already paid for that one, Alpha. No double jeopardy.”

“Agreed. And we’ll figure out the rest of it. We have time. Come here, Dean.” He wrapped his beloved up in his embrace as the sun disappeared behind the trees.

“You can stop trying to sabotage us, now.” Cas spoke into Dean’s hair. “The way I understand it, it’s a simple question that’s being asked when you do that. You’re asking, ‘does he love me enough to still think I’m worth loving if I do this…?’ Am I right?”

“Basically, I suppose.”

“Well, here’s the answer, Dean, no matter what crazy scheme you come up with at any point in the future, here’s the answer: Yes. Yes, I love you enough. That’s not ever going to change. So just skip all the insane ideas before they take shape, and if you need a reminder, come and ask me. ‘Hey, Alpha, remember how you said the answer was always going to be yes? Is it still yes?’ And I’ll say, ‘Yes, Dean. It’s still yes.’”

“And Dean?”

“Hmm?”

“From you, for your part, is it still a yes?”

“Always, Alpha.”
Castiel waited a minute before going on. “What do we do about the trust, or the lack of trust? We’re both guilty of that one. I thought that our trust inside the playroom meant we would be naturals out here. It never occurred to me they were two different things.” Cas spoke into the darkening space, his voice quiet like the dusk before the bullfrogs began to sing.

Dean answered him just as quietly, his face pressed close to Castiel’s throat. “Guess we’ll have to do that the hard way too, Babe. Maybe that’s our problem. So much of what we have came to us too easily. We were naturals at so much, that we weren’t ready for any of it to be hard. Trust comes with time, right? Time and patience? As long as you can promise we have time, we’ll get there.”

“I can only promise from my side, Dean. For that, you have my word. I can’t speak for you, though.” Right on cue, as if triggered by the last rays of the sun, the bullfrogs chimed in.

“You said you felt like you were the only one fighting for us.” Dean’s voice dripped with remorse. “Cas, I’m sorry. I should never have let you feel like that. You shouldn’t ever have to hold it all up by yourself. That’s not fair. I was so distracted inside myself, I wasn’t paying attention to what it was doing to you. Babe, I’m not going anywhere. I’m not gonna lie, this is going to be really hard sometimes, and I know you need more from me. Here’s the deal; you need to know I’ll fight for us, well, my means of fighting is I’m serious about getting myself some help. I can’t always win these battles on my own, but maybe a good therapist can give me some new weapons. Maybe I can learn how to face down some of those demons, and someday even defeat them. Would that be good enough? For now?”

Cas sobbed before he could stop it. “Yes, that would be enough. Thank you, Dean. I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

“I’ll only cry on your shirt, at least, for the shoulder that already has the tears and snot from Meg over lunch. There’s no need to douse the whole shirt.”

Cas laughed through his tears. “Shut up, Dean. It’s not funny.”

“It’s kind of funny,” he concluded.

They stood and watched the moonlight spill over the duck pond and set the Live Oak tree to a silver glow. Cas took a shaky breath. “I want to ask you a favor. I’m a little nervous to ask.”

“Oh crap, what now?” Dean moaned, pulling his head back to look at Cas.

“We can have a stronger bond than what we have right now. We can pull a better connection out of the Claim-bond, and that might help us trust each other.” Cas held his eye with a strange glint.

“You want to Claim-fuck me again? Dude, when have I ever said no to that?”

“No, Dean, me. I want you to Claim me.”

Chapter End Notes

Yikes.

Okay, I’m headed in for several days of night-shift. Going dark for a few days will let everyone mostly catch up.
It's 4 am, Houston time. Night y'all. Write to me if you feel like it.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

There's a lot more talking. They sort of see eye-to-eye, and then they don't. Dean does a thing, and then he does another.

Chapter Notes

First of all, please let me say how awed I am by the outpouring of love and support from you guys. I really don't know what to say except thank you. The phrase, 'Holy Shit' has fast become one of my favorites.

Second, amidst the hurricane, we haven't flooded, been struck by a tornado, or lost power. All is well with me and all of my Texas family and friends. It's very, very wet out there, but there's still plenty of high ground. Gentle reminder, never buy a house in a flood-plain, not for any reason.

Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 49 – Tuesday, June 20, 2017

NOW:

Wrng out, but feeling lighter than he had for some time, Dean allowed Cas to pull him to sit in his lap on the porch. He was still angry, and he didn’t need a Mating-bond to know that Castiel was as well. They hadn’t finished unleashing it all yet, but they’d come to an eye-of-the-storm of sorts. Which way they moved from here was anyone’s guess. Cas pulled Dean to lean in a little awkwardly, resting the side of his head against the Alpha’s collar. Easy, light strokes through his hair made Dean’s eyelids flutter, and he went with it. He relaxed into the feel of home and protection that his body craved from Castiel’s.

“You don’t have to answer me right away, but will you think about it?” Cas asked him.

“Hmm? Think about what?” queried Dean sleepily. He loved the sensation of Castiel’s fingernails on his scalp.

Dean felt Cas huff, and then kiss the top of his head. “I’m serious. I think it would help us both feel a stronger sense of connection. I’d like to try.”

“You were serious about that?” Dean mumbled. “I thought you were being metaphorical, like, I don’t know. I’m not going to Claim you, Cas. Wouldn’t work. I don’t understand the point,
anyway.”

Castiel sighed, but he continued to pet Dean tenderly. “The point is, we need a new way to relate. I want something different with you than what we had before, but we keep falling back into Top and Bottom roles.”

“Yeah, well, maybe that’s what we need from each other, and all we’re doing by fighting it is to muddy up the waters. Who says we can’t have a marriage based on Top and Bottom roles? People do it all the time. I think I’ve read a book or two on the subject. In fact,” Dean shifted so he could look up at Cas’ face without losing his stroking fingers. Those fingers were magical. “I think I WROTE a book or two on the subject. What’s wrong with going where our wolves take us?”

Castiel thought for a few moments without responding. He looked out to the horizon, dark and shaded now, hidden vaguely in a blur of shadows. He couldn’t quite tell where the tree line ended and the sky began. “Is that what you want?” he asked at last.

“I want to be with you.”

“I need a bit more detail from you, Dean. We got engaged without really understanding if we were on the same page about what we both want.” Cas pushed himself up a little to get some blood flow back into his right leg which had begun to tingle, but he clutched onto Dean, settling him back down before he tried to remove himself from the Dom’s lap.

“You’re just figuring that out now? I’ve been trying to tell you that for a while, C.J. We skipped right over a buttload of steps to get here. It was bound to come whacking us in the face eventually.” Dean squirmed to rebalance on the firm lap beneath him. Full grown men weren’t really suited for snuggling in wrought iron patio chairs. The arm of the chair dug uncomfortably into his back no matter how he shifted.

Castiel ignored the new nickname. Dean could call him anything he wanted. “I guess I took it for granted that you want what I want. Maybe that’s not the case.”

“I dunno, man. We fit together. When we stop trying so hard to be everything we think we’re supposed to be, and when I’m not dead set on screwing it up for both of us, we work. I want…” Dean bit his lip. He gave up on trying to stay balanced on the lap that wasn’t big enough to hold him like this, and he pushed off. He pulled another chair up close and opposite so they could look at each other. Sitting well forward and leaning toward Castiel, he tried again.

“I just want you, Cas. Whenever I think about what I want it to look like between us, I see you and me comfortable together – like, domestic or some such shit. I guess I want it to feel like it does when we’re working on a project or writing a budget plan. You know how easy that is, right? There’s not any complicated crap getting in the way there. How do we get that? I want that, but with sex and pups and all the rest of it, too – ass beatings wouldn’t be unwelcome. We can keep the damned hairbrush that you like so much.”

Castiel leaned forward too. “But that’s exactly what I want too! I want a relationship with you where we get to spend most of our time together outside of our wolves and outside of our deep genders. That’s what I’ve been trying to get to, but it feels like you need me to be a watchdog over your wolf all the time. Lately, I don’t think I even get to see more than a peek at the real you. It feels like you want a babysitter more than a husband.”

Dean’s brows shot up, and Cas winced, regretting his words immediately. “Babysitter, Cas? That explains why you didn’t trust me enough to talk to me about OKC. Besides, it’s all ‘the real me’, you know. I’m not hiding behind the Sub. I’m not… fuck, Cas, I’m not as fragile as you’re making me
out to be. I mean, yeah, it’s been an adjustment bringing in mates, trying to find balance with you, all the shit going on at work, Sammy trying to come to grips. It’s overwhelming, and I get antsy when I feel overwhelmed. But I’m pretty simple, really. Lay my ass raw, get me crying and shit, and let me wash it all out, and I’ll be right as rain. Or do you not wanna do that with me anymore? We could, I guess try to keep the balancing stuff just with our mates?”

His questioning inflection came with an uncertain look to his facial expression. Dean didn’t want that, but he needed to feel Cas out. He squinted one eye and held his breath.

“I need to stay a part of your balancing, Dean. I need it at least as much as you do. Shit. I’m sorry. I can’t seem to say what I mean. I don’t think you need a babysitter. That isn’t what I meant.”

“Shh, I know. I hear you, Cas.” Dean put his hands on Castiel’s thighs and gripped. “What we have to work out is, what are we doing wrong or what aren’t we doing right. Sounds like we both want the same thing here. Sounds like we’re not as far off as we thought.”

“I feel like I’m carrying both of us right now, Baby.” Cas put his hands over Dean’s, settling into a light hold of his wrists. “I don’t mind that. I mean, I get that sometimes there will be a need for both of us to step up and keep the ceiling from collapsing on the other, and I will do that for you without question when you need me to. What I need to understand is whether it’s always going to lean this way or if there’s eventually going to be a righting of the ship. Am I ever going to have a chance to lean on you? Can you hold me? That’s where I feel so unsure. Can we ever balance?”

Dean’s face was solemn. He stared into those azure eyes; the ones he dreamed about, and he blinked. Then he looked down, feeling insufficient again. What if he couldn’t give Castiel what he needed? God, how could he ever imagine he might be up to this kind of commitment? He was always going to be the dead weight, wasn’t he?

“Dean, no.” Cas’ voice was louder, sterner. “Don’t listen to that. I know what you’re thinking. Listen to me. You don’t have to believe every thought that runs through your head. Come back to me, Baby. Come right back to this moment, right here, with me.”

Dean looked up, shaking his head slightly. He caught Castiel’s eye from beneath his lashes, and his eyes were haunted. “I don’t know. What if you need me to be strong for you, and I crumble again? What if I can’t do it?”

Cas’ eyes smiled into Dean’s. “You are the strongest man I’ve ever met. You are everything I need, and we’ll be all right. If we need to accept that our marriage won’t be evenly balanced between us, then so be it. I can do that. I think you can do that. I needed to know, that’s all.”

Dean frowned. “You don’t mind being my babysitter?”

Cas rolled his eyes. “I deserve that. You aren’t ever going to let me forget I said that, are you?”

Dean let the comment go without remark. “And next time you and Bobby put your heads together and pull out the C4, are you going to bring me in?”

It was Castiel’s turn to break Dean’s gaze. He took a breath through his narrow nose. “He doesn’t tell me what he’s doing most of the time. I only hear from him when there’s no way out of it. Usually, there’s only a recap afterward.”

“Cas.”

“Do you need to know?”
“Yes. I need to know.”

They looked at each other. Cas wrangled internally with why it was so hard to give this to Dean. He told himself it was for Dean’s protection. He didn’t want to burden Dean with the moral blurriness that came part and parcel along with the work Bobby did.

“Cas, I’m not going to break if you let me in on all of it. I can handle it so much better if you keep me in the loop than if I have to try to guess what’s going on and get blindsided over and over. You’ve got me up on a pedestal, man. I’m not as pure and uncorrupted as you seem to think. Bobby too, hell even Benny treats me like I’m supposed to be some kind of fucking saint. I’m not your conscience, Castiel. You’ve got one of those for yourself, and it’s pretty damned good when it’s not setting unreachable standards for you. What exactly are you trying to protect me from?” Dean searched his face.

“I don’t want you splattered with the filth that comes from what he does. You’re so beautiful, Dean. The only word I can think of is righteous, and this work isn’t pretty or clean. It’s necessary, but there’s no way to do it without getting dirty, and I don’t want…” Castiel stopped at Dean’s flat expression.

“You get how unfair that is? You don’t define me, Cas.” Dean let the anger he’d been trying to keep in check peek out a little.

Cas set his jaw, but he couldn’t stop it from working as he tried to accept Dean’s statement. “You don’t want in on this, Dean.”

“No, Cas. YOU don’t want in on it. I know it tears you up. You need the world to make sense. You need good people to be able to only do good things, and you’ve never been able to reconcile between what it takes to fight these bastards with who you think you oughtta be. Don’t put that on me, Castiel James. Don’t try to make me into who you think I should be. I’m not that guy.”

It was a hard choice. Dean let Castiel think, but he didn’t back up at all. Finally, when Cas didn’t answer, Dean sighed. “Look, I’m not asking you to watch me jump into the work they’re doing. That team is badass, and I’ve got no call to try to be a part of what they do. I’d only be in the way. Just don’t hide what you find out from me. Let me help you carry it. Let me help you make some of the decisions you have to make. Isn’t that what you just said? You need my help sometimes? You don’t have to do this by yourself, man. Let me help.” Dean leaned in very close to Castiel’s face. He knew what the physical proximity of his body did to Cas, and he wasn’t above using it.

“This is where you can show you trust me, Castiel.” Dean rubbed his hands up and down his fiancé’s thighs.

Cas sighed. “You’re right. I hate it, but you’re right.”

“Don’t try to make me someone I’m not. You want things between us to get easier? The first step is to let go of whatever fantasy you’re holding onto about who I am. Let me be real, not some imaginary saint you mount up on a pedestal. I can’t live up to that. It’s hard enough for me to live up to my own standards. Don’t try to turn me into an icon.”

“I didn’t realize that’s what I was doing.” Cas flexed his grip on Dean’s wrists. He frowned uncomfortably, but he couldn’t deny the logic. “I’ll do better, Dean. I promise.”

Dean quirked a tiny smile at him. “And my Baby keeps his promises.” Dean patted his thigh firmly and stood up. “Let’s go in. I’ve been getting a weird vibe from Michael, and it’s making me nervous. Besides, the mosquitoes are out.” He hauled Castiel to his feet and pulled him into the house by his
hand. Cas caught up to him and wrapped an arm around his waist.

“I always get dizzy watching you switch back and forth between the different aspects of your genders. You seem to do it so easily, but I struggle to keep up.”

Dean smirked his iconic half-smile. “Keep up, Alpha. If you can’t do it, what hope is there for those alphas who go through our training classes?”

“To be fair,” Cas noted as he and Dean made it to the kitchen. It was empty. “You are a bit of an extreme case. Most alphas don’t face your degree of discrepancy.”

Dean grinned. “You up to it, Alpha?” Cas soaked in the expression on Dean’s face as Dean left him, walking backward to collect himself a new beer from the Butler’s pantry.

“I’m learning. Never had to do this before. We were nearly always in one mode or the other in the past, weren’t we? Be patient with me, Dean.” Cas settled into his chair at the kitchen table and took the beer Dean handed him.

“Cards on the table, Cas. I don’t have any control of the pace of the switching. It takes me as much by surprise as it does you. I’ve learned to roll with it. I’m not going to hold you to handle it better than you do already. I mean, you get credit for hanging with me like you do, with me and Michael both.”

Cas acknowledged the praise with a clink of his bottle against Dean’s and a tip of his head. He checked his bond to see if he could pinpoint his mate. She was relaxed and calm. He guessed she was bathing.

Castiel took a drink, and then risked digging a little deeper since Dean seemed up to it. “Are you happy with the balance I’ve got going with Michael? Are you getting enough from each of us?”

Dean regarded him, pursing his lips. “It’s about to get weird. He’ll struggle with the Omega training, and I predict a lot of tears and punching of walls before he makes peace with who he is. And then of course, if he, uh…if we hit a home run next month, I mean, his hormones will go crazy. It’s going to be rough. Can you hang with us through that?”

“Of course, Dean. But I mean right now. Are you happy with what we set up with you?”

“Does it matter? I didn’t notice anyone asking my opinion before you two pulled out your rulers and lined ‘em up for measuring.” Dean wrinkled his brow as he tried to get a lock on Michael. He seemed to be upstairs. Probably in the game room.

Cas put his beer bottle down on the table. “I didn’t know you were bothered by that.”

“You didn’t ask.” Dean pointed out and then took a drink.

“Shit,” Cas said thoughtfully. “Is there anything else I’ve fucked up in the last few weeks?” Was that a defensive tone?

Dean huffed. “Relax, C.J. I’m not upset. I just want you to think about how you sometimes say you want us to have a relationship outside our wolves, but then you go and barrel through like you’re my babysitter.”

Cas groaned.

“If you really want more of a partner than a Sub, you need to be consistent.” Dean angled his bottle
and his head at Cas.

“Consistent.”

“Well, yeah.”

“You’d rather we choose one way or the other?”

“That’s all I’m saying.”

“And you’re annoyed that I negotiated with Michael and didn’t ask for your input?”

“A little.” Dean leaned back and crossed an ankle over his knee.

“But you also want to keep our Top/Bottom dynamic?”

“Um, yes, please.”

“And I’m supposed to know when you want me in each version of this dynamic how exactly? You’re going to keep quiet unless I think to ask?”

“Um.” Dean went alert. That was swiftly becoming Castiel’s Alpha-Dom face.

“Tell me what you want from me, Dean. I’m through trying to guess.” There was pain behind his stern eyes, and Dean’s stomach dropped out.

“I’m not playing games, Cas. It’s confusing, all right? I told you it’s all overwhelming.” Dean’s brow knit tightly.

“Cards all on the table, then. Dean, are you planning to marry me? Is that what you want? I’m getting a mixed message here. I feel like another shoe is going to drop any minute.”

“Fuck, yes! That’s what I want. I don’t know if we can pull it off, though – the marriage, not the wedding. This thing we’re doing, this crazy pack life plan you came up with, it’s so damn complicated. There’s like, a million ways to fuck it up.”

“Well, possibly the easiest way to fuck it up is for one of us to deliberately sabotage it,” Castiel said with an arched brow. “How about we try working together to make a successful marriage? Do you think you might be able to give that a try?”

“I said I was sorry about that, Cas.”

“Did you?”

“I…Son of a bitch. Cas, man, I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have lied to you. I shouldn’t have tried to go around you. You’re right. I used Michael to push you.”

“I flew to Dallas to propose marriage to you because I finally understood that no matter what happens to me in my life, no matter if I’m Mated or not, I can’t live without you.” Cas got up and tossed his bottle into the recycle bin. “I need you like I need water and air. I imagined building something with you that was different and exciting, and I imagined that you might want that too.”

“I do!”

“Then what’s going on, Dean? Why are you still fighting against me? What do you want from me?”
“I want to be your mate, Castiel.” They stared at each other, unblinking. Castiel wilted, and Dean dropped his face into his hands. “I didn’t mean that,” he mumbled through his fingers.

“Look, I know you love Michael. I know you’re not saying you wish you didn’t have him. I get it. I really do. But we have to live in the real world, and we don’t get to have that. Dean, if you want, we can mimic it. I can play that role for you and April both. That changes our plan a little, but it’s doable.”

Dean scrubbed the back of his neck with his hand. “Thing is, I don’t think that’s what I really want, but it’s so hard to tell. One minute I want one thing and then the next minute I want the opposite. I’m so sorry. I know that’s not fair at all. I don’t know what to do. Maybe you should just take it over and make the call.”

Castiel pulled Dean’s head in against his belly and held it there. “We don’t have to figure it out right now. I need to go get the patio cleaned up. Are you ready to call it a day?”

“I’ll get the broom,” said Dean. “Where are we tonight? In the playroom?”

“No. Let’s get some sleep. We’ve got another full day tomorrow.” Cas grabbed a dustpan and a small trash can from beneath the counter while Dean pulled out a broom.

“No sex?” Dean asked him.

Cas stopped in the doorway, not looking at Dean. “I think that would be an extravagantly bad idea.”

Dean walked up behind him, very close behind him. “What? Why?”

Castiel glanced back, but then continued without speaking. Dean followed him out the back door. “Come on, Cas. Please? We always get that part right. You’re not that mad at me, are you?”

“It isn’t because I’m mad at you,” he snapped shortly. Right, not because he’s mad. “I need to know you’re in a safe place before I touch you.” He traded tools with Dean and began to sweep up the broken glass and ceramic. “You are showing me classic signs that you’re on the cusp of a drop. You deserve to be protected if that’s the case, and we’re going to play it safe.”

“Cas. I’m fine. You’re throwing words out at me to make it look like you’re not having a temper tantrum. I hurt your feelings, and you’re punishing me for it.”

Castiel scoffed. “If I punish you, you’ll know it. And whatever reason I have for telling you no, Dean, the answer is still no. Grow up. You’re not the only one who gets to protect his boundaries.” He swept for a minute, and then burst out again. “It wouldn’t be hurtful to me that you aren’t certain what you want between us, Dean, except that you clearly expect more from me. You’re still doing it. You’re still abdicating your own role and expecting me to carry you. I get it if you aren’t clear. But don’t look at me with a blank expression and put all the decisions on me. I’m not going to do that for both of us. You’re setting me up, and I’m not going to put myself in that position.”

“Well excuse me for thinking you wouldn’t have bought me a ring without thinking it through. You think everything through. Don’t tell me you don’t know what you want.” Cas had all the glass in a tidy pile, but Dean held onto the dustpan and made no move to assist.

“I know what I want, but there are two of us in this relationship. Forgive me for attempting to listen to your side and give you a voice too.” Cas was working himself back up into another lather.

“What you want isn’t going to work! I don’t work that way! Cas, I’m too fucking broken to pretend to be a monkey for you.”
“FINE! Then let’s not do that! Just tell me what YOU want, Dean! WHAT DO YOU WANT?!”

Dean felt wildly out of control. He wanted Cas’ grip on the back of his neck. He wanted hard strikes on his thigh. He wanted a leash and Castiel’s fingers gripping his hair. “I want your Claim and your bite! I want you to own me and tell me what to do! How many times do I have to say this? Fucking take ownership, ALPHA! I’m begging you here!”

Castiel’s eyes went red and his nostrils flared. It was erotic and frightening at the same time. “You have a mate for that!”

“I have an Omega-mate, Cas! He can only do so much. What I need is you! Why are you holding back? You love to take me apart, and I want you to do it. Why are you pretending you only want a domestic partner? I know better.” Dean advanced on Cas with menace in his eyes. He wanted to provoke no matter what kind of thunder he unleashed. He needed the thunder. God, he needed it.

Once he was close, Cas snatched the dustpan from his grip and turned his back, stooping to fill it with broken glass.

“Cas, please.”

“How do I know if this is really what you want and not you being a brat? I know you when you get horny, Dean. You’ll say anything.” Cas refused to look at him, and Dean didn’t offer to help. Dean slapped a mosquito on his arm. He pouted, thinking hard.

“It’s not the first time I asked. Jesus, you told me to tell you what I want and now you don’t believe me. AGAIN!”

Cas dumped his burden in the garbage can he’d carried out with him. “We’re going in circles. I’m going to bed. You’re welcome to join me. Or do whatever you want.”

“Son of a bitch,” he said under his breath. What did a guy have to do to get his ass whooped around here?

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“Not a chance, Dean. It’s your night with Castiel. You get it from him tonight or not at all. I’m not suicidal.” Michael slipped a pair of sleep pants over his nakedness and pulled back the covers of the bed he shared with Dean most of the time.

Dean’s pout grew epic. Seriously? Two Doms. Both of them off the charts. And he couldn’t convince either of them to roll him.

He tried a different tack. “Get on your knees, Omega, and get to work! It’s not going to suck itself!”

Michael laughed. “Nice try, Dean. You’re cute when you’re a brat, but the answer is still no. Be careful. You don’t want to push me.”

But he did. He did want to push. He really, really did.

“Did you hear what I said? Suck me off, bitch!”
Michael rolled his eyes. “Walk away now, Submissive, and I’ll let it go. Keep pushing me and you’ll get chastity no matter what your Alpha has planned.” He swiped his tablet nonchalantly to a new page, and began to read. Dean’s jaw worked. He shivered at the tone from his confident Dominant mate. He wanted so badly. Why was no one there for him? How serious was Michael? What would he do if Dean flopped down beside him started to jack himself? Dean discarded that idea immediately. He knew Michael wasn’t joking, and he didn’t want a week in the cage. That was the opposite of what he wanted. Dean stood awkwardly over the bed watching Michael read, trying to discover another route.

Michael sighed. “Lie down on your belly. I’ll rub your back.”

“And then you’ll fuck me?”

“I said no. Ask me one more time, Dean. Just one more time…”

“Forget it!” Dean reversed and slammed the door behind him. He headed for the master suite but found himself in the play room instead. How did that happen? Somehow his hands were rifling through his toy box, coming up with a vibrating plug and also with something he was sure he wasn’t allowed to play with on his own. If he was careful, it wouldn’t break the rules explicitly – not exactly. He could be careful.

Dean slipped across the hall into the H/R room and locked the door. He felt terribly guilty but sloughed it off. A 27-year-old man should not feel guilty for meeting his own needs. It wouldn’t be perfect, of course. He couldn’t do the pain thing for himself, not and get the sense of pleasure that came from a strong-armed Dom, but he could take the edge off.

He could get away with it too. Cas had seen him slip in with Michael, and Michael would think he’d convinced Castiel. Dean stripped down and lowered himself onto the padded bed in the middle of the room face down. He grunted and stood right back up again, collecting a bottle of slick from the drawer next to the bathroom. In no time, he had the vibrator in place and cranked all the way up. He reddened his cheeks with a couple of awkward slaps, reaching weirdly around himself, and he then started thrusting slowly. It felt good, but there was a pall over him that he couldn’t shake. This was all Castiel’s fault. If anyone got punished in the morning, it should be the Alpha who had left Dean hanging.

He picked up the pace and moaned out loud, one hand behind him to keep pressure on the vibrator so that it didn’t slip out of place. The other hand held very tightly to…not his dick. He wasn’t touching himself. It might have been semantics, but it was true nonetheless. Dean worked himself to a frenzy and then backed the speed way off again in a cycle that made him crazy when Castiel forced it on him. He wanted to make this last, though. He knew once they discovered what he’d done (and they would), he would lose access to this particular toy. He went four rounds of building up and then slowing down again before he couldn’t do it again and he tumbled over the edge with a deep grunt, his thighs shaking.

Dean relaxed into the sensations pulsing though him and came slowly back from his floating high. He groaned as he rolled off the bed and removed the vibrator, still doing its job, completely unaware that its task had come to completion. Dean switched it off. He stood on the soft floor staring at the toys in his hands, and his eyes welled up. He wasn’t horny anymore, but the emotion that replaced his arousal was so much worse. He felt alone and invisible. He felt wrong. He felt broken. He needed his Alpha.

Dean stashed both the toys and the bottle of lube in a drawer full of clean linens and all but sprinted back up the stairs. He’d left a mess, but that happened sometimes. It would be taken care of early in the morning without a second thought by people who had seen all the things he and Castiel liked to
get up to late at night hundreds of times.

Cas was already breathing deeply and evenly on one side of the enormous bed. He looked very wrong alone in the bed that could easily house all four of them. Dean tucked himself in the opposite side and eased backward up against his Alpha’s warm naked body. Cas adjusted to him in his sleep, sliding an arm across his ribs without waking up. Dean pushed his ass back into Castiel’s groin, seeking as much contact as he could.

He lay awake for a long time, worrying about Michael’s psych eval in the morning. It was never fun to have your emotional guts ripped out and put on display. He watched Michael dreaming, and he could tell the moment the little Omega from the room next door joined him. Michael’s dreams shifted from anxious tones in swirling red, yellow, and orange down to still, soft greens and blues.

Dean turned his thoughts to Castiel – C.J. – he smirked cheekily to himself. The nickname was an impertinence that Castiel wouldn’t have allowed from anyone else. It was a way to slide his middle name in during regular conversation without raising a fuss. It was a very brat thing to do and utterly alpha at the same time. Cas hadn’t said a word, hadn’t even registered that he noticed, but Dean knew he had.

He went round and round for a good long time. Cas was hurt and angry. Was he right about Dean? Dean didn’t believe he was. Cas had started it with an off-the-cuff proposal that was more Hail Mary desperation than deliberate life choice. He’d resisted every suggestion that they slow down and take time to learn their new roles. He’d put it all on Dean, and Dean hadn’t been ready, still wasn’t ready, to make these choices. How was he supposed to know if it was possible for him to get enough from Michael to allow him to relax into an Alpha-to-alpha relationship with Cas? Michael wasn’t even trained yet, much less stable and comfortable inside his Omega. He’d not overstepped boundaries as Dean’s Dom in some time, but he still might at some point – probably still would. Michael often forgot himself once he gave in to the demands of the bossy wolf.

Most of all, Dean didn’t want to lose the intimacy with Castiel’s hard hand that fed him so deeply and filled his emptiness. He wanted Cas to be his Alpha and his Dominant, and at the same time, he wanted not to be overridden all the damned time when his alpha stepped forward with demands of his own.

To be fair, Cas hadn’t tried to force his vision for an ape-like marriage on Dean. To be fair, the Alpha had asked Dean for his honest opinion and Dean had thrown it hurtfully back at him. He thought they’d made a lot of progress. He felt so relieved to have his secret out in the open and to know that his brash stupidity hadn’t ruined everything. He had been an idiot to put Michael up to that. Why did he always do that?

He still knew he didn’t deserve to be here, held tightly by the massive paw across his chest as if he meant something, but in the end, what did it matter if he deserved it? As long as Castiel wanted him here, what difference did their relative value really make? He was beginning to believe he could have this, that he was genuinely wanted as much as Cas said he was. He was starting to feel hope flicker to life even in the darkest places, but it was almost as if his desperate need to make a huge show of destruction had been a distraction from the real work that lay ahead for them both.

Who were they now? Who were they going to be together, and who were they each separately? If their recent ‘discussions’ had unearthed anything, it was to highlight how different their world views still were. Could they be meshed? Was one of them going to have to capitulate to the other, and if they did, would it define a lifetime of slowly growing resentment?

Dean wanted to be himself. It’s all he wanted. Well, not all, but you know what he meant. Dean had no false notions that somehow nobility of character lay in the impersonation of the ‘civilized’ species
the way Castiel always had. He still struggled with his sense of submission that was so at odds with his Deep alpha designation. He could feel them warring constantly within him even as he knew that none of the effort to find consensus showed on the outside.

Michael saw it. Michael was the only one who would ever see it, and Dean had felt nothing but awe from his mate when he registered just how much struggle happened below the surface of Dean’s cheeky smirk. He wanted to be able to set down the weight of the shame inside him, and Michael was helping him with that. It was carving Dean into something new, and the pace of the change made his head swim. It was no wonder he couldn’t explain what he wanted to Cas. How could he begin to know for himself?

Only he did know. Dean came back to the Shareer ka Daava over and over again. It’s what he wanted. It’s what he would need to find balance inside himself. He wanted to hand Castiel everything that he was. He wanted Cas and Michael to take all of his power away from him and hold it over his head. He wanted to...what was the word Cas had used? Abdicate. He wanted to abdicate everything.

And then.

Only then.

After they owned him body and soul, after they Claimed him in the most humiliating and permanent way imaginable and made a statement so public that there could be no question ever again of just how Sub Dean really was deep inside:

Only then would Castiel raise his brow in stark command, fix Dean with a judgmental eye, demanding that he hold custody of Castiel’s property close to his protective alpha heart, and hand himself back to himself – on condition of course. On condition that he kept the Alpha’s property safe and secure. On the condition that if Dean fucked this up, he owed his ass and all of the rest to the Alpha. It made so much sense to Dean that he shivered in anticipation.

Dean knew that he could fake it if he had to. If Castiel wouldn’t give him this, he would still marry the guy. He would want Castiel however he could get him, despite their recent squabbles. But Dean knew how to sparkle and make lemonade out of lemons. He didn’t want to do that. He wanted to be himself – with Cas as he was with Michael.

And then, out of the blue, Cas slammed him with a request to try to put a backwards Claim on his Alpha. Eww! Why would he want to do that? COULD he do that? His Sub had seriously considered rolling for April, for God’s sake. Where was this coming from?

He’d said he thought it would help them understand each other better, give them a stronger bond connection. Dean couldn’t fault Cas for that. They both longed for a Mating-bond. Even now. Even after Michael. Even after April. Cas used to leave Dean’s shoulder bare for months before he put a new bite in place, but not now. Now he barely let it scab over before he pierced back through the sore skin. Michael had been as good as his word, granting his blessing every time Castiel requested time alone with Dean, and he’d not even blinked when he walked in on them fucking hard over the back of the couch in the game room a week ago. Michael watched calmly as Dean took his pounding, and then fucked him into their mattress later that night without needing any prep.

Could a backwards bond give Dean and Cas more of an intuitive connection? Could it help them trust each other? He wanted that, too. He wanted badly to trust Cas. He wanted desperately to believe that Cas loved him as much as he said he did. Dean felt in his gut that it was really a matter of time and patience. Already he felt stronger. He was closer tonight than he’d ever been in being able to feel it like he needed to. They’d fought, and Cas had been so angry, so hurt, yet he never even
suggested they break up. He’d calmly told Dean he knew everything and then simply shrugged it off.

It took Dean so long to fall asleep, he watched as Michael woke up to pee and go right back to sleep. Dean could almost see him pull the girl into himself and steal the warmth of her body. He needed to sleep. He needed to be awake and alert for Michael, but he couldn’t stop pounding through the mess he’d created with Cas.

Who was wrong? And who was right? Cas wanted to build a life with Dean as an alpha. He wanted an intellectual and intimate partner. He didn’t need another Sub. He had April for that. But. If Cas would help Michael fill the holes inside Dean’s Submissive parts, all of them, then he’d spend his days balanced and easygoing, just like Cas wanted him. Couldn’t they have it both ways? What was Castiel fighting him on this point for? He didn’t believe for a second that Cas, the Big Bad wolf would be happy without his hand and his paddle landing squarely on Dean’s red ass. There was something Dean was missing, but he was too sleepy to suss it out.

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Dean woke up first. He woke up well before his alarm sounded and found himself chest-to-chest with Cas, his head shoved unceremoniously into Cas’ throat. He smelled enticing. He smelled like home. He needed more sleep, but he knew right away it wasn’t going to happen, so he pulled away, sneaked into the bathroom and showered.

The fighting from the night before hit him as he washed; and so did his massively embarrassing panic attack from yesterday morning and his guilt over having secreted himself away last night to get himself off when no one would do it for him. Dean needed a scene, and he needed it badly. He felt dreadful. His sleepiness left a gritty feeling in his eyes that the shower wasn’t washing away.

Dean felt dreadful, and he felt reckless, and he felt determined. He’d already tried asking. He’d asked nicely even. He’d asked them both. He’d fucking begged. Fuck that. Dean knew how to get what he needed, even when they had other plans. He ignored the little naggy voice reminding him that Michael had explicitly threatened chastity. He might end up there, but he’d get a beating or a pounding first, and that’s all he needed.

Dean started a pot of coffee, and then filled his cup. He kept an eye on the time. Cas was nothing if not predictable on a work day. The only unpredictable housemate had bundled off last night to go save Omegas. Dean knew what he was doing. He waited calmly, sipping coffee. April’s knee pillow was in its usual place beside Cas’ chair. Dean eyed it hungrily as he waited. At precisely 6:20, Dean undressed and rinsed his mug in the sink.

He kicked the pillow underneath the massive oak kitchen table and crawled under to kneel on it, facing Castiel’s chair. He sent a silent apology to April. She wasn’t going to like this, but he would make it up to her later. Dean let the familiarity of his position calm him. He breathed evenly, and let his gaze go deep. He let his calm wash away the guilt he felt over co-opting another Sub’s pillow. What he was doing was strictly taboo. No one had a right to molest April’s pillow except Cas.

He heard them coming down. He heard them enter the room. He couldn’t see them as he faced the back wall, but he knew Cas was pouring coffee. “He wasn’t in the bathroom either, Alpha,” said Michael walking in.

“He’s around somewhere, Michael,” said Cas calmly. “He made coffee.”
“Are you sure that was him? Sometimes Fred makes the coffee.” Michael sipped noisily, and then coughed a little. “No, you’re right. This was Dean.”

April gasped all of a sudden. Dean saw her bare feet out of his peripheral vision, and he took a deeper breath.

“April?” Cas asked. “What’s wrong?” He set two cups on the table and then looked down, where she pointed.

“Oh.”

“Dean?!” Michael yelped. “What are you doing? Get out of there! That’s not yours.”

“Alpha!” April cried in despair. She danced from foot to foot. “Get him off! That’s my spot!”

“Calm down, Submissive. Stay where you are. Michael, would you please select any pillow out of the living room and bring it for us? April’s in need of a new one. I fear her old pillow is contaminated. I’ve been meaning to replace it.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Michael was only gone for a minute, but the whimpers from April’s throat got louder and she shifted unhappily. Neither she nor Cas addressed Dean though.

Cas sighed as he accepted the pillow from Michael with a word of thanks. He’d really liked this table, and he would miss it. Dean didn’t know it yet, but he would be building Cas a new one soon. Cas dropped the pillow casually onto the floor beside his chair and pointed. April calmed immediately and took her place. She would never use the old one again. It was tainted. Much as she loved Dean, some things were sacred.

Castiel held a cup of juice for her, helping her drink, and then he set the cup back on the table and left her to begin cooking breakfast.

“Sir?” asked Michael nervously. “Aren’t you going to do something?”

Cas raised his brows in interest and glanced at the far end of the table. “No, I’m not. You said you wanted custody of Dean’s wolf; so much so that you asked to take his spanking for him only two days ago. Well, now’s your chance. Please be my guest.” Cas began toasting English muffins and digging jam out of the fridge. “Would you like yogurt this morning, Michael?”

“What? Oh, um, sure. Yogurt’s fine.” Michael squatted down on the other side of Cas’ chair from April, and he frowned at Dean. Dean didn’t look at him. “What’s he doing, Sir?”

“He’s eliciting, Michael. He wanted something last night that he didn’t get, and now he’s pushing.”

“What should I do?”

“You have a number of options, and I believe you’re bright enough to recognize many of them. I leave him to you.”

“Well, what would you do?” Michael kept looking at Dean. Neither of them were upset. Cas was completely calm, and Michael looked upon the episode like a puzzle to be worked out. He cocked his head to one side.

“I plan to ignore him. He has a car, and he knows how to tell time. You and I and April can drive to The Facility together in your car if Dean isn’t dressed and ready when we need to leave.”
“I’m not just gonna leave him here! What happened to listening to his wolf and giving him what it needs?”

The muffins popped up, and Cas plated them, shoving four more into the toaster slots. He put a plate at Michael’s spot, and another at Dean’s, then he returned to the kitchen to finish up. “Would you please bring the butter, Michael? Dean! Breakfast is ready.” Cas called it out as if he didn’t know perfectly well that Dean was present and wouldn’t be coming out voluntarily.

Michael kept his eye on the table, but he collected the butter dish and the jam from the counter and put them both in the middle of the table.

He squatted back down, clearly having decided on a course of action. “Come out of there right now, Submissive! This is completely unacceptable!” Dean didn’t flinch, or move, or blink. “Dean, you’ve got to the count of three to get your ass out from under the table and take your seat with the rest of us.”

“One!” Dean didn’t respond.

Cas set his breakfast down and took his place. Dean moved in as soon as Cas was settled. He mouthed hungrily at Castiel’s crotch, seeking to find his cock through the fabric of his pants. He kept his hands clasped behind his back, using nothing but his lips and tongue.

The percussive cuff to the side of his head surprised him and knocked him sideways with a yelp. Michael startled to his feet. “Whadja hit him for? I thought you were leaving it to me?!”

“Apologies, Omega. I have a rule. No one touches me without my permission. Allowances can be made to rookies, but this particular Sub knows this rule well.”

Dean rubbed his head and stoically retook his place. He moved fast to unzip Cas’ pants with his hands before Cas could stop him, and this time Cas caught him across the mouth with an open palmed slap that would leave a four-fingered imprint and a little blood inside his mouth. Dean whimpered, but he didn’t give up. April’s eyes were wide on him. Castiel hadn’t moved from his place. Dean grimaced ugly and determined, and dove in one more time.

The grip to his hair at the back of his head wrenched him back painfully and strained the tendons in his neck. He cried out loudly. Cas held him there with one hand, passively eating with the other. Dean gurgled as he tried to breathe normally. Cas fed April a bite. She accepted it without looking away from Dean’s face.

“Feel free to handle the situation any time you’re ready, Michael. Please don’t let me stop you. I believe you’d already passed ‘One’.” Castiel took another bite and twisted his grip on Dean’s hair.

Dean whined.

Michael took a deep breath, handing his uncertainty to the wolf inside him. “All right. Dean, are you listening to me? Fuck counting. You’ve got three days of chastity and a strapping coming to you. Get out of there now!” Cas heard the growl start low in Dean’s throat. It began to grow louder.

“Michael, would you please come stand over here on this side for a moment? Right here beside April.” Michael shifted without a word. He was about to ask Cas why when Dean’s growl turned into a roar. He ripped free of Cas’ grip and lifted upright, taking the table with him on his shoulders. He flung it over to crash into the kitchen counter with a sickening crack, all of their breakfast went with it, breaking into dangerous shards that scattered everywhere. Dean’s eyes were red, and his breath heaved. Tears tracked down his face.
“Son of a bitch! FUCK!” shouted Michael. “What the fuck did you just do? You broke the table, Dean! Holy fuck!”

“Any time now, Michael,” Cas suggested simply, soothing April with a touch to her hair. Then he stood and went back to the toaster, starting four more muffins cooking and retrieving bowls for another round of yogurt. The table had landed right where Michael’d been standing. Cas had known. Fucking alphas!

Snarling, Michael ignored the broken glass. He ripped Dean away by the bicep, planted himself in a chair that looked remarkably out of place without the table over it, and he pulled Dean in short order over his lap. Dean cried out as Michael spanked him.

Fred darted in to investigate the noise. “Ah, Sir. Not the table.”

“Fred would you please fetch three pairs of slippers for everyone’s feet? We’ll need to get this cleaned up right away, but I don’t want anyone’s feet cut.” Cas put three plates together quickly. “Would you also please see that there are TV trays available in the living room for us to finish breakfast? We only need three.”

“Right away, Sir. Please don’t allow any bare feet to move from where they are.”

“No, I won’t.” Cas was dressed all the way to his shoes. He collected April from her pillow and carried her out of the room to set her on her feet at the foot of the stairs. She clutched at him, and he shushed her gently. They could hear the regular sounds of Michael’s hand coming down on Dean’s flesh and Dean’s begging.

“Hustle up and get dressed, Kitten. Be back down in 90 seconds. We’re finishing breakfast in the living room, and I want you seated before Michael finishes with Dean.” Cas left her to fetch two of the meals. By the time he got them to the living room, Dean’s cries had turned desperate, and April was settling in on the couch where Fred had lined up trays.

“Sir, would you not be more comfortable in the dining room?” Fred handed over two pairs of shoes to Cas and then fiddled with one of the trays.

“No, I think this is fine. We’re nearly finished eating. We won’t be long.” Cas returned to the kitchen to give Michael the shoes. Michael was finishing up. He slipped the shoes on grimly, and then he carried Dean out, bridal-style. Once in the living room, he arranged Dean in the corner and met Cas at the couch to finish eating. Cas had given April leave to speak and participate in the meal on her own. She ate mechanically, still in shock. She really couldn’t think of anything to say.

As soon as they’d settled back in, April in the middle, none of them speaking, Dean left his corner and tried once more. His backside red and shiny over the bruises his hairbrush left two days ago. He’d pushed up underneath the tray table, heading once more for Castiel. Cas sighed and ground his heel down on Dean’s fingers.

“AHHHH!” Dean rocked back, pulling his hand free.

“Shit, Dean, STOP IT! GOD! What the fuck is wrong with you?” Michael extricated himself without spilling anything and hauled Dean to his feet, holding him with one arm around his chest and the other wrenching his wrist up behind his back and twisting it to put torque on his shoulder. Dean went up on his tiptoes and flung his head back.

“I don’t know what to do, Alpha! Tell me what to do. What does he need? What’s he doing?!” Michael was beside himself.
Fred cleared his throat. “Omega, if I may. The upper left hand drawer in the kitchen next to the refrigerator holds my best pruning clippers. Might I suggest, in a situation such as this, when the Submissive has been particularly naughty and his bottom requires more reddening than one’s hand, although it is clearly a mighty hand, can deliver, I have noticed over the course of the summer that both the Hickory tree in the front and the Willow near the duck pond have enjoyed quite a solid season of growth this year. Either of the two should be capable of producing a fine switch at need. It is none of my business or course, but I’ve always found Hickory to be most effective.” Fred nodded politely and excused himself to collect helpers to get started cleaning up.

Michael caught Cas smiling a little, his eyes on his plate. Cas tapped April’s plate with a knuckle to remind her to finish her breakfast. She was staring in horror at the door through which Fred had disappeared, but she jumped at the correction and finished spreading jam on her muffin. Dean struggled in Michael’s grip. Michael let him go.

“You heard the man, Dean. Go get the clippers. Go out front and cut me a switch, and then meet me in the play room. We’re going to be late leaving today, I’m afraid.”

Dean turned to Cas. “Alpha, please! I need it! Why does she always get to sit and be good for you? I can do it too. You know I can. I only wanted to be your warmer today. Why can’t I have you like this? Please, Sir! Please.”

Castiel wiped his mouth with a napkin. “It doesn’t work this way, Dean. You know I can’t reward you for that behavior. Submissives don’t make demands in my house. They make polite requests at appropriate times. You demanded quite rudely. You broke our table. What’s worse, you stole from April. I’m leaving you in your mate’s hands. I believe he told you to go out and cut a switch. The Hickory tree is in the front yard, about halfway to the Guard house. Don’t get dressed. Wear those shoes Michael’s got for you. Come straight back. While you’re gone, please consider which of our rules you’ve just broken. Be ready to tell Michael when you return.”

Castiel put down his napkin and pushed his tray back. “Come on April. We’ll take my car.”

Fred returned to speak to Michael as Dean gave up and slunk out of the room to get the clippers. He knew where they were. Fred kept them sharpened just for him. Fred handed Michael a sheet of paper. “Sir, Eunice has completed her morning inventory in the play room, and there are items missing. I thought you would want to know.”

“Missing? What’s missing?” Michael looked it over.

Castiel joined him reading over his shoulder. Michael pointed for him. “Sir, did you take out an anal vibrator and a fleshlight?”

“No, I didn’t. Dean and I didn’t play last night.”

“You didn’t? Even after he came to talk to me? I felt…Sir, you might not have played, but he did. I felt his orgasm.” Michael scrubbed a finger over the penned items.

“He’s under no restriction that I’m aware of to abstain from seeking his own orgasms, Michael, but if he used a fleshlight to get him there, that’s awfully close to breaking your rule. I don’t pity you. You have a difficult decision to make. I advise you to think carefully about how you phrased the rule before you act.”

“Yes, Sir. I will.”

“Please try to be on time to your appointment this morning. There is a great deal to get accomplished.”
Pam has made special arrangements to be with you for this. Don’t keep her waiting.”

“No, Sir. I intend to be thorough, but it shouldn’t take long.”

“Very good. I’m impressed with your work this morning, Michael. You’re doing quite well considering your lack of training.”

“Sir? Didn’t I fuck it all up? I mean, if I’d acted faster, we might still have a kitchen table.”

“No, the table was doomed from the moment Dean knelt on another Sub’s pillow. He wouldn’t have done that unless he was very deep and beyond the point of commitment. I’m just glad he didn’t hurt anyone. Thank you for moving when I asked you to. You didn’t hesitate at all, and I take that as a good sign of burgeoning trust between us. No doubt, we still have a way to go, but you did very well this morning.”

“Uh, thank you, Sir.” They exited the room together, Michael turning right to head down to the play room to wait for Dean, and Cas and April turning left to head back into the foyer.

Cas paused, sending his mate on ahead, and he put a firm hand on Michael’s shoulder. “Stay strong for us, please Michael. Dean’s responding to me, but it’s really more about him. I know you want to take the lead with him. Don’t let him see you weaken. Don’t give him more than ten minutes to get back. He knows how to select a switch, and he knows where the Hickory tree is. If it takes him longer than ten minutes, he’s stalling.”

“Sir, this may be a stupid question, but are you two okay? I only felt it from his side last night, but it felt, um… Are you okay?”

“Thank you for asking, Michael. Dean and I have some work to do, but I believe this difficulty will prove to strengthen us in the end.”

“yessir,” he whispered.

Cas collected April, and they had to pass through the kitchen to get to the garage. Fred showed Castiel the crack that ran the breadth of the table. It could be pinned and glued, but it would always look damaged.

“Dean’s going to build us a new one, Fred. Please dispose of this one however you think appropriate.”

“Sir, I wonder if you might grant me permission to fix it back up and gift it to Eunice’s god-daughter. Erica’s furnishing her first apartment. It may be a bit too big, but I believe we can make it fit.”

“That’s a wonderful idea. Please see that she gets it and give her my best wishes. Let me know if you need help.”

“No Sir. This repair is well within my capabilities.” Fred ran a hand over the smooth wood until it caught on the break.

“As are most things, my friend. Have a good day, everyone. I’m sorry about the mess.” Cas ushered April out as Dean was coming back in. Cas held his hand out, and Dean put the switch wordlessly into the Dom’s hand. Cas swished it, flexed it, balanced it, and then ran his hand along it, looking for blemishes. It was perfect. Castiel nodded and handed it back to Dean. He took Dean’s chin in his hand and kissed him on the lips.

“You’ll settle up with me tonight, love. We’ll go from there. I want you to think about what you
want from me. I’ll give you anything.”

“Yes, Cas. I understand.” Dean looked him in the eye.

“Did anyone see you?”

“A security sweep drove by.” Dean answered sheepishly.

“Did that make you uncomfortable?”

“Yes, Sir. I’m embarrassed. They saw me cutting it from the tree, and they knew what it was for.”

“Good,” said Cas, and he left with April, leaving Dean standing naked in the kitchen, four maids and the butler watching him.

“Um, excuse me. I, uh, I gotta go do a thing,” Dean said, blushing.

“Mm-hmm, you sure do,” Monica told him maternally. “I hope he beats your ass raw, boy. Lookit what you did.”

Fred cleared his throat, and Monica desisted with a scowl.

Dean scuttled out, his face and ears bright red.

Chapter End Notes

Mmm-mmm. I feel like the rambling in this one got to be a little hard to follow. Poor Dean, that was a lot of late-night introspection, and I'm sure his fatigue had a lot to do with his decision to go table-tipping.

Wish me luck. We're in for another couple of days of torrential toad-floaters. My poor dog. He hates to pee in the rain, and it just won't stop.

Love to all y'all.
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Dean gets a switching, and then he concludes unfinished talks with Cas.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: If you are looking for a way to donate to the relief effort in Texas, consider the Crowd Rise site for Random Acts by Family Business Beer Company. Local charities benefiting are posted on the website. Thank you all for the powerfully warm wishes and all the love. We're still fine, but tens of thousands of my neighbors are not.


Whew! If I had to guess, I would say the previous chapter ruffled some feathers. I hope this one clarifies things a little bit. Don't worry, our boys are still on-track, and things are way better between them than they were a few chapters ago.

I feel like I want to explain a little bit about what last chapter was all about, but I won’t. Just keep in mind how Bobby objected to letting us apes into the inner workings of The Facility because apes always misunderstand. Maybe try to see it from that light.

In more personal news, we're still not flooded and we still have power going into the third day of Hurricane Harvey (stupidest name for a storm ever). Levees on our major rivers will be opened tomorrow (Monday) to relieve pressure behind the dams which is expected to cause 800-year flood conditions. They don't have any topographical computer models for that amount of water. There's no way to know yet what will happen to all of us downstream. I'm not in the path directly, and am not in the evacuation zone, so we're sitting tight. We have food and water and family, and we're dry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 50 – Wednesday, June 21, 2017

NOW:

“Thank you,” he said, accepting the switch. Dean stood awkwardly while Michael inspected it, unsure of where and how he should be. The inspection didn’t take long, and Dean moved quickly when Michael used the switch to point him to the mattress. Slipping out of the flimsy shoes, Dean arranged himself over the end. It wasn’t really a bed, per se. It was a lined, cushioned surface that could be adjusted to whatever height.
Looking up, Dean grasped the two leather handles that Michael had arranged running down on rope lines from the head of the mattress. He got a good grip and took a deep breath. His feet were flat to the ground and his belly flat to the padding. Michael flipped the toggle switch and raised the mattress until Dean was up on the balls of his feet.

“Do you understand why you’re here?” he heard from behind him. He also heard the evil swish of the switch as Michael tested it in the open air. Dean’s ass clenched involuntarily.

“Yes, Sir. I took liberties with my Dom’s body. I stole another Submissive’s property. I broke Pack property. I didn’t stop when I was told to.”

“Wow, Dean. It sounds almost like you knew exactly what you were doing.” Michael swished the Hickory switch again, getting a feel for speed and balance. “Which rules did you break?” Michael’s voice was airy and interested. Warm.

“Number 1, Number 3, and Number 4, Sir.”

“What about Number 5?”

“I didn’t lie.”

“There’s more to that one, Dean. It also commands that you not behave in a manipulative manner. It commands that you ask for what you want directly, I believe.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Did you provoke us on purpose?” Michael stood close, with his right hip against Dean’s left one, and his warm hand caressing Dean’s lower back.

“Yes, sir. I did.” Dean spoke clearly. He wasn’t nervous or penitent. He was right where he wanted to be. Anticipation thrummed through his body to his toes.

“I see. Before we start, tell me – if I had dealt with you last night as you wanted me to, would we be here this morning?” Michael rested the hand on Dean’s back.

“Probably not, Sir.”

“Are you disappointed about that?”

“That I’m here right now?” Dean looked over his shoulder. His body melted into the padded surface.

“Are you upset that we drove you to this?” Michael stroked his hand up and down Dean’s back again, watching it break out in chill bumps.

“Did you, Sir? Drive me to it?”

“Didn’t we? By not helping you out last night?”

“No, Sir. I’m responsible for my behavior. With all due respect, you don’t control me.” Dean began to feel antsy again. He wanted to get started, not have a lengthy philosophical discussion.

“All right. Then are you disappointed that we’re here right now doing this rather than what we might’ve done last night?” Michael tapped the switch lightly along Dean’s legs. Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.
“Sir, please.”

“No. Answer the question. I’m in charge right now. You’ll do as you’re told.”

Dean sighed. “You wouldn’t have hit me as hard as I needed you to last night. I had to break something. I’m sorry, but I need it. Please, Michael.”

The switch whipped back and popped Dean’s right thigh hard and stinging. Dean gasped.

“Please refrain from using my name for the moment, Dean.”

“I’m sorry, Sir.” Dean clenched his ass again, but Michael soothed him with a firm, massaging hand.

“I’m not going to continue until I understand,” Michael told him, and Dean refrained from groaning by the barest of margins. “You wanted a strong scene, and you wanted to hurt, but you felt that neither of us would give you what you needed without provocation. Is that it?”

Dean sighed in frustration. “Sir, you weren’t going to give me anything at all. Alpha turned me down flat, and you deferred to him.”

“I see. Did it ever occur to you to ask for what you wanted directly? You could have skipped that awful display at breakfast and just talked to us. I might surprise you with my abilities, Submissive, without needing a provocation to get us there.” Michael kept a hand on Dean as he moved slowly behind him, enjoying the play of muscle in his legs as he strained to support himself at this height.

Dean didn’t answer. Michael took hold of his balls and pulled slowly and firmly downward.

“Ahh! Yes, Sir! Ow! Yes, I thought of that!” Michael released him. “I didn’t want that, Sir. I need a punishment, not a scene. Sir, please!”

It was Michael’s turn to sigh. “You’re a real piece of work, my Sub.”

“Yes, Sir. I love you too. Please hit me now!”

“You see? When you do that, when you make demands from down there…Dean what’s a Dom to do, eh?” Michael popped the switch along the curve of Dean’s ass several times just hard enough to sting.

“I’m sorry, Sir. It wasn’t a demand. Please, it was a request. PLEASE!”

“You don’t get a warmup, Dean. You broke four of our original five rules in one morning. Congratulations. Brace yourself.” Michael hummed contentedly for a moment longer as Dean held his breath and closed his eyes. Then he swung. The switch was just right. It started at the base at barely smaller around than Dean’s thumb. It was free of shoots or bends. It was supple, springy, and strong. It was long enough to provide a whip-like snap at the end that left a welt wherever Michael applied it. And he applied it liberally all the way across Dean’s canvas, up and down his ass from top to bottom, painting both sides with angry, raised pink welts. He worked steadily at a regular tempo until he’d covered the whole span twice, then he stopped and rubbed the sting out.

Dean worked to keep his breath even. Michael’s pace helped him work his breathing into a measured thing that took him deep inside himself. He grunted on occasion, but didn’t tear up. It hurt, and his body broke out in a cold sweat. Adrenalin and endorphins encouraged him to move, to escape, to save himself, but he funneled it all back into himself and rode the wave of hormones into a state of bliss.
The stinging swipes stopped abruptly, and a cool hand passed over him, soothing. The hand that soothed him soon turned to squeezing. “Why did Alpha tell you no last night, Dean? He asked permission to scene with you. I know he had plans. What went wrong? Is it something you can share with me?”

“We had a fight.” Dean squeezed the words out through his teeth. He felt hiccups on the horizon, and he hated getting hiccups.

“Yes, I felt that. Surely that’s not reason enough to call off a scene. Don’t tell me Alpha’s got a moral objection to angry sex.” He continued rubbing the inflamed skin of Dean’s backside.

“He thought I was close to dropping, and I think,” Dean paused. “…no, that’s private. I’m sorry Sir, I can’t tell you everything.”

“That’s fine. I understand. Here we go…” And the swipes started up again. Dean was caught off-guard, and he cried out and clung tighter to the hand holds. His feet came up off the floor until Michael popped the bottoms of each one, encouraging him to put them back down. Dean began to whine into the strikes that peppered him as the pace picked up. Michael was a fast learner, and Dean’s wolf leaned into the pops in eagerness, heartened by Michael’s confidence.

This time when Michael stopped, he knelt down and pressed his gritty cheek against the hot striped flesh.

“OH, Fuck!” decided Dean, squirming.

“Why didn’t Alpha deal with you himself this morning? Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Nnnngh! Sir, please!”

“Can’t talk right now?” Michael used his scratchy face to light up the nerves that were already alight with a new kind of hell.

“please….”

“I’ll take that as a ‘no.’ Let’s finish up. Ready?” Dean simply moaned from deep in his throat and pressed his ass out toward Michael, who chuckled. Remembering that Dean wanted power and pain, Michael unleashed. He’d become adept at watching Dean’s various aspects from the inside, and he fed them as well as he could.

He struck again and again until he saw Dean light up gloriously in flame, and then he slowed and stopped.

“Next time you try that stunt, Dean, I’m going to give you only half of what you want and I’m going to find an alternate punishment that you hate to make up the difference. But I’ll make you a deal. Next time you want me to lay you raw, just tell me, and it’s all yours. Got it? You don’t need to break our house to get stripes on your ass. It’s hard on the furniture. Don’t push me.”

Dean hiccuped his assent and buried his face in the inside of his upper arm. His muscles ached from straining to hold position, and his ass was on fire. “I’m…I’m sor…ry, S…sir.” His mind was still, though. He felt warm, cradled, safe, and cherished. He felt like he’d been herded back into his corral and provided all the comforts a stallion could want and the security of not having to fend for himself to get them. He let the throbbing heat course through his body and bring him peace, reminding him how much love he had already for the young Omega who could so easily bring him to this place.

Michael lowered the mattress enough to help Dean scramble up onto it. He arranged the Sub on his
belly with his legs straight out behind him. Michael ran fingertips up and down Dean’s shoulders and back, over his swollen ass, and all the way down to each foot, then back up again.

“I’m going to fuck you, Dean. Stay right there.” Michael lowered his pants, and he lubed up his fingers, transferring a liberal amount to his own ready dick. He’d been ready for some time. “Eyes front!” he snapped when Dean looked back at him. His Sub huffed but turned back around. Michael straddled Dean’s thighs and used his fingers to guide his cock in between those beautiful hot pink cheeks. He couldn’t really see his target, but he had no trouble finding it, and he pressed right in.

“Ohhhh! Fuck! PREP, Michael!” Dean’s cheeks pressed together.

“Hmm. You’re right. I didn’t open you up. Strange, though, you don’t really seem to need it. You feel ready to me.” Michael pumped his hips in and out a couple of times very slowly, pressing the scratchy curls at his groin right up against Dean’s red ass, and he felt the ache intensify along Dean’s skin, but not inside his body. “You’re open enough to take an Omega cock this morning, Dean.” He fucked into Dean as deeply as he could, and he let the weight of his hips press Dean into the cushion. Briefly, he pounded into him hard and fast, and then he slowed again. Dean was whimpering and squirming on his cock.

“Why are you already open this morning, Dean? You told me that Alpha turned you down. If he didn’t fuck you, why are you prepped for me? And don’t lie to me.”

“I didn’t, Sir.” He hiccupped and tried again. “I didn’t touch myself.”

Michael growled and bit down on Dean’s shoulder, making Dean scream out in a high pitched squeal. “I DIDN’T, I SWEAR!”

“I felt you come last night. Don’t lie to me!” Michael pressed his thighs tight around Dean’s and fucked into him hard, intensifying the sting as their bodies slapped loudly together.

“I used toys, Sir! I didn’t actually, oh fuck please, I didn’t…it was a…fleshlight. It’s not against the rules! You never said! I didn’t touch my dick!”

Michael went still and chuckled against Dean’s shoulder, making Dean scream out in a high pitched squeal. “I DIDN’T, I SWEAR!”

“Vibrating plug. The wide one with all the ridges. Love that one.”

Michael laughed out loud and kissed Dean’s lips, making his partner lean around and strain to keep the connection. Slowly, Michael began to move again, easier this time, gentle and hot, holding onto his hips and working his thumbs into the meat of Dean’s cheeks.

“Word to the wise, little alpha brat,” Michael whispered as he pressed sensuously into his mate. “If you want to get away with it, wipe the toys down and put them back, especially if your mate is the pack manager.”

“You knew?” Dean pulled up onto his elbows and looked around. Michael pulled out, and manhandled Dean up onto his knees before sinking back in. He fucked in hard and fast, going into a simple, bestial frenzy of sensation that stole Dean’s breath and made him lower back down onto his chest, grasping at the bars of the headboard.

“Always assume I know, Dean! You can’t hide shit from me for long.” Michael reached around and wrapped a hand around Dean’s engorged cock. He pumped in time with his powerful thrusts, and
Dean was already too far gone to hold back. He shouted and came, spilling sticky and hot over Michael’s hand. Michael kissed his mate’s back and slowed down enough to really savor the pulses as he came too. He stilled deep inside Dean as he shot hot come up into his mate. “You didn’t break any rules, Dean. You’re not in trouble. But it was a very, very close thing. Semantics, my sweet Sub.”

They lay side-by-side. Dean swept Michael’s hair from his forehead. “We need another shower before we go,” Dean said sleepily.

“Are you okay to go to work?” Michael asked.

“Of course. I’ve worked under worse conditions.”

“Oh, really? You mean it wasn’t hard enough for you?” Michael teased.

“It was perfect.” Dean’s eyes were serious, and Michael went where Dean was.

“What’s going on, Dean? Please tell me whatever you can.”

Dean rolled onto his back, ignoring, or maybe enjoying, the pain from his backside. “I’m not completely sure. Cas knows about our plan, and he’s not going to fight us over it.”

“Yes, I know. But we’re in trouble, aren’t we?”

Dean turned his head and smirked at Michael. “Uh, yeah. You could say that. He said he’d settle up tonight; with me, anyway. I dunno about what he’s planning for you.”

“Why did he leave you here this morning? I don’t understand. That wasn’t like him. Was he really that upset over the table?”

Michael ran his fingers down Dean’s chest, scratching through the smattering of freckles.

“Doubt it. It’s complicated. I’ll check in with him when we get there, after I drop you off with Pamela.” Dean rolled onto his side, facing away from Michael and pressed back into him. Michael wrapped him up in his arms.

“Aren’t you staying with me?”

“T’ll stay for some of it, but she’s going to want to talk to you privately most of the time. They don’t let mates in for the psych stuff.”

“Oh. Damn. That makes sense, I guess,” Michael conceded. “And the rest? What else is going on with you? I know you’re all stirred up. I want to know why.”

Dean took a minute to think, and Michael let him. “I want to marry him. So badly. But I don’t think we see it the same way. I tried to explain what I want, but every time I say it, it comes out different. I’m confusing the fuck out of him and me both. Why is this so hard? You know what made us great together was always how easy it was to be together. No matter whether we were working or scening or out drinking with the guys. We always fit together like we belonged. Now everything’s confusing, and it’s like we don’t even speak the same language.”

“I’m sorry, Dean. How can I help?” Michael full-on nuzzled Dean’s neck and stroked his bare belly.

Dean flinched. “Dude, that tickles!” Michael huffed, but he stopped the light touch, resting a hand on Dean’s abdomen with more firmness. “I want to ask you, Michael, please take the training seriously, and work hard. You’re not going to like all of it, but we’ll all work better together once you get
“settled.”

“How’s that?”

“Once you get used to what it feels like to be an Omega without fighting it, I’ll be able to settle down too. It’s going to be good for both of us.” Dean lifted Michael’s hand up to his face and ran the back of it over his cheek with his eyes closed.

“You’re this unsettled because of me?” Michael asked him softly.

“There’s so much going on. Someone like me needs something stable to be sure of, like a home base. My alpha-side and my wolf want that to be you, but I keep trying to get it from Cas. It’s so fucked up. You’re not doing anything wrong, Babe. It’s not your fault, but if you wanna help…stability in being an Omega would make all the difference. I feel so wrong in asking that. I know you hate being Omega.” Dean sighed heavily. “Forget it. I shouldn’t put pressure on you like that. All you can do is your best, and you’re already doing that.”

“Dean, you’re babbling. I asked how I could help. Of course I want you to tell me. Don’t feel guilty. If learning to be Omega will help you, then it’s going to get my full attention. I hate seeing you in pain.”

“Really?” Dean blinked over his shoulder. “But you hate that side of you.”

“Maybe I just don’t know it yet. Give me a chance, alpha.” Michael smiled at him, crinkling his eyes. “You ready? We need to get going.” Michael glanced at the clock, and Dean followed his eyes.

“Son of a bitch! I’ve got a department staff meeting in 45 minutes!” Dean threw himself off the mattress and pulled Michael up too. “And you need to be there in 30. Quick, get the shower going.”

Michael laughed at Dean’s panic. He was cute when he panicked like that. “I thought you were going to stay with me for a while!” Michael shouted over his shoulder while Dean dug a bottle of shampoo and towels out of a cabinet nearby.

“Not at the beginning. They’ll call me in when you’re ready to do the physical stuff.” Dean pushed Michael under the water before it was very warm and dumped a squirt of shampoo into his palm.

“You mean the metal dildo-chair?”

“Yep! That’s the one, now move it! We leave in five.”

**************************

They left in ten, and they were a few minutes late. Pam gave Dean a surprisingly powerful bitchface as she guided Michael into her office. He grinned at her like a scamp, and she broke, shaking her head in amusement. Dean blew a kiss at his mate over her shoulder before she closed the door. Michael acknowledged it with a firm nod of his head. He had his brave face on.

Then Dean met with his team. He paused for a breath in his office before he headed for the meeting. Dean had a trace of the Sub still kicking around inside him, and he pulled his professional face on
like a mask to cover it.

All of them were already assembled in the smallest conference room. Jo had her feet up on the table and her pen tapped impatiently against her teeth. Jody was reviewing her notes. Kevin was describing the pesto dish he’d made last night to Hannah.

“Morning everyone, sorry I’m late. Ready to get started?” Dean bustled in and dropped his notes on the table at his chair, but he remained on his feet.

“What’s wrong with your chair, alpha?” Jo teased him.

“Not that I’m aware,” said Dean blandly as if he didn’t understand the jibe, and he opened his folder without even looking at her. “Jody, what’ve you got for me?” Dean had a no-nonsense air that heightened everyone’s defenses right off the bat.

Jody sat up straight and glanced left and right at her colleagues, looking for guidance. Dean was rarely abrupt. The rest of them simply looked at her with blank faces, so she cleared her throat and started her report.

The meeting went quickly, much more quickly than usual considering the omission of the usual joking around. Dean kept them on track, asking for clarification, making quick decisions, settling disagreements, and setting deadlines with a firm voice. He finished up his notes with a sharp pop of his pen against his yellow legal pad, and he closed his folder, still on his feet and bracing against the table on one arm.

“That’s it, then. Thank you. Dismissed.” He pocketed his pen, and straightened his pile of folders and papers.

“Dean,” said Jo, standing slowly. “Are you all right?” She approached him slowly, speaking just for him and nodding to Hannah as she slipped out.

“I’m peachy, Jo. Do you need something?” Dean picked up his stuff and turned to face her, all business, nothing but a manager.

“Um, no, but you’re not acting like yourself, and I feel like, as your friend, I ought to see if you need, I don’t know – anything.” Jo frowned, watching him with a tilt to her head.

He sighed and softened. “Rough patch, Pipsqueak. I’ll be okay.”

“You sure? Hard night? Not to be too subtle here, but you usually sit down during meetings.”

Dean smiled and looked at his feet. “Three guesses, first two don’t count.”

“Can I see?” Her eyes sparkled with cheeky enthusiasm. Jo knew how to draw Dean out.

“No. Mind your own business.” He opened the door, and she followed him out into the hall, trailing him like a puppy.

“Okay, but you usually love a good strapping. Usually it puts you in a BETTER mood, not turns you into a grouse. What gives? Come on, you can tell me.” Dean spotted Castiel disappearing into his office down the hall, and he pulled up short.

“I’m fine, Jo. Don’t you have a class to get to?” He touched her arm, an apology for acting like a dick.
“Yeah, I suppose. Hey, you’re coming to the Certification ceremony tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“How can you imagine me missing April’s Certification? I’ll be there with bells on.” Dean leaned in and kissed her cheek, whispering, “Thanks, Jo.”

“Shape up, Winchester. You’re the fucking Director of this rag. If you bail, they’re going to make me do it again.” She walked backwards down the hall, pointing her finger at him, and raising her eyebrows meaningfully.

“Full curriculum review edits on my desk by Tuesday, Harvelle! I’m not fucking around. You don’t get an extension this time!”

“There’s the asshole I know and love!” She turned and strutted off down the hall, swinging her hips. Dean pulled an exasperated face and then turned to go face Castiel. He steeled himself, taking a very deep breath and running a hand over his ass. (Man up, Winchester. He loves you. Get your act together and face him.) Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.

Dean pushed Castiel’s door open without knocking and slipped in. Cas was on the phone, but he looked up when Dean entered, and his eyes showed relief. Dean leaned his shoulders against the wall and pulled out his phone to check email while he waited.

“Both of us?” Cas asked into his phone, his eyes on Dean, and Dean perked up. “I suppose, but it will need to be late afternoon either Monday or Tuesday. That’s the only time next week we both have free.” Dean frowned and Cas nodded, putting a finger up. “Just a minute, Jamie, let me ask him.”

“Jamie McKenzie wants to do an in-home photo expose’ and an interview for Rolling Stone. Do you want to do it?” Cas seemed completely calm.

“Rolling Stone? Like, THE Rolling Stone? Is Jamie doing the interview, or is he just setting it up?” Dean had his stylus poised above his screen, but he merely held it there.

“Do you know another Rolling Stone? Yes, Dean, it’s that one. I believe he said he would be filing the story as a guest columnist.”

“Do you want to do it?” Dean looked up at Cas from under his lashes as if still working in his emails. Cas held the phone still, giving Dean’s question his full attention. “Not really, but I can’t think of a good reason to say no. We’re still on campaign, after all, and there’s a message that needs spreading.”

Dean nodded slowly. “I’m game. And they’re coming to the house? No mates though, right?”

“No mates. Unless they want to, that is. Should I bring it up with Jamie?”

“Talk to Michael and April first,” Dean decided, opening his calendar to check dates and times. Cas was right. Monday and Tuesday afternoons were all they had free. Dean could see Castiel’s computer screen from here, and his calendar wasn’t up. Did he have both of their schedules memorized? Dude.

Cas turned back to his phone and set up the plan with Jamie before hanging up. He stood and approached Dean slowly, carefully. “You’re standing.”

“Uh, yeah, I am,” confirmed Dean, nodding with a tightening of his jaw. He didn’t look up from his screen.
“Are you all right?” the Alpha asked tentatively.

Dean hit send, and then slid the stylus into place. He propped a flat foot against the wall, level with his knee, and looked up at Cas as the Alpha’s hands took an easy hold of Dean’s hips. Cas pressed his face slowly into Dean’s throat and sucked lightly at his Adam’s apple.

Dean’s hand came up and held the back of Cas’ head. “I’m okay, Alpha. I swear,” he whispered. Cas began to nibble softly. It wasn’t hard enough to cause Dean any pain. It felt erotic and sweet, and Dean leaned his head back, giving Cas room.

“What was enough, Dean?” asked Castiel in a whisper that matched Dean’s, only pulling his lips away long enough to get the words out before sealing them back on Dean’s throat and starting a slow suck.

“Mmmm,” Dean responded coherently.

“Was it too much? I slapped you.”

“You can do whatever you want to do to me as long as you’ll keep doing that. Fuck, Cas.” Cas moved his feet to straddle Dean’s thigh and ground into Dean’s hip, moaning. He moved his lips to Dean’s ear and nibbled again, then broke off.

“Please answer me. I need to know. Sometimes you scare me when you do that; when you go that far.” Cas eased the tension of his words with a dirty grind of his hips.

Dean snickered simply. “Still? Aren’t you ever going to get used to me, Alpha?”

Cas pulled back and used his Dom – actually Dean secretly dubbed it his ‘Papa’ – face. “Dean, answer the question. Did I go too far? Was it too much?”

Dean’s eyes crinkled, “It was perfect. You were perfect. Michael was perfect. Shit, Cas, have you been giving him lessons?”

Castiel noticeably relaxed. He kissed Dean’s lips sweetly, but short enough that Dean chased him when he pulled back. He turned Dean around, helping him balance as his foot pulled away from the wall. “Drop ’em. Let me see the damage,” he ordered.

Dean unbuckled and worked his slacks down. “Buy a guy dinner first, Alpha. Geez, where’re your manners?”

Cas ran a hand over the stripes welting all over Dean’s skin, nodding and frowning. Dean laughed at him, looking over his shoulder, provoking Cas to smack a hand down and making Dean jump.

“We scared Michael,” said Cas pulling away. Dean dressed himself again. “Did you explain it to him?”

“We scared April too, Cas. Did you talk to her yet?” Dean cocked his head.

“I guess we should talk to them both tonight. You could’ve given me some warning, you know. I hate it when you spring it on me like that. I really liked that table, Dean.”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t know. Isn’t that why you turned me down last night, to give me fuel to work with?”

Cas tightened his lips and wrinkled his forehead. “To some extent, yes. But I wasn’t lying when I said I was protecting my boundaries last night. I was not in a safe place in my head, Dean. I was very
upset, and I felt like I might not give you what was right for you. This morning was much better for both of us. Thank you for that, although you could have clued me in sooner, and you could have spared the kitchen table.”

“Sorry. I’ll make it up to you.”

“You’re right. You will. You’re going to build us a new one; one that our pack and our pups will use as their home base for the next hundred years. Build it well, alpha. I plan to fuck you on it many, many times.” Cas had a mischievous glint in his eye, and Dean couldn’t help but respond. He bit his upper lip. His cock twitched.

Cas leaned against his own desk, and his face grew somber as he frowned at the carpet. “I hate fighting with you,” he admitted. “I think it was necessary, and I feel like we made some progress, but I hate it. You, um, you understand why I handed you off to Michael this morning, don’t you?” Castiel’s discomfort was an indication to Dean of how unclear their roles had become. Cas was never uncomfortable about the part he played in balancing Dean.

Dean found it as hard to look up as Cas did. He frowned too, unsure how to respond. Cas had never left him before – not when he was mid-brat episode and in need of correction, but it had felt organic. It had felt right. The slough off by his Alpha-Dom felt like a scene-stroke to the part of his wolf that needed to be ground into the dirt.

“Michael did great, Cas. He wasn’t too harsh. In fact,” Dean chuckled, remembering, “he wasn’t harsh enough because he was genuinely worried about me.”

Castiel smiled sadly. “Talk to him please, Dean. Make sure he knows what that was all about.”

“I will.”

Cas worked his jaw. “Are we…?” He huffed an unhappy breath and looked at Dean. “Are we better? Is it all on the table now? I can’t stand being this scared for you. I can’t keep it up for this long.”

Dean peeked up at him, a worried look marring his features. “You know everything, Alpha – shit, nearly everything. I…uh…I thought you would be so disgusted that I could use my own mate and my own kid like that, you would put a stop to everything way before we ever got that far. But you were right: there was more. God. Fuck. I can’t. Cas, I can’t.” Dean’s brow knit in pain. Castiel was beside him in an instant.

“Tell me, and get it over with. I’m not throwing you out, alpha, no matter what. You need to remember that.” The look on the man’s face gave Dean courage. He was Alpha-solid, and his blue eyes promised everything Dean needed. Dean wanted to trust that look. Here goes everything, he thought.

“I was going to wait until after Michael caught,” Dean began slowly. “I was going to pick a fight with him while we’re out driving in the middle of nowhere and tell him I was breaking it off with you, that we were moving out of the manor, maybe set him some terrible rules, really restrictive ones, you know, whatever it took to piss him off. He was going to refuse to move. I know he would do that now. He loves you, and he loves that house. I was planning to get so enraged that I pulled over and kicked him out of the car into the night on the side of the road and leave him there.”

“Dean!” Cas looked aghast.

“I know. I wasn’t going to let him get hurt, but he’s a resourceful guy. He would’ve called you, and
you would come and get him.” Dean closed his eyes and leaned his head against Cas’ chest.

Cas let him stay there for a few breaths, then he pulled Dean’s chin up and looked sternly into his eyes. “You. You are going to confess this plan to Michael, and you’re going to apologize as if you had gone through with it.”

“I can’t,” whispered Dean, looking away from the Alpha’s eyes.

“Look at me!” Dean’s eyes snapped back up. “You can, and you will. I will stand beside you the whole time.” Cas offered no respite, but there was no anger in his eyes, only justice. Dean nodded reluctantly, sheepishly.

“Thank you for telling me. Is there anything else? Is that everything?”

“That’s all of it.”

“Were you trying to chase Michael away too?”

“No. We’re Mated. He would be hurt and angry, but he needs me. We would be able to heal from it all eventually. Probably.”

“Probably,” Castiel repeated, irritated at Dean’s reckless disregard.

“It was a stupid idea, Cas. I get that. But I didn’t go through with it. I don’t know if I could have.”

Castiel lowered his chin and regarded Dean with his brows raised. Pure judgment.

“What? I know, all right?” Dean looked at his Alpha, straight into his eyes, and the gravity of what he’d planned to do hit him squarely between the eyes. “Fuck.”

Cas nodded. “That’s right. ‘Fuck’ is right. Feel repentant yet?”

“I’m an asshole, Castiel. You should dump my ass.”

Cas laughed. “You’re not an asshole. Well, maybe you are, but you’re my asshole.” Cas hugged him, rubbing his ass for him. “Answer me honestly. Could you really have done it?”

“I was counting on you to stop me before it came to that. I probably wouldn’t have been able to drive away from my pregnant mate in the dark.”

“No, I don’t imagine you could. Do you need any closure over this, Dean?”

Dean’s face was pressed right up against Castiel’s collarbone, so his voice was muffled. “yessir.” Cas grinned in spite of himself. It felt good to smile, and he wasn’t sure why this incident made him feel so much better. Had it actually occurred, it would’ve been dreadful. It was so quintessentially brat-Dean, though, that it felt familiar and easy.

“What do you want me to take care of it, or Michael?”

“Do I have to choose?”

Castiel grinned wider. “Yep.”

“Dick,” Dean whispered to himself, and Cas busted out with a belly laugh, holding Dean in closer while he calmed down to giggles.
“Choose, Dean, or let it go.”

Dean pulled away and he walked a few steps on before he turned. Cas wondered immediately if he’d fucked up by laughing, but Dean had a calm look. He was thoughtful, not offended. Finally, he decided. “Both of you.”

Cas rolled his eyes and his shoulders. “Dean, you didn’t DO it. Don’t be prideful.”

“I was legitimately going to, C.J. It’s not funny. I mean it. I owe you both over this.”

“So, that’s going to be a thing now?” Cas asked him.

“What?”

“Uh, C.J.”

“Oh. I like it. It keeps me alpha.” Dean shuffled his feet uncomfortably, looking decidedly far from alpha.

“It does?”

“Cas,” Dean wheedled.

“Fine. I’ll arrange it. You fess up to your mate, and we’ll come up with something suitably painful or humiliating, but you’re going to drop it after that. You’ve got enough to worry about, and you’ve taken enough punishment lately to cover your bratting for the next two years. It’s enough, Dean.”

“All right. I can live with that. Hey, did you figure out what you want for your birthday yet?”

Dean wandered the office, shifting knick-knacks on the bookshelves back where they belonged, shifting topics without preamble.

“I don’t want or need anything at all. Please don’t make a deal out of this. It’s bad enough to be pushing forty without shouting it out to everyone.”

Dean nodded, and Cas had a sinking feeling. He didn’t say anything. Dean was essentially unstoppable when he wanted to gift something to someone he cared about, and Castiel decided to go ahead and let him do it. He watched silently as Dean fucked his figurines up again.

“You’re okay?” he asked once more, unable to resist.

“Cas, I’m solid. I needed that. You know I did, and you were perfect. I don’t know how you always know what I need, but you do. You read me, and you’re always 100% spot-on. I may not be sitting down for the next week, but it was worth it.”

Dean blew the dust off of the ceramic spring robin that Maureen had given Cas, and he set it back down, turning it left instead of right.

“Did you do some thinking last night?” Cas side-eyed him carefully, sitting on the edge of his desk. Dean’s head whipped around. “Dude, stop it. You’re creeping me out. How did you know about that?”

Cas smiled. “You always get introspective when you don’t get what you want. I’ve guessed it’s about trying to figure out what you might’ve done differently to get a different answer, and then you usually just keep going. Did it do any good?”

Dean stared at Cas for a long time, but Cas merely looked back expectantly. Finally, Dean realized he was out of his depth and went with it. “It helped, I think. I really think it helped.”
“Dean, I have to be honest. I’ve been considering postponing our wedding. I’m uncomfortable with where we’ve been going. We were both lying to the other, we were making a mess of everything.”

“I don’t want to postpone anything, man. Don’t do that to us.”

“I know. I don’t want that either, but if we can’t get on the same page. How can we go through with it? This is for our whole lives. I’m truly concerned, Dean. You’ve been all over the place, and I’ve been, frankly, I’ve been a disaster. Can you honestly tell me we’re ready for this step?” Cas watched Dean closely for signs that he might be interpolating the message to mean Cas wanted to cancel the wedding outright, but Dean seemed to take him at his word.

“I have a ways to go, but talking to Pam helped me a lot. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and I’m not going to back out of my promise to try therapy. If you’ll help me out with it, with the hard parts, I think I can get to a good place. It seems to me that we need to practice trusting each other. You know, on purpose, and outside of our bedroom. I need to let you see me when I get scared. That right there scares the shit out of me, but Pam made a good point, and I think I’m ready to give it a shot. I promise to let you see me, Cas. All of me.”

“Oh. Okay. Wow. Thank you.” Cas wasn’t sure how to respond to Dean’s flagrant nakedness. He certainly didn’t do half measures. “I’m honored. I promise to cherish this responsibility. I won’t take it lightly, Dean. Please trust me.”

Dean nodded solemnly at him, but then he shot Cas a cheeky, half-sided smile. “And what about you?”

Cas thought he was easily the most adorable man living, and he grinned back. “No more hiding things from you either. Full partners in the business and in the pack, just like I promised you from the beginning. Everything I know, you’ll know…minus the minutia I suppose. I want you to make decisions. I want to have you standing beside me.”

“And if I can’t stay in my alpha? If I keep getting stuck as a Sub?”

“Well, then we’ve got a couple of options: let you make decisions as a Sub…”

“Bad option, Cas.”

“…or I whip you back out of it and hold off on the decision until you can take your alpha place again.”

“Congress would move faster than we will if you do that.”

“I don’t care. We’ll wait. I love your Sub. I don’t consider you less than yourself when you dive under. It’s simply another facet of the beautiful man I’m engaged to marry, but you’re right, it might not be the best designation for making impactful decisions. Whatever choices need to be made, we’ll make them together.”

“You won’t invite your mother for dinner without asking me first?” Dean teased.

“I won’t.”

“You won’t ask random wolves you meet on the street if they want to join our pack?”

“They weren’t random wolves, you jerk. They were friends who are already close enough to be family.” When Dean simply stared at him, taking a page from Cas’ own book, Cas conceded. “I won’t. I swear to God.”
“You won’t blow people up without at least leaving me a note on the kitchen table?” Dean smirked.

Cas tapped his foot. “You’re pushing it, Winchester. I reserve the right to explosives.” Dean laughed, and it was beautiful and so very welcome. Cas smiled, then he went on. “What about my idea? I still want to do that. It might be challenging, but I think we can do it. I really want to try.”

“You really want to fuck you in the ass? You? A Bottom? C’mom, Cas. Don’t do that. It’s unnatural. I won’t be able to. YOU won’t be able to. It’s not you.”


“You don’t have to be an asshole about it. I’m serious.” Cas loomed suddenly over Dean, and with their positions, Dean leaning back against the bookshelf, Cas was taller. Substantially taller. “Will you fuck me, Dean?”

“I think my ovaries just exploded,” whispered Dean, turning his face up for a kiss.

“You don’t have any ovaries,” Cas explained to him, leaning in to take him up on the offer. “I’m a doctor. I know these things.” Damn, Dean’s lips were soft and pliable. “So will you?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll try. You said yes to my wedding Claim. It’s the least I can do.” Dean chased after the Alpha’s lips and captured them. He kissed Cas hard and opened for him when Castiel growled and pulled him in. “You have to promise me something, though,” he said breathlessly, breaking away.

“Hmm?” Cas didn’t hesitate to go back in and taste the man again.

Dean pushed him off. “You put a stop to it if it’s not right, if it doesn’t feel right. Deal? Don’t push through. I don’t want any part of that. It might work out, and it might not. If it doesn’t, we’re not going to force it.”

“Deal. Come here, Dean.”

Dean was supposed to be somewhere, doing something. He had commitments. Instead, he spent long enough in Castiel’s embrace to emerge much later, ruffled and kiss-swollen and a little dizzy.

Chapter End Notes

I hope this helped to clarify what happened at the Winchester Pack home at breakfast. It was neither out-of-control nor completely unexpected. For a brat, even if he scenes regularly, someone like Dean really needs to explode sometimes to fulfill the needs of his designation. Cas is used to it, and he gets a lot out of the interaction too. We should start to see a more stable alpha Dean emerging after this.

It’s 2:00 am in Houston. Constant Flash Flood alarms and tornado warnings are keeping
me awake. The Flash Flood alarms are massively annoying. It's like, Really!? It's raining!? You're kidding, I never would've noticed.

If you're so inclined, please pray for or send healing love to Houston. We're resilient, but this is just a shit-ton of water.

Listening to the rain from inside my closet just in case the tornado warnings turn out to be real.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Cas meets an ape, Gabriel hears a bullfrog, and Michael doesn't like to be bound, like, at all.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so, so much for all the kind words. If you want to donate, there are so many ways. Houston Food Bank is one of my all-time favorites. They are really good at what they do.

All right, to this chapter:

Beware that there's a whole long string of kink snap-shots. There's bound to be a few that you find icky. That's the whole point...ish. Plow through or skip it. Totally up to you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 51 – Wednesday, June 21, 2017

THEN:

Flames were everywhere, and he couldn’t breathe. Smoke filled his eyes and his nose. He called out,
but there was no sound except the raging fire. He tried to suck in a breath to shout again, but he choked on the thick black smoke, and he coughed painfully. Everything hurt. Everything burned, and he had no idea where the exit might be. He couldn’t see daylight anymore. He had been sure it was this way, but he ran into a wall, not a window.

He thought he saw figures dashing past out of the corner of his eye, but they couldn’t be real. There was nothing that way but flame. No one could survive in there. His abdomen cramped, and he doubled over with a miserable grunt. A heavy beam crashed to the floor not two feet from his feet. So, he scrambled in the opposite direction, clearing the space just as the floor where he’d been standing gave way and flames from below leapt up at him, reaching for him. He screamed again, trying like hell to run, but he ran into another wall. It was a hallway. He squinted in both directions and selected one at random, disappearing into the smoke.

The hallway was endless. Closed doors, bright underneath with flame marked the spaces, but he never seemed to find an end. The smoke grew thicker and thicker. He turned a corner and suddenly there was nowhere to go. A wall of flame blocked his path, and when he turned around to head back the way he had come, he was blocked there too. Where he’d just stepped not a moment before was now blocked from wall to wall by bald raging flames, hot and stretching – stretching out to take him. He shouted and flinched, turning from side to side. There had to be a way out, there had to be.

There wasn’t. Even if he’d been braver than he was and could convince himself to dive through the flames, there was nothing on the other side but a glowing pit of Hell. It’s all that was open to him, burning Hell. He screamed in frustration and agony and pounded his fist into the wall at his shoulder just as the floor gave way, and he fell into red-hot, ember covered, smoke-filled Hell.

He woke with a hoarse shout, sitting straight up, sweating his ass off, trembling. It took him a minute to note the darkness and realize he was at home in his bed. Sam had moved from his own bed, and he held the back of Dean’s neck and his hip, gripping him tightly. Sam. Sam was telling him to breathe. Could he breathe? Wasn’t the smoke too heavy? Last time he tried to breathe, he’d choked on smoke. He took a gasping breath, and it didn’t hurt. He took another, deeper and slower. Sam said to look at him. It was dark, but he could see Sam’s eyes. They were dark but warm. Sam.

Sam said, “I’m here, Dean. Calm down. You’re okay. It was just a dream.”

Dean calmed down, but it hadn’t been a dream. He’d seen it true enough. That’s what he had waiting for him. One day. Nothing but fiery pits, smoke, and darkness. It was Hell, and it was waiting for Dean. Some day.

NOW:

Sarah hiked her satchel up further on her shoulder. It kept sliding off.

“Please make yourself comfortable, Ms. Blake,” the chipper receptionist instructed. “He’ll just be a few minutes.”

Sarah selected a seat that allowed her to watch people in the foyer. They were all wolves, all of them, and it felt surprisingly unnerving to the young primate researcher. She had thought herself immune to the knee-jerk discomfort of being outnumbered to this degree, but apparently, she wasn’t. Most of those waiting were very young. Most of them had at least one older family member with them, but there could be no confusion about which of them were here for themselves and which ones were
support. All wolves were pale, but there was a palpable nervousness on the extra pale faces of those who would be called in soon for, whatever.

It was fascinating in a way that she hadn’t expected. Sarah was no newbie to Lupin culture. She had spent the last three years researching its strange, subtle idiosyncrasies. Sitting here in the foyer, surrounded by pointed ears, she was aware of both how very different they felt from her and how very, very familiar. That was the source of the constant discomfort between the species – the near perfect similarity that served to highlight in blazing terms the ineffable differences. She noticed a few quizzical glances, and she smiled with her lips closed and minimized her eye contact.

“Ms. Blake?” called the receptionist. “Dr. Winchester will see you now. Right through here, if you please.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said, picking up her satchel. “But I’m meant to be speaking with Dr. Novak. I think there’s been a mistake.” Sarah approached the desk.

“No, Miss. There’s not a mistake. Right through the door. I’ll walk you down myself. He’s ready for you.” Becky opened the door from inside the hallway and held it for Sarah, smiling happily. Sarah frowned in confusion. She knew of the Winchester brothers, although she’d never met them. Had she been shifted to an underling? Without a good alternative, Sarah followed the receptionist down the hallway a short distance, to a tall office door with a noticeably missing nameplate above the stenciled title, “Facility Director.”

Knocking, and then pushing the door open, Becky ushered her in. “Ms. Blake to see you, Sir.” Castiel Novak stood up as she entered, still a bit confused, and he extended his hand.

“Welcome, Ms. Blake. Please have a seat. Would you like something to drink?” he greeted.

“No, thank you. Thank you for speaking to me. Sir, I’m a bit confused. I was told I would be speaking with Dr. Winchester?” Sarah sat down, setting down her satchel and beginning to dig out her notebook.

He chuckled. “Yes. Becky is nothing if not enthusiastic. As it turns out, I’ve recently changed my name. It’s premature, but I confess to feeling impatient for my upcoming wedding, and I jumped the gun by a few months. Please feel comfortable to use either name. I’ll answer to them both.”

“Oh,” she said with surprise. “Congratulations. I’d heard you and Dr. Winchester were engaged, but I assumed you would be keeping your name.”

“It’s complicated, but no, Dean will keep his, and I’ve taken the name ‘Winchester’.” He shifted in his chair, and straightened some papers on his desk, smiling a sweet, private smile that she mimicked unconsciously. Damn, the man was beautiful. Sarah blinked, trying to avoid falling under the spell. She’d heard that alphas could cast a wide net and suck unsuspecting innocents right under, but she’d never experienced it.

He cleared his throat and looked at her. “What would you like to discuss, Ms. Blake? You had a proposal for me?”

“Yes, Alpha. I, um, I’m hoping to do my thesis on comparative cultures between our two species. I want to get an up-close look at adolescent Lupin development and socialization. Sir, I want to see how you train young Canids as they come of age. To be of any use, to be more than what’s already out there, I need to see it for myself. I’m asking for full access to your Facility.”

He sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “All of our research on the matter is already
available to you Ms. Blake. If you like, I’ll be happy to sit with you to discuss it at length. I can’t allow you inside the working areas, though. I have vulnerable clients to protect, and I see no value in sacrificing their privacy or their training just so you can write up the same studies we’ve already done.”

“Sir, it won’t be the same. I’ve read your work. It’s brilliant. It’s what got me into this in the first place. But it’s all from the wolves’ point of view. There’s no point of reference that ties it to the primates. Sir, please. I’m not going to put anyone at risk. I’m not going to judge you. There’s no arguing with your training techniques. I’ve seen the statistics. Since you opened your doors, everything’s better: crime by Lupins, crime against Lupins, mental illness, chronic disease, poverty, cases of abuse, illegal prostitution, drug use, employment rates, stability and opportunity, it’s all better. It’s markedly better. What you’re doing here is working! But you’re still fighting the prejudice of the larger community. What I want to do isn’t just an exercise for the sake of getting my doctorate. I want to shed some light on why we still feel so awkward sharing the same spaces. We need to learn to understand each other. There’s so much left to learn.”

She took a deep breath. He was still listening, and he hadn’t thrown her out yet. That had to be a good sign, right?

“Dr. Nov…um Winchester, you built an island here where your clients are safe, and you protect their safety by blocking primates from seeing anything that happens inside. I understand why that’s necessary. I really do. But what’s your long game, Sir? You have a vision for the future between our two species. I know you do. And I’m willing to stake my project on the fact that your long-term vision embraces the notion that someday we won’t NEED to be locked out.

“We primates, as a society keep trying to shame you Canids back into your secret dark places. We’re trying to convince you that as a species your ways are hedonist and wrong, and they have to be hidden or snuffed out entirely. Sir, the statistics don’t back that up. Speaking purely as a scientist, I’ve seen how effective your work has been. That means that what you’re doing here and how you’re doing it is neither hedonist nor shameful. It’s necessary.”

She paused, but he didn’t say anything. He just kept looking into her eyes, listening, waiting for the rest of it.

“You need me, Alpha. You’ve done so much already, but you’ve come to the point in your crusade where you need to bring in allies from the other side. It’s time to be brave, believe in what you’ve built, believe that it can withstand scrutiny from the outside, and take that chance. If you’re right, and everything behind those doors is tenable and sustainable, I can help prove it for you. If it’s not, then your clients deserve to know that.” She bit the inside of her cheek. Did she just call him a coward? To his face? Shit.

He scratched the side of his face absently. “Ms. Blake, do you consider yourself a crusader, an investigative reporter, a researcher, or a scientist?”

“I follow the data, Sir.”

He raised an eyebrow at her, but she didn’t clarify. “I see,” he said, leaning forward again. “But which data? Much can be derived and misconstrued simply by following selective lines of data. Surely you are aware that numbers can be manipulated without altering them, manipulated to indicate virtually any result you prefer. What is YOUR long game, Sarah?”

She fidgeted uncomfortably, off-balance at hearing him use her first name, not sure how to respond. “Sir, I just want to get to the truth.”
“Not good enough.” Sarah felt 9 years-old suddenly, but she steeled her nerve and tried again.

“I don’t have a sob-story to tell you, if that’s what you need. I don’t have a nephew who died at the hands of a deranged Lupin, or a wolf ex-boyfriend who made me curious to learn more. Sir, I just feel driven to understand people. It’s what I was born to do. I got into the field of Lupin studies because there is so much happening right now, and it fascinates me. Every tidbit I learn sends me off into four new directions. I can’t know enough. I can’t learn fast enough. It keeps me awake at night, but I don’t know why. Alpha, please let me do this. You need an Ape ally, and I need to fill this hole in my gut. I’ll do whatever you say. Please, sir. I won’t get in the way. I won’t betray your trust.”

Castiel thought it over. She was right. It was time to begin to let a little light shine through and out the other side. But Bobby was right, too. They were so vulnerable. Safety inspectors and auditors were the only primates he’d ever let in, and they were always escorted. They reviewed documents and spaces, interviewed people, but they didn’t watch the people at work. This was new.

“I need to speak with my team, Ms. Blake. I can’t answer you today, but you raise some interesting points. Maybe it is time. It’s a long shot to be sure, and I doubt we’ll say yes. If we do, you won’t be averse to my doing a background check on you personally, I presume. Also, I need to speak with your faculty advisor.” Cas shook his head sadly. “I’m not sure you’re aware, but there is bad blood between my staff and Dr. Meyer’s. We aren’t friends. We haven’t been for some time. Many of my staff will assume you are a plant sent to dismantle our operation.”

His stark accusation made Sarah sit up straight. Her eyes widened in alarm. “No, Sir. Please. I don’t work for him. He was assigned to me, but I don’t agree with any of his views. Please don’t refuse me because of who my advisor is. Please.”

“But he’ll have some editing rights and some directional liberties over your work, or at least your focus. You’ll be required to pass along your drafts before you’ve drawn any conclusions. He’s an advisor, Ms. Blake. That puts an enemy of my ‘crusade’ as you call it, right in the middle of my camp. Even if we are ready to try letting a primate in to observe and study us up close, I’m in no way convinced that it should be you. It’s going to be a very hard sell with the rest of the staff.”

“I understand, Sir. Perhaps we could try a probational first series? Maybe extend limited access? I’ll do anything to prove that my intentions are sincere.”

“We’ll see. You’ve got me intrigued, Ms. Blake, and that’s more than I expected from this meeting. Unfortunately, your intentions are not the only consideration. You cannot be naïve enough not to realize that you may be perfectly positioned to play a sacrificial role in your advisor’s plans. You don’t strike me as a dupe. I intend to follow up on your proposal, confer with my leadership team, and get back to you. I don’t plan to make you wait for very long, but I advise you to begin making alternate plans for a different thesis. This is a long-shot for you.” He handed his business card to her as he stood, and she took it grimly. How much closer to ‘no’ was it possible to get without actually saying ‘no’?

“Thank you for your time, Alpha. I look forward to hearing from you, and I’ll remain hopeful that we can work something out.” She slipped him a contact card of her own that she’d printed in the University business office. “Please extend my congratulations to your fiancé. I hope to get the chance to meet him someday. I have about a million questions for him that have been eating away at me for ages.” She smiled.

Cas walked her out politely and shook her hand at the door. She wanted to kick something, but she refused to give up. If she had to fight for it, she would. Sarah Blake was tougher than she looked.
Gabriel sipped Coke from the room-temperature can and laughed at the young Omega. He propped his feet up on the squirrelly coffee table. It shifted under his weight. “You got all that from one six-character message?”

“I told you,” defended Claire, “We’ve got a code. We understand each other. She’ll be ready for us at dusk.”

“And she wants you on the north side, in a flat boat with room for six, manned by two people, and noises off?” He held her eye with a look of disbelief. “Six characters.”

Claire scoffed. “You’ve been out of the game, Omega. We’ve gotten way better at keeping it short and untraceable. Just trust me, old man. We’ve got this.”

He shook his head in disbelief, but what choice did he have? Except for his own fuck-up in Oklahoma, Claire and her team had a nearly perfect track-record going, and the best he could do was stay out of the way and do as he was told. He laughed again quietly at how things had changed. “Where’s Alex? Thought she’d have come back by now.”

Claire gave him such a flat bitchface that he set his feet on the floor in alarm. “What? Lover’s spat? What did I step in the middle of?” he asked carefully.

“We’re not lovers, you jerk. Just because we’re opposites in gender designations doesn’t mean we have to be sleeping together. Jesus! Why does everyone always assume…! Jerk,” she finished lamely when she noticed his eyes twinkling. “Actually, if you have to ask where she is, you just lost me forty bucks. Are you serious? You didn’t see her on your way in? Tell me you’re joking. I’m going to be hearing about it for the next six months.”

Gabe was taken aback. “Um,” he said. “Shit,” she muttered then called out loudly to the door, “All right, you bitch! Come on in, I know you’re listening. You fucking won this one!” The door opened just enough to admit the dark-haired alpha-Sub who smirked happily and held her hand out to accept the pay-out. “Thank you very much. I told you he was getting old. Never even came close to spotting me. Nearly stepped on me, and he didn’t see a thing. I don’t know if he’s just gotten that blind, or if I’m really that awesome. Probably some of both.” Alex dropped onto the dusty couch next to Gabriel and stole his drink.

Gabe spluttered. “What? Where were you? Old, my ass. I’ve forgotten more about this game than you people could ever know.” Gabe wrenched his soda back and wiped her spit off the rim.

They both laughed. “Right,” said Alex. “I was twenty yards out, flat to the ground, simple green-cover. Shit, Gabe, I didn’t even have to hold my breath. You were looking up the whole time. Put a camera around your neck and a Hawaiian shirt on you and call you a fucking tourist,” chuckled Alex. Claire laughed and fist-bumped her friend.

Gabriel looked back and forth between them. “Fuck.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Claire comforted him earnestly. “There’s no reason you would have to expect an attack from the ground on your way in. We’re pretty far out here. No one, and I mean, no one comes out here.”
“It’s no excuse…” muttered Gabriel.

“Down to business, ladies,” Alex broke in. “Krissy wants us in place in three hours. We need to be ready, and we need to make it work the first time. Gabe, those two dirt-bags in the house are all yours. Keep them from suspecting anything. Claire, Krissy, and I will get the people out.”

Gabe’s eyes went cold. “I can do that, kid. Just tell me how high I can let the blood splatters go up the wall.”

“Gabe, you can’t kill them. Alpha’s orders. No one dies unless you have no other choice.” Claire leaned in and put a hand on his arm. “We can’t afford to be noticed right now. Our focus has to be on getting people to safety, not on vengeance. One thing at a time.”

“And let them walk?” he sputtered indignantly. “They’ll just set up all over again somewhere else. Fuck that! Fuck all of it. I’m sick of letting the same monsters go over and over again. You don’t understand. I HAD these fuckers right where I wanted them, right where I could keep an eye on them and reel them in slowly. I was nearly there. I had all the evidence I needed to do it Alpha’s way, all legal-like, and then he swooped in and kicked them into the wind, and allowed them to come up here and do this!” Gabe crushed the empty can in frustration and threw it the length of the tiny wood cabin.

Alex pulled his face around to look him in the eye, suddenly very alpha. “If you can’t get a lock on your emotions right now, Omega, you can’t be a part of this. I don’t care who you are.”

Gabriel wrenched his head out of her grasp. “It’s not your call, Alex. Claire’s in charge.”

“She’s right, Gabe. I can’t use you if you’re going to go off half-cocked and bring spotlights down on us.” Claire was instantly the leader she needed to be, demonstrating in no uncertain terms why she’d risen to this position. “Promise me you’ll go by the book. Distract them, and then get out of there. We set a tail on them from here, and let Bobby make the next move. That’s the plan. Don’t you dare fuck it up!”

Gabe leaned back and rolled his closed eyes. Women! Always so damned logical!

“What’s the signal?” he sighed.

“PROMISE ME!” she repeated.

“FINE! I fucking promise to let the snakes slither back off into the fucking woodwork! What’s the fucking signal?”

Alex put a firm hand on his thigh. “Gabe, look at me. Are you, you know…Balanced?”

Gabe’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “Excuse me?” he said in disbelief. “Fuck you.”

“Alex,” Claire sighed. “Don’t be a dick. Not every emotion that comes out of an Omega is because they need a paddle. Grow up.”

Alex held her hands up and backed off. “Sheesh, sorry. Excuse me for caring.” She got up and went to grab a drink from the cooler.

Claire focused on Gabriel and pursed her lips, weighing him. Finally, she decided. “The signal is a bullfrog croak. Three times. Should stand out clearly. They don’t have bullfrogs here. We’re counting on Alistair not knowing that.”
“Don’t let them see your face or hear your voice,” Alex interjected. “They can’t know it’s us. And especially, they can’t know it’s you. We got an earful from Alpha over this already. Don’t make us explain to him that our cover got blown. I, for one, don’t ever want to have that conversation.”

“When you say ‘Alpha’, you mean Singer, right?” Gabe stood up and stretched.

“Castiel called us himself, Gabe,” Claire clarified. “Please be careful. He’s putting your safety on us. I almost cancelled your involvement entirely.

“Well, shit.” Gabriel turned to face the window. “Look, he can’t do that. He’s just doing the big Alpha crap-fest thing to protect me. I’ve had it with that. We’re just going to focus on the job we’re here to do, and get those people out of there.” He rubbed a restless hand through his hair. “Get them to the rendezvous point and let my guys do the rest. We’re splitting up after this, so just let me say right now, while I’m still all ‘Omega-emotional’: thanks, for everything you do – both of you, all three of you. If I don’t get to see Krissy before I have to cut out, let her know too. You three are badass. You’re the sharpest team in the game, and I’d work with you any day of the week, even if you’re girls.”

He threw them something to frown against just to keep the mood from getting maudlin. Claire rolled her eyes, and Alex threw ice at his head. “If you screw this up for us, Gabe, you’re never coming back in, you got me?” Alex threatened.

“Who me? When have I ever…? Oh. Yeah. Right.” He held up two fingers in the face of her flat expression. “Scout’s honor. I swear to behave.”

“Nobody dies,” she reminded.

“Nobody dies,” he confirmed, and she nodded her head and headed for the door. She pulled up short and shot him a death glare over her shoulder when she heard him mutter, “unless I have to,” under his breath.

The rescue went off without a hitch. Gabriel caught sight of Krissy crossing the yard with a pile of dinner trays as if simply doing her chores. He began to count silently in his head, watching the back door to make sure no one followed her. If Ruby and Alistair trusted Krissy as much as he hoped they did, they had no reason to suspect that she wasn’t slopping the livestock and mucking out their stalls of an evening just like always. The house was quiet. He kept count and waited. There was no way to predict how some Omegas who had been born and bred in captivity, created wholly for the purpose of taking an alpha’s knot and bearing pups over and over again, might respond to a rescue attempt. Very often, they panicked and screamed, refusing to be torn out of their disgusting stalls, fighting for the only security they had ever known. That kind of noise would be heard up at the house, but as Gabriel waited, his knife clutched in one hand, and his remote in the other, he heard nothing from the barn. The long minutes stretched by.

He reached a slow count of eight-hundred in complete silence before his lip twitched at the sound of a particularly grating female voice. “She should be done by now. God, she’s probably petting the livestock again. You know, I caught her actually talking to one of them the other day. Go and check on her. Her dinner’s getting cold.”
Alistair’s voice was no less grating. “No. I don’t give a shit if she plays with them. What does it matter if she’s making pets out of them? She could fuck them for all I care as long as they get fed and cleaned on time. What do you care if her dinner’s cold? Throw it out. Now shut up, the game’s on.”

Gabriel saw Ruby pull the curtain back on the kitchen window and peer out. She couldn’t see him, but he remained motionless anyway. “The light outside the barn is out again. I’m going to go check. Don’t touch Krissy’s plate.”

“Suit yourself. I already told you it was a loose bulb.” He didn’t move.

Gabe carefully lifted the trip wire across the path. All he needed to do was keep them away from the barn, and the less they realized they were being managed, the better. Ruby stepped off the end of the kitchen steps and sprawled gracelessly into the gravel almost immediately, her hands going wide to catch herself. There may have been more broken glass along the pathway than usual.

“Son of a bitch! What the fuck?!” She couldn’t see the trip-line once Gabe dropped it again, but she looked around and spotted the lawn mower wheel in her direct path. “SHIT! Alistair! Fuck, give me a hand! Fucking Krissy left the fucking mower torn up and I fell over it.” She struggled to her feet. In the light from the kitchen it was obvious that she’d cut both knees and both palms badly. Her pants were ripped and already absorbing blood as it ran down her knees to her shins. Ruby struggled to the kitchen steps and sat, looking herself over.

“Alistair! Get out here! I need help! Damnit, where is that girl? Krissy!” No one answered from the barn, and Alistair did no more than grunt at her from inside the house. Score first blood to Gabriel, and he couldn’t help the cruel smile. She bled so prettily.

Ruby picked gravel out of her palms and tried to inspect her knees, but the light was too dim. Finally, she gave up and struggled to her feet, staggering painfully back up the stairs and into the kitchen, shouting at Alistair, bullying him into getting up and digging out a first-aid kit. He complied unhappily, grumping the whole time. Gabriel listened to the silence that followed. No guards. No security. They honestly believed that out here in the middle of nowhere they were safe from molestation. It was a long way into the middle of nowhere, he had to admit, but if their clients could make the hike, then so could a stalwart band of rescuers. Plus, the swift stream ran right alongside the property, a ready and simple highway for making a swift getaway.

A bullfrog croaked. It croaked again. And one more time, and then the eerie silence followed, feeling far deader than before. Gabriel grinned to himself. They were off, floating downstream like a clutch of rabbits from Watership Down, silently letting the current whisk them to safety. Now it was just Gabriel. Now it was time to finish it up.

Gabe slipped quietly up the steps and peeked in. Ruby was alone at the kitchen table directly under the light, her pants slipped off and wadded on the floor, doctoring her own knees with bloody hands. Alistair was sucking whisky straight from the bottle, his eyes glued to the soccer game on TV. Morons. Gabe checked the lead line one more time. It would be consumed by the fire and be virtually untraceable except by an arson expert. No one would send an arson expert to a derelict farmhouse in the deep woods of Minnesota. If his luck held, they wouldn’t even notice the fire or smell the smoke until it surrounded them at the ground floor.

Gabriel walked calmly away and flipped the switch on his remote, not looking back. He didn’t hurry, but he didn’t linger either. He dropped nothing. He broke no limbs, bent no twigs, followed the worn path. He was a ghost, and he had never been here. He left behind only a loose trip wire, tied at one end, and an incendiary that circled the house, feeding the fire from every point at once, making an immediate ring of high flame. By the time they realized they were surrounded, the house would be engulfed. Their only hope was to scramble upstairs and fling themselves out a second-floor window,
but would they realize that in time? He hoped not.

No one dies, Castiel had ordered. Alpha. Alpha had ordered. Fuck that. Gabriel was through taking orders like that. Gabriel belonged to Bobby now, and Bobby had said no such thing. He ignored the unpleasant twist in his gut as Castiel’s Claim on him made its presence known. No. Not anymore. He loved Cas, but Cas just refused to play hardball, and there was no way to win this game without getting dirty.

The sound of a rising inferno reached him just as he tracked lightly across the place in the grass where he’d nearly stepped on Alex’s face coming in. A quick shift of his weight had allowed him to alter his step to avoid breaking her nose without her even knowing that he saw her. He was impressed and a little annoyed that she’d seemed willing to take the broken nose rather than give away her hiding place. How was she supposed to affect a rescue with both eyes swollen shut and blood gushing out of her nose? He had to hand it to the alpha, though. He nearly missed her where she lay motionless in the loose ground cover. He certainly hadn’t smelled anything. These girls were good. He owed them a steak dinner next time he saw them, but that wouldn’t be for some time. Now that he was free of the Big-house, Gabriel intended to disappear. There was real work to do out here, and he didn’t need Castiel James Novak Winchester wrapping him up in swaddling blankets.

Sam came in to assist with Michael after the psychological profiling was over. His class had an afternoon at the gym, and he’d volunteered. He was just arranging the meters and electrodes they would be using to take readings of Michael’s body’s responses to the visual stimuli when Dean entered with Pam, Charlie, and Michael. The Omega was dressed in a thick bathrobe, and his face looked drawn, weary. Sam smiled indulgently. “Rough day?” he asked.

“Well, you might find this part more enjoyable. Did they tell you what we’re doing here?” Sam asked him, untangling a cord that had wound itself up on its own.

“Something about having to sit on a pole.” Michael eyed the chair in the middle of the room.

Pamela patted his arm. “It’s not that bad. Omegas don’t usually have any problem with the probe at all. It’s alphas I have to talk down from the ceiling. They’re the biggest babies when it comes to this test.”

“Is this really necessary?” Michael asked. He’d stopped about three steps into the room. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the metal prong seated at a slight angle in the middle of the flat plastic-formed chair. Dean soothed him, wrapping arms around him and kissing his throat.

Charlie explained. “Your Keller test gives us everything we need to know about your genders, Michael, but many wolves find a great deal of benefit in digging deeper into their Z-matrix, their kinks. Everyone has them, and we’re all different. Knowing what gets your motor running and what turns it off can be really helpful for you and your partner. It can save a great deal of time and heartache. Your father signed you up for the full psych spectrum, and when your custody shifted, Alpha signed off on it too. So, yes, in short, it’s necessary.”

“I already know my kinks, though. Ask me anything. We don’t need to do this. I can just tell you. I
already did, didn’t I, Pam? We talked about it. I’m an open book.” His voice shook a little, and he was slightly breathless.

“Calm down, Omega,” said Sam assertively. “It’s painless. You might even enjoy it. Just relax and let your body do everything for us.”

“I don’t want to do this,” Michael objected getting agitated. “Red. RED! Dean, I don’t want to do this!”

“Shhh, Michael listen. You’re scaring yourself for no reason. It’s not that bad. Hell, it’s not bad at all. I’ll be right here beside you. We’re going to put images up on the screen and record what your body responds to. That’s all. It doesn’t hurt, I swear.”

“No. I’m not doing it. You can’t make me.” Michael stuck his lip out like a toddler and crossed his arms.

Dean sighed. “Yes, I can. You know I can. It’s not your call, and you know it. Please don’t make us do this the hard way. I don’t want to have to be that guy today. You need to cooperate. It’s a one-time deal, and then you’re through.” Dean crossed his arms too, a mirror image of his stubborn mate. It was a stare-off, but in this setting, Michael had no footing.

He crumpled in defeat. “I hate you,” he groused, letting Charlie slide the bathrobe off his shoulders.

“Ouch. I’m crushed,” Dean responded flatly. “Where do you need us, Sam?”

“Right over here. Let me get the sensors in place. Can you get him ready for the probe? There’s lube in that drawer if he’s not in the mood to make slick.” Sam was all business. He had all the electrodes laid out in an intricate pattern. Dean guided Michael over with an unsubtle push to his lower back. Michael growled softly, and Dean growled back at him louder.

“Can you place the electrodes if I bend him over a little bit, Sam?” Dean had his hand on Michael’s neck, holding him in place.

“Yeah, I think so. Just give me a little space to work.” They worked it out between them. Michael was arranged with his hands out wide against the countertop, bent at the waist just a little bit, his feet wider than shoulder-width, a scowl on his face. His flaccid dick ignored between his legs, Michael tightened up almost unconsciously. Dean pulled the bottle of synthetic slick out of the drawer.

“Don’t touch me with that shit, alpha,” Michael warned. “I’m allergic.”

“Is that a fact?” Dean asked him suspiciously. “Strange that it’s never come up before. You wanna try something else? Here, open up.” He put two of his fingers up to Michael’s lips with a challenging dare in his eyes. “Open up,” he repeated in a whisper.

“I’m so pissed at you right now, Dean Winchester,” Michael shot.

“I get that. Now open your fucking mouth.”

Michael let Dean put two fingers in his mouth on his tongue, and he closed his lips. “Now suck, Omega,” whispered Dean. Sam began to apply electrodes all over Michael’s body as Michael laved Dean’s fingers inside his mouth, keeping his eyes locked on his mate’s, giving away nothing. “Good boy.”

Dean removed his fingers, spit on the tips to add his own version of slick, and pressed both fingers to Michael’s tight hole. “Relax your ass, Babe. We’re doing this. Don’t make it harder than it has to
“Dean…” Michael whined.

“Why are you so upset over this test, Baby? I know you hate the spotlight. Is that it? All this focus on watching you get turned on? How is this different than the Keller? You did great there. Come on, Michael. Relax.” Dean pressed his fingers into the tight space. At least he was in Michael’s channel. That much was obvious, and that told him Michael wasn’t on the verge of a complete breakdown. He was very uncomfortable though. He began to pulse slowly in and out up to the second joint of his fingers. He couldn’t press his body in as closely as he wanted. Sam needed room to maneuver. But he kept a hand rubbing lightly up and down Michael’s back. “Talk to me, Michael, or just send it to me.”

A barrage of discomfort and dread fell unceremoniously through the bond. “You already know all of this, Dean. I’m an open book.”

Dean scoffed quietly. “No, you’re not. I know some things about you that you’ve never admitted to me out loud. Who knows what else there is? Baby, we need to know. We need to do this. We’re too complicated together not to get all the help we can get. Please stop fighting it. You’re okay, I promise.”

Michael took a deep, shaky breath. He concentrated on relaxing his muscles and letting Dean in. The friction felt too warm and dry, too raw. “Unngh,” he grunted, leaning deeper into the counter.

“Chin up for me, Michael,” Sam corrected quietly.

“You wanna know what I know about you, Michael Quentin?” Dean asked into his ear in a sultry voice. “I know you get off on bringing it out in other people. Whatever they are, you get hot knowing you can bring them to ecstasy in exactly what they want to be. Fuck, I love that about you. And you love to show me off, don’t you? You fantasize about putting me on display, hot and pink and needy; bending me over in front of God and everybody and fucking me hard. Come on, Omega, listen to my voice and let go.”

Dean pressed in harder and faster, deeper with his thick fingers. He felt slick begin to surround his fingers, easing the way at last.

“You want to watch me get fucked, too, don’t you, Michael? You want to step back and watch me do your bidding; take the cocks that you pick out for me. You want to watch alphas cram their dicks down my throat until my eyes water and my spit gets ropey on my chin.” Michael moaned and pressed his hips back. Dean scissored his fingers and then added another. “There we go, Baby. That’s what I’m looking for. You never told me any of that, did you? I had to learn it all for myself. What else are you hiding behind those beautiful green eyes? Moan for me again, Michael.”

He did. He moaned. Slick leaked out around Dean’s fingers. “I hate you so much right now,” he added, just in case Dean had forgotten.

“I know, Baby. I know.” Dean pushed a fourth finger in and pulsed in tiny little beats, barely moving. “You done, Sam?”

“Yes. All ready. Be careful of the wires, Michael. It’ll hurt if these puppies come off too fast. Go on and stand up for me. You ready over there, Charlie?”

“Bring him on over. We’re all set.” Charlie had a plastic film laid over the chair, and a fabric sheet on top of that. Both layers had a small, elastic-lined hole that let the metal probe poke up through.
Michael eyed it uncertainly as Dean walked him over.  

“It ain’t no big thing at all, man. Just relax. Look right at me. Relax. Take a deep breath. Whenever you’re ready, just ease yourself down. Hey, just pretend you’re on my lap.” Dean talked Michael into a position hovering just over the probe. It wasn’t very big. His channel could accept it painlessly as long as he was slick even without prep, but he’d psyched himself out, and he wavered. 

The rest of them stepped back, out of Michael’s field of view so he could focus on Dean. “Eyes on me. I’m not going to let you get hurt. Easy does it, Omega. Deep breath, let’s do it. I’ve got you. Down you go.” Michael let Dean ease him onto the chair. Dean held onto the probe, warming it and helping Michael aim. “There you go, no big thing at all. All the way down. Just relax.” 

“Fuck, Dean. It feels…ugh…it feels gross.” 

Dean chuckled gently and kissed Michael’s temple. “I know. You’re doing great. Relax your thighs, Michael. Just sit down. I know.” Michael was sitting tensely as if perched upon a filthy public toilet. Sam and Charlie stepped up behind the chair and quickly began to hook the leads of the electrodes up to their connections. Pam typed rapidly on the keyboard and loaded an image, the ACRI logo, on the large screen before Michael.

“There you go. You’re doing great.” Michael had finally relaxed enough to be fully seated. Dean could tell he was clenching down on the probe uncomfortably, but he stroked Michael’s thighs for him, sending him assurance straight through their bonds, pure alpha-Omega comfort.

“Fuck you, Winchester,” Michael muttered. “I’m so glad you’re in chastity right now. I want you to fucking suffer.”

Dean laughed easily, letting Michael’s annoyance just wash over him, finding no mark.

“We’re going to put straps on your wrists to keep you still, and we’re going to strap a gag in place to keep you from speaking,” Sam told him seriously. Michael narrowed his eyes at Sam. “None of that, Omega,” said Sam sternly, snapping his own Dominant into place. “Put your arms on the arm rests, right now.”

Michael complied reluctantly, shooting Dean a vicious look. Dean pretended not to notice. He took the ball-gag that Charlie handed to him as Sam buckled in Michael’s right arm. Dean fixed Michael with a stubborn, immovable eye, holding up the gag and raising his brows. Michael frowned and clenched his lips tightly. Dean rolled his eyes and tilted his head. Sam moved around behind the chair and began buckling Michael’s left arm. 

Dean lowered his chin, but he didn’t back down. There was a rapid-fire argument going on between them silently. Michael frowned harder and worked his jaw. He started to lift up, and Dean pressed his thighs back down. “Stop it, right now. Work with us through this, and I’ll make you a pie. Whatever kind you want.”

“Dean, really?” said Sam sharply.

“What? He’s upset, Sam. Just do your job and stay out of our business.” Dean defended himself and Michael both. “Open your mouth, Michael. Work with me here.”

“I don’t need a gag! I’ll be quiet.” Michael’s voice was pleading.

“Baby, it’s part of the test. Everybody gets the same apparatus. It’s a controlled variable, that’s all. Just think: PIE! You with me?”
“No, I’m not with you. You can take your fucking ball-gag and your pie and shove them up your ass!”

Dean remained calm and persistent. “I would, Michael, but I’m in chastity right now. Enough of this. You aren’t panicky, you’re just pissy. I know you hate it. Your vote has been registered. Open your mouth now.”

Michael glared at him a moment longer, and Dean raised his brows again, a simple threat. Finally, he opened his mouth and let Dean slip the ball in. He buckled it swiftly. He patted the side of Michael’s face, eliciting another low growl, and he nodded at Pam.

“All right. Let’s get started,” Pam said from her computer station. “Michael, keep your eyes on the screen. That’s all you have to do, love. Don’t look away. Let your body do the rest.

She turned back and pushed ‘Play’, then stood up, gathered Charlie, and Sam and herded them out the door. “Don’t touch him, Dean,” she reminded the alpha.

“I know!” he squawked. Jeez. He helped design this fucking test. Dean squatted beside Michael’s chair before the video started and pulled Michael’s eyes onto his by will alone. “I’m right here, man. I’m not going to leave you, and you aren’t in any danger. The data from this one are all internal. No one’s going to see any of this except Pam, Ellen, Bobby, Benny, Cas and me. Can you handle that?”

Michael thought about it, shooting his eyes to the screen where a set of preliminary graphics were still running. Finally, he nodded gravely and settled in to watch. As badly as he hated this, having to do it again would be even worse. The lights dimmed and went out.

It started easily enough. A couple embracing, kissing, caressing. A couple locked together in passion, fully clothed but tangled together. A couple in the dark, a couple out in the daylight. A naked couple on the beach. Men. Women. Beautifully androgynous wolves. Thin and lithe, heavy, bulky, tall, short, so many people in rapid-fire images. Two people. Singles with their hands on themselves. Three people. An orgy of people, arms and legs indistinguishable from one another. A strap. A sublime male wolf, half lit, shadowed to perfection – the image stayed on-screen just a little longer than the others. Most of the images swirled so quickly, he couldn’t focus on anything before it was gone. Sometimes he imagined there were images between the images that never registered consciously at all. Some of the images moved. Every now and then, a video stayed long enough for him to really take in what he was seeing. Slow, sensual sexual congress, bodies moving, serpentine against one another, a single hand gripping a pale thigh, squeezing.

Michael sucked a breath in through his nose when he realized he was hardening in spite of himself. Two green eyes, locked into the camera, focused, the pupils enormous. A mouth, teeth holding on to the lower lip, barely able to keep hold. He felt slick leaking past the probe and onto the sheet. His fingers gripped harder onto the arm of the chair beneath them. He noted a number of standard kinks as they flew by: a young woman dressed as a school-girl, her white panties peeking out, then the same girl, flat on her back, her panties at her ankles raised high above her head, her ass bright red. A tall man urinating on a smaller man, the small man’s mouth open and receiving, a look of bliss upon his face. A whip landing soundly across a woman’s bare back, leaving a wicked stripe. An older bear of a man, his lips stretched wide around an alpha knot, tear tracks running down both cheeks and a hand gripping tightly into his hair.

Small and delicate, thick and muscled, bound, gripped, fucked and spanked - and stepped on. A high-heeled shoe, bright ‘Fuck-Me’ red, pressing a bearded man’s face into the mud. It threatened to cover the man’s nostrils, dripping already into his gasping mouth. Two lovely soapy women in a bathtub lit by candles. A girl in pigtails holding hands with a boy in boots, both naked and staring transfixed at each other’s genitals.
A stern-faced Domme, clearly displeased, pointing her Submissive slave down onto his belly. Yeah, there was no doubt whatsoever - that one got Michael. His cock twitched and dribbled. A middle-aged man licking his partner’s asshole, pulling a streak of what was clearly feces along behind him. Yikes! That one didn’t. Michael grimaced as much as he could with the gag stretching his lips.

A paddle, just a paddle hanging loose in someone’s hand, then the camera followed it as the grip tightened and brought it down to land squarely upon a pair of shapely buttocks. WHAT!? Back it up! Michael knew those buttocks. That was Dean! His Dean. Oh holy shit, holy Mary Mother… His cock dribbled a thick pulse, and Michael felt Dean’s amusement through the bond.

Bare feet, flexing. Someone’s toe between two luscious lips, women’s lips. A man’s face…man? No. He couldn’t possibly be older than fifteen, covered in semen and surrounded by a ring of older men with their spent dicks in their hands.

A woman with the tail of a horse affixed to a butt-plug, down on all fours, her rider just saddling up. A man in lace panties, his erect cock peeking over the edge where a tiny bow mocked its masculinity. A domestic hetero couple sitting down to dinner with their pups, everything in the picture gentle and untoward except that the man had a cock-warmer kneeling at his lap. A glory hole, empty, beckoning, tempting. A solid wall with a simple hole carved into it from which protruded the lower half of a svelte male body, face down, his belly supported, disappearing into obscurity. His legs braced against the floor, his ankles chained wide apart. His cock was caged and small. An Omega Fuck Hole. The video stayed on him. An alpha woman pressed up to him, stroking herself. She pushed into his channel harshly, and he flinched.

It was all here. Every age, gender, shape, every possible coupling, every kink Michael had ever heard of: pleasure and pain, control and mutuality, participation and isolation, tears and gasps and moans, filthy and wet, sweet and tender. He knew they got a hit from him on the exhibitionist scenes. He knew they would register a peak at a scene that was clearly partner-sharing. He responded to the obvious Dominant-Submission images. He watched carefully for another glimpse of Dean. An image of a Submissive on her knees before her alpha Domme, drooling and straining for a chance to put her swollen lips on the woman’s cock. That one got him. The Sub’s eyes looked lust-filled, but also clearly adoring. Michael had seen that look in Dean’s eyes, and it did something primal to Michael; so did an image of an alpha knot releasing across a distended pregnant belly.

His dick was hard and leaking, pulsing occasionally. He felt tense and horny. He needed to put Dean on his knees once he got this damned ball gag out of his mouth. The bondage scenes made him shiver, and he wondered if they had any way to distinguish that it was the idea of being bound that was anathema, and not the idea of binding a Sub, especially while he was indeed bound to the chair. A priest, a business woman, a college professor who looked remarkably like (but wasn’t) Castiel.

Leather and lace. Double penetration. A cheek marred with a full five-fingered slap. A cage holding a miserably straining cock. A bulging knot with a woman’s hand squeezing it until it turned purple. A knotted Omega channel, dribbling slick. A tongue, pointed and hardened, fucking deep into an Omega’s channel. A bite, oh Jesus, teeth breaking the skin of an otherwise unmarred shoulder, a line of blood snaking past the lips.

It continued well past the point Michael felt capable of responding to anything in particular. The images all merged into one steamy, sticky picture of lust in his head, and when at last it faded out, he sat unmoving, trying to calm himself. He felt fingers at his wrist, and he jumped. He’d forgotten Dean was still right next to him. The lights of the room came back up. Sam picked at the buckle of Michael’s opposite wrist, and Charlie unbuckled the ball-gag, helping him spit it out.

“You need a minute?” Dean asked him. Michael shook his head, sweeping his lower jaw back and
forth. Dean held both of his arms near his armpits, and lifted him straight upward. Michael pushed with his hands and his legs and unimpaled himself, looking back down at the wet spot and the shiny probe in the center of the sheet with a shiver of revulsion.

“You’re not going to learn anything from that that I couldn’t have told you myself, Dean. You have a lot to make up to me for.” Michael looked at him meaningfully, and Dean caught on right away. He bit his lip seductively, blinked his eyes closed very slowly and then opened them again, looking coyly from beneath his lashes and used his grip on Michael’s arms to support himself as he dropped to his knees.

Dean put his hands behind his back, gripping one wrist, and he leaned in and licked the underside of Michael’s cock. “Yeah, Dean. Come on. Do it.” Michael grasped Dean’s short hair and pushed into the heat of his mouth. Dean hummed happily and began to move, assisted by Michael’s grip. Sam and Charlie peeled electrodes carefully off of Michael’s body, and he accommodated them by leaning a little or lifting up an arm when they needed him to. Michael wasn’t paying much attention to what state of mind Dean was in, and surprisingly, neither was Dean. They were both too turned on to think about it. Dean’s chin went sloppy and his eyes closed as he buried his face up to Michael’s pubic hair, thinking about the shaving scene, wondering if Michael wanted to try that.

His own cock was leaking into his boxer briefs, rubbing uncomfortably with his motion. He knew it wasn’t going to get any attention, and that made him all the more frenzied on his Dom’s cock.

“Bend your head down, Michael. Let me get the one on the back of your neck.” Sam pushed gently on Michael’s head and Michael snarled and snapped fiercely at him. “Uh, right. Okay, you can get that one when you’re finished here.” To Charlie he said, “Ready? Let’s go. Grab that one on the floor there.”

Michael had waited too long on edge to last very long. He pulled Dean in by the back of his head and spilled down his throat with a deep groan. He stayed like that, his head thrown back, face to the ceiling, as the endorphins coursed through his body and he flew happily in the clouds. Dean chuckled at him without releasing his softening cock and Michael looked back down at him, stroking his hair.

“I love you, Dean.” He pulled out of Dean’s mouth and crouched down.

“I noticed.”

“I’m sorry I was a dick. I hate being bound.”

“I know.”

“Do I still get a pie?”

“Whatever kind you like.”

“Can I eat it off you?”

“Only if you wait until it’s cooled from the oven.”

Michael sat down and pulled Dean to sit with him. Dean hissed as his ass took his weight. Michael smirked rudely. Dean reached around to the back of Michael’s neck and peeled the last electrode off him, tossing it away behind himself.

“That was stupid, Dean. How can they tell what anyone’s reacting to when the images move so quickly? By the time my body reacted, it was three scenes on. They’re going to think I’m into little
pigtailed school-girls in panties and sheep-fucking.”

“When did we add sheep-fucking?” Dean teased.

“I’m certain I saw some sheep,” Michael responded moving in for a kiss.

“Maybe they’ll conclude you’re into little sheep wearing panties fucking girls in pigtails. I hear that’s a thing now.” Dean kissed him back. Michael laid Dean out on the floor, but Dean rolled them, taking the higher position, and Michael didn’t fight him. Dean’s erection pressed into Michael’s hip. They both ignored it. The kisses grew heated and wet, and they both moaned into it. Dean kissed the tip of Michael’s nose with a twinkle in his eye, then he sighed and sat up, straddling Michael’s hips on his knees and trying to avoid putting pressure on his ass.

Michael popped one eyebrow up. “They show the same video to everyone?”

“Yes,” said Dean, trying to adjust his posture so that his ass and his cock were both unstimulated.

“You’re getting paddled, wasn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah. That was me. We didn’t have much of a budget to produce it. We bought some stock footage, but a lot of that was all of us pitching in. Sam’s in there, and so is Cas. You want me to tell you where?”

“God no. I don’t want to think about this ever again. Only, did you do any other scenes? I only saw the one.”

Dean smiled mischievously. “Feeling a little possessive?”

“Yes. Please just tell me. I don’t like knowing how many people watch your ass get spanked without me having any control over who sees it. At least tell me that’s all there is.” Michael surprised Dean again with simple honesty where Dean expected a deflection.

The alpha took pity on his mate. “That’s all. We had lots of volunteers. They didn’t need me for anything else.”

“Whose were the green eyes?” Michael asked churlishly.

“No idea. We got that off the internet.”

Dean went pensive as he looked down at his mate and changed the subject. “I have to ask you something. It’s probably Cas’ job to ask this, but I’m just going to do it for him.”

“Okay. Shoot,” said Michael, wrapping an arm behind his head, holding Dean’s hip with the other.

Dean took a deep breath. “He wants me to try to put a Claim on him. Obviously, we would have to involve my penis to make that happen, so we need you to sign off on it.”

Michael burst out with an explosive laugh and rolled Dean off him. “Wow. Didn’t expect that one. You’re joking, right?” He stood up slowly, looking for his bathrobe.

“I’m not joking,” Dean said from the floor. “We think it might help us to communicate better, understand each other more. It could give us a two-way bond, like you and me.”

Michael rolled his eyes, slipping his arms into the robe. “Dean, what’s going to help you two communicate better is TALKING to each other. How would you even begin to Claim him? You’re insane!”
“We’re not asking for your blessing or your approval, Michael, just your permission to try. It’s a yes or no question.” Dean pushed up from the floor and rubbed his backside which was throbbing again.

“No, it’s not.” Michael shook his head, tying his robe. “I couldn’t begin to stop you two from trying a stunt like this. It’s a freight-train already, I can see it in your eyes. You’re doing this no matter what I say, aren’t you?”

Dean huffed a quick laugh. “Probably, but I still want to ask. I want to be what I agreed to be for you, man.”

Michael walked right up into Dean’s space. “In that case,” he put a hand along Dean’s jaw and looked deep into his eyes. He could see Dean’s wolf hopping from side-to-side in anticipation, the cheeky fucker. “I give you permission to fuck the hell out of him, and own his ass. Anything less, and I’ll be utterly ashamed of you.” Michael’s eyes danced in reflection of Dean’s.

“Thanks, Michael,” whispered Dean. “Remind me next time to ask you for what I want while you’re still high off a blow-job. You’re a piece of cake like that.”

“Watch it, Winchester,” the Omega warned, hugging him tightly.

Chapter End Notes

Gah! I love how sappy they get when they're balanced! ***Sniffle***

I have no idea how much free-time I'm going to have in the upcoming days. If my work isn't accessible, maybe a lot. If it is, I may disappear for the next few weeks.

Love you all! Thanks for caring about the people of the Gulf Coast. It's a mess down here, but we're strong.
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Sam's pissed at both of them. Dean's working his way through a whole lotta apologies, and then he sings.

Chapter Notes

Happy 10th to AO3. Happy 21st to my alpha (anniversary, not birthday). Wet carpeting and carpet pads are heavy and Tetanus boosters are expensive.

This is another first for me. We've been here before a little bit. I love having little glimpses of the world they live in that we can play around with. In my world, Dean has always been a singer, but I kept it to myself until now. I do that with a lot of their traits. There's too much to tell. Have y'all checked the word-count lately? Holy shit!

So here's the deal. You can look up Jensen's singing performances and go there with me if you want. I wanted his songs in the house to be unique, though, so you just have to imagine that part.

I hope you enjoy, as usual. I feel it's time to remind folks that I write this primarily for myself, and that's part of the reason it's going on forever and it's all over the place. I love absolutely EVERYONE who's hung tough through all of this. Things are looking up for my boys (and April). Can they keep it rolling?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 52 – Wednesday, June 21, 2017

NOW:

“Take a breather, boys. We’re almost finished,” Benny reminded them calmly in Sam’s office as he handed Michael and Dean each a soda.

“Christ, what next?” wondered Michael, sinking back into the short loveseat. He’d lost track, and couldn’t recall anything else being on the schedule for today.

“You’re through with everything my department needs to do,” clarified Benny. “From here you move from Behavioral testing over to Medical. Bobby just needs one more thing. He’s going to check your Mating-scars for sensitivity. It’s a follow-up exam for your Mating, or Matings I should say. We need clarity on how they work, or at least on what they do. We’re in uncharted water with you, young man.”
“I thought I was clear that we weren’t doing any extra prodding on him, Ben.” Dean stood near the door, watching Michael carefully.

“It’s a necessary medical exam, Dean. We would follow-up with any wolf who presented to us this way.”

“He’s had enough today, alpha,” Dean declared. “He’s tired, and he’s done everything he’s been asked to do…”

“Bribed to do, you mean,” put in Sam caustically from behind his own desk.

Bobby stuck his head in the door without knocking before Dean could respond. “So, there you are. You ready? I won’t need very long.” Dean was torn between addressing his brother and putting a stop to Bobby’s plans, but as he waffled, Michael heaved himself up with a sigh, handing his drink to Dean.

“Let’s get this over with. Last thing, right? Promise?”

Bobby put a reassuring hand on his shoulder and nodded. The older alpha asked Dean, “You’re coming?”

“Give me a minute, Bobby. I need to take care of something first.”

“Can do. We’ll get him ready. Don’t be long. I really do need you for this. We’re checking mating-response, and we can’t do that very well without a mate. Room 204.” Dean acknowledged with a quick nod, but his eyes were already on his brother.

“You two don’t need me for this. I’ve got work to do.” Benny made to leave, but Dean put a hand on his arm and stopped him.

“Please stay, Benny. I’d like an objective ear.” Dean was still staring hard at Sam, and Sam had raised his eyebrows in response.

“Dean, I’m not objective. It sounds like you two have a beef of some kind brewing. That’s between you as brothers. Either that or you have a legitimate complaint to make against my direct report here. If you want to file a complaint, then say so; if not, I’d appreciate you keeping me out of it.”

Sam ignored Benny and cut right to the chase. “You’re too soft on him, Dean. He’s never going to learn to respect you if you baby him all the time. He’s Omega. He needs a firmer hand. Did you even hear yourself in there?”

Dean rifled vaguely through the file drawer at his hip before shifting his focus to the books on Sam’s shelf. He paused a little longer as his fingers skipped over the titles with his own name on them. “Mind your own business, Sam. We’re different, and we don’t work that way.” He abandoned the books and crossed the room to paw through the drawers of Sam’s credenza, obviously searching.

“He’s Dominant, I get it. Okay? I get it. But he’s still Omega. You need to put your foot down now and then, or he’s going to walk all over you.” Sam watched Dean kick lightly at his umbrella stand, watching something at the bottom shift. “What are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for all the fucks I have to give over what you think about the matter. Oh, that’s right…” Dean stopped and faced his brother aggressively. “There aren’t any. Mind your own fucking business. He isn’t even in a white tunic yet, Sam. He’s got less training than Jeremy did when he started here. He’s at nil except for the craptastic conditioning his father put under his skin before he broke free and made a catastrophe of college life. Why are you being an asshole about this? Where’s
“You bribed him to obey you, Dean. That’s not ever going to be okay. And you’ve been all over the place lately. I have to think that has something to do with Michael’s influence over you. He’s got you wrapped around his sad, manipulative finger, and you can’t see it. By the time you clue in, it’ll be a pain in the ass to untangle it. You’re setting some terrible precedents. I’m just trying to look out for you. You’re my brother.” Sam wasn’t backing down, despite the bitchface Dean leveled at him.

“Benny, call your boy off,” Dean pleaded. “Tell him it’s under control and to mind his own damn business.”

Benny scratched his head absently. “Did you bribe him, Dean?”

“He was upset! He doesn’t do submission! That was really fucking hard for him, and he didn’t need another hard-nosed alpha on his ass today. TRUST ME! We’ll get there. Jesus, maybe let him get started on the Omega training before you tear him a new one. At least I wasn’t a freakin’ robot in there like Samuel here. Don’t forget, I can see inside his emotions. I wasn’t going to back down, but he doesn’t always need a hammer like some Omegas do.”

“I wasn’t a robot. I was an authority figure. It wasn’t personal. The sooner he learns to behave when he needs to, the better.”

“Benny, tell your lead officer that not every instance of disobedience requires him to break out the maple-wood.” Dean squared up to the head of Sam’s department, who put his hands up defensively.

“Tell Dean,” Sam countered to his boss, “that setting the bar at bribery right out of the gate is a prelude to disaster later on.”

“Whoa, fellas. Here’s the deal. You’re both right, and you’re both wrong if you ask me, but you’re also both full-grown adults, and I’m not getting in the middle of this. Figure it out. If I do have to get in the middle here, neither of you is going to like how it comes out. All I’m going to say on the matter is that bribery is never a good idea, but if we can’t trust a mate who’s one of the leading authorities on Omegas to navigate this boy’s designations, I don’t know who would have more expertise.”

Dean bristled a little. It was an ego-stroke, but it wasn’t the full support he felt he deserved. “Look. I’ve got a lotta years coming with this guy. We’ll get there. Even if Cas DOES call off the wedding, and my whole marriage falls apart before it gets started, I’m still going to have Michael. I’m not about to fuck this up. Trust me, Sam. I’ve got this, and I know what I’m doing.” Dean glared at him, but Sam simply stood with his mouth slightly open in shock. Dean took his silence for retreat and slammed the door on his way out, just as a text arrived from Bobby stating they were ready and waiting for the alpha on the medical wing.

Sam turned his attention back to Benny. “Did he just say what I think he said? Do you know anything about that?”

Benny shrugged uncomfortably. Sam’s cheeks took on a high blush, and his nostrils flared dangerously.

“Sam, wait!” But it was too late. Sam was already gone.
“You fucking son-of-a-bitch!” Sam declared, bursting through Castiel’s clinic door and surprising
him with Meg, their heads bent over a clipboard. “I TOLD you! You’re cancelling the wedding?! I
fucking KNEW this would happen! What the fuck is wrong with you?! How can you do this to
him?!”

Meg backed up rapidly, pressing her back against the exam room wall. Castiel frowned in dismay.

“What are you shouting about, Sam?”

“Dean. You and Dean. God, I was so stupid! I bet everything on you. I trusted you. You swore you
were going to stick it out and take care of him. You SWORE it Castiel! Now you’re backing out?
Just because things got complicated? You knew what he was like. You knew from the beginning,
before you ever bought that fucking ring! You knew how easy he is to crack open, and you swore to
me you wouldn’t ever hurt him! You actually think just because he’s got Michael now that this isn’t
going to crush him?”

“Sam, please calm down. You’re not making sense.” Cas set the clipboard down on the counter and
twitched his head toward the door to send Meg scurrying out. She complied with a terrified squeak,
avoiding touching either of the Doms on her way out. “What have I done exactly?”

“The wedding,” Sam elucidated. “Dean told me you plan to call off the wedding. Don’t bullshit me,
Cas. I deserve the truth. Are you calling it quits?”

Cas frowned deeper. “No, I’m not, but it’s complicated.”

Sam cocked his head. “It’s not complicated, Alpha. It’s a simple question. It’s either yes or no. There
are wedding plans going on right now to get a ceremony set up in September. Is there going to be a
wedding in September? Yes, or no?”

“I hope so, Sam.”

Sam turned his back on Castiel and scrubbed a hand over his face. “I KNEW it! FUCK!”

“He’s not in a good place, Sam! Or, well, he hasn’t been. It’s yet to be seen if he’s been able to get to
a more even keel over the last few days. I can’t, in good conscience, go through with marrying him if
he’s not in a healthy state-of-mind. I’m not leaving him. Please, believe me, I’m not. But we may
need to postpone the wedding for a few months until Dean and I can work through some issues.”

Sam turned back and put his finger right in Castiel’s face. “You knew all of the issues from the very
start. You knew what you were getting into. You KNOW him! What part of this is coming as a
surprise to you exactly?”

Castiel defended himself, but he didn’t pull rank on Sam. He still needed Sam’s alliance. “Neither of
us had any way to know how difficult the adjustment would be for him once he Mated, and we both
made some mistakes right off the bat. We’re getting there, Sam. Please try to understand.”

“And you thought it was a good idea to threaten him with cancelling the wedding? He starts to go
off-balance, and you respond by pulling the rug out from under him? How is that supposed to make
him more stable?”

Cas paused, unsure how to respond.

Sam pressed, self-righteous anger and trust in Castiel’s self-control making him brave. “YOU
proposed! YOU pursued HIM! You don’t get to retract that just because he’s struggling. You don’t
get to flash a ring at him and then demand he change in order to keep it. You promised me you
would always be his rock! What’s worse, you promised DEAN! KEEP YOUR FUCKING PROMISES, ALPHA! Don’t you dare do this to him. You knew all about him when you proposed, but you were so scared you were going to miss your chance that you just jumped right in the deep end without thinking what it might do to him. Well congratulations, Cas. You got what you wanted. You got Dean! You’ve got him heart and soul, and if you don’t man up and take control of this situation, I will fulfill MY promise. You remember that promise, Alpha?”

Sam took another step forward so that Castiel had to look up into his full height to meet his eyes. Sam stilled his body, and quieted his voice. “Complicated, you say? No. It’s not complicated. You wanted him. You asked for him. Now you’ve got him. Don’t you even THINK you have the right to try to change him now just because he’s not a simple man.”

“Sam”

“I’ll tell you one thing, Castiel. If you don’t marry him in September, you’re not ever going to. That’s my prediction. You call this off now, or even just try to delay it, it’s going to destroy the last vestige of self-esteem he’s got left. You think he’s a basket-case now, just wait. Wait and see what it does to him to know that you’re going to pull back any time he wavers just a little.”

“I’m not pulling back! I’m just being realistic. You’re right. I jumped in too deep at first. We can’t even agree on what we want in a marriage. We don’t agree on anything! He keeps spiraling into drops I can’t predict even though he should be stable. You saw what happened last Friday! I did that to him! So far, I’ve lied to him. I’ve manipulated him. I’ve set him up to fail disastrously, and I’ve ambushed him with a night with my mother that none of us were prepared to handle, and Dean took it right between the eyes! I keep trying to make him into some kind of utopian primate ideal of a husband that doesn’t exist!

“Sam, I’m sorry, but if things don’t improve between us, I CAN’T go through with it. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us. It’s not on Dean; it’s on me.” Cas continued to look up into Sam’s outraged face.

Sam shook his head slowly. “You proposed to him, Novak. You’re damned right this is on you. I don’t care what you have to do. You’re going to fix this. Whatever fucked up bullshit you’ve been putting him through, stop it and straighten up. No one fucks with my brother, Goddamnit! No one. You’re going to go home tonight, and you’re going to reassure Dean that you’re there for him no matter what.”

Cas began to protest that he’d already done that, but Sam barreled over him.

“You’re going to declare in no uncertain terms that the wedding is still on, and nothing he could do will stop it, come hell or high water. You’re going to STOP fucking lying to him, whatever that’s about. You’re going to stop all of it and be the man you promised me you were going to be for him. Either that, or you’re going to end it now. For good. Any questions? Alpha?”

Castiel regarded him quietly for more than a minute, his eyes and his face unreadable. Sam ignored the worrisome poke from his wolf that said he’d gone too far, and Cas ignored the snarling and snapping from his own. They met as men, face to face; equals in their mutual love for the alpha-Sub between them.

“I don’t have any questions, Samuel,” the Alpha said at last, unblinking. “I will speak to Dean tonight, and we will make a decision together. Thank you for your concern. I hope you realize that I hear you, and I appreciate what it must have taken for you to confront me like this. I take your concerns very seriously. Now, if you please, I need to resume my clinic hours. I have a number of patients who have been waiting quite a long time.”
Sam didn’t move. He didn’t thaw. “And now he’s a cold, dead android again. Fucking great.”

“Sam, please. I’m not going to abandon your brother. I’m in love with him. I’m going to fight like hell for him. Don’t lose faith in me just yet. I beg you.” Cas turned to the sink to wash his hands and prepare for the next patient. “And you know enough about me to understand why the robotic presentation is necessary. Please don’t provoke me.”

Sam still didn’t leave. He backed off a little, but he simply stood in the doorway as if expecting something more definitive.

Cas tried appealing to Sam’s commitment. “You made an oath to me, Sam. Unless our pack disbands, I hold your oath active, and I’ll expect you to behave that way. I’m not…”

Sam interrupted him abruptly. “You made oaths to me first, Alpha. If you don’t keep those, the ones you made about how you were going to take care of my brother… If you break those oaths, I consider mine to you null and void. Is that clear enough for you?”

“Crystal clear, beta.” Castiel was at his breaking point. Another aggressive shove would push him over.

“Good. Then I guess the line in the sand is drawn now. You know where I stand. I may not have the power to take you down, Castiel, but I can do some devastating damage if you push me into it.”

“Threats, Sam?” Cas took a step forward. “That isn’t necessary, and it’s a terrible way to motivate me to do anything. You and I are allies here, not enemies. Your brother’s well-being is all I care about anymore. I already told you where I stand and what I’m doing about it. It’s time for you to go, before…”

“All right. I’ve said my piece.” Sam began to leave, but Cas put a hand gently on his shoulder and stopped him, surprising both of them.

“It’s going to hit you, after you leave, after the adrenalin wears off, it’s going to hit you hard, so I’m telling you right now. I don’t take offense at what you said here today. You aren’t going to be in any trouble. I respect you, Sam, for putting Dean ahead of yourself; for looking out for him as a brother should; for standing your ground and saying what you needed to say. I needed to hear it. You’ve helped me to get it straight in my head. Please believe me. I’m not going to abandon him.”

Sam held his eyes for a moment longer, then nodded once and left.

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Michael phoned Rachel on the drive home to let his family know he made it through the gauntlet run mostly unscathed. He giggled happily through describing his mate’s reaction to having his Mating-scars both stimulated at once. Dean was still twitchy in the driver’s seat as he drove. The alpha didn’t find it quite as funny and glared at Michael from the driver’s seat. A tinkle of laughter from April in the back seat made Michael laugh harder, and Dean expand his glare to the rear-view mirror. She didn’t meet his eye.

“Shut it. Both of you. Or else!” His voice warbled on the ‘or else’ as his body twitched again, and they both doubled over in laughter. Dean tried to stay mad, but he had to concede, it was pretty funny. Bobby had found it so interesting to watch how backward everything between them seemed
to flow, that he had run through multiple duplicates and alternate iterations of the test just to see Dean react. It was all purely scientific (of course it was), but in the end, Dean was so over-sensitized from the tips of his ears to the soles of his feet that he’d shouted, “Don’t touch me!” at the technician when she tried to remove his electrodes. He was still wearing one that he wasn’t ready to go near, but Michael didn’t need to know that.

Dean sighed and kept his peace through the drive and on past when Michael said goodbye to Rachel and hung up the phone. Michael watched him pensively. “Serves you right, Dean,” he said airily. “After how you made me do that stupid video with that chair from the Spanish Inquisition.”

Michael wasn’t trying to start anything, but Dean was still annoyed at Sam. “About that,” said Dean, looking into the turn as he directed the car rather than at Michael. “We need to work on your obedience in A/O settings. I’m not thrilled with how that went down. I know you were uncomfortable in there, but you don’t get to just dig your heels in when you don’t want to do something I tell you to do. I’m letting it go this time, Omega, because you’re just about to start your training class, but consider this fair warning. There will be consequences next time you defy me like that.” Dean sent one stern look at the Omega beside him whose mouth had dropped open.

“You’re not serious.”

“I think you’ll find I’m serious as a heart-attack. I’ll let you get a few weeks in with Hannah before I start to put the thumb-screws on, but we’re going there, Michael. Get ready.”

Michael glanced back at April in the back seat. She met his eye with a grave air. She knew. April was graduating. She’d been there already.

“You promised me you would do your best, Michael. I need to know you’re going to keep that promise. We can’t always do these half-and-half dances where we’re only halfway in the right mindset. It’s not good for either one of us.” Dean activated the garage door with his remote and pulled the Impala to a stop. Michael was out of the car before it came to a full stop, disappearing without a word into the house, and slamming the door behind him.

Dean killed the engine and put both hands on the wheel, closing his eyes for a minute. When he opened them, he found April perched on the edge of the back seat watching him seriously. “What’d I do wrong?” he asked her. She simply shrugged judgmentally and got out of the car slamming doors as she went too. “Oh, now you’re mad at me too?!” he called to her retreating back. Great. Well, at least she had a legitimate reason.

Dean didn’t see either one of them as he threw a taco salad together in the kitchen. April was in the Conservatory practicing. Michael was who-knew-where, sulking pissily. Maybe Sam was right. Maybe a firmer hand would help him avoid this uneasiness within the Omega. Nah. Sam was wrong. They would get there – needed to get there, but it wasn’t time yet. Dean trusted his instincts where Michael was concerned. He didn’t feel guilty or wrong-footed over what he’d told Michael in the car. That was true, all of it, but Michael deserved the time to grow and mature at the same pace they allowed seventeen-year-olds who’d only just come of age. Just because he was older didn’t mean they should expect faster development.

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Dean let him sulk. Michael would come around on his own, and solitude was an important part of his processing. April was the one who felt like a thorn in his toe. Dean and April had hit it off so well and so immediately, that a rub right now, this far into things, was painful. He’d hurt her badly this morning. Dean didn’t need a Mating-bond to know he’d fucked up his relationship with his Mate-in-Law. The empty space in the kitchen where a table used to stand - warm, rich oak tones creating a central nest in the heart of the pack home - stared at Dean like a wound. Now all of the chairs rested against the wall, stacked in pairs, mated seat-to-seat, unusable until he built them a new table. Neither
of the knee pillows were anywhere to be seen.

He needed to talk to her. Dean cooked everything that needed cooking, and staged the ingredients, ready to assemble when Castiel came home. Cas was running late, finishing up working through the line of patients who had backed up outside the clinic. Dean washed and dried his hands, took a grounding breath and headed toward where the music emanated from the back of the house.

He slipped in quietly, so as not to interrupt her work, but he didn’t sit. He leaned into the bend and listened. Damn, she was good. He couldn’t see her fingers, but they had to be flying over the keyboard, and the look of concentration on her face was an insight into her depth he’d not witnessed before.

“What?” she asked, stopping abruptly mid-phrase. “I need to practice.”

“We have to talk. I owe you an apology and an explanation.” Dean leaned into his crossed arms on the piano, his eyes begging her to pick up the olive branch.

“You don’t owe me anything, alpha. This house, and everything in it, belongs to the alphas to do with as they will. That’s what alpha Jo taught me in Omega class. Now, may I please continue, Sir? I owe my mate a full two hours before I eat.”

“April, please. I’m not leaving until you hear me out,” Dean pleaded.

“That’s your prerogative, alpha.” Her eyes fixed back on the sheet music. She frowned and flipped the page, picking up with her fingers on the next passage and steadfastly ignoring his presence. She’d skipped on to the Andante Fortissimo, and he grimaced when he realized he wasn’t going to be able to talk over it.

“April! Stop playing!” She ignored him. Jesus, even the Ozzies were ignoring him now. Maybe Sam had a point after all. Dean listened to her work as he thought it through. It wasn’t his alpha who had wronged April. Maybe it shouldn’t be his alpha who approached her now.

Dean slipped around the side of the piano and sat down on the spare few inches of bench to her left, balanced precariously on one sore cheek. He cocked a single brow her way and began to plink out an annoying staccato repetition of a single note, interfering with her reach, her pace, and her… everything.

“Stop it, Dean! I need to work. Get off the bench!” She tried to shuffle sideways to shove him off, but he turned his back to her, braced his feet, and pushed back, gaining more inches than he had originally. He giggled mischievously, leaning backward into her space and getting both hands on the keyboard to create a steady, pulsing bluesy beat.

She huffed, shoving her own hands beneath his to prevent him from making any progress, and his tune turned messy. He laughed and dodged, skipping higher, reaching over her arms. When she tried again to disrupt him, he reached all the way around her back with his right arm, caging her against his chest and putting together a disaster of a tune that made no sense no matter how you tried to perceive it.

He kept his right hand goofing up high, but stood from the bench and straddled her hips from behind, settling down again, shoving her butt forward, and adding his left hand back in as he tried to make something sound anything more than accidental from the keys.

“Man-handling me around on my own piano isn’t the way to convince me you’re sorry for being a prick to me this morning, Dean,” she said, looking straight forward, her hands in her lap. He stopped
playing and wrapped his arms around her waist, laying his forehead on her shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, April. You didn’t deserve what I did. I fucked up everything.”

She rolled her eyes, but he couldn’t see it. “You didn’t fuck up everything, you dunce. Don’t be dramatic. I’m pissed at you, though. That pillow was mine. That space is mine. You had no right to take it. If you need to be Sub at the breakfast table, FINE. You’ve got your own Dom. Go warm his cock! Stay off my mate’s. In the morning, at breakfast, that’s MY space.”

“I’m sorry, April. I give. I had no right.” He took a breath and kissed the side of her neck gently. “It wasn’t about that, not really. Well, maybe a little. I should’ve talked to you about it. I should’ve talked to Cas and Michael both. I should’ve told them I wanted a spot on the floor. But that’s not what this morning was about.”

“Dean.” She let a sigh tremble out. “I know you’ve been going through something really scary lately. I don’t know what it is exactly, and Alpha told me to stay out of it. But I want you to know that being mad at you doesn’t mean I stop being here if you need me. We’re a team, right? Both of us?”

He chuckled. “Yeah. Like we were a team when you threw me under the bus on Monday night, pretending you misunderstood my advice about bratting for Cas when you knew perfectly well what I meant; setting it up to let it all come tumbling out right at his feet. That was you staying out of it, wasn’t it? You can’t interfere directly, so you snuck around the back way instead.” His voice was accusing and bitter, but there was a vein of respect underneath. He knew how hard it was to stand up for himself as a Sub sometimes, and that gave him more insight into the world of the Ozzie, who had almost no inherent rights at all. Ozzies almost universally learned to manipulate the people around them - learned quickly or suffered until they figured it out.

She didn’t take the bait. “You stole from me.”

“I needed to provoke a big reaction. Hurting you is the fastest way into Castiel’s rage. I’m sorry. I fucked up.” He brought one arm up across her shoulder to pull her in tighter, hugging her close, trying to ease the sting.

“You said you’re sorry already, Dean. What you haven’t said yet is that you won’t do it again.”

He pressed his face deeper into her shoulder and clung on. He had no answer for that. He wasn’t going to lie to her.

April sat still, weighing him. She could sense their vastly different secondary positions. Wolves could smell and measure the secondary positions of anyone relative to themselves. It was a sliding scale that ran from the maple sweetness of the Deep Omega up to the crisp autumn apple tang of the Deep Alpha.

The tertiary side was much more subtle. Only apparent to those who knew one another intimately, the tertiary wolves had to feel one another out over time, their ears and noses thrust forward in exploration. Dean’s Claim over April allowed them a deeper awareness of what their wolves knew about each other. She leaned her head sideways into his, sensing for only the second time since she’d known him that he really did sit in a more submissive space relative to her.

“What am I going to do with you, Dean?”

He shrugged without letting go. He still had no words.

April put her hands back on the piano, and played him a soothing melody, rocking slowly from side to side. “You’re a brat, my big brother, but I love you anyway, and I forgive you. This time. We’re
going shopping this weekend, though. You’re going to buy me a new knee pillow. Any one I want. And you’re going to make me some home-made ice cream, too. Peach.” She played for another minute or two. “Dean? Is it a deal?”

He nodded into her shoulder and let the music do its thing.

Eventually, she shrugged him loose. “Sit next to me and play with me. Don’t pretend you don’t know how. I’ve seen you on YouTube. You play the keyboards on some of those videos as well as the guitar. Sing something for me, Dean.”

“Ugh! That’s just something I do for the screaming hordes. Don’t make me do it here. Please?” He got up and positioned himself next to her when she scooted right.

She fixed him with a disbelieving expression. “You need to prepare something for Phoenix anyway. Got something in mind?”

Dean didn’t meet her eye. “I don’t do this where Cas might hear me. He doesn’t know about the singing, April. I haven’t shown that to him yet.” He put his hands up and started playing “Faithfully” very quietly in the wrong register. He soon ran out of room on the keyboard and stopped, looking up into the silence from his right.

“What do you mean he doesn’t know? It’s on the internet. It’s public knowledge. How could he not know?” April frowned at him.

Dean shrugged uncomfortably. “He doesn’t go to the Cons. He’s been to one, but he was only there for the last day, and we don’t do any singing on that day. It’s all panels and workshops…and one-on-ones. He doesn’t troll through YouTube either. At least, he’s never mentioned it. I don’t think he knows I sing.”

“Good God, you two are a disaster! We’re fixing this right now. Tonight. We’re eating in the Game room, and I’m putting Michael in charge of the remote. I can’t wait to see his face! He’s gonna shit himself.” April kissed Dean’s nose. “And you. You need to have something ready for him, because he’s going to want you to sing him something, and you’re going to do it!”

“April. This isn’t a good idea. I’m not ready.”

“Not ready for what? To show your fiancé who you are and what you can do?”

“I don’t have anything prepared. I’m gonna make a fool of myself.”

“That didn’t stop you this morning from stealing my spot and breaking the house,” she replied flatly.

“Touché,” he said, a little hurt.

“Come on. Play with me. You want to do Journey? That’ll work.”

Dean pressed his lips together, thinking. Then he cocked his head back and Steve Perried for all he was worth. “You should’ve been go-one!”

“No!” she interrupted. “Not that one. Pick a love song.”

“That is a love song!” he protested. “Pretty fucking appropriate one too!”

“NO!” she drove on. “Explaining to him how you two are still together despite being wrong for each other isn’t the message you’re looking for. Pick something else.”
Dean went serious. He put his hands back up and pulsed a deep throb. April recognized it and nodded, smirking just a little. She added her own hands as he went through the first refrain before putting words to it.

“My lover’s got humor. He’s a giggle at a funeral…”

They played together with no sheet music, picking up in each other’s pauses as if they’d done it all their lives. April supplemented the heavier lines with her own voice as Dean’s forehead wrinkled in determination and passion.

“Take me to church, I’ll worship like a dog at the shrine of your life. I’ll tell you my sins, and you can sharpen your knife! Offer me that deathly stare, well, good God, let me give you my life!”

He had a tear break over the lip of his eyelid as the last “Amen” fell into silence, and he let his head fall to the keyboard with a dissonant crash. April rested a hand on his back.

“It’s going to be okay, Dean. It’s all going to be okay. Maybe sing some Eagles instead of Hozier. Maybe don’t break this one out just yet.”

He huffed without lifting his head. “God, April, I’m such a fuck-up. I’m so sorry.” His voice was muted.

“Knock it off, Winchester. Everybody fucks up. You get punished for it yet?” She scratched at his scalp gently.

“Mm-hm.”

“Then let it go.”

Dean lifted his head and looked at her. “I love you, you know.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry, too for putting you inside a scene you didn’t know about. That wasn’t fair either.”

“Not my first rodeo, really,” she deflected. “It’s not a big deal. I’m way more annoyed about losing that pillow than I am about having to wing it through a scene. I trust Castiel. He takes care of me when I don’t know what to do.”

“Did you know it was a scene?” he asked.

“Yeah. I mean, not at first, but when the Alpha didn’t react much, I figured it out. It was pretty funny to watch Michael flail. You know, if you ask me, he’s the one you should be apologizing to. I get the sense you haven’t done that yet. Pulling a stunt like the one this morning without warning him, and then trying to pull rank as an alpha on the way home without settling up first was a douche move, alpha.”

“What are you talking about? We settled up! You want to see my bruises?”

“Did you explain what it was all about to him?”

“No, I was too busy getting my ass beat!”

“Then you haven’t settled up yet.” She stared at him pointedly, and he sighed. He knew she was right. “Go on. Get out of here. I need to practice this awful piece-of-shit audition piece. Call me for dinner. Go talk to Michael, and then let it go.”
Dean got up and leaned down to kiss her temple. She hummed at him.

“Thanks, kid. I don’t care what Cas says about you, you’re all right.”

“I’m getting the most expensive pillow in the store, Dean!” she shouted out to him, and then the music started back up again. He laughed as he picked his way up to his room to change clothes and look for Michael.

Cas still wasn’t home yet. The house carried a different energy when the Alpha was inside, and it was still in waiting. Dean slipped into a loose pair of sleep pants and tossed on a T-shirt. He poked his head into several likely places, using his bonds to guide him, but they weren’t giving him much of a hint. Michael had obviously muted the bonds. Dean ran back by the kitchen and grabbed two beers before heading out to the back porch. Michael was sitting on the low stone wall, his back to the square wooden pillar, watching the ducks.

Dean held a beer out to him, which Michael accepted with a grunt.

“How deep in the doghouse am I right now?” Dean asked him, settling on one of the iron porch chairs.

“You’ve seen the old ‘Peanuts’ cartoon shows? The ones with Snoopy’s doghouse where he goes deep into the basement looking for something and it’s obvious that the sucker goes way down into the ground and has, like a pool room and shit? Kinda like that. But deeper.”

“Michael, I wasn’t wrong. You need to obey me when we’re outside of our wolves. You kicked up a fuss over nothing today, and you made a fool of yourself.”

“But?” Michael prompted.

“But nothing. You’re not getting out of this. You need to learn to accept that you’re Omega and do what you’re told.”

“How about, ‘But I was a dick to you today, too, and I’m sorry.’”

Dean struggled not to snap back at his mate. “I wasn’t a dick to you in the testing room. If anything, I was too easy on you. Not that it means anything, but I had to listen to Sam give me shit over the pie thing.”

“I really don’t give a fuck what Sam thinks,” Michael shot back.

Dean re-set and tried again. “Babe, I owe you an apology and an explanation about this morning. I scared you, and I ran you through a scene without your consent. That’s a separate thing to what I’m saying about your Omega. I need to know you heard me about that. Say something.”

“And then we’ll get to the part about you being a dick?”

“Michael!”


Dean pressed his lips together then looked away, taking a swig from his bottle. Neither of them spoke for a few minutes until Michael couldn’t stand it any longer.

“I don’t understand what happened this morning. You provoked a stiff punishment because you wanted stripes and not just bruises. So, the whole thing was just a choreographed set-up? Alpha
moved me just before you threw the table. Did he know you were going to do that? Did you two work out the scene ahead of time and just not tell me or April about it? You know I got spanked for doing that to you.”

“It wasn’t choreographed, but he knows me well enough to read what my plan was.”

“Would you have thrown the table if I hadn’t moved?”

“Don’t be stupid. But I would have needed something else. He knew I needed a big show.”

“You suck, Dean. I had no idea what to do. You freaked me the fuck out, and then he just left me there with you on my hands, and I had no idea what to do.” Michael turned his back on Dean, letting his legs dangle.

“You did fine, Michael. You did perfect. You gave me exactly what I needed, and I’m really proud of you for that. When the chips flew, you stepped up.”

“You’re mixing metaphors, moron.”

“Michael, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Keep the damn metaphors straight next time.”

“No. Damnit. Listen to me. I’m sorry. I was bad off, but I wasn’t out of control. I should have talked to you before I did that. I was angry that you turned me away last night, and I let you suffer through a scene without prep to get back at you. That was immature. I’m really sorry.”

“It was a dick thing to do.”

“I know.”

“I’m so fucking tired, Dean. This day. This week. Fuck! Last week too. When does it stop?”

Michael watched a hawk swing in a wide circle right over the oak tree.

“Not for a while probably. Your training may really be hard at first. There are things you don’t have a handle on that most Omegas already just kind of get on instinct before they step foot into a classroom. Our cycles are right around the corner. The wedding plans need to really get going. April’s stressing over her audition. Phoenix-Con is coming up.”

“Holy shit, Dean! Is this supposed to make me feel better?” Michael hiked his legs back over the wall and turned to face his mate.

Dean continued softly. “Plus, we’re waiting to hear from Gabe, the FBI, and Cas’ little ape researcher. There’s a journalist from Rolling Stone coming to the house next week. I have to figure out how to Top the unToppable.”

“Stop. All I care about is you and me. Well, and getting you right with that asshole you’re engaged to.”

Dean took a deep breath and dropped the last shoe. “And I have to talk to you about something else.” Michael’s eyes widened, and he froze with his beer bottle poised at his lips.

“You’re putting us back on birth-control.” Michael said it starkly, with confidence, as if he’d been expecting it all along.

“What? No. No, that plan’s still a go as far as I’m concerned. You know we’re all too fucked in the
head to have pups right now, but what the fuck? Why not share the insanity with a new generation?”

“Don’t play with me, Winchester.”

“Cas should be home soon, Michael. I need to wait for him, and then we’ll finish this up. Let me have a little more time. I need to tell you the rest of what I had planned for Cas, and for you. There’s more than what I told you yesterday, and it involves you directly.” Dean looked down between his knees at the concrete slab at his feet where dark drops of condensation formed perfect circles beneath his drink.

“Oh, Christ. Yeah, fine. Whatever. How much worse can it get?” Michael meant it to come out weary but accepting. The emotions he sensed from Dean, though, overtopped anything he intended. Dean’s face fought to hide his despair, but Michael felt it all anyway. He hadn’t meant to drive Dean that deep into desolation. He stood up slowly and crouched down beside his mate.

“Whatever it is, Babe,” he whispered. “I’m not going anywhere. Alpha’s not going anywhere. We’ll get through it, and we’ll deal with it. Do you love me?”

Dean nodded morosely.

“Are you leaving me?”

Dean frowned and shook his head.

“Then we’ll deal. Let’s get dinner ready. Come on, alpha.”

“I just need to reheat the beans and the meat. It’s all ready. It’s taco Tuesday.” Dean followed Michael to the kitchen.

“It’s not Tuesday, but I’m not saying no to tacos.”

They found Castiel, still dressed from work, looking through the refrigerator. “Go get changed, Cas,” Dean told him. “We’ll take care of everything in here.” Castiel grabbed a kiss as he slipped out, and Dean put Michael to work over the stove.

Dinner went quickly. They ate in the dining room. Dean filled Cas in vaguely on his talk with April. Cas let Dean know that Gabriel had checked in but not given many details other than that they’d successfully disappeared with five rescuees, two of whom were pregnant. April didn’t get her game-room dinner theater, and Dean refused to press it. “Later,” he mouthed at her, and she sulked unhappily. Near the end of the meal, Cas went Alpha.

“Dean, I promised you we would settle up tonight. We need to discuss a few things first, and so I’m making the executive decision not to pursue your punishment just yet. Michael, you’re in this too. It’s my wish that we get everything out in the open at once. You may leave the dishes for the staff this evening.”

Neither of them said anything. Leaving their mess to the staff told them the Alpha intended to take his time. Putting off the punishment told them it was likely to be a doozy once Cas got around to it. Dean was suddenly finished eating. Michael pushed his plate away too. Nobody asked for dessert. Cas finished his Merlot slowly, letting them wait. And twitch. And cast sidelong glances at each other.

At last he stood, taking them both in like wayward lambs. “Come with me.”

There weren’t three more dreaded words in the English language to Dean. He followed the Alpha
and heard Michael do the same. He didn’t look to find out what April decided to do with her time, but he knew she hadn’t crammed in two hours of practice before they ate, so it wasn’t hard to guess. Dean wondered if Cas was aware of just how much she hated that piece of music she played again and again.

Castiel took them upstairs to their own bedroom at the back of the house. He gestured to the wide bed. “Sit.”

They both sat.

“I’ve spoken to you both about your deception over the last few weeks. You’ve both confessed that you lied to me and that you deliberately hid your plan from me. And while you were both in on the same plot, I think it’s clear that you didn’t both have the same goal. Between the three of us, we need to stop. We need to clear the air, and that starts here. Both of you need to speak out about what motivated you to pull this terrible subterfuge. We’re getting everything out on the table right now. Do either of you have any objections?” Cas squared off to speak from a commanding vantage point, but Michael, as usual, wasn’t very cowed.

“Yes, Alpha,” he stated as if in court. “You said the both of us, but Sir, it seems to me that this incident only went as far as it did because you kept what you knew under wraps too. It seems to me that all three of us are guilty of deception. Wouldn’t you agree? Anyway, that’s my objection. I don’t mind talking about it. I’m just glad we can all stop playing this stupid game. You want me to go first?”

Castiel let his irritation go. The pup was right. None of them were clean. “Please,” he prompted.

“Well, you both know it already. All I wanted was a baby. It’s really that simple. I should have said it straighter from the jump. It’s a biological mandate, or whatever they call it when an Omega can’t stop dreaming about pups and it starts to physically hurt when there’s not one. I’m sorry I pretended it was about something else. I really don’t have much of an excuse for that except that I didn’t trust our Pack much at the time, and I wanted to see how far I could play Dean. I’m sorry, alpha. I fucked this up so bad, but please don’t say no just because I’m a selfish prick. I swear I’ll do better. I’m going to really work hard in the training. I’m going to learn everything they teach me. I’ll even work on that damned obedience thing, so I don’t embarrass you in front of your brother. Please don’t take this away from me.”

He stopped into complete silence. Dean looked at him, then he turned to Cas and saw his fiancé’s face mirroring his own thoughts. They didn’t, either one of them, deserve this boy. Michael was sweet and innocent and adorable. He was out of his depth with the likes of the two alphas and their ‘crimes’.

“Babe,” started Dean, turning back to Michael. “I knew from the beginning what you were doing. You don’t owe me an apology. Yeah, you could have been straighter, but it was me pulling your strings anyway. I played you, and fuck, I’m so sorry. It was a shitty thing to do to you when you were so vulnerable. I knew you were burning up inside over getting pregnant. I can feel it even when you’re not thinking about it, and I… I used you to get at Cas. I think, in the grand scheme of things, I owe you so much more than I can ever pay for. If I baked you a pie every day for a year, it wouldn’t begin to make a dent.”

They both went quiet, letting their discussion sink below the surface. Michael let Dean feel his hurt, his sense of betrayal, his hope that they wouldn’t let this bump in the road stop them from driving on down it to the next stop. Dean sighed, and accepted it all as his due. He sent regret and commitment back to Michael. They didn’t need to play these childish games. They could be honest. They could rebuild trust. They could rely on the love that was growing stronger every day, even after they both
showed an ability to hurt the other one enough to bring tears.

Castiel watched the interplay of emotion on their faces silently. They drifted closer together, eventually touching foreheads and clinging to the back of each other’s necks. It was sweet, but Michael was right, Cas had played a role too. He waited for his turn.

At last, there was a break in the tension. Dean’s eyes showed a sudden mirth that Cas didn’t try to translate, and he cleared his throat. Both of them turned in startlement. They had obviously forgotten he was there.

“Whatever you two decide you owe to each other is between you, but I’ll expect you to get it settled within the week. Capiche?” Cas shifted his stance.

“Yes, Alpha,” they chorused, Dean with an ironic eyeroll and Michael in absolute gravity.

“As for me, I’ve already confessed this to Michael. Dean, I first became aware of your stupid plan on the flight from Boston. Please don’t forget that my sense of smell is significantly more adroit than that of most wolves. You were awfully sloppy in your effort to hide your actions.”

“Adroit, Cas? Really? ‘Adept’, you mean. Adroit has to do with acquirable skills, not inborn senses.”

Castiel blinked at him. “It’s a bad idea to wind me up right now, Dean. I’m in no mood to play.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“I can’t explain very clearly to either of you why I let you continue on with your deception. The best I can say is that I felt it was necessary. I’ve been aware for some time now that the real driver here was Dean’s need to test my resolve. Dean, please believe me. My resolve remains just as strong as it’s ever been, and just as strongly as I wanted to put a stop to your play, I wanted…” he sighed again. “Dean, I needed to test you back. I can’t apologize for that. I’m sorry for letting you suffer for so long like I did, but there has to be a point in your self-destruction where you realize that you aren’t the only one in the line of fire, and you’ll put the brakes on. For me. For Michael. Baby, if you can’t, I’m afraid we’re in a dangerous game of chicken, and I can’t marry you until we work that out. This isn’t about punishment tonight. It’s about really getting to the heart of what’s making us both feel the need to play the other.”

Michael shifted uncomfortably. “Should I really be here for this? It’s between you two.” He looked rapidly between them.

“It involves you as well, Omega. I’m comfortable with you hearing what I have to say. Dean?”

Dean’s glazed eyes broke free from the distance that held him captive. “Hmm? Oh, yeah. Sure. He can stay. You think I’ve gone mentally ill? You think I need professional help? More than just counselling, I mean. You think I’m on the verge of a breakdown, and I can’t control myself?”

“You’re unstable. How many drops and panic-attacks have you experienced in the last month?” Cas said it gently. “But it’s not just you, Dean. I’m right there with you. I’ve done a terrible job responding to you. I thought I knew you well enough to take this step, but I’m lost. I have no idea what you need or what you want from me, and that scares the shit out of me.”

Dean perked up a bit. “But that’s the thing, Cas. I’ve got it. I’m ready to explain, and then we can move forward. Punish us both for the lies. I’m in chastity right now for throwing the table, so I guess another DF is out of the question; although Michael conveniently forgot about that this morning when he fucked me into the mattress.” Dean side-eyed his mate. “How come you get to forget, and when I do it, I get punished again?”
“I’m the one who set the punishment, Dean. I didn’t forget, I simply waited to start the timer until I was through with you this morning.” Michael picked a fluff of something out of Dean’s hair.

“Whatever,” Dean shook him off. “Punish us both, and then you and me need to talk. I’m ready. I’m all yours. I’ve got it crystal-clear in my head. We don’t want different things, man, we just think about them differently. We see them from opposite sides, that’s all. You want to be an ape who plays BDSM games in the bedroom, and I want to be so satisfied in the bedroom that I can be stable and solid outside of it. Don’t you see? It’s the same damn thing. Play hard with me in private, and we both get what we want.”

“And what about your attempts to bring your private self, public?” Cas asked, still confused.

“That’s between Michael and me. It doesn’t need to be a part of our relationship. Maybe someday, maybe once we get the kinks worked out. I don’t know. Maybe they’ll just always be separate.” Dean practically vibrated in his enthusiasm.

Castiel frowned in thought. “I’m not trying to be an ape. I just want…”

Michael snorted and Dean coughed simultaneously. Dean picked up where Cas left off. “You want to present a civilized face to the world. You don’t mind talking about genders two and three, but you want to maintain enough control that no one sees them that you don’t want to see them. Call it whatever you want, Cas, but it sounds ape to me.”

Cas cocked his head and chewed on the inside of his cheek. He’d never thought about it like that before. Not exactly.

“Look, I’m down with that. Shit, this is exciting! We’re finally getting somewhere! Hey, you accepted all my insecurities and crap right from day one, and you never tried to change me or anything. Fuck, C.J., I can do the same for you. Easy. I’ll be a rock-solid alpha with you in front of the world. All I ask is that you own my ass in private. Like, completely. That’s all I need. Don’t tell me that doesn’t turn you on. I can see the wheels turning from here.”

“But, Dean. That’s not you. I could never ask you to play that public persona for me. I want you free to be as authentic as you can be.” Cas paced a few steps to either side, and Dean quieted.

“I am, Cas. I am authentic. That loud, confident man? The charismatic one who will say anything at all? That’s me just as much as all the others. I’m not just one man. I’m all of them, and they are all me. Who’s to say which ones are more authentic? As long as I can be what I need to be when I need to be, who’s to say? I promise I’ll ask for help when I need it, and I’m not saying I don’t still have issues I need to face, but you don’t define me, Alpha. I do.”

Castiel bit his bottom lip. Dean sounded so hopeful. He sounded strong and sure. He sounded alpha. He looked up hopefully and met Dean’s green eyes. “How do we stop the testing, Dean? I’m afraid of the next one. I’m afraid you’ll feel a need to turn up the volume.”

Dean wilted, and Cas’ heart went out to him. “One thing at a time, Alpha. I’m going to talk to a therapist. Maybe they can help me. Anyway, I think we bought some time. This one was a doozy, and I’m walking away relatively unscathed. I think you are too. We shouldn’t need to face another one for a good long time. Besides, I have a new Rule Number One, now. As long as I hold onto that, we’ll be fine.”

Cas scoffed. “The rules are the first things you abandon when you play this game, and you know it. If I thought a rule would stop you, I would’ve placed a ‘No Tests’ rule long ago.”
“Don’t give up on me, C.J. Don’t count me out just yet.”

Cas bitch-faced to give Sam a run for his money. “If you haven’t figured it out yet, Dean, it’s going to take more than a test for me to give up on you. I’m never going to do that. Never. If that makes me co-dependent or whatever, then fine. I’m not EVER going to give up on you. The ONLY way you’re ever going to be rid of me is if YOU walk away. The only way.”

“Hold on a minute,” Michael broke in. Dean turned starry eyes from Cas onto his mate, shaking it off as he realized Michael wasn’t as lost in the sap as he was. “Dean said there was more to tell me this evening. He said he wanted to wait for you, but he had something new to say. So far, it’s all been the same old that I already knew.” Cas and Dean both froze, and Michael knew he’d hit on something important. “Guys?”

“It’s been a while coming together. I guess since about a week after we got back from Texas. That’s when I started to feel like I needed to carve a way out. Not from you, Michael. Never from you.” Dean risked a glance up at Cas who met his eyes with security and strength. That was what it meant to have a rock to cling to, he realized, and Dean clung to it for all he was worth. He worried about Michael, tossed about in the tempest with no mooring. Dean was supposed to be that for him, but he’d just pulled it up and left Michael alone.

Michael stood up slowly and turned to face Dean, his face unreadable, the bonds nearly closed entirely. Dean couldn’t tell. “Here’s the thing,” he told Dean. “I would have chosen you. Did you ever consider that? I would have argued with you, and I would have tried to talk you out of leaving your Alpha because I know how much you love him, but I would NEVER have gotten out of that car. Not for anything in the world.”

Michael looked into Dean’s eyes for a minute longer, then he bit his lip just as it began to tremble, and he slipped the bonds closed as he turned and left the room, slamming the door on his way out for the second time that evening. Dean flinched.

Cas pulled him up and held him as he broke down into sobs. “It needed to be done, Dean. You did the only thing you could do, and you did fine. He’ll come around. Give him some time. I know it hurts right now.”

“I’m not upset about me, Cas. It’s Michael. He needs me, and I’ve just hurt him. He’s got to go hear
his assessment and start his training. He’s going into Heat soon. He needs me, and I left him! What if he doesn’t come back in time?”

“I’m sure it won’t take that long, Dean. Michael flares up fast, but he calms down quickly too. Let’s just wait and see. We’ll give him some space and keep an eye on him.”

“Will you see him through his Heat if he doesn’t want me there? Please?”

Castiel smiled into Dean’s wet eyes. “Of course I will, if he wants me to. But I don’t think it’s going to be necessary. I think it’s much more likely that he’ll come up with some elaborate and horrible punishment for you, and then forgive you whole-heartedly. I give him three days, max.”

“It’s not funny. I can’t believe I even thought of doing that to him. Why do I keep fucking up so bad. What’s wrong with me, Cas?”

“You fucked up because you took your eye off the target. Everybody does that sometimes, maybe not always this spectacularly, but there’s nothing wrong with you, Dean. You have to stop seeing every bad decision as evidence that you’re inherently flawed. It’s just not true. What’s Rule Number One?”

“Hold onto you.”

“Good. And you’re doing that. Right now. You did everything asked of you today, and we all go upward from here.”

“Okay, Alpha. If you say so.”

Cas held him and sighed. “Two down, one to go,” he said quietly.

“Hmm?” queried Dean.

“I feel like I’m getting a handle on you and Michael. Now we need to turn our attention to the Ozzie. My mate’s up to something.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s playing me too, Dean. At least I think she is. I haven’t figured it all out yet, but there’s something squirrely going on with her.”

“Cas. Words, man. You have to speak the words. I can’t read your mind.”

Cas ran his thumbs over Dean’s cheeks to clear away the wetness, and then he kissed under each eye, wishing he could prevent Dean from ever having to cry again. “She picked Pembrandt over KU to try out for. She was a shoe-in at Kansas. They have a whole Omega dorm. They’ve got a long history of Omega acceptance and handling Omega-related concerns. But she chose the school she has almost zero chance of getting into.”

“So? She’s a fighter. Maybe she wants to prove those assholes wrong and break some barriers down. Nothing wrong with setting your sights for a challenge.” Dean sniffled as he sat back down on the bed and leaned back on his hands, savoring the heat and the pressure to his swollen backside. Cas resumed pacing.

“That’s true, but she shows no commitment to making it happen. She only practices when I make her do it. She HATES her audition piece. She’s miserable, and it’s not just because auditions are stressful. I don’t think she wants to continue on with classical music at all, but I can’t make her talk
about it. To tell you the truth, I suspect she’s using the audition to pull something over on me. I have an idea what it might be, but I’m just not sure.”

“All three of us at once? Jesus, man, I feel like a complete douche!”

“I’m not innocent here either, Dean. I still haven’t come clean about Oklahoma to anyone but you. I’m not sure if I should. It would lighten my burden, but it might just add to theirs.”

“Do you need help with April? She talks to me sometimes.”

“No, I don’t need a spy. What I need is for her to just come out with it and talk to me. It’s the fact that all of us feel the need to play each other, to hide, and lie, and trick each other over and over again. That’s what makes me think we’re not be ready for the next steps: for marriage, for pups.”

“Oh no you don’t! Don’t start that up again. Promise me right now, Alpha. Say it straight out – when are we getting married?”

“Dean, what if…”

“NO! No what ifs. I’m going to stake a Claim to your virgin ass, and you’re going to take mine in front of everybody, and we’re getting married this September damnit!”

Cas’ eyes crinkled in adoration and amusement. He had no defense against Dean. “Whatever you say, alpha. I’m yours to command.”

“Good. Better. So, here’s what we’re going to do.” Dean sat up straight. “You’re going to come with me to the Game room. April’s got something she wants you to see. I’m going to give Michael all the space he needs, and I’m going to kiss his ass and bake him pie, and he’s going to come around. Eventually. You and me are going to put our heads together and figure out what it’s going to take to muzzle that Hellhound of yours so he’ll let me in. Maybe drugs. Have you considered depressants?”

Cas laughed. “It’s ‘You and I’, not ‘You and me’, and no, we’re not feeding drugs to my wolf.”

“Fine. Whatever. April’s graduating on Thursday and Michael starts right up on Monday. All of us need a good stiff stripping from you for the shit we’ve pulled. Once that’s done, we’ve got this, Cas. We’ve got nowhere to go but up. You with me?”

“I’m with you. I’m always with you. What does April need to show me?” He took Dean’s hand and led him out of the room.

“You ever watch YouTube?” Dean asked him.

“Not if I can help it.”

“Ever seen any footage of me at a Convention? Up on stage?”

“I don’t think so. Well, bits and pieces. I know you’re a show off, but I’ve never stopped to watch any of it.”

Dean took a deep breath. “I want to show you something.” He took Cas to the Game room and was surprised to find April and Michael both. He was seated on the long couch, and April was perched on the arm on her knees facing him. She had her hand on his cheek, and there were tears in his eyes. She looked up angrily at the alphas as they came in.

“Dean!”
“I know. I’m a dick. Tell me something I don’t know. Michael, sugar, you okay?”

Michael glared straight ahead, stifling his tears. “Don’t call me ‘Sugar’ Dean.”

He took a calming breath and left Michael alone. “April, did you still wanna…?”

“Oh! Yes! Yes! Alpha, sit here. Right here! You’re in for a treat. No, Michael, please stay.”

Michael sat back down with a huff. He seemed reticent, but he didn’t fight very hard to leave either. Dean understood. Even in the midst of real heartache such as Michael was feeling, being surrounded by Pack added a deep comfort that couldn’t be disputed or mimicked.

“Here, Michael. You do it. Go to the one you had up yesterday. Where he’s doing ‘The Weight.’ I love that one.” April handed the remote to Michael who took it grudgingly with a barely noticeable glance at Dean. The bonds were still closed, and Dean didn’t poke at them.

Cas frowned at April, but she just smiled and settled on the floor between his knees and faced the screen. Michael flicked the remote with a huffy air, and the screen sparked to life. He flipped expertly through the menus as if he had them all memorized and soon Dean, seated on stage with a guitar and a grin lit up the room. The real Dean kept his eyes on Castiel as his recorded self strummed the first chords.

When he began to sing, Cas’ frown deepened. “I didn’t…”

“Shhh! Just listen,” April admonished, and he stilled at her word. Dean tried not to stare at the man, but he couldn’t help it. Cas’ eyes danced, and he leaned forward, mouthing words that Dean hadn’t even been aware he knew. When the Dean on stage goofed the lyrics and chuckled to himself, Cas sparkled along with him.

Michael sulked on the couch, but his foot kept time, and his eyes never left the face on the screen.

They listened to the end, to the uproar of the crowd, to the kudos from the other musicians on stage, to the self-effacing deflections of the man with the guitar. Michael looked across the couch at Dean solemnly, then he looked down. Cas turned to Dean as well.

“I didn’t know you could sing.”

“I’ve sung for you before, Cas. You just weren’t really paying attention.”

“Well, yes. I knew you could sing, but I didn’t know you could do that.” He put a hand toward the screen. Michael scoffed.

“Everyone knows he can do that, Alpha,” Michael put in. “It’s part of what brings people to the Cons. People love to hear him sing.”

“Michael,” Dean started, but Michael stopped him with a look.

“Not yet, Winchester. I’m still pissed at you.”

April sat up on her knees, ignoring the tension. “Did you pick a song yet, Dean? I’ve got your guitar here.”

“Um. I’m not sure it’s the right time.” Dean couldn’t pull his eyes away from his angry mate. Michael in self-righteous condemnation was the most beautiful version of Michael he’d seen yet.

Michael looked up. “Sing for him, Dean. I can’t believe you haven’t done that yet.”
Castiel startled. “Has he sung for you?” he asked Michael curiously.

Michael blushed and dodged his eyes, nodding. Yeah, they had done that, more than once. Michael asked for Dean’s soothing voice often, and Dean loved to give him that.

Dean looked from Michael to Castiel. Cas’ hopeful look gave way to one of simple curiosity when he saw Dean shift his gaze, and Dean melted. He stood and held his hand out to the Alpha, pulling him to his feet. “Come on Alpha. If we’re doing this, we’re gonna do it right. April, you’re on the piano. Michael, that means you’re coming too. Be pissed at me as long as you want, but you’re Pack, and you’re going to come watch me make a fool of myself.”

April squealed and grabbed the guitar from where it rested in the corner, dancing along behind as Dean led Castiel back down to the music room and settled him on the couch. He pulled a smaller chair into the bend of the piano, oblique to the audience of two. Michael stood behind the couch.

Dean whispered to April, and she giggled. She started the intro without speaking, and went serious.

“Lying beside you, here in the dark, feeling your heart beat with mine…”

They’d never had more than a slender cord of a Claim between them, but in that moment, they were bonded enough. Everything fell away but Castiel. It was a sweet, sappy, classically trite love song, but it wasn’t the words or the chords or the piano that made it so rich. He had NEVER thought he could have this. Not this. To bare himself so completely to Castiel as the fully multidimensional human that he was and have Castiel over-flow with gratitude. That’s what Dean felt from the man: gratitude. Dean worked hard to keep his voice steady, but it wasn’t easy.

He had hidden this side of himself on purpose for years. Michael was right. Everyone else knew. Cas had never known to look for it. Sometimes someone would refer to it tangentially, but it was never direct enough for Cas to really catch on. Dean sang to him with all of the love he had, holding nothing in reserve, and not worried in the slightest that his mate was right there to witness it all. Despite his anger and Dean’s fretting, Michael would always be a lock, and they both knew it. This wasn’t for Michael. This was for Cas.

Dean had always wanted, needed something of himself that stood independent, outside of the deathly glare of the Dom who knew how to take him apart so quickly, so thoroughly. He needed to know that at the end of the day, Castiel didn’t have a hold of everything that made Dean himself. But that was then. That was before the ring, and the professions of love, commitment, adoration. Things had changed. Everything had changed, and Dean felt like a page had finally, finally turned in the book of his life.

The pitch was higher than was perfect for Dean, but he managed it. It was a promise, and he meant it with his whole heart. Finally. Cas cried. Holy fuck. Cas cried. Michael’s eyes moistened too, and Dean cast him a glance just as he got to the words, “I need you to stay.”

Michael steeled his jaw, and he nodded just minutely, and Dean felt the bonds peek open ever so slightly. Just a bit. Michael’s anger was still there, but he wasn’t planning to go anywhere. He just needed some time and a piece of Dean’s ass. Another piece.

Dean looked back to Cas and found him weeping openly. Dean ended the song, “What your love means to me…open arms.”

April played through the end, and Dean dropped the guitar’s body to the floor, supporting the neck
and leaning into it.

“Well?”

“You surprise me every damn day, Dean Winchester,” Castiel said into the quiet, “Every single day.”

Chapter End Notes

I've always thought Hozier's "Take me to Church" fits Destiel. You can play it playful, but in my mind, it's raw. I kinda thought "Whipping Post" that seems to be Jensen's go-to now is a little too on-the-nose, so I didn't want to use that. There's a part of me that struggles just a little at the slight RPF of tying real-life video to my fic, but it's really, really small. If you want, it's there. If not, don't go through YouTube with Caniformes in mind.

Best hopes for the Caribbean and Florida. Fuck Irma.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Dean gets an unpleasant phone call, Sam gets to witness history, and someone buys a ring.

Chapter Notes

Warning for mention of alcohol abuse/using alcohol as a coping mechanism.

Also, there's a naked and miserable minor in the first section.

This is the last one for a while. I'm going back to work finally. That's both a good and bad thing. If I liked my job, it would be entirely good. I'm on night-shift for the next four days.

Thanks again for all the beautifully supportive words. I love you guys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 53 – Friday, June 23, 2017

THEN:

“I almost have enough Dean!” shouted Jo, walking away from the house as the door shut. “One more house.”
“’Bout fuckin’ time, Harvelle. We’ve been out here for hours. I’m exhausted.” Dean pushed his bicycle down the sidewalk to the next house. He’d given up trying to ride it since they were only moving a few feet at a time. Dean had reached his quota long ago, but he had promised to stay with Jo until she got there too. He let her have all the remaining doors on the block even though he knew he could sweet-talk the residents into donating their left kidneys if he flashed that one quirky smile at them. He even offered to do the talking for her, but she turned him down flat.

Dean took hold of her handle-bars as she set off down the next walk, her American Heart Association pin gleaming on her chest. One more house. Please let it be just the one more. Dean’s legs ached. His stomach was beginning to ache, and he shifted his stance, grunting quietly.

Actually, Dean needed to shift more than just his stance. He looked both ways down the street and surreptitiously pulled on the crotch of his jeans, trying to free himself from the binding folds and the zipper. He took a deep breath and wiped the sweat off his brow. His arms felt suddenly weak, and he bent over a little to lean his soft belly against his bike. A pang of pressure passed through his gut and a painful shiver ran the length of his penis. He gasped, dropped Jo’s bike to clatter to the sidewalk, and wrapped his free arm around his abdomen. He bent his knees to push harder into his bike’s crossbar.

“Dean? What’s wrong? Are you all right? You’re really pale.” Jo took hold of his shoulders and pulled him upright to look into his eyes. Back already? Had she already finished speaking to the homeowner? Had he lost track of time? He groaned in pain and doubled over, letting his own bike fall into the neighbor’s lawn. One of his arms clamped tightly across his belly, and the other hand began to pull at his belt buckle. He couldn’t get it off fast enough. “Wha? What are you doing?! Dean! You can’t…what’s wrong? No! Shit, leave your pants on dude! Oh fuck! Seriously?! Right here!!”

Jo dashed back up the sidewalk, calling for help as she ran. Dean had his jeans and his boxers tangled up with his shoes at his ankles. He struggled to free his feet for a moment, then gave up. He still had an arm clutching his abdomen, and a hand squeezing his bare cock which had swollen painfully. Clear viscous fluid dribbled out the end. He couldn’t stop squeezing the base where the pain was most intense. The pressure helped a little, but it still hurt so badly. He sat upright on his bare bottom in the grass, his knees spread wide and his pants still holding his feet close together. He moaned and rocked miserably.

“Oh no! Sweet pup! Come here. Let me carry you. You just hang on, little alpha. I’ll get your mom on the phone.” Dean didn’t know her, but he didn’t care. He let her sweep him up onto his shaky feet, and he let her support one side while Jo took the other. They made a chair for him out of their arms, and they carried him through the front door and into a cool dark bedroom.

He rolled over and grunted loudly. He found that putting pressure on his belly at the edge of the bed, with his feet on the floor helped a little too. It freed both of his hands to circle his dick which was throbbing.

“Hold your feet still, Dean! I need to get your shoes off!” Jo nearly got kicked in the head as he writhed, thrusting awkwardly against the flowered bedspread.

“What did you say your name was, young lady? Are you his sister?”

“Jo Harvelle. I’m his best friend. Here, I’ll dial. He’s Dean. Dean Winchester. His folks are Mary and John. Can you do the talking, though? I don’t know what to say. Is he…presenting?”

“It’s scary to witness, dear, but your friend will be fine. It happens to all of us in one way or another.” She took the phone back from Jo and listened to it ringing. Jo managed to pull Dean’s
shoes off, and she didn’t need to worry about his pants. He kicked violently until he flung them off. The shirt went next. He was naked and rutting against the bed like her father used to do when he fucked her mom…years ago, before he died. Jo backed up a few steps, biting her nails. She looked to the neighbor woman who had taken control so quickly and prayed they were in good hands.

“Culbertson. That’s right. And you’re Mary? Mary, your son Dean is here at my house. He’s fine. I don’t want to alarm you, but he seems to have just begun to present. I believe he’s in Rut.” The woman looked up and smiled at Jo. “1154 Treetop Terrace. He’s just fine. He’s very uncomfortable, but I’ve got him inside. He’s safe. Actually, I’m more concerned about his little friend. She may just pass out from shock.” The woman smiled and ran a soothing hand down Jo’s hair to ease the harsh words.

Dean’s voice crescendoed, and his hips moved furiously in his hands. He shouted and stilled against the side of the bed as he drenched the covers in a foul-smelling sticky mess. He whimpered pitifully without looking around and then collapsed to the floor. Jo was at his side before he settled. She held him tightly in her arms, speaking gentle, calming words. She hoped they were calming. She couldn’t tell if Dean could hear her.

“Can you stand, sweetheart?” the woman asked. “Let’s get you up on the bed. The floor is no place for an alpha.”

“Alpha,” Jo repeated at a murmur, helping him stand and shift up onto the bed, avoiding the wetness over the end. “Dean, you’re alpha.” Her voice sounded odd to her own ears, and the space felt surreal. Dean was alpha.

“Fucking great,” he mumbled, groaning again. “Make it stop. Hurts like fuck!”

“What hurts? Your knot? You have a knot yet? Shit, can I see?” Jo crawled up beside him.

“Fuck off Harvelle! Of course there’s a knot, and no you can’t see. Shit, call my mom, okay? I wanna go home. Oh, Christ! OHHHHH!” He rolled over onto his side, still holding the base of his dick with both hands and squeezing.

“Your mom’s on her way Dean. She’s coming. Just hold on. You’ll be all right! Just, Holy fuck! You’re an alpha! I thought for sure you’d be Omega.”

“Fuck you, Jo,” he squeezed out as he writhed. “You’re the fucking Omega!” His words were callous, but he had begun to sob as he rolled. He started to squeeze rhythmically, helping the throb to find a tempo that it needed to let the pain escape. His cock burned down its entire length, but it was the bulge at the base that ached like someone had pounded it with a rock. He rolled onto his belly and scrubbed back to the end so he could drive his belly into the edge again and find friction against the side of the mattress. Sweat poured off his body.

Jo was torn between giving him the privacy he would have wanted if he was in his right mind and sticking by her friend. If she had been in that much pain, she wouldn’t want to be left alone in a strange house. She opted to stay in the room, but stand gracelessly off to the side, not really looking at him, but incapable of completely looking away. The woman had left her bedroom. Jo hoped she’d gone out to flag down Dean’s mom. Jo watched, transfixed, as Dean shouted again and came once more, adding another dose of semen to the bedspread to drip onto the carpet. He stilled and cried softly before starting the same routine up again. In no time a third dose painted the delicate blue flowers.

Then Mary was there. She scooped Dean up in her arms. “Jo, can you grab his belongings? I need to get him home. We’ll come back for the bikes later.”
“Yes, Ma’am,” Jo answered by rote obeying Mary as if she were Jo’s own mother.

“I’ll get the bikes off the street. Just have your mate come by any time. They’ll be on the side of the house. Do you need help carrying him?”

“Thank you, alpha. I’ve got him. Thank you so much! We’ll give you a call. We’ll pay for the mess of course. I just need to get him home.” Mary collected Jo with a look and disappeared out the front door. Her Nova stood idling on the street beside their abandoned bicycles.

“In you go, Jo. Sit in the front. Do you have everything?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” she repeated.


“It happened so fast,” said Jo in wonder. “One minute he was just Dean, just like always, and the next minute he was alpha.”

Mary put the car in drive, waved to alpha Culbertson, and pulled away. “That’s the way it works. It’s really fast, sweetie, and things are never the same again. Are you okay?”

“I think so,” Jo answered, but she had begun to tremble as the adrenalin worked through every limb. Alpha.

Dean was alpha now, and things would never be the same. Would he still want to be best friends? She kept her face resolutely forward. Mary put a hand over Jo’s, patting it a couple of times. Jo took a shaky breath.

Dean moaned in the backseat.

NOW:

Dean’s cell phone rang as he was fastening a rose corsage to April’s lapel. He finished up quickly with an expert slide of the long pin, adjusted its tilt and then dug his phone out of his pocket. It wasn’t a number he had saved, and he nearly let it go, but swiped Accept just before it rolled over to voicemail. The Ozzie class was assembling in the main auditorium, everyone looking remarkably different in regular dress-clothes than they had in their color-coded tunics for the last twelve weeks.

“Winchester,” Dean answered confidently, sticking a finger up to indicate to April that he didn’t expect to be long.

“Dean. It…it’s me.”

“…Dad?”

“Hey, son. It’s good to hear your voice.” John Winchester sounded clearer in voice than Dean could remember hearing in a long, long time, but he also sounded fatigued.

“Dad, where are you? Are you okay? Hey, tell me where you are, and we’ll come get you.” Dean stepped quickly into a quiet side hall, his finger plugging his opposite ear, so he wouldn’t miss a word.
“None of that. None of that. I’m staying put, but I just wanted to let you know. I, uh, I saw the news about both you boys. Tell Sam too, all right? I wanted to say I’m happy for you. You Mated, I saw the pictures. I’m happy for you. Is…? Is it a good match, Dean? Are you happy?”


John huffed a laugh that might have been a cough. “I remember. I can’t say I understand really, but if he’s happy, then that’s all that matters.”

“Yeah. Yeah, he is. I know. It’s a weird match, but he really seems happy. They seem to balance each other, and she’s drawing his wolf out at last. I know you worried about that. He’s good, Dad. He’s good.”

They fell into old patterns: surface-talk, lots of repetition, simple statements.

“And you? What’s your fella like? Does he treat you right, Dean?”

Dean leaned up against a wall and nodded to one of his trainers as the man dashed past, late for the walk-through. “If I said no, would you come down here and kick his ass?”

There was a silence that hurt Dean’s chest just like a glowing red ember had been crammed up inside him.

“Never mind, Dad. I get it. Hey, uh, yeah. Yes. Michael’s good to me. It was a True-Mate thing, and we match. You don’t need to worry about me either, all right? I’m good. I’m real good.”

“That’s good, son.” John’s voice belied his exhaustion suddenly, and Dean went wary.

“Dad, are you okay? I… Fuck, can’t you just tell me where you are?”

John sighed and avoided the questions. “And the other fella? You can’t be satisfied with just one, huh? Had to go for two?”

Dean laughed quietly. There wasn’t any judgment in John’s tone. Those days were long over.

“Apparently not. I’m selfish that way. You know me, Dad, always wanting more than my share.”

“Dean.”

“I’m just kidding. You know Castiel. You met him a few times, remember?”

“Yes, I know him. I knew his mother when we were just pups. We were kids together, but of course, she didn’t go to the public school like we did, so I didn’t know her well.”

“I never knew that, Dad. What about his father? Did you know him too?” Dean closed his eyes and prayed his dad would just keep talking. Hearing his voice was a soothing balm all its own.

“Nah. He lived in that big manor house behind the gates. Nobody I knew ever saw Zachariah.”

“The house is Castiel’s now, Dad. I live there. It’s really nice. It’s big, but it isn’t cold like you might expect.”

John was quiet for a moment, then added softly, “Well look at you, then – all grown up and rich and powerful now. Turned into quite the alpha, didn’t you? I’m proud of you, son.”

“Dad…please. You never call me unless you need to. What’s going on? This number, can I call you
John sighed. “I’m not keeping this one once the prepay is done. I needed to tell you…fuck. Dean, I want you to know, I’ve been sober about three months now. It hasn’t been easy, but I’m getting through day by day, and I’m taking it in just little pieces. I can’t make you any promises…”

“That’s great, Dad! Shit. That’s terrific. I’m so proud of you…”

“No, you don’t understand. Shhh, Dean, listen to me. It doesn’t really matter much anymore.”

“What?! Of course it…”

“Dean, shut up a minute. I’m trying to say this, and I don’t want to, so just shut up and let me.”

“Dad.”

“My liver’s shot, and there’s nothing they can do. It’s just a matter of time now, and it doesn’t matter a whole lot if I ditch the bottle or not, but I have some business I need to take care of, so I need to stretch out how long I can keep going. The biggest thing I gotta do…I gotta make things right with you and Sam. I fucked up so bad.”

“No, Dad. No, you didn’t. Hey, just tell me where you are, and I’ll come get you. We have the best doctors on the fucking planet. You just need to see the right ones. Shit, Dad, where the fuck are you?!”

“Dean. Alpha. Son, listen to me right now. Shut up and listen.”

“Cas is loaded, Dad. We can afford it. We’ll get you on the waiting list. They do transplants all the time now. You’re not giving up! I won’t let you.”

John chuckled quietly again. It was a sound Dean knew well. It was fond and exasperated at the same time. “They’re not giving a healthy liver to a drunk, Dean. And if they tried, I wouldn’t let them. Son, I’m a sorry excuse for a wolf and a father both, and I gave up years ago. There’s only two things I still have any control over, and that’s whether I ever put a bottle to my lips again and how I choose to meet my end. You’re not taking that away from me, alpha. I don’t care that the law gives you the power. Nothing gives you the right.”

Dean startled as a strong pair of arms turned him and circled his waist from behind, but he leaned back into the body at his back without looking. Michael’s scent was home and strength to him. He could feel concern through the bonds. Funny that he hadn’t felt Michael approach. Funny that all the anger Michael still had roiling around in his gut took an instant backseat. Neither of them were going to mention it. They both just knew. Priorities.

“I need to see you again, Dad. You could…Dad, I want you to come to my wedding. It’s in September. Please say you’ll come. Jesus fuck, just tell me where you are!”

“You’re a bright man, Dean. You’re twice the man I ever was. You’re twice the alpha. I’m not suitable to be seen at a wedding. I would just fuck it up. If you tried to find me, nothing would stop you. That man you’re engaged to, if he doesn’t have mob ties, I’ll eat my shirt. Don’t pretend you can’t dig me up if you put your mind to it. I ain’t exactly in the witness protection program. But Dean, I’m asking you not to. A man’s got a right to die how he sees fit. A man’s got a right to a little bit of dignity at the end. I don’t want you or Sam to see me like this.”

Dean’s anger sparked fast and hot. “Then what the fuck did you call me for, huh? Just to poke at me? Just to torture me? What the fuck, Dad? You’re just going to roll over? You’re alpha! Stand up
and fight, Goddamnit!”

“Dean my wolf’s gone to sleep. Hell, the fucker’s probably dead by now. And I don’t have any alpha juice left to speak of. I pissed it away with all the whiskey that ran through me over the last ten years. I’m not out to torture you.” John sighed. He sounded so tired, and Dean’s face caved into pain. Michael held him tighter. “I need you to know – you and Sam both – I’m…” His voice broke, and he had to start over. “I’m so sorry I fell apart when you needed me. I’m so sorry I wasn’t who you needed me to be. I tried my best, son. That’s all the defense I have. I wasn’t enough. I was never enough for any of you. It was your mom. She was the glue that held me together, and when she left me,” he sighed and regrouped again.

“You know all of this. You know why we fought so hard before she died. You know about the bills and the creditors. You know I tried to be enough, do enough, earn enough, tried to keep her out of having to work. You know I told her all we cared about was having her home, that none of the things she was working for were worth the hours she was gone. You know it was never worth it. You remember, Dean? You remember after she died, and we talked about it? All we ever wanted was her, and I tried to tell her that. I tried to make her understand none of us cared about the stuff or the money. It wasn’t worth it, was it, son? You knew. Sam knew. I could never convince Mary.”

Dean’s fingertips had gone cold, and his voice had gone quiet enough that he couldn’t be sure John would hear it. “It was mom? I mean, you knew I would have been okay without the, you know, the stuff, the presents? You didn’t think it was me being selfish?”

“What? Dean, you were the least selfish pup I ever knew. Your mom insisted on pushing herself. She knew that place was a hazard waiting to explode, but I couldn’t stop her short of tying her up every day. She kept saying, ‘Just one more week. I almost have enough to pay off the Master Card. One more week’. And then she would go out and buy you boys something you didn’t want or need, and one week would turn into another month. She was sick, Dean. You already know that. Shit, I think they even have a name for it nowadays. That’s what I was saying…it wasn’t worth it, you know?”

Dean let his head fall back against Michael’s shoulder. He remembered the words perfectly. They had gone around and around in his head for years. For thirteen years. John had said it just after the funeral. “Was it worth it, son?”

“Was it worth it, son?”

He had thought he understood. A wall of shame and recrimination sent those words through John’s lips. Only. Dean had always believed they were aimed at him. He had always believed his father knew that Dean was to blame because of his willful selfishness. But, it hadn’t been Dean that held John’s blame at all. Had it ever been? Had John been speaking rhetorically back then, looking for an ally, and not throwing culpability over his shoulder at his adolescent son?

It was Mary.

John was so angry with his wife for losing sight of what mattered, for choosing the material over her own mate and her sons and her limited time to hold them tightly as they grew, before they flew away. He tried to reconcile the anger with the grief, but it destroyed him. Rage at the dead has nowhere to go. John shoved it all inside, drowning it with whiskey, and Dean had taken an unwitting collateral hit right between the eyes.

Michael kissed Dean’s neck and moved an arm up to circle his chest, wrapping him thoroughly in an inescapable web of comfort. John didn’t have a Michael. He’d had to face everything alone.
It all hit Dean so abruptly and with such clarity that he gasped.

“Dean? Son, are you all right? I didn’t mean to upset you. I know this sucks. I feel like a Goddamn burden, and I probably shouldn’t have called. I wanted to hear your voice, though. I miss you, and I’m so proud of the man you’ve become, alpha. You take care of your pack, you hear me? You take care of your brother.”

Dean tried to say something, but nothing came out. Michael’s hand left his belly and moved easily through his hair.

“I hope it’s okay, Dean. I gave your number to the hospice nurse. She’s not going to call you unless… Shit, now I sound like some kind of a girl. Look, I don’t own anything. I gave you everything when I gave you the house and the car. There’s not going to be any work you need to do. I don’t have any debts except for a couple of hospital bills, but I’ve arranged payment for most of those. It’s not much. They’re telling me there’s not a lot of time left.”

“Dad! Where the fuck are you!?!?”

“Please honor my wishes, son. You can’t do anything here but watch an old crumpled loser die. You don’t need that. I love you. Tell Sam I love him too. I’m prouder of you two than any father ever was of his pups, and I wish to God I’d been more for you. You deserve better.”

Dean sobbed as he realized his father wasn’t going to tell him any more. “Dad, I love you! You’re not a loser. You’re our dad! You’re the reason I can build a bookcase or a kitchen table with my bare hands. You’re the reason I can keep our old car running no matter what breaks next. Hell, if everything in my life goes sideways, I can still make a living as a mechanic if I need to. Dad, please. You’ve always been enough. You’re enough, and I’m proud of you, too. Kick its ass, Dad, and show everyone how to be alpha, just like you’ve always done. Dad, please!”

“Bye, Dean. I love you, son.”

The click was audible, and a knife in Dean’s gut. He pulled the phone away, saved the number under his father’s name, and hit redial four times in a row, letting it go to voicemail before trying again.

“Dean,” said Michael quietly. He put a hand over the screen. “He’s not going to answer. Let it go for now. Come here.” Michael took the phone and pocketed it. He held Dean and let his mate sob.

Dean pushed away after only a minute or two. “I need to get up onstage. Let me go, Michael.”

“I’ll text Alpha and Jo both. They can do this without you. Come on, we’ll stand in the back. Come with me, Dean.” Michael pulled him along the hallway and ducked through a door that led into the auditorium. It was only about half full. April’s wasn’t a very large class. Michael set Dean against the wall and took a place beside him. The Omega’s face lit up with reflected glow from his screen, and Dean watched both Castiel and Jo take quick peeks at their screens and then look up, searching him out. He wanted to sink through the floor. He was very glad the back of the house was dark.

Sam walked in through a back door near the two mates. He held the door open for his class to file through and take seats in the gallery. Their time would come in a few weeks. They weren’t really expected to attend this one, but Sam hadn’t wanted to miss it, so he brought his class rather than seek out a substitute. Sam noticed Dean and Michael on the wall just as the last of his class dribbled in, and he frowned in confusion, gesturing up to the stage where Dean’s seat still sat unoccupied.

Michael shook his head, and then texted “Later” to Sam. The beta checked his phone, and then he
checked his students. Satisfied, he came to stand beside Dean.

“What’s up?” he asked. “Why aren’t you onstage?”

“Just wait until this is over, Sam. We need to talk.” Dean kept his eyes forward, and he refused to say anything else. Sam bit his lip, looked to Michael who only gave him a worried glance before turning back to the stage, and then settled against the wall too, his shoulder brushing against Dean’s.

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The ceremony was simple and elegant, with a generous helping of basic human dignity that many schools lacked. Too often, as they graduated, Ozzies were showcased to the audience, put through their positions and debased as if the whole point of their training had been merely to turn them into the perfect willing sex toys. Many schools actually paired the Certification ceremony with an auction, offering the trainees whose pack alphas had signed them up for the service for sale to the highest bidder. It was legal, and in many cases, it worked to find suitable mates in a safe and vettable way. But.

Castiel hated the practice. In his vision, the whole point of training was to condition wolves to find their balance-points within the tangled mess of their own designations so that none of the rest of it would ever be necessary – no auctions, no sales, no humiliating demonstrations of public submission. Ozzies in Castiel’s school learned their anatomy. They learned how to recognize their own vulnerabilities and how to ask for the help they needed to navigate through and back out. They learned how to meet the needs of their Tops, but they also learned to speak up for themselves, to defend themselves, to know when obedience was the right response and when it wasn’t, to understand their needs and demand to be taken seriously. He wasn’t about to step from twelve weeks of self-discovery and empowerment straight into forcing them into a mortifying display of sexual titillation.

Everyone was fully clothed, fully Released, balanced and stable. Each class elected a spokesman who would read a prepared statement to the assemblage, and each class offered a gift and thanks to their trainer.

April accepted her certificate, smiled shyly, and then stepped back in line. Her eyes sought Dean at the back, and she waved when she found him. He smiled at her and waved back. Simone spoke for the class nervously. She expressed a simple hope for the future of their species, for the continued improvement of the relations between people of all stripes, and for the chance for her kind to step into the world and be accepted as full people with rights of their own. Jo beamed. Dean made a mental note to highlight this class in Jo’s file as a particular success. She deserved to be applauded and awarded. He didn’t think he had anything left in his budget for bonuses, but he needed to check.

His mind wandered as the ceremony dragged on. Jo needed to say a few words. Castiel needed to speak. Benny would add his two cents in place of Dean. Benny had no problem extemporizing a short speech. Dean thought about his father and of Sam standing next to him. He couldn’t help feeling a connection between Dad’s life and his own. They’d both lost Mary, and they’d both taken the wound so deeply to heart that it had never healed over. Dean had felt solely responsible for so long that he felt dizzy with the enlightenment that his father saw it completely differently. How had he not realized? They talked about it. They fought about it. Dean had begged his father so many
times to fight for the surface and come back up to him, to Sam.

The conversation haunted him. John had given up, turned his alpha off and just crumbled. It had never really struck Dean before just how hopeless John was. He’d always assumed a part of John was still fighting. Sometimes he would flare up and show signs of life, of his old alpha self, but they never lasted long. Over the last ten years, Dean had let more and more time elapse between contacting his father. He told himself it was to allow himself to breathe through the stress, like emerging from a deep lake to suck in a deep lungful of air before plunging back under to try again to haul his father up from the depths.

At first, when John moved out, Dean stayed in near-constant contact, bringing him meals, seeing him bathed and pouring bottles down the sink, offering him want-ads with mechanic jobs highlighted. Slowly, rather than stopping by several times a week, one full week would go by, then a couple of them before Dean could make himself go back. There was blame in both their gazes. There was judgment that neither talked about. They never talked about anything that healed them because healing words had to break through the crusty scars, and neither of them could do that. Dean asked John how he’d been eating, whether he would be willing to see a doctor, whether he needed Dean to cover rent for him again. And then John had moved away. One day, he simply wasn’t there.

Dean tracked him down easily, and he kept tabs for a long time. Sam helped, but usually it was Dean who did the work. They visited a few times, but the smell of decay hurt so bad. John made promises that he never kept, and the weeks turned into months turned into seasons between efforts to get back in touch.

They hadn’t had a phone number or an address for about a year and a half now. Dean had told himself over and over that he was going to get around to searching his dad back up any week now, but he just needed a little more time to dig up the strength. Now it didn’t matter anymore whether he found the strength or not. Time and decay had caught up with all of them.

Castiel thanked the audience for trusting their Ozzies to The Facility and promised them their trust was well placed. A few more words, a swell of piped music, a last round of applause, and the beaming row of Omega-Submissives filed off the stage.

Dean felt numb. He didn’t know what to feel or what to say to Sam. He needed to be there for April. There was a reception, and she deserved to feel how proud her pack was of all the work she’d put in. Nothing about his father’s failing liver was going to change in the next couple of hours, so Dean took a deep breath, squeezed his mate’s hand, and led the way out of the auditorium to the reception hall next door.

“Please tell me I don’t have to do this at the end of my training,” Michael pleaded, watching families take pictures, watching all of them smile and hug and share cups of punch.

“I’m planning to throw a wake for you when you get your certification, Michael. We’ll all dress in black and hang crepe over the windows.” Dean stood beside him with a hand on his arm. The crowd was beginning to disperse, and Dean could start to relax. He let the sparkle fade a little from his smile and his eyes. He’d stood for so many pictures his eyes still registered the glare of the flash from countless cameras. He looked to Castiel across the room, wondering if it was too soon to collect his pack and give them all the somber news. Should he speak to Sam alone first? Probably.
Michael wrapped him up from behind, and Dean let himself sink back into it again. He couldn’t even remember what it had been like before he had this. How had he ever survived? “So, you admit that training me as an Omega is basically going to mark the death of Michael as we know him?” his mate said softly into his ear.

Dean smiled. “Think of it like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. You’ll be reborn as something entirely new and beautiful.”

“Fuck that. I hate butterflies.”

“Liar. Nobody hates butterflies.”

“Have you thought about what Castiel told us yet?” Michael changed the subject.

“Nope.” Dean nodded to an alpha mother as she led her son to the door. There were only about four families left, and none of them seemed to need to speak to Dean again. He and Michael had been swarmed at first, but everyone eventually got their fill, and drifted back toward Jo and Cas.

“He’s not going to wait forever,” Michael reminded him, setting his chin on Dean’s shoulder above his Mating-scar.

“I’m too damaged for another round right now anyway, love. He’ll wait until we’re ready. I’m not ready.” Dean took hold of Michael’s arms and snuggled them closer.

“Doesn’t mean we can’t figure out what to ask for. He said it’s on us to set the punishment. We need to talk about it soon.”

“I can’t think of anything that seems suitable, Michael. I tried to derail our marriage. How do we come up with a punishment for that? How do I begin to pay for that? Why doesn’t he just step up and name it himself?” Dean kept his eyes on his Alpha across the room, appreciating the strength and power that oozed right out of Cas even when he was calm and relaxed. Castiel had an arm around April’s waist, and he chatted so easily with Simone’s father. He made everything he did seem so effortless, it was easy to forget that none of it was. Cas had to fight for it just like everyone else much of the time.

Michael chuckled. “Making you name the punishment is part of the punishment. He said so himself.”

“And what about you? Have you figured out what I owe you? I nearly fucked everything up so badly, it might take us years to get back to normal if I’d gone through with it.”

Michael cinched him in, and then loosened his grip again a little bit. “You weren’t going to go through with it.”

“I was. I can’t tell you how sincere I was. I was going to drag you out of that car kicking and screaming if I had to. You don’t know, Michael. You don’t know how deep this shit goes inside me sometimes. I’m capable of destroying everyone and everything just to make a point if I feel I need to.”

“Mm-hmm. You told me already.”

“Fine. Don’t believe me. You’ll see. I’m good and balanced right now, but I’m still me. It’ll come swinging back around some day. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. Where did Sam sneak off to?”

“Sam went back to his office. You ready to go talk to him? I’ll stay with you.”
Dean caught Castiel’s eye and couldn’t stop the blush from pinking his cheeks when Cas winked at him across the distance. He pulled out of Michael’s embrace and caught the Omega’s hand in his, gesturing to Cas that he was going to sneak out now that almost everyone was gone. Cas nodded, whispered to April, and sent her dashing over for one more hug. Dean kissed her cheek and hugged her tightly.

“Proud of you, kid. You did good,” he told her. Michael got a hug too, and Dean was happy to see him return it fully without seeming put-upon for once.

Sam had his face buried in his computer and his phone to his ear when Dean let them both in. They waited. Sam finished up, ending the call with a quick, “Love you, too. See you tonight. There’s chicken thawed in the fridge.”

Sam looked up at his brother, and he knew immediately that it was something grave.

“Dad called,” Dean told him with no preamble. Sam took a very deep breath and leaned back into his chair.

“Is it bad?” he asked, clearly bracing himself. Dean nodded with his lips pressed together.

“It’s his liver. It’s failing. There’s nothing they can do for him.” Dean paused and let it sink in a little. “He’s dying, Sam.”

There wasn’t a whole lot to say. They talked for a while, and Michael sat beside his mate, letting Dean cut off the circulation in his hand as he explained John’s request not to be located to Sam.

“If he didn’t want us to find him, why call, Dean? Why not just wait and let hospice call us after he’s gone? You think he meant it?” Sam frowned. His eyes seemed much older than they had a few minutes ago.

“You know Dad. He doesn’t usually play mind-games. He said he needed to tell us he’s proud of us. He loves us. I think he wanted to say goodbye, Sam. He sounded so tired. He sounded ready. I don’t know what to tell you. I really don’t think it was a cry for help. I think it was just…just goodbye.”

“And you’re okay with that?” Sam’s wolf sparked up. “You’re just going to let him die alone somewhere? How is that right, Dean? How is that anything he deserves? No one deserves to die alone. I don’t care what he did or what he turned into, he was there for us, even when it was too hard for him to get dressed in the morning. He was there for us as long as we needed him.”

“No. You don’t get to go hunt him down and drag him back into the light just to make yourself feel better about abandoning him. That’s what we did, Sam. Paint it however you want to, we let him go when it got too hard. We abandoned our own dad. Now he’s only asking one thing from us, and that’s to let him die in peace. I’m going to honor that. He doesn’t want to be found, and forcing him to face us now is only going to cause him pain.”

“You don’t mean that. Cas and Bobby have the resources to find him, to help him. Hell, they may
even be able to treat him. What if he’s in more pain than he has to be? What if we can do something
to ease his pain? We have to try. You say we abandoned him? Well, shit, let’s not do it again. Help
me. Michael, help me.”

“Sam,” Dean tried, but he couldn’t put a verb to the sentence. He had no idea what to do.

“First, we find him, then we figure out what he needs. I’m not letting him go like this. I failed him
way worse than you ever did, Dean. I gave up on him first. Maybe it’s guilt that’s making me need to
try, but I don’t care. I have to try. Please help me.”

Michael’s voice wasn’t loud, but it cut to the core of the matter. “There’s nothing you can do, Sam.
Are you prepared to find him just to watch him die?”

“Let’s find him first, and then we’ll see. One thing at a time. He may have said goodbye to Dean, but
he didn’t say jack to me, and that means I’m under no obligation to stay away. I’m going to talk to
Bobby.”

“No! We talk to Cas. We talk to Cas and April. If I’m hearing you right, you’re going to want to
bring him here. Keep Bobby out of this until Castiel knows what’s what.” Dean’s alpha fixed a
strong green-eyed glare on his brother.

Sam put his hands up. “Fine. We do it your way, as long as we do it. That man gave the last of
everything he had for us, Dean. We’re not leaving him alone now.”

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“Where are you getting a nineteen from? The kid’s no higher than a seventeen! He rolled for Novak.
He rolled for Winchester. If I’m reading this right, he’s been disciplined by a beta and had no issue
with that. I think you’re letting his unusual gender mix sway you. His records from San Antonio
don’t support anything exceptional. Forget that he’s Omega and just look at it objectively.”

Jonathon defended himself. “We can’t discount his being Omega, Carol. It’s all relevant. We can use
all of these other records as evidence, but we have to set the ratings on what he did in the testing
room. You can’t pretend that wasn’t exceptional. Omega or not, I’ve never seen anything like it. He
self-Released. He placed a Claim without touching the boy. He called out two submergent kinks
without knowing either of them beforehand, and he handled both of the Subs perfectly from pure
instinct. Shit, he found a Daddy-kink in a straight boy! The kid probably didn’t even know he had
that himself!”

“Yes, he did,” interjected Ellen from the side of the table. “It’s really a Mommy-kink that Michael
bent to fit himself. We knew Adam’s penchant. Of course, Michael didn’t before he went in there.
It’s true that he unearthed it himself…in like three seconds.”

Carol pursed her lips. “He played games with the test algorithms. We can’t rate him higher just
because he knows what we’re looking for. If we reward that, every half-baked Dom for the next
twenty years is going to start trying more and more outlandish tricks to try to sway the readings. Hell,
they allowed him to bind the Ozzie! How many times has someone tried that? It shouldn’t have been
allowed! And don’t get me started on how you people let him call in a beta. He probably had
coaching from his mate before he went in there. Winchester might have even coached Adam into
appearing to body-mirror. I’m not convinced any of this is real.”
Ellen, Benny, and Bobby all scoffed and protested at once. Bobby’s voice won out.

“I don’t know who you think we are, who Dean is, but we’ve never given the Foundation any reason to question our tests before, and we never will. We probably take the application of this test more seriously than anyone else on the fucking planet. Go watch the tape again, lady. There’s no faking the mirroring. Adam wasn’t even looking at him. You’ve got it all wrong! We have nothing to hide. You wanna talk to Adam? You wanna talk to Dean?”

“I’m not accusing anybody…”

“Yes, you sure as hell are. Your words…!”

“It’s a huge step to rate a nineteen, alpha Singer, and we have to be absolutely sure.” Carol insisted.

“I would almost say twenty,” Jonathon put in.

“Well, great! Bringing you two in was supposed to bring clarity, not make the divide even wider,” mourned Ellen. “Now what do we do?”

“I’d like to meet this Omega,” Carol piped up.

“Absolutely not!” said Benny. “You rate the testee based on the data that’s collected during the test, just like everyone else. We’ve all seen the data. We’ve watched the tapes over and over. We know the computer’s result, and we know why that’s been called into question. I say we get the committee members on a conference call and end this. We’ll take a vote, and we’ll accept the results. Arguing about it isn’t getting us anywhere.”

“Alpha Novak cannot be a part of the vote,” Carol clarified. “He’s too close. And Winchester as well, of course.”

“Obviously,” said Bobby. “How many votes do we need?”

“We need a minimum of thirteen,” said Jonathon. “We’ve got six here. Is anyone else onsite qualified?”

Pam spoke up after sitting quietly for some time, taking it in. “Meg Masters is qualified. That gives us seven. There are six committee members. I’ll start getting them on the line.”

“I’ll get Meg,” said Ellen. They both stood up.

“Let’s take ten. Everyone get a break and meet back here,” announced Bobby, stretching.

Bobby and Benny conferred quietly in the corner of the conference room, and then Benny left to find Cas, Dean, and Sam. They might not be allowed to talk or vote, but there was no rule that prevented them being present for the momentous vote. Bobby stepped into the hall too, standing with his back to the wall, listening to the heated argument one niche down.

“But it’s NOT objective, Jonathon. There’s prestige to having a high-rated Dom affiliated with any Facility, and now they’ll have two. Don’t tell me they’re going into this from a purely scientific frame of mind. Novak wants a nineteen. I’m almost convinced he rigged it. All I’m asking for is to get an objective vote. I want two more unbiased ballots just to keep the ACRI from having a majority. If they still call it nineteen, then so be it. At least it’s defensible that way.”

Jonathon sighed and nodded. “Yeah, I know. If they have seven out of thirteen of the votes, the rating is always going to be suspect. Let me call in another couple of qualified members. Did you see
which way Pam went?” He started off down the hall the way she pointed, but he turned back to her.
“I think you’re wrong about Alpha Novak, though. I worked with him a couple of times, and I think he’s genuine. Don’t let your history with him impede your judgment, Carol. I’m just saying.”

Cas looked up when Benny stuck his head in the office door. Cas had April sitting sideways on his lap, but he was simply working at his computer and not really giving her more than his body heat.

“The committee’s getting together right now, Alpha. They’re going to vote. You want to come watch?”

Cas smiled a dark smile. “Absolutely. Is Carol here?” He set April on her feet and stood.

Benny nodded. “Yep. And you called it. She’s the anchor to all this. She wants to call him a seventeen.” Benny reached out and took April by the hand, leading her out of the office, and Castiel followed.

Cas snickered. “She’s never lived down rating me, Benny. She still takes shit over it to this day. It’s got to kill her to be called in to do it again.”

“It’s her own fault,” claimed Benny as he led them to Sam’s office. “She could’ve just done her job instead of playing politics over your numbers. She knew the chart needed an adjustment, and she was a bitch just to be a bitch. I think the younger one is onto her, though. I like that guy.”

“Jonathon?”

Benny nodded, knocking on Sam’s door. “Was he there when you tested?” Dean opened the door, surprising Benny.

“He was too inexperienced to vote, but he was there. Yes, I like him too. Hello, Dean. Sam. Michael.” Castiel stepped in and brought the other two with him. “I’m glad you’re all here. The committee is ready to vote on Michael’s Keller rating. I’d like to stand witness. Dean and Sam, you may come as well if you like. April, I’d like you to stay with Michael.”

They all looked back and forth between themselves for a moment, startled.

Sam stopped on Dean’s face. “Dean? Do you want to? They’re not going to let you say anything.”

Dean frowned. “I’ll stay with Michael and April. I’d need a gag to keep my mouth shut in that room. Sam, you go. Tell me what they say and who needs a kick to the teeth afterward.”

Sam smiled and gripped Dean’s arm in solidarity. Then he did the same to Michael who rolled his eyes.

Three men vacated the office like they were evacuating for a fire. Michael could almost see papers go sailing in their wake.

“Wow.” He was unimpressed. “I guess this really means something. Whatever. So, what are we going to do?” He turned back to Dean and April. Dean narrowed his eyes.

“We are getting out of here. I need a breather, and I owe April a new pillow. Let’s go.”

“YES!” the Ozzie enthused. “AND…We need birthday presents.”
“Speak for yourself, Kitten. I’ve already bought mine. It’s on order.” Michael bragged as he opened the office door.

“HEY! You can’t call me that. Only Alpha calls me that. Dean, tell him.”

Dean felt like a baby-sitter. He shook his head at their antics, but the kid was right. “Pick another nickname, Michael. Don’t call her Kitten. Cas will remove your nuts with a scalpel if he hears that. Plus, it’s rude.”

“What are you getting Castiel for his birthday, Dean?” Michael asked him, skipping right over the admonishment. Dean followed them into the hall and led the way out the turnstile. He squinted in the sunshine.

“I had an idea, but it’s probably stupid. I think I need to come up with something else.” Dean slid into the car and wasted no time getting it started so the air would kick in that much faster. He felt the exasperation from his mate. It was an eyeroll from inside their heads. He could practically hear Michael say his name with an impatient air. He looked across the bench.

“I want to get him a matching ring. He gave one to me. I want him to have one too. It’s stupid, right? It’s not a birthday present. I need to think of something else.”

Michael seemed thoughtful. “It’s a little unusual to give an engagement ring for someone’s birthday, but you two don’t much fit the mold anyway.”

“IT’S PERFECT!” said April, leaning over the seat. “I know where he got yours. I’ll take you there.”

Dean grinned back at her. “You two are the best, you know that?” He put the car in drive and pulled onto the street. “Actually, there’s another part of it. I talked to Chuck Shurley a couple of days ago.”

“Shurley, like the East Wing of The Facility? That Shurley?” Michael asked.

“He’s a big donor. He’s rich as hell, and he’s been very generous over the years, but he’s my publisher too. He owns the publishing house that prints my books. They do most of the scientific and anthropologic publishing for Lupins in the U.S. It may not sound sexy, but that shit sells like hotcakes.”

“So, you talked to your publisher…” April prompted. “Oh, get on the freeway. We’re going into the city.” Dean put his blinker on and watched for a chance to merge.

“Yeah. He’s been hounding me for another book for a year now. I was time-lined to have it started by now, but I got a little distracted.” Dean let the Omegas both tease him about distractions. “Yeah, so anyway. I was planning to do a, more like a college text-book on Omega development. I have enough material. I just need to get it organized. I need to get it laid out. Chuck says there’s more and more of a market for colleges and universities to start offering a wider coarse-load on Lupin studies.”

“How does this tie in to the Alpha’s birthday?” April asked him.

“It’s kind of an inside thing. We’ve talked about it a lot in the past.” Dean checked his rear-view mirror and his side mirror and revved Baby’s engine to pass the slower traffic. “I can’t write from a Sub perspective. I can only write while I’m stable and alpha. If I show him I’m ready to start working on my next project, it’ll show him I’m not losing it. It’ll help him understand I’m okay, especially if I can keep it up. I’m actually planning to use it as a measuring tool. Am I making any sense?”
“I think so,” said Michael seriously.

“No, not a bit,” answered April. “Why would Castiel think you were close to losing it? Is that what he’s been worried about, Dean?”

“Oh, uh. I guess I owe you an explanation,” Dean began a little sheepishly.

“I don’t like it, Winchester,” Michael spoke at the same time. “You have too much on your plate already. You only just cut back your work hours. Now you’re planning to fill them right back in with this? You promised you’d be home more. What about our plan? What about your father?”

Dean wrinkled his face in thought. “I can do this from home, Babe. All my notes are digital. We’ve got eight more months before you need me there for diaper changes and sleepless nights. I can have this thing in the can by then if I try.”

April squeaked, putting her hand over her mouth. “Does that mean you’ve got the green light now?” She asked hopefully, catching Dean’s eye in the mirror.

He made a rueful face. “It looks like it. Your boss isn’t very happy about it though. We owe him our asses over how it all went down.”

“You tricked him, right?”

“Uh, yeah. We were assholes.”

She bit her lip and glanced down. Michael looked back at her over the back of the bench significantly, but she didn’t meet his eye.

“So anyway, as I was saying, Dean,” Michael picked back up. “I mean, it’s your decision, but how do you have the time to start a new project?”

“I can do this, man. It’s a matter of time management and organization. I know what I’m doing. This one’s gonna be a piece of cake. It doesn’t have to appeal to the masses, so I don’t have to try to be charming or entertaining. I can just pull my nerd hat on and write it straight.”

Michael gave it a minute of thought, but then he nodded. He used the bonds to express his reticence, but it was clear he wasn’t going to try to stop Dean from trying.

“What was that about your father?” April asked curiously.

Michael grimaced, but Dean didn’t mind her knowing. April pointed him off the freeway and began to direct him to the jeweler who sold Castiel Dean’s ring. “My dad’s not well, April. He’s in really bad shape. I don’t know exactly where he is right now, and he doesn’t want to be found. Sam thinks we should get out there and find him.”

“And what do you think?” she asked softly.

“I think he wants to be left alone. There’s no convincing Sam of that, though, and I have to say, I don’t want to imagine that I’m not ever going to see him again.” Dean parked where she sent him. “He’s my dad.”
Jonathon took a final look around the table and nodded to those who could see him. “I think we’re ready then. Thanks to everyone who was able to join us remotely on such short notice. No matter how we decide today, I believe this will prove to be a momentous occasion. This young man has put his faith in the Keller system, and we intend to do right by him. Please vote your conscience, and be swayed by no other voice or opinion that runs counter to your own. We are all professionals here. We bring many, many years of experience, different experiences, different viewpoints, and together, we will make a decision that I trust will stand the test of scrutiny for many years to come.”

It was pompous, but it fit the occasion. Castiel stood against the wall, still and silent, watchful. Sam shifted every now and then, but he made no move to sit or to speak. The arguments had finally wrapped up. All fifteen qualified voters had indicated they were ready to cast a vote. It had proven remarkably easy to find the needed members who had already familiarized themselves with the videos and the data. Michael was famous. Jonathon let the room fall to stillness before he began speaking again.

“Here’s how the voting will work. I will call on each of you, one at a time. This is not a secret ballot, so as I call on you, I need you to speak out clearly. State the rating number you deem appropriate - whole numbers only please. For documentation purposes, I need you also to text that number to my cell phone. Please be careful to text and say the same number. At the conclusion of the voting, the highest and the lowest ratings will both be discarded and the remaining thirteen votes will be averaged. Again, please vote your conscience. We’ll begin with the Foundation members who are connected with us remotely. Once your vote has been registered and confirmed, you may hang up if you have other responsibilities. I will be announcing the result at the end, though, so stay connected if you like.”

Jonathon began the devastatingly slow process of asking each individual one-by-one to speak out. Pam wrote the numbers on the whiteboard as they were spoken, and Jonathon waited to receive each text, to verify it verbally, to return a confirmation text, and to ask for corrections before he moved on to the next member. He had clearly done this many times before. Sam couldn’t imagine why it would be necessary under normal conditions. He began to realize how much of an expert Ellen was at her job. He hadn’t ever seen a process like this before for anyone.

Cas leaned over and whispered quietly to Sam, “Expect Carol to under-vote by a large degree. She’ll throw her vote to bring the average down.”

Sam frowned. This process wasn’t supposed to be political. These were supposed to be scientists. “Should we stack it high, then?” he whispered back.

Cas shook his head. “It’s not a game. I believe she’s the only one who cares enough to try to pull it. Most of these people will just go with what their experience tells them. They’ve all seen enough eighteens to know what a higher rating would look like.”

The voting was slow, but eventually, Jonathon concluded with the eight linked in on the phone. The count stood at four votes for eighteen and three votes for nineteen, and a single vote for seventeen. Cas looked serene, and Sam wondered suddenly why it felt so important to him that Michael be validated as exceptional. What difference did it make? Except that it did. Michael WAS exceptional, and an eighteen just didn’t feel right.

“Thank you, remote members, we will now turn to those sitting here with us in Lawrence. We’ll go around the table beginning with Dr. Barnes. Pamela?”

“Nineteen.”
“And send that to me by text please.”

“All right, verifying nineteen shows on my screen. Thank you, Pamela. Dr. Singer?”

There wasn’t much to this part. Everyone who had met Michael rated him as a nineteen. It was cut and dried. Simple. Jonathon reached Carol with three votes remaining: hers, his own, and Ellen’s.

“Sixteen,” she said clearly, punching into her phone at the same time. Sam expected a stir or a response of some kind. Sixteen was a blatant attempt to skew the numbers. If Jonathon joined her in low-balling, Michael’s rating would stick at eighteen. It shouldn’t matter. Certainly, Michael wouldn’t care. Dean would grumble, but then he would realize that a more typical rating for his mate would keep the research requests down, and he would accept it too. No one responded at all. Sam suspected that, like Cas said, Carol’s vote had been predictable to the others. Theirs was a small enough industry that everyone of note knew one another.

Jonathon asked for Ellen’s vote, but she demanded to be last. It was her facility; it was her right, and Jonathon nodded politely.

“All right. I register a rating vote of twenty. I am texting that to myself, and I confirm that it shows on my screen as twenty. Voted and recorded as such.” Now that got a response. Through the phone line and around the room, there was a murmur of shuffling. Several people whispered. Benny sighed loudly. Jonathon had not merely struck Carol’s vote off the register and his own as well, he had highlighted the extremity of her low-ball attempt in a way that would be obvious to everyone. Neither Carol’s nor Jonathon’s would count. Sam looked to Carol, concluding that she had expected her colleague to play along. She was furious. Jonathon showed no emotion whatsoever, nor any sign that he knew he’d just played a killing hand.

“Dr. Harvelle? You have the deciding vote, I believe. We stand at the moment poised at an average of 18.4. I believe it is appropriate that you, in essence, will be making the final call on this young Omega. You have our full confidence doctor. Your history, and your experience speak for themselves. There is no one more qualified. You’ve heard all of the arguments and all of the previous votes. How do you cast your ballot?”

Ellen licked her lips, but she didn’t look nervous. When she spoke, her voice was clear. “Michael Winchester tests as a tertiary positive nineteen.”

“I protest!” Carol spoke into the din that followed the pronouncement. “They were all intimidated by the presence of Doctor Novak. All five of his Facility employees voted exactly the same way. That shows a clear influence!”

Jonathon sighed. “You can’t protest his presence AFTER the vote, Carol. If you had wanted to close the proceedings, you should have said so before we started voting.” And then, under his breath, Sam heard, “You’re such a bitch.”

Sam leaned in to Cas’ space. “Will there be a protest filed? Ellen was clear that she wanted it done this way so we could announce it to the world with confidence. Is this going to muddy it up again?”

“No, Sam. He’s a nineteen. The rest of this was just power play and politics. We’re really just children on the playground when you cut through to our base personalities.” Cas pushed off the wall, and exited the room without speaking to anyone else. Sam followed him.

“But can’t those playground tactics lead that witch to file a complaint?”

“I suppose so, but I get the sense Jonathon Miles has her by the scruff now. That was pretty damned
blatant. He’ll be able to show what an outlier her vote was. Even the seventeen was clearly wrong. Disagreements like this almost never have a range of three rating numbers, and they NEVER go to four. If Jonathon wanted to, he could have her fired.” Cas descended the stairs quickly to get back to his office. He wanted to be the first to call Dean.

“But Jonathon did it too. He voted twenty.”

“Sam, he’s got a responsibility to keep the voting on-track, fair, and truthful. He has leeway to deliberately offset a transparently off-spec vote. His is defensible. Hers isn’t.”

Castiel hit speed-dial on his phone as he opened his office door. “Where are you? Can you swing by my office?” he asked into the phone. “Oh. Okay. Well, are you sitting down?” He chuckled at whatever Dean had to say to that.

“Yep. Just like you predicted. Your ass is toast, my love. It’s official, and it’s real.” Cas laughed and shook his head. “No, I don’t know. I’ll ask Charlie. Yes, you can tell him if you want.”

His face sobered. “It’ll be fine, Dean. We’ll take care of him. He’s the same man he’s always been. Knowing his strength doesn’t change that.” Sam watched the Alpha calm his fiancé. He did it with just a few well-chosen words and a calm demeanor. “No, that’s the Observer Effect. It’s not going to change anything. Look it up. You have a phone, Dean, look it up yourself. Yes, I’m sure. Give him a hug for me. You have April, right? Wait, where did you say you went?” He laughed a little once again. “All right. Make it a good one. I don’t want her knees damaged. I love you.”

Cas hung up and looked at Sam. “Call Charlie.”

Charlie bustled in, her hair flying out of its clip. “I heard we have an answer. Can you tell me, Alpha?”

“Do you have the list from the betting pool?” Castiel asked her.

“Betting pool? What betting pool? We don’t place bets on our testees, Alpha. That would be unethical.” Her eyes went wide and she shot an accusing look at Sam. Sam laughed at her, and Castiel joined him.

“Yes, it would,” stated the Alpha. “Hand it over, beta.”

“Are you confiscating it, Sir? I have it saved on my phone. I guess you can just watch me delete it.” She looked repentant and disappointed.

“Charlie, give me the list. I need to see who won, so we can announce it. What’s the payout?” Cas held his hand out.

Charlie jumped to get her phone out, scrolled through it quickly, and handed it to him. “Um, three-grand, Sir. What’s the rating?”

Cas took the phone and looked through the list. He looked up at Sam. “Okay, wow. Three-grand. Looks like we have a winner. A near-perfect guess of negative thirteen and positive eighteen. The winner is Jessica Winchester.”

Chapter End Notes
Please, please, those of you on the east coast of the U.S. Be safe. Know where your loved ones are. Protect yourselves first, your neighbors second, your stuff last. Help where you can, but don't put yourselves in danger to do it.

Hang tight. You're not alone.
“You can’t keep the money, Jess,” Sam informed her sadly at dinner that night after roundly congratulating his mate on her unexpected victory. “You’re a Winchester. It looks bad for one of us to walk away with three grand. It looks like we’re fleecing.” Jess conceded with a pout. Appearances defined reality sometimes, and she wasn’t naïve.

“Or, how about if we donate it back into the employee assistance fund?” she suggested. “Your facility has one of those, right? I mean, it’s either that or we give it all back.” She passed the bowl of mashed potatoes on to Michael who sat beside her.

“Donate it if you like, Jess,” responded Cas. “Personally, I don’t care if you keep it. You won fair and square, and I don’t much care how it looks. You weren’t here long enough before you placed your guess to have had any inside information on the matter. It wasn’t a sanctioned event anyway. This is why we don’t officially allow betting on the outcome of client’s designations. No matter who wins, there will always be an unfairness factor of some kind to contend with. But, of course, you need to listen to your mate. It’s his call. If he says you can’t keep it, then that’s the final word.”

Sam nodded with satisfaction. “I’m fine with making a donation out of it, but we’ll need to make it public. It needs to be visible.”

“You’re making a thing out of something that isn’t a thing, Sammy,” Dean protested. “Let her keep
the money. She won it outright.”

“Mind your own business, Dean,” Sam shot back testily. If he had to listen to that from his brother, he wasn’t going to be patient with turnabout where Michael was concerned.

Castiel cleared his throat and then changed the subject.

“Dean, I believe I can locate your father without difficulty, but I need to be sure that’s what you both want. Have you discussed it? Is that what we’re doing?” Castiel had set down his knife and fork.

Dean glanced at Sam, who looked away. “Can we, uh, can we find where he is, and check up on him without letting him know about it at first? He was very clear that he didn’t want to be hunted down, but I would…WE would feel a lot better if we knew more about his condition.”

Jess said, “You don’t have any rights, Dean, to his personal or medical information, unless he officially stepped down as alpha. Has he done that?”

“Um.”

“He has. Of course, he has,” Sam announced confidently. “Dean, he gave you the house. You were seventeen. He turned over all his property to you and left me in your custody. He hasn’t been Alpha since we were teenagers.”

Dean shifted uncomfortably and glanced at Cas and then Jess. “He never actually said the words or signed anything legally, but Sam’s right. He made it pretty clear when he moved out that he was done, that he was handing it all to me. He even said so on the phone today. He said the law gives me the power to take over his care, but that nothing gives me the right.”

“Alpha?” Jess looked to Cas. “It’s your decision whether to pursue it or not. Legally, it’s too vague to call without a signed abdication. There’s no property in dispute, but you may not be able to get the information you want without legal footing. It would be a shame to go to all the trouble to locate him just to be turned away at the door.”

“The real question is,” interjected Michael, looking at Dean, “do you honor your alpha’s wishes and leave him alone, or do you charge in, guns blazing and rip him out of there against his will?”

“Wow, Michael, tell us how you really feel,” snarked Sam testily. He looked at his big brother. “No one’s got a say in this but you and me, Dean.”

“Cas does,” Dean shot back, “if we plan to use his Mob connections to find the old man.”

“For the last time, I don’t have Mob connections!”

“Just tell me,” sighed Sam. “What do you want to do, Dean? Me, I wanna find him before it’s too late. He might get angry, but he might not. I’m willing to piss him off a little just to get a chance to talk to him again. I need to see him. I need to tell him I’m sorry. Jesus, all we ever did was shout at each other. I can’t leave it like that. Can you?”

Dean scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck. He took a moment, ignoring all the eyes on him. “I want to know he’s in good hands. I just need to know he’s getting everything he needs. If we find where he’s holed up, and the staff or whoever won’t talk to us, then maybe we contact him directly. But I want to try this way first. I just want to check up on him. See if he needs anything he can’t afford. Maybe green light the good meds. I don’t want him in any pain if we can stop it.”

Sam’s face was flat. “You’re just planning to hand over more money and leave him in whatever hole
he’s dug himself into?”

“You didn’t hear him, Sam. He doesn’t…”

“NO, I didn’t hear him! Because he didn’t fucking call ME, did he? You got your goodbye, Dean. Whatever happens next, you got to talk to him and hear his voice. He told you all the shit he never said to me. Don’t look at me like that! I know I let him down, all right? I fucked up every conversation I ever had with the man, and yeah, I feel like baked shit about it, and I wanna make it right before it’s too late. Fucking sue me!” Sam tossed his napkin on the table and pushed his chair back. Jess sighed and followed him out the kitchen doorway.

“I guess we’re doing this,” sighed Dean.

Cas nodded sadly. “I need Bobby’s help. Do you mind?”

“Nah. Whatever it takes. I get the sense we don’t have all the time in the world.” Dean stacked his plate on top of Michael’s, tousled his mate’s hair, and excused himself from the table.

Castiel caught up with him halfway up the stairs. “I’ll speak with Bobby before tomorrow’s Owner’s meeting. Go ahead and pull together any information you have about your dad. He’s going to need something to go on.” Cas followed Dean into the Master bedroom and stood regarding the alpha when Dean threw himself unceremoniously onto the bed on his belly. “Dean, are you certain about this?”

Dean rolled up onto a hip and looked back at him. “Nope. I think Sam’s feeling guilty. I think he’s being selfish, but I would do the same damn thing in his place. I can’t tell him no on this, man. If we don’t help him, he’ll just do it himself, and probably make a clusterfuck of the whole thing.”

Cas nodded solemnly. He sat on the end of the bed beside Dean’s feet. “How did Michael take the news? He hasn’t said anything this evening.”

Dean chuckled and rubbed his face. “He didn’t care; didn’t even blink. I think he knows who he is, at least on that side of himself. I think it’s no surprise to Michael at all. He thinks the whole testing process is pointless.”

Cas huffed a laugh, running a firm, massaging hand over Dean’s foot. “But he’s somewhat less sanguine about his secondary designation.”

“He’s scared shitless, C.J. He thinks Hannah’s going to try to turn him into a Sub. Things are about to get crazy around here, and he’s not going to like any of it. We don’t have a choice though. He can’t live in his nineteen all the time. I’m going to have to set some strict boundaries and hold him to them.”

Castiel agreed. “It’s for his own good, Dean, his and yours both. I know you feel sympathetic toward him, but you can’t show him any weakness. There’s nothing wrong with being Omega. You and he both have so much distaste about Omegas that you tend toward avoidance too much. Dean, he’s got to reconcile himself, and your attitude about it isn’t helping.”

Dean stayed resting on his hip, but he curled around Cas a little, bringing his head closer. “Don’t give me that. No one wants to be Omega. Tell me you would be fine carrying the wolf you have inside you and an Omega’s channel. Tell me there’s not an inherent advantage of being alpha over being Omega. It’s easy to sit on the top of the pile and postulate that everyone else has it just as good as you do. It’s bullshit, Cas. Being Omega bites ass, especially for a Dominant.”

Castiel sighed. He wanted to argue. Gender wasn’t good or bad. It just was. Once he’d hammered
the whole American culture and community into accepting all genders as equally valid, scrubbed out the inequity, found ways to provide access to everyone… No, who was he kidding? No matter how many roadblocks they shoved out of the way, being Omega was never going to be the same as being alpha. It was an inherent weakness, and it always would be.

“We can’t change him, Dean. Wanting things to be different doesn’t make them different. What we CAN do is to give him everything he needs to fulfill himself in a way that stays true to who he is and what he needs. We can live in the real world. That means that you, my dear, need to step up and stop coddling him. Now, now, don’t huff at me. Don’t misunderstand. I have no issue with how you have related to him up to now. You found a beautifully instinctive balance point. He’s clearly happier here with you than he’s ever been in his life. He’s also learning to trust his Omega side more, and that’s positive. But once he begins working with Hannah, you need to support their work.”

“I know. Did you get any feedback from Pam yet?’

“It’s too early. She and Ellen are just beginning to compare notes and readings. Go ahead and let Hannah and Joshua get started on the basics. They both know that we need to stay flexible and respond to Michael’s needs as we learn them. We have no guidebook for this. We’re all relying on you to lead the parade, Dean. You are better equipped to handle his training needs than anyone on Earth. I trust you, and I know Hannah and Joshua trust you. Michael trusts you.”

“He’s not a Sub though, Cas. Don’t expect me to turn him into a standard Omega. I’m aiming for something like a beta with a channel. Shit, he can even Release himself. He’s barely O at all.”

“I think you’re missing the point, Dean. Michael IS Omega, whether he identifies that way or not. His maternal instincts are extremely strong, and that’s pure Omega. I think we run a real risk of imprinting gender dysphoria in him if we allow either of you to deny what he is. He needs the hierarchy. He’s responded to our Pack structure from a very Omega perspective. I don’t think there’s any other way to see it. No beta would seek structure and accountability like Michael has. Please don’t allow your Submissive to try to set the training regimen for him. You’d be doing him a great disservice.”

“I want what’s best for him, Cas. I do. I don’t want to fuck him up with a heavy hand if it’s not what he needs. He got that from his father, and it nearly broke him. You said it yourself. We balance. Why force him to crouch when that’s not Michael?”

Cas switched his hands to begin massaging Dean’s other foot. Dean shifted to let him pull the foot into his lap. Cas told him, “His father had no idea who Michael is. He saw nothing but Omega, and he had no response EXCEPT a heavy hand. Michael’s too dominant not to rebel against that. But we know better. We know who he really is. Once Pam and Ellen finish their analysis, we’ll know all of it. We can give his wolf what it needs and feed his Omega at the same time. Dean, he needs structure, just as much as you do. He’s shown himself willing to turn full brat to get us to take him by the back of the neck and put him on his knees. He may not need to live down there, but he does need to know we’ll do it for him when he needs us to; when he needs YOU to.”

Dean sighed and curled tighter around Cas, pulling his foot free and replacing it on Castiel’s lap with his head. Cas scratched fingernails along Dean’s scalp. “How do you do it, Babe? How do you find the time and patience to be Alpha for all of us at once? I only have one to look after, and I’m overwhelmed.”

Castiel chuckled. “That’s not true, Dean. You take care of Michael, but you also watch out for Sam and April. When Jess is here, you check in on her too. I’ve seen you do it. You just don’t realize that you’re doing it because you do it effortlessly. Michael isn’t effortless for any of us, I’m afraid. He’s going to take very careful consideration.”
“I can’t fuck this up for him, C.J.”

“You won’t. I trust you. I said my piece, and I leave it to you. Whatever you want from me by way of support, you’ve got it. I’ll follow your lead with Michael’s training. We all will.”

“Thanks, man. It might get weird.”

“I have no doubt that it’ll get very weird.” Cas laughed. He hunched over and kissed Dean’s lips awkwardly just as someone knocked quietly on the door. “Come!” Cas called.

April stepped in. “Am I interrupting?”

“Come in, April.” Castiel patted the bed beside him as Dean scooted his legs out of the way. “Have you finished practicing for the night?”

“I need to get in another half hour, Sir, but I wanted to know if you’ve heard from Gabriel. Is he coming home?”

Castiel rolled his eyes and stood up. “My brother needs to keep a wide berth for some time. I found out today that he set the farmhouse on fire before he left. It was a deliberate act of defiance, and I’m going to skin him alive as soon as I get my hands on him. I thought he’d learned something from the debacle in Oklahoma, but he’s still exactly the same loose cannon he’s always been.”

Dean frowned and side-eyed April. “But the team pulled off the rescue? They got everyone out?”

Cas frowned back at him. “They got everyone out, but that’s not the point! We can’t keep drawing attention to where we strike. Sooner or later, we’ll shoot ourselves in the foot.”

“Did he kill anyone?” April asked quietly.

“I don’t know. The farmhouse is nothing but ash now. If there are bodies inside, they’ve been cremated. Finding remains at this point would take a forensics team and weeks of work. We can’t afford to put that much attention on the site. No one was supposed to be there. It’s not supposed to have been noteworthy.”

“So, we don’t know if Ruby and Alistair are still in the wind,” Dean said mostly to himself. “I’m sure Gabriel knows.”

Cas ran a hand through his own hair. “What does Bobby have to say about it?”

Castiel didn’t answer Dean’s question, and that answered Dean’s question.

“Is it time to disentangle The Facility from the rescue teams?” Dean asked. “It sounds like their methods don’t align with yours much anymore. You can keep slapping their hands every time they defy you, or you can cut them loose and let them do whatever they’re going to do anyway. If you and Bobby can’t see eye-to-eye on this, maybe it’s time, Cas.”

“They need our money to operate, Dean.”

“But if you can’t control them. Fuck, Cas, even your own brother…”

“I need to speak with Bobby. I need to understand where he draws the line. If murder is okay, then what’s not? He seems willing to risk our whole enterprise every time he sends a team out the door, and I can’t have that.” Castiel fixed Dean with a firm eye. “You’re part owner too, Dean. You have just as much say as the rest of us. This is not just on me and Bobby. We know where Benny stands.
He’s going to flip when he hears the latest.”

“So you think it’s two against two? Bobby and me versus you and Benny?”

“Dean…” April started, setting a hand on his shoulder.

“I go where you go, Alpha,” he said to Cas.

“You have to have an opinion, Dean.” Cas wasn’t about to let Dean abdicate again.

“No, I mean, I agree with you. The Facility can’t afford the vulnerability. We’ve worked too hard to let it fall apart if the connections ever get traced back to us. You want to put your foot down and tell Bobby in no uncertain terms that either he toes the line like we all agreed years ago, or all the funding stops. I’m with you Alpha. I’ll back you up. Benny will too. Bobby doesn’t have an ally who has any purse strings.”

Cas’ frown deepened. “What I’m hearing is that you don’t have a problem with our teams killing people as long as it can’t be tied to our Facilities.”

“I’m not going to pretend I’m not hoping those two are greasy ash stains in the rubble.”

April sucked in a quiet breath. Dean sat up and wrapped her in his arms. He kissed her hair. He didn’t say anything else, but he held Castiel’s gaze for a long time.

Finally, Cas broke the stare off. “April, Gabriel’s not coming home any time soon. I’ll try to keep an eye on him, but he knows me too well to show his face here for a while. By the way, I learned that two of the Omegas that were rescued are pregnant, and one of those is in very bad shape. He may not survive.”

“How far along is he?” she asked.

“About five months.”

“What happens to the pup if he dies?”

Castiel blinked. “We find a home for it. The pup will go into our Social Services network, foster care initially, then we find adoptive parents. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves though. The man’s alive at the moment, and the pup still has two months of gestation to get through.”

“Sir, Sam and Jess….”

“Stay out of it April. I mean it.”

She leaned her head against Dean’s chest. “Yes, Sir.”

“Go get your practicing finished. Come back up here when you’re through. You’re in here with me tonight. I’ll have a hot bath waiting for you.”

“Yes, Sir.” She slipped off the bed and kissed him deeply before she left, whispering something in his ear that had him smiling softly at her as she pulled the door closed. Cas turned back to Dean who had stretched out again on his belly across the bed like a cat.

“Have you thought about your punishment much, Dean?”

Dean laughed into his folded arms, face buried, shoulders shaking a little bit. He turned his head and looked up at the hovering Alpha. “Covering all the bases tonight?”
“Clearing the air.”

“Hmm. Okay. Yeah.” Dean rolled back up onto his hip lazily. “I don’t know what to ask for. Nothing seems strong enough to cover it. I fucked up so bad. How do I pay for that?”

Cas went to his knees on the floor near Dean’s head. “I fucked up too, Dean. Don’t overthink it. Don’t make it bigger than it is. We need to move on. What do you need to make that happen?”

“I need your hand and that Goddamned hairbrush. I know that much. But it’s not enough. I need something that lasts a while, but here’s the thing – I need to stay alpha right now, and a good strong punishment that goes longer than a day is going to put me under. How do we do both?”

Castiel petted his fiancé’s head gently, thinking. “Why does it need to extend past a single day?”

“It just does, Cas. It just does. Trust me on this.”

“Okay. Have you, uh, have you ever taken a punishment as an alpha?”

“What?”

“From your alpha instead of your Sub. Have you ever let your alpha in front during a punishment?”

“Fuck no! Why would I do that? That would hurt like hell!”

“Well, I was thinking. You’re a masochist, and so even though you don’t enjoy being punished, there’s a part of you that loves it. It’s a sticking point we’ve always had to contend with. It didn’t matter when we were simply scene partners because you didn’t owe me anything more than your Submissive. But now we’re Pack, and you’ve said you want to belong to me completely.” Cas raised his brow to seek confirmation, and Dean swallowed and nodded, his eyes troubled.

“Punishments are not supposed to be enjoyable, Dean. Perhaps you feel that my hand and your hairbrush are insufficient to the task because you know that they’ll stroke your wolf no matter what you intend.”

Dean filled in the gaps. “And if I take the spanking as an alpha, it would be nothing but a punishment. I wouldn’t feel it like a masochist does. Cas, there’s a reason we don’t spank alphas. It doesn’t work. It just pisses them off.”

“Just think about it, Dean. I don’t have the answer for you, and I’m not going to name your punishment. I will wait until you figure it out and come to me and ask me for it. We’ll go from there. Talk it over with Michael. Ask me anything you want, but it needs to come from you two.”

“Anything I want…” Dean murmured, rolling over and sitting upright. “All right. Help me figure out what I’m paying for here.”

Cas’ eyes twinkled merrily. “You want an itemized list?”

“Don’t be a jerk, Cas, I’m serious.”

“What have you got so far?” Castiel asked him, going thoughtful.

Dean took a deep breath and let it out very slowly through his mouth. “Uh, I manipulated Michael into going along with me to deceive you. I let him think it was all his idea. I put him into a vulnerable position, and I lied to him. I lied to you multiple times. I concocted a plan to conceive a pup that we aren’t all ready for, knowing that all four of us would be expected to parent it. I was dishonest about
my reasons for changing work-entry classifications. I stopped taking birth control without your approval. I dropped my mate off for testing at The Facility in full knowledge that he was out of compliance to proceed with the test, and I let it happen anyway. I lied to Becky at intake. I lied to Charlie at Processing. I lied to Adam, and Jody, and Raphael by omission.” Dean paused, thinking.

Dean looked up at Cas, his face showed his confusion. “Cas, you knew by then. You knew we were fertile, and you let the test happen. I don’t… Why did you do that?”

Cas bit his lip. “I spoke to all three testers before the test, and I told them that Michael wasn’t protected. They all agreed to proceed and to maintain discretion. Adam was the only one in danger. I gave him a morning-after, and I’ve been monitoring him. Forgive me, but I already knew that Michael was in no danger of being Topped by Raphael. And Dean, our policies are overcautious. Adam wasn’t really in any danger of catching. His birth control is up-to-date, and he was nowhere near his Heat. I’m far more concerned that Michael was able to waltz into the Processing room without giving a sample specimen. That shouldn’t be possible. Both Becky and Charlie have been held to account for failing to follow policies in place to prevent that ever happening.”

Dean’s jaw dropped. “You punished them? How did you document it without revealing what happened? Fuck, Cas. That’s not fair at all. It was all my fault!”

“No, it wasn’t. They both know their jobs, and they both let Michael through. They have no excuse. As to how I documented it, I told them it was a compliance test. I took care of it myself, and they both agreed. We spoke at length. I didn’t reveal everything. Neither of them knows that Michael would have failed the birth control check. They believe that you orchestrated a high stress client entry on my instructions to see how they would respond under pressure. They believe that it was essentially a drill that they failed. It won’t happen again, so I hope you have no plans for a repeat performance. I believe my lesson was appropriately integrated.

“You lie just as smoothly as I do, Alpha,” Dean accused.

“Please stop putting me into positions where I have to make choices like that, alpha!” Cas gave him right back.

“I didn’t make you do any of that, Castiel James. You had every opportunity to stop all of it. I can’t believe you. I can’t believe you did that, any of it. How do you justify holding me and Michael responsible? You’re totally complicit.”

“I am.”

“Cas, you’re just going to walk away from this?”

“I told you Dean, I’m only holding you responsible the way that I am because you need it. Michael too. You need the closure. I have no call to name your punishment, because I’m guilty as hell. I should have confronted you both directly right from the start, but I felt compelled to let it run its course. I don’t know if that was right or wrong. I feel like we learned a great deal from the experience, and we’re in a better place than we would have been if I’d just stopped you, spanked you, and left you to try it all over again on something else. I don’t have a justifiable excuse. I can’t defend myself or my actions.”

“Jesus, man, you’re a bigger mess than I am! What happened to all your moral integrity? What happened to the Alpha I know? Have you really changed that much?”

“I don’t recognize myself anymore, Dean. Apparently, where you and Gabriel are concerned, I will do literally anything,” the Alpha confessed, ashamed. Dean realized in a flash how deeply wounded
the man was.

“Cas, come on, man. You just got caught up in my bad idea. It’s not that bad.”

“No? I didn’t hear you itemize any felonies in your list, Dean. I killed people. I committed unethical acts to protect you that would get me stripped of my medical license if they came to light. I don’t deserve you. I don’t deserve to be Alpha for any of you. I don’t deserve the trust that Raphael, and Jody, Adam, Becky, Charlie, all put in me. I don’t deserve any of it because I’m a selfish prick, and I’ll sacrifice anyone who gets between me and whatever I want. I feel like the hammer is going to fall any minute now and strip me of everything, and I’m going to deserve whatever comes. Benny was right. I’m leading everyone over the cliff.”

“Holy fuck,” Dean Breathed.

Cas’ brow darkened and he looked at his feet. “I’ll understand if you can’t marry me.”

Dean snorted. “Oh, no you don’t! You’re not getting rid of me that easily! My mate likes it here, remember? We’re staying! I’m not going through everything we’ve just been through just to have you kick us out now.”

“Kick you out? That’s not what I said at all! I’ll die if you leave me! Fuck, Dean, I’ll die! I…I just said, I’ll understand.” Cas lowered his voice. “That’s all. I’ll understand. You’re so beautiful, and you’re so just. I know you don’t want to be put on a pedestal, but I can’t help it. Baby. You belong up there – not like me. You’re nothing like me.”

“Well, shit. You just made me feel better than I’ve felt in weeks! Here I was thinking you’re standing golden and sparkly up on the hilltop, passing judgement down on all us lowly peons who fuck up everything we touch, and all the while, you’re just one of the peons too. You struggle just as much as we do. And what’s more, you touch bigger things, so your fuck ups are bigger. God, I love you so much, C.J.”

“Don’t make light of it, Dean. Please.”

“I’m not, Babe. I’m really not. I get it. But you don’t know what it’s like to stand apart from you and watch the world fall into place for you. You make everything look so easy. I could never live up to all that. I don’t know how to even try. I can be your Sub. I can do that for the rest of my life, but I had no idea how to be your equal. There’s no one who’s your equal. How do I promise to be your husband when I can’t even see the plane you live on from here?”

“No, Dean. I’m not… I’m not that. I’m not how you think I am. I’m so flawed, I don’t think I’m salvageable. How do you not see that? You see everything.”

Dean laughed. “Then we’re the same, Castiel. You and me. We’re the same.” Dean scooted off the bed on his swollen backside, wincing. “Here. We need to start over. I want to show you something. I have something for you. Fuck, where did I put it?”

“Dean?”

Dean disappeared out the door and appeared back again only moments later. “Here, look. Listen to me. I talked to my dad today, Cas. He’s dying. I can’t do anything about that. He just gave up when Mom passed, and he died years ago. He let his grief and his guilt eat him from the inside, and he never even tried to stop it. How many wolves go like that, Castiel? How many?”

“What are you talking about?” Cas asked him, flummoxed.
“We wear our emotions too close to the surface, man. Everything hurts. Everything feels wonderful. There’s no middle ground. It’s all or nothing. Everything’s different shades of extreme. If we can’t learn to let go of all our baggage, we’re destined to let something drag us over the cliff eventually. Usually it’s loss: a loved one or status, or something that meant everything to us, and now it’s gone, but sometimes it’s our own guilt. We fuck up because we’re fucking human, and we can’t let it go, and it drags us under until we can’t surface again. I’m not doing that, Castiel James. I’m not going where my dad went. And you’re not either!”

“Dean I can’t just pretend that I didn’t do those things!”

“You learn from them. You recommit to who you are. You square back up, and you set your feet again, and you let it go. Don’t pretend, don’t forget, but if you let it, it’ll destroy you. Don’t you let that happen, Alpha. We need you. I need you.”

“I don’t know how to let go. I don’t know how.”

“Do you love me?” Dean asked, lowering his head below Cas’ eyes to catch his gaze.

“I love you with all my heart.”

“Do you trust me?” Dean worried that this one might be harder to answer.

“With my life.” Oh. Maybe not harder after all.

“Will you consent to a punishment from your fiancé, Alpha?”

Castiel raised his head suddenly. “You want to punish me?”

Dean smirked at him. “I figure two birds with one stone, C.J. I think we’re ripe for a D.F., and if I do it right, I might be able to slip in a Claim on your ass. I think it’s time. What do you think?”

“You’re in chastity, Dean.”

“You let me worry about Michael. I’ll make it up to him.”

Castiel sat frozen in place. He looked terrified. It was an expression Dean had never seen on his face before, and he nearly laughed at how adorable the Alpha was. He didn’t laugh though. He waited. Dean could tell Castiel was thinking it through.

At last, still pale and unsure, Cas nodded.

“Is that a yes, Alpha?” Dean asked.

“Please punish me, Dean. I s..submit myself to your authority.”

Dean’s eyelids fluttered and his cock twitched as it hardened. The feeling was heady. The weight felt immovable on his shoulders. Slowly, he nodded. Shit. They were doing this. No planning. No way to overthink it. Just dive right in and do it. Dean lowered his voice and alpha’d for all he was worth. “What’s your safeword, Castiel?”

Cas made a small noise almost like a whimper. “Celestial,” he whispered.

“Say it out for me, please. Good and clear.”

Cas swallowed. His Adam’s apple bobbed, but his voice was steady when he spoke. “Celestial.”
“Good. Please go lock the door and undress.” Dean felt a shiver run up his spine. His vision blurred. Shit. Shit. Shit.

Castiel rubbed his hands on his thighs a couple of times, his eyes fell to the floor. He was warring with himself; warring with his wolf. At last, he stood and crossed the room, bolting the door. He turned back around and looked right into Dean’s eyes. He saw something firm there, something new, something incredibly exciting. Cas undressed very slowly, letting each button make a statement, each article of clothing that hit the floor added another declaration of intent. Dean didn’t undress. He kept his chin up and his eyes cool. He waited patiently until the Alpha stood bare before him.

“Come here,” Dean told him. “Put yourself over the side of the bed.” Somehow, his voice held steady.

Castiel moved slowly, but he moved. Each step was a new battle. Each step turned into a submission. Dean could barely breathe. He forced the Alpha to break their eye contact as he turned to face the bed. Slowly, so very slowly, he leaned down over it, stretching his arms out above himself and going flat on his belly. His feet separated, and his long legs stayed straight as he presented his perfectly formed ass to the wolf at his back.

Dean took it in and tried to breathe normally. When Cas had first proposed this, he balked. He couldn’t have imagined it would feel like this. Erotic wasn’t the word. It was all kinds of Hot. Castiel’s legs trembled. His back pulsed with his shallow breath. His dark hair stuck up in many directions. His flank quivered like a nervous horse.

Dean broke away to move to the side of the bed. He opened the nightstand drawer and pulled out a small bottle of synthetic slick. Then he set a small blue velvet box on the nightstand where Cas could see it.

“If you’re very good for me, you’ll earn what’s in this box. I think you’re going to like it, my love, but you have to earn it. Be good for me. Take your punishment. Relax and let me in, and it’s all yours.” Dean stroked Castiel’s back as he made his way back to the end of the bed and squatted down.

“Dean,” Cas whispered, his eyes locked on the velvet box.

“Unh-uh. Don’t say my name right now. You know the rules. Not until your punishment is over.”

“I’m…sorry. You’re right. I can do this.”

“Shhh!” Dean huffed softly. “It’s probably better if you don’t try to talk at all.”

Dean ran a trembling hand over Castiel’s round backside, presented for him, only for him. He was so turned on, he couldn’t really take it in. Castiel, the Alpha, THE ALPHA, presenting himself in submission to Dean Winchester. Castiel Winchester. It began to sink in as Dean stroked slowly over the firm curving flesh. Everything that Cas had ever told him. It was all true. Dean felt loved to the marrow of his bones. There was no faking this. This was Castiel in submission. There could be no other explanation – this was Castiel in awe of Dean, and Dean reflected it right back. He felt dizzy. He tightened his grip on Castiel’s backside, bringing his other hand up to knead the flesh in a bruising grip.

Dean remembered he had a job to do. He wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with Domination Fucks. This wasn’t his first, but may as well have been. DFs on Omega students didn’t begin to prepare Dean for this. He and Cas were both out of their own zones. They had no way of knowing how to do this but to put all of their trust in each other and feel their way through.
Dean shook so much as he squirted lube on his fingertips that most of it dribbled onto the carpet. He tried again, warming it between his hands, coating the fingers of both hands. He didn’t want to risk touching Castiel with an unlubricated digit, risk hurting him. This wasn’t about causing physical pain. It wasn’t really about punishment either. That was just an excuse to get them both to this place. If Castiel could use it to release his own guilt, then all the better, but for Dean, it was something else.

He stroked one finger slowly down the crack of Castiel’s ass, letting it glide seamlessly over the dark, puckered skin of his hole, moving down his perineum to his scrotum, bringing all of his fingers up to massage his balls. Slowly, he gripped them, pulled them tight. Cas’ legs tensed up, but he didn’t break position or protest. He was fighting hard to trust. Dean wouldn’t harm him. Dean would see him through this and hold him safe to the end. Trust.

“Good. Very good,” Dean whispered just loud enough for Cas to hear him. Dean felt a spark of irritation pop through his bonds with Michael. His mate had caught on, and he wasn’t happy. Dean snuffed the bonds out with a sigh, knowing he would be baking at least two pies for Michael.

“Castiel James Winchester, you broke faith with your Pack. You’ve broken faith with yourself. I demand that you submit yourself to me in punishment, in submission! I DEMAND IT, ALPHA!” Dean let his voice rise by the word until he was shouting.

Castiel didn’t respond in words, but his legs straightened further. His ass lifted just a little higher, and his breath became a steady, deliberate pulse. Dean pressed his finger so slowly into Cas’ hole, it felt like he wasn’t moving forward at all, but he was. He pulsed it at the first knuckle, letting Castiel process the sensation. This would be the sticking point to know if Cas could handle the submission or not, and Dean knew he needed to take his time.

Castiel moaned uncomfortably. His muscles clamped down on Dean’s finger. His shoulders tensed across his broad back, but he held position and maintained his breath. “Relax, Alpha. I don’t want to hurt you. That’s not what we’re doing here. You’re going to let me in. You’re going to LET me, do you understand? Let me in. Relax.”

Castiel full-on whimpered, and pre-come dripped from Dean’s cock. He pressed in just a little deeper, dripping a few more drops from the bottle of lube directly onto Cas’ virgin hole. “Let me,” he whispered.

Dean could feel Castiel relaxing deliberately at his touch, and he pressed in up to the second knuckle. “That’s it. Very good. So good for me. Let go, Alpha. I’m not going to break you. Trust me.”

Dean spent some time working one finger in and out, keeping the slick refreshed, letting Cas get used to the strange sensation. Cas began to push back very slightly on his finger after he had it buried to the hilt, and Dean nearly fainted, overcome. Cas moaned, reaching for the iron bars above his head and starting a slow pulsing pace. Dean removed his finger and lubed up another one. Cas turned and looked back at him.

“Ready, Alpha?” Dean asked him.

Castiel nodded, pushing his hips back. Dean slipped two fingers in and took much less time in sinking them in past his rim and burying them both to the hilt. He scissored them open and Cas cried out, flinching, pulling away. Dean hissed at him and clutched his hip. “Stay right here, Alpha. Don’t go anywhere. You need this. You need to do as you’re told right now. Trust me. I’m not going to harm you.” Castiel panted and looked over his shoulder again, his eyes wide and uncertain, but he put himself back into place.

“That’s it. Very good. You can do this.” Dean was so hard he wanted to drop everything and just
lose himself in fucking into that tight hole. He was lost in the feeling. He’d never felt anything like it before, not even when he Claimed his mate. This was so different. It was prohibited possessiveness. It was illicit, taboo. It was indefensible. He wanted nothing in the world inside this moment but to own this man. Dean growled from the Deep alpha that got so little exercise in the real world that Dean often forgot he was there. He added a third finger and picked up the pace.

“You fucked up, Alpha. Didn’t you? You lied to me! You broke your word, and you NEVER do that! I don’t care what your excuses are! You don’t get to do that! You don’t EVER get to do that again, do you hear me?! Do you hear me, Castiel?!”

“I’m sorry! I won’t! I won’t do it again! Please!”

“Please what, Alpha?”

“Please take me! Hurry, please! I can’t hold him! He’s so angry!”

Dean roared at him, and he pushed himself to his feet, thrusting his fingers in aggressively.

“You HOLD HIM, ALPHA! DON’T YOU DARE LET HIM GO! You deserve this! SAY IT!”

“I deserve this!”

“TELL THAT WOLF OF YOURS! I WANT HIM ROLLING!” Dean used a slick, sticky hand to flick open the button on his slacks and lower the zipper.

“I CAN’T!” Castiel wailed, pressing back onto Dean’s fingers as if his only choices were to press into the touch or flee.

“TELL HIM, ALPHA!” Dean shoved his boxer briefs down and tucked the elastic band behind his balls. His slacks fell to his knees. He smeared slick on his cock fiercely, just as brutal with himself as he was with Castiel.

“Please! Oh God, I can’t!”

“You’re ready, Alpha. We’re doing this. Knees up on the bed. I want you to roll over on your back. Roll for me, Alpha. Show me your belly! Do it!” Dean followed Castiel when the Alpha pulled himself off Dean’s still thrusting fingers and climbed onto the bed.

Dean put his hands on his lover’s hips and helped him to turn over. Moving in slow motion, or maybe just appearing to, in surreal slow motion, the great Alpha rolled onto his side and then over onto his back, revealing his soft belly to the Deep alpha who knelt above him. Dean got a first good look into Castiel’s red eyes. The Alpha in Castiel was on board. The Alpha understood, but the wolf, holy hell, the wolf was rabid. Dean’s breath caught, and he nearly aborted everything.

Cas panted, spreading his knees wide, revealing his whole self. His cock was hard and leaking. His balls hung heavy, low enough to be an impediment. “Please,” he whispered again. “Alpha, please!”

Dean kept their eyes locked. He needed to be able to see the wolf. He needed warning if the leash began to slip. Dean kept his own eyes cold and strong. He wasn’t Michael, and there was no way he’d be able to get a Claim to stick without a Dominant façade. He grimaced, snarled, growled as he lined his cock up with Castiel’s tight hole.

“Who gets to know your ass from the inside, Castiel James Winchester? Say it. Who owns your ass?” Dean pressed forward, not enough to press in, but enough to let Cas feel it. “SAY IT!”
“YOU, ALPHA! ONLY YOU! TAKE ME, DEAN! PLEASE!”

Dean groaned as he pressed forward and felt the head of his cock push past the Alpha’s rim with a pop.

“AHHHH! DEAN! FUCK!” Castiel cried out, and tightened up around Dean’s cock. Dean stilled, listening for a safeword, breathing hard, closing his eyes. He opened them as soon as he felt his control slide back into place and he sought his Alpha’s red eyes with his own. Alarm passed back and forth between them for what seemed like forever. They were stuck. Dean couldn’t pull out without giving in, and he’d be damned if he was going to do that at this point, not without hearing the safeword. He couldn’t press in further though, not while Castiel’s face looked like that. Their nostrils flared in tandem. Castiel squeezed his eyes closed and moaned in pain. “Please.”

Dean couldn’t read him. He couldn’t tell. “Please what, Alpha? You have to tell me. You decide right now. Decide, Alpha. For both of us. Yes or no. Either you let me in, or we call it. We don’t have to do this.” Dean didn’t mean it. He would pull out if Castiel asked him to, but he really, really didn’t want to. His hips throbbed to push forward into that hot tightness. He wanted so badly. So very badly.

“Fuck me, alpha! Do it!”

“Aaaaagh!” Dean shoved in hard and bottomed out all in one harsh push. Castiel screamed, and clutched at him. “Open up for me! Alpha, open up! Let me in!” Dean panted hard into Castiel’s collarbone. He was too close to the wolf’s jaw, to its teeth. The wolf went wild on his leash, snarling and thrashing. Dean felt it through Castiel’s body, and he lifted his head slowly to look straight into the beast’s bottomless eyes.

“Stop,” he said firmly, eyes only inches above the wolf. “You’re going to destroy everything. Stop right now, and give us this. You’re not in charge here. I AM.” Dean’s wide red eyes held steady, unblinking. He had no idea where the strength was coming from, but he was tired of worrying about it. He was either going to succeed at taming the beast, or he was going to die trying. “ROLL OVER, YOU BITCH! GIVE HIM THIS, DAMN YOU!”

The wolf snapped at him, and Dean pulled his cock most of the way out in response and drove it hard back in, then he did it again. He felt Castiel flinch and tighten with each thrust, but he was locked in a bigger battle now. He knew Cas was right there beside him, battling alongside him, shoulder-to-shoulder. Dean set up a brutal, feral pace, plunging into Castiel’s body again and again. The wolf slavered and fought, gamely holding his ground.

Dean’s body moved passionately, wildly, but his mind slowly stilled. He calmed his breathing to a third of his pace, and his eyes sought the Alpha in Castiel’s red eyes, passing right by the wolf. He found him there, stoic, determined, a warrior in every sense. He found the Alpha calm and sure. He locked on and he smirked, finding his cheekiness mirrored on the face he loved. He ignored the noises their mouths and their throats made. He ignored the sweat. His whole world narrowed to the pulsing heat and pressure around his cock as he forced his way in again and again. He pulled one of Castiel’s legs over his shoulder, folding his body nearly in half and raising his ass up off the bed. Dean pistoned like a machine, slapping hard against Castiel’s wet open asshole. Both of them groaned and clutched, the pain giving way to urgent, urgent need, the beast howling in rage and impotent wrath. Try as it might, he couldn’t defeat both alphas when they ganged up against him.

Dean felt his knot swell and press up against Castiel’s rim. He wanted. He wanted so much he almost forgot he needed a submission. Knotting Omegas, even betas felt nothing like this. His cock throbbed with need. Castiel’s eyes rolled back in his head and he cocked his head upward, baring his throat. The wolf howled louder, longer, and then…
Then it whined in agony. The wolf shivered, but it was helpless to stop the inevitable, and so slowly, Dean almost didn’t understand what he was seeing, the wolf fell to his side, and rolled onto his back, crying piteously. Dean snarled, his nose wrinkling as his upper lip pulled away from his teeth. He thrust in hard and pushed in one long drive rather than pulling back out in rhythm. The knot caught on Castiel’s rim long enough that Dean nearly despaired, and then, just as fast, it popped into place and locked.

Castiel threw his head further back and howled. Dean ground down hard against his ass, lifted his head, sought out a place on Castiel’s right shoulder, and bit down hard, breaking the unblemished skin in one smooth motion, and worrying it harshly between his teeth. Castiel’s howl turned into a scream.

Someone pounded hard on the door and then it shook on its frame as a body crashed against it three, four times in a row.

Dean released the hold of his teeth, as he pulsed into Cas’ ruined hole in circles. He felt his balls pull up tight, and the weight of what they had just done crashed down on him as his orgasm stole his breath and his Claim slammed their bodies from the inside out. He cried out in dissonant harmony to Castiel’s lowering scream. The wolf had nothing to say. Dean pumped copious amounts of come deep into his Alpha-Dom’s body as a rivulet of Castiel’s blood ran down his chin.

He still, panting. He was terrified to open his eyes and see what damage he’d inflicted on the man he loved. Castiel was rhythmically pulsing around his cock, and Dean realized he hadn’t finished yet. He didn’t know when his eyes had closed, but he wasn’t ready to open them just yet. He wiped the blood from his chin with the back of a sweaty hand and then scrabbled blindly for Cas’ erection to stroke him and finish him off. His eyes flew open when his hand encountered a flaccid, not an erect, Alpha cock. Looking down, fearing that the pain must have been so severe that Cas had lost his erection, he found instead, heavy white lines of thick semen running up Castiel’s belly and chest.

“You…Cas, did you?”

Castiel was still out of breath, but he huffed a simple laugh, squeezing Dean’s cock in the process. “I didn’t touch myself, if that’s what you’re asking, alpha. I came untouched. Never thought I’d hear myself say that.”

Dean looked on, marveling. He groaned as his cock delivered another pulse up into Castiel’s body, and Castiel moaned back at him, his eyes back to blue, his brow wrinkled. Dean met his eye in wonder.

“Did we? Alpha, did we just? Holy fuck, I think we did!” Dean babbled as a laugh bubbled up. “Cas, I Claimed you! What the actual fuck? There’s no way! How? What just happened? Oh shit, are you okay?”

Cas was hurting. Alphas aren’t built to take knots. It’s not really a safe thing to do. He grunted in pain as Dean helped him to turn to his side. “I’ll be fine, Dean. I’ll be okay, just give me a minute. It hurts.”

Dean couldn’t stop looking at his face. It was so open, so readable, all of his emotions right there on the surface. Maybe it was the Claim. Dean didn’t care. He tried to stay as still as he could. Keeping still would let the knot deflate a little faster and it would keep the tie from pulling.

“I love you, Castiel.” It was the simplest and truest thing Dean had ever said, and it meant everything he was all in one simple sentence. The pounding on the door had stopped, but Dean knew Michael was still there, just on the other side. A part of him wished he could open it and let their mates in.
Mates were a part of this too, in the strangest and most intimate way. Michael was a part of Dean, and that made him a part of Dean’s connection with Castiel. Dean opened the bonds back up and let Michael’s worry and ire flood him. He giggled. Michael was so predictable, so reliably Michael.

“I love you too, Dean.” Cas wasn’t laughing, but he had a serene look on his face. Dean searched for the Claim bond in his head. It was weak, but he found it. He pushed out along it, sending his love down the narrow stream that was now his to use. Cas’ lips quirked up.

“You feel that?” Dean asked him.

“Mm-hmm. I feel it. I like it. I like it very much, Dean. Kiss me.”

They didn’t say anything else for some time. Michael sulked in the hallway. Dean guessed April was probably with him, probably trying to talk him down, and the image caused another bubble of laughter to break through the kiss. Castiel’s dry lips were softer than they looked, and now they were swollen, red, and spit-slick too. Dean took control of his giggles and dove back in for another kiss, but Castiel dodged him.

“You promised I could have whatever’s in that box if I was good for you, Dean. Was I good enough?” Castiel’s voice was a tease.

“Yeah,” Dean breathed. “You were so good. Fuck, Cas, I never could’ve done that without your help. That was incredible.”

“So, then, do I get the box?”

“Can you reach it? It was supposed to be your birthday present. Um, happy birthday, I guess.”

Cas grunted and stretched his arm past Dean’s shoulder. “Got it.” He pulled his chest back away from Dean’s so he could work the box open between them. “Oh, Dean! You…? How did you find…? Did April help you with this?”

“Cas.”

Castiel stilled and looked up from the ring into Dean’s face. “Dean.” Dean had stilled and become quite somber. He had something to say. Cas snapped the box closed and listened.

“I was angry with you for proposing the way you did. We weren’t ready. We were both scared and desperate. We didn’t know who we were or what we wanted. I didn’t believe you; didn’t believe that you really love me; couldn’t make myself trust in you. It hurt so bad, and I was terrified. All I could see down the road for us was a massive crash and burn. I just couldn’t see it, no matter how badly I want it.”

“God, Dean.”

“Shh. I love you, Baby, so much. I’m not the same man you proposed to. Hopefully, I’ll never be that man again. What I’m trying to say…what I need you to know and believe until the day you die…I love you. I’m ready. Cas, I believe you. I’ve never felt this before, and it scared me, but you stayed through all of it. You should have run away from me, screaming, but you didn’t. Everything you’ve ever said to me is true, isn’t it?”

Cas nodded warmly at him, raising Dean’s ring finger to his lips and kissing it. “Everything, Dean.”

“I trust you, Castiel. When you tell me that you love me, I can feel it now. I believe you. It took all of this to get me there. It took April and Michael. It took Sam and Jess and knowing what they have to
face together. It took watching you cast out your mother and other demons. It took watching you
stand up to your weaknesses and shake your fist at them and scream, ‘that’s not me!’ and it took
talking to my dad, and seeing that that’s what’s in store for me if I let fear take me.

“Baby. Cas. C.J.” Dean sniffled and laughed softly at his own tears welling quickly. “I’m never
going to doubt you again. I don’t care how much we fight. You can scream at me. You can beat my
ass black and blue. I might get so mad at you I can’t see straight, but I’m never going to doubt again
that you love me. And I love you. Just as much as you love me, always know, my sweet Alpha, I
love you at least that much, probably more. Marry me, Cas. Please? I’m never going to doubt you
again.”

“Dean.”

“Say yes, Alpha. Say it while my knot’s still tying us together.”

Castiel laughed quietly. “Funny, I thought we were already engaged. I didn’t know two proposals
were necessary.”

Dean lowered his chin severely. “If you want the ring, you have to say yes. Don’t be a dick.”

Cas laughed, and then groaned as his rectum tightened painfully again.

“Cas? You gonna leave me hanging here?”

“This is my birthday present?”

“Was going to be.”

“Usually birthday presents come without strings attached. Now you’re telling me I have to say yes to
your proposal or I don’t get to keep it.”

“I take it back. Give me that. You don’t get to have it. I’m returning it tomorrow. Fuck you.”

Cas laughed outright. Loudly. “No,” he said, clutching the box in his fist and dodging Dean’s
attempts to get it back. “You said it’s my birthday present. You can’t take it back.”

“Watch me.”

“NO! Dean quit it! I’m not giving it back! YES, OKAY? I’ll marry you! YES! Please, stop. Oh
shit…” Cas trailed off. The laughing pulled the tie and everything below his waist throbbed. He
chuckled easily though, lightly, then he sobered and looked back up into Dean’s face. “I love you,
Dean. I’ll marry you. I want to be yours forever.”

“You mean it this time?” Dean asked him shrewdly. “No takebacks? No postponing the date?”

“I’m so sorry, Dean. Please forgive me. It was wrong of me to ask you to marry me before we were
ready, and then act like it was all your fault we faltered. It wasn’t. You know that, right?”

“I know. It’s what I’m saying here. I’m not the same guy. I was all ready to believe that everything
was my fault, that I was driving you away, that I didn’t deserve you, wasn’t worth the effort you
were putting in. I couldn’t see it was both of us.” Dean’s eyes were on the velvet box that Cas was
twirling around and around his fingers. He’d looked at the ring, but then he’d snapped the box closed
again.

“So, you gonna put it on?” Dean asked him.
“You do it.”

Cas held the box out, and Dean took it from him with shaky fingers. He wrenched the spring open, and took out the ring carefully. Cas presented his left hand, and Dean frowned as he slid it onto Castiel’s finger, hoping they’d judged the size right. It stuck for a moment on Cas’ thick knuckle, then slid into place. The diamonds sparkled. The dark Tungsten, unblemished, and polished to perfection sat in counterpoint to Castiel’s light skin tone. The style was an exact match to Dean’s but the stones, the cut, the band, all just slightly larger, perfect for the Alpha.

“Dean, I love it. Thank you.”

“Happy birthday, C.J.”

“Not my birthday, Dean.”

“Dork.”

“I love you, too.”

The pillow talk and the kissing didn’t last long enough. Michael fumed outside the door while Dean and Castiel talked future plans. Cas saw a bright-eyed, black haired baby boy bouncing happily on Papa’s knee. Dean found himself imagining a certain Submissive spit-roasted between two Doms while the Ozzie drizzled warm honey down his back; down the unnamed Sub’s back. Whoever it was. Dean blushed but refused to name names. Cas laughed at him and rolled his eyes.

The pounding started up again as Dean’s knot released its hold. Castiel breathed a sigh of relief and rubbed himself immodestly, trying to ease the ache.

“That’s not very ladylike, Alpha,” observed Dean, stretching and leaving to fetch a cloth. He snapped the bolt loose on the door as he sauntered past.

“Does it always hurt like this, Dean?!” Cas called in to him just as Michael burst through the door.

“Yeah, but I like the ache. I’m a masochist. I may have forgotten to mention that.” Dean ignored Michael’s spluttering, rolled Castiel onto his stomach, and applied a warm, moist cloth to his ass, working it deep into his crack.

“Well, that’s not exactly dignified, either,” Cas commented, looking back over his shoulder.

“It’s what you usually do to me,” Dean reminded him. “Good for the goose, good for the …wait, how do you say it if we’re both ganders?”

“AND,” Cas pointed out, “You rolled me over before you wiped my stomach down. Now the sheet’s all gross. Haven’t you ever done this before?”


Dean looked up and realized that Michael was in no joking mood. He had a stone hard look in his eyes and his arms were crossed prohibitively across his chest.

“Oh. Shit,” Dean figured.

“You think?” Michael replied.
“Look, I asked you yesterday, remember? You said yes. In fact, you told me to own his ass. God, Michael, you should’ve seen it. It was glorious! We rolled the wolf, too! Both of us together! It was incredible!”

Michael blinked a couple of times and began to tap his foot. He pursed his lips and sighed.

“I’m in trouble? But you said yes. Cas, help me out here.”

Castiel rolled up onto a hip and caught Michael’s eye. Yeah, no. That wasn’t going to happen. “If I recall, when I reminded you that you’re in chastity at the moment, I believe your words were something to the effect of ‘You let me worry about Michael’ and, ‘I’ll make it up to him’.”

Dean narrowed his eyes at Cas, who simply smiled sweetly at him and rolled back to his belly, flinched, and then moved out of the wet spot.

“Well, that was short-lived.”

“It was a direct quote, Dean.”

Dean cracked his neck, swallowed his pride, squared his shoulders, and met his mate’s eye. “So what happened to yes?”

“You know very well I didn’t mean for you to try a CF while you’re still in chastity. Don’t play stupid.” Michael wasn’t playful at all. Michael was singularly unimpressed.

“Oops. My mistake. So, then, uh, am I in trouble?” Dean tried to hide his smirk, but it just kept creeping back out. He’d just rolled the Alpha’s wolf!

“Go to our bedroom. Undress. Get on your knees on the floor and wait for me. You, my beloved brat, are in a world of trouble.”

“But my ass is already…”

“NOW!”

Dean scampered.

“And you!” Michael fixed Cas with an angry eye as well. “You owe me for this too! You promised you’d back me up. What the hell was that?!”

“Michael please calm down. I will make it up to you, not in the way Dean is going to, but we’ll figure something out. I promise. You’re right. I owe you compensation for overriding your consequences. Please try to understand that the situation had come to a critical head, and delaying what we needed would not have been healthy for either of us.”

“You’ll make it up to me? How?”

“Name your request.”

“Drop my upcoming punishment.” Michael went for broke.

“I can’t do that. You need it just as much as Dean does. But how about this? I relinquish my nights with him for the next two weeks. In essence, you’ll have put us both in chastity in regards to each other for a fortnight. I won’t touch him. Whether he gets any from you is your call entirely, but he won’t get it from me.”
“Two weeks?”

“Two weeks.”

“And not just scening. You swear off all sexual touching for two weeks.”

“We won’t even take a bath together. He won’t warm my bed or my body in any way for the next two weeks.”

“Deal.” Michael shuffled his feet as April slouched in, pouting.

“Did you need something else, Michael?” Castiel asked, standing up and catching hold of the cloth as it fell free.

“Dean’s going to claim he’s too damaged to spank. Um…is he?”

Cas laughed darkly. “No. He’s not. Go to town, Michael. Perhaps aim for his thighs. He absolutely hates to be struck there, especially with the back of his hairbrush.” He didn’t sound at all like someone who’d just been dominated and Claimed. He sounded elated.

Michael nodded. “I don’t get you, Sir. I don’t get you at all.”

Cas smiled at him. “April does. Don’t you sweet Omega? Are you ready for your nightly swats? My hand is itching to pink up a firm round bottom. Michael’s called dibs on Dean. That leaves me and you. What do you say?”

“You don’t have to sound so happy about it, Sir,” she grumbled.

“Close the door on your way out, Michael. I’ll see you at breakfast.”

“Yes, Sir,” he answered, bewildered, pulling the door closed. Everyone in this house but Michael was crazy.

Cas smiled a downright evil smile at his mate, and her pout disappeared. She strutted just a little as she approached him. He quirked a brow in her direction. A dare.

She smirked and mirrored him.

All right then, he thought, game on.

The door, thick and sound-proof, kept their privacy as they played far into the night. Cas ignored the ache, and very soon, so did April.

Chapter End Notes

If I had any integrity, I would follow my gut and end the fic right here. I could do it. I could keep going in a new story and turn this serial. I should do that, but...I'm just not ready yet.

I'm headed back to work. I'll get to everyone's comments. I promise. They mean so much to me.

Bless you all. Stay safe.
Chapter Summary

Michael isn't assuaged yet. Castiel demands a face-to-face with Bobby. Benny's good at breaking tension and ego-bubbles. Dean and Cas can't go two steps without everyone catching on to what they've done, and also, April's up to something. That's what everyone says, anyway.

Chapter Notes

Holy jumpin' Jehoshaphat! I swear I won't threaten to end the story again any time soon! Y'all are awesome, and I live off the support. Be prepared though. I could seriously keep this up indefinitely. There's a couple of times per month where I'm switching from day work to nights, and I have the house to myself all day long, and then I have to stay up all night too to get my internal clock changed. That gives me so much writing time. So much time. And viola, 12000 more words.

I've been asked about adding Michael's scores to the linked graph. Yes, we need to do that, but we have to wait for his Z-rating since that's included to. Our lovely Melodina has been out of pocket because SOME PEOPLE get to skate off to France on holiday, while others are on vacation blackout. I hope you had a wonderful time, my dear. I plan to get Michael fully rated in the next chapter or the one after that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
NOW:

Dean awoke with a sting and a deep ache down the backs of both of his thighs that throbbed with the pulse of his heartbeat. He groaned and rolled onto his belly, then grunted into his pillow and threw his comforter off violently with a few powerful kicks of his feet. Michael snored softly beside him, not disturbed by Dean’s outburst. Dean grumbled silently at him and gave the comforter enough extra kicks to bare the Omega down to his shins too. The house wasn’t cold, but Michael slept nude and he was a blanket-snuggler, preferring to stay encased in layers of warm puffy softness.

Feeling justifiably compensated in the knowledge that Michael would soon awaken chilled and cranky, Dean rolled off the bed and hopped into the shower. He let the scalding water cascade down his back and over his ass and his thighs. It awakened the sting in his legs, and Dean craned around to see them. He was red and blue in splotches almost to the backs of his knees from that fucking hairbrush. The stripes on his ass from the Hickory switch didn’t hurt anymore, but they hadn’t disappeared yet either. Dean washed quickly, dressed, and headed down to make breakfast. He compensated in quantity for the possibility that Sam and Jess had stayed over, whipping up a batch of biscuits in no time.

Everyone would be sleeping in today. It was Saturday, and except for the Owner’s meeting at noon, they had nothing pressing on the calendar. Dean let his mind wander back to last night. He didn’t even try to suppress the satisfied half-smile when he thought about his win, well, their win, over the big dog. Dean was under no illusions. The win was Castiel’s, but Dean had been invited to ride that roller coaster too, and he had to breathe through his hardening wood at just the memory. He never knew that having someone’s trust so deeply could make him feel so powerful. He felt like a Dominant for just a little while, and he thought he understood a little bit if what makes Doms tick. It was a rush!

It wasn’t something he was in any hurry to do again, mind you, but Dean let the feeling of taking the tiger by the tail and living to tell about it fill him up. It felt…very, very good. What? Adverbs were outside Dean’s verbal command this morning.

But while his relationship with Castiel had never been stronger, Michael wasn’t pleased with him at all. As usual, Michael had demanded they talk it all through beforehand rather than simply wail on him and put him to bed. Dean had been honest, making it clear that while hurting Michael wasn’t even remotely intentional, that Dean didn’t regret his decision to act for a split-second. Michael took a face full of realization that to a brat, a willingness to pay the price for one’s decisions means that any choice is really on the table at all times. Do what you want, and pay for it; that’s the motto that Dean lived by. He explained that Michael was wasting his time and energy trying to drum complete obedience into his mate. Any time Dean wanted something badly enough to accept the consequences, whatever the cost, he made no pretense that he wouldn’t simply barrel through.

Michael took offense in a way that threw Dean for an unexpected loop. Michael was genuinely hurt and angry, and Dean couldn’t understand how he didn’t already know this. It’s what brats do. It’s who Dean IS. Didn’t Michael know that?

Yeah. They’d fought. Michael held back long enough to deliver the necessary hard stinging swats to Dean’s legs, but the closure that Dean took from the punishment didn’t flow through to Michael, and he’d exploded in self-righteous indignation as Dean brushed his teeth. Where was the trust? Where was the respect he was owed? How dare Dean take him for granted like that?

They shouted at each other late into the night, resolving little, nearly calming enough to get to sleep before the clock clicked over into the wee hours, until Dean mentioned offhand that he felt he’d paid
enough with this last round over Michael’s knee to cover all of his recent transgressions. Michael
disabused him quickly and decisively of that notion. He felt Dean still needed to atone separately for
his plan to shove Michael bodily from the Impala and, blah, blah, blah, the fight sparked back up
again.

As the night wore on and the sound-proof door did extra duty, Dean shifted more and more deeply
alpha, and Michael dug his Dominant heels in. It turned mean, and it turned ugly, and things were
said that both would come to regret, but each was in his most stubborn designation when the chips
were down, and neither was willing to budge.

Michael finally called it at two a.m. He tried to send Dean to bed, but Dean refused flatly to obey, so
Michael clicked the light off on him, standing staunchly with his arms crossed and his lips pursed.
Michael disappeared under the covers and refused to answer anything Dean said to him after that.
Eventually, Dean had no choice but to join him or find somewhere else to sleep. In a single night
he’d had his most glorious victory with his betrothed and his most heart wrenching altercation with
his mate. Dean didn’t sleep for some time, but he resisted the urge to kick Michael’s shins when his
snores started up.

Cas awoke with an ache deep in his center that thrrobbed with the pulse of his heartbeat. He groaned
clenched down with the muscles of his core then gasped, releasing them immediately and
throwing his comforter off violently. His attempt to sit up was thwarted mid-motion, sinking back
down on his side with a very unmanly whine. Alphas and pain…there’s a reason alphas dole it out
rather than allow themselves to be on the receiving end. There’s a reason they make great warriors.
Pain avoidance is a great motivator to get the strongest fight out of a dude. When it’s strike or be
struck, it gets to no holds barred awfully fast. Plus, their immediate response to pain is nearly
universally rage.

Cas grimaced and suppressed the immediate rage response that tried to surface. He breathed
deliberately for a few minutes with his eyes closed, willing his anal and rectal muscles to relax with
the rest of his body. They weren’t doing it. He hurt. Badly.

A quick self-assessment assured him he wasn’t really damaged, just used hard. Dean had prepped
him thoroughly and taken good care not to allow any tearing. Castiel sighed, thinking about his
condition and what brought him to this pitiful state. Dean had called it a DF, but then not delivered
one. He’d been Claimed, and even that wasn’t easy to pull off, but Dominated? No. Dean had also
called it a punishment, a payment for all his sins of late. There were so many. How could it be so
easy to atone just by rolling onto his back and letting another man do as he pleased in a way that
made Castiel’s skin crawl? Well, maybe not crawl exactly. It hadn’t been enjoyable in the classic
sense. It hurt, and he felt humiliated. It was a battle from the very beginning, but Cas had scored a
victory for himself and his own self-control, proving once and for all that the wolf didn’t call the
shots. Castiel did. He couldn’t deny that his anatomy had responded, though. It might not have been
enjoyable exactly, but he had come all over himself without a hand on him. That was a first.

He chuckled humorlessly. The victory was Dean’s as well. The alpha had been flawless in his
execution, standing firm when he needed to ground them both, giving praise when Cas’ confidence
wavered, letting Castiel lead when their cumulative strength called for it. In the end, Castiel had been
the muscle that toppled the wolf. Dean had been the motivation and the choreographer, but Cas had
done most of the hard work. It could not have happened any other way. But it HAD happened, and
Cas could feel a new bond line that paralleled the one he was familiar with. It told him that Dean was awake and in the kitchen cooking, just as the Mating-bond told him that April was at the keyboard already.

Punishments were designed to provide closure, and Castiel needed closure. He let his mind think it through from a scientist’s perspective, often his first go-to when he needed to get inside himself and do a little introspection. He thought about how he was going to write this episode up in Subject 00032’s notes. His file was already the thickest in the ACRI archives, as he added to it constantly, scribbling in his responses to various stimuli and his physical reactions to new encounters. He journaled himself incessantly, and he re-read his notes from years past, trying to paste together a profile that could help other Alpha-Dominants to wend their way through the jungle without having to reinvent the wheel at every new phase.

He rolled out of bed and started the shower running. Did he feel he’d reached closure? His scientist side wasn’t really able to put any meaning to the word. Maybe he needed a different way to look at it. What would Dean have done? Dean had the processing of punishments down to an art form. What Dean did – he let himself go and absorbed all the pain, all the humiliation. He took it in and let it fill him completely, and when it was over and the flood passed back out, he let it take the guilt with it. He let go, and he walked on refreshed.

That was the part Cas didn’t know how to do, let the guilt go once the punishment was over. He still felt remorseful. He still felt nearly overwhelming regret. But that was all his problem, not Dean’s, not anyone else’s. A Top’s misdeeds couldn’t be punched out of him like that. Cas turned his face into the scalding water, letting it sluice down his body and relax his muscles. He knew he deserved to hurt, and he wasn’t even a little sorry that he’d allowed Dean to Top him. It had been incredible – not something he wanted to do again in any kind of hurry – but surprisingly hot all the same.

The question was, where to go from here. As a punishment, it might not have been totally effective, but it wasn’t a complete wash either. Cas knew that to Dean, the past was now in the past. It was over, all of it. Everything that Cas had done in the last few months was confessed, discussed, and paid for. Next time they looked into each other’s eyes, Dean would see a clean slate in the Cerulean blue gaze, and maybe that could be closure enough.

Everyone but Michael assembled for breakfast in the dining room. Cas accepted the soft, quilted, sky blue knee pillow from Dean without remark, then he presented it to April as if she’d not selected it herself to match her eyes. Cas put her in place and petted her easily, taking her state of mind into himself and adjusting his touch accordingly.

He asked after Michael softly, and the troubled look Dean gave him spoke volumes.

“He’s still angry with me.”

“What did you expect?”

Dean scoffed. “I expected him to whip me and get over it, but that’s not what happened.”

“He didn’t whip you?” Cas was sitting very still. He was already seated when Sam and Jess slouched in in their pajamas, so no one but Dean and April had seen him limp his way to his chair.
He slipped a forkful of eggs to his mate and followed it up with a drink of juice that he leaned down to deliver, wincing as he sat back up.

“Oh, he did that too, but it didn’t do anything to mollify him. He’s pissed. He’s up there right now sulking. You’d think I cheated on him or something.”

Sam frowned and Jess turned to look quizzically at him.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

Cas started to answer, but Dean got there first. “It's private, Jess. I’m sorry, but it’s just a fight, and I’m not going to tell you about it.”

“You didn’t cheat on him though, did you?” Sam asked.

“Not exactly,” Cas put in. “Dean and I broke Michael’s chastity sentence last night.”

Dean ruffled at the end of the table, but Cas stilled him with a hand, saying, “I’m not giving any details, but they need to know the core of what’s going on. We’re not going to have hidden resentments floating around that get misconstrued. Did he tell you about our agreement for compensation from my side? He’s pretty angry with me too, and I…well…I agreed to something you’re not going to like.”

“Oh. Yeah. Thanks for that, Cas. Two weeks. Yeah, he told me all about it. You know the last time I went two weeks without sex? I think I was fourteen.”

Jess stifled a laugh, and Sam’s lips quirked up before he suppressed it.

“It doesn’t have to be two weeks of no sex at all. Just none between you and me. You still have Michael.”

“What part of ‘he’s pissed at me’ are you not hearing? I don’t get to touch myself – pardon the explicit topic Jess…” Dean seemed to have forgotten that Jess had already witnessed far more explicit actions than the words that were cascading from Dean’s mouth. “I don’t get to touch you, you can’t touch me, he’s NOT going to touch me. He said he’s not even going to let me blow him! Sorry Jess. Have you looked at the next two weeks? That’s your birthday, Cas. I always give you a birthday B.J.! It goes all the way up to my Rut. Your bright idea has me locked out until I Rut, and you know how I get the week before.”

Cas didn’t rise to the energy level that Dean had pouring out of him. He ate calmly. He fed his mate. “Are you finished with the self-pity? Have you thought it through yet? Try looking at the big picture.” Cas met his eye peacefully, and Dean’s frown turned into a pout.

“I thought you said you were going to wait for me to name it. You said it was my call.”

“That’s true, and if you want, I’ll speak to Michael and retract my offer. Think about it, Dean. I’ve cast the line out into the water, but you decide whether you want to bite the hook or not. Will this give you what you need?” Castiel let his genuine concern for Dean’s well-being into his eyes. He didn’t need to contend with the wolf this morning. Like Michael, it was sulking and choosing to hide itself from view.

Sam and Jess watched the pair like they were at Wimbledon. Something was going on that went deeper than they were going to be allowed in on, but even the parts they were witnessing had them both riveted.
“Two weeks is a long time to try to stay alpha.”

“You need the practice. Think of it as a Tantric exercise.”

“And you still want me to try to take your, uh,” Dean shot a look at Jess, wondering how much to say out loud, but then figuring that as a Sub, she was part of his club, and she’d understand. “You think I should try to stay alpha for the painful part?”

Castiel laughed quietly. “It’s up to you, Dean. I think it might be worth a try. I want you to feel absolved. What do you need to get you there?” Dean didn’t answer. He ate slowly, clearly thinking hard. “You gave me what I wanted, Dean. I just want to return the favor.”

“Michael’s not going to let you go back on your word.”

“He’s Omega, Dean. I’m Alpha. I have an advantage he lacks, and I’m not above exploiting that.”

“You suck. You know that, right? You knew I would say yes to this once you put it like that. It’s fucking perfect, you asshole. Two weeks is way longer than I would have been brave enough to ask you for, but it’s perfect. It’ll soothe Michael, and it’ll give me the severity I need. Fuck, I should say no just to watch you crawfish with Michael, but he doesn’t deserve that.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

Dean rolled his eyes and scoffed. “You know me way too well.”

“I know you very well, but I’m still never sure how far to act on what I know. I promised to let you in on our decisions. Did I break faith with that promise again? Did I act too quickly?”

Dean scrubbed a hand down his face. His wolf was beyond pleased. “Fuck if I know. It feels right though, doesn’t it?” (Simmer down, you moron), he shot at the grey wolf who was laughing in glee. The wolf always basked in a firm hand and decisive action from his Dom. Dean set his resolve, and he set down his fork. “All right, here’s me asking. Sorry Jess. Cas, I want you to spank me. I want you to use your hand, the hairbrush, and your black belt – the really supple one. I'd like to ask you to wait until the lines on my butt fade a little more, but it’s really your call. You set the day, time, and location. In addition, I want... shit... I want two weeks of complete... FUCK!... complete chastity. No sexual stimulation of any kind until I lock in with my mate when my Rut hits.”

Dean lowered his head and looked up sheepishly at Castiel. “I haven’t been with anyone but you for Rut since I was just a kid. Can you, uh... do you think Michael might be willing to let you in for just a little while? Would it be okay to ask him for that?”

“Oh, wow...” Sam whispered.

Cas glanced briefly at Sam, but quickly went back to Dean. “Dean, I’ve spent two cycles alone with my mate. Don’t you think Michael deserves the same level of respect? I’m not going anywhere. I’ll still be here when you come out. Think about how hurt he is right now, and why. If it’s really what you want, I’ll be there. You know I’ll always be there for you, but just think it through carefully before you ask him to share you when you’re both in cycle.”

“We don’t know he’ll Trip too, Cas,” Dean responded.

Cas scoffed. “He’s only a week behind you, Dean. He’ll Trigger.” Cas’ eyes glazed over as he thought it through, and Dean realized they’d been monopolizing the breakfast table. April was practically a footstool at Cas’ feet for all the participation and attention she was enjoying, and Sam and Jess had both been silent almost since they sat down. He sighed.
“Plans for the day, Sammy? What are you two up to? Are you doing anything fun?”

“What? Wait. Cas hasn’t answered you yet. You can’t just change the subject.” Sam was speaking to Dean, but his eyes were on Castiel.

Castiel responded in-kind, his eyes meeting Sam’s but his statement was for Dean. “Your request is acceptable, Dean. I will name the date, time, and location, and I’ll let you know. I ask that you attempt to kennel your wolf for the duration of the punishment, to the extent that you can.” He shifted his gaze to meet Dean’s green eyes. “Please try to settle your differences with Michael. You owe him the respect of taking his feelings seriously, but he owes you the same, and I say this as your Alpha. I expect you to meet your obligations to each other, not to take each other for granted. When either of you fall short, I expect you to make amends in good faith, not simply pay the price for your misdeeds as a calculated expenditure.” Castiel raised his eyebrows. “That is what Michael’s upset about, isn’t it Dean? Not that you broke chastity, but that you did it with a complete lack of regard for how it would feel to Michael?”

“Um, yeah. I think so. I didn’t think he would be this angry. I guess I was a bit of an asshole about it, but I don’t regret what we did, and I don’t think I should pretend that I do. I don’t know how else I could have faced him last night. Did he want me to lie?”

“You don’t have to lie to be contrite, Dean.”

“Contrition connotes remorse, Castiel. I’m not remorseful. I would do the same thing all over again. Wouldn’t you?” There was an alpha challenge in the words that he couldn’t have put there yesterday. The Claim bond flared between them, and Castiel’s ass cramped, making him wince.

He stared down the table at Dean, then he admitted, “Yes, I would. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Oh, wow…” Sam repeated in surprise. “I never thought I’d see the day. Holy shit.”

Dean startled. “Mind your own business, Sam. I’m serious. None of this leaves this room.”

Sam’s brows shot up. “Fuck, Dean! Do you know what this means? How did you even…?”

“It’s private, Sam! I’m not telling you anything. This is between Cas, Michael, April, and me. I don’t care if you know, but I’m not talking about it!”

“You don’t have to be ashamed, man. This is awesome!”

“I’m not ashamed, Sammy. It’s just private! Please keep it to yourself. Promise me.”

“Sam?” ventured Jessica. “What’s going on? What are you two talking about?” Sam answered her with a gesture toward Dean and a questioning look at his brother.

“Fine,” Dean conceded. “Explain it to Jess. Later. I’m not talking about it….” he pointed down the table at Cas who startled back in his chair in surprise. “And neither are you! None of this goes in your stupid, fucking Subject journal. None of this leaves this house. It’s private, you get me?”

“All right, if that’s what you want.” Cas’ eyes were wide. Sam responded with a long, low, quiet whistle and a deep breath.

They finished eating and stacked the plates. Sam and Jess volunteered to clean up. Cas let April take a chair since the meal was over, but no one seemed ready to disperse yet. Everyone was pensive. There seemed to be more to say, but no one knew how to broach the rest of it.
Dean noticed that April held her body stiffly this morning. “Are you all right?” he asked her.

She nodded, but she didn’t really look all right. Cas glanced at her, but then looked away. “We need to get dressed. I told Bobby to meet us at eleven. I assume you want to be there for that, Dean?”

“Yeah, I’ll go. I want him to see that we’re united on this.” Dean fiddled with the stack of plates in front of him, rotating them all to line the scalloped edges up in a spiral pattern. Finally, he broke the silence. “I’m back to having nothing to give you for your birthday. Can’t even fall back on sex now. I don’t know what to do, man.”

“Dean, look at me.” Castiel sat forward, ignoring what that did to his lower body. “You’re going to be fine. We’ll get through it together, all of us. We’ll pull Michael in to help. He’s going to be practicing maintaining his Omega anyway, and that will help you make it through. It’s only two weeks. It’s not going to kill either of you. Focus on Michael. Lean on me. Vent to April. You can do this. Your body needs a break anyway. You’ve got one more powerful punishment coming before I make you stop to heal. It’s time, Babe. You need the break to let your veins re-strengthen and your muscles heal. After you finish with your cycle, after a couple of weeks, you nearly always go extra bratty. I can step back in for that if you want. You should be ready for a restart by then if you can maintain the alpha through your Rut. What do you think, Dean?”

“I still owe Michael one more too. He didn’t want to count last night’s toward my, uh, my big plan from before. He said it was only payment for the broken chastity. I told you, Cas, he’s really mad.”

“We’ll talk to him together. I’m not going to allow you to take more than your body can handle, even if you are the world’s biggest brat. We’ll figure it out. Corporal punishment isn’t the only option.”

“I was thinking maybe ask him to consider our two-week chastity extension to cover the remainder of what I owe. How about that? I gotta tell you, man. I’m feeling pretty thoroughly punished over here already.”

“Good luck with that, Dean. I’m not helping you there. It goes against what he seems to be looking for from you.”

In the end, Dean asked. He asked sheepishly, laying all of it out there to Michael who listened with a stony face, but it didn’t work. Michael agreed that Dean’s body needed a break, but instead he assigned lines. He assigned Dean lines like a fifth-grader.

“Hand them over to me by the end of the weekend, Dean. I want us clear before I have to go to training. I don’t want to try juggling my Omega designation with finishing up your punishment.”

“By the end of the weekend? It’s not possible! It’ll take me all night, both nights!”

“Then I guess you’d better get started. Eight-hundred. Before Monday morning.”

“Look, Michael, I’m sorry about what I said last night. I don’t think you’re…”

“Forget it, Dean. I said things too. I don’t want to talk about it. We don’t need the words. I can feel you well enough to know when you’re just shouting at me out of frustration and not really meaning it. I assume you can do the same. I want to just walk away and pretend it never happened.”

“But I hurt you. I didn’t ever want to do that. I’m sorry.”

“For what you said or for what you did? Never mind. It’s just something I have to get used to, Dean.
You’re a brat. It’s your nature to push people. I should know better by now. Let’s just forget it. Please?”

Dean sighed and looked at the paper in his hand. It was a needlessly verbose and pompous sentence, and eight-hundred repetitions were going to take him a long time. Dean nodded and folded the page, tucking it in his pocket. He kissed Michael’s cheek, grabbed his boots, and hustled down the stairs to meet Cas. He could listen to the other owners and participate while scratching the first few lines out. They knew him. It wouldn’t be weird, would it?

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Both of them limped slightly as they walked down the sidewalk hand-in-hand. Dean had deliberately chosen to walk on Castiel’s left side ostensibly to allow the Alpha the street side. It honored the gentleman in his big dog, and it allowed Cas to feel a sense of protection. But really, Dean wanted Cas’ ring where he could touch it. He lifted Castiel’s hand to his lips and kissed the ring, much as Cas had done in that now-famous photograph that popped up in odd places. They had somehow been nominated as New York’s hottest couple despite the fact they lived nowhere near New York. Just like all those weeks ago, a flashbulb popped in their faces, and Castiel snarled. Dean grinned, though, and waved at the lone paparazzi cheekily as he pulled Cas onto a side street. The photographer didn’t follow. Occurrences like that were rare in Lawrence, but not unheard of.

Cas sighed and shook his head, wrapping an arm around Dean’s shoulders and grimacing at the faster pace. “Thought we were safe at home,” he mumbled.

“Guess not,” Dean mumbled back, turning his head to make sure they weren’t being followed. “You’re hurting pretty bad, Cas. You all right? Did you see I set the enema kit out for you? You’re going to want to take care of that. Trust me.”

Castiel pulled Dean in by his neck and kissed a wet one on the side of his face. “You’re a fucking brat, Dean Winchester,” he whispered nastily into his ear just as he pushed on the door to Zeke’s. The door didn’t budge. He knocked loudly.

“Fine. Don’t use it. Doesn’t make any difference to me.”

“Yeah! Coming!” Zeke shouted from the back. He hustled forward and let them in. “Sorry Alpha. Hey Dean. I was just cleaning up the back room for you folks. You’re all set. What can I get you?”

“Beer please, Zeke. Two of them. Thanks for letting us come by early.” Dean said, pulling Castiel through the door and not pausing to chat. He didn’t want Zeke to notice Cas’ stride, awkward as it was with his limp.

“You got it. Go on through. Make yourselves comfortable. You mind if I just leave the bar open? I might get some customers this early, and since I’m here and all… Are you folks doing anything you need privacy for?” Zeke walked around the bar and dug out two tall mugs from behind it as he spoke. He wasn’t looking at the two wolves.

“Nah. It’s just a meeting. It’s your place, Zeke. Knock yourself out. Send Bobby and Benny through when they get here, would’ja?”
Eavesdroppers, had there been anyone else in the bar, would not have noticed the codewords. Zeke said “privacy” in his question, and Dean included “knock” in his response. Just like that they were secure. No one would be allowed close enough to hear anything said, even shouted, within the back room without their permission. The room had a backdoor that led out into the alley behind, but it was locked from the inside. Trust, long earned, passed between the parties in simple acknowledgment.

“Of course.”

The two wolves ducked through the beaded curtain and into the back. The construction of the doorway was deceptive. Carefully positioned fans provided enough white noise, and the nearest tables were a good distance away. No one could approach the curtain close enough to hear anything inside with being observed. They’d found Zeke’s back room useful many times over the years, each of the four owners keeping it handy for a different purpose. Weekend owner’s meetings nearly always happened here.

Dean scooted into one of the few booths in the back room, and he pulled Cas in tightly beside him. They’d only just accepted their drinks when Bobby arrived. He took one look at the couple, raised both eyebrows in surprise, and said, “Wow, I did not see THAT coming.”

Castiel smiled in spite of himself, but Dean sparked up. “See what coming? You got a problem, Singer?”

Bobby slid into the opposite bench. “Nope. None of my business. I’m just surprised as hell, that’s all. What put an idea like that in your heads?”

Castiel opened his mouth to speak, but Dean slapped a hand across it. “Unnh. Private, remember?” he reminded his fiancé. Cas rolled his eyes, but nodded, and Dean removed his hand.

“You had to leash the big guy, I suspect. You worried about what’s going to go down next time he gets his paws on Dean?” Bobby asked, then he nodded to Zeke as the bartender approached. “Just water, Zeke, thanks.”

“No.” Cas took a drink from his mug, and Dean blushed. They hadn’t discussed it, but since the act had been more a Domination of the wolf by his own Alpha, purely internally, neither of them was worried. The wolf was tame for Castiel. He would know not to touch a hair on Dean’s head that Cas didn’t want touched, and he wouldn’t dare displease the holder of his leash. The wolf was powerful, but he wasn’t stupid, and he was no masochist.

Bobby nodded and didn’t press for details. He wasn’t going to get them. “I count three of us, and LaFitte is never late. Should I take that to mean that the change in timing was for my benefit alone? You got something to say to me, Alpha?”

“I need to ask you a favor first.”

Bobby sat back in surprise. He knew why he was here alone, and that didn’t fit with a favor request. Castiel deferred to Dean. “I, uh, need to see if you can find my dad, Bobby. I need to check on him. It’s been too long.” Dean kept his eyes on the salt grains he’d spilled onto the table.

“I see. He called you, didn’t he?”

Dean looked up. “You know something?”

“Yes, I do. Dean, I’ve had eyes on your dad since he waltzed out. Who do you think pays his medical bills? His rent? He hasn’t held a job in ten years. I know exactly where he is.”
“And you never TOLD ME!??” What the fuck, Bobby!?

“Dean, please. He made me swear not to last time he moved. He’s bad off. He’s really sick. He doesn’t want you boys to see him like that. The man may be broken, but he’s still a man. He’s still alpha, and he has a right to his privacy.”

“He would never take charity. How do you get away with paying for shit for him?” Dean leaned forward, intent.

“He thinks it’s a split between a government program for disabled Lupins and an old Steel-Worker’s pension. I’ve been letting the statements dwindle down once I was sure there wasn’t much time left. He’s dying, Dean. I’m sorry, son.”

Dean softened. It wasn’t Bobby’s fault. In fact, Bobby had been doing Dean’s job all this time with no gratitude or compensation. Dean owed him more than just the money he’d put in. He deserved better than Dean smacking him in the face with an adolescent kneejerk response. “Thanks, Bobby. I know. He told me. That’s why I need to see him. I have to know he’s not in any pain. Sam needs a chance to make things right. We just wanna say…goodbye. You know?”

“I’ll send the address to your phone. Be careful, Dean. He’s not the man you knew.”

Dean pressed his lips together. He tried to hold Bobby’s eye, but he couldn’t do it. He just nodded, feeling Cas press his thigh into Dean’s and wrap an arm around him.

Bobby gave them just a minute or two, taking his water from Zeke with a nod of thanks, and waiting until the beaded curtain that blocked out the noise from the front had stopped swinging violently. “That’s not why I’m here early though, is it? I could have answered that one in a text message.”

“You know what I want to discuss, alpha,” Castiel confirmed. “I want to hear it from you.”

Bobby shot a glance at Dean. He wasn’t usually present when the details were brought to light, but Castiel would not have brought Dean if he’d wanted it kept quiet. Recent developments between the couple must have deeper roots than just kinky sex if Bobby was reading this right. He cleared his throat and furrowed his brow. Deflection wasn’t going to work today. It was time to settle up, and he knew it.

“What do you want to know?”

“Don’t play games with me, Singer,” Cas snapped. “Did you authorize Gabriel to set fire to the farmhouse after I specifically instructed Claire to make sure no one died?”

“Claire was a mile downstream by the time Gabe struck the match. She had nothing to do with it, and she couldn’t have controlled your brother anyway.”

Bobby and Dean both jumped when Castiel’s hand struck the table, sending his beer mug wobbling precariously and spilling some of its contents. Dean scrambled to right it and catch the flow with their few napkins. Cas’ eyes blazed. “Answer the question!”

Bobby calmed himself with a deep breath. “I provided the technology, and I trained him to use it.”

“You promised me…”

“And what was that supposed to mean, huh? Alpha? You know how this works! You’ve been giving me those upfront instructions for years and all the while you slip me money and resources under the table. You made it mighty clear that the less you know about the details the better. I’m not
gonna just run the sleaze balls back underground and let them set up shop somewhere else. Do you have any idea how many slaves and prisoners are out there right now? You just gonna let them keep piling up?"

“NO! I want you to start working with the authorities. It’s not your right, Bobby! It’s not your right to execute punishment on these people.” Cas pointed his finger right at Bobby, driving it home hard.

“The authorities?! Fuck, Cas! The system isn’t even remotely prepared to handle this. Turning the criminals over to the cops means the “authorities” get their grubby hands on the Omegas too. The public system fails Omegas in every single possible way. In some ways, it’s worse than where we’re saving them from. You wanna point some fingers? You promised me legal support way back when we started this. Where are the laws, Alpha? Where’s the reform you said was coming? You want me to do this, then we do it in a way that puts these people in safe hands, not rapes them again and again until they die! Don’t you sit there and put your fucking finger in my face!”

“The laws are in place! I gave you what I promised!”

“Some of ’em maybe, but there’s no enforcement. They can’t put in the safeguards without funding, and no one gives two shits about Omega slaves!”

“You promised me no one else would be executed.” Cas was still and cold. “Are Ruby and Alistair dead?”

“They’re both dead.”

“You’re positive.”

“Yep.”

“And Gabriel knows.”

“Gabriel knows.”

“What’s it going to take to get through to you? I promised you I would never… Bobby you’ve done so much for me, but I can’t have you writing your own tickets. You answer to me, or you excuse yourself and set up your own shop.”

“Hold up!” Dean interrupted. “Hold up a second.” He leaned in close to try to separate them as much as he could. “Cas, you can’t mean what you’re saying. I mean, I know what you’ve always said, but that’s not what it seemed like you meant. Jesus, even I thought you were, you know, wink-wink-nudge-nudge. I thought your Batman-no-kill rules were all about the public face. You HAD to know what was going on behind the curtain. You had to know.”

Cas frowned at him and blinked. “I knew there were unsavory actions that I was better off not hearing too deeply into the details, but murder? You think I approved Bobby to commit murder? What’s wrong with you people? When did I ever give you that idea?”

Dean scoffed, and Bobby looked away, sipping his water. Dean had heard enough. “Holy fuck, the two of you! I swear! All right, look.” He pointed at Bobby with an authoritative air. “You go too far. You’re a nearly amoral sociopath, and you need a fucking leash or you have no rules at all. I just thank God you’re on our side, and yes, I know everything you’ve done for me too. This ain’t about gratitude. It’s about putting it all out there plain as day, so we can get on the same fucking page for once.”

He took a breath and turned to the side, shifting the finger from Bobby to Cas. “And you…you’re a
control freak and a psychopath and trying to figure out from one minute to the next what you’re really up to is not something any of us have ever gotten straight. You lie as easy as you breathe if it suits your plans.” Dean bowled over Castiel’s spluttering protestation. It was all true, and pretending it wasn’t wouldn’t get them anywhere but deeper in the muck. “You do it, Castiel James. Don’t try to deny it.”

“The two of you talk to me though, so I know what’s what. Bobby, find another way. I don’t care what it is, but no one else dies. If you can’t do it, then we stop doing this. Believe me. He’s serious. He always has been, and I know what you thought you had the authority to approve, but you don’t. Maybe none of us understood, but we do now.”

“You turned my brother into a killer!” Castiel accused.

“I did no such thing, Castiel. You need to talk to your brother!”

“Shut up!” Dean shouted between them. “Look, I know I’m number three here, and you don’t have to listen to a word I say, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to say it! Cas, this is on you, too.”

“Why, because I trusted him to follow my instructions?”

“Because you never followed up. You had to know. You HAD to! You delegated this to Bobby, and then you put blinders on and refused to hear any details. What was he supposed to think from that? You gave him two clear instructions, dude. You said, ‘get the Omegas out safely’ and ‘don’t let any of it be traceable back to The Facility’. If you ever told him anything else, I sure as hell didn’t hear it. As far as I can tell, you green lighted everything he’s ever done.”

“You weren’t there for all of our conversations, Dean,” Castiel protested. “Bobby knows what I expected from him. He may be a wizard at spinning intent out of unspoken words, but he knows my feelings.”

“That true, Singer?” Dean asked him directly. “Did you know?”

Bobby ran a finger through the condensation on his glass. “I knew.”

“Fuck, Bobby,” said Dean softly.

Bobby looked up and met Dean’s eye. “Yeah,” he sighed. “Thanks, pup. Thanks for trying. It looked from the outside like I had that green light. He kept the money flowing, and he never got in my way or asked me any questions, but I always knew how he would respond if he knew how deep into the slime we have to go sometimes. He’s made it abundantly clear on a number of occasions.”

“This is your ultimatum, Singer,” Cas told him starkly. “It stops, and you find another way, or all the money dries up.”

Bobby stared at him without responding. Dean looked back and forth. They looked like a Mated couple deep inside their bond, but Dean knew better.

“Where is my brother?” Castiel asked at last.

“He’s gone to ground with Christian outside of Vegas. He’s helping with the newest rescuees. We have a couple of pregnancies to manage.”

“Call him. I want to speak with him.”

“Not a chance.”
“Call him, Bobby.”

“When he hears your voice, he’ll hang up on you, and he’ll never answer to this number again. Leave him alone, Alpha. He’ll come around.”

“Robert Singer, get your fucking phone out and get my brother on the line.”

Bobby rolled his eyes, but he obeyed. He handed Cas the phone, already ringing. Castiel took it and stood up stiffly, moving out into the bar to speak with his brother.

“Well that went well,” snarked Bobby.

“You’re an asshole sometimes,” Dean told him.

Bobby regarded the alpha that he still saw as a pup. He first met Dean through John Winchester, who had been a good friend once-upon-a-time. After John crumbled, Bobby watched Dean grow up much too fast, spending most of his after-school time in the piano bar that John favored for its proximity to his house, and its smoky darkness. He knew Dean was only there to keep an eye on his father and help him make it home every morning after last call, but Bobby paid off the pianist to put a wing over Dean’s shoulders and teach him the basics of a standard blues riff. They were both surprised when Dean turned out to be a natural. Bobby was mostly certain that Dean never knew about the payout; never even knew Bobby was there.

Bobby stepped in when John took off. He arranged for Dean to take legal custody of his younger brother. He made sure the house and the car were signed over legally. He checked in on them enough that Dean began to call him ‘Mom’ in jest. It made Bobby’s heart ache every time he heard it, but he laughed easily. He helped both boys get all the I’s dotted and T’s crossed to get financial aid and acceptance into college. He helped Dean learn how to manage a household and a budget. He insisted that Dean major in Education and minor in Gender Studies, carefully managing his schedule each semester to make sure that the adolescent alpha had at least one class per year under the fusty young Alpha professor with the unruly dark hair.

It had taken Castiel way too long to act on what Bobby knew was there under the surface, ready to bubble to life. He’d nearly interceded himself, but just as Dean was about to graduate, Cas finally made a move on him, and the rest is history, as they say.

“I’m sorry, Dean,” Bobby said.

“Don’t apologize to me, alpha,” Dean retorted. “You fucked this up. I may have made it sound like he’s mostly to blame here because he needs to hear that. But you and I know better, don’t we?”

Bobby found holding Dean’s eye difficult, but he did it. “Yeah, I know. Look, for what it’s worth, I didn’t mean any of this to turn out like this.”

“You’re talking to the wrong Winchester. You owe him your ass, plain and simple. Let me guess, he feels like he owes you a debt so deep that he promised he wouldn’t ever bend you over and give you what you deserve. That right?”

“Something like that,” Bobby admitted.

“Yeah, well how’s that working out? You operate knowing there are no consequences for your actions. Why aim for Heaven if there isn’t a Hell?”

Castiel rejoined them with a grim face, handing Bobby his phone back and taking his place next to Dean again. Dean didn’t pause. He continued as if there was no interruption.
“The Alpha may not have ever really read into your profile, but I have. You ARE a sociopath, and you’re a brat too, aren’t you? All it takes is a tiny chink in a rule and you scuttle through that fucker like it’s not even there. Some people might think you can’t be a brat if you aren’t O or S, but you know better, don’t you, Bobby? Believe me, it takes one to know one.”

“Bobby?” Cas cocked his head, trying to catch up. Dean seemed very intent, but he wasn’t sure where this was going.

Dean didn’t wait to catch Cas up. “But your wolf has gone to sleep. He’d been more than half dozing since your mate died, and he’s gone completely now, am I right?”

“I haven’t heard a peep out of the wolf in twenty years, Dean,” Bobby admitted quietly.

Dean nodded. “Brats need attention, Bobby. If it’s not for your wolf, then what? What do you need? What’s it going to take to stop you? Stop you from making deals with the devil all the damn time? It’s got to stop, alpha. What’s it going to take?”

Bobby narrowed his eyes at Dean. “Careful there, son.”

“I’m not your son.”

“Dean!” chided Cas sharply.

“What?”

“Is this how it’s going now, Alpha? You let him fuck you, and now he catapults past Benny and me to sit right beneath you? I didn’t sign up for that.” Bobby dismissed Dean and focused on Cas. Dean’s words were hitting a little too close to home.

“The hierarchies stay the same, Bobby, and watch your mouth. Answer his question.”

“I’ll tell you one thing I need, Alpha, WE need you back on your game. You asked for some time to handle your personal affairs, and we gave it to you, but you’ve been balls deep in Winchesters for two months now, and you barely notice the rest of us are still here. We’re facing a budget crisis that’s about to dry up my rescue funding whether you cut the tap or not. We’ve got a staffing shortage in every department, and you and your boy here just cut your own hours in half. We have to define the future leadership, or we’re gonna be just a one-generation flash in the pan!” Bobby was sneering as he got his momentum going.

“We’ve got the FBI breathing down our necks. Did you know they’ve already started interviews? Don’t give me that look! I know it’s all my fucking fault. We’ve been over that, but you promised that dealing with the Feds would be on you, Castiel. AND, you fucking promised me legislative support for more than just Omega restitution. Where is it? Omegas still have no protection in the public schools, and there’s no requirement that Lupin adolescents be protected when they Present in public spaces. What are you even working on? When’s the last time you checked in on our allies in Washington? Do you even know where your lovely mother’s bill is at the moment? What are we going to do if it passes?”

Cas punched up a text conversation he’d had with his closest congressman this morning and held it out for Bobby to read just as the curtain swung open.

“The bill’s dead in the water, fellas,” announced Benny, strolling up casually. “We forced a vote late last night and killed it dead.”

“Yes, I see that,” replied Bobby, squinting at Castiel’s phone before handing it back.
“Now, I don’t know what all the hollerin’ is about, but it looks like you boys started without me. Care to catch me up?” Zeke pushed through the beaded curtain, took Benny’s order for a glass of iced tea and promised refills for the others. He noticed the sticky remains of Cas’ beer, and mopped it up with his bar rag without comment.

“Nothin’?” remarked Benny, scooting in close to Bobby on the bench seat.

“Bobby believes I’ve been overly distracted for the last couple of months,” Cas supplied into the silence.

“And Castiel thinks I’ve gone rogue with my death squads, and I just kill folks at random,” Bobby grumbled.

“Ah. Sorry I missed it,” Benny muttered, taking the glass from Zeke with a quiet thanks. “What about you?” he asked Dean.

“Me? I’m peachy.”

“Well, it sounds like Bobby just laid out the agenda for today’s meeting. We got any ideas folks? Scratch Naomi off the list. That action item’s been handled. That POS of a bill ain’t coming back. It’s deader than a coffin nail, and she’s tumbling fast behind it. Her approval ratings are in the toilet. Congrats, Alpha. Looks like you finally won one.” Benny raised his glass in toast, but no one responded.

“All right,” he snapped, setting his glass back down with a thud. “I ain’t the most charismatic guy any of y’all know, but I usually get a better reception than this. What the fuck is going on? I take it by my evident late arrival that there was something on the table that I wasn’t meant to hear.”

Dean broke the ice. “You heard about Ruby and Alistair?”

“Oh. That. Yep, Bobby and me had a nice long chat about that late last night. Didn’t we, Singer? You, uh, feeling okay this morning?” Benny leaned back in his booth seat, and Dean frowned, noticing all at once how close Benny was sitting to Bobby, and how tense Bobby was, leaning into the wall.

“He’s not going to be giving you any more trouble, Cas. Are you?” Benny raised his brows as he stared Bobby down.

Bobby narrowed his eyes at Benny as he had just done to Dean, but he had no footing with Benny. Benny outranked him in seniority with The Facility and in both gender designations that mattered. Bobby had nothing but age, experience, and grit over Benny, and the grit was a close thing. Benny laughed a deep chuckle at him.

“What did you do?” Dean asked Benny, nearly in awe.

Benny turned his sparkle onto Dean. “What’d I do? Well, it seems to me we got, oh, I’d guess 75% of the fellas at this table walking ginger today, and I know I’m right as rain, so you do the math.”

Dean blinked at him in disbelief and then turned back to Bobby.

“Did you fight it?” he asked Bobby, trying to imagine how a DF between the two alphas who’d always gotten along so well would go down. Dean hadn’t noticed any evident discomfort out of the older wolf, but he hadn’t been watching for it either.

“None of your damn business, pup.”
“Not a pup, alpha,” Dean reminded him.

“No, the real question is my best friend over here,” Benny broke in. “You got anything to tell me, Brother?” Benny fixed a powerfully astute gaze on Castiel.

“Um, it’s uh, private, apparently,” Cas replied quietly, drinking deeply from his mug. Benny laughed loudly.

“Who told you that? Dean?” Benny turned back to Dean, still laughing. “You don’t get to lay something like that down, make him sit like that, and then not share with the class, Cher.”

“What the fuck, Benny? How does everyone know already?” Dean exclaimed. “He’s not even walking around! He’s just sitting there!”

“Yeah,” Benny agreed. “Sitting there with a pole up his ass. Last time he looked that uncomfortable I had to make a midnight run to the drugstore for laxatives. You remember that Cas? I forgot what you ate, but it was bad! That was what, Junior year, I think. Plus, don’t look now, but your man’s mirroring your every move.”

Dean couldn’t resist testing it. He flicked at a grain of salt on the table and watched in wonder as Castiel’s finger twitched. He did it again. And then again, grinning. Cas put a stop to it by gripping his beer mug in both hands.

“All right, all right, don’t make him dance or anything…”

“I appreciate your attempts at levity, Benedict, but we need to finish this conversation before we move on.” Castiel was indeed sitting very stiffly, Dean realized, even for Castiel.

Benny swallowed and then looked between Cas and Bobby. “What, the one where you can’t decide if a DF is the right answer because he saved your brother’s life, and he took care of you and Dean both when you were fledglings? That conversation?”

“Christ, Benny!” Dean exclaimed. “Get over yourself, Castiel. Turn your fucking brain off for a minute and listen to your Alpha. I’ve never known him to lead you wrong. If he thinks there’s another way, then by all means, let’s do that. Me, I got tired of waiting for you to do it, and I’m sick of the body count. I don’t think it would be overkill if he gets the same message from us both, do you?”

“I already told you I was done, LaFitte!” Bobby protested, and Dean almost spewed his beer all over the table at the out-and-out bratty tone from the alpha whom he viewed as the closest thing he’d known to a father in the last ten years.

“Yeah, you did,” Benny agreed, “But I’ve heard you say that before, and then you went right back out and did it again. Forgive me if I doubt your credibility for the moment, Singer.”

“Bobby?” Cas asked him, looking him straight in the eye. “Is that what it’s going to take? Tell me the truth. Can you change on your own, or do you need a leash?”

Benny put his hand up between them. “NO! Don’t ASK him, Cas. You decide. Pull that rod out of your ass and beat the ghost of your father out of your head with it, and make a fucking decision, Alpha!”

Castiel snarled at Benny fiercely, baring his upper teeth.
“Good,” Benny responded. “Get pissed off. Stoke that rage and then do something with it.”

“NO!” Cas shouted. “You don’t control me any more than Bobby does! I’ll make my own fucking decisions, Benedict, and my decision takes Bobby’s answer into account. Shut the fuck up a minute! And leave my father out of it!” That last was an afterthought, and Cas couldn’t have explained where it had come from. He’d never felt the need to defend Zachariah to anyone, least of all someone who’d never even met the man.

Dean looked around the table and realized that too many of their eyes had gone red. Things could turn ugly very quickly this way. He calmed his breathing and stayed very still, trying to send soothing pheromones out to the others.

“Well?” Castiel spat at Bobby with his wolf’s voice. “Answer the question! Is this what it’s going to take, Robert Singer? Do you need me to put you on your knees?”

Bobby blinked at him. Like Dean, Bobby knew an explosive situation when he saw one. He didn’t have a good answer. Benny was right. He shouldn’t have been asked. It was entirely Castiel’s decision. “Sir, I submit to your will, whatever that is. You know I do. I trust you, Alpha.”

“No you don’t!” The wolf was still in front, but only because Cas wanted him there. “If you trusted me, we wouldn’t be in this mess. You would have obeyed me from the start! Answer the question! And not with a fake submission. Tell me the truth. Do you need me to put you down?”

Bobby swallowed heavily. He wanted to believe they had somewhere left to go besides there, but he felt like he was in a room with no doors. He didn’t know how it had come to this, and he suddenly wanted to let someone else bear the weight for a while. It was the hardest nod he’d ever had to force his neck into performing. He knew now that even Castiel wasn’t immune to submitting to a Claim, for whatever reason, and that helped. A little.

“We’re not doing it here, obviously.” Castiel’s voice and his eyes were back to normal. “I will see you this evening at your house. Be as ready for me as you believe you deserve to be.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Bobby Singer would have crumbled at the humiliation had anyone else witnessed what he just agreed to, but he felt Benny put a supportive hand on his arm, and Dean pressed the side of his lower leg against Bobby’s as well. They were Pack, in a sense, and they were here for him. They’d both been here before. Both of them had knelt before Castiel – Dean many, many times, but even Benny couldn’t be called a newbie. Early hierarchies had been established both pre- and post-Keller for the two of them, and in the intervening years, Benny’s place had been forcibly reinstated on several occasions. He was pushy enough when he got the itch that he would need occasional reminders, probably forever, although the outcome was never going to change.

“No on to other matters,” Castiel said calmly. Dean prayed that a surreptitious palm to his crotch didn’t count as illicit touching. He couldn’t help himself. His erection was massively uncomfortable, and he didn’t have the leverage to adjust.

“I recommend we approve Sarah Blake for a limited access study within the testing zones of The Facility. I expect her to be escorted at all times, and I want her with someone who can explain to her what she’s seeing when anything uncomfortable happens. I recommend Sam Winchester as her mentor. He’s only got one hourly class next term, so he has time.” Cas was entirely himself again, leaving the other three to scramble to catch up.

It was a hard fought argument, but Sarah finally got the approval she wanted. There were contingencies of course.
The house was quiet when they got home several hours later. Cas gave Dean a chaste kiss on the cheek, and then hurried into his office to record his notes and get started on his action items. He had quite a few. Bobby, it seemed, had a point about how much slack there was in what Cas used to take care of and what he’d been doing lately.

Dean ducked his head into his bedroom where Michael was laid out on the bed with headphones in his ears and a laptop open on his lap.

“What?” he asked aggressively.

Dean frowned. “You’ve got the rest of the day to sulk, and then I expect you back to normal. Deal?”

“What?” Michael responded. “Is that all?”

“No. There’s business too. Rolling Stone magazine will be here tomorrow and Tuesday to do photos and an interview. The house needs to be ready, and you and April have to decide whether to be here for the interviews or make yourselves scarce.”

“Tomorrow?! Fuck, why didn’t you tell me sooner? There’s crap I need to do. Jesus, Dean! They can’t photograph the house like this!”

“Relax, Michael. The house looks fine. Just get the staff to tidy up a little bit, and we’re ready.”

Michael fixed him with a withering glare. “You’re a moron sometimes, I swear. How did I wind up with someone so irreparably male?”

“Excuse me?”

“Get out of my way, alpha. I need to find Fred. Despite what you think, there IS work that needs to be done before your dirty boxers end up in the pages of Rolling Stone magazine.”

Dean stood in the doorway, blinking for a few seconds after Michael disappeared. Eventually, he shrugged, cracked his neck, sent Michael a firm swat through the bond that emanated just from the alpha, and trotted back downstairs to let April know she had a decision to make too.

He found her in the Conservatory, playing softly a tune he didn’t recognize. He got fairly close before he realized she was singing as well. It was hauntingly beautiful, and heartbreakingly sad. Dean took up his usual place in the bend and let her finish. She met his eye, and she sang to him. It was a song about broken trust from a young lover and hopes dashed too soon.

“I don’t know that song. Who’s is it?” he asked as she finished up.

“That one’s mine,” she admitted. “I write tunes sometimes. That one was from a couple of years ago. I knew this boy back home, and he kinda broke my heart. It was very tragic and teenaged and dramatic. The song’s not very good, but I was in that sort of mood, I guess.”

Dean slid away from the piano and crossed the room to her writing desk, pulling his page of lines from his pocket. “I didn’t know you wrote songs. That was really good. If I didn’t know better, I would have sworn it was from, like, an Ingrid Michaelson or someone like that. You mind if I use
your desk? I have to do lines for Michael, and I’m way behind.”

She smiled and followed him. “There’s paper in the second drawer, and there’s pens in the top. What kind of lines? What’d you do? Will it bother you if I talk while you write?”

“I could use the company,” Dean replied. “Here, come see what that asshole put down for me. I have to do eight-hundred before Monday morning. By the way, Rolling Stone is coming here to interview us. Do you want in?”

“God, no. I pass.” She read over his shoulder as he picked up where he’d left off. “How many do you have so far?”

“Eighteen,” he admitted. “I tried to get some done during our meeting, but I forgot all about it until near the end.”

“Yikes,” she sympathized. “What does it say?” She read out loud as he wrote:

“I, Dean Michael Winchester, swear upon the graves of every ancestor who bore my blood before me, that I will never, ever concoct such a dastardly and cowardly scheme as to forcibly eject my own beloved, loyal, dashing young mate, especially should he be carrying my first born child at the time, from the warm, comforting confines of my 1967 Chevrolet Impala and into the cold, wet, dark night alone and unprotected out of a destructive and fruitless attempt to test the bounds of love and/or esteem that my fiancé holds for me.”

“You can’t write that eight-hundred times before Monday morning.”

“I have to try.”

“I think I can match your handwriting well enough. Hand me one of those pages.” April pulled a chair up to the opposite side of the desk.

“Thanks, but I need to do what I can on my own. I don’t want to get you in trouble, and we’d be bound to get caught.” He didn’t look up, and he didn’t stop writing.

“I’ve done a lot of lines in my time, Dean. People’s handwriting changes as they get tired. There’s no reason we would get caught.”

“Oh yes we would. Cas would feel that kind of tedium from you. He would know, and he’s already proven he’ll rat me out. Plus, he loves having any chance to wail on you. It’s not worth the risk.” He glanced up at her. She was pouting, but it was just a frustrated pout, not a look of defiance. “Stay and talk to me. Tell me about last night. You looked shaken up this morning.”

“Nah, I’m fine. It was weird though. He’s usually very forceful, and I enjoy that, but he was obviously in pain, and it threw us both off. I’m not complaining, it was just strange. I think maybe I tensed up wrong.” She watched him write for a while but didn’t renew her offer.

Eventually, she broke the silence. “Dean, do you ever think we might do a scene for Castiel together? You know, you and me? Maybe Michael too. Is that something you ever talk about?”

He cleared his throat uncomfortably and stole another glance at her. “April, I’m gay. You know that, right? It’s nothing personal.”

“No, I know. We wouldn’t have to be in contact together, though. Just you and me both doing his bidding together. It wouldn’t even have to be sexual. I, uh, well shit, now I’m embarrassed.”
“Out with it,” he prompted, still writing feverishly.

“When we all got our asses beat together in the kitchen, and he went right from fucking me to you and Michael…”

“You liked that?” he didn’t look up. He wanted her to be safe in her expression, and he knew a private confession when he heard one.

“Mm-hmm. And I liked watching the Claiming too. And even before that, when he was just spanking you in the parlor in front of everyone. That was really hot. Sorry, I guess it wasn’t so enjoyable for you.”

Dean laughed, still writing. “Yeah, not so much. I hate the punishment spankings.”

“I don’t. Well, not really.” She paused and then huffed, “If you hate them, why do you act the way you do? Are the rules that hard to follow?”

He glanced up at that question, but frowned and focused back down. “Did you read the sentence? Did you see what I did? I can’t help it, April. It just happens. I don’t plan this shit out really, and I’m not usually thinking about the consequences when I do it.”

“You planned what happened last night, didn’t you?”

“Not really. I mean, we planned to do it eventually, or try at least, but we never meant to have it happen like that, just spur-of-the-moment. I wasn’t in trouble for doing it, just for doing it when I did. I was already in chastity.”

“And the chastity was for throwing the table?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And you threw the table because you felt ignored by both of them, and you wanted to get their attention.”

He chuckled in a self-deprecating way. “Do you have a point?”

“No, not really. I’m just trying to figure you out, Dean. I’ve never met anyone like you before. Or Michael.”

“Yeah, we’re a strange pair.”

“Michael’s not gay, right? He’s bi, I guess.” Her tone was casual, but Dean knew how to recognize a fishing cast when he heard one, and he went on alert.

“Michael is bisexual,” he confirmed.

“Well, he and Castiel both played with you together. If you don’t want to, I understand, but do you think Michael would ever be interested?” She crossed her arms on the desk and laid her cheek against one arm in an adorably disarming way.

Dean thought hard for a minute. She could be headed in a lot of different directions with a question like that, but none of them were pointed at a simple desire for an interesting scene partner. “Be very careful, kid,” he said at last. “You remember what happened when Michael made a suggestion like that to Castiel.”

“Oh, that’s right. Alpha got pretty steamed, didn’t he?” Dean put his pen down and looked up.
“Don’t play this game, April. It’s fire you’re playing with. You or Michael, or both of you are going to get singed. Is he in this with you?”

“What? No. It’s not like that.”

“Then tell me what it’s like.” Dean was worried suddenly. He wasn’t sure what he was worried about. He noticed she had her bottom lip between her teeth, and he reached over and freed it carefully. “Your mate thinks you’re up to something.”

“I know,” she admitted. “So does Michael.” She didn’t confess to anything though. “Dean, why doesn’t he like me? We’re going to be spending so much time together. I don’t like being disliked. I know it’s not possible to be liked by everyone, but I’d hoped that in my own pack at least…”

Dean shook his hand out and picked the pen back up, resuming drearily. “Michael doesn’t dislike you, April. He likes you better than 99% of the people he meets. It’s just his way. He’s aloof. It’s a defining trait.”

“He’s a what?”

Dean looked up and chuckled at her. “That was good. I’m going to steal that one.”

“I’m lonely, Dean. I’m finished with my training, and I don’t know what to do now. I want to go back and hang out with all the friends I made up at The Facility, but there’s no reason for me to be there anymore.” She had dropped the affected tone that told Dean she was fishing, and he heard a genuine worry in her new tenor.

“You still have us. Plus, once you get into that fancy, expensive school of yours, you won’t be home much anyway.” Dean watched her face. She looked into the distance with a flat expression. “You still want to attend that school, don’t you?”

“I’m not going to get in. All the practicing is for nothing. They’ll know I’m Omega before I ever step onto the stage, and they’ll have their minds made up.”

“That’s not fair, April. Isn’t there any way to buck the system? Can you submit a recording and a false name? Is there any way to expose the bias? You know, you can always go to KU instead. You’re too young to give up on your education like this. You’re too young, and you’re too talented, and you’re too bright.”

She didn’t answer him. She chewed the inside of her cheek. Dean went back to his lines. They sat in silence but for the scratch of the pen for a while.

“I’m too young for Castiel, too,” she said suddenly. “Dean, we have nothing in common except the same taste in sex. Why did the Universe do this to us? I can’t be what he needs me to be, and he can’t…” she paused and her eyes widened in alarm. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be talking like this. Forgive me Dean! Please forget I said anything.” She reached out and squeezed his arm, and then she fled.

Dean sat at her writing table in stunned silence. Both of the Doms were right. That girl was up to something, and Dean had a suspicion about what it might be. If true, it could upset the whole frikkin’ apple cart.

She was playing him, and he needed to think. That had been an action move. She was deliberately pushing him into an action of one kind or other. He went back to writing and let his wolf chew on it. What did his impulse have him wanting to do after hearing her out? He wanted to talk to Cas. He wanted to tell Cas that April was unhappy, that she didn’t want to go through with the audition, that
she felt inadequate and unfulfilled. He frowned as he wrote, trying to suss out the next chess move after that. What would Cas do with the information? He would take it straight back to April and confront her with it. How was this going to get her anything new? He might pull her from the audition, but more likely, he would still make her go through with it.

Dean scratched his head with the pen. He hated chess. For every move, he could always see twenty different responses, and each seemed as likely as the others to Dean. He sighed and put another page face-down on the finished pile. It was a small pile at this point. He needed to think. What would be the one thing she didn’t want him to do after a prompt like that? He hated being played, and he was both brat and stubborn enough to want to dig his heels in no matter whether her end game aligned with his or not, and he suspected that it didn’t.

Dean scribbled out two more sentences without making any progress within his head, and then it hit him. She’d just given him a prompt; a call to action. He wasn’t sure what she really wanted him to do with it, but the one thing he was sure she didn’t want was for him to do nothing at all. Dean scratched his head again with the end of his pen, shook out his hand, squirmed his sore thighs against the chair to loosen them up, and then he settled into the same breathing routine he used in his submissive pose on the floor. He put his pen on the paper, and he wrote.

Chapter End Notes

I doubt there will be much disappointment, but I'm not even a little interested in writing the DF scene between Cas and Bobby. It's a done deal, and next time you see them both, it will have been completed off-stage.

There are still many loose ends to tie up, but I'm trying to start tying them up instead of always adding more. I'm also trying like hell to move things along faster than a single day or half-day per chapter. Chalk it up to inexperience. I know there has to be a way. Even Tolkien didn't keep this slow a pace.

Love you all!
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Dean's getting fitted for his wedding, uh, apparel, and he learns a little something-something. Gabe's going to be blind-sided.
April's in the hot seat, and earns one. Michael's Michael, and what's up with that?

Chapter Notes

Y'all! I took a break! I'm so proud of me! Spent some time with the pack, got a sunburn even. Now I'm back at it. I'll be doing another chapter pretty fast on the heels of this one. I need to get their personal business cleaned up. They all need to talk some more, but I'm dying to get to Michael's assessment, Cas' birthday, an actual Heat/Rut cycle in an A/B/O, H/R fic that's brutally long without really going there yet. Instead, 13000 words popped out that spans about four hours in a single day.

For those of you with communication kinks like me, this is going to be acceptable. Anybody who wants action...skip to the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 56 – Sunday, June 25, 2017

NOW:

“Dude! Where are the apples?!” Dean pulled his head out of the refrigerator. He’d dug through the fruit basket and the pantry. Michael kept the house supplied with plenty of fresh fruit, and he had Fred display it enticingly, but the lovely, firm apples that wanted to overflow the basket…

“Are you blind?” Michael asked in a calm quiet voice, stepping into the kitchen. He still had ice in his tone and his carriage.

“Fuji? All you bought was Fuji? I can’t bake a pie with Fuji apples; they’ll turn to mush. Where are the Granny Smiths?”

Michael rolled his eyes and his whole body. “You never said what type of apple you needed, Dean. I’m not a mind reader. You just said apples. How am I supposed to know there’s a difference? If you need something specific, it’s your job to tell me that.” Michael collected a biscuit and a few pear slices on a small plate, and he paused in the doorway. “Besides, you don’t have time to bake today anyway. You have lines to write.”

Dean slammed the refrigerator door closed and straightened to explain to his mate just what he could
do with his damned lines, but Michael was already gone. Dean’s hand had muscle cramps where he hadn’t even known there were muscles. The task was impossible. They both knew it, and Dean had gamely stayed up until two in the morning in an attempt to show Michael he was taking the assignment seriously. He picked it up again at six on Sunday morning for the same reason, even allowing Michael to set him up in an alcove off of the library where he would be out of the way of the photographer who arrived early, and he had pages and pages completed. Three minutes was the fastest he could scribble out the sentence that was now imprinted behind his eyeballs for the rest of eternity, but completing eight-hundred repetitions was going to be mathematically impossible. Michael knew it.

Late in the morning, Dean needed a break. He needed something different to do with his hands, something that worked his tight muscles in a new direction. He owed Michael a pie. There wasn’t time for more than some preliminary prep before he needed to leave for his fitting at the tailor, but if he had to sit in that chair one more minute, he would go insane. In a sense, pie was all still part of his payment to his mate, and he felt Michael should be giving him credit for the effort – beginning to thaw a bit – but he wasn’t.

Angela, the tiny photographer for Rolling Stone and her two assistants were already gone. She needed early morning light streaming through the block-plate windows, and now that the light had passed, she’d packed up and left. Michael escorted her everywhere with an air of ownership as if the house had been in his family for generations. Dean had barely been allowed a handshake and a short goodbye wave before Michael was showing her the library proper, with its warm honey toned woodwork, rare collection of first editions, and clever rolling ladder that skipped tracks when a lever was pulled. It was obvious that Michael wanted to push Dean into his wolf, but the alpha had marching orders from above, and that gave him the authority to let his alpha’s backbone stand firm. Dean knew it was fucked up, but it worked.

“Sir? Was there something you needed?” Fred queried, stepping in from the dining room with a dust cloth in his hand. Fred was dusting? Christ, the house was already spotless.

“I’ll pick it up when I go out later, Fred. Don’t worry about it. Just a pissing match between me and my beloved.” Dean scuffed his feet against the tile and grumbled. “I think he’s gonna win this one.”

Fred’s eyes showed a sympathetic lean toward Dean’s plight. “Sir, would it be presumptuous of me to offer you an outside perspective?”

Dean sighed. “Lay it on me, Fred. It can’t hurt. I don’t know what else to give him.”

“Forgive me, Sir, but it seems to me that since young Michael can feel your true intent, that simply going through the motions to assuage him is unlikely to produce a satisfying result for either of you.”

Fred stood stiffly in the middle of the space where the table had been.

“You think I should apologize.”

“Not if you don’t mean it, Sir, but perhaps the issue at heart is why you don’t mean it. Has he failed to meet your expectations? Have you his?”

“Thought you’d be on my side, man. You’ve known me way longer. How’d I lose you already?”

Fred chuckled good-naturedly. “Michael is an engaging young man, Sir. I enjoy working with him. Before you jump to conclusions as I know you are wont to do, Michael does not confide personal information in me, but anyone who spends time in this house can see how much you mean to each other. It’s not a matter of choosing sides, and I believe you know that. Sir, please don’t lose focus on who and what you are to one another. You owe him just as much as he owes you. Have you been
making those payments in good faith?”

Dean frowned and looked at his feet. Fred was an outsider. He was staff. He had no business interfering. Only, Fred wasn’t staff, and he wasn’t an outsider. He might not be Pack, but he was family as surely as Sam or April. Fred spent more time in the manor than he did in his own home two blocks further down the road, where he lived a Domestic Discipline lifestyle with his husband of thirty-eight years. Fred knew everything there was to know about Castiel, and his insights over the years, given freely and often at just the right moment, had been priceless to Dean. They trusted each other, looked out for each other, depended upon each other. Fred wasn’t above ratting Dean out to his Top when he felt Dean needed a firm pull on his leash, and Dean had never resented Fred’s judicious interference before.

But Fred didn’t know Michael all that well. Couldn’t it be true that Michael had the wool pulled over Fred’s eyes? Was the butler seeing both sides clearly? Dean didn’t feel in the wrong, and that was the part that struck him. He and his wolf always knew. He was brat enough to play innocent when he knew he wasn’t, but that never meant he didn’t know deep down. Slowly he shook his head, still facing the floor.

“He wants me sorry for being who I am, Fred. I can’t give him that.”

“Are you certain that’s what he’s asking of you?”

“It’s what he said. He said it several times at pretty high volume.” Dean looked up at the butler. “He said he was sick of being an afterthought, and I should stop and think about what I’m doing before I run out and do it, that I should feel sorry about it before I even do whatever it is I’m about to do. How am I supposed to respond to that? It’s like he doesn’t get me at all. I thought we had it all figured out. We were tooling along great. I take shit all the time for being too soft on his Omega, and I give him everything my wolf has to give, and I feel like it should be enough. I can’t just stop being who I am. Cas gets me. God, did you see us that morning? He just stood to the side and let me flare up and break the fuck out of our kitchen, and he didn’t try to make me feel bad about not worrying about it beforehand, he just made me pay for the mess, and he let it go. Why can’t Michael do that?”

“Sir, while I sympathize, all I can say in answer is that Michael is not your Alpha. He does not enjoy the liberties that Alpha Winchester does where you are concerned. For all the care he gives to a certain brat-like side of you, he is still an Omega wolf, is he not? Have you considered the difference? I’m no authority on the subject as you know, but I wonder if you are perhaps too close to the issue for your own vantage point to assist. Would you like me to buy pie apples? You will have more time to complete your Top’s assignment if you have fewer errands to run today. I’m already going out.”

“Um, yeah. That would be great. Granny Smiths please. Get a lot of them. …Maybe some kind of berry too.”

“Very good, Sir.”

“Thanks Fred.”

“Any time, Dean.”

Throwing Dean’s name at him after avoiding it for a whole conversation was a message from the natural Top who knew Dean’s inner submissive voice would key in on it. He did. And he pouted as he collected his keys, collected April, and shoved his feet into his boots.

He pouted his way on to the freeway and all the way into Kansas City. April watched him, but didn’t
ask. Dean was in a strange mood, in a strange designation inside his head. The wolf seemed just as confused as the alpha, just as confused as Dean was himself. He’d tried explaining to the beast why he was keeping an alpha presentation when he was in punishment, but the wolf had no access to abstract thought, and wasn’t capable of understanding. He lay in the shade of a fragrant pine with his head between his paws, waiting for his master to come to his senses.

Dean took April’s presence as an excuse to shift the focus onto her.

“It’s just you and me here, Kid. You wanna tell me where your head is? What was that show you put on yesterday all about? And don’t try to con me. I’m onto you. Don’t con a conman, April.”

“How many lines have you done, Dean?” she deflected, “Not eight-hundred.”

“Nope, not eight-hundred. Answer the question.” Dean rarely used an alpha tone with April. They connected so much better through their mutual designation than they did as Top to Bottom. But he was alpha right now.

“What makes you think it’s a con?” She wasn’t looking at him, and that was tell enough right there. Dean glanced at her without losing focus on his driving, and he sighed heavily.

“So you want me to believe that you’re NOT in love with Castiel? You think it’s a bad match, and you’re lonely? You want to try that one again? I’m not buying it.”

“Dean, I’m eighteen. He’s about to turn thirty-six. We have nothing in common. He’s almost as old as my father.”

“And?” Dean pressed, putting his blinker on and checking his rearview mirror.

“Isn’t that enough? I’m too young to be tucked away in a big house and used as a sex toy. I want to get out and meet people, have fun, learn new things, try new things.”

Dean scoffed. “Bullshit. Cas will give you anything you want, April. You said you wanted to be a great pianist, and you picked the school. Now you’re acting like he forced you into it and that somehow that means you’ll be chained to the house. Cut the crap. You don’t give a shit about the age difference, any more than he does. What are you really after?”

She didn’t answer right away, then said, “It doesn’t matter. He’s not going to say yes.”

“Yeah, probably not if you never ask him, and you try to manipulate it out of him.”

“Dean, I’m not trying to manipulate anybody, but I’m scared, okay? I don’t know how to ask for what I think I want, or even how to get it if he tells me I can try. I don’t even know if it’s what I really want. All I know is I have these images that go through my head before I fall asleep at night; images of me up on a big stage in a huge auditorium, sitting at my piano, and everyone I care about is there. Thousands of people are there listening to me play, and it doesn’t matter that I’m Omega. They just like the music.”

“April, that’s exactly what he’s trying to help you get to. What’s the problem?” Dean pulled into a small parking lot with a strip-mall and parked the car.

“It’s the music industry, Dean. An Omega isn’t going to get the chance to be a soloist by going through a conservatory. If I get in at all, they’ll put me in the symphony orchestra and put Marimba mallets in my hand. I’ll be forced into the herd. I love music, but I want a spotlight, not obscurity. I want more than to just help play someone else’s music in the rank and file. I want to play my own, and I want to do it out in front, with my name at the top of the playbill. I don’t know how to get that,
or how to ask for it.”

“Have you told any of this to your mate? He’s a very resourceful guy, and he’s got connections. He’s got tight music connections.”

“I know.” She put her hand on the handle of the door and paused before opening it. “But I want to do it on my own, like Nicholas Maraby did, not jump to the front of the line because my mate is well-connected.”

“Kid, you need to use what you have. It’s not cheating to take the advantages that are available to you. You have your share of disadvantages that you can’t shake off, and in the end, it comes out pretty even. Go play the hell out of that audition. Make them listen to you and make them let you in. Use our prestige and our connections if you have to, especially if they try to throw that Omega crap at you. Make them take you seriously. Learn everything they have to teach you, and then get out there and make yourself into whatever you want to be. You’re eighteen, and you’re Mated to the most famous Lupin in the world. You have all the time and resources in the world at your beck and call. Stop trying to be noble, and use it.”

Dean cut the engine and stepped out of the car. April followed him into the little tailor shop on the corner. It was messy and stuffy inside, and Dean frowned in disapproval, sure he’d come to the wrong place. A little bell above the door jingled, alerting the tall, statuesque beta woman who strolled through a draped golden curtain from the back.

“Winchester?” she asked, looking him up and down in a rudely assessing way. Dean was sure she had just filed away every measurement his physical body could produce and a few that weren’t measurable with a tape at all. He licked his lips and nodded, kicking loosely at his wolf to sit him back down in the shade.

“Thank you for being on time. Please come this way. We have a lot of work to do. And who is this young Omega?” The beta held the curtain back for Dean and April to duck under as they followed her back.

“This is April, my fiancé’s mate.”

The woman stared at him in confusion as if he’d spoken to her in Gaelic. Her pale skin was obviously pack, but her exotic eyes and her Indian accent marked her as an outlander. Maybe she didn’t know who he was. There were still some people whose circles didn’t include the celebrity circuit, although they were very few right here in eastern Kansas where the Winchester pack lived. Dean assumed she was confused that his fiancé had a mate who would be willing to accompany him to a fitting for a Shareer ka Daava robe. He began to explain, but she cut him off with a wave of her hand.

“If you want something to drink, let me know. I need you to disrobe down to your underwear and stand up on the platform. Don’t move unless I tell you to. My name is Kali. April, is it?” she asked the wide-eyed Omega, who nodded.

“Yes, beta Kali,” said April meekly, taking the spot Kali pointed to. Dean frowned. Ordering Omegas around wasn’t something a tailor should have call to do. It was her shop, but she could’ve asked. Before he could raise a protest, Kali turned her sharp eyes on him.

“You aren’t Omega, Dean Winchester, and I don’t like this one bit. I’ll make the robe because doing so earns me big points back home, but let’s just be very clear, this isn’t right, and you know it.”
Dean had begun to unbutton his shirt, but he stopped and cocked his head to one side. His Deep alpha rumbled to life. “Last I looked, you’re selling me a service, not issuing judgment. Has something changed that I don’t know about? I would hate to think you’ve sullied your integrity for me. I can take my business elsewhere if it offends you. And next time you need something from my Omega, you ask. You ask HER. Politely. Just to be very clear.”

They stared at each other silently for a few moments, assessing. Their wolves sniffed the air. Dean knew she was a Profound Dominant. It oozed out of her condescending gaze, but his alpha was solid, and he could posture like nobody’s business when the situation demanded it. At last she appeared satisfied that he passed the test, and she looked away, busying herself with a small cart of tools and bits.

“Tell me why, alpha. If I’m going to do this, I need to understand.”

“First apologize to April.”

Kali stopped and closed her eyes. Then she seemed to decide, and she opened them again, turned to the Omega who hadn’t moved, and said, “My apologies, Omega. I will refrain from issuing commands. I was out of line.”

April squeaked an acceptance. Kali gestured Dean to continue undressing, and he began removing his shirt and explaining himself at the same time. “It’s not our intent to appropriate Indian culture, Kali. We know this is unconventional, but I don’t know of any other options that will get the message that I need to send across as clearly as this ceremony will do it.” She nodded without looking at him, selecting pins to fill her wristband cushion, but she beckoned him into explaining further.

“I don’t know if you know anything about me and Castiel. We want to get married and have a domestic life together outside of Mating…like apes do, but different. Only, we’re too complicated for that. He’s too dominant, and I’m too submissive for us to ever be equals that way. It’s more than just Pack hierarchy. It’s more than just Dom and sub. We get tangled up in all the crazy designation juggling.” Dean slipped out of his shoes, and dropped his pants, handing his clothes to April.

“Socks too?” he asked.

“Are your feet cold?” Kali asked him back.

“Not particularly.” Dean somehow felt stranger about baring his feet than he did about standing in his boxer briefs.

“Take them off. You will be barefoot for the ceremony, and we need to see the full effect.” She pulled the cart over and indicated he should step up onto the platform in his bare feet. Mirrors faced it from several vantage points, and he could see himself reflected from almost every angle at once without turning his head.

“I need to touch you to do my work, alpha. Have I your permission?” She still wasn’t looking at him as she arranged a number of pieces on the cart.

“Of course,” he replied.

She approached him and noticed the bruises on his thighs for the first time. Clearing her throat, she asked, “Do I need permission from anyone else before I touch you, Submissive?”

April snickered, but Dean replied that his own permission would be sufficient with a roll of his eyes. He avoided grinding his teeth by a bare margin.
“Go on,” she prompted, stretching a tape measure across his shoulders. “You were saying?”

“I know I’m not Omega, but what we are together is a little bit like that, as if I were. No one but my closest Pack really knows who I am inside. I’ve hidden it my whole life. If I try to build a marriage based on that, based on the person the world thinks I am, it’s going to fall apart. I can’t let that happen. He means everything to me.” Dean met April’s eye, and she smiled a private smile at him, confirming that they were the only two members in their tiny, private Castiel-Sub-club, and it bolstered him. He said the next part just to her. “I want to give myself to Castiel as I really am, and more than anything, I want the whole world to know that I’ve done that. It’s not enough for me to be submissive at home. I want to make a declaration to the world that he owns me, and that I want him to. That’s what this robe and the ceremony is all about. If you know of a more public way to submit everything I am to my husband, I’m all ears.”

Kali had moved through the measurements swiftly as he talked. She nudged his feet apart, and rearranged his arms. He let her do whatever she needed to without protest.

“Ceremonies are powerful things, alpha,” she told him. “All I ask is that you don’t go into this without due consideration for all the people who have been dressed in these robes before you. It’s not a costume, and this isn’t a roleplay. When I first saw the assignment come down to me from India, I was disgusted, and I tried to refuse. But apparently, you’ve been speaking to the owner over there, and you have him won over. He insisted that I accept the assignment if I ever wanted to do business with him again.”

Dean broke in. “He said you are the best, Kali. He told me he wouldn’t trust this job to anyone else for a thousand miles in any direction, and that if you turned us down, he would have to fly over himself to make it.”

Kali pulled away and looked up at Dean’s face in shock. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

She took a minute to process the praise, and then she cracked her neck, and went back to work, clearing her throat. “Be that as it may, you have a responsibility to do justice to the robe, the ceremony, and to the Omegas of India to whom the Shareer ka Daava is a sacred way of life. I will hold you to that, Dean Winchester.”

“I hear you loud and clear, beta. I’ll do my best.”

Kali nodded and signaled to an assistant in the storeroom to bring the robe out. It was in pieces, cut and basted together rapidly in the home shop in India, then air-freighted to Kansas City to be assembled and perfected. April gasped as the pieces were fitted into place, and Dean’s body filled it out. It was still very rough, but the effect was going to be stunning, and she grinned.

“I’m so jealous, Dean. You are going to be so beautiful. Do I get to wear one too?”

“You’re naked for the wedding, April,” he explained. “All your natural glory. You’re going to be gorgeous, and you don’t need any decorations to be the most beautiful wolf in the room.”

“Oh,” she said. “Could I have a waist chain? Like a really delicate one? That wouldn’t be too much, would it?”

Dean chuckled at her. “I think that would be perfect.”

“What about Michael? Is he going to be naked too?” April wondered out loud. Kali continued to pin the robe. There were a number of separate pieces, although once constructed, many of the seams
would be almost invisible.

“Would it bother you if he wasn’t?” Dean asked. “The thing is, he’s not like other Omegas, and I want to honor who he is as much as I do you.”

“Nah, I don’t care. I can’t really picture Michael standing naked in front of thousands of people and ever forgiving you for making him do that.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Dean agreed. “I’m thinking about some kind of a nearly sheer tunic with gold bands on his biceps. He’d still look Omega, but not on display like you.”

Kali retrieved her chalk from the cart. “Not to be a pushy salesman here, but I can help you with the jewelry if you like. We can keep the styling of all of the participants in line and coordinated. Do you already have a tunic picked out?”

April clapped her hands. “Oh, this is fun. What’s Castiel wearing?”

Dean smirked. “No idea. He said it’s none of my business how he decides to present himself to his husband on his wedding day. I think he’s taking a page out of the apes’ book, like how the groom shouldn’t see the bride’s dress before the wedding.”

“Quite right,” confirmed Kali.

“I thought you wanted us all matching?” asked Dean, confused.

“No, the wedding party should match out on each side. His attendants will match him, and yours will match you. You can coordinate colors if you like, but you have no business trying to see what he’s got planned, and he isn’t to know what you’re wearing either.”

“Oh,” said Dean, glancing at April and pressing his lips together.

“You’ve already shown him, haven’t you?”

“I had to,” Dean protested. “He needed to understand what I want to do.”

Kali shook her head and went back to work. “Americans have no culture,” she lamented.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Dean, affronted.

“Never mind. That was rude of me. I apologize.” Kali’s face told Dean the apology was just for show. She didn’t mean it, and he was halfway through huffing out a protest that she shouldn’t bother with an apology that wasn’t genuine when he realized how annoyed he felt that she’d tried that, and that that was exactly what he had pulled with Michael. Crap. Why couldn’t Dean just be one of those people who never felt or admitted to being wrong? He sighed heavily and rubbed his face as he realized what Michael was so angry about. He wasn’t asking Dean to stop being a brat; he just wanted Dean to acknowledge how much pain his episodes caused, and to show a little consideration for how hard he was to live with sometimes. Michael just wanted a real apology instead of a fake one – an apology for the part that Dean had any control over, namely how he behaved afterward and how much communication he did leading up into it. Castiel didn’t need the head’s-up any more. He could read Dean’s tells, but blindsiding Michael wasn’t fair to his mate. Dean had already said he was sorry, but he hadn’t BEEN sorry, and Michael could feel that.

“I think that’s everything for now,” Kali told him as she began to remove pins and pull each piece carefully off his body. “I’ll get some preliminary stitches done, and then I’ll bring you back in to check how it drapes when you present. It needs to be right, and I can’t be sure of the pivot-points
until I see it for myself. I’ll need you nude for that. There are some genital measurements that we
didn’t do today. Don’t die, alpha. Don’t change anything about your figure if you can help it. This
isn’t the kind of work that can be altered in a day or two if you lose weight between now and
September.”

“Yes Ma’am,” he cheeks. “I’ve got an excuse to keep eating pie. I’ll tell Cas it’s tailor’s orders.”

“Don’t gain weight either, alpha Winchester. No one wants to see the robe gape while you’re
standing up.”

“Can I bring Michael to the next fitting?” he asked, stepping down and collecting his clothes from
April.

“Your mate?” Kali asked, and Dean nodded.

“No. If he sees you present, he’s going to fuck you right here, and I don’t want that smell in my
shop. Not to mention the damage it’ll do to the robe.”

“Wow, you don’t censor yourself much, do you Kali? And call me Dean. If you’re going to be
measuring my dick, I think that puts us on a first name basis.”

“Actually, Dean,” she said, inserting his name smoothly and changing the subject with a wry look on
her face, “I wanted to ask you. Does Alpha Novak’s brother still live with him?”

“Gabriel?” Dean snorted in surprise. “Uh, yeah, sort of. Gabe doesn’t really live anywhere, but his
mail comes to our house. How do you know Gabriel?”

She turned her back on Dean and began to futz about with her cart again, a clear indication that the
subject embarrassed her, and Dean’s cheeky side went on alert.

“We had a very intimate and satisfying encounter together a couple of years ago; satisfying from my
point of view anyway. I was just wondering how he’s been doing. He never called me back. I’m not
desperate or anything, but I liked him a lot. Is he dating anyone? Would you be at liberty to tell me?”

She was blushing. Dean could see the color change on the back of her neck.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he whispered. “Ol’ Gabe’s got a girlfriend.” Dean shared a leer with April,
but Kali whipped around lightning fast.

“It’s not like that!”

“So you want it to be?” Dean asked her. He had his scamp face on. His eyes twinkled, and his lips
both pushed out into a cheeky pursed duckface. He cocked his head.

“I care about him, okay? He told me some of the, well, the bad stuff. I know about his mate. He
wanted me to know how to be careful when we… You know what? Just forget it.”

“Oh, sweetheart, there’s not a chance in hell I’mma forget about this. Just you wait. He’ll come back
home eventually. All I need to know from you is if you’re still interested or not, and I gotta think you
wouldn’t have asked if you’re not.” Dean shimmied back into his jeans and buttoned them, then
stepped into his boots, shoving his feet down firmly.

“So you think there’s a chance he might want to hear from me? He never returned my calls.” Kali
was sheepish all of a sudden, and the presentation didn’t suit her at all.

“You look like just his type to me, beta. We won’t know unless we ask, though, will we?” Dean
grinned his most charismatic alpha smile at her and chucked her lightly on the chin. “By the way, you’re invited to the wedding. We won’t be sending out invitations for a while yet, but save the date. September 9th. You’re on the guest list for both the wedding and the smaller Shareer ceremony afterward. Gabe will be there, and if you can’t get laid at a wedding, then maybe you’re just not suited for sex.”

“Well that’s harsh,” April commented. “I’ve been to a few weddings, and I never got laid there.”

“Were you trying?” he asked.

“No, but…”

“Yeah, that’s the difference.” He turned back to Kali who was handing pieces over to her silent assistant. “We done here?”

“Thank you, Dean. I’ll call you to arrange the next fitting. You are going to make a beautiful Omega,” she teased.

“Not an Omega,” he reminded her, adjusting the way his cock sat inside his jeans. She rolled her eyes. Alpha size didn’t do anything for Kali, and she’d seen her share of posturing. She shook her head at him, and waved as he pushed through the gold curtain.

“I’m going to have fun with this.” Dean high-fived April as they separated to get into the car. “Gabe’s not gonna know what hit him. Okay, where to? Coffee, soft drinks, or beer?”

“Nothing for me thanks. Stop and get whatever you want, but I’m not allowed snacks or caffeine without permission.”

“Oh, Christ. You gotta learn to lighten up. We’ll stop by campus and go to the coffee house. They’ve got some kind of health-drink crap. You can get a Kale smoothie or something. There’s no way he’ll object to that.”

“I’d better call first.”

“Crimeny, April. Live a little. Don’t you need to rack up some points to get enough swats every week for your Release anyway? You might as well enjoy yourself in the process.”

“Don’t you need to get back in a hurry to work on your lines?” she shot back defensively.

“Tch,” he scoffed. “Fifteen more minutes isn’t going to make any difference. I can’t get them all done anyway. Plus, I need to go by the lumber yard and figure out what my wood choices are. I need to get started on the table. I hate eating in the dining room.”

“Dean, Castiel expects me home right after the fitting at the tailor. If you’re adding more stops, you need to let him know or drop me off first.” Her tone told Dean she meant business, and he sighed again.

“Fine. Don’t sit there and pretend you don’t have anything in common with Cas though. You and he both have sticks so far up your asses, it would take mining equipment to get them out.” Still parked, Dean activated his phone and checked quickly for texts and emails. He found a strange note from Michael, and he opened the picture attachment. It was a shot of the pile of pages he had been working on to complete Michael’s punishment, and the caption simply said, “What the Hell is this?!?”

Dean replied tersely, “About to be driving. Can’t talk. Don’t know what the fuck you’re mad about now.” He sent it, dropped the phone, put the car in drive and headed home. It rang almost at once.
“Don’t answer it,” Dean instructed, but she’d already done so.

“Michael, it’s April,” she said into the phone then paused. “No, he’s driving. You know he doesn’t have a blue tooth.” She stopped speaking abruptly. “Um, yeah, hold on a second.” She turned to Dean. “He wants you to pull over so he can talk to you.”

“Tell him I’ll be home in forty-five minutes, and to keep his pantyhose on.” Dean had about had it with Michael and his tantrum. He wanted to clear the air, and he wanted to share his epiphany, but listening to the tinny sound of Michael’s insistent voice through the phone wasn’t going to help him get there. Then Dean realized that April was speaking into the phone quietly with her hand tucked over her mouth and had sunk down in her seat. She looked guilty as hell as she hung up and put the phone down.

Dean picked it up and slid it into his shirt pocket. “And?”

“Nothing.”

“Kid, I want an honest answer out of you.” Dean looked straight ahead and kept his voice calm but assertive. “You and me are kind of a special deal together, right? We have each other’s backs and all that. We don’t lie to each other.”

“Dean, I didn’t lie to you.” She seemed nervous. She seemed on the verge of confessing something, but Dean wanted to lead the parade.

“We’ll talk about that in a minute. You did lie to me yesterday when we talked in the conservatory. All of that was bullshit, but I want to ask you another question first, and you’re going to give me a straight answer.”

“Um, okay.” Her hands kneaded one another in her lap.

“Are you interested in Michael? The truth, now.”

“What?! No! What makes you think that? He treats me like I’m six years old! He hates my guts!”

“I didn’t ask what he feels about you. I want to know if you feel anything for him.” Dean turned left, and accelerated toward the onramp.

“I just want him to like me, Dean. That’s all. I swear. Two Omegas living in the same house. It’ll be miserable if he doesn’t thaw out about how much he hates me.”

“So, you don’t want to sleep with him?”

“I told you, I’d really like it if we could, you know, all scene together. I fantasize about that all the time. If Castiel says we can try it, I’m totally on board for anything, but I’m not, you know, interested in your mate.”

“He doesn’t hate you, April. And he doesn’t think you’re six. I can’t put my finger on what he’s feeling when he talks to you, but it’s powerful protective, and something else, like he thinks of you as a complicated puzzle, and he wants to work you open. It’s brand new, maybe just a week old, but it’s there, and I just wanted to know if you two have been, you know, feeling each other out. You know what I mean. Would you tell me if you were?”

“I’m not, Dean. I’m not. But, would I tell you? I dunno. What could come of it? If I was?” April fidgeted, and Dean struggled to keep looking straight ahead.
Dean didn’t have an answer for that. He frowned and drove on, thinking while the silence lengthened. He made it all the way back to Lawrence before he tried again to talk to her about it. The subject was so delicate, and the wrong approach could wind up driving the Omegas together instead of keeping them an arm’s length apart.

“Not really a fair question, was it? Sorry, Kiddo. Just, please don’t. Fuck. What am I even saying?”

Dean lost himself in voicing his stream-of-consciousness. “I don’t want you in any trouble, and I don’t think it’s a good idea. That’s all.”

April laughed gently. “Don’t you care? I mean about keeping Michael to yourself? Our Alpha would freak if he thought your mate was sniffing around his. Don’t you have any of that alpha possessiveness? You’re different, Dean, but you aren’t THAT different.”

“Sending me a shitload of mixed messages here, Kid,” he said, pulling up in front of the coffee shop and taking advantage of the open street parking on Sunday. Dean put the car in park. “Give it to me straight.”

“I’m not going after Michael,” she stated clearly. “I want to be his friend, and I want him to join Alpha and me in bed. I want you there too, Dean, if there’s any way you can do it. But here’s the thing, I’m not closing the door on the idea either. I like him a lot. He’s sexy as hell. He’s a smartass, but he’s also funny and, as you say, really protective of me. I’m not seeing it ever happening, but we don’t choose who we fall in love with, do we? Castiel taught me that. If Michael and I spend time together, and we get to know and trust each other, what do we do if something blossoms from that?”

“Great! Now I’ve put the idea into your head. Not what I meant to do at all. Come on, we’re getting drinks.”

Dean got out of the car and headed around it toward the coffee shop, but April blocked his path. “You didn’t put the idea in my head, Dean. I’ve thought about it already. He’s really hot, did I mention? Michael’s thought about it too. He even said so. Got his ass blistered for it, remember?”

Dean put his arm around her and led her into the coffee shop. “Michael got his ass blistered because he needed it, not because of what he said.”

“No, but it proves he’s considered the idea.”

“Well, you are very fuckable, with your blue eyes, and your soft hips, and whatever it is straight guys see in chicks.” They took a spot at the back of the line, and Dean wrapped his arms around her waist from behind. “Change of subject: you lied to me. You can literally tell me anything, April. Anything at all, but just don’t lie to me. What were you trying to get me to do?”

“I, um, I wanted you to chase after me, and make me talk. I don’t feel like I can do it on my own. You alphas, you don’t get it. Alphas make their own decisions. They always think the rest of us can do that too, but it’s not like that for us Ozzies. I want to talk to you, Dean, but I can’t make myself do it.” The woman in front of them in line turned and looked at April with a condescending air. Dean
growled at her and motioned her to turn back around and mind her own business. He felt April settle back into his chest.

Dean whispered to her, “You told me that you think you and Cas are mismatched. That’s bullshit, April. Two mates couldn’t be more perfect for each other. You are perfect together. Lonely for friends, maybe, but lonely for a soulmate? No way. That was a lie.”

“No, Dean listen…”

Dean interrupted her as the obnoxious woman moved aside. “I’ll have a large cup of whatever the stoutest brew you have hot at the moment is, two shots of espresso, and we’ll have a…” he looked at April, “Peach or raspberry?”

“Oh, um raspberry, please.”

“Medium raspberry tea. Nothing else.” Dean dug his wallet out and then he prompted April to continue.

“He’s not my soulmate, Dean. I wasn’t lying, I just exaggerated. We’re perfect together, it’s true, but it’s not like we ever just hang out together, you know? He’s a world-renowned scientist, blah, blah, blah, you know the drill, and I’m pretty sure I’m not going to make it through four years of college.”

Dean took her hand and guided her to a table. “Don’t sell yourself short, April. You’ve got it in you…”

“Damnit, Dean! Listen to me! I know who I am, okay? I’m smart enough, I get that. It isn’t that. Jesus, college isn’t for everyone, not even every bright person. If I get into Pembrandt, and they take me seriously, then I’ll stick it out, and learn whatever they can teach me, but the honest truth is, I don’t really think that’s the direction I should go in. The point is, I need close friends, Dean. I need someone I can giggle with and paint my nails with, and go shopping with. I need a friend, and a cohort, and a boyfriend. I’m too young to just stop looking around at the great wide world and focus solely on him and his needs, even if he is the hottest wolf on two legs.”

“You need a boyfriend?” Dean honed in.

“Alpha’s a lot of things, Dean, but he isn’t much of a boyfriend.” April accepted her tea from the young woman who delivered it.

“I have to beg to differ. I think he makes a hell of a boyfriend.” Dean blew across the top of his coffee. His phone buzzed in his pocket, but he ignored it.

“To you, maybe.”

“Are you unhappy, April?” Dean asked her bluntly.

“No, I’m just scared. You know how sometimes you get a vision of where your life is going from here? Well, all I see is me in skimpy dresses with bruises up and down my ass, stuck in the house with Michael all day, playing lounge tunes on my piano, and going no-fucking-where. Please tell me that’s not what’s coming.” April sipped her tea and looked out the window.

“If you don’t talk to your mate, you have no business complaining that you don’t get what you want, Kid. Start there. So, do we agree that you lied to me?”

“Which part was a lie?” she countered. April had no intention of making this easy for him. She felt he was missing the whole point.
Dean let the conversation from the previous day run through his head. “You told me that you can’t be what he needs you to be. You said the Universe made a mistake. You said he’s too old for you, and then you went on about Michael, as if you don’t know damn well that Michael swings for both teams. Look right into my eyes, and tell me that you didn’t intend for me to misunderstand those statements.”

April’s sense of guilt made itself readily apparent on her face. “What happens now?”

“You tell me,” he said with an authoritative air. “You just finished twelve weeks of training. What happens in a healthy stable Pack when an Omega tries to play a Top to her own ends?”

“You’re going to spank me, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Dean sipped his coffee. “Do you disagree?”

“Does it matter?”

“I’m a Sub, April. I need you to understand where I’m coming from. It matters a whole hell of a lot.” He pulled her eyes to his without touching her, and he held her there until she nodded. “Talk to me, April. Don’t play me. Learn it this time, okay?” She nodded again, swallowing and looking away.

Dean’s phone buzzed again, and he groaned and reached for it, scrolling through the texts and images Michael had sent, frowning. “What the…?”

“Dean?”

“Do you know anything about this?” he asked, laying his phone out on the table for her to examine.

“What?” she leaned in, and then gasped and leaned back.

“April? What is this?” Dean scrolled back through them. Michael had sent a lot of question marks and exclamation points. He’d found Dean’s stack of lines, counted them, found five-hundred twenty-seven sentences, some of them missing full phrases, some of them clearly photocopies of whole sheets, some of them in a completely different hand, and he’d sent pictures of them to Dean with instructions to get his ass home on the double. “Did you do this?! April!?”

“I, I wanted to help! I worked on it for hours. I thought that if we had each other’s back, that we could, you know, help each other out. You weren’t going to finish them on your own!” April was pale and shaking.

“Get your drink.” Dean stood up. “We’re going home.”

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Michael paced in the kitchen. Dean had marked for him the time that he pulled away from the tailor, and it didn’t take an hour to get home from Kansas City. He should be home by now. Michael felt so dismissed, so disrespected, and he couldn’t stop his face from making ugly grimaces at random. He knew Dean was probably driving, but to hell with it – April had answered earlier, and she was in on this façade too. He sent the pictures he took, and he blind copied them all to Castiel. Michael was
done. There would be no training. There would be no Omega. He meant to send a message that stuck, and he meant to do it now, except he didn’t have a target.

He growled. And he paced.

Should he go talk to the Alpha? Castiel was in his office doing God-only-knew-what for The Facility. He’d spent the entire night at Bobby’s house, dragging back in in the early morning like a strange wolvish walk-of-shame, expertly avoiding the photographer shooting artistic images of his house, and he wasn’t very forthcoming with details from the evening before except to say that he believed the night had been a success. Whatever the fuck that meant. The Alpha was taking it easy today physically, but he was working his ass off in his office. Michael wasn’t sure if he would welcome being disturbed.

He paced. And he growled quietly to himself. Dean was in so much trouble. And April! Michael had just begun to think he’d judged her harshly at the outset. He was beginning to see flashes of an intricate kind of light beneath her placid surface, and he’d been intrigued, and now she proved to be just a shallow teenaged troublemaking manipulator. Who’d made the first move in this scheme? Had Dean asked for her help, or had she offered? Either way. It didn’t really matter. Dean was in so much trouble. Michael paced.

“You’re going to wear divots into the tile if you keep that up,” mused Cas, coming into the kitchen for a coffee refill.

“You saw my note?” Michael unloaded his frustration on the only target in the room, and Castiel absorbed it with grace. “Did you see the pictures?! He went right around his punishment, and he threw it right in my face! What the fuck, Castiel?!”

“So it would seem,” Cas responded calmly. “I wonder though, did Dean turn those pages over to you himself, or did you find them?”

“What difference does it make? They were laying there on his dresser, just like that. Photocopies! He mixed them in at random, just sprinkled copies through the pile like I wouldn’t notice, and he skipped whole phrases in some of the sentences. He even spread the words out so they would take up the same amount of room on the page. And there’s no way Dean was the only hand working on those pages. He got April doing half of it for him. It’s not right, Alpha, and I’m going to make him pay! AND her! Both of them!” Michael paced heavily, so Cas leaned back against the counter to stay out of his way.

There was a touch of good-natured affection in Castiel’s tone when he answered. “I’ve known Dean to skip a phrase here and there when he’s doing lines. He knows he’ll get busted for it, but… You know, I’ve never seen him do the other… If you want my advice, I recommend you keep an open mind and ask him about it before you jump to…”

The door burst open, and Dean strode purposefully in, pulling April by her wrist. Michael squared up to confront him, but the storm on Dean’s face gave him pause. Dean pointed to the floor with a meaningful look at April, and she swallowed before sinking down to her knees on the hard tiles.

Dean turned to his mate. “Do you have the pages? Give them to me, and next time, keep your paws off my property. These are not yours until I give them to you; do you understand me, Omega?” Dean swiped the stack from Michael’s hand. He began sorting through them, tossing rejected pages onto the floor at April’s knee. She winced. Once he’d culled out all the ones his little sister had slid in, he straightened the stack again, rolled it in half, and then stuck it awkwardly into his back pocket.
Michael’s mouth gaped open. Dean’s alpha meant business. He wasn’t even going to explain himself to Michael. Michael had been smacked down and summarily dismissed. Wait just a Goddamned minute! The Omega puffed up his chest and prepared to unleash his venom, but Dean turned and faced him with a stony look and a simple, “Don’t.”

Castiel sipped his coffee.

Michael didn’t know what to do. He’d obviously lost control of the situation, and his wolf was beside himself, but the persistently stubborn little Omega in Michael refused to move aside, and he stood frozen in the middle of his pacing, unable to speak.

Dean addressed Castiel. “Alpha, may I have permission to blister your mate’s ass?”

“You don’t have to ask, Dean. You know that. Although I’m curious. Michael seems to believe that you’ve committed a crime against his trust. Perhaps you and my wayward mate can clarify the matter.”

Dean nodded and turned to Michael. “I’ve completed three-hundred fifteen lines for you so far, Michael. I’ve just been back through the pile, and found a few sentences that don’t meet our standards, so I pulled them out. I believe I still have the rest of the day and tonight to get as many finished as I can. Is that correct?” Dean’s businesslike tone left Michael no room for anything but a simple yes.

“Good. Now that that’s settled, I have a question for you both.” Dean spoke to both of the Doms as if April wasn’t cringing on the floor. “You guys said you feel like our little Ozzie is up to something, but you don’t know what it is. Has she been saying odd things or acting unhappy? Cas, does she feel unhappy to you? I wanna get this all out. I’m sick of it, and what’s more, I’m not gonna take a whipping over it, and that’s where it’s headed if I don’t bring it all out in the open.”

April whimpered, and Dean put a painful grip on the back of her neck. She stilled immediately.

Castiel raised an eyebrow.

Michael spoke up hesitantly, “I don’t think she’s really sure about going to school. I think she might be using the audition to… I don’t know, to play for something else, maybe. I don’t know what.”

Michael was looking at April, and her eyes were soft and pleading. He almost revealed all of his suspicions about her to the alphas, but he felt a flash of simpatico from his Omega, and he petered off into vagueness.

“Cas?” prompted Dean.

Castiel put his mug on the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. “Not unhappiness, exactly, but there’s a malaise that she won’t talk about. Why? Has she said anything to you?”

“Just strange things that make no sense. I’m not going to reveal the details of our private conversations, but she’s been trying to convince me that she’s unhappy Mated to you and needs more of an avenue to meet new people.” Dean frowned down at April as he spoke.

“Meet new people?” Castiel said thoughtfully. “New friends, you mean? Or sex partners? April?”

“Just new friends, Sir. I would never cheat on you!”

“I know you wouldn’t, and I’m very confused right now. Why wouldn’t you ask me for help? We can get you involved in plenty of outlets that would allow you to meet people. Plus, all your friends from The Facility don’t simply vanish just because you aren’t in training anymore. And what does this have to do with your interference in Dean’s punishment? None of this makes a lick of sense.”
Castiel wanted to pace, but his self-control usually kicked up a notch when personal matters went tense like this. Pacing would add to the tension, and he wanted calm.

Dean scoffed. “Oh, that was just normal Ozzie stuff, Cas – throwing pages into my work. It’s not a big deal. She’s just pushing boundaries. I think she wanted to find out how much of a cohort I might be. Ya know, for a non-brat, it was a mighty brat-like thing to do, and I want it noted in the record, that the brat in the Pack didn’t go along with it. You hear me, Kid? I’m not going to go along with shit like that. Pull it again, and you’ll get worse. Let’s keep these two things separate, folks.”

Michael broke in with a question for his mate. “So, then you didn’t ask her for help with the lines?”

“She offered, Michael. I turned her down flat. Ask her.” Dean kept his hand on her neck, but he used his other hand to lift her chin up until she was looking at Michael again.

“Is that true, April?” Michael asked. He wasn’t ready to buy it fully yet. Why would the brat behave while the Compliant Ozzie didn’t? It made no sense.

April nodded miserably, but Dean tightened his grip on her neck. “Words, Omega. Answer the question out loud.”

“Yes! I stayed up last night and filled in a bunch of pages, and I used Alpha’s copier to make even more. Michael, he can’t do eight-hundred lines in a weekend! It’s not fair! I was just trying to help you, Dean! I thought we were friends!” April dissolved into tears.

Dean squatted down beside his little sister and looked sternly into her eyes. “We’re the closest of friends, April. Don’t ever doubt that I love you. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to cover for your screwups. You nearly got us both whipped. Friends don’t do that to each other. Next time I tell you to stay out of it, you stay out of it. This may seem unfair to you right now, but really it’s the best thing for you. Take the strapping, learn from it, get to know where the boundaries are, and it’ll save your ass a lot of pain in the long run. Do you understand?”

“You can’t do eight-hundred lines! Not in one weekend!” she wailed, and Dean chuckled.

“No I can’t, but Michael never expected me to. It wasn’t about the number, Kid. It was about the effort. The punishment was meant to make me stay put all weekend and stay up late into two nights. He didn’t want me finishing it. I just had to try my best, and lose my whole weekend sitting on my ass.”

“I didn’t know that!”

“You didn’t need to know that. It wasn’t your punishment.” Dean explained to her simply and starkly; firm, but not unkind.

“But we stopped for drinks,” she protested, and Dean felt his stomach drop a little.

“Uh, yeah. Call it a short break.” Dean looked up at Michael and grimaced a faint apology. He tried to communicate through his bond, but Michael wasn’t receptive. More and more, each mate had begun to use his own bond for sending, and the alternate for receiving deliberate messages. It was less confusing and overwhelming that way.

Castiel cleared his throat, ready to sum it all up and move forward. “Dean, I’ll see you tonight after dinner for your punishment. Please be on your mark in the playroom twenty minutes after I leave the table.”

“Yes, Sir,” replied Dean.
“Michael, yours will take place at 3:00 this afternoon on the dot. That gives you forty-five minutes. As we discussed, you will need to provide your own implements. Dean can assist you with selecting a switch if you need help. I will expect you in the H/R room at three, prepared for me. Do you have any questions?”

“No, Sir,” replied Michael.

“Good. April, I believe you owe a significant payment to two of your packmates. From what I understand, Dean is planning to punish you for interfering where you weren’t invited, and Michael should feel free to collect from you for your dishonesty as well. Tonight is my night with Dean, but I would like to speak candidly with you first, perhaps while dinner is being prepared?” April nodded, wide-eyed. Cas seemed to be filing the appointments away in a blackberry in his head. “Is that everything?”

Dean answered. “I need to take care of some dishonesty too, Cas. She lied to me last night. We’ve got it straight now, but we still need the follow-through.”

“All right. I trust you, Dean. Come and speak to me in my office when you’ve finished. April, go straight to bed after your punishment. I want you sleeping for at least two hours. It sounds as if you missed most of your night’s sleep.”

“Yes, Sir. I’m really sorry, Alpha.” April was miserable. Everything had gone wrong, and it was all because of Dean.

“Thank you, Love. Be sure to apologize to Michael and Dean as well. They have enough struggle to keep themselves balanced without your meddling. Learn from this experience, and don’t do it again.”

“Yes, Alpha.” April was too angry with Dean to feel repentant yet. She’d be damned if she ever stuck her neck out for him again. So much for having each other’s backs.

The Alpha collected his lukewarm coffee and returned to his office. “Michael?” Dean asked. “Do you wanna…? You can go first. I want to spend some time talking to her.”

“What’s to talk about, Dean?” Michael asked coldly.

“That’s between April and me. Mind your own business. Just take your swats and go on about your day. God, you’re a prick sometimes.” Dean released April and walked away from her to pour a glass of water.

“ME!? What about you? You stopped for drinks? You were supposed to come straight home after the fitting. Why can’t you behave for fifteen minutes in a row? I was worried you’d crashed and were lying dead in a ditch!”

“No you weren’t. You were just pissed that I wasn’t answering your texts.” Dean felt drained. He missed Michael, and he wanted him back. It was all his own fault – fall-out from his horrifying confession that he’d planned to pull Michael into his destructive scenario – and Michael was within his rights to hold a grudge for a day or two, but it made Dean tired to his core. “Just get it over with. She’s on her knees on Italian tile, man. She doesn’t deserve to suffer for hours while you and I bicker.”

Michael unstacked a chair and sat with a grunt. “Come here, Submissive.” Dean’s dick twitched at the tone, and he turned to face the sink and breathe, sipping water. April struggled to her feet, and shuffled to him. She’d thought that she had the measure of Michael, and that when the time came, he would prove incapable of laying into her, but he looked pretty serious at the moment.
“Writing out Dean’s lines and making copies of the pages is a form of lying, April. You lied to me. Do you agree?”

“Yes, Michael.” She couldn’t meet his eyes, and he didn’t ask her to. He took hold of her wrist firmly.

“Tell me why you did it.”

“Um, I thought the punishment was too harsh. He can’t do it, and I thought he’d get into deeper trouble for not finishing. I wanted to help. I hate it when Dean’s in trouble.” April shuffled her feet next to his. She didn’t even try to look up.

“You love it when Dean’s in trouble,” he corrected. “You practically come just from watching his cheeks turn red. You want to try that again?”

“Michael, it’s not like that. I get really turned on when Dean gets punished, it’s true, but I love him, and I hate it when he’s in trouble. There’s a difference. One is about me and my…kinks, the other is about Dean. I don’t want him in trouble. I really don’t.” Although she wouldn’t mind Dean taking his share of swats right now. He’d thrown her under every wheel on the bus, and she fumed privately.

“How’d that work out for you?” Michael cast a glance across the kitchen where Dean was leaning straight-armed against the counter at the sink, his shoulders tense, his head cocked a little to the side, listening.

“I won’t do it again. I’m sorry Michael. I promise I won’t interfere again. Please don’t be mad at Dean. He told me not to do it. He didn’t have any part in it. I snuck the pages in the stack without him knowing about it.” Why was she still defending Dean? She couldn’t make herself stop, and her irritation was beginning to turn on herself.

Michael nodded. He flexed his grip on her wrist. He took a deep breath and he willed himself to pull her over his lap. He huffed at himself when none of his muscles obeyed. His lips became a thin straight line across his face, and he set his jaw. Sweat broke out on Michael’s forehead.

“April, look at me,” he finally managed to say. She did, but it was a strain. “Dean’s going to spank you. You don’t need it from both of us. I believe you, and you’re forgiven. Don’t let it happen again, or I won’t go easy on you. At all. Understood?” Michael saw Dean spin around slack jawed, but he didn’t meet his mate’s eyes.

She whispered an assent, and Michael released her, disappearing through the door before Dean could get a word in.

Dean stared at the doorway, and then he turned wide eyes to April. “You still want to tell me there’s nothing going on between you two?” he asked.

“I don’t know what that was, alpha. I thought he was going to… he started to, I could feel it, but then something snapped.” April looked as confused as Dean felt.

“Guess it’s all on me then.” Dean took the chair that Michael had vacated. “Are you pissed off at me, Kid? Didn’t go down how you thought it would, did it?” He moved to catch her eyes, and they welled up immediately. Dean pulled her in to stand between his knees. He braced his hands across her lower back supportively.

“You ratted me out, Dean. I thought we had each other’s backs. I thought I could trust you. How could you do that?” Her tears overflowed and sent tracks down both cheeks which Dean wiped
away with his thumbs.

“I love you too much to let you get away with crap, April. You aren’t a brat naturally, so I gotta think you’re mimicking me, and that’s not something I can just watch you do and let go. It’s not right for you. I do have your back, Kid. I have your back so much that I’ll make myself stand firm and be alpha for you when you need me to be even if I hate every second of it. I’m telling you right now, I will ALWAYS do what’s best for you, even if we both hate it.”

“I don’t want you to spank me, Dean. I’m scared.”

“Nah. You’re fine. It’s just me. Still just me, and I’ve still got your back. I’m going to take care of you. I need you to trust me.”

“I’m trying, but I don’t understand what happened.” April was open and vulnerable.

“You tried to play me. Kid, you aren’t going to get what you want by playing any of us. We’re older and more experienced than you are. Cas and me, we made it our life’s work to understand how Ozzies tick. You think you’re the first one to try to manipulate your Tops? You’re out of your league here, April. You think I caught on quick? Cas had you from the minute you had the spark of an idea, and he always will. Michael too. I don’t know how that prick does it, but he reads people’s motivations like reading a book. You’re never going to get away with anything in this house, so stop trying. Jesus, just talk to us! What makes you think your mate wouldn’t climb up and pull the moon down for you if you asked him to?”

“I’m sorry, Dean.”

“Sorry for the mess you made, or sorry you got called on it?”

“Dean please! I’m sorry. Yes, I’m sorry I messed with your lines and almost got you in trouble. I’m sorry I tried to make you think I’m not a good match for Castiel. But I don’t even know what it is I want. I’m just scared, okay? I’m scared of growing old inside this house all alone…all alone except for a grumpy, scowling introvert who doesn’t want to even touch me, let alone be my friend.”

“There now, was that so hard? Now we have something to work with. Start with, if you want out of the house, then get serious about your audition piece. I know you hate the thing, but all you have to do is nail it once for the audition committee, and then you never have to play it again. If you get in, and you hate the school, we’ll figure something else out. You got your whole life ahead of you, and I don’t have any idea which way it’s going to go, but I know one thing.” Dean lowered his chin meaningfully. “I know you aren’t going to get stuck locked in this big house all alone with Michael. That would drive anyone crazy.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Psshh, because you don’t sit still that long, and you’re too much of a people person to stand for it. Even without the scheming, you generally get what you want, April. My money is on you every time.”

“How do I figure out what I want?”

Dean cocked his head to the side and ran both thumbs across her back. “Take it day-by-day and talk it out with Cas. Do you, uh…do you think you want pups yet?”

April broke from his eyes and looked down, frowning. “I can feel that pulling at me sometimes, just a little, but it’s not strong yet. If I’m going to try for a music career, I need to wait. But…”
“But what?”

“Dean, Alpha wants them so bad. He’s going on middleaged. He’s like Michael. He’s burning up inside, but he’s trying to cover for it so he doesn’t put any pressure on me. He wants to give me time to go to college and get my career going. But he’s in so much pain about it. When he’s asleep, his hands…they always come back to my lower belly, and he just touches me there, all night. He won’t talk about it. He pretends that the urges aren’t there, but I can feel it. I imagine you feel the same thing from Michael. Dean, it’s time; for both of them. What should I do?”

It took Dean a minute to think. “He does that to me too, April – the hands thing while he’s sleeping. I always thought it was just a caress-thing, but it’s right there, you know? Right on the lowest part of my belly. He’s done that for years now… But I can’t give him that. Shit.” Dean’s eyes welled up too, as he realized what the intimate little caress of Cas’ late at night was really all about. He’d done it for years. Dean sat back and looked away. “You’re sure it’s connected to pups, and not just a sleepy caress? He’s a touchy-feely guy.”

“It’s all tied together. I can’t explain how I know that it’s about having a family, but you feel it from Michael too, right? I’d bet it feels the same if we could put it into words.”

“Yeah. Probably. I can feel it clear as day, too, but I can’t explain how I know what it is.” Dean sat still and thought it through. He seemed to have forgotten about April’s punishment. She stood still and waited for him. At last he took a deep breath and looked back up at her. “Problem for another day, though. Right now, we need to deal with this. You ready?”

“No.”

“April.”

“I’m scared.”

“Let’s get it over with then.” Dean pulled her down over one leg, using his other to support her legs. “Hands on the floor. Hold yourself in place, and don’t move.” He lifted her skirt and pulled her panties to her knees. Her backside was a little bruised and marked already, but he knew she could take it. He rested a hand in the middle of her ass. “This is the first time for both of us, April, so we need to be careful. You tell me if you need a break, but other than that, don’t break position. Cas tells me you’re a natural. Do you have any questions?”

“No, sir.”

“You’re getting fifty with my hand, and then twenty with my belt. Do you understand why?”

“Yes, sir. Please just do it. Please.” She trembled.

He nodded to himself and rubbed her backside a little bit to get the blood flowing and then he smacked her ass right in the middle hard enough to leave a handprint. She sucked in a breath, but held still. He began to spank his little sister in earnest, making sure to leave a solid impression, and keeping the count in his head. It felt like when he had spanked Sam all those years ago. He felt less like an alpha, and more like a dad. It was awkward, and he didn’t want to keep going, but he reasoned that if he did this one well, there would be fewer to do in the future, so he made it real. His steel-hard hand heated quickly and turned a vibrant pink. April didn’t cry or kick, but she sniffled, and she fidgeted a little. He watched her butt turn pink and then red, and then nearly glowing as he covered every last section equally but randomly.

He stopped at fifty and rubbed the sting out a little. That was something that Castiel always refused
to do. In his mind, what was the good in applying a stinging swat if you were just going to soothe it right away? Dean felt differently. “Anything you want to say?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I’m really sorry.”

“Mm-hmm. I forgive you. Is that all? Is there anything else?” He moved his touch up over her back to massage her shoulders.

“Like what?”

“Like we never really followed up on my question. Are you still mad at me? You know it’s okay to be angry, right? You can tell me what you’re feeling, even if it’s about me. You can tell me anything, April, anything at all.”

“Yeah, I was mad at you. You threw me under the bus, and I didn’t expect it to go like that, but I’m not mad any more. I understand. I don’t like it, but I see it your way. I fucked up, Dean. I’m sorry.”

“What did you call me?”

“Sir! I’m sorry, sir.”

“All right, let’s finish this up. I don’t like this any more than you do. And before you roll your eyes at me, remember I’m usually on the receiving end, so I know what it feels like. Trust me. It sucks from this side too. I’m not a sadist like our dear Alpha is. I’d rather be done. Up you go.”

Dean helped her stand and balance with her panties still wadded up at her knees. He stood up and turned the chair around backward.

“Bend over the back and put your hands on the seat.” He lifted her skirt again, letting gravity draw it down toward her shoulders. “Still scared?” he asked, unbuckling his belt. “I’m nowhere near as harsh as Cas is. You can do this, Kid.” He slid the belt from its loops and folded it in his grip. She had scars on her hips that looked suspiciously like Castiel’s buckle.Hmm. Dean was surprised they did that. None of his business though.

“Sir?” Her voice was muffled by her position.

“Yes?”

“I like it when you call me ‘Kid’.”

Dean laughed easily. They were going to be fine. They weren’t broken. “Now you’re just sucking up. Breathe for me now, and brace up. Here we go.”

Dean waited for her to take a deep breath and let it go, and then he whipped his belt back and smacked it down hard. The telltale stripe didn’t form right away, but by the time he’d done it five times, her butt was beginning to swell and welt beautifully, and he kept a rapid pace. This time she did cry out. Her right foot kicked up a little, but Dean dodged it easily.

“I’m sorry! God, I’m sorry! I won’t do it again! Please, alpha!”

Just a few more and he’d be able to hold her and comfort her like he wanted to. How did Castiel enjoy this? It was awful!

“Ow! Ow! Ouch! Please STOP!!! PLEASE!!” She Released with a spasm that spread across her back, and then she went limp. Dean only needed to apply three more strokes, so he made them swift.
He set the belt on the chair beside her hands and leaned down over her limp body so he could whisper in her ear. “I love you, sweetheart. You’re all done now.” He rubbed very lightly over her backside. “You did great. You know how this works. You’re square with me and Michael both, and we aren’t going to hold it over you. Let it go, Kid. Let it go. C’mere.” He pulled her up to standing and turned her to face him, stooping to carefully get her underwear back into place as her skirt covered her again. He rubbed her back and petted her hair, kissing her temple again and again.

“Please don’t make me do that a lot. I’m not stupid enough to think we won’t ever be here again, but I hated that. I need you to talk to me instead of trying to play me. Please, April. God, please?”

She nodded into him, smearing the moisture from her face on his shirt.

“Let’s get you into bed – two hours at least, Alpha’s orders. You want me to stay with you? Will it keep you awake if I’m writing?”

He guided her up the stairs and into her own room. “Please stay a while, Dean. I don’t fall asleep well when I’m alone.”

“Yeah, me either.” Dean tucked her into the bed, then found a pen and some paper on her small correspondence desk. April showed him where her lap desk was, tucked beneath the bed, and he climbed in beside her. He spent a few minutes rubbing her back gently, then he sighed and began to fill in another page of Michael’s lines. April watched him through sleepy eyes for a while, then slowly drifted to sleep. Dean watched the clock. Three o’clock came and went. Michael’s bond flared up in agonizing pain for a surprisingly long time, and then he slowly followed April into slumber over the course of about half-an-hour. Dean wasn’t going to get off that easily, he knew. In his heart, he didn’t want to. Even as an alpha, Dean felt he owed more than he could pay. He always felt he owed more than he could pay.

His beloved Alpha would help him with that soon. Dean scribbled on. His penmanship was gone, but he made sure to include every single word Michael wanted in every single line.

Chapter End Notes

Dean hadn’t spanked April yet, and it was time to change that, especially since he's committed to staying alpha. It was inevitable. Here's the topic for discussion for this chapter: April. Is April fully busted, or is she still playing some deeper game? Is she setting her sights on Michael or not? Is he in danger of falling like his sister thinks he is?

Actually, comment anything you want. As you know, I'll go over-the-top w/ my answers no matter what the topic.

Each of the characters has committed to discussions with the others, and I want to tie those up in one chapter (huh, fat chance) and then move back out into the world to let Ellen and Pam explain Michael. That's the plan.

Love y'all, and y'all means all.
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Everybody's talking. Lots of things need to be said. Everyone learns something new, and also Dean learns why he shouldn't try to stay alpha through a punishment.

Chapter Notes

See end of chapter for warnings.

In keeping up my standard pattern of posting in twos, here's the second chapter in this round. 56 & 57 are kind of a continuation of each other. They make sense in sequence. From here, we move on to Michael's training, Michael's assessment and full ratings, Castiel's birthday, Heat / Rut and hopefully a conception, PhoenixCon, April's audition, and then down the back-field straight-away to the finish line. Yeah, like it's going to be that straightforward.

In real news: I know we're all heart-broken over all the recent craziness worldwide. I offer what I can by way of adding good to the world instead of awful, and I try to donate where it will do the most good, but the suffering is overwhelming right now. It's too much. I hope all of you have a place of peace you can go to to renew your faith in humanity. It's a bit shaken for me today.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 57 – Sunday, June 25, 2017

NOW:

Dean resisted the temptation to kiss April’s sleeping cheek. She was just so damned kissable with the hint of puppy fat still rounding her cheeks, but he didn’t want to risk waking her up. He slipped out of the bed once he was sure she was out for the count, stowed the lap desk, and trotted down the stairs to find his Alpha.

Castiel was frowning at his computer screen and mumbling to himself. He didn’t exactly acknowledge Dean’s presence, he just started talking as if Dean had been there all along. “The budget’s untenable. There’s not enough cash flow. There are no new income streams to speak of. Why the hell did we build three new facilities at once? We’re stuck now.” Cas looked up at Dean.

“We have a couple of routes we can take that you don’t want to try. I know you don’t want us prostituting ourselves, Cas, but it might be the fastest option.” Dean took his regular seat at an angle on top of the front of the desk.
“You mean letting Sam sell correction paddlings to sports teams? Come on, Dean, we need real money.” Cas dismissed the idea flatly.

“There’s a whole ape market out there, man. Sports teams are just the tip of the iceberg. Who knows what might open up if we jump over that barrier. Sam’s started talks with a couple franchises, just minor league stuff, but I think there’s a real opportunity there.”

Cas shook his head. “You called it prostitution, Dean, and that’s exactly what it is. I don’t like it. What comes after corporal punishment, huh? Do we start fucking apes for cash?”

Dean smirked, happy to see Cas draw the line firmly right where Dean felt it should be and filing the information away. He’d found years ago that Castiel James worked best when the words tumbled out of his own mouth. Sam would be disappointed, but Dean had mulled on it for long enough to realize that easy money wasn’t the right answer if they wanted to build something to last. “Another option is to close Dallas down. It’s a major revenue-sucking swamp right now. Close it or sell it. I told you before we opened up down there that it was going to be too much of an extension. Nobody listens to the fourth man down.” Dean slumped in a dramatically put upon way.

“Really?” Cas sat back in his chair and rubbed his neck. “Not helpful. What about Bela? Can she turn Dallas around? Should we send Bobby down there? If they don’t start making money by the end of Q4, we’re fucked.”

“Cas, relax. We’re putting a committee together, and yours truly is going to chair it. Let us untangle this for you. Kay? You don’t have to figure everything out yourself.”

Cas made a worried face, but he agreed, shuffled some papers on his desk and shifted in his seat.

“Still hurting?” Dean enquired. “Need me to take a look?”

Cas stiffened. “No, I’m fine. It’s just muscle soreness at this point…that and an annoyingly persistent inability to…” Cas stopped as he noticed the glint in Dean’s eye. “Are you laughing at me?”

Dean schooled his face quickly and lowered his eyes to the desktop. It wasn’t funny really, but seeing Cas try to handle what he put Dean through on a somewhat regular basis – well, it was a LITTLE funny. “How’d it go with Bobby? We good?”

“I’m not going to talk about it, but yes, we’re good. Suffice it to say, I believe he understands the message now.” Cas pulled another pained face that could be from either physical or emotional trauma. Dean watched him closely.

“And how are YOU, C.J.?” he asked shrewdly. “I know that took a lot out of you.”

Castiel met his eye and shook his head. “Why must we always end up here, Dean?”

Dean bit his lip. He needed to pop Cas out of the downward spiral that he was standing right on the precipice of sliding into. Doms could drop too, if no one watched over them. “Well, son,” Dean began in a low deep voice, as if speaking to a young pup, “When two wolves love each other very, very much, and they want to build a pack together, sometimes the Bigger Daddy wolf has to put his penis inside the Smaller Daddy wolf and move it around a little bit until it feels really good, so the Smaller Daddy wolf knows deep inside who his ass belongs to.”

Cas rolled his eyes and reached across the desk to whap Dean on the back of his head, but his eyes lost their haunted overtones. Dean followed up quickly. “You’re not immune to the call of the wolf, Cas; no more than any of the rest of us. I don’t care what you want to be, this is who you are, and there’s NOTHING wrong with you.” Castiel obviously didn’t want to talk about it, but he
acknowledged Dean’s words with a touch to his hand and a quick squeeze.

“How is April?” Cas changed the subject.

“How’s Michael?” Dean countered.

“He did great,” Cas answered simply. “He’ll need a week or so to heal up, and we need to let Hannah and Joshua know his state before they begin. He’s come a long way in a very short time. He’s responding to correction as an Omega now without struggling against the designation.”

“Well, yeah, C.J. He responds as an Omega to everything you do. It’s not transferring to me yet, though.”

“Patience, Dean. He’ll get there.”

“I know. I’m just jealous.”

Cas sat forward, “So? How’s April?”

“She’s fine. She’s asleep. She Released for me,” Dean admitted.

“I know. I felt it.” Cas closed his eyes and rubbed his face. Dean watched him silently for a moment.

“Michael didn’t…um, when it came time to spank her. He couldn’t do it,” said Dean cryptically, falling silent and looking into the distance beyond the bookshelf. Neither of them broke the silence for a couple of minutes.

“So, you wanna talk about it?” Dean asked at last.

“Yes,” Cas said firmly, breathing in through his nose, straightening up, and opening his eyes again. “Yes. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t know what you’ve guessed or what you know, but I think we need to keep an eye on our two Omegas, man. We need to set some boundaries, and we need to decide what’s acceptable. What are you comfortable with?”

Dean didn’t flower it up, and he didn’t want to sway Cas either way.

“Comfortable with? Between the two of them? I thought I made that clear already. No one but me…”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna work, Cas. Forbidden fruit and all that. You’re begging for trouble.”

“What are you saying?” Castiel asked Dean, wrinkling his brow in concern.

“Open it up. Let’s scene together. Let’s break the taboo that’s making them both curious, bring it all out in the open. Don’t tell me you haven’t sensed something from your mate.” Dean leaned down and rested on one elbow, stretching out his long torso across the front of Cas’ desk.

The Alpha took a minute to think about it. “The time’s not right. I want you involved if we’re going there. I’m not doing this without you. Besides, I’m not convinced April’s interested in Michael intimately. I’m really not getting that from her. Do you have any more insights to share about what’s bothering her?”

“Do your own detective work, detective. I’m not your snitch. You need to sit down with her and talk it out. I will tell you this: she’s scared of you for some reason. Any idea why she might not feel safe to talk to you?”
“No, not really. I mean, I thought we were communicating pretty well before this. She tells me what she wants from me as a Dom. God, Dean, she’s further out there than you are in stamina. I knew she wanted a foursome. She’s had her eye on that since you brought Michael home, but it’s not personal to Michael specifically. She’s just horny, I think. And she’s insatiable.” Cas laughed at the irony. All his life he’d worried he would never find a partner who could go at it for hours and then turn right around and start up again. Even Dean hit his limit before Cas did, begging off once fatigue and oversensitization broke the pain/pleasure balance. April would literally beg him to keep going until her body gave in and she passed out. He cleared his throat at the quirk of a brow from his fiancé.

“Having trouble keeping up, old man?”

“No.”

“Well, you may have turned a virgin into a nympho in a matter of months, but there’s a whole other side to the kid that you’re not keyed in on. I don’t know if she’s hiding it, or if you’re not open to hear it, but there’s a disconnect, and it’s not my job to fix it.” Dean scrubbed a smudge on the desk with his thumb. He tried to keep the rest of it to himself, but his mouth betrayed him again. “She said you’re burning up wanting pups, and you want ‘em right now. She said it’s a biological clock thing.” Dean made sure to catch Cas’ eye before the Alpha could dodge, and he saw the truth.

Cas startled and looked at the computer screen to avoid Dean’s piercing gaze. It was the last thing he expected the man to mention. He wanted to deflect, but that wouldn’t work here. Dean deserved the truth, and he’d promised. “We can’t always get what we want, Dean. She needs time to grow up and explore. She needs to let her talent take her somewhere. There’s still time for a family later.”

“How bad is it, Castiel James?”

Cas sighed. “It’s hard, Dean, but it’s manageable.” There was a brief moment where their weak double bond – just a parody of the ones Dean shared with Michael – flared with regret from both sides as their eyes spoke of wishes for a chance to bring pups into the pack together, shared wishes that could never be granted. Sam and Jess weren’t alone in mourning a family that could never exist, despite the alternatives available to all of them. It wasn’t the same thing. Dean reached for Castiel’s hand, his brow furrowing. Cas squeezed again, and then let it go, so Dean moved the conversation into safer waters.

“Have you talked it over with your mate? You aren’t the only person affected, you know. She can feel your pain, and it’s hurting her too. She wants a bunch of stuff, but it might surprise you what’s on the list and what’s not. Did you know she writes and sings her own songs?”

“I didn’t know that,” admitted Cas.

“Mm-kay. That’s all I’m going to say on the matter. Talk to her, C.J.”

Cas nodded, and they went into their own thoughts once more. Castiel saved his work and closed out of his computer. It felt like a good time to bring up all their business. Dean was open and amenable. “Dean, I want you and Michael to resolve your issues. I’ve been patient, but it needs to end.” Cas as pained lover desperate for a family had little in common with Cas, the Alpha Director of Pack Winchester.

“Wrong Winchester, Cas.”

“No. It takes two to squabble, and that’s all this is at this point. Whatever you haven’t given him yet, stop holding out and give it to him. It’s enough, and he needs to go in there tomorrow without distractions.”
“Whoa, now! Why are you putting this squarely on me? If it takes two to squabble, then why just poke at me?” He sat up and crossed his arms defensively.

“I gave him the same lecture. I told him to stop sulking. But there’s a piece that’s on you, Dean. Tell me I’m wrong.” Cas crossed his own arms and raised one brow. It was THAT brow. Dean rubbed his mouth with his hand and resisted biting the inside of his cheek.

“Yeah, all right. You know, I was all ready to come home today and smooth it all over with him, and then he jumped right to conclusions about the lines, and I couldn’t do it. He’s such an ass sometimes.”

Cas firmed the line of his jaw. “You’re being stubborn, Dean. Both of you are. You sound like a whiner and a victim.”

Dean huffed a protest, but then caught the stress in Cas’ eyes, and he wilted. “I’m sorry, man. I hate fighting with Michael, and I know it makes you crazy. It’s just… Nah, you know what? I’m gonna fix it. You know where he is now?”

“I put him to bed in the H/R room. He’s sleeping.” Cas pivoted in his chair as Dean stood and circled the desk.

“Too bad I’m not touchable right now, Baby. The kids are sleeping. We could carve ourselves out some adult playtime. You sure there’s nothing I can do for you?” Dean slid in to straddle Cas’ lap, and the Alpha smiled indulgently and pulled him in close.

“Not a brass farthing, Dean,” he whispered.

Dean chuckled, nuzzling Castiel’s neck. “Was that a show tunes reference? You’re such a dork.”

“It feels wrong to be snuggling up with you and talking to your alpha when we haven’t settled your debt yet, Dean. I don’t think we’ve ever really done that before. Have we?” Cas embraced him and ran a light touch through his hair, but he refrained from bringing their crotches into contact.

“I told you it was going to get weird, Babe.” Dean kissed along Cas’ carotid artery, feeling the increased warmth there. He felt his nether regions responding, and he pulled back with a frustrated sigh. “I’m going to die, Alpha,” he whispered with his face as close to Cas’ as he could get it without touching.

“It’s a punishment, alpha. It’s not supposed to be fun,” Cas whispered back before kissing Dean’s pouting lips.

“Asshole,” Dean charged, pulling away and dismounting his lap.

“Careful there, Sub. I make no promises that I won’t add on to tonight’s tally if you provoke me,” Cas teased him. But Dean was thoughtful, frowning. He faced the bookshelf, and rotated two of the figurines to face differently. Cas watched him, but Dean didn’t speak. He obviously had something on his mind.

“Dean?”

“Yeah, I’m working on it. Give me a sec.”

Cas huffed a laugh and waited. He waited a little longer. He waited patiently. Dean made a circuit of the knick-knacks and messed with each of them in one way or another.
Castiel waited for him, watching.

“I want a spot on the floor.” Dean said at last, facing the shelf, his hand still mid-motion.

“Excuse me?” Cas asked.

“At breakfast, or dinner, whenever. I want to Sub for you outside of our scene nights. I want you to feed me. I want to be good for you.” Dean’s face reddened with embarrassment, and he avoided Cas’ eye.

“Why me and not Michael?” Cas wondered out loud.

“Michael and I can add it in later. He needs to be Omega for the next whole crap-ton of weeks. I don’t want to wait that long. April told me to stay the hell off her pillow, and she’s right. I probably shouldn’t try to ask for a place at breakfast. I’m not trying to muscle her out of the way, but I’m not getting enough. It’s hard enough to hold onto the alpha, but if the wolf doesn’t get fed, especially if he isn’t getting any sex, I’m going to lose my grip on the alpha. Cas, I’m sorry I tried to force my way in on you that morning. I know I’m supposed to drop it, but I never really said what I needed to say.”

“I see.”

“This feels crazy to talk about while I’m not…you know, deep inside. But I guess I’m just speaking for the wolf. It’s what he wants, Cas. He wants to kneel for you.”

“I can’t give you breakfast, Dean. Michael could, but I’m spoken for at breakfast. I can’t just push April aside like that.”

“I know.” Dean frowned down at his socks and shuffled his feet uncomfortably. His alpha, if it still had any hold, was rapidly losing its grip.

“I want you alpha at dinner, too. Dinner is pack time, and we all need to be there,” Castiel continued.

“Okay,” said Dean, disappointed and falling softly into his Sub.

“How about after dinner?” Castiel suggested. “We relax in the game room often enough. There isn’t a meal to feed you, but we could work around that. I’d have to be creative for the next two weeks, but after that…I mean, are you interested in cock warming? Something like that? Are you asking for a sex-slave roleplay? I need to understand what you want.”

Dean’s shoulders curled in a little, and he assumed a smaller presence. He met his Alpha’s eyes with a careful countenance. He was watchful and responsive. He was Submissive. “Sir, I’d like to be good for you. If it pleases you, I’d like to answer to you, to whatever you care to ask of me.”

Castiel took his lower lip in his teeth and fought his own wolf’s burning desire to take hold of Dean and ravage him on the spot. Instead, he smiled kindly at his Sub. “You are so good for me, Pet. Come here and kneel for me, please.” Dean scrambled into place before the Alpha, letting pleasure replace the tension in his shoulders. Holding the alpha in place was exhausting, and he needed a recharge. Castiel positioned him beneath the desk with a little fumbling and pulled Dean’s head to rest on his knee. The Alpha let one hand rest on Dean’s head, scratching lightly at his scalp every now and again. He booted his computer back up again, and let Dean’s tears absorb into his slacks silently and unremarked. He could feel the release of tension as Dean slowly assumed the position his wolf needed. There would still be time for Dean to come back to the alpha that Michael needed him to be before Cas locked them up in the playroom and let Dean’s wolf out completely.
“We need to get you a pillow, Pet.”

“Sir? Um, I kinda already did. It’s green.” Dean sniffled, feeling warm and safe; relaxing.

“Good boy.”

Michael awoke slowly, and he woke grumpy. His hair askew, his backside throbbing. He hadn’t realized how deeply his crimes had wormed their way into his conscience and taken root until the Alpha made him enumerate each one and let the man flay them out of him. He’d lied about how painful his Heats had become as he ended each one with an empty womb. Well, omitted rather than lied, but he was rapidly learning that omission in this pack was considered lying, straight and clear. There was no difference. Castiel explained to him the inherent danger in keeping physical and emotional pain a secret from the alphas, and Michael conceded that he’d fucked up royally. He’d plotted and manipulated, lied overtly and discreetly, put others at risk, hidden matters that pertained to his health and his sanity. It all looked much worse when he had to say it out loud than it had buried deep in his head. Then the hand, the belt, and the shower brush. Then the willow switch. Michael was feeling many painful things, but he was also feeling absolved.

The bed clothes beside him shifted, and a warm, gentle hand smoothed a soothing coolness across his bare butt, rubbing it in with the right mix of tender and firm. Michael groaned and buried his face in his pillow. He didn’t want to be pleased at Dean’s presence. He wanted to be grouchy. Dean refreshed the balm on his fingertips, and began to apply a second coat.

They were feeling each other out in their heads, each one supremely careful, each one weary of the bickering but needing to maintain his stance until he knew the other’s mind. Michael let Dean fondle his ass, gently stroking arnica into his welts and bruises. At last, he reached to the bedside table and collected his phone wordlessly, navigated to an email, opened it, and handed it awkwardly behind his own back to Dean before slumping back down into the softness. One thing Michael appreciated more than any other single point about being wealthy: the linens were heavenly.

Dean took the phone and nodded. His voice cracked with disuse. “Yeah, I, (ahem), I got that too. Your assessment is on Wednesday morning. Cas and I will both be there with you. Are you nervous?”

Dean knew that his mate was nervous, but he didn’t know why, exactly. The Keller score meant nothing to Michael, but the psychological assessment had him tied in knots. Of the two, the 19-rating was likely to have a much greater impact on Michael’s life than Pam’s report. Maybe Michael hadn’t realized that yet.

“Fuck the assessment. I’m not going. I don’t want anything to do with any of this, Dean. It’s bullshit. I’m not doing the training either. I’ve lived this long without pretending to be a Sub. I don’t need it.” Michael had his face pressed into the pillow, but Dean heard him just fine.

Dean thought for a minute. “How’d it go with Castiel?”

Michael rolled to his side and up onto his elbow. “Did you hear me? I’m not going!”

Dean ignored his belligerence. “Michael, I’m sorry I was a dick to you. I’m sorry I called you names, and said you’re a child.” He huffed a frustrated breath. “I’m sorry that I just bowled right over your
feelings and treated you like a doormat. I do respect you, man. You mean the world to me, and you deserve better. I swear I didn’t ask April to help me with the lines, but I did do the ones that had some skipped words. That’s on me. I threw all of those out, and I’ve been working on them while I waited for you to wake up. I’ve got something like three-hundred-sixty now.” Dean began to apply a third coat of arnica awkwardly to Michael’s sideways cheeks, reaching over his hip, not trying to look at him bared naked to his thighs.

“You called me a prick in front of April.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“There’s really not anything I can do about it either. You’re up to the tips of your gel-styled hair spikes in punishments. I can’t spank you. I can’t DF you. You’re already doing lines, and I’m too exhausted to even try to add anything else, not that it would do any fucking good. You’re going to do whatever the hell you want, so just…fuck it!”

“Shit. I’m so sorry, man.” Dean leaned into Michael’s chest and rested his cheek against the warm flesh. Michael didn’t pull away. He sighed. Dean listened to his heartbeat and let their bonds stir up and flail around for a while. So much could be communicated without words, and all of it was pure and unhindered by motivation or skewed presentation. Michael’s hurt and resentment flew right to the front, and Dean accepted it, soothing his mate.

“Michael, I’d forgotten how long it took for Cas to learn what it takes to keep me balanced. We fucked up a lot at first. I shouldn’t have expected you to just magically get it all, and I should never have expected you to accept an apology that I didn’t mean. Baby, I didn’t mean it then, but I do now. You’ve put up with so much from me. You’ve done everything I asked you to do, and I was an asshole – a monumental asshole. I won’t take you for granted like that again.”

Michael adjusted the way his chin rested on Dean’s head, and he brought his arm up to hold Dean in place. “I want to believe you, alpha. I think you believe yourself, but when the brat sticks his ratty little head out again, I’m going to take it on the chin.”

“That’s why you need the training, Michael. You shouldn’t take that shit from me. There are other ways to deal with it besides arguing and fighting about. Doms shouldn’t argue with a brat. Joshua’s going to teach you all kinds of tricks that’ll set me back on my heels, but good. I need you to learn them. Can you do that for me?”

Michael frowned and pulled back to look Dean in the face. “You WANT me to put you in your place?”

“Well, yeah – when we’re in private, and I’m being a dick. Fuck, I forget how green you are…Babe, I’ll never be a dick to you on purpose. So, if that’s what I’m doing, then it’s the wolf, and you have the authority to smack him back down. Don’t argue with me. All that does is pull my alpha up, and then we’re screwed.”

“I tried that, Dean, and it didn’t stop you from acting like a spoiled child. What did I do wrong?”

Michael ran his hand down Dean’s back and into the back of his jeans, taking a firm grip of Dean’s ass and squeezing.

“You went too easy on me,” Dean admitted. “Times like that, you need to fucking tear me a new one. Keep wailing on me until I break. You’ll know when I get there because I get really small in my head.” Dean closed his eyes and pressed his hips back into the touch.

“The little waif?”
“Huh?” Dean looked up at Michael.

“There’s a little boy inside your mind. He’s really vulnerable, but he’s got this mischievous thing about him too. He comes out when you’re in brat-mode, and Christ, he breaks my heart. Is that who I need to look for?”

“Um, yeah. I guess. Never thought about it like that. Maybe you should talk to Cas about this.”

“I’m sorry too, Dean. It’s my fault, isn’t it? If I didn’t do my job as your Dom, then I’m the one who caused all the rest of it.”

“No, you didn’t. Even as mates, we still aren’t gonna be perfect. You need the training, and I need to take responsibility for myself.” Dean sat up. He faced Michael. “I made an appointment to talk to the shrink Pam sent me to. I’m going to start with once a week; see how it goes. It isn’t fair of me to let the brat do whatever it wants and abdicate all my behavior to you and Cas. I need to grow up.”

Michael seemed startled by Dean’s admission, but he caught himself. His first impulse was to deny that Dean wasn’t perfect just as he was. Even after being angry with him and hurt at Dean’s childish conduct, Michael’s first impulse was to defend him. Instead, he simply said, “Thank you, Dean.”

“Can you get up?” Dean asked.

“No.”

Dean chuckled. “I need to get dinner started.”

“Not yet. Talk to me.” Michael pulled Dean back down, and he went willingly. “What is the assessment going to tell us that we don’t already know?”

“You tell me. What are you afraid of hearing?” Dean rubbed his back with a feather-light touch of his fingertips.


“No. I wanted to wait until you were ready to tell me.” Dean’s voice was canted for an intimate ear. He wanted Michael to know he was safe.

“I assaulted a girl, Dean. She didn’t press charges, but she should have. It was on campus, and that kind of assault, it goes through the school authorities, not the cops, so I got off with a slap on the wrist, and expulsion, and a referral to Lawrence, Kansas.”

“You can tell me anything, Michael. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I was at this party. It was small, just a little thing in some kids’ dorm rooms. They all got together and bought booze and drugs, and they all had their dorm room doors open, so everyone was just roaming from room-to-room. I wasn’t planning to stay long, but my wolf was itching to play with somebody, so I was out hunting for tail. That’s all it was to me.

“I met this girl, and we got to talking. I was pretty drunk, and I didn’t care a whole lot to get to know her. She was hot, and she was mouthy, just like I like them. But I mistook her mouth for a bratty come-on. I thought she was trying to stir me up, provoke me. Turns out she just wasn’t into me at all, like, she wasn’t into MEN at all.”

“What happened?” asked Dean quietly.
“We were in the room at the end of the hall, and neither of us noticed when everyone else had wandered out. We were alone, and my wolf started to get pissed off that she wasn’t putting out. Before I knew it, she was face down on the floor, and her clothes were ripped open. God, Dean, I came to my senses like waking up to a face full of cold water. All I could do was apologize and run to get her somebody to help her home. I nearly raped that girl! What the fuck kind of monster am I?

“Then my Pop, he drove down and picked me up. Had a good, long private conversation with the Dean of the school. I’ll never forget the way he looked at me when he came into that room. It’s like if you drop your pup off for school one day all innocent and sweet, and then when you go back and pick them up, the school hands you a demon. He didn’t know how to talk to me or what to say. He told me he was going to get me help, and that he expected me to behave my-fucking-self for once in my fucking life.

“We didn’t even go home. He made me just bring what I had in my dorm room. Didn’t let me see Rachel or Mommy. Drove straight north from San Antonio. We stayed a couple of nights north of Fort Worth while he worked out the details, and then we hit the road. That’s when I met you.”

“Baby,” began Dean.

“I’m a monster and a rapist, Dean.”

“No. You aren’t either of those things. You assaulted a girl. Yes, you did that, and I’m not going to excuse it or gloss over it, but you didn’t rape her. Twice now that I know of, your wolf has flared up when confronted with a homosexual woman. Twice you’ve managed to leash him before he goes that far. You did it with no support or training. Michael, I know you think it’s bullshit, but your wolf is a fucking nineteen. Do you have any idea how much willpower it takes to control a nineteen? I mean, I know you do, because you DO it, but I don’t think you realize what it is that you do. Baby, you have to get the training. You’re hanging onto him by your fingernails, and you need some real tools – tools like Cas has.

“Your wolf…” Dean continued, “He doesn’t have a conscience. Wolves are pure selfish desire. That’s all they are. They can’t reason or think. They don’t have empathy. They don’t care about anyone but themselves. Your wolf is only a piece of you. It isn’t all of you. It isn’t even the quintessential you. It’s transient. Wolves don’t last your whole lifetime. They’re there to help you in your prime: to be a strong warrior, or to build a pack, or to procreate the shit out of each other, or to make a stable union. All that stuff happens when we’re young and middle adults, and then it fades. You need to learn to let it go so it doesn’t take you with it when it goes to sleep.”

“I’m afraid, Dean. I don’t want to be Omega.”

“You have to learn to control your wolf or someone will get hurt, Michael. But you also have to learn to live as the Omega that you are, or you’ll hurt yourself. I love you, and I’m not going to let you hurt anyone…not even you.”

“What are they going to teach me? I mean, what’s it going to be like?” Michael was wide open inside the Mating-bonds, both avenues opened as wide as they would go.

“They’ll start with basic anatomy and some exercises that are meant to drive you into one designation or the other. You’re going to hate the Omega stuff. It’ll feel like touchy-feely, campfire, love-in crap to you, but it works, Michael. I need you to try.”

“You won’t be there with me?”

“I can’t. Your wolf responds too strongly to me. We’re going to have you in a small private room up
at The Facility, and you’ll…”

“WHAT? You said I could do it here!”

“Shit. I’m sorry, Michael. You need to get out of your nest for this. Fuck, I should’ve told you sooner. I’m so sorry. But this is important. Do you trust me?”

“Why would I trust you?”

Dean waited him out.

“So I’m just supposed to shove the wolf into a mason jar and screw the lid on it? Will I ever see him again?”

“That’s what I’m here for, my grouchy love. The upshot is, we let the wolves out of their crates and run them around in private, so we don’t scare the villagers out on the street.”

“You want me to learn to be submissive in public and only be myself when I’m alone with you.”

“No. I want you to learn to be OMEGA in public, and to be yourself everywhere. It’s all you, Michael. At your very heart, at the base of who you are is a very ancient core that connects back to every wolf who’s ever lived. Sometimes we get to see and touch that connection a little bit. We have pack memories buried inside us that aren’t from our own lifetimes. It’s frikkin’ epic, Michael, but it’s all Secondary designation stuff. You are Omega more than you are anything else, and you’re missing out on the richness of being a wolf because he’s the one you’ve stuffed into a mason jar. You need to let him out. You need to get to know him.”

“I don’t want to do that, Dean. I don’t trust that side of me.”

“Baby, the Omega isn’t the side of you that’s untrustworthy. Forgive me, this is a dick thing to say, but it wasn’t your Omega who tried to take Jody down and tear her apart.”

Michael didn’t have a response to that. He sniffed. “I don’t know if I can do it, Dean.”

“You can do it, Michael. I’ll be right here, and I’m going to help you with every single step.” Dean sat up again and took Michael’s face in his hand by his cheek, holding his chin with a thumb. “I can’t do the work for you, but I won’t ever leave you alone. Do you hear me? You don’t ever have to be alone again. Never.”

Michael’s eyes mirrored the storm Dean felt inside him. “You aren’t going to be in the training rooms with me.”

“No, but I won’t cut the bonds, and I’ll be there when you come out. Every. Single. Day.”

“Will they touch me?”

“Yes. And they have permission to. You will have to submit in places, Baby. You will take spankings. You will be handled and manipulated and fucked. Listen to me. Hold up, Michael, listen to me…” Michael was growling deep in his throat, and Dean kicked himself for putting this conversation off too long. “It will all make sense in context. No one’s just going to walk up and mount you. You will be part of every decision and every action. You will have a safeword, and you’re going to know what’s going on every step of the way. I know you can’t see it right now, and your imagination is going crazy on you, but it’s not like that. No one’s going to hurt you. Do you think I would leave you with anyone who would hurt you? Would Castiel?”
“Please don’t make me do this. Dean, please.” Michael was reduced to begging, and he knew that meant he had lost.

“Here, let’s try something. Close your eyes for me, Baby. Trust me. Just let me try this.” Dean put a warm hand over Michael’s eyes, careful to keep the hand that had arnica cream on it far away from his mate’s face.

Michael whimpered, but allowed the touch. “Think for me, Michael,” Dean whispered. “Think of the safest you’ve ever felt in your life. Think of a single moment when you knew in your core that nothing could touch you, nothing could harm you. When have you felt safe, sweetheart? Do you remember feeling like that? Did you fight it, or did you relax into it? Do you have it?”

“I, uh…yes, I have something,” Michael responded after some thought.

“Can you tell me where you are?” Dean used present tense. He wanted Michael encased in the memory.

“I…don’t want to tell you.” Michael’s head ducked even though he had no gaze to lower. He was ashamed.

Dean leaned in as close as he could to Michael’s ear. “You can tell me anything, Michael. Don’t hide yourself from me.”

“But, Dean. It wasn’t you. I’m sorry. It should be you.”

Dean chuckled. “There’s no ‘should’, Babe.”

Michael wilted against Dean’s touch, his eyes still covered. “Against the wall in the kitchen. Alpha was pressed right up against me, and he asked before he fucked me. I’ve never felt anything like that before. It was like I was invincible because there was some kind of a shield covering me, keeping out all the bad. It was like nothing scary or painful would ever be able to touch me again, and that’s insane. It makes no sense.”

“There it is. That’s what I’m looking for. Your Omega knows, Michael. That was your Omega, and he’s right. He went straight to the strongest Alpha in the Pack, and he climbed aboard that train. Your Omega knows what it needs. It needs shelter and structure. Cas gives you that way better than I can, and that’s how it’s supposed to be. We are pack animals, my friend. Don’t be ashamed of sheltering beneath Castiel. You belong there, and so do I.” Dean removed his hand and made sure Michael was all right.

“No, it feels comfortable.” It was a admission.

“Safe?”

“Yeah.”

“You, uh…you may not have noticed, but you respond to Fred in much the same way.” Dean worried that the revelation that Michael was openly Omega for an ape might set him back, but Michael merely blinked.

“Really?”

“Yep. You direct his work, but you do it from an Omega mindset, and there’s virtually no stress when you two talk to each other. It’s business, not personal. Michael, it’s perfect, and if you can just
learn to trust that feeling and bring into some new places, you’ll be right where you belong. You’re afraid of something that isn’t real. You aren’t a Sub, and no one’s going to make you be one. Living in your Omega doesn’t mean living submissively. You can work from there. I’ve seen people do it all the time. Like Gabriel. Gabe’s not submissive. He’s kickass and badass – doesn’t have a compliant bone in his body, but he knows how to be Omega.”

“And the nineteen?”

“The nineteen is all mine, Michael. Well, mine and our pups’. You’ll use your wolf in raising our pups. Kids are natural submissives, and they respond to a firm Dominant hand. But the sexy side of your wolf is mine alone. Don’t worry, I’ll give it plenty of exercise once you’ve completed your training.”

Michael hummed at the image that elicited in his head, and he let his wolf welcome Dean’s back with little nips to the Sub’s ears that made Dean smile.

Dean allowed the nuzzling to go on for a little bit, but then pushed Michael back. “Hey, um, just to get this out on the table…you know that April’s not on your menu, right?”

Michael thunked his head back against the headboard hard enough to make Dean wince. “Yes Dean. I get it. Omega. Obey. I GET it. Paws off the chick.”

“…for now,” Dean amended, watching Michael’s wolf closely. Michael lifted his head.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Do you want her?”

There was no hiding Michael’s physical response, and that was answer enough from his animal side. “I’m Mated, Dean, not dead. She walks around the house naked.”

Dean narrowed his eyes to try to keep the complicated plays inside Michael’s response separated. It went deeper than lust in Michael’s head, but it wasn’t…well, Dean didn’t know what it was exactly.

“Would you be interested in opening up into a foursome? Once I’m out of the cock-cage, that is of course. Castiel would be lead dog, but you would get your say as well.”

“He’s agreed to this?”

“I’m working on him.” Dean studied his fingernails.

“Ah. I see. Dean, you’re homosexual. Do you need me to explain what that means?”

“No thanks, I think I’ve got it. Crap, I’m just asking questions. It wouldn’t do any good to sell Cas on the idea if you’re not interested.”

“Oh, I’m interested. I don’t think April is though, and I don’t know why you would be.”

Dean regarded Michael for a long time, trying to read him, trying to figure out if he was for real. “Why didn’t you spank her?” He hoped to catch Michael with his guard down, and it seemed to work. Michael’s defenses shot up, but he let Dean catch a glimpse of panic before he covered it up.

“Michael?”

“It’s nothing. I wasn’t in the right mindset. I’ve been holding onto the Omega for several days now, and I couldn’t get into a good headspace. Better to walk away than to do it wrong. You had her
“Michael…” Dean drew the name out in a clearly unconvinced denial of the Omega’s explanation.

“What? I’m not perfect, okay? I fucked up and couldn’t cut it.” Michael glared at Dean, and then he followed with, “That’s all I’m going to say, so you can just drop it already. Punish me if you need to.”

Dean laughed. “I’m not going to punish you for not punishing April. That’s ridiculous. I just wish you trusted me enough to talk to me. Maybe someday. Someday, Michael. I’ll still be here.” Dean rested his forehead against his mate’s.

“I know. I’m trying, Dean.”

“I know. But… Michael, are you in love with April?”

“Jesus Dean! No! God!”

“Then what?!”

“She’s not mine, all right? I don’t know how to do this halfway, and she’s not mine! I’m so fucking confused. She’s like a little sister, but she’s not. I’m supposed to be her babysitter? Supposed to spank her? You want me to be an Omega, man. I can’t do both! And I’m getting all these weird-ass signals from the little bitch. She struts around in nothing but her birthday suit, just daring me to have a go, knowing I’ll get smacked down for it, and I don’t have any fucking idea if she really wants me to or not! Is she toying with me to get a rise out of Castiel? Is she aiming darts at you? Does she have the hots for me? Fuck if I know, and all I can think to do is just back the fuck up and not go there.”

“How long had this been going on?” asked Dean coldly. April had some more explaining to do.

“No you don’t,” said Michael sitting up. “Stay out of it. I need to get my head wrapped around it, but I want you to let me handle it. The crazy thing is, I’m really starting to like the little scamp. Maybe it’s because I know she’s got claws and she’s digging them into me…or you…or somebody, but she’s not just a piss-ant little yes-girl, and maybe she knows that too. Knows that she’s sparkling my wolf’s nose by letting me see her play. Whatever this is, the last thing I want is for you alphas to start flinging straps around and driving her back underground. I want to figure it out on my own.”

“And you want me to believe you’re not falling for her?” Dean was looking out the window.

“What do the bonds tell you, Babe?”

Dean snapped his head back around to his mate. “You’re right. I’m sorry, man. I keep forgetting I can see it for myself. Shit. Michael, don’t let it go too long. We are so close to fucking everything up again or finally getting it right. I don’t want to go right back through that again. It’s okay to ask for help, and we might even be persuaded not to fling straps.”

Michael chuckled. “Give me a few days, Dean. I want to try talking to her first.”

Dean nodded reluctantly, but added. “Cas is going to lose his shit if you keep this from him. Come on, let’s go make dinner. I’m starving. I skipped lunch.”

“I’ll cook,” offered Michael. “You have lines to do, and you’re keeping it from him too.”

Dean groaned. Right back in the fire again. Already.
Castiel could feel his mate as she began to emerge from sleep, and he swiftly put his work away and hurried to her side. He felt good. It was a day for clearing the air, and they were so close to a new, fresh start. Dean’s green eyes were clear and bright when he looked into Castiel’s. Michael had submitted wholly to Cas, and had walked away, well limped into bed, a new man. Cas had a lighter burden sitting across his back. He was ready to take April by her shoulders and support her however he needed to.

Her eyes were still closed when he walked into the room. She was sleep-mussed and slow moving, but she was awake.

“Hey, Kitten. Would you like something to drink?” She shook her head, cracking an eye open to look at him.

“I Released, Sir. I’m sorry.” It was the first thing she had to say, and Cas realized that Dean was right. She was afraid of him. It wasn’t an open emotion, such that he would feel it through the Mating-bond, but it was a wariness, borne of Omega uncertainty. Despite having clearly stated rules, she felt unsure that anything she did or said might be construed as unacceptable by her owner and lead to pain and punishment.

“It’s fine, April. There’s no rule against that. You don’t have any control over it anyway. I ask our packmates not to seek it out for you because it’s an intimacy that I like to keep for myself. I’m selfish that way, but it’s a request, not a rule.” He sat beside her and stroked her back, letting his hand delve slowly down over her backside, assessing Dean’s work without really noticing that he was doing it.

Cas worked himself up to slouch against the headboard and pulled her to rest between his legs with her chest against his belly, and her head against his chest.

“I love you, Kitten.” He let the bond reflect the words, and his hands roamed her body. She was quiet and still, and that wasn’t like his Ozzie. He needed a new tack.

“You know, when I was eighteen, God, ages ago, I had just started school here in Lawrence. I went to KU as an undergrad in the Biology department, pre-med. I was still a virgin. I was the saddest, most naïve, socially awkward freshman who ever stepped foot on that campus. I was so fucking lost. I didn’t have any idea who I was or what I needed. I met this boy, and he wanted to play around with me. I think he was a beta-Dom. I don’t remember. But I got scared, and I punched him in the nose. Broke it, too, I think. I was terrified to touch anyone. I had learned to keep the wolf inside me under control, even when I got angry, but I didn’t think I could do it if I let myself get lost to lust. I couldn’t risk it.”

“I wish I could’ve known you then,” she told him softly.

“Me too. I can’t imagine being afraid to touch you. You’re like the softest balm and the spiciest chili all at the same time. My point is, it’s okay not to know everything you need right now. It’s okay not to have all the answers.”

She pushed up and looked at him. “You’ve been talking to Dean.”

“I have, but he didn’t tell me much.” Cas smoothed her hair off her face and tucked it behind her ear.

“Why didn’t you start college at seventeen like most wolves do?”
Cas chuckled. “My mother wanted us to be apes. She sent Gabriel and me to a primate private school, and held us to their advancement schedule.”

“You were a virgin at eighteen? YOU?”

His eyes glittered at her. “April, I was a virgin until I was twenty.”

“What?!”

His face became pained at the memory. “It was too risky. We didn’t have training classes back then. We were all on our own, and my family taught me that we were all just like the primates. Alphas got to make the rules, but that was more for decorum than for any biological need. I knew they were wrong, but I didn’t have anyone to talk to. I met a woman in my Junior year. She was an alpha-Sub. She taught me a lot, and she was willing to take it really slowly.” He chuckled to himself in a self-deprecating way. “I had a lot to learn, but I was a very willing student. Back then, I didn’t really understand limits or issues of consent, and I overstepped a lot of boundaries even after I should’ve known better, but Marie was patient with me. She was good to use the safewords, and that’s one thing I understood. She was really good to talk things over afterward too. She taught me so much. But she wasn’t a masochist. We weren’t a good fit, long term. Still, I don’t know if I would be who I am if it hadn’t been for her.”

April lay back down against his chest and wrapped her arms around the back of his shoulders, holding tight. “It’s my turn now, isn’t it?” she asked.

“She was really good to talk things over afterward too. She taught me so much. But she wasn’t a masochist. We weren’t a good fit, long term. Still, I don’t know if I would be who I am if it hadn’t been for her.”

Cas was taken aback. Teenaged boyfriends were not what he expected to be dealing with this afternoon, but she was so young. “Do you still want to be friends with Nate?” he asked carefully.

April giggled. Hearing her mate say her ex-boyfriend’s name hit a weird chord for her. “No, I don’t think so. We broke up on a sour note. I’m just not sure we ever really got closure. You know?”

“And do you still need that? Closure?”

“No, I don’t think so. We broke up on a sour note. I’m just not sure we ever really got closure. You know?”

“Nate was really sweet to me,” she began, clearly digging in to tell the story. Castiel put his arms in a crisscross over her back, making a web to hold her close. He reminded himself that he was in no danger of losing her to a pimply adolescent in the middle of Oklahoma, and he calmed himself deliberately.

“I always assumed we would Mate someday, but something always stopped me. He was sweet and funny, and smart. We had fun together, and we talked about all kinds of things. I knew him before either of us presented, and I liked him way back when we were pups. When we presented, and I was
Omega, he was alpha, and it just felt like it was fate; like the Universe wanted us Mated.

“But he never challenged me. He went along with everything I said. He wouldn’t even argue with me when I was obviously wrong! The only time he ever tried to stand his ground was about sex. He said that if I loved him, and we were going to Mate someday anyway, we might as well go ahead and break the ice. Like, what was I waiting for. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t sleep with him.”

“You knew he would Mate you.”

She nodded into his chest. “He would have. He’d have said he was sorry afterward, and he’d be so sweet about it, but nothing would have stopped him at the time. I could see it in his eyes. Every time I thought about it, I tried to tell myself that I should just get it over with, that we were going to end up together anyway, but I just couldn’t. I couldn’t do it.”

Castiel held her tightly enough to feel the pain through the Mating-bond, but she didn’t want him to loosen up. He knew that too.

“What about your Heats? They had to be excruciating.”

“The last year was the hardest,” she nodded. “Each one was worse than the one before. My parents were afraid I might die. I spent the last day of my last Heat in the hospital, and I was scheduled for an alpha interference when my fever broke just before the alpha showed up. The time before that, my dad stayed in the room with me while IP+2 deathskilled myself with the toys my mom bought me. He was trying to give me some alpha scent, you know? I begged him to fuck me. My own Dad. He didn’t do it, but I think…well, I think he almost did. He let me go into one of those hotels that have the Heat rooms so we could keep Nate away. He knew I didn’t want to Mate that way. I can’t imagine what that must have been like for my folks.” She paused. “I want better for my pups, Castiel.”

“Me too, my love. Me too. That’s what I’m working on.”

“I know. I’m so proud of you.” She smiled at him, and he smiled back and leaned down to kiss her.

“April, have you thought about when you want to start a family? I know we need to wait until you’ve finished school, but after that?” Cas was intent and focused, and April wasn’t sure at all how she should respond.

“I thought we were starting a family already. Dean and Michael are ready to try, but the pup will belong to all of us. Isn’t that right?” She was very careful to avoid landmines that were scattered everywhere in a conversation like this.

Castiel glowed, but the expression on his face didn’t touch the ember in his belly. “Yes, that’s right. I’m so excited. I can’t wait to see if they catch. We could be parents eight months from now.” He wasn’t faking his enthusiasm, and April couldn’t help the happy blush that covered her cheeks, a mirror of his joy, but that ember still burned hot and bright even though he wasn’t looking at it.

“You’re so cute when you’re thinking Papa thoughts,” she told him. “Let’s just wait and see what happens with their try, then. We can go from there.”

“You think I’m cute?” he asked. Then he sombered a little. “I want to fill you up, my Ozzie. Did you know that? I want you so pregnant you can’t walk. I’ll wait until you’re ready, but that’s what I want.”

“Yes, I know,” she explained. “You aren’t very subtle with your breeding kink and your magnetic hands that keep finding their way back to the same place on my belly every night.”
“April, what do YOU want?” He felt frustrated asking her that again. He had already asked so many times, the question sounded rote. She always deflected.

“I want a big family, Sir.”

Cas cleared his throat, and sat up straighter, fixing her with a stern eye. “If you ‘Sir’ me again, I’ll give you something to ‘Sir’ me about.”

It was a bizarre thing to say from an outsider’s perspective. A Top can’t demand the Bottom fail to show respect simply out of a desire to pretend they aren’t Top or Bottom to each other. That would be an abuse of power, but that’s not what it was, and she knew it. They understood each other from a deep core of instinctive comprehension. She was deflecting again, manipulating again, trying to draw out his wolf to distract him from the question, even as she answered it, and he was tired of the games.

That word. Sir. It had a place. It had a very critical and defined place, and it wasn’t supposed to be in play here. Not here and not now, and she knew it.

“Just talk to me, April. Please.” He softened his tone to avoid scaring her, but she wasn’t frightened. She sighed.

“I really do want a big family. I can’t wait to be waddling around full of your pups, but I don’t know when to do it. If I’m going to try to be a pianist, is there ever a good time? Is there any chance I can have both? I’m not going to give birth to a litter and then just leave them with Michael while I fly to Berlin for a concert.”

Cas grinned at her.

“What?” she asked.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard you think bigger than Lawrence.” His eyes danced. “You want to play in Berlin?”

She smiled tentatively at first, and then the smile grew bigger under his encouraging grin. She nodded. “I want to play my music for the whole world, Castiel.” He hugged her tightly enough that she had to pound his arm to get her breath back.

Castiel was so relieved, it broke a dam inside his heart. She meant every word. He could feel it all. She wanted his pups, and she wanted to play. Now he had something he could work with. Finally.

“Kitten, you can have all of it if you want it badly enough. Let’s make some plans, and we’ll see how the audition goes.” He sparkled with naïve excitement.

She shook her head sadly though, disappointed to burst his bubble. “It’s not that easy, my sweet little Alpha. The music business is brutal to Omegas. I have so much to learn. I need to understand the business, not just the music, and I don’t know the first thing. Pembrandt has a terrible track record of providing support to Omegas.”

“Then why did you choose Pembrandt?” he asked at last. That one had been bothering him for a long time.

“Because they’re the best. I can’t learn the skills I need at a run-of-the-mill state school. I could stay with private tutors, but that won’t prepare me for the real world. I have to go up against my real competition and learn to hold my own. I have to learn to go toe-to-toe with the assholes who want to tear me down and show them that I can compete.”
“But you’ve resisted every step of your preparation. I still don’t understand.”

“God, you’re so dense sometimes!” she shouted unexpectedly, and Castiel’s head snapped back at her unexpected vehemence. “I’m fucking terrified, all right?! The only way to succeed is straight through the middle. I have to show them I’m tougher than any alpha, but I’m NOT! I couldn’t even pick an audition piece! I fell apart. I panicked. I always panic when shit gets real. I fall to pieces just like everyone thinks Omegas are going to do. I’m the fucking stereotype! I’m going to get up on that stage, and I’m going to shake so bad, I won’t even be able to hit the right keys. Forget playing the piece like an artist. I’ll be lucky if I can play it at all! I’m going to fail!”

“No, you’re not!”

“What?!”

“You’re not going to fail. You’re not going to panic. You are every bit as strong as any alpha at that school. I believe in you, April. Whether you get in or not, you are going to succeed, because you are going to go up there and play the thunder out of that crappy audition piece.”

“Can you just hold me for a few minutes? I’m a little rattled.”

(Of course. Or…can I offer you other comforts? I have several options that come to mind,” he teased.

She giggled, much less rattled at the offer of a solid pounding. “Dean used his belt. I’m sore and swollen right now.” She looked over her own shoulder as if she’d be able to see through the fabric covering her. Castiel pulled her skirt out of the way with one hand, and pulled her panties off her ass with the other and looked over her shoulder.

“He did a good job,” the Alpha conceded. April nodded thoughtfully.

“Too sore to play?” Cas asked. It wasn’t a scene, and she could be or do as she liked.

“Fuck me from behind? I like to wake up the sting after it settles.”

“I like the way you think. You’re wish is my command, young lady. Up on your knees, and Nate can eat his heart out.”

***********************

No one had much to say at dinner. Dean learned that April hated catfish, despite the fact that Michael had prepared it well. He added that to his mental list of pack preferences and dislikes. Dean wasn’t hungry either. Even as a Sub, the anticipation was always the worst part of the punishment. Mostly. He couldn’t escape into the soft, protective confines of his wolf, and he was really nervous. He’d promised Cas to stand firm as an alpha and take it like a man. Dean’s words, not Castiel’s.

Michael played with his meal and watched April, both of them shifting miserably in their chairs. Castiel ate well, sipping a single glass of white wine and complementing the chef. Michael merely grunted at the praise.

After dinner, Dean gave his lines ten more minutes of concentrated attention, and then handed them over silently. Michael scoured through them, checking random passages for signs of subterfuge, but
he knew he wouldn’t find any. He didn’t count the sentences. He thanked Dean, hugged him, smoothed his hair, and sent him away with a word of good luck. Dean swallowed, and left his mate alone in the kitchen without a word.

In the playroom – in the dungeon…tonight it was a dungeon – Dean stripped and put himself on his square. Everything felt odd. Surreal. He’d been here thousands of times, but never like this. He couldn’t still his body. Random flinches and twitches crossed his muscles, and his breathing refused to follow any pattern. He felt naked, which was preposterous of course, as he WAS naked, but it had never felt so bare before. He felt like thousands of eyes watched him from all around, judging him harshly. His cocoon of safety wasn’t safe anymore.

Dean shrugged his shoulders and shifted his weight.

“It’s not the same, is it?” Cas’ voice came from the doorway where Dean’s gaze was supposed to be centered. He’d been staring at the ground in front of him.

“Ah, shit. Sorry, man. I was doing Michael’s pose. I’m seriously wigging out. You wanna try coming in again? I got this.”

Castiel laughed. “No, let’s just pick it up from here. Stand up. I don’t want your safe spot to lose its meaning, and you aren’t in any kind of headspace to be there right now.”

“Thank God.” Dean struggled to his feet, his knees having stiffened up in the short time he was down there. He didn’t remember that ever happening before. Were there physical differences between his wolf and his alpha? That bore a deeper look. Dean made a mental note to talk to Kevin.

“How are you feeling, alpha?” Castiel asked him, guiding him to sit on the mattress in the middle.

“You mean besides wigged out? Nervous as hell. I don’t have any idea what I’m doing. I mean, crap, when was the last time I forgot my pose?!”

“Relax a little bit, Dean. I’m not going to try to hold you to a Submissive presentation. Let’s just talk.” Cas squatted in front of him and met his eye squarely.

“Then why am I naked?”

“You’re naked because you’re being punished.”

“It feels weird.”

Castiel chuckled at him again. “I’ll bet it does. Look, this is for you. You know that. We talked about that. I’m going to give you what you wanted from me, and once we’re done, I want you to tell me honestly if it was enough. I want it over with tonight. Clear?”

Dean’s head cocked hopefully. “Does that mean we don’t have to go through with two weeks hand’s off?”

“You know what I mean. Don’t push.”

“Sorry.”

“Dean.”

“Yeah?”

“If it’s too much…if you need to slip away…you don’t need to ask. Just go.”
“No. I said I would do this as alpha, and I will.” Dean pouted.

Castiel stood and stepped away. “Nope. I’m not doing this if you’re going to be stubborn about it. I’m in charge, even if you aren’t my Sub, and I say you need to leave that door open.”

“You can’t make me, Cas.”

“I can walk away, Dean.”

They glared at each other, standoff initiated.

Finally, Castiel closed his eyes to regain some patience. “Why are we doing this? Let’s start there.”

“I tried to destroy our marriage before we even had one,” said Dean in simple terms.

“Why did you do that?” Cas took a couple of steps closer and knelt back down again, leaning in onto Dean’s legs.

“I thought that I was more in love with you than you were with me, and I didn’t know how to find out for sure except to try to push you away and see if you left or stayed.” Dean looked down at his lap.

“And now?” Cas’ hands twitched on Dean’s thighs. It was a fearsome question.

“Um…you let me Claim you. You opened up for me, Cas. You let me fuck you. I can’t think that you would do that just to prove a point. I can’t make myself see that as anything but what you said it was.”

“And what was that?” Cas’ deep blue eyes held no Alpha red, but they bored into Dean’s where the intensity of his emotions were beginning to swamp the green with crimson.

“You love me,” he whispered.

If Dean had been Submissive, Castiel would have made him say it again louder, but the alpha didn’t need volume. He’d said it. Castiel leaned his forehead against Dean’s. “Yes, I do. With all my heart. If I’d known that was all it would take to convince you, I would have Bottomed for you years ago. Truth is, I’ve always kind of wondered.”

“Please don’t tease me, Cas.”

Castiel pulled back a little, patting Dean firmly on the thigh. “I don’t feel right about punishing you, Dean. It was a momentous screwup, but it came from a very broken place, and I want to help you, not make you feel guilty over it. I don’t like this.”

“You didn’t mind flaying Michael.” Dean pointed out.

Cas snorted. “Michael doesn’t have self-esteem issues. I expect Pamela will confirm that he’s a narcissist. Michael deserved every lick.”

Dean looked at Cas thoughtfully. “So, if I said that I don’t need to be punished, we walk away?”
“Yep. We just walk away. But if we do that, it needs to be over, Dean. Can you let it go without a punishment?”

Dean didn’t need to think about it. “No.”

“All right. Then this is for you, okay? Not me. And alpha or Sub, that’s for you too. It’s your decision. I think you should try it, but in the end, it’s your call.”

It took a bit for Dean to think it through. He could feel his wolf trying to shove in. He knew that no matter what Castiel dished out, he could take it, wanted to take it, relished it. The pain and pleasure response pathways were all connected inside his wolf, but they weren’t when he was alpha. What would happen? Would it work, or would it just make him mad? Could he get anything out of a punishment that made him angry?

At last, he looked to Castiel who had stood to wait him out. “I can’t pay for this, Cas.”

“I know.”

“But I have to try.”

“Dean, I’m not ever going to leave you.”

Dean nodded. The lump in his throat swelled and cut off his words. “Where do you want me?” he said brokenly.

Castiel looked around and spotted the hairbrush on one of the countertops near the door. His Alpha strength flagged at Dean’s heartbroken voice, but his wolf stepped up in a rare posture of gentle strength and held him steady.

“You’ll have the most support on the bench. Get on that one.” Cas pointed, and Dean stumbled to his feet. Cas collected the brush and the belt that he’d brought down with him. He took a deep breath.

“We’re doing something new, Dean, and that means I’m going to talk it through with you before we begin. You’re to attempt to remain in your alpha headspace during the punishment, but if that becomes unsafe, you have my permission to settle into your wolf or to use your safeword. Have you selected a unique safeword yet, Dean?”

Even after years of scening, Cas still asked every now and then, even though he knew Dean never would, and he knew Dean wasn’t going to call a halt anyway.

“No, not yet. I’m good to use stop light colors.” Dean was settled into the bench, finding that his alpha could allow itself to go limp easier than it could hold a firm Submissive pose.

“That’s fine. I’ll expect to hear you say ‘Green’ if I ask, and you’re fine to continue. You’ll tell me ‘Yellow’ if you need to pause, to alter anything, or to discuss anything. If you need me to stop, say ‘Red’. Do not wait for me to check in with you if you need to call Red. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“I’m not going to touch you sexually today. I will be applying a series of painful blows to your buttocks and your thighs. You will be marked with potentially severe bruising, abrasions, and welts. I don’t plan to break the skin beyond that although some light bleeding may occur from the blows with the leather belt. Would you like to examine the implements I plan to use?”

Dean huffed. Communication was important, but this was ridiculous. “No, I think I’m familiar with
them already.’ The failure to call Cas ‘Sir’ was overt and intentional, and it helped Dean stay alpha, while it helped Cas recognize him as such.

“You will count the blows as they are applied. I don’t need anything more than a simple number after each one. If you fail to count, I will consider that the same as calling out Yellow, and I will pause to check in with you. Clear?”

“Clear. Uh, thanks for that. That helps.”

“The counting?”

“Yeah. It’ll keep me grounded.”

“You’re welcome. Do we need to establish a target number before we begin?”

“Um, no I don’t think so. Can you just…keep going until I’m done?”

“I’m not sure I know what to look for if you stay alpha, Dean. None of your usual tells will be there. Do you think you’ll be able to tell me? Can you call a halt when it’s time?”

Dean pushed upward onto one elbow and looked back at Castiel. “Shit. I didn’t think of that.”

“Then we set a total before we begin,” Castiel confirmed with one brow up.

“Five hundred,” said Dean firmly at once.

“No. That’s not going to happen. You’re already bruised.”

“You said it was for me.”

“I’m not going to hurt you, Dean.” Cas closed his eyes and sighed at Dean’s ironic expression. “You know what I mean.”

Dean flopped back down just like a Sub-brat, but he was thinking. “Fine. How many?”

“One hundred each,” replied Cas after a minute. He’d begun stroking Dean’s back with a warm easy hand.

“Three total?” Dean asked over his shoulder.

Castiel nodded.

“Fine. Let’s do it, Alpha,” said Dean loudly.

Cas swatted his hip. “I want you as an alpha, Dean, but there’s a limit to how much cheek I’ll allow even now.”

“My bad.”

Cas rolled his eyes and looked heavenward to locate his patience.

“Go ahead and start counting. Let’s begin.” Cas rested his left hand on the small of Dean’s back, and he spanked his right down sharply with a loud ‘Crack!’.

“One,” said Dean on his exhale. His back tightened up, and his butt clenched as the handprint pinked his right cheek.
By twenty, Dean was panting. Castiel could tell he was fighting with his own wrath. Staying on the bench was taking almost all of Dean’s concentration, and counting was getting harder. His ass was far brighter in color than it usually was after twenty swats. Castiel rubbed the sting out for him.

“Color?”

“GREEN! JUST KEEP GOING, DAMNIT!”

“Shouting at me isn’t a good way to convince me you’re all right,” Cas reasoned.

“It’s a punishment, Cas! It’s not supposed to be enjoyable, remember?”

“Do you need to talk about it?”

“NO! Goddamnit, I need you to pick up the pace!”

“Watch your mouth, Dean. It was a simple question.”

“AAaagh! Please!”

Cas started up again with no preamble, and Dean had to scramble to keep count. Jesus F, that HURT!

“Twe-ee-one, Twen-two, Tw-three, fuck! Slow down! Twen-ee-four, Twenty-five! OW! FUCK!”

“Are you ready to rethink the pace?”

“Ow, God! Yes, I’m sorry!”

“Dean, you’ve spanked alphas before, right? Young ones?”

“Yeah?” Dean panted.

“Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn’t. You know better than I do; when does it work?”

Dean let himself take a deep breath. “It only works if they really think they deserve it, and it only works up to about the age of twenty-eight. After that, it’s pointless.”

“Okay. Good. We’re okay then, aren’t we? You’re still a year from that cut-off.”

“You’re asking me this NOW!?”

“I don’t feel like it’s working, and I needed to check in with you. You just seem to be getting irate and panicky. Am I wrong?”

“It really hurts, Cas! Worse than I thought it would.”

“Should we stop?”

“No. Let’s kill the counting. Go fast, and let me try to just breathe through it. I wanna do this.”

“You don’t have anything to prove to me, Dean.” Cas rubbed Dean’s red ass.

“It’s not for you, man. I need to do this for me. Please.”

“All right,” said Cas in a deep breath. “I’m starting with twenty-six. You don’t need to count. Stop me if you need to.”
“Hit it.”

He did. He let the world and the room fall away, and he concentrated on letting his wolf run the scene with purpose and strength, and he kept an eye on Dean’s shoulders. That was where he would see it first. If it got to be too much, Dean’s shoulders would be the first sign, not the cries from his throat.

Dean cried and struggled. He flexed his grip on the hand-bars and pushed his chest off the bench every now and then, but he didn’t ask to stop, and he didn’t shift to avoid the blows. Castiel reached one hundred blows with his hand in short order, and he crowded up behind Dean and rubbed his ass.

“God, you’re incredible! How do you feel?”

“I feel like tearing your face off and shoving it up your ass, Castiel! Don’t ask me that right now. Just get on with it!”

“Change of plan,” announced the Alpha. “I’ll give you thirty with the hairbrush, and fifteen with the belt, and no more. If that’s not enough, then we revisit this again after your Rut. You’re borderline right now, and I’m NOT going to hurt you. Understand?”

Dean sobbed with relief and nodded into the bench. Cas picked up the brush. “Go Sub if you need to Dean.”

“No.”

“Holy fuck, you’re stubborn! Fine! Close your fucking eyes, and let go. I want you to feel each and every blow, and I want you to fucking let it all out, do you hear me? If you walk away from this with anything still hanging on, I’m gonna make you feel it for weeks! Don’t make me do this again, Goddamnit!”

Dean couldn’t stifle the laugh that broke through his tears. “Watch your mouth, Alpha!” he chided. He regretted it instantly as the hairbrush crashed down on his thigh where Michael’s marks were still tender. “Aaaaargh!”

“Close your eyes, Dean!”

“FUCK!!! FUUUUUUUUUCK!!!”

Cas wanted to temper the intensity, but if Dean was going to be stubborn, then so was Cas, and he held back nothing. Castiel was so done with Dean’s guilt hanging over everything they did together. If he could, he would have tried to flay the self-deprecating thoughts out too, but Dean didn’t work that way. The alpha responded in a strange way to this hairbrush, and Cas had never been above using that sensitivity against him. He went strongly to work with it now, driving out demons so fiercely that he could practically see them fleeing Dean’s body. Dean screamed, white-knuckling the handles and straightening his legs out behind himself.

Thirty arrived very quickly, and Cas threw the brush down violently, panting his temper out at the floor. He should stop. Enraged was no way to run a scene, but he couldn’t. Dean couldn’t stop crying as the brush stopped landing, but he didn’t seem Submissive. He was still firmly, stubbornly alpha.

Stupid, mulish, obstinate…what was it going to take?! Castiel didn’t want to break him, but he wanted Dean to realize that his Sub was there for a reason. He couldn’t make the decision for him. All of the pain and the exhaustion of everything Dean put him through over the last eight years, all the worry and the self-doubt, all the scrambling once he figured out Dean’s plans, all the efforts to
help him get back to himself, and Dean was still, flamboyantly stubborn! Castiel picked up the belt and smashed it across Dean’s hips in a rapid thunderous rhythm.

“Don’t EVER do that to me again! Do you hear me!?”

“CAS!”

“YOU BELONG TO ME, AND YOU’LL DO AS I SAY!!”

“YE…ES!!!”

“SAY YOU’RE SORRY, DEAN!!! SAY IT AND MEAN IT!!!”

“I’M SORRY!!”

Castiel stopped. He dropped the belt. He didn’t know if he’d gone over fifteen or not. It seemed fifteen…ish. Dean’s backside was a mess. He would need dressing and ice, and a pain killer. Dean lay limp and still but for the catch in his breath as he hiccupped. His sobs were quiet. Castiel’s breath hitched too. His hands were shaking. He’d never pushed a punishment too far before in his life, but he’d most definitely lost control of himself just now. All he could do was damage control.

“Dean? Can you talk?”

Dean’s back huffed. Was that a laugh?

“Holy shit, Alpha. Remind me not to make you mad.” Dean turned his head. He was still crying, but he was getting it rapidly under control.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.”

“Cas, hold on. (Hiccup) Before you start beating yourself (Hiccup) up. I’m okay. Shit, no I’m not, but I’m not (Hiccup) broken. It was good. I’m good. (Hiccup) I’m done now. Think I’m done.”

“You are the stubbornest son-of-a-bitch I have ever met, Dean Winchester.”

Dean chuckled through his drying tears. Every muscle was on fire, and he was loath to move. “You not (hiccup) so bad yerself, man.”

“Stay right there, I’m going to get a dressing for the damage. It’s pretty bad.”

“I love you too!” Dean shouted over his shoulder although Cas wasn’t going very far. The medical kit was in a cabinet by the door.

Cas lay the kit out on the mattress and helped Dean waddle to it. Dean observed, “I guess you had a few scabs that needed scraping off too, eh, Cas?”

Cas laid Dean out on the mattress and followed him up, walking on his knees. “I’m sorry Dean. I went way out of bounds. We’re not doing that again. Not ever. Are you really all right?”

“Ttchhh,” Dean scoffed. “My ass is broken. You broke my fucking ass, Castiel!” His hiccups were fading, and the tears were gone. He was getting normal color back in the flesh of his body, and the redness was fading from his face. Dean’s backside was a disaster, but the rest of him looked good.

Cas glared at him, and Dean huffed again. “I’m okay, Cas. Thing is, it turns out, you needed that as much as I did.”
“Don’t do that, Dean. Don’t pretend this was okay. I’ll go intense with you, but I don’t get to lose control.”

“Yadda, yadda, yeah, yeah, I know. But look at me. We’re not doing that again. Ouch! Be careful, Jesus! We’re not doing that again, but we did it, and we’re done. You and me, right man? We good?”

“How are you so sanguine about this? I’ve never hit you that hard before, and you weren’t even in your wolf? You had no protection at all. How can you be okay with it?” Cas applied another coat of ointment, checking each skin break.

“You’ve hit me that hard, it just struck differently what with the alpha thing. Here’s the deal: it hit me when you were, you know, hitting me…this is what I’ve been doing to you in a way, and we both needed to even it back up. I just kept hitting you, totally blindsiding you, hitting you with no protection over and over again, and you had to figure out how to take the blows and still keep me safe. Every time I went through one of those stupid fits where I felt justified to try to test you, it was like I was just wailing on you with no control. I’m not saying you had to do the same to get back at me, I’m saying I needed to feel what that was like for you, all that crazy with no brakes on.

“We’re not ever doing that again,” Dean confirmed, his voice gaining strength as he spoke. “I’m never going to test you again, and you’re never going to hit me with your temper on full blast, and I’m never going to take a punishment as an alpha again. It’s over, man. I’m done. You’re done. We walk out of this room new men. You with me?”

“You think it’s that simple?” asked Castiel, deciding not to try bandaging all of the wounds. He put gauze over the worst of it, high on Dean’s left cheek.

“No, I don’t. I’m still going into therapy. I’ve got shit I need to work out. But I’m not mad at you, and we aren’t broken. You fucked up just now, right?” Dean shifted to an elbow so he could look down at Cas.

“I did.” Castiel kept it simple.

“You did. And so did I. I’m done. I don’t need anything else, and I suspect neither do you. You just told me what you needed to tell me, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Cas sat back on his heels.

“You still mad at me?” Dean asked. He felt like he probably should have posed that question before they started this.

Cas wilted. “No, I think I got it all out. I think I’m good.”

“How about your wolf? Is he still pissed off?”

“He may have some residual resentment about your Claim, but that’s not on you. That’s my problem.”

“C.J.”

“He’s fine, Dean. None of us are mad at you.”

“Good. Then we’re through. I hope you didn’t have a lot planned for tonight.”

Cas crawled up beside Dean and sprawled out. “All I planned was to cuddle with my husband all
night. Is that enough for you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think that’s enough. Could use a blanket, though. Maybe a pillow.”

“Come on. Up. Let’s get you to bed upstairs. I want you to take a pain killer, and sleep in tomorrow.”

“I can’t sleep in. Gotta get Michael to class.” Dean struggled up and off the mattress. Pain shot down both legs as he walked, or…stumbled. Cas put an arm under his to help him, and once the door was opened, Michael took up the other side without a word.

Chapter End Notes

Warning for corporal punishment that becomes abusive.

Warning for mention of attempted rape.

Whew! This went longer than I intended, but I wanted it all done and wrapped up.

It’s my birthday this Friday. I’m turning 46. I have no memory of turning 45. How the fuck does that happen?

Love to you all!
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

Dean confronts an old man, April needs a puppy pile, and someone's assessment is out - at last.

Chapter Notes

This is another long one. It's my birthday present to me, and it'll be that last one for a week or two as I head back in to work night-shift. This is another of those that I've been pacing around waiting to get to. I skipped right over the interview with the magazine, but if I feel like it, we can always get that when the article comes out. See, the writing process for me, it's way messy.

I feel like I'm forgetting something I meant to say, but it's three in the morning here, and the caffeine is wearing off.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 58 – Monday, June 26, 2017

NOW:

Dean let his head rest forward near his chest as he leaned his shoulders against the tall brickwork pillared mailbox across the street from the dingy white house. He needed to concentrate to keep his hips from relaxing back onto the masonry again. Everything hurt – from his calves where the muscles were still tied in stiff knots, up to his neck which had developed a nasty crick from sleeping belly down with his head crimped to one side.

He’d awoken in the wee hours of the night in agony, realizing that he’d been mewling in his sleep. April was tucked warmly against one side, and the two Dominants stood beside the bed whispering. He’d pushed up with a whimpery groan, only to have them both lay tender hands on his head, face, and back, soothing him back down again. Castiel said it was time for another pain pill, and Dean didn’t fight it. The medication put him back into a deep sleep that trailed after him all morning while he tried to set a normal routine for Michael.

Michael didn’t protest the morning’s schedule. He was pale and a little shaky, but he’d obviously decided to give it his best boy scout try, and he stood squarely before his trainers with his game face on. Dean didn’t stay long, and he didn’t sit to talk the training plan through. He simply gave Michael a minute of deep connection and support, let him know that he wasn’t alone, let him stand and take a long drink from Dean’s pained eyes, and then left the room as quickly as he’d come.
Joshua nodded, holding the door for him. “Take care of him, alpha,” Dean pleaded on his way out. He couldn’t resist. Joshua’s eyes sent understanding and kindness. For all the fierce old wolf had seen and been and done, he was gentle now in his aging body, the brimstone replaced by wisdom that outlasted his wolf. Dean breathed outside the closed door and took a moment to center himself, wondering how he was going to drive the thirty-minute span without another round of medicine. Everything hurt. He couldn’t drive with a head clouded by drugs though, so it was a no-go on the pain meds. Dean checked his phone’s map again.

So close. John was so damned close, parked in a suburb east of Topeka. How long had he been there? Last time Dean knew anything about his whereabouts, he’d been in Colorado, living miserably on a fucking hippie commune in the mountains.

Dean knew he was visible from the house, standing against the mailbox in plain view, looking like a stalker in the morning fog. He also knew that he had probably missed the early morning shift change. Unless they decided to come out and confront him, he might find himself standing here for hours before the door cracked open again. His ass gave an unhappy twinge at the thought of standing still that long.

Dean skipped right out this morning without telling anyone but Bobby where he was going. Sam didn’t know, and Sam was going to be furious. But Dean wasn’t planning on going inside this morning anyway. He just needed information. He needed to talk to the people who had their hands on his dad’s pulse. He needed to know who they were, and whether they had any chance of meeting his approval. He wanted to see his father, but John’s words, ‘Nothing gives you the right…’ echoed constantly through his head. He snapped as the meat of his backside inadvertently relaxed into the bricks, and he nearly doubled over, groaning. This was a terrible idea.

Firming his stance and his stubborn resolve once more, Dean cracked his neck and relaxed again onto his shoulders. He turned his head as the front door to the rusty, dilapidated clapboard house opened, and he rolled it back down again when he recognized Rufus coming down the walk to talk to him. When had Rufus come back from Dallas? What the fuck was he doing here at 8:45 in the morning?

Rufus didn’t say anything; he simply took Dean by the elbow and helped him shift to standing, pulling him to indicate the direction they were headed. The two men walked silently at a slow pace that suited both of their limps. They focused on the blacktop stretching out before them rather than on each other. There was no traffic to speak of on the narrow residential road.

“Bobby called you?” Dean asked finally, unable to resist breaking the silence. Rufus just grunted and walked on for another block.

“How’s he doing?” he tried again.

Rufus looked up; looked at Dean with his eyebrows raised. He clearly needed a moment to remember that Dean wasn’t a dimwit. “He’s dying, boy. How do you think he’s doing?”

They went quiet again, coming to the end of the block and turning left onto a busier street, one with shops and restaurants. Rufus took Dean into a mealy diner right on the corner, and slid into a booth without waiting to be escorted. Dean eyed the bench warily and took a very deep breath before he copied Rufus on the opposite side. Rufus chuckled at him.

“It’s not funny, man,” Dean pouted defensively.

“Right. Not funny. I’ll try to remember that while you limp around like a pup who got caught sneakin’ in after curfew. You want me to get you one of them donut pillows? I think I got one back
“at the house.”

“What are you doing here, Rufus?”

“I should be askin’ you that, boy. He doesn’t want you here. I believe you know that.”

“Don’t give me that. He’s my dad, and I’m his alpha.”

“Is that a fact?” Rufus looked up to the waitress as she approached and ordered two coffees and a Monday special, hold the bacon. “You eatin’?” he asked Dean.

Dean shook his head, and the waitress disappeared with a click of her pen and a smack of her gum.

“Look,” Dean tried again, leaning up onto his thighs where the ache didn’t go quite so deep. “I’m not trying to break in on him. I just need to know the facts. Who’s taking care of him? What’s his condition? How is he being treated? C’mon, Rufus, talk to me! Why are you here?”

Rufus nodded to himself. “I come by every now and then and sit with the old bastard. Bobby’s got a few of us on rotation just to keep the staff on their toes. They’re in there 24/7 now, takin’ care of your dad, but we just drop in random-like.”

“We? Who else besides you and Bobby get to see my dad?”

“Now, now, don’t get yourself all twisted up.” The coffee arrived, and Rufus set to making his right with a hefty helping of sugar and cream. Dean left his black, sipping it carefully. “It’s just Bobby and me, Ellen and Joshua…all us old farts what knew your dad from way back in the day.”

“Back in the day,” Dean stated flatly. “Back in the day, like almost thirty years? You don’t think I’ve known him long enough to rate a spot by his death bed? What the fuck, Rufus?!”

“Dean, he doesn’t want you there. I know it’s a kick in the castanets, but this is his call, son.”

“Don’t call me son. How long has he been here? How long have you known? How the fuck did you justify keeping this from me?! I’m his fucking Alpha, man. You’ve got no right!”

“Dean, listen to me. He’s not the man you knew. He’s all kinds of broken – not just his body. He has nothing left of the man he was, and he thinks he did it all to himself. He’s so eat up with guilt, it’s all he talks about. Talks about how he failed you boys and his dead mate…talks about how glad he is it’s almost over. You don’t want…”

“Don’t tell me what I want, you old bastard! You’re just going to let him wallow in all that, when Sam and I could go in there and show him it’s not true? Jesus, just let me talk to him for five minutes!”

“Thought you said you were his Alpha,” pointed out Rufus, sitting back to let the waitress plunk down a plate heavy with grease and salt. “If that’s the case…you know where to find him. You don’t need my permission.”

Dean grimaced at a cramp that ran down his leg from beneath the gauze high on his ass.

“Can you explain why he won’t talk to us? Can you at least give me that?” he watched the old beta stir his fork into a thick glob of grits and mix it chaotically with the eggs on his plate.

“I told you. John’s just a sliver of the man he was, and he doesn’t want you boys to see him like that.
Wants you to remember him from before he went belly up.”

“So, he’s just ashamed? Is that all? Rufus, we can fix that. We can explain to him that he doesn’t have to feel ashamed. He didn’t have any control over what happened, and he fought it as hard as he could… Christ, this is all for nothing! He’s gonna lock us out on the curb for nothing.”

“It may be nothing to you, Dean. But you ain’t John. He may be dying, but he’s still John. You know how stubborn that fool is. He passed that right on to both you boys.” Rufus took a big bite, yolk dripped down his chin.

Dean looked away, mumbling. “Damn right he did.”

“Just tell me what you’re hoping to get out of barging in on the man. You think you’re gonna hold his hand and cry together, and all the crap’s just gonna melt away? You picturing some big emotional deathbed scene where you all confess all your hurts and your resentments, and then you hug and off he goes into the great white beyond?”

“Fuck you, Rufus.”

“It ain’t gonna happen like that, Dean.”

“Just let us in to see him. I’m not going to force my way in. I want him to know we’re coming, and I want to keep it short. I’m not afraid of what he’s turned into, and I’m not afraid of pissing him off. God knows I did that often enough to be used to it by now. He’s a stubborn old bastard, just like you said, but he has no right to keep this from us. We don’t get another chance to say goodbye, man. We don’t get another chance. If he can let you in, and a fuckin’ cast of thousands, he can, by damn, man up enough to face his sons!”

“I notice Sam’s not here with you. Does he know you’re here?”

“Nope. I’m not stupid. Sam needs to be managed, just like Dad always did. They’re practically the same man in two bodies. Sam would flare up and burst in there and fuck it all up, piss everybody off, then wonder what the fuck went wrong. I know my brother.”

Rufus chuckled, and took a drink from his mug. “All right. Look. I’ll get one of the hospice nurses to sit down with you and go over his charts. She’ll talk you through everything they’re doin’ for him, and everything they ain’t.” He raised an eyebrow to make sure Dean understood that he shouldn’t expect the nurse to mention any active treatment still going on. “He’s on some good drugs, so he’s not in a lot of pain. They make him loopy. He’s usually got a window in the morning where he’s closer to himself before the next round of meds knocks him on his ass. I’ll talk to Bobby, and I’ll let him make the call whether to try again with John.

“You gotta know, Dean. We’ve already tried a whole bunch a’ times. He ain’t goin’ for it. He’s said no in just about every language he knows, usually with some profanity thrown in for good measure.”

“He called me, Rufus. I have to think that a part of him needs to see us again. And what’s more, he didn’t call Sam. That’s eating a hole in my brother ten feet wide. Can you imagine what that must feel like? Sam was always Dad’s golden boy, and now he won’t even talk to him? What the fuck did Sam ever do to deserve that? It’s not right, and you know it.”

Rufus put his hands up in supplication, pursed his lips and shook his head. “I just work here, man. It’s not my call.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a fucking copout if I ever heard one. You and Bobby are planning to run me
around in circles until it’s too late. Fuck that.” Dean pulled his wallet out, dropped some cash on the table, and slid gingerly to the end of the bench.

Rufus reached out and grabbed hold of his arm. “Is it for you, Dean? Or is it for John? What are you trying to accomplish here? Just tell me that.”

Dean fixed his firmest alpha countenance on the beta. “It’s really none of your business, old man, but here’s the deal: my dad’s about to die. He’s gonna die thinking that he failed as a father, and he’s a failure as a human being, and that’s bullshit. He fell into the same fucking pothole that we’ve been falling into ever since we slunk out of the forests and tried to pretend we’re monkeys, and it’s not HIS fucking fault. If I have any chance of convincing him of that and giving him a little peace before he dies, then I have to try. Do you get me? Whether that’s for me or for him, I don’t really give a fuck! He’s meant too much to too many people to just walk away and let him die in pain. They don’t make drugs for that kind of pain, Rufus!”

Rufus nodded solemnly at the alpha whose eyes had submerged into red. The diner was too quiet, and Dean blushed to realize that he’d been shouting. “Let me know when I can meet with the hospice nurse. I can be back tomorrow afternoon. I can bring Sam, too. Just let me know.”

Dean stood with a slight stumble, and limped out of the diner.

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April sat at the elegant Steinway and went through the sheets again and again, striving to bring life into what had become a lifeless lump of notes tangled up in a knot. The music was dead. It was dead, and try as she might, she couldn’t bring a pulse back into it. Notes came and went, dynamics from the page issued through her fingers, but it was soulless, and Nicholas Maraby laughed at her inside her head. ‘See, told you so…’ he snarked, and her wolf snapped ferociously at the Omega’s ghost.

Frustrated tears welled over her eyelids, only to be furiously scraped away by the back of her hand as she reached the end of the page and flipped it viciously. She WAS going to find a heart inside this moribund wreck of a sonata if it killed her. Beethoven. Why the fuck hadn’t she gone with Beethoven? Her mind skittered over into his comfortable embrace even as her fingers continued with Chopin. Fuck Chopin. Chopin wasn’t fit to lick Beethoven’s boots.

April heard the front doorbell, but she ignored it. It would be a delivery or some brave solicitor, risking life and limb by ringing at the grandest door in Lawrence just to say they’d tried it. She barreled on, turning another page.

Plucky.

April hated that word, but it went through her head again and again at times like this, when the fire in her belly battled the staunch grit in her head, and she burned with sparks that shot from her fingertips. People called her plucky.

“Thanks Fred!”

April stopped playing and looked around at the door in confusion. What was Jess doing here on a Monday morning? Was she carrying coffee in a drink carrier? Starbucks coffee?

“Jess?”
“Hey there, sweetheart. A little birdie told me you were here on your own this morning for the first time. Just graduated and thrown out on your own in the great wide world. I thought you might like a little company.” Jess stood near the entrance, looking unsure. She twisted one of the cups in its holder. “Do you need to keep practicing? I can just drop off your drink and go.” Jess took a half step back as if suddenly rethinking her plan.

“No! I mean, please stay. I need a break anyway. Is that for me?”

“Yep. You do drink coffee, don’t you? I guess I should’ve asked.” Jess took a few steps in and set the carrier down on a low table, breaking one cup free.

“I love coffee. I usually don’t get to have it very often. I’m supposed to ask first, and it’s usually a no.” April got up off the bench and accepted the cup that Jess handed her with a smile.

“Do you want to call and ask?” she prompted. “I won’t tell if you don’t want to.”

April smiled back. “It’s just coffee. Dean says I should learn to live a little.”

Jess grinned. “You’ll be in trouble constantly if you listen to Dean.”

“I know,” April grinned back.

Jess sat down with her own drink and looked out the tall windows where the morning light baptized the back lawn. “It’s beautiful here. I love this room. I love this house. Sometimes I can’t believe I get to be part of all this.”

“You and Sam could move in, you know,” April suggested, sitting down beside her. “There’s room. I think it bothers Castiel to have you guys so far away. It’s almost like you’re not fully pack, but you are.”

Jess laughed. “Far away? We’re a mile and a half down the road. We’re here almost every other day for something or other.”

“It’s not the same,” insisted April.

“Um, I wanted to talk to you about something,” Jess said, unsure. “Can I…?”

“Okay.”

“It’s just…we got off to a bad start, and I wanted to tell you that I think we could be close friends. If you want. I’m not mad at you or anything. I don’t really understand what went wrong right at first, but I want to start over.”

April just blinked at Jess. Was she serious?

“Please. Can we have a do-over?”

“You want to be friends? With me?” April’s world didn’t have a niche for a friend like Jess, and she didn’t know how to process the request. Jess was Sub, but that seemed to be in title only. She was polished and professional. April had never heard her giggle or whisper. She wasn’t all that much older, but they had less than nothing in common. If they couldn’t connect as like minds, and they couldn’t connect as opposite designations, what did that leave open?

The confusion on April’s face made Jess pause. “Um, if you don’t want to…that’s okay, I guess. I’m not trying to be pushy. I guess people try to tell you what to do all the time, don’t they? You can say
no if you want. I’ll still be your packmate. I still have your back."

April watched her body language, watched her fold back in on herself as the light of hope winked out. Jess looked away and sipped her coffee, but all of her walls went up in a flash, ready to take the barrage from an unfriendly world and stand fast, just as she’d always done. Jess was lonely.

April almost gasped as she realized how alone the lawyer had been since she moved to Lawrence. For all her staunch and stiff upper lip, for all her careful presentation, the young woman had yet to make any real connections aside from Sam, and while Sam could be much to her, he could never be everything.

“I’d like to be friends, Jess. I’d like that a lot. Do you have the time to stay with me today? Just for a little while?”

Jess’ walls crumbled, and her face broke out in a wide grin. “Absolutely! That’s what I’m here for.”

It was weird at first, like a blind date. They knew almost nothing about each other and they struggled to find much that they had in common, but they connected over a couple of television programs and they found that they had the same favorite book, spending a good long time trashing everyone who didn’t like Jane Austin.

April told Jess about Nate long after her coffee was gone, and Jess told April about flying away from Sam at fifteen, certain that her life was over, and then having to struggle to keep her teenaged angst from giving way to an actual end as her body turned on her. The two were slouching down into the couch as lunch time approached, trying to decide on how best to feed themselves when Charlie burst in unannounced followed by Jo, each carrying a couple of takeout bags from the Chinese place down the street. Charlie had a bottle of wine.

Jess sank in a little lower into the couch, but April sprang to her feet, squealing and laughing, handing out hugs as if she hadn’t seen the two in ages.

“What are you two doing here?!?” she demanded, thrilled.

“You think we would let you sit at home all alone while all those assholes run off and leave you to play Chopin by yourself all day? As if that wouldn’t make anyone crazy,” Charlie explained, setting down her bags on a table to the side of the room near the writing desk.

“I’m not alone,” April told her. “Jess came over to hang out with me.”

Jo had an arm around April’s waist, and she regarded Jess a little coolly. Jo remembered Jess from years before, and she remembered watching Dean tend to his heartbroken brother in the aftermath. “So it appears. Hi Jess. You good?”

Jessica lifted just her eyes to Jo’s, ready to put walls back up, but bravely hoping she wouldn’t need to. “I’m good,” she affirmed. “It’s good to see you. Thanks for checking in on April. It’s nice to know she has loyal friends who care about her.” Charlie answered cheerfully from the corner in the affirmative, and April skipped over to help her spread out the food. Jo cocked her head at Jess, weighing her. It was an ageless dance between women, potential rivals for no reason that either woman could name. The idiocy of the tension struck Jo first, and she broke in an ironic half-smile.
“Look, Jess, I’m sorry, all right. Can we just…?”

“I’d like that,” answered Jess. “I never meant to…”

“I know. Just forget it. We brought Chinese. Come and get a plate.” Jo reached a hand out and pulled her to her feet. “And wine. Hey, Kid!” she called to April, adopting Dean’s nickname for her. “You promised me you’d play for me. I’ve come to collect. I just about decided you’re full of shit with all that bragging. Can you really play Beethoven from memory?”

“Eat your chow mein, alpha,” April sassed back in answer, and Charlie snorted. “I don’t have to prove anything to you. You aren’t my teacher anymore.”

Jo made a face at her, but sat down to help herself.

“Where’s Meg?” asked April.

“Couldn’t get away,” explained Charlie. “Somebody’s got to keep working. First Dean takes off, then Jo and me snuck out. Place is going to be deserted by mid-afternoon if it keeps going like this.”

“Dean took off?” asked Jess.

They chatted happily through lunch and finished the bottle of wine. Fred produced another without being asked, and April grinned at him. He leveled a look at her that was pure alpha and tapped her cell phone where it sat on the table. She bit her lip, but texted a quick note to Cas. Fred beamed and touched her cheek before disappearing back into the front of the house.

Cas’ response came quickly, and surprisingly, he said yes. To all of it. April showed Jo the message, and she cheered, pouring another round to top off their glasses. It didn’t take long before they were all tipsy, circled around the piano and singing sappy pop songs to each other. Jess and April favored the quirky Indie rock variety while Jo went for eighties hair bands, and Charlie liked nineties top forty. April played them all. They soon made bets on trying to trip her up. There were a couple of requests that she didn’t know, and she flat refused even to try when Charlie asked for “They Might be Giants.”

After more rounds than any of them could count and their voices began to give out from song and laughter both, they ended up sprawled out on the couches, a bit more than buzzed and very comfortable.

Jess was attempting to comfort Jo who had sunken nearly to tears as she admitted how hard it was becoming day-by-day to watch everyone she’d loved and grown up with mate and move into solid domesticity while she waited like the last flower girl for her prince to appear and sweep her off her feet.

Charlie told them that she wished there was a pill she could take that would prevent a True-Mate Trigger from ending what she considered a perfect lifestyle. “I do what I want, where I want, with whomever I want. I don’t want that to end just because I turn left instead of right one day and get stuck with some chick I don’t know for the rest of my life.” She put a finger over April’s lips, stopping her protest. “I don’t wanna hear it outta you, young lady. If I’d been True-Mates with Castiel, I’d turn straight in a heartbeat and take everything I just said back.”

“Liar,” declared April.

“Okay, fine, I could never be straight, but you know what I mean. Not every pair is as perfect as you two.”
“Or Dean!” said Jess drunkenly. “Dean and Michael practically live in each other’s laps. It’s disgusting and adorable at the same time.”

“What about you?” Jo said. “You and Sam? You don’t think you qualify as disgustingly perfect? You two couldn’t stay apart if you tried.”

Jess looked down and smiled, and Charlie shoved her shoulder teasingly, laughing. “Yeah, Little Miss ‘Dean’s disgusting’. That’s the pot calling the kettle black if I ever heard it.”

Jo nudged Charlie and twitched her head toward where April slipped down morosely and lay flat on the floor in front of the couch, not sharing in the teasing any more.

“You know that Jo can always tell when you’re hiding something, April.” Charlie kicked April’s foot gently. “And you know she’s gonna make you spill it. Why don’t you go ahead and make it easy on all of us? I don’t want to listen to her yell.”

“I don’t think you guys can really understand. It’s not that I don’t trust you. I just… I sorta need to talk to Gabriel.” April looked away blushing.

“Omega stuff? You don’t think you can tell us Omega stuff?” Charlie pretended to be incensed, and April laughed.

“I need some advice.” April sat up and bit her lip again.

Jo, who was closest, leaned down and pulled it free with a kind smile and a look deep into her eyes. “Why do you think we’re here, Kid? Just to drink all of Cas’ wine?”

“It’s really good wine,” Jess mentioned, with a shrug, and Charlie snickered, reaching for the bottle.

“You know I’ve got an audition coming up,” April said bravely. “The thing is, if I go through with it, and I get into the school, that sets me down a really long path toward something I’m just not sure I want, not in that way, anyway. I don’t know for sure, and I’m not sure how to find out. It’s going to be a lot of hard work – way harder than anything I’ve ever done before – and I don’t even know if it’s what I want to do.”

“What do you think you want to do?” asked Jess.

April wanted to roll her eyes. Hadn’t she just said she didn’t know? And how many times had Alpha posed that question? But the thing was, way down deep, she did know. At least a core piece of it, and it didn’t include playing fucking Chopin.

“Did I ever tell you guys that I write songs? I have a bunch of them recorded through my tablet. I have this App that can record the tracks separately and then put them all together, so I can put piano and synth and guitar down, and then put the lyrics on top, and play it as one piece.” April stopped speaking, but she didn’t look up at them. Her heart was beating ninety-to-nothing, and the longer the silence dragged, the faster it went until she couldn’t stand it. She looked up to find all three of them staring slack jawed at her.

“Um, forget it. They aren’t very good, and I could never do anything with them anyway. Look, I should probably get back to work…”

“Oh no you don’t!” interrupted Jo fiercely. “You don’t just drop a bomb like that and then pretend it didn’t happen. Get up there and show us. I want to hear these songs!”

Charlie took April by the hand and pulled her up. Jess directed her by the hips toward the piano
“Bench.

“Guys! It’s just a stupid fantasy! I’m not really a song writer, and my voice isn’t good enough anyway. Seriously! Stop!”

“Sit!” said alpha Jo.

April sat.

“Play. Play anything. Play whatever the fuck YOU want to play.”

“Jo…”

Jess squatted down next to the piano. “Hey. April. Tell me something.” Jess took a deep breath and looked up at Charlie and Jo before locking back on to April. “Have you ever wanted anything just for you before? Something that had nothing to do with just staying safe? Something just from inside your own soul?”

April stared into her dark eyes, suddenly terrified. Slowly, she shook her head.

“It’s scary,” continued Jess, “Because you are finally at a safe place, and you’re starting to feel secure enough to begin to believe that you deserve to want things, to have things, just for you. Does that sound right?” Jess wanted April to believe her, but she didn’t want her to feel ‘handled’.

April clutched her shoulder in panic. “I can’t, Jess. What if…”

“What if, what?” asked Charlie, squatting down next to Jess.

“What if it’s not what he wants for me? He said I could go to school. He said I could learn the piano; classical piano. I think that would be good enough, you know? He’s the scientist, and I can be a classical pianist…I think it’s good enough to make me fit here. I want to stay.” April was shaking, but her eyes stayed dry. Jo moved in behind her and put arms around her middle.

“You don’t get it, Little One,” Jo whispered. “You are safe here no matter what. You don’t have to prove yourself. You don’t have to try to be what you think the Alpha wants you to be just to earn a right to stay. You fit already, without even trying. You fit just fine. Look, he got to pick for himself what he wanted to be, and he chose kickass all-around know-it-all. You get to choose too, just like he did. What did I tell you in class? Don’t you dare let anybody try to make you be anything they don’t have the authority to make you be. If he tries to tell you who you have to be, you just call me, and I’ll come down here and kick his ass for you. No one makes those decisions but you!”

“Yes they do! See? I knew you wouldn’t get it! I BELONG to him. I fucking BELONG to him! He gets all the say, and all it’ll take is one single NO, and it’s over and done with!”

“No, April. It’s not like that here. Step back a minute and look around you. It’s not like that.” Jo spoke slowly and deliberately. She was steadfast and bordering on angry. “You’ve met my mother. You think she didn’t hear her share of ‘no’? You think she let that stop her? She had shithole alphas try to block her every step of the way, including her own mate a time or two, but she’s not playing games, never was. It was HER life, and she wasn’t going to let some fucking custody papers decide who she answered to. When it comes to living inside these walls, you follow his rules, but he has NO RIGHT to tell you who or what to be. Has he tried? April, has Castiel tried to tell you you can’t do this? Fuck, have you even told him yet?!”

“NO! He has no idea. Dean walked in on me playing one of my songs on a break, so he knows, but I can’t! I can’t risk it! I have to wait until I can figure out how to make it safer. I can’t hear no right
now. Besides, the school can teach me so much that I really need to know.”

April’s three friends looked back and forth from one to the other, silently.

“Please don’t tell him yet. Please! I need to think it through first. Let me do the audition. If I don’t get in, I mean, I just want to wait and see. Please?”

“You deserve the right to try, April,” Charlie told her sharply. Charlie had never been sharp before.

“Play me something,” Jo insisted, turning the Omega to face the keyboard. “Whatever you want, but make it something of yours. Please?”

April’s fingers trembled as she put them up on the board and sat forward. She cast an uncertain glance at Jo, who nodded firmly at her and winked. Just like Dean.

April closed her eyes and allowed an old emotion to revive inside her. It didn’t fit anymore, but it had been so real once. Betrayal and fear, loss and mourning. Her fingers began to introduce the song, and its sadness filled the room. Her conservatory echoed the sound back to her, a warm and loving acknowledgement. She’d only been brave enough to play this one once before in this room, and like that time, she was struck by how strangely well it seemed to fit here even though it came from another time and place. The room loved her song. It wafted across the golden wood and the stuffed arm chairs, harmonized with the shady reflections coming in through the tall windows. She began to sing – shaky at first, and then stronger.

It was about finding strength where there shouldn’t be any left. It was about having everything pulled out from under her and having to claw her way back home on her own. It was about how easy she was to hurt, but how hard she was to break, and it filled her with a ferocious sense of pride and determination, even as its words sounded hopeless. The music swelled in contradiction to the lyrics, and she chose to side with the music. This time. Sometimes it went the other way. April sang the last note, and then thundered through the last stanza on her beautiful grand piano with her friends tucked tightly around her. Then she stilled, and pulled her hands to rest in her lap. She couldn’t look up. She didn’t dare. How could she have been so careless? It was all going to come apart now. She would be laughed at. Called plucky. They would ruffle her hair and hand her another glass of wine. Everything was so quiet. So still.

“Holy Mary Mother of God,” said Charlie.

“April?” asked Jess softly. “Did you really write that?”

April forgot how to breathe, but she was a good Omega, and she’d been asked a question. She nodded.

“Hey, Kiddo. Calm down. You’re panicking. Take a breath.” Jo pulled her in to scent the alpha, and it helped her find the ground again before she floated too far away. April trembled, but she breathed.

“Um, you know,” said Jo carefully. “That wasn’t half bad. You said you don’t have the voice for it, but I gotta say, it sounded pretty damned good to me.”

“Good?!! That was…” Charlie started, but shushed quickly at Jo’s wild gesture behind April’s back. “Oh. Um. Yeah, I mean, I think it has potential. I think you could probably make something out of that.” Charlie made a confused face at Jo over the top of April’s head, but Jo just shook her head in response and indicated they should talk it over later, in private.

“Please don’t tell Castiel,” April repeated.
“It’s yours to tell, April – not ours,” Jess assured her. “I, for one, think you can trust him with this, but it’s your decision. You wait until you’re ready. We’ll back you up, okay? We’re all on your side, sweetheart.”

“Thanks Jess.” April leaned to the side and touched her temple to Jessica’s and heard the beta gasp faintly at the touch, then Jess put an arm around the Omega and hugged her with a sniffle.

“Ladies, if I may?” Fred stood in the doorway. “You are all welcome to stay for dinner this evening. I’ve set out extra portions to thaw, and I believe alpha Dean is planning to grill the pork chops. It’s a specialty of his, so I recommend you all accept. Beta Jess, would you like for me to contact your mate to extend the invitation to him as well?”

“Thank you, Fred. That would be great. All we have at home is leftovers.” Jess pulled away reluctantly and stood up.

“Very good, ma’am. And may I tell Dean that he’s got guests to cook for?” Fred looked to Charlie and Jo. Jess and Sam weren’t guests.

“They’re all staying,” said April firmly.

“Excellent. Please excuse my interruption.” Fred backed up and disappeared as if he’d never been there.

“I want a butler,” whined Charlie.

“You have to Mate a Winchester, Chuck,” Jo informed her. “And there aren’t any girls unmated in this pack.”

“Naomi’s unmated,” April said.

“Ewww!” Charlie protested.

Monday turned to Tuesday, turned to Wednesday, and Michael settled into the black swivel chair at the long conference room between his mate and his Pack Alpha. His first couple of days of training under his belt, Michael felt a little better about the whole shebang. He got on very well with Joshua, who promised to act as mentor rather than strict classroom teacher. Joshua laughed good-naturedly at Michael’s description of his first few weeks Mated to Dean, shaking his head at the fumbling way they’d found a shaky balance. “That boy’s one-in-a-million, son. You’re going to need to keep up on your toes around him or he’ll eat you alive.” Joshua laughed.

“I know. I figured that much out for myself,” Michael grouched, and Joshua grinned.

Hannah was another story, and Michael couldn’t tell yet which way it would go. They measured each other every single time they caught each other’s eye. Every conversation was a challenge. She wanted him Omega, and he wanted to comply. He’d promised Dean, but there was just something about her that put his wolf’s hackles up. Dean assured him that Hannah wasn’t a lesbian. Selecting a gay woman to teach him Omega matters would have been a disastrously bad idea, but she obviously
didn’t find Michael particularly attractive, and he suspected that was all his wolf was responding to. He didn’t remember feeling like that during her interview.

He talked it over with Dean and Castiel on Monday night before dinner, ignoring the drunken giggles coming out of the parlor from the unwelcome gaggle of women in his house. Dean reminded Michael that Omega teachers usually held a Claim on their students because it created a constructive bond that allowed them to communicate better. Michael refused to consider allowing that, and Dean frowned, but he didn’t press it. Castiel asked Michael to give it a week or two and try to find a way to work with Hannah.

“She can teach you a great deal, Michael. Please don’t let your wolf dictate this decision. What does your Omega think?” asked Cas, chopping celery.

“I have no idea,” confessed Michael. “I can’t get to him while she’s there. I think it may just be a bad fit.”

“Or,” said Dean, seasoning the pork chops, “It’s a perfect fit, and she’s just the challenge you need to learn how to be assertive from that side.”

“You think I can be assertive from my Omega?” Michael took a drink from his bottle. “You think the Omega’s going to be able to shoulder in on him? Really Dean?” Michael’s voice was acerbic.

“Yeah, I do,” said Dean, irritated and slapping the jar of seasoning onto the counter. “Seen him do it. So have you. You just didn’t know that’s what was happening.”

“I’m not giving up after just one day. Give me a little credit, for Christ’s sake.”

“Yeah? Then stop bitching, and get back in there and try.” Dean turned and faced his mate down.

“Bitching? You said you wanted feedback. Or did you just want smiles and rainbows?”

“Stop it. Both of you.” Castiel had his hands up, one still clutching the knife, and he lowered it quickly when he realized what it looked like. “Dean….”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m just… I think we’re echoing. I’m gonna go put these on the grill and cool off.” Dean slouched out.

“Echoing?” asked Michael, turning to Cas.

Cas glanced at him and then went back to chopping vegetables. “It’s when a Mated couple get stuck in an emotional loop. You feel annoyed, and Dean senses it, but it feels like his own emotion, so he gets annoyed too, and it just goes back and forth, the volume increases, and sometimes it gets out of control. Normally it only happens to couples with an extremely strong bond. It’s a good thing, really, but if that’s what this is, you’ll need to learn how to recognize the symptoms and cut it off at the start.”

“Great,” snarked Michael. “Another thing I have to learn, and another thing we’ve got going for us.”

Cas cleared his throat and shot a pointed look at the Omega.

Michael apologized quickly, and then he let the subject drop. It was going to be a very long twelve weeks. He watched Dean through the kitchen window. Every muscle in Dean’s body was tense. He was still in a great deal of pain, and Michael wanted to help, but he didn’t know how.
Michael settled into the chair between Dean and Castiel with a feeling of dread that turned his fingers numb and made him sweat. Dean put a hand over his and wrapped warm fingers around his cold ones. “Relax, Michael. The executioner doesn’t arrive until one.”

“Very funny.”

“Tell me what you and Jamie talked about yesterday in there all on your own,” Dean pressed. He’d been trying to get Michael to talk about it ever since Jamie had wheedled him into a one-on-one interview yesterday morning at the house.

“I told him that you are an asshole who steals all the covers and can’t hit the target even with the toilet seat up, and that you eat your steaks well done.” Michael said with a straight face.

“You didn’t! Michael, that kind of thing turns into… Wait. Did you really?” Dean was leaning forward, speaking urgently into Michael’s ear.

Michael laughed despite his nerves. He kissed Dean’s nose. “Thanks for trying to make me feel better.”

“Is it helping?”

“A little.” Then Michael blanched as Ellen and Pam walked in together, followed by Joshua and Hannah. Ellen had a thick stack of paper in her hands. Dean squeezed his hand, and Castiel’s hand found its way to grip his neck.

Michael took a deep breath. “Good morning everyone,” said Pam cheerfully. “It looks like we’re waiting on a couple of alphas. We’ll get the reports handed around, though. Dr. Harvelle?”

Ellen nodded and began to distribute packets, leaving one for Benny and one for Bobby at their usual chairs. Michael stared blankly at the stapled packet of papers she slid before him, the logos for the ACRI and the Keller Institute standing out boldly on either top corner as if confronting one another. Dean took his with a smile and a word of thanks. He released Michael’s hand to flip it open and scan through. Michael snarled when he heard and felt Dean snickering. Castiel’s hand tightened minutely, and Michael stopped.

He was curious, a little, but Michael couldn’t make himself pick it up. The report was going to define him from here on out. As long as he’d avoided being evaluated, he could always dodge the uncomfortable truths he knew were waiting just under the surface. Michael didn’t want to know what words they were going to assign to his various abnormalities. He crossed his arms on the table before him and rested his chin in the middle, looking straight ahead.

“Chill out, Michael. It’s not that bad,” Dean told him with an elbow to his ribs.

“Says you,” Michael responded, turning his head a little. Castiel’s hand didn’t flag in it’s consistent calming pressure despite the odd angle that the Omega took it to. “Does it have the word ‘Narcissist’ in it?”

“Yep,” Dean agreed. “It’s got the word ‘Mild’ in front of it. You don’t have a personality disorder, Michael.”

“Bullshit. Tell me why I got kicked out of school, then.”

“Because your wolf is a nineteen, and he’s an asshole. Get a leash on him, and you’ll be good to go.”
“You are so full of shit, I’m not even going to answer that, Winchester.”

Bobby came in with Benny and took his seat while Benny closed the door. “Everybody here?” asked Benny rhetorically. “Good, let’s get started. I can’t wait. This is gonna be exciting.” Benny rubbed his hands together, and Michael shot him an offended look.

“All right, then. Let’s dig right in, folks,” Ellen spoke loudly enough to get their attention and swing their eyes to her. “Michael, I want to thank you for allowing us the privilege of learning from you. We’ve learned a great deal in a very short time, and I’d like to share what we can. I believe that you will find it interesting and informative. First off. You all know that Michael’s been rated a tertiary nineteen, and that he’s the first individual to have done so. As our scale is not really suitable to support both Michael’s nineteen, and Alpha’s twenty, it looks by all accounts, as if the Keller folks are finally going to take an adjustment of the scale into consideration. So there’s that. I expect Charlie will be taking bets on where Castiel’s number will top out at once it’s re-scaled.”

Ellen’s face betrayed no humor, so Michael couldn’t tell if she was for real, but Dean chuckled with a quick, “’Bout fuckin’ time,” under his breath.

“Excuse me, Dr. Harvelle. Sorry,” Michael sat up. “Does that mean my rating will change once they re-draw it?”

“That’s a good question, Michael. I don’t believe so. We rated you from below. You are higher than an eighteen, but I feel confident that you aren’t a twenty, even if we didn’t have a false twenty throwing it off scale. I believe your rating will remain the same.”

Michael nodded.

Pam picked it up. “So, you’ve got a negative thirteen as an Omega. That makes you a solid Central O. Do you know what that means?”

“Uh. It means I don’t need as much submissive stuff all the time, right? Like control stuff?”

“You could say that,” agreed Pam. “It’s not really about submission so much as it is about firm structure and clear lines of authority. As a Central, you won’t need firm discipline or constant Releasing. Your Omesol production is very low for a thirteen, but your need for clarity of structure is higher than we usually see in Centrals. It balances out a little. You test extremely fertile, Michael. I advise you to be cautious if you aren’t prepared to start a family.”

Dean took his hand again and smiled warmly, catching his eye.

“Yes, that’s what I thought,” smiled Pam. “We’ll get back to that later. I know that you have only just started Omega training, so I’ve asked your trainers to be present. You are a unique individual, Michael, and they need to know everything we can share with them about how your designations fit together.”

“Shouldn’t I have a say in that? Shouldn’t it be private?” Michael asked.

“No,” said Benny simply.

“Oh.”

“Nothing we have to say verbally leaves this room, Michael,” Castiel clarified. “But the written report is open to anyone with an account through Keller as a qualified test administrator. There are quite a few of them now, and your report is likely to garner a great deal of attention.”
“Wonderful.”

“Thought you didn’t care?” said Dean carefully.

“About the ratings? I don’t. But there’s shit in that report, I bet – private shit I don’t want everybody knowing.” Michael met his eye.

“Moving on.” Ellen shuffled her papers. “You will get much more information from alpha Hannah about your Central Omega rating than we have time to go into here. Do you have any specific questions about it?”

“Do you know why I can Release on my own? That’s an Omega thing, right?”

“Yes and no,” said Bobby. “The need to Release is certainly Omega, but we believe the capacity to auto-Release stems from another part of your psyche. We’ll get to that too. You really are a very interesting wolf, Michael.”

“Can I get a drink of water?” Michael asked. Dean chuckled and pulled on the back of his mate’s chair to roll it out from under the table.

“Seriously, chill out, Michael. It’s not fourth grade. You need water, just get up and get some.” Dean pointed to the counter at the end of the room where a cooler and some cups stood waiting.

Michael sent Dean a smack through the bond. He didn’t want to be told to chill out any more. He poured himself a cup and brought it back, sinking into his chair with a scowl.

“Before we talk about Michael’s wolf,” Pam said abruptly. “I’d like to just quickly go through his Z-rating.” She waited to catch Castiel’s nod. “Michael, you’re a positive twenty on the Z-scale. Now, that number doesn’t really mean much by itself. All it tells us is that you tend to prefer Topping to Bottoming overall, and that you are about middle-of-the-road in terms of how…let’s just say…how kinky you like to get. From what I can tell, your rating is a bit misleading. As an Omega, you have a significant physical drive to Bottom, and that’s pulling your number down artificially. You had an interesting mix of responses to our little video. Would you like to discuss it? This part can stay private if you’d rather.”

“I get to decide?” Michael said, very surprised.

Pam answered kindly. “Remember, this isn’t part of the written report. This is just for you and Dean. I will tell you that everyone here can help you understand it, and there’s nothing in there that we haven’t seen before. You have nothing to be ashamed of, Michael.”

“I’m not ashamed,” he protested.

“So, would you like me to continue?”

Michael looked at Dean who smirked, daring him to say yes. “All right,” he said, speaking to Pam, but keeping his eyes on Dean.

“All right. I’m going to skip over the ones that got no reaction. On the negative side, that is, the ones you find repulsive: cutting and scarring, having yourself bound in any way, in fact, every form of submission we showed you elicited a revulsive response. Michael, this probably comes as no surprise to you, but you don’t like to submit at all.”

Dean snorted, and even Castiel chuckled softly.
“That’s what I thought. Okay, also you’re not into any kind of fluid exchange for its own sake, so all of that is pretty well off the table: blood, urine, feces, saliva, semen. I guess I would describe it as… you don’t like to get too messy.”

“Wait. Semen?” asked Dean.

“For its own sake, Dean. That doesn’t mean he won’t come on your face to mark you, but it’s about the mark, not the fluid,” Pam explained.

“Oh. Good.” Dean sat back in his chair.

“Michael, you are not interested in pain-play from a receptive perspective. You are neither a masochist nor a sadist, and that had us scratching our heads a bit, what with your mate’s tendencies, but I think you fill that hole from a different mindset than Dean does.”

Dean laughed. “Did you say, ‘fill that hole’? Really Pam?”

“Grow up, Dean,” she barked back, and he laughed outright. “What I’m trying to say is, just forget about any kind of Bottoming or submission. Don’t go there. You’re going to be the physical bottom much of the time, but just go ahead and Top your sophomoric mate from the bottom. He’ll get all the pain-play he wants from you because he is a brat.” She looked right at Dean, who stopped snickering and sat up straighter.

“May I ask a question, Dr. Barnes?” said Michael, ignoring Dean.

“Of course, Michael.”

“I remember those scenes in the video. How can you tell when I perceived it as an aversion to the idea of being tied up instead of getting hot over the idea of tying Dean up?”

“That’s a good question. I can’t answer it very well, except that the folks who put the video together are professionals and this is their specialty. They have ways of drawing the eye to the giver or the receiver in each image, so each scene is specific to a Top or Bottom perspective.” Pam answered him, and she waited to see his response.

Michael nodded. “And the fact that the images went by too fast?”

“The charts account for processing time. Every image has a correlation mark on the response charts. Synapses pretty much fire at the same rate for everyone. Your reflexes may be quicker than mine due to musculature or what-not, but our nerves actually fire at the same speed.”

“Oh.”

“Okay,” Benny jumped in. “So we know what he doesn’t like. What’s on the yes-list?”

“Well,” said Pam with a deep breath. “Michael’s what we call a Ring Master. He wants full control. Of everything. If he can’t control it, he’s not interested. He’s both an exhibitionist and a voyeur.”

“See? Told you!” crowed Dean.

“Yes, Dean. Thank you,” said Michael flatly then turned back to Pam.

“Michael, I expect that you feel turned on when your partner misbehaves under your direction and you bring him or her to heel again. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s not that I want a brat to misbehave exactly,” he explained. “It’s just that if he’s
going to, I want to be the one to get him back in line. Yeah, that feels good.”

“Mm-hm, and that’s why you align with Dean even though you aren’t a Sadist. You have no problem dispensing pain, but it isn’t the pain that interests you. It’s the control.”

“No offense, doctor,” he broke in again. “But we already know all of this. We’ve talked about it at home.”

“All right, well, here’s where it gets interesting.” Pam looked across at Ellen with warm eyes. They had obviously already talked it over.

“A couple of things really lit up bright on Michael’s test,” said Ellen. “For one. He’s got a size kink, and it’s a real doozy. Keep that boy well fed, alpha. You hear me?”

Dean squawked, and Michael spewed his water. “I TOLD YOU!” shouted Michael. “I told you from day one!”

“Settle,” said Benny quietly, and the mates stilled. “Go on, Ellen.”

“Also…, look I can’t get a read if it’s a kink or not, but that boy lit up like a Christmas tree to every image of pregnancy and pups. Either he’s got a massive breeding kink, or you need to get him knocked up, like yesterday, Dean.” Ellen raised an eyebrow, and Dean nodded in earnest.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll do my best.” He squeezed Michael’s hand again, and Michael pulled it away and smacked him on the back of his head. “HEY!”

“SETTLE!” called Benny again, with a ‘don’t make me separate you two’ look. Dean scowled at him.

“Okay, here are the pieces we’re not sure you know.” Ellen passed it back to Pam with a look, and Pam nodded back at her.

“Michael, do you know what a Ring Master does?” Pam asked him.

“He directs the show?” Michael guessed.

“That’s right. And that means that it’s a show. When we apply that term to a Top who is an exhibitionist, it usually means partner-sharing and multiples, but the Ring Master is always going to want to stay in complete control of who touches his partner and how.”

“Wait. Hold on,” said Dean. “Partner-sharing?”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t know, alpha,” said Michael. “You’ve made comments about it before.” He was a little uncomfortable discussing this one in front of so many people. It would have been better coming out in private so Dean could have a chance to process it without so many eyes on him. Michael’s discomfort made him short with his mate.

“You want me…? With other guys?”

“You really didn’t know?” Michael asked. “But you even brought it up. Back when you were prepping me for the video. You said…”

“I was just talking dirty, Babe. I thought it was just one of those things people say but don’t really do. You mean…? Really?” Dean stumbled.

“I showed you off for Sam on almost our first day here, Dean. I put Castiel behind you and let him
fuck your cock right into my mouth. How could you not know?”

“I dunno.” Dean stared at Michael. “I knew you were an exhibitionist, but... We really haven’t done anything like that for a while. I guess I thought it was just experimentation.”

“You aren’t ready. I’m not going to push something on you that you don’t like, Dean.”

Dean held his mate’s eye with a frown, searching inside him. They needed to figure this one out. Taking their sex life into the living room and letting packmates see it was a far cry from passing him around to other men. Dean didn’t know what to think. He didn’t know if it was something he wanted to think about or not. “What else?” he asked Pam without looking away from Michael.

“One thing you need to keep in mind and really pay attention to is that Michael doesn’t do half measures. He doesn’t share ownership. He’s got a gi-normous case of possessiveness. What’s his is his, and what’s not his is untouchable. Sharing custody is always going to rub the wolf the wrong way. He’s honorable to a fault that way. He’s not going to steal someone else’s property, but he expects and demands the same respect. All of you need to be aware of that. What you’ve achieved so far between the three of you is really nothing short of astonishing. It could never have happened with a weaker Alpha-Dom than Castiel. Be sure you keep a solid Claim on Michael, Cas. You’re going to need it.”

Castiel nodded absentmindedly as he read the report. “Anything else?” he said to his papers.

“Well, I believe you already know that what might actually be his most defining kink is the way Michael can sniff out the kinks in his partners and bring them to light, fulfilling whatever roles meet their needs, and satisfying them with their own fantasies. It’s an actual kink of Michael’s. It’s rare, but not unheard of, and it falls into the partner-pleasing category. Michael is sexually stimulated by discovering and becoming whatever his partner desires.”

“Is this still part of the Ring Master thing?” asked Dean.

“Yes, in a sense. He’s still maintaining control, and it’s still a show. He writes the script and choreographs it to his partner’s satisfaction, but it’s Michael putting on the show. If there’s an audience, then all the better.”

“Hmm,” Dean responded.

Ellen took it up, bringing a close to the talk about kinks, “There’s more, of course. Everyone has a whole complicated pile of pleasures and revulsions. I encourage the two of you to go through the list exhaustively together. We’re just hitting the high points here. And if you haven’t done so already, Dean, be sure to share your Z-scale report with your mate.”

Michael raised his brows at Dean. He hadn’t been made privy to that yet. Dean leaned in and kissed his cheek. “We got two weeks to talk it over, then all bets are off, Michael. Then we let those horses run. You hear me?”

“If you mean, then I get to own your pretty round ass, then yes, I hear you.” Michael kissed him back, and Bobby cleared his throat.

“All right,” said Ellen. “Next order of business: the tertiary rating. Before we move on. Alpha? Dean? Do either of you need any input regarding how to keep Michael’s Omega balanced? It’s in the report, but I didn’t think you’d need much guidance for a thirteen.”

“Do you have a recommended Release schedule, Ellen?” asked Cas, flipping through the report’s many pages.
“He can probably go almost two months, Alpha. I’d suggest setting it at six weeks, but he may not need assistance at all if what we saw during the test happens on a regular basis.” Everyone turned their eyes to Michael, but he simply blushed and looked at the table. “Even if it’s not self-performed, Michael’s likely to Release fully enough during sex that it will manage itself. I’d advise checking him with a Peliomometer every four weeks or so to keep it from sneaking up on him, but I believe he may be about the easiest Omega we’ve ever seen from that standpoint. Congratulations, Michael! That means that if you keep your nose clean, you can avoid corporal punishment altogether.”

“Not gonna happen,” spat Dean indignantly.

“And on that note...” Bobby leafed noisily through his packet.

“Yep, on to the real meat of the matter,” said Benny, taking over. “From a psychological perspective, Michael’s well-balanced in his front brain. We see a bit of social anxiety and an overactive ego, bordering on narcissism, but essentially Michael’s a healthy, stable, introverted guy who just doesn’t much like people. I’m not gonna call him unbalanced. He’s a smartass, and he’s never going to have a lot of patience with stupidity, but then I can’t really blame him for that. Let’s take a look at the Omega real quick.”

Benny ignored him and continued. “Michael’s Omega is deeply repressed. Its emergence seems to have been suppressed early on – maybe shortly after he came of age – by his Dominant wolf. The Omega is no match for the wolf, and it’s got little chance of coming to full maturity unless we intervene. However, the Omega is strong, protective, maternal, and intuitive. Michael, I believe most of what you enjoy about the work you do for your pack is driven through the Omega’s sense of pattern and order. It’s also strongly moral. The Omega is where your basis for ethical behavior stems from, rather than your front brain. We see that go either way in Lupins, but your sense of integrity is clearly based in your Secondary gender.”

“You can tell that from how I fuck people?”

“We can tell that,” Pam laughed, “from your interviews during the psychological evaluation.”

“So, what does it mean?” Michael wondered out loud.

“It means you would do well to learn to occupy and trust your Secondary gender. He’s the most ‘You’ part of you, Michael, at least he is if you want to lead an upstanding, responsible, adult life and be the best version of you,” Pam concluded.

“But then what about the wolf? Y’all don’t know...he’s pacing right now. He’s not happy with this at all. I can’t hold a leash with my Omega. You don’t know what you’re asking for.” Michael’s two hands were flat to the table and pressing down hard. Dean put a hand over one of them, and pried it loose, wrapping it in his own.


“He’s a wolf,” confirmed Michael. He had no intention of describing him for them.

“It doesn’t really matter, but it helps me to know where he sits in your mind.” Benny took a sip of water, and checked his notes. “Michael, your wolf is a classic psychopath and a true narcissist. Now, I know that sounds scary as hell, but it’s something we can train you to handle. Tertiary genders are a product of the reptilian part of your brain, mostly the cerebellum. They are not capable of abstract
thought, but they control many of your behaviors, and responding to and through them is key to staying healthy. Your wolf is pure selfish desire, as is everyone’s. Yours, Michael, is extreme in its power and its need both. It is massively possessive. It is pleasure-oriented. It is easily enraged, and it is difficult to calm. It is violent in the extreme. Your wolf demands order and control, and ironically the need for order seems as if it may stem from a desire to placate the Omega side of your psyche. It is also vengeful. You need to realize that if you plan to apply punishment to your mate.”

Dean disagreed. “He Mated me with a sweet little, control-centered D/s scene. It wasn’t violent. We barely broke a sweat.”

Bobby answered for the Behaviorist. “He’s pleasure-oriented, Dean. You submitted immediately and allowed him all the control. He liked that. There was no reason to become violent.”

Benny chuckled at Dean’s blush. “Michael, my boy, you seem to have been born with a wolf who thinks he’s God, and just nearly has the strength to back up his claim. He’s a handful, I can tell you that. You got a tight grip on that leash?” Benny asked.

“Most of the time,” muttered Michael sheepishly.

“Well, I gotta tell you, son,” Benny fixed his blue eyes onto Michael’s fervently. “You are one tough son-of-a-bitch to keep that beast controlled by yourself with nobody guiding you. You’ve done a hell of a job. Most Lupins, if they had to walk around with that inside them would be dead or in prison by now. Fact is, I wonder if there aren’t more nineteens and twentys that we never get a chance to meet because they’ve imploded on themselves before they make it through puberty.”

Castiel frowned. He’d listened with one ear while he scoured the packet’s every word. “How did he make it through, Benny? Why is Michael sitting here with us when by all accounts he should have self-destructed?”

“I’ll let Bobby answer that one,” Benny gestured to his colleague, and Cas looked up.

Bobby cleared his throat. “We’ve been studying this boy’s Mating and his Keller with a fine-toothed comb. We got readings off every test we could, including his Mating-scar response test. What it looks like, and this answers to how he can self-Release, is that Michael’s wolf believes he’s an alpha.”

“Huh?” Dean scratched his head and turned to look at his mate as if the wolf was going to emerge and explain.

“Or, more like, the wolf believes that Michael’s front brain, his neocortex, is an external Pack Alpha. He responds to the leash only if it’s wielded by Michael’s human mind.”

“Bobby, come on, man. That’s ridiculous. What the fuck?” Dean was stunned, but Michael had his head cocked in interest, a frown furrowing his brow.

“Guys,” Ellen said assertively, “What you need to understand is that Michael’s brain is, well it’s wired differently. We can’t tell yet if it’s congenital or if it’s environmental. Neural pathways form for the entirety of a person’s life, and this connection – it could have occurred at any point. But he’s got an extra set of connections that fire like crazy when the wolf activates strongly. The connections run from the primordial part of his cerebellum, straight through to the neocortex. He’s got his wolf leashed through his front brain. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“And that’s why he can self-Release,” posed Bobby. “His wolf believes the sensations are coming from an external source, from a strong authority figure outside of himself. He doesn’t recognize the
front-brain as ‘self’ at all. He thinks it’s an Alpha.”

“Nothing my Pop ever did had any effect on me…” muttered Michael.

“Because your wolf didn’t recognize him as Alpha,” Bobby put in.

“But he rolls for Castiel.” Michael made it a statement, but the question was clear.

“Son, everyone rolls for Castiel. Your wolf ain’t gonna be an exception to that,” Bobby admitted with an uncomfortable glance at the Alpha that Cas didn’t return.

“What about the Mating?” asked Dean. “Did you figure out how he pulled that off?”

Benny cleared his throat. “We don’t have enough to go on without another chance to interview Michael. We need your permission for that, alpha.”

Dean changed subjects. “How’d you know to look for a special connection in his brain if no one’s ever had one before? You do that to everybody, just in case?”

Benny didn’t answer. Neither did Bobby. Ellen and Pam met gazes and then looked away. Dean gave the silence in the room a chance to reach its full, uncomfortable weight.

“Bueller?” he prompted after a couple of tense minutes.

Benny was the first to break. “We suspected that Michael might have a singularity or two in his circuitry upstairs. We applied a few extra electrodes to his head during the Keller test.”

Dean slapped the table violently. “I said NO extra testing! I made that VERY CLEAR! You wanna poke around at somebody, go out and get your own O/D! What the fuck, Benny?! Did you forget how to read? He’s not a science experiment for you to go poking at with your pointy little probes. Who authorized this?”

Bobby sat forward and opened his mouth to speak, but Benny beat him to it. “I did, Dean. Bobby went along with it, but it’s Michael’s behavior that we were investigating, so the decision fell to me. We all talked about it, and when the idea was floated, I said yes. It’s on me and no one else, and I’m not apologizing for it. We needed to know. Michael needed to know.”

“Who is ‘we’, Ben?” Dean looked across Michael at his fiancé. “Did you know about this?”

“I had no idea, Dean. I’m as surprised as you are.” Castiel may have been surprised, but he was also very calm. He, in turn, handed the question off to Michael.

“Did anyone inform you that you were going to be fitted with extra electrodes?”

Michael looked from Castiel to Dean and back again. “I don’t think so, but if it’s all the same, and if the Omega gets any kind of a vote, I’m okay with it. I kind of want to know. I’ll take a little extra prodding if it helps me understand.”

“The FUCK?!?!?” retorted Dean, confronting his mate. “Half an hour ago you wanted nothing to do with any of this.”

“I thought they were going to tell me that I’M a psychopath, Dean. Forgive me if I freaked out a little bit. I know what that bastard’s capable of. And now they’re telling me there’s some kind of freaking pathway or whatever that might help me put a lid on him when he gets like that? YES, I WANNA KNOW, all right?!”
“You want them sticking probes up your ass day and night? You want college students and penny-ante researchers from the middle of who-knows-where signing up to take a poke at you? You’re a nineteen, Michael. Have you got any idea what that means to these people? I’m begging you, man, don’t do it. Don’t say yes to this.”

Michael shifted his shoulders and suddenly assumed more space in the room than he had done before. “There’s a difference, Dean. There’s a difference between whatever pile of slavering idiots is sitting outside your doorstep waiting to poke at a piece of the freak Omega versus the people in this room. Tell me there’s not a difference.”

Dean narrowed his eyes, trying to suss out who was speaking. The posture and the authoritative voice. It sounded Dominant. Only, Dean wasn’t tempted to roll, and there’s no reason to believe that Michael’s wolf would defend the team’s actions.

“Fuck me,” he muttered. “This is insane. We’re supposed to come out of here with some clarity. All I’m getting is more confused. Are you telling me that half the time when I think I’m dealing with your wolf, it’s just you in there? Are you more dominant than the wolf is?” Dean tried looking into Michael’s eyes, and he searched both bonds. The complexity was making him nauseated. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Castiel nod firmly as if something had fallen into place.

“You knew?” he accused Cas. “You knew he had another dominant side?”

“Dean, you are submissive in your front brain, and Michael’s your True-Mate. It stands to reason that he’s a counterpart to that. Also, I knew that a Central Omega couldn’t have the wherewithal to control a 19-rated Dominant wolf. Somebody’s been holding the leash and keeping him at heel. If it’s not the Omega, then who?” Castiel took a deep breath through his long nose and let it out slowly. “I believe we may need to authorize more tests – purely for Michael’s personal benefit.” Cas was quick to placate the ruffled alpha. “If he has the first chance to control the beast, we need to give him as large an arsenal as we possibly can.”

“You’re going to overrule me?” Dean asked.

“Do I have to?” Cas countered.

“I hate it when you answer a question with a question,” Dean pouted.

“You’re being stubborn, Dean,” Michael whispered to him. “Everyone’s on board but you. Don’t make me a point of contention just to make a point. I thought you wanted to help me.”

“I do. God, fuck, I do.” Dean searched Michael’s face again. How had his firm stance to protect his mate turned into a stubborn dragging of his heels purely on principal? When had Dean become the unreasonable one. “Fine. Go. Get yourself probed.” He turned to Cas and put a finger in his face. “But I get authority to approve every Goddamned study BEFORE it starts. Every single electrode any motherfucker puts on his body goes through me first!”

“Agreed,” said Castiel. “Are we though here?”

“Did April have to go through this?” Michael asked, worn out.

“Hardly,” answered Ellen. “April’s a standard Ozzie with a higher-than-normal Secondary designation and a Release block. She’s run-of-the-mill compared to you, kiddo. It took Bobby and me fifteen minutes to talk through her assessment.”

Hannah had been scribbling furiously in her notebook and highlighting passages in her report packet. Joshua simply observed the proceedings silently with his fingers steepled before him. Michael risked
a look at the two of them. Hannah attempted a full smile, but Joshua nodded grimly. Of the two, Michael wished he could spend more time with Joshua. He seemed to understand the gravity of the challenge before them better. Hannah’s unflagging cheerfulness was getting old already.

Michael sent his exhaustion through to Dean, and the alpha swiftly canceled the training classes for the day, bundling his mate home without further comment, and tucking him into bed for a much-needed nap with a kiss to his temple and a quickly rebuffed proposition. Dean curled up beside his mate and tried to think of anything but his blue-to-nearly-purple balls.

Before he fell asleep, his mind reminded him that he’d be driving out with Sam tomorrow to speak to his dad, maybe for the last time. That killed his burgeoning erection instantly. Michael snaked an arm around his waist, pulling him in close, and Dean drifted to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the continued support. We lose a few readers here and there, but that’s okay. Every now and again, we pick up some new ones.

I love my pack!
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

It's a difficult day for Sam and Dean. Then Michael visits his new doctor, and it's the Alpha's birthday at last.

Chapter Notes

I almost didn't get this one out before I needed to go back to work. Don't you dare skip the premiere to read this (those of you who get a premiere tonight...I don't know when the folks across the pond and elsewhere get to see it). First, watch S13, E1, and then catch up on fan-fic. Priorities are important.

Happy Premiere Thursday!

It's another bridge-chapter. It seems crazy to me how many words it takes me to say very little. ...Like Melville.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 59 – Thursday, June 29, 2017

NOW:

The silence in the car was thick enough to congeal, and it made Dean twitch. Sam watched him, but
refused to be the one to break it. He already knew what Dean had to say, and he didn’t really want to hear him out. Sam’s foot bounced in the wheel-well.

“Sam, listen…”

“Don’t.”

Dean glanced at his brother. “Don’t what? Look, I just found out I got two fuckin’ psychopaths who each have a hand on my ass. I don’t need you giving me orders too. This is my car, and I’m the big brother here. You’re gonna listen to me.”

Sam rolled his eyes at the drama. “Psychopaths, Dean? Seriously?”

“Seriously. What does that say about me, huh? What does it say that I’m attracted to violent, crazy men? Can we just get through today with a minimum of bickering so I can go back to wallowing in self-pity over here? Please? Sam, please?”

Sam laughed at his brother’s pitiful attempt to soothe him, but it broke the tension. Dean had always had a way of breaking right through when Sam’s uptight became unbearably uptight. He shook his head and stilled his bouncing heel. “Do you know what you’re going to say to him?” Sam asked, changing the subject.

“I don’t have a lot to say, man. I want to see him, you know? I want him to see us – see how good we turned out. I want to talk to him a little bit without all the guilt and blame getting in the way. He said yes, so maybe he’s ready to hear it. I don’t know.” Dean faded out and squinted out the window, trying to remember which exit he needed to take from the freeway. “What about you?”

Sam twitched. “I don’t think he knows that I love him. All we ever did was fight, and I called him names I can’t take back. Would it be too much? Do you think? If I just try to say that?” Sam’s voice started and stopped. He seemed completely out of his element. Asking Dean for guidance had become a rare occurrence as Sam matured, but he resembled nothing so much as a pre-adolescent pup slouched down on the shot-gun side, watching buildings fly by and running through imaginary conversations again and again in his head.

Dean pulled restraint from somewhere. “He knows you love him, Sam. It was never that getting in your way.”

“Then what? Why did he only ever talk to you? Why did he only call you? Is it the beta-thing?” Sam’s voice broke a little.

“Jesus, Sammy! You can’t take all that crap in there with you. Don’t put that on him right now. I mean it. He’s not up to that.”

“Right. I forgot. Betas are just supposed to sit back and speak when they’re spoken to.”

“Give me a fucking break! Look, I know you’ve got your share of baggage between you. You want to talk it over? Fine. I’ll talk with you until we’re both blue in the face. Don’t forget, I was there too. But if you needed something from Dad that he didn’t give you, that’s not about to change today. Don’t you fucking dare!”

“Then what’s the point? Why are we doing this?” Sam pouted petulantly.

“You tell me, little brother. You’re the one who called this meeting.”

“Dean, I don’t know what to do. I just know I can’t let him die without telling him I love him.”
“Then just say that. Just say that, Sammy.” Dean signaled his exit and moved his car right. “Let’s try to keep it simple and real. Let’s just talk about right now. Can you do that?” He kept an eye on Sam’s face – at the troubled lines on his brow. “He loves you, Sam. He loves you. Always has.”

John’s face had a color that no one wanted to put a name to. He was gaunt and haunted. Bobby stood up as the brothers came in hesitantly. The hospital bed stood oddly in the living room of this unassuming suburban house, and the smell of decay and disinfectant made both men queasy. John’s deeply sunken eyes passed over Dean to Sam without acknowledgment at first, and then widened and snapped back. He looked quickly away and reached a hand out toward Bobby. Bobby let him hold onto his hand with a claw-like grasp. His emaciated body barely registered under the smooth blanket.

“How ya Dad,” said Dean quietly, stepping closer. “It’s been a long time.”

“Dean.”

John’s voice rasped much more than it had done on the phone. How much strength had he needed to summon to make himself sound strong for that call? Bobby stepped back to allow Dean to take his place, and John’s grip transferred shakily. He held onto Dean’s arm as if it were the only thing keeping him afloat. Dean noted the difference in flesh. His own arm, fully spanned, young and elastic, next to John’s talons, devoid of fat and fluid, colorless in their grip.

John’s eyes moved back to Sam, and he made a horrifyingly heart-breaking sound as they welled with tears. “Sam. Shit, son… I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

“Don’t worry about it, Dad,” said Sam gently, moving in next to Dean. Sam reached out and put a hand on John’s far shoulder. It was almost an embrace. He leaned his hip against the tall sturdy bed. “We wanted to see you. We don’t care what you look like.”

John’s other hand struggled free of the thin blanket and took a vice-like hold of Sam’s wrist. He kept his eyes on Sam’s as if drinking in his youth and vigor. John’s eyes sparked with a temporary light, like a fever-glow.

“Bobby says you boys are doin’ real good. Says you’re workin’ together, lookin’ out for each other.”

“That’s right,” confirmed Sam. “We joined a Pack together too. We don’t live in the same house, but we’re always nearby. We’ve got each other’s backs, Dad. It’s real good.” Sam squeezed his shoulder tenderly and rubbed a thumb over his clavicle.

“I’m watching out for him, just like you said,” nodded Dean. “Him and his mate too. We’ve got this, Dad.”

John’s eyes didn’t leave Sam. He frowned as pain passed across them. “You still living in our old house, boy?” he asked Sam.

“That’s right. Jess and I live there together. Did you hear we both Mated, Dad?” Sam shifted to sit on the bed beside his father’s frail frame.


Bobby touched Dean’s shoulder, and he turned. A nurse in blue scrubs stood behind him. Bobby gestured that she wanted to speak to Dean, so the alpha extricated his arm from his father’s grip and passed him off to Sam with a look. Sam nodded and began to describe how happy he was Mated to
Jess and how satisfying his work at The Facility was. John seemed content to let the words tumble over him. His face took on a simple serenity as he listened.

The nurse led Dean into the kitchen and pulled some papers across the counter. “Alpha Singer’s adjusted the custody forms for us, transferring everything to you, alpha. I know you’ve been over the charts already, but we need to make sure we’re all on the same page about your father’s care.”

“Whose custody was he in before?” Dean asked, scratching his head.

“His own, but alpha Singer was listed as primary physician, and that gave him some decisional rights. He’s still offering his services to you, but he’s filed a petition with the courts on your behalf to transfer power of attorney to you and Pack custody as well. I’m sure he’ll go over all of that with you and get your signature. All I need is to know what you want from us. Hospice care isn’t medical treatment. You understand that, right?”

“Yeah, I get it,” said Dean in a gruff voice. “No extraordinary measures, and all that crap. Look, just keep doing what you’ve been doing, and send the bills to me, not Bobby. Can you do that?” Dean was fighting to stay on-track and business-like. It wasn’t the nurse’s fault his dad was dying.

“May I call you Dean?” she asked quietly, and he nodded, meeting her eye.

“Dean, your father doesn’t have much time left - maybe a couple of weeks if he starts eating again. Less if he doesn’t.”

Dean took hold of the countertop and trembled slightly. A wave of despair passed across his body from his belly outward, like an Omega. He felt nauseated. “It’s not enough time.”

“I know, but it’s all I can tell you. I’m not going to paint you daisies.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell us sooner?” Dean shouldn’t press the nurse. It wasn’t her decision, but maybe she knew.

“We don’t have a lot of freedom where the law is concerned, Dean. Your father was his own alpha. He refused to let us notify you. Our hands were tied. I’m really very sorry.” Her eyes spoke comfort and kindness, and Dean didn’t want to be an asshole.

“What would’ve happened if his mental faculties went before he did? Could you call me then? If he can’t serve as his own alpha? Doesn’t the law let you step in, you or Bobby either one?”

She looked uncomfortable, but the woman had strength. “Dr. Singer could make that call, but I have to be honest with you Dean, we haven’t seen any indication that your dad’s losing his ability to make decisions for himself. We may not like his choices, but they are his to make as long as he’s competent.”

“So somebody brow-beat him into letting Sam and me in? That what I’m hearing?” Dean had an ear focused into the living room, but all he could hear was a muffled mumble of soft voices.

“I wasn’t here when he changed his mind, but I can’t imagine anyone brow-beating John Winchester into anything.” Dean let out a relieved breath and looked to the doorway. The nurse put a hand on his arm.

“Go and talk to your dad. Tell him that you love him. Don’t bring up anything that doesn’t matter anymore.” Dean nodded sadly. “Let him go, Dean. He’s ready.” She left him standing in the kitchen beside a messy stack of medical-jargon and insurance claims. Orange bottles of pills lined the counter in neat form. Dean picked one up and read the label. Dr. Singer.
Bobby appeared in the doorway. Dean didn’t look up.

“You know how angry I am, right?”

“You’ve got a right to be angry, Dean. But tell me what I could’ve done different.” Neither man moved or looked up.

Dean didn’t respond at first, and then he said, “You break any rule you don’t like as if it’s not even there. Someday, I’m gonna want you to explain this to me. Not today.” Dean brushed past him on his way back into the living room. Sam and John had gone quiet, but they seemed to be comfortable together. That was a first. The two had done nothing but squabble since Sam was twelve years old. Dean had always ached for his brother’s inability to see where the tension came from. They were too alike, John and Sam. They rubbed each other’s pointiest aspects wrong. Dean’s softer side dovetailed right into where the Dominants both dug their heels in, and where both men proved weaker, Dean was strong.

Sam couldn’t see it, and Dean had worried that Sam would demand compensation from John for all the hits his psyche had taken in his youth from his demanding father. Nothing Sam did was ever good enough for his dad, but only because John wasn’t good enough for himself, and he saw his own likeness in his younger son. He wanted a do-over and he wanted Sam to give him that.

The look on John’s face as he gazed at Sam said he might have achieved his goal at last. He seemed to have finally decided that the tall, confident, gentle man who held his shoulder was a better man than his father. John shifted his gaze to Dean as his older son rejoined them. Sam stood up to make room, and Dean moved in close, smiling. “You two have a good talk?” he asked, resting his hand on John’s flaccid bicep. John nodded.

“I’m sorry, son,” he confessed in a gravelly voice. “I shouldn’t have kept you away so long. I’m sorry. I finally kicked that damned bottle, and that’s brought me back a little.”

“You did the best you could, alpha. I ain’t mad at you. You did just fine. I’m proud of you.”

“Dean, I fucked up everything. How can you say that? Don’t call me alpha.”

Dean sat down on the bed beside his father. “Dad, look at me. What happened to you…it happens to a lot of wolves. It wasn’t your fault. I’m the one who fucked up. I should never have let you go off on your own. You needed me, and I walked away. Don’t you see? Even as broken as you were, and I’m not saying you weren’t broken, even as bad as it was, you never left Sam and me. You stayed and battled it out until we could stand on our own, and then you crawled away to lick your wounds, and it was easier for me to just let you. That’s on me, Dad, not you.”

John couldn’t meet Dean’s eyes. A tear tracked its way down his cheek, and he shook his head.

“Hey, hey…come on now. Don’t do that. I’m not trying to stir shit up here. I know you didn’t want us to come by, and I know why. Dad it hurts like fucking hell right now, and you’re not strong enough for that. That’s okay. It’s okay, alpha.” Dean put as much acceptance and forgiveness into his words as he could without saying them right out. Embarrassing John wouldn’t help him find peace. “You know, Sam and me? We’re strong, just like mom wanted us to be. We’ve got family and friends who look after us, and we take care of each other. We’re making a difference in the world, Dad. We’re helping people – people who fall through the cracks because we’ve all forgotten how to be wolves – people just like you. We’re watching out for all of them. That’s what you wanted us to do, right? You don’t have to worry about us anymore, alpha. You raised us right. You hear me?”
He hoped his father could hear permission in his voice; permission to let go, to turn it all over to his sons, to release the pain and the worry and to just go home at last. Dean’s voice held true, but it was so hard.

“Does your brother still paddle your backside when you misbehave?” John asked with a rare glint in his eye. Dean sputtered to a stop.

“Uh…” He glanced back at Sam and ran a hand across the back of his neck. “Yeah, that still happens from time to time. You know me, if I’m awake, I’m probably up to something.” He let out a self-deprecating chuckle. Dean hadn’t been aware that John knew they did that.

“Good. That’s good. I worry about you sometimes. You never wanted to admit it, but I knew you’d always need that.”

“That’s what we’re saying, Dad,” Sam leaned back in close. “You don’t need to worry anymore. We’ve got everything we need, and you gave us a strong start. We’re just fine.”

John closed his eyes and let an exhausted breath escape. Dean saw Bobby shift slightly in his peripheral vision. It was time to go.

“Can we come back by in a couple of days, Dad?” Sam asked tentatively. John just shook his head minutely, and Sam’s breath caught in his throat. Dean pressed his lips together.

“Love you, alpha,” said Dean in a cracked voice. It was goodbye, and they both knew it. John’s hand closed around Dean’s and squeezed. Dean released him and stepped back to let Sam back in. He didn’t stop until he stood on the porch, retching into the bushes, doubled over. Bobby helped him stay upright, and Dean clung to the alpha. Soon he was cradled in Bobby’s embrace, sobbing disconsolately. Sam joined them shortly and added his own arms to the cocoon. Sam didn’t cry, but the pallor of his face spoke to his deep pain.

They drove home in silence, a copy of Dean’s signed custody form sitting on the bench seat between them.

***************

The last day of the second quarter was chaotic at The Facility. Castiel was being summoned to Oklahoma to answer questions before a panel of FBI investigators. He decided to fly out on Saturday with April and visit the in-laws while he was there. The FBI interview was on Tuesday, on Independence Day. Dean’s Rut was due in a week, but there was no way to know if it would Trigger on-time or stall due to Michael’s Heat pheromones dragging at it. Also, today was his birthday, and he’d been allowed to know when and where his ‘surprise’ party was going to be only on the promise that he wouldn’t dodge it this year.

The reports coming out of Dallas were auspicious, but they still had work to do, and Rufus and Pam both packed to head back there. No one smiled at all during the budget report at their Top-staff meeting, but Dean’s grim face promised them all a solution was coming. He and the budget committee just needed a little time. “We don’t have time, Winchester,” Castiel reminded him Starkly. That was the whole point.

Word from the Keller Institute and the unofficial rumors said that the great institution was in an uproar. No one would be surprised if a mutiny was at-hand. Meg revealed that she’d been contacted
quietly to test her interest in taking a job there, and then Pamela admitted that she had as well. Neither woman had any desire to leave Castiel.

Next session’s training course schedules were unveiled. The classes had been booked for months, but assigning teachers to each one often waited until the last minute. Castiel and Dean both got animated over Sam’s assignment. Dean wanted Sam in the classroom with him, but Cas reminded Dean about Sam’s new role as Primate baby-sitter.

“I thought you meant NEXT session, Alpha, not this one. Sam and I had this worked out already. I need him with me now that I’m in the cage. I can’t run a class on my own.” Dean whined, sounding even to himself like a pathetic facsimile of an alpha. He really needed to get laid soon.

“We had a deal, Dean. Sam is committed as Sarah Blake’s escort. You need to go back in and reschedule yourself another assistant.” Castiel stood firm, captain of the ship and accepting no excuses.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” muttered Dean, meeting Jo’s eye with a worried look. She shrugged.

“What do we hear from Naomi, fellas?” asked Benny, breaking through the eye-stabbing between fiancés. “Has she pulled out of the race yet?”

“No,” Cas answered, turning to Benny and letting Dean stew. “She’ll stick it out and wait for the election. My mother is many things, but she’s no quitter.” Had that sentence come from anyone else, there would have been teasing, but no one said a word. “Is that everything?” Cas asked after a moment. “Billie? You’ve been very quiet over there this morning.”

“I don’t have much, Alpha,” she told him. “The celebrity rags are running a new shot of you and Dean here in Lawrence. And the article that Rolling Stone is running should be in the next edition. They haven’t sent me copy to review, but I’m not worried. Jamie’s reliable. He’s not going to paint you in a bad light.”

“Try again please, to get a copy to review,” said Cas empirically. “I want a head’s-up if it turns on us in any way.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Ellen, who cycles next month? Do we have coverage?”

“Yes, Alpha. You know Dean will be out the second week. Balthazar just got back. Adam’s due the last week of July. I think that’s it, and we’re scheduling around them. We always have some folks out from the contract side, but it’s nothing the others can’t handle.”

“You’re in August, right?” he asked Ellen.

“Yes, Alpha. August 13.”

Cas nodded and finished scribbling notes. “Thank you everyone. I will be returning from Oklahoma on Thursday, but I don’t plan to come back onsite until Friday. Let me know by email or text if you need me. You know the drill. Dismissed.”

Dean grumbled his way back to his office, trailed by Jo and Sam both, ignoring Castiel. He threw his notes violently on his desk and turned to face them both. “What now? We had it all straight. I was really looking forward to this round. I can’t do this on my own.”
Sam was calm. Sam was always fucking calm about things that drove Dean up the wall, and he went ballistic over things that Dean saw as manageable. “Swap me out for one of the newbies. You’ll be fine, Dean. You need to give those guys some one-on-one training time anyway. We were just being selfish trying to run a class together like the old days.”

“All the newbies are women, Sam! I hate to have to explain this to you, but I need somebody who’s packing a third leg. Mine’s locked out.” Dean threw himself into his chair and let it spin a little bit.

Jo chuckled. “It’s not that bad. Let me re-arrange things a little. Maybe we can split your class in two and half of them can join me. You wouldn’t mind working with me, would you boss?” Dean peeked out at her through his fingers before dropping his hands into his lap.

“That’s all we’ve got isn’t it? God, we’ve gotta get this budget thing figured out so we can hire some more teachers. Why didn’t you tell Alpha to stuff it, Sam? You don’t have time to play nursemaid to some ape chick. We need you teaching,” Dean’s tone was accusatory, but Sam knew he was just lashing out.

“I’m not going to tell Castiel to stuff it. I’m not suicidal, and anyway, it sounds like an interesting assignment. I’m really looking forward to it.” Sam sank down onto Dean’s loveseat with a whooomph. “You know, I’m not really supposed to be counted part of your staff anyway. I work for Benny. Teaching was only supposed to be temporary while the Training Department got itself figured out. That was four years ago.”

“Yeah, well, you belong with us. Fuck Benny.” Jo beat Dean to the response, but he didn’t counter. He couldn’t have said it better himself. Jo turned to Dean suddenly. “What about your staff of researchers? If we can turn a hot-head E.O. into a first-rate trainer, we should be able to multi-task those nerds. What about Kevin? He already reports to you. Make him get certified. Make him take a class.”

Dean scoffed. “Kevin gets spooked talking to his team of three technicians. Put him in front of a class, and he’s likely to wet himself.” He raked his hands through his hair, leaving it sticking up in all directions. “What a fucking mess! God, I can’t THINK! I need…” Dean clamped his mouth shut tight with a determined growl. Jo didn’t know about his two-week sentence, and Sam wasn’t going to sympathize. He wasn’t about to whine about it anyway – not yet anyway. He’d done this to himself, and he was by-damn going to see it through.

Jo leaned over his desk. “Put half the class in with Sonny, and the other half with me. You float for the semester. Sit in on all the teams in turn. Offer guidance where it’s needed, and be the hard-ass the rookies can’t pull off yet. Sam’s not going to just disappear on us. He’ll be around too. You can even work together on this. Travel as a team. It’s the training classes that this researcher wants to see anyway, right?” Dean scowled at her. She turned around to look at Sam. “Right, Sam?”

“I think so.”

Dean started to open his mouth, but Jo cut him off. “I swear to God, Winchester, if you whine at me about this, I’m marking you down and assigning you a correction. I’ll do it. Don’t try me.” Dean’s eyes cut to the handle sticking out of his brother’s pocket. He narrowed his eyes at Jo, but he gave way with minimal complaint.

“Fine. I’m gonna make Cas pay for this. I was looking forward to this round.” Dean was most definitely NOT whining.

“That sounds very close to whining.”
“Fuck you, Harvelle. How about that? Did THAT sound like whining?”

“You’ll be late for your appointment, Dean,” Sam reminded him, pulling himself up.

“What are you - my appointment genie? I’ve got fifteen minutes.” But Dean stood up too. He gave Jo a quick hug and a kiss on her temple. “I couldn’t do this without you, you bitch,” he whispered.

“And don’t you forget it either,” she sassed back. “Hey, whatever’s up your ass, see if Michael will go in there and pull it out, all right? Don’t be bringing that shit to work with you.”

“Yes, Mother!” he snapped as he tossed back the door and disappeared to find his mate.

“Seriously, he’s been a bitch all day. What gives?” Jo asked Sam.

“He’s just under a lot of pressure, and…did he tell you about our dad?”

Jo shook her head, and Sam closed Dean’s office door.

Dean stuck his head into Michael’s little training room, paled, whimpered, and then pulled it right back out again with an, “Oh, God.”

He pressed his back against the wall beside the door and tried to erase the image of Michael in presentation, ass high, back sweaty, a sparkling blue plug in place, catching the light. His arms had been trembling, and his head hung low between them. The bond, which was no more than background noise unless Dean focused on it these days, told Dean that Michael was heavily aroused and more than a little pissed off. Dean’s cock ached as it sprang roughly to attention and dragged harshly against the fabric containing it. It took everything in his power to keep his feet planted. It might be worth the punishment to ignore his chastity and barrel in there, rip that cursed plug out and plow his fertile mate into oblivion. But, he’d promised Michael, and he really did understand about taking these things for granted. Really, he did.

The door cracked open.

“They’re nearly finished, Dean. Let’s just wait out here.” Joshua stepped out and pulled the door closed.

“Hey, whatever’s up your ass, see if Michael will go in there and pull it out, all right? Don’t be bringing that shit to work with you.”

“Peachy,” said Dean, huffing out his cheeks and side-eyeing Joshua. The alpha-Dom knew about Dean’s chastity sentence. A sentence for Dean was a sentence for Michael too, and they needed to know not to assign him any homework that his mate couldn’t follow up on.

Joshua was smart enough not to offer him unhelpful platitudes. He put a hand on Dean’s shoulder and chuckled kindly. Dean just huffed and willed his erection to go away. It wasn’t working. The door cracked back open a few minutes later, and Michael emerged, red-faced but dressed. He mumbled a goodbye to Hannah without looking at her, grabbed Dean by the hand, and stormed off down the hall in a hurry.

“You don’t even know where we’re going!” Dean protested. “Slow down. My balls hurt! Michael, slow the fuck down!” The alpha put his voice on full command and ground his heels into the floor. Michael dropped his hand, continued on two or three more steps, and let his head fall back to gaze up at the ceiling as he came to a halt with his back to his mate. Dean walked up behind him and
pressed up against his back. He knew Michael could feel his state against the crack of his ass, and Dean let Michael’s head come to rest on his shoulder. “You’re okay,” he whispered. “I’m proud of you. You did just fine.”

“It’s humiliating, Dean. I promise you I don’t need some chick in a pant-suit to tell me how to present to my mate. Once my Heat hits, I’ll be every alpha’s wet dream. Why do we have to pretend I need to learn it like a virgin?”

“It’s not about the pose, Babe. It’s about the mindset. You’re fighting it.”

“Yeah, no shit, Sherlock. Look, let’s just go do this thing. I haven’t flashed my pussy at enough women today. Where are we going?”

“Wow, you’re cranky,” said Dean, pulling him down the hall with an arm around his shoulders. “You know what would make you feel better?”

“I swear I’ll spank you right here if you offer me your knot again. Drop it, Winchester.” Michael’s wolf wasn’t cowed by Dean, and Dean kinda liked the shiver that ran down his spine.

A spanking. Now that wasn’t a bad idea. It wasn’t sex, but it hit a lot of the same notes. Michael poked him in the ribs. “I can hear you thinking over there. Maybe I’ll give you lines again instead.”

“Come on, you big baby,” groused Dean, turning the corner to head toward the medical wing. He checked them in at the reception desk and was told to have a seat and wait.

The P.A. checked Michael over and asked them both some simple questions, then left the room with instructions to have the Omega undress and lay out on the exam table. She offered Michael the simple paper robe to wear, but she spoke only to Dean. Michael growled at her.

Dean didn’t offer him any help. He tucked into a tight ball in his chair and looked through a magazine that was eight months old, still trying to come back down from the erotic image of Michael – ass out – that had lodged behind his eyeballs, and trying like hell to give Michael some space in the tiny room.

“Well, there’s my favorite alpha!” Dr. Mosely beamed as she opened the door. “How have you been, boy?”

“Hey, Missouri.” Dean rose and kissed her cheek, bringing her in for a tight hug. She swatted him on the ass, and his yipe had her pulling back with a knowing look in her eye.

“Mm-hmm. Drop ‘em, Winchester. Let me see the damage.”

“What? No!”

Michael snickered. He’d rolled up onto a hip and held his robe closed with one hand. “Listen to the doctor, Dean. She needs to examine your bruises.”

“Fuck you too, Michael! We’re not here for me!”

Beta Dr. Mosely moved like lightning and had Dean squashed against the counter, his belly pressed in painfully, and she whacked his backside five or six times. “HEY! OW! OW! STOP!!”

“Oh, you don’t like that? Then learn to follow simple instructions. I said, I want your pants down at your ankles so I can take a look.”
Michael laughed in delight.

“Thanks for the support, MATE,” said Dean, imbuing the word with derision.

“Look, boy, I know you’re sporting a woody. I don’t much blame you if HE is what you go home to every day.” She indicated Michael with a twitch of her head. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen a thousand times before. Now get that buckle open or I will do it for you.”

Dean’s ears were on fire. He dropped his head onto the counter and slowly worked the buckle of his belt open, grumbling the whole time, then unfastened his slacks and shoved them down. The release of pressure on his dick felt good and horribly disappointing at the same time. He turned his head to the side and let the cool Formica calm his blazing cheek.

Missouri sucked in a deep gasp and held it in. She ran a tender hand over his flank, over the yellowing bruises that still showed in the deep muscle of his backside and his thighs. “Dean.”

“It’s not what you think, Doc.”

“Did Michael do this to you?”

“No. It wasn’t Michael, and it’s not what you think.”

“Boy, your Alpha would NOT go this deep. What happened to you? Did one of our contract boys bruise you this bad?”

“Why the hell would I be using contractors?! No! It’s private, Missouri. And I’m fine. We’re done.”

Missouri stood still for a minute, watching him, then flicking her eyes to Michael, looking for clues. The Omega had his eyes on his mate, and Michael held onto Dean’s lower arm easily. There was no tension between them. Bruises like that were not rare in this clinic, and they never boded well. It was mystery, but Missouri didn’t believe that Michael was involved. It just didn’t fit the way they touched each other.

“I need to know what happened. That’s not an acceptable level of damage. You and I both know it.”

“What are you even looking at me for? You’re a Gynecologist.” Dean went for the redirect, but Missouri shook her head.

“Boy, I am an ACRI DOCTOR, and I would follow up on this even if the law didn’t require me to because I care about both you and that Alpha of yours. Answer me. Did Castiel hit you hard enough to cause those marks? Don’t you lie to me and tell me you fell down no stairs either.” Her eyes were piercing right into Dean’s.

“Yes Ma’am, but I wanted him to…” Dean mumbled with his head down.

“Mm-hmm. Look, son, you know both sides of the equation. It doesn’t matter if you want him to cut your feet off. There’s a limit to what’s acceptable and what’s not. Just because you ask for it, doesn’t mean he should give it to you – not if it does you harm. He knows that. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know.” Dean looked up at her through his lashes. “He…We…It went too far, Missouri. We both know that, but it wasn’t like that. I’m not harmed. It was a one-time mistake. You know he’s not like that.”
“Castiel is going to tell me the same thing?” She approached him and pulled his chin level with a gentle hand beneath it. Dean nodded. He knew she would call Cas. He knew she would write it up. At least his erection had deflated and wasn’t pressing against the line of his zipper anymore. Missouri looked into his eyes for a moment, and then she patted his cheek and turned to Michael.

“All right, then. Let’s get a look at this young man. Hello Michael, I’m Doctor Mosely. I’m going to be examining your channel today. Dean tells me you two want to try to conceive in a week or two. I’m going to check you out to make sure everything looks ready. I need you to scoot your butt right up to the edge here and put your feet in the stirrups. When you’re ready, you just let your knees fall out real wide for me.”

Michael rolled his head back but didn’t move. His grip on Dean’s arm tightened painfully. Dean leaned over him. “This is not submission, man. This is just an exam. She’s a doctor. Even Cas does this sometimes. Relax and don’t make me get firm on you. Just chill out and do it. It’s no big deal. Think about why we’re here. Why are we here, Babe?”

“We want a pup.”

“Mm-hmm. You think you’re gonna get a pup without doctors gaping at your ass?” Dean grabbed a firm hold of his mate’s chin and kissed him firmly. “You good?”

“Yeah,” said Michael grudgingly. “I’m good. I guess.”

He shifted, and followed the instructions, wincing as Dr. Mosely spoke through what she intended to do, and scrunching his face hideously when she actually followed through. “You owe me another pie, Dean,” he breathed out through clenched teeth.

“You’ve only eaten half the first one. How about I fill you up instead? How about I give you a pup? Would that be reward enough?”

“Mm, barely,” Michael murmured.

She paid only passing attention to his external male genitalia, focusing instead on everything inside. She commented that he showed no sign of trauma internally. Dean knew well that Omegas Michael’s age often had scars from past abuse. She prodded him, probed him, stretched him wide with her speculum, and examined everything she could get to from her perch between his knees.

Missouri capped the vial containing his cervical swab, then patted the outside of his thigh. “We’re all done, sweetie. You can sit up now.”

Michael was upright in an instant, wrapping himself up tight and letting his legs dangle over the side, knees clench together.

“You look good, Omega. You’re swelling up nice and firm. The cervix is rounding out. You’re ripe enough to pop. From a mechanical side, you are ready. Your file tells me that the hormone range is right where we like to see it. Dean, hey Dean, pay attention. Have you had your hormones or your counts checked?”

“No ma’am, do I need to do that?” said Dean sheepishly looking up from where he’d been kissing the back of Michael’s neck.

“Babies have two parents, boy. It does no good to get the Omega all set up and then shoot blanks at the target.” She turned around and washed her hands.

“Blanks!? I’m not shooting blanks!”
“Fine. It makes no difference to me. There’s not much anyone can do for you this round anyway, but if THAT womb doesn’t catch,” she pointed to Michael’s crotch, and he frowned and tightened up, “then it’s all on you, alpha. You’ll be lucky, as fertile as he appears to be, if he doesn’t get pregnant just walking around out in public.”

Dean ate lunch with Michael. They were both grumpy at first, but the words Missouri had spoken worked their way through both of the mates’ minds, and they began to thaw as the message took root. Dean chuckled first, and Michael followed. His little bag of Folic acid and Prenatal vitamins sat on the long bench beside him. “Are we really that close, Dean? Is this for real? Pinch me.”

“I’m not gonna pinch you and piss off your psychopathic wolf,” giggled Dean. “Holy fuck, Michael, I’m gonna knot you so hard and so many fucking times, you’re gonna have septuplets. C’mere.”

Making out in the lunchroom didn’t usually elicit any comments at all, but sometimes, when a make-out session went into extra innings, a few eyebrows raised. Dean whimpered into his Dominant’s mouth, letting him rule them both, letting him lay Dean out across the long table and splay himself over his mate, letting Michael climb on top of him and grasp him by the hair with a menacing growl. One hand tore at his Sub’s hair, pulling his throat taut, and the other held his jaw and cheek in a painful grip. Dean’s hands grasped at nothing, his hands flexing, his knees shifting up to straddle Michael’s legs and then flattening back down again. The sound from Dean’s throat was unearthly and not remotely alpha. The table creaked.

The first wolf whistle went unremarked, unnoticed, but soon a rousing round of cat-calls joined in and Dean heard them. He huffed out through his nose, trying to get enough air, trying to break the kiss, but Michael’s wolf doubled down, and pulled his head up and to the side. His hand shifted down from his jaw and pulled at the collar of Dean’s shirt, searching for his healing scar. His fingers found it, and he pulled out of the kiss, panting harshly, meeting Dean’s eyes for only a moment before plunging his head down and Claiming Dean with a fearsome bite directly over his previous one. Dean cocked his head back and yelled low, loud, and hoarse. His knees pulled up high around Michael’s hips, and he rocked into the pain. The crowd that had surrounded them erupted in cheers and applause, whistles, and shouts.

Dean grabbed for Michael’s head and wrenched him away from his bleeding shoulder to kiss him again. This time, Dean’s alpha took over, and he bruised Michael’s bloody lips, rolled him over and nearly tumbled them both off the table. He rutted filthily into Michael’s groin. And kissed the daylights out of his mate as a dribble of blood trailed down his chest. He wanted to keep going. He wanted desperately to rip Michael’s clothes off and fuck him hard, bent over the lunchroom table, but he was in chastity, and if he kept rutting the way he was doing, he would break his honor about that. He would come embarrassingly hard, like a pubescent pup who didn’t have any control. Dean broke off the kiss and pulled back to look into Michael’s golden eyes.

“I’m not worried that you’re shooting blanks, Dean,” Michael told him and reached up to kiss his nose, leaving a smear of blood on the tip. Dean hmphed, and scrubbed at his nose and mouth with his hand. He climbed down from the table and helped Michael up. Looking up, Dean found friends and colleagues, clients, and staff weren’t dispersing. He felt his face grow hot as he realized that what they’d just done, what Michael had done to him went farther than he’d been willing to do before in public. It wasn’t that he had forgotten where they were, it was just that the aura of Michael, once he was fully revved over-ruled everything else. Dean chuckled to himself and raised an
appreciative hand to the crowd, ducking his head, and the cheers went back up again.

Ellen appeared before him and ran a peliomometer across his bleeding shoulder and down his chest. Dean pulled his arm out of her grasp. “Enough, Ellen. I don’t care if we’ve got three mating bonds now. It’s my own business and my mate’s.”

“Relax, Dean. I’m just curious. I’m not giving the readings to anyone.”

“You could have asked though,” said Michael, leaning over her. “I’m just saying.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. But you two should have seen what that looked like from the gallery. I’m sure there’s a renewal to your Claim, Michael, and you both stayed fully dressed. No matter how many times I see it, it’s amazing every time.”

“HEY, WINCHESTER!” Dean’s head snapped around just in time to catch hold of the wrapped chocolate muffin flying toward his face. “Eat that! You gotta keep your calorie count up!”

“Get back to work, Jo,” he told her, tossing the muffin to Michael who unwrapped it immediately.

Dean left the lunch trays on the table and steered Michael back toward his classroom, passing Cas on the way out.

“Are you finished eating?” Castiel asked, but then his eyes widened. “You’re bleeding. Why are you bleeding?” He reached for Dean’s shirt, saw the mark, and looked to Michael.

“We need you to at least TRY to stay in your Omega mind-set, Michael. Claiming your mate is no way to do that,” Cas chastised, putting Dean’s shirt back in-place.

“Yes, Alpha. Sorry about that. We just left the clinic. They gave us the green light to try to conceive this round. We were, um, celebrating a little bit. It won’t happen again.” Michael shuffled his feet, Omega mind-set instantly re-activated.

“I need to speak to Dean,” Cas told the Omega with a touch to his cheek. “Can you find your way back to class without him?”

“Yes, Sir.” Michael kissed Dean before he left and squeezed his shoulder on top of the new bite. Dean winced, but pressed into the touch rather than pull away.

Dean took a spot beside Cas while the Alpha ate lunch, but Dean faced outward on the bench, leaning against the hard line of the table.

“Missouri Mosely called me,” Cas told him.

Dean didn’t respond. He was battling internally, fighting not to excuse his actions, reminding himself he’d done nothing wrong and that getting defensive wouldn’t be a response Castiel would appreciate. His first impulse was to retort that he hadn’t meant to let the doctor see his bare, damaged flesh in the first place, and to deny having betrayed Castiel’s trust.

“She’s opening a report on the damage she noted, and it will be reviewed by the Internal Affairs Committee,” he continued in Dean’s silence.

Dean lost the battle. “Cas…I…I’m sorry, man. She swatted me in play, like she does, and I flinched. I didn’t mean to…”
“You misunderstand, Dean. I’m not upset with you, or with Dr. Mosely. She’s doing precisely what she’s responsible to do. I feel confident that the matter will be documented and reported, but that it won’t go further than that. I just wanted you to know. You’ll likely be called in this afternoon for a more thorough exam. I’ve taken responsibility for the damage, and we’ll both be interviewed. Dean, I’m the one who owes an apology here. She’s absolutely right. I lost control, and you could have been badly hurt. I need you to know that that can’t ever happen again. I need to take care of my side of it, but you need to start doing your part too.”

“My part…” Dean knew what Cas meant.

“We’ve become too comfortable with your inability to use safewords. That needs to change.” Castiel took a bite from his sandwich and chewed slowly, his eyes seeking Dean’s. Dean avoided him, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

“How do we do that?”

“You’re the expert trainer, Dean. You tell me. What do you do when a Sub has a block of some kind that puts him in danger while he’s scening?” Cas turned sideways on the bench and cocked his head to one side.

“HEY, DEAN!” someone shouted from the doorway. “Great show earlier! You perform here often?”

Dean popped up a middle finger in response, but he hollered back cheerfully, “Week-days after school. Same Bat-time, same Bat-channel!” He lowered his hand and caught Castiel’s head-shake.

“What?”

Cas didn’t respond. Dean sighed. “All right. Give me a little time. I’ll figure something out. I got an appointment with this shrink right after we cycle. Maybe she’ll have some ideas.”

Cas looked at Dean sharply. “Do you really need an outside opinion? Or could it be that you already know how to address this, but you don’t want to?”

“Fine. Right. You got me. I don’t want to.” It wasn’t a sarcastic answer. He didn’t. They both knew he didn’t. Castiel had always accepted the weight of responsibility in their scenes over the safety of them both so that Dean could feel free to let go completely. It was a part of his submission, a special need within Dean’s psyche to let go of all holds and trust in the free-fall, knowing he was safe. In light of the bruising that had shocked a seasoned Omega doctor, perhaps their play-style needed a re-dress. Dean’s heart was heavy. Had Cas really struck him that hard? It hadn’t felt much more powerful than usual.

“What’s going to happen if there’s an investigation?” Dean already knew the answer to that. He’d been through countless reviews where clients came in with more substantial damage than they could explain. He needed reassurance though.

“It isn’t an investigation,” Cas reminded him. “It’s just documentation. It doesn’t become an issue unless there’s an identified pattern or a single incident of serious concern. This meets neither of those requirements.” Dean nodded. He knew, but it made him nervous to have their private life scrutinized. They both pushed limits, and they both wanted to do that. He didn’t want anything to change.

“Dean, the committee knows that the outer edge of the spectrum is rife with more extreme needs. They know that this kind of thing might happen every now and then with those of us who need to play hard. They take it into account. Please don’t worry.”

“Nah, I’m more worried you aren’t going to be coming home from Oklahoma on Thursday,” Dean
admitted very quietly, casting Cas a look. “What would we do if they think they know something, and they hold you for further questioning?”

Castiel didn’t flinch. He took the question seriously, although his soft answer was weighted to alleviate Dean’s fear... “Then you’ll check in with our lawyers. You’ll assume leadership of our pack while I’m gone. And you’ll bake me pies while I’m in prison.”

“I don’t think it’s funny.”

Cas changed the subject. “How did Michael Claim you if you’re still on lock-down? I thought he made that sentence a total black-out.”

“He did. We didn’t have sex. It was just kissing...a little harmless rutting, I guess, but nobody got naked, and nobody came.” Dean stole a fry from Cas’ tray.

Cas stared at Dean. “What?” asked Dean defensively.

“And you did that right here in the Galley? In front of everyone?”

“Um, yeah. It was pretty hot. Talk to Ellen. She ran a Pelio reading. Somebody might have filmed it.” Dean shifted. The bruising was healing up well, but sitting for any length of time still made him uncomfortable.

Cas didn’t know what to say to that. The Dean who Michael knew was evidently not the same Dean who was engaged to Castiel. Cas reached across and lifted Dean’s shirt collar away from the scabbing wound, touching the bruising on one side. Dean pulled away.

“That’s Michael’s,” he said succinctly.

“I was just checking it,” Cas defended, but he didn’t try again.

“It’s Michael’s,” Dean repeated.

“Noted. Keep an eye on it for signs of infection.” Cas finished his lunch, kissed Dean rather more soundly than he usually did in the lunchroom – perhaps new precedents were being set – and he went back to work.

Cas sat bravely through his surprise party like a good sport, glad that at least no one suggested he wear a pointed paper hat. Charlie winked at him, grinning. She knew he was irked, but she also knew that celebrations were important to the pack. They weren’t just for the honoree, they also gave the pack a chance to bask in the glow of family, and he was willing to put up with it in that light alone.

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“How much longer?” Michael groaned. He was flat on his back in the playroom with Dean’s hand stroking his cock so slowly, it could never be more than a tease.

“Ask me that again, and I’ll add another ten minutes,” Dean scolded. “You’re supposed to be concentrating on controlling your impulses.”
Michael groaned louder.

“Answer the question,” Dean reminded him. “Capital of South Dakota.”

“I don’t give a fuck!” Michael protested. There was an Omega in there, and it was hovering near the surface, but Michael’s wolf refused to get out of the way.

“You’ve already got a spanking coming for cheek and for losing your temper on me twice tonight. You need me to add more points?” Dean spoke patiently. Professionally. Rationally. Michael didn’t want rational.

It went downhill from there, and Michael earned himself a belt before they finished with the homework Hannah had assigned. Dean denied him the support of a structured bench and made him bend in half, holding onto his own ankles and balancing through the licks. Dean took an appreciative moment to enjoy the view, although he struggled with keeping his own slacks in-place. They wanted off. God, he really needed to get laid!

“So you’re taking him where exactly?” Michael asked, wiping the moisture from his eyes, and finding his equilibrium rapidly.

“We’re just driving out to go star-gazing. I know a few spots to pull off the road where the sky really opens up. There may be meteors this time of year.” Dean finished cleaning the vibrator and put it away into a drawer newly marked with Michael’s name.

“Do you mind if I give him my gift before you leave?” He was already dressed again and waiting by the door.

“No problem. Meet up in the kitchen.” Dean kissed Michael and tried to check his state-of-mind through his eyes without making a big deal out of it. Michael knew what he was doing, and he nodded somberly. He really was trying. He sent Dean an emotional tangle through the bond and headed up to his room.

Castiel looked odd in blue jeans and a pull-over sweater. Sneakers made him an almost laughable caricature. Dean thought he was adorable. He closed up the picnic basket, and set it on the floor beside the garage door. “I think Michael has a present for you before we go. You mind waiting for him?”

“Of course not. By the way,” Cas put an arm around April’s waist to include her. “What do you two think of the idea of instituting regular Friday night Pack dinners? I’m not thinking they need to be formal, but more defined perhaps than our standard week-day evening meals. I want to make them mandatory. We need to connect at least once a week as a Pack.”

Michael entered the kitchen carrying a rectangular package beautifully wrapped in glossy green paper and tied with a ribbon. “I think that’s an excellent idea, Alpha,” he stated. “Of course, there would need to be excusable reasons for missing dinner – such as going into Rut next Friday.”

Cas chuckled. “Yes, we would excuse anyone who was in cycle. Please don’t try to attend dinner in that state.” April laughed at the image, and her eyes went unfocused for a minute at the idea of sparking an orgy over the formal dining room table by emerging from the H/R room early. Cas pulled her in and applied a kiss to the top of her head. “Anyone who needs to miss dinner will need to be excused before-hand by yours-truly. Are there any objections?”
There were no objections. Michael handed over his gift, and Castiel was delighted to receive a very old copy of “On the Origin of Species.” He asked Michael where he got it, but Michael wouldn’t tell. It wasn’t a first edition, but it had the most fascinating notes scribbled throughout by some late nineteenth-century naturalist, long-dead, who argued with Darwin from the title page through the appendices. Castiel sat down on a barstool and paged absently through it. Dean cleared his throat, and Cas looked up.

April was next. She told him that she had no physical gift for him, but that she’d written him something, and she wanted him to meet her in the Conservatory when he returned from his date with Dean. She was obviously very nervous - scared to death might be a better description - but she was resolute. Dean winked, and Cas gave her a hug and whispered a preliminary thank-you into her ear. He would get back to April. He had the Omega tonight, and he had plans – birthday plans.

Dean met him at the door with his basket in his hands, took Castiel by the hand, and ushered him out to the wide black boat of a sedan that he called home.

“Where are we going?” Cas asked him.

“Nowhere special. Just out. I wanna show you Kansas, Cas.”

Castiel laughed happily. “I’ve lived here my whole life, Dean. What makes you think you know Kansas better than me?”

“Cause you’re an indoor guy. I’ll bet you never just sat out under the stars and felt the Earth rotate under you before, have you? We’ve got the biggest sky anywhere, man, and you’re missing it.”

Castiel blushed at Dean’s passion. “Show me, then,” he said, and he slipped into the car.

They drove south, away from all the lights and the noise of town. KC and Topeka couldn’t reach them here. All the lights from the KU stadium where the band already practiced every Friday night faded into the distance. They drove south into the heart of the heartland, into the full glory of the pioneer spirit and the farmer’s dedicated grit. They drove south into the rolling plateau that soon smoothed out to almost perfectly flat – into Kansas. Castiel watched the sun set in quiet contented peace, ruminating on how differently he felt as he turned 36 than he did last year at 35, how different a single year could be in the direction of a life. Dean reached across and took his hand.

After about forty-five minutes, Dean pulled off the road and followed a dusty, unpaved farm road into the stubbled remains of a wheat-field freshly mown. He pulled off again into a dirt round-about where tractors turned to head back in the opposite direction, and he parked the car.

Leaving the headlights glowing, he pulled the basket and his fiancé from the car, spread out a blanket from his trunk, and gestured around them. “Well? What do you think? Pretty awesome, right?”

Dark, fully leaved trees marked the steep descent down to a swiftly flowing creek at the field’s edge. Crickets and bull-frogs competed with the fireflies for the glory of the stage, and an overwhelming sense of rightness carpeted everything in all directions. It smelled sweet and earthy. Cas let his head drop back and feel the soft breeze touch his cheek, closed his eyes, and listened. “It’s wonderful, Dean. Can we stay here?”

Dean laughed and circled his hips in a loose embrace. “Nope. I’ll need to get you home so that you can knot your mate after she plays for you.”

“Plays? I thought she wrote me something. She said…”

“Just wait and see, man. Here, help me unpack. I’m starving.”
Cold roasted chicken and a number of types of salad, wine and cheese and pie rounded out Castiel’s birthday dinner. Dean knew what he liked, and he provided a sampling of each of the Alpha’s favorites. They were soon full and laying out on their backs. Dean pointed out constellations that Cas didn’t know, and Cas made a few up on the spot just for fun, inventing stories that made Dean laugh. Dean’s head rested on Cas’ shoulder. His fiancé smelled good, even without cologne (he never wore an artificial scent) and even without being mates. Castiel just smelled edible anyway. Dean wondered idly if he smelled that good to everyone or if it was just Dean.

“Ready for your present?” Dean asked him. Cas chuckled darkly. He’d obviously taken the dirty-minded route, the wine having gone right to his head. Dean smacked his belly hard enough to elicit a “Whoof!” from Cas. “It’s not that kind of a present. I’m serious.”

“If we’re going to be fathers, then I need to begin to work on my dad-jokes,” said Castiel somberly. “Hello, Serious. I’m Papa.”

Dean let the feeling wash over him. It was just a dumb joke. It was a terrible joke actually, but he teared up instantly anyway, and Cas squeezed him in by his waist. “I can’t wait to be Papa, Dean. I’m so fucking excited.”

Dean took a calming breath and sat up. “So. Your present. Here goes.” Castiel sat up opposite Dean and took a hand so he could play with the wrinkles on Dean’s thumb. “I talked to Chuck a week or so ago. I’m going to write another book. I’ve committed to a timeline, and we’re signing papers some time after next week, after I cycle.”

Castiel didn’t answer right away. His two hands massaged Dean’s left hand, rubbing every now and then over the ring on his finger. “Do you understand, Alpha? You get why I’m making this your gift? It’s not a gift really…”

Cas nodded, but he kept his gaze down, and he didn’t release Dean’s hand. No one else would have understood without an explanation, but Cas did. He surged up, tears in his eyes as well, and he pushed Dean backward with the force of his kiss. They tumbled onto the blanket, missing the food, but knocking over the empty basket. He kissed Dean fiercely, erasing Michael’s bruises, pulling Dean’s lips between his own in turn and nipping harshly at them to swell and mark them. Dean’s lips were beautiful on a regular day, but after an evening of making out, they were unearthly: plump and soft and wet, so very erotic. Dean moaned and held on to Cas’ shoulders for dear life. He didn’t challenge the Alpha. He rolled. His eyes closed, though. It was a very new place for them to be, even after having moved in together, starting a pack together, scening as a couple rather than business partners, and all that they had recently shared. Kissing was still so new – kissing without rules, kissing with no purpose but love and intimacy. Dean loved it. He felt like a teenager just finding out what his body was made to do. He felt free and Claimed at the same time. He felt the earth rotate beneath his back as the love of his life took ownership of his mouth.

Eventually, they fell still. They both wanted more, but they both owed Michael a bit more suffering before they could walk away clean. Neither of them acknowledged the driving urge or the pounding in their ears.

“Got another present for you, Alpha,” Dean told the night sky.

“Hmm?” Cas hummed. He seemed sleepy, but Dean knew he wasn’t.

“Lemme up. It’s in the trunk.” Cas sat up and let Dean slide out from beneath him. He returned into
the light of Baby’s headlamps with his guitar, and he flushed a little in embarrassment.

“Are you going to sing for me again?” Cas asked. He sounded hopeful. He sat forward and let Dean sit almost in his lap with the guitar poised across Dean’s folded legs. Cas wrapped his arms back around the Sub, behind the guitar, finding it impossible to stop touching him, even if they couldn’t consummate the desire.

“I’m no songwriter, man, but I practiced this a little bit. It’s kinda cheesy, I guess. Just…don’t laugh at me, okay?” Dean shrugged the strap into place, and he strummed once, setting his fingers, checking the tuning. He adjusted it a bit. He strummed again, played a couple of chords, and decided it was close enough. The crickets had gone quiet. Jeez, no pressure, right? Even the bullfrogs seemed to be listening.

Cas put his chin on Dean’s shoulder. He found himself smitten all over again at the contradictions this man showed him, the complexity, and the realness, and the honesty, and the vulnerability, and the strength, and the beauty.

“Play for me, Dean,” he whispered. “I won’t laugh.”

Dean put his fingers to work, and he played “More Than Words” softly, singing only for Castiel. Cas knew what he meant. The bullfrogs and the crickets could go fuck themselves if they didn’t like it. It wasn’t for them anyway. He played the song as a gift, as a request, as a hope for where he wanted them to go from here. He played it straight through, and then, as he strummed the last chords, he finished with a quiet, “Happy birthday, Cas.”

Chapter End Notes

Please check out the graph that’s attached as a related work. If you haven’t been there recently, our lovely Melodina updated it with a new chapter to include Michael and a few others.

One quick note: Bobby seems to have gone sideways on me. I never meant for him to be a villain, but I just wanna smack him upside the head right now. His intentions are good. I swear they are, and I need to think that matters.
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

There's a loss and a double-gain, and a shake-up that might change everything. And Gabriel.

Chapter Notes

It's been too long, and too many interruptions. I need to do some clean-up of older chapters where the inconsistencies are breaking the story. Sorry, there's no smut or spanking in this chapter.

I want to get another out soon, real life keeps shoving its way into my writing time. I'll try.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 60 – Saturday, July 1, 2017

NOW:

John died quietly in the wee hours of Saturday morning, as if closure with his boys had been his only remaining tether, and Dean’s simple permission had cut his last string. Castiel traded his two Saturday morning airline tickets for a single one-day hop on Tuesday. The pack spent the early hours of Saturday in virtual silence in the game room. Dean sat on the floor between his two Tops. Each
pressed a leg in close, and Dean sank back into the strength, but he said nothing for hours. Hands brushed lightly through his hair every now and then. Sam and Jess arrived washed and dressed at 3:00 am, ready to drive out to Topeka to begin the miserable process of signing documents and closing up loose ends, but one look at Dean, and they quietly sank down into one of the large chairs, tangling their bodies together and letting the silence continue undisturbed.

Fred brought water in a chilled pitcher along with a carafe of hot black coffee. In times like this, the butler never allowed anyone besides himself to take care of his pack. He spoke softly with Michael, but their voices didn’t rise high enough to be heard by the others. Fred nodded solidly and disappeared again. April left her mate’s side long enough to serve each Top a steaming cup of coffee and to put glasses of water close enough to Jess and Dean to be reached if they wanted them. Then she folded back up and leaned into Castiel’s side and eventually settling her head in his lap. She could reach Dean’s shoulder easily from that position, so she kept a hand on him as he mourned, motionless.

They sat in solidarity and silence until the sun came up, and Dean’s phone rang again. He flinched. Michael picked the phone up from where it lay beside Dean’s thigh on the floor and took the call, meeting Castiel’s eye.

“All right. Thank you alpha. We’ll head out soon and meet you there.” Michael hung the phone up and set it on the table. “Dean? Baby, that was Bobby. They’re ready for us. He needs us to meet him at the funeral home. There aren’t many arrangements left to make, but since you’re alpha now, only you can sign the final documents.”

Dean nodded simply and looked across to Sam. It was the first motion he’d made since he sank into grief on the floor and let the pheromones of Pack descend to hold him.

Sam seemed a little more solid. “We’ll do it together Dean. You don’t have to go anywhere alone.”

“It doesn’t…” Dean’s voice cracked, and he had to start again. “It doesn’t take six people to sign off custody of Dad’s body.”

“Seven people,” said a voice from the doorway. Gabriel stood in the frame of the door as every head whipped around. Gabriel looked straight at Sam and then at Dean with compassion in his eyes. “We’re all going, guys. There’s no point in arguing.”

April sobbed out loud and rushed to embrace the Omega. “Gabe! Thank God you’re home!”

He chuckled softly and held her close. “I missed you too, sweetheart.”

Castiel pulled himself up, then hoisted Dean to his feet as well. “Let’s get showered and dressed. Come on, Dean. We’ll help you.”

Michael followed as Cas supported Dean through the doorway, touching his brother’s shoulder on the way out. They needed to settle up later. Later. Gabe wasn’t home because of John Winchester, but he couldn’t have timed it better. Michael paused, turned, and held his hand out to April in summons. She nodded at a look from Gabe, and then slipped her small hand into Michael’s and let him draw her away.

The day was half gone by the time they headed back toward home. Setting the service for Wednesday afternoon meant that Castiel wouldn’t have to miss it due to his interview with the FBI and Dean and Michael could expect to be clear enough from cycling hormones to attend without
causing a ruckus.

Dean’s emotions flashed into rage when he first saw Bobby standing on the lawn outside the small funeral home where his Dad’s remains were being prepped for cremation. He tore loose from Michael’s hold and threw himself on the older alpha in a flurry of fists and loud accusations. Bobby blocked the blows, but made no real move to defend himself, and Dean’s outrage didn’t last long. Even before Cas or Michael took hold of him again, he’d already stifled the violence, stuffing it back inside, and panting in frustration on the bright sunny lawn. Bobby pressed his lips together tightly, then he looked bravely into Dean’s eyes, and found him lost and hurting.

“C’mere, pup,” he said, holding his arms open, and Dean threw himself into Bobby’s embrace and wept. “I’m sorry, Dean. I’m so sorry.” Bobby looked up and found Sam surrounded by pack as well. They all moved in close together like a ring of magnets to make a tight, unbreakable bubble around the Winchester boys. Pack life has many benefits, but the tangible chemical sharing of support may be the most powerful of all. The danger of living in a body whose emotions are not capable of being buried for long turns inevitably to an advantage when those who love you can pour love and protection straight into your pores. For Lupins, it’s not an ineffable, intangible support – it’s real, measurable, and chemical.

Many of their Facility family met them at the manor house when they got back and held an impromptu wake. Michael got the arrangements for a massive amount of food handled without ever leaving Dean’s side, and Fred took care of everything that couldn’t be done by phone. Sam listened gratefully to the stories of his Dad that he’d never heard before from those who knew him way back when. He even smiled a little at some of the shenanigans his dad and Bobby pulled off in their youth.

Jo told Sam how important John had been to her when her own father died, and Ellen looked on with a sad smile and a firm nod. Losing her dad as a young girl had meant she feared having no one to go to but her Omega mom, and she admitted with an apologetic look at her mother that sometimes a girl needs a father to talk to. Sometimes she needs an alpha, too. Ellen didn’t take offense. She smiled and hugged her daughter. John had been there for Jo when the adolescent presented alpha, answered her questions, taught her to walk with pride and a gentle step, never seemed the least bit embarrassed by the embarrassing bits, taught her that strength doesn’t always come from proving your power, but from restraint.

Dean’s phone rang for the billionth time, and he excused himself from the small cluster he’d been reminiscing with and let himself out onto the back porch before accepting the unknown number.

“Is that you, Dean? It’s Naomi, dear.”

“Uh. Wh…”

“Look, I know you and I have never been especially close, but…Dean I heard about your father, and I wanted to tell you how very sorry I am for your loss. John Winchester was a good friend once long ago, and he was a good man. He’ll be missed.” Naomi’s voice held none of its usual cold judgment, sarcasm or feigned-innocent condescension. She just sounded like people. She sounded sincere.

“You knew my dad?” Dean leaned sideways against the square-block stone pillar supporting the roof and blinked in indecision. Should he just hang up? Why on earth would Naomi Novak be calling him? Why not call Sam?

“We grew up together. I thought you knew that. Lawrence isn’t a very big town, son. Everyone knows everyone in a town like that…or, well, at least that’s how it used to be. Your dad was one of the good guys, I hope you know.”
“Um, yeah. Yeah, I know. Look, uh, thanks, I guess. I need to get back.”

“You know,” she continued wistfully. “Things could have gone much differently for me back then – for me and John both. We dated for a while. I guess you didn’t know that either. He was a gentleman and a sweetheart, and I really thought, well… But then Mary Campbell transferred in, and they Triggered right there at school, and your dad never even glanced at another girl after that day. It happens that way sometimes.”

“I gotta go, um, Naomi. I, uh, thanks for calling. I need to…” Dean hung up with numb fingers and pressed his head back against the stones, closing his eyes to stop the world from spinning so badly.

It didn’t matter. It really didn’t. Dean collected himself, tucked his phone back in his pocket, sent a prayer of gratitude up into the Universe that his mother’s family moved to Kansas just when they did, and pushed off the pillar to find a beer.

She had conducted an entire conversation with him without once putting him down, even obliquely, short though the phone call had been. It left a sickness stirring in Dean’s belly. His instinct, given the circumstances, was to believe that she’d been genuine, and his instinct was nearly always right, but he didn’t want to consider her one way or another. Naomi Novak had no right to a piece of today. Today was for family, and she’d shredded her ticket to this show years ago.

But why would she have called Dean and not Sam? She’d always liked Sam. Of course, there was the point that Sam wasn’t fucking and/or engaged to her youngest son. There was that. Dean put her out of his mind. Whatever she was doing mattered not at all, not to Dean.

It was a hard, but a meaningful day. Dean slipped out without speaking to anyone, finding solace in sanding the plains of the long flat surface that he’d chosen to shape into a new table for his pack. He watched his hands become his father’s hands as he worked the sander. He heard his father’s rich deep voice guide his movements. He let the image of the table he meant to build take shape in his mind, and he wondered if his father would approve.

It was found wood from a place where harvesting live lumber wasn’t permitted. What was almost a lost and worthless piece of fallen lumber had once grown strong and tall, overtopping smaller trees, owning the canopy outright, shading the smaller brush, taking the brunt of the storms that passed over, and providing shelter for countless fauna over countless years. It was wide and tortured, with strange markings interspersed between the tight looping rings. The slab that Dean sanded was hundreds of years in the making, wide enough to serve all of them from a single massive slice. It had a history that no one outside the secret world of the interconnections between all living things would ever know. Dean felt he knew this tree from the dark untouchable part of himself where his wolf lived, where his spirit flowed, where his father would always be, sure and strong and alpha, where his mother was ready to welcome her love home. He could almost touch it through this old gray slab.

Dean worked his sander with the grain of the gray wood. The craftsman had cut it lengthwise rather than in cross-section, along the tall axis so that the rings made long graceful parabolas from one end to the other, a connection between the head and the foot of the table it was meant to become. He tried to picture the enormity of the tree this piece must have come from, and he couldn’t wrap his head around it. It was a redwood relic – part of the great Muir Woods of California and selected from among images on a website that catered to wood-workers, craftsmen, carpenters, and artisans. Dean spotted it and put a bid in within fifteen seconds. He knew quality when he saw it, and he felt an immediate kinship with this piece from the first picture.

As he worked his hands over it, every touch confirmed his first impression. This table deserved to be
cared for, crafted, and loved. He intended to preserve the odd curvature along its edge, and he intended to use a carefully layered coating of oils and natural lacquers to turn the weathered gray back into a rich amber that glowed in the morning light. It held the promise of home if he promised to care for it, just as Dean’s Impala did. This table was going to withstand at least the next hundred years of Pack focus. Pups would do homework here. Dean would feed his family here. April would kneel beneath it every morning – taking in strength and certainty like a part of her breakfast, Cas would take ownership of Dean here in countless ways, and each of them life-affirming. Michael would waddle up to sit at this table and struggle to keep his meal down through months of morning sickness. April would do the same. Mornings like this morning, as the Pack came together in grief and solidarity – Dean knew there would be more occasions for that – those times belonged to a table like this, not to a dim, heartless TV room. He needed to get this piece finished, and he couldn’t do it fast enough.

A beer bottle appeared in Dean’s vision, restricted as it was due to his safety-glasses. He sighed and turned the sander off. Michael didn’t speak as he handed Dean his drink. Dean shoved the glasses up onto his head and rested the sander on its butt on the table-top. “Has anyone missed me?” he asked Michael.

“Nah. They understand. Everyone’s too busy eating us out of house and home anyway.” Michael ran a hand along the smooth stretch that Dean had just finished. “It’s going to be beautiful. I had no idea you knew how to do this, Dean. You’re an artist.”

“Pssh! It’s not rocket-science, man. My dad taught me…” He cut himself off and looked up at the ceiling. Michael waited him out. At last, Dean simply said, “My dad taught me a lot.”

Michael nodded. “I talked to Bobby and Ellen. They’re going to be collecting pictures for the service, and Jo’s agreed to put a video-composite together. Do you have a stash of pictures somewhere? Would you like me to help you go through them?”

“Yeah, I’d like that. Sam and I are gonna go through the house tomorrow and see what has potential. I want you there, if you’re willing.” Dean was still facing the ceiling, his beer-bottle gave up a drop of moisture which landed with a plink on his boot.

“I’d be honored, alpha,” Michael responded, uncharacteristically Omega, and Dean closed his eyes.

“I wasn’t ready, Michael.”

“No one’s ever ready, Dean.”

“He told us we couldn’t come back to see him later, and I thought he just meant he didn’t want us to, but now…I think he was saying there wouldn’t BE a later. I think he knew.”

“Yeah. Maybe so.”

“Michael, I know you’re trying to be Omega right now cause that’s what we said we needed from you, and you’re doing so good. Baby, you’re doing so good for me. But do you think it would be all right if we just switch for a little while?” Dean put his drink on the concrete floor. “Would you hold onto me for a bit? Just a little while?”

“Anything, Dean.”

The switch happened effortlessly for them both, and Michael’s wolf surrounded Dean both inside where no one else was welcome and outside where the Dom’s arms wrapped around his mate. Outwardly, it was just a simple embrace, but inside Michael stood vigil with a sheltering canopy held
over Dean’s weaknesses, and he let Dean crumble beneath it. It wouldn’t be forever, but Michael’s wolf was on guard for the moment, and Dean was safe to fall apart while the strength of his Dom watched out for him.

Inside the house, Sam sank into the crowd. His grief no less powerful than Dean’s, but his needs very different. He let them touch him and talk with him. He let them meet his eye, and accepted their support and their stories. Sam needed quantity and quality. He needed to know that his dad meant something to all of these people, and he was comforted by the repetition. People who hadn’t known each other – who hadn’t known John at the same point in the alpha’s life – they all used the same words. John was a GOOD man. He cared for the weak. He didn’t lie or cheat or steal. He never harmed anyone. Like Bobby, John threw a protective arm across anyone he saw in need, regardless of the price to himself. He rejected the Progressive line that wolves are just people and not instinctive creatures in need of a pack, and he raised his family Traditionally at a time when that was out of fashion. Sam boggled in finding out just how far reaching his kindness was – just how many people he’d touched before he fell into darkness. They’d all failed John, and that hurt worse than knowing his dad was gone. Sam couldn’t stop wondering: Why are we so blind to the opportunities to love one another while they’re still with us? Why don’t we see it for what it is until there’s a funeral to attend?

Jess never left Sam’s side. She had stories of her own about John. She’d known that Sam’s father never felt she was mate-material for his son, but she’d watched him stifle the words, and he’d always had a kind word for her – when he was sober that is. When he was drunk, sometimes his tongue sharpened into a weapon, but Jess had always respected the deliberate way he suppressed his mean side when his faculties were sharp, choosing kindness on purpose and going against a hurtful base-setting in an act of pure will-power. John CHOSE who he wanted to be, and he became someone he was proud to be, someone his sons could look up to. Jess suspected that the driving force behind John’s refusal to see his boys in his last year was that he’d lost the strength to suppress his natural darkness, and he feared letting either of them know who he really was at heart. He feared hurting them once he couldn’t choose who to be anymore. She didn’t talk about her suspicion with Sam. Jess felt that John had a right to vote about how he presented himself to his sons, and it wasn’t up to her to change that.

It made her quietly contemplative though. It made her wonder, who is more honorable: someone who is born naturally warm and compassionate, who spreads comfort with ease and aplomb from their very nature, or someone who is born with a dark temper and a snide vindictiveness but who fights toward the light and rejects the pain they could cause effortlessly, fighting through every interaction to be who they’d rather instead of who they are?

In Jess’ astute view, Dean and Sam were both the former. Maybe they got it from their mother, but their dark sides both turned inward only. Neither had an unkind word to say about anyone; neither hurt others on reflex; both saw people as pack first and as ‘other’ only when driven to it. She knew herself though, and that’s what had allowed her to see it in John, in Naomi, in Cas, and in Michael. Where Naomi embraced the darkness, and John and Cas rejected it, Michael seemed to be balancing on the razor’s edge of decision. She would be fascinated to watch which way he went, and if he let Dean guide him, as Cas had obviously done, Michael was going to be a beautiful soul one day.

Gabriel, of course, was an angel of justice. His moral code made even Dean’s look dubious. Gabriel meted out for each person precisely what they deserved - no more and no less. Like many Omegas who’d embraced their designation to its fullest extent, Gabriel could see right through people, and he was judge, jury, and executioner when he found real fault.

The only mystery Jess still hadn’t worked out in the pack was April. April was either naturally sweet, but young and impulsive enough to lash out when threatened, or she was a bitch at heart, suppressing
that side of herself for whatever reasons. Jess couldn’t tell directly yet. All she had to go on was that Gabe adored April. That had to mean something, but then Gabe could probably appreciate a bitch just as much as an innocent. Either way, Jess wanted to be April’s friend. Having a true bitch for a friend could be all kinds of fun as long as they didn’t let it get truly mean.

Jess shook off her wandering thoughts as the crowd petered out. Everyone stopped by where she and Sam were seated on barstools in the kitchen on their way out to express their condolences and give Sam another hug. Most of them asked him to pass their sympathy on to his brother. Dean was nowhere to be found as the afternoon waned.

The kitchen filled with late afternoon light. It was warm and comfortable. Jess mused on the wasted space…every home she’d ever known focused down into the kitchen in times of pain or crisis. All of the other rooms became nothing more than four walls and a bit of carpeting. The kitchen was always home, and Jess was comforted to know that her enormous Pack manor house was no exception.

Jess shared her observation with Sam, and he agreed with a sad smile, looking around the space. It was easily the homiest room in the house, but it wasn’t Sam’s kitchen. A part of Sam dreaded going home tonight and facing all the memories his house had to share. Sam had been born in that house, and it held ghosts – one more as of this morning. Could he stay there and share the house with ghosts? Could it still be home without Dean or his mom and dad? Without pups?

“Let’s stay here tonight,” Jess suggested, reading his mind, and he nodded, too exhausted to try to face the ghosts tonight.

Gabriel wound up in the kitchen too. He’d spent quite a bit of time holed up with Bobby and Castiel, but Gabe was needed in the kitchen, and he had thrown the alphas off after a quick debrief and a promise to report for the entirety of his payment-due in the morning. Gabriel knew how to nurture, and he knew when and where to let his Omega take its place in front. Gabe could be charming when it was called for, and he had the charm turned all the way up, but he’d also positioned himself carefully. Gabriel was surreptitiously guarding the door into the garage, which led to Dean’s workshop. No one was allowed past, although he made it seem as if he was redirecting them for other reasons. He had an eye on Sam as well, and he intervened when any of the guests seemed to be pushing too hard or hurting Sam unnecessarily. None of them realized they were being carefully shepherded away from the grieving beta. Gabe was better than that. He allowed those whom Sam needed to hear from to stay and help bolster him, but some folks just didn’t know when to shut up, and Gabe picked them out like specks in the rice. He wasn’t about to let anyone hurt his pack, and he knew it was up to him to guard them while they were vulnerable. If he left it to Michael or Cas, someone was likely to get bitten.

April watched him from her place beside Castiel. Sometimes their eyes met, and she smiled discreetly.

***************

Castiel wasn’t sure how Sam found out about the orphaned pups. Gabriel swore he hadn’t said anything, and the Claim-bond didn’t show any evasiveness. Dean and April both knew a little, but neither had heard about the young woman’s death yet. Of course, Bobby knew. As the longest day any of them could remember drew to a close, Sam confronted Cas with a drawn face in the Alpha’s study, asking him if it was true. Were there two new-born orphans in Nevada in need of a home?
Cas needed time to think, but Sam pressed, and Dean’s piercing green eyes held the Alpha to his promises to deal straight: not to play secrets and not to ‘handle’ his pack.

“Twins, Sam,” Cas admitted at length. “Their mother shouldn’t have died. We were expecting the weakest of the Omegas to succumb to dehydration and malnutrition, but he seems to be making a strong recovery. His pregnancy has stabilized, and his body is strengthening. We were all taken by surprise when the younger, healthier of the rescued Omegas took a sudden turn for the worst. The medical staff in Christian’s compound were watching closely enough to save the pups, but they lost the mother. Both of them are weak, but it appears they will live.”

“Little boys?” Sam asked. He hadn’t brought Jess in with him. He needed information first.

“Yes. Two little boys. One is in substantially better shape than the other. One was conceived in the anterior womb and one in the posterior. It’s the backdoor baby we’re watching especially closely. He’s expected to survive, but he may have some health concerns.” Cas was in doctor-mode, but he didn’t miss the raw hunger on the beta’s face. “Sam, I need you to be straight with me. Are you considering asking to adopt either of these babies?”

“I want them both, Sir. I’m not simply considering it – I’m putting in whatever passes for a bid right here and now. I want them. Can you give me any reason that Jess and I shouldn’t be their parents?”

Sam’s dispassionate tone spoke volumes. He was probably as desperate as his words sounded, but he was in complete control of his emotions. Dean had to give him credit for knowing precisely how to press Castiel’s buttons.

“They aren’t pets, Sam. We need to be cautious about making commitments on the fly. The pups are slated to go into an adoption program that Christian has vetted. He’s worked with these people for years, and they’ll see that the pups find a good home. It needs to be…” Cas stopped as Sam stood and cut him off.

“Stop. Stop right there. I know what you’re doing,” Sam accused. “You’re putting up a defense to make me fight for it. You want to see how committed I am to the idea or if I just feel sorry for them after this awful day. Dean and I just became orphans ourselves, and it doesn’t matter that we’re grown. It’s horrible to be orphaned at any age. Listen to me, Castiel. I want these two brothers. I AM their father. I need them. Jess needs them. Tell me what to say or do to make this happen. I’ll do anything.”

“It doesn’t work like this, Samuel.”

“It works however we want it to work, Castiel. The pups’ mother was rescued from an illegal breeding kennel. She never existed legally, right? There’s no record that her pups exist except in Christian’s records. From the state’s view, they’re foundlings. You haven’t answered my question: can you give me any reason we can’t have them?” Sam stayed calm and seemed rational although his words had the potential to spark the Alpha to anger if Sam wasn’t careful.

“Why isn’t Jessica here with you to make this plea?” Castiel stayed rational as well.

“I can’t risk her getting her hopes up if the answer turns out to be no. She doesn’t know about them yet.” Sam shot a look at Dean as his brother shifted.

Dean seemed troubled by the same thing that worried Cas. Today had been awful, and their emotions were in turmoil and so focused on family. Would Sam still have responded with this much force if their father hadn’t just passed? “It’s just so sudden, man,” said Dean. “How can you be sure…?”
“We want pups, guys. We talk about it all the time. We’ve already settled on adoption, and we’ve already started to follow up on some different options. I know it’s sudden, but…” Sam took a deep breath, and he looked at Cas sitting behind the desk, and then at Dean beside him on the couch. “It’s not really all that sudden. We both know we’re ready. Jess works long hours, but I don’t. I’m home enough. We’ll make it work like all parents do. Do you know of any good reason not to give us this?”

Dean looked at Cas, wide-eyed, taken completely by surprise. “The trail might be hard to fabricate. Babies don’t just fall from the sky…” It was the only reason Dean could think of despite trying to play devil’s advocate.

“Christian already has a whole host of ways to make babies fall from the sky,” Cas pointed out, speaking to Dean as if Sam weren’t there. Castiel was as taken aback by the vehement demand as Dean was. Pregnancies lasting seven months allowed parents and pack to prepare for a new arrival. Sam wanted to skip all of it and take ownership of two newborns right now, this moment – they didn’t even own a crib between them. Cas spoke to Dean with his eyes. Was he resisting simply from being taken by surprise? He couldn’t answer Sam’s question. Cas had both the authority and the resources to take custody of the pups and hand them to Jess and Sam. He was powerful enough to skip all the red-tape, and they hadn’t been entered into the adoption-services agency’s system yet. Legally, they didn’t yet exist.

“Sam, go get Jess,” Dean said without looking away from Cas. “She deserves to be part of this.”

Sam sucked in a loud quick breath, hope sparking in the energy-level coming off his body. “Really?”

Neither of the alphas answered him, but he didn’t wait. Sam was off like a shot, returning in no time pulling a bewildered mate by the hand.

“Jessica,” Cas greeted. “Have a seat. Sam tells us you and he are ready to consider parenthood. Is that true?”

“Um.” Jess shot a look at Sam who nodded at her eagerly. “I’m infertile, Alpha.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” Cas said gently. “I’m asking about parenthood, though, not fertility. Are you…?”

“Yes! I want pups, Sir. I’ve always wanted pups. Is that what you’re asking?” She sat forward on the couch, picking up on Sam’s excitement, and reading into it.

“When?” Dean asked her. He’d moved to stand behind Cas and allow her to sit next to Sam.

“When? Um, I’m ready, Dean. Sam’s ready. We, uh, we talk about it all the time. I have some connections through the P.D.’s office with Child Services. I might be able to pull some strings if I can worm my way in. Otherwise, the wait’s really long, and we don’t want to wait any longer than we have to.” She looked at Sam with a confused expression and held his hand. He was shaking. Why was he shaking?

Dean stepped forward and leaned on the desk. “What would you say if I told you you might not have to wait?”

Jess’ eyes flew open, and she put her hand over her mouth. She looked at Sam again. “Really? Is there…? Do you know something…? God! YES! Whatever, whoever… Where?” Jess babbled in the affirmative.

Dean felt Castiel grip his shoulder, but he didn’t have the emotional strength to look at him yet.
Castiel leaned in too and spoke to the couple carefully. “There are twin boys, newborns, orphaned at birth. The ACRI has custody of them for the moment. The expectation is that the boys will be put up for adoption in California under a program that we established years ago for just such cases. The pups will have a good home, and they will be watched over. They are in no danger whatsoever, although the smaller of the two is weak and may have lifelong health issues. Legally, they do not exist yet. I need both of you to understand – this is not your last chance to be parents. It is extremely sudden, but Jessica, Sam has stated his desire to adopt them both. How do you stand on the matter?”

“Are you…offering them to us, Alpha?” Jess wasn’t really breathing anymore. No plea she could come up with was going to speak louder than the bloodless pallor of her skin and the shallowness of her breath. Dean closed his eyes. Why did this hurt so much? It should be a joyful occasion. Everything about this conversation was about to bring light and family and happiness. Why did he feel like fleeing?

“I want to make one thing perfectly clear,” said Cas abruptly. “Any pups the two of you ever bring into this pack will be fully pack. They will enjoy all the support and protections this family can offer them. However, I believe you are both aware that Dean and I, and both of our mates plan to parent our pups communally. I have no intention of appearing exclusive, but that plan has not been put together with the expectation that it will encompass your pups as well, nor Gabriel’s should he have any.” Cas seemed uncomfortable. There was no easy way to say that, but Sam and Jess would have to deal with it if they were disappointed. They weren’t directly connected to Dean’s and Cas’ marriage, and that put them outside of the parental matrix.

Sam choked a little. Maybe it was an aborted laugh. “No, Sir. We get it. That’s, uh…that’s fine with us.” He squeezed his mate’s hand until her fingers turned white, but she squeezed back just as hard. She didn’t dare look at him.

Castiel nodded, and he paused, obviously running swiftly through any ramifications he hadn’t thought of yet. Everything that he thought of – traceability, pack instability, the pups’ long-term health – all of it had either already been addressed previously, or seemed trivial in the face of Sam’s and Jess’ hope.

“Dean?” he asked.

“I got nothin’, Alpha.” Dean’s eyes were locked on Sam’s. “I can’t think of a single reason not to say yes. You two understand it’s twins, right? There’s two of them. Newborns. Newborn twins.”

Jess sobbed and nodded. “Dean, please.”

Dean finally looked across at Cas. “It’s your call in the end, Alpha. My vote is yes.”

“Then I believe I have a phone call to make.” Castiel stood up. “And I believe congratulations are in order.”

“Hold on,” said Sam, harnessing the last of his control. “Are you saying there’s a chance, and once we submit an application we’re in the running, or…?”

“There’s no running, Sam. If I make the call, the pups will be turned over to my custody directly, and I will grant them to the two of you. There is no uncertainty whatsoever as long as you are both sure.” Castiel’s blue eyes sparkled with intensity.

“We’re sure,” said Jess with a shaky voice.

Castiel moved to squat down before her, and he took her hands. “This is extremely abrupt, Jess. I
reiterate that it’s not your only option. Please know that.”

“Alpha…” her voice was broken, and Cas conceded. He kissed her knuckles.

“Congratulations, my dear. You are the proud mother of twin baby boys. I suggest you discuss names with your mate.” He spoke softly, excluding Sam. He spoke only to Jessica. What was Michael going to feel when he found that he’d been beaten to the gate not by Castiel, but by Jess and Sam in the end? It was enough to make a simple bubble of laughter sneak out. Jess laughed with him, and then she was crying. Sam collected her from the Alpha and hugged her.

Sam thought his emotions had already been wrung dry today, but he was wrong. Dead wrong. He forgot his brother. He forgot his Alpha. He clung to his mate on the couch and wept fiercely. They were the first tears he’d shed all day, and they were for his dad and his boys and how they had just missed each other in passing. He wept for his mate and her years of grief and how even filling the house with family wasn’t going to erase that entirely. He wept in relief and sudden dizzying fear. Did he have any idea what he’d just agreed to? Begged for? Demanded? He and Jess clung together for some time, and when they looked up, they were alone in Castiel’s study. Sam pulled his mate to her feet and took her to bed, too exhausted to undress, too drained to do anything but collapse on the mattress and wonder for a moment how long they had before they met their sons. Their sons. John seemed like a good name. Sam drifted off before he could put the name to Jess for consideration or think of another. They would need two.

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Dean met with the hiring team early on Monday to finalize their decision. They only had the funds to hire one employee, and the candidate needed to replace Dean’s spot in the Keller testing team. That meant they were looking for an alpha-Sub. The new employee also needed to either be fully certified to teach classes, or close enough that Dean and Jo could get them there quickly, or they needed to be capable of contract-scene work, freeing someone else on that team to join the teaching staff.

The decision hadn’t been easy, but they were down to two options. Both women were alpha-Submissives. They possessed the physical capabilities of running a class alone once they were fully trained, and they both had experience with Keller testing for other organizations. One had more experience, and the other had struck a stronger initial rapport with the staff. The discussion never became impassioned, but they still struggled with deciding. They all agreed that what they really needed was both women. They needed both.

“Alpha, I swear,” said Jo in frustration. “If you don’t get this budget crunch fixed, we’re not going to make it past next session.”

“You think we’re not trying?” Dean snapped back. “It’s complicated!”

They decided to go with the woman who had all the right qualifications plus the benefit of fitting easily with the team she would need to work with over the one who had even more in abundance on paper, but seemed stiff in person.

“Keep her resume handy though, Jo,” Dean told her. “If we get the chance, and she’s still looking in another couple of months, I want to see if we can slide her in too. It’s not like we don’t need the help.”
“10-4, boss. I’ll get the offer letter from H.R. and get the offer out this afternoon. Good job, people!” Jo dismissed Dean’s meeting with an impertinent wink, and Dean stayed put. He had another meeting on the tail of this one, and right in the same room. He was surprised when Michael appeared beside him with a bottle of water and a banana.

“Uh, thanks?” Dean sat up straight and took the snack and a kiss from his mate. “Aren’t you supposed to be in class?”

“It’s break,” Michael explained. “And Castiel sent me here. His idea, the banana. I would’ve brought you some beef jerky if it had been up to me. Can’t let my alpha get protein-deficient.” Michael straddled Dean’s lap. The next meeting wasn’t due to start for ten more minutes.

“You’re saying his name more often now. That’s good. That’s progress.” Dean put the bottle and the banana on the table and proceeded to forget about them. He had Omega hips that his hands were much more attracted to holding.

“I’m getting there, Dean. Sometimes I think I can see where it’s all heading, and it doesn’t seem so bad, and sometimes it feels like where they’re trying to take me is one of the rings of hell,” Michael told him.

“An outer ring, I hope, at least.” Dean kneaded the hips beneath his fingers. There really wasn’t much give. Michael was slender without much fat to speak of. The Omega leaned in and took a little bit of Dean’s throat between his teeth for just a minute, reddening the skin.

“How are you doing today, Dean?” he asked without moving away. He kissed the sore spot to soothe it a little before shifting to the side and nipping another spot.

“I’m as good as can be expected. It’ll take time. I’m not in any danger of dropping suddenly I guess, so that’s good. Jesus, baby, that feels good. Could you maybe just move that shit on south a ways for me?” Dean pushed his chair back from the table further in case Michael wanted to take him up on it.

“Don’t ask me when you know I can’t say yes.” It was the gentlest no Michael had ever given him – courtesy of the state of grief Dean was in no doubt. But it was still a no.

“Baby…” Dean was ready to beg. “I’m gonna die. I can’t do this.”

“You did something like three months of chastity in Dallas, didn’t you? You can do this.” Michael didn’t let up with his lips and his teeth. And his tongue.

“It was six weeks, man, and I still had my right hand and my trusty purple ribbed stiffy. Plus, they were giving me pops every other day for something or other. My backside was as purple as my vibrator. I never had to go two weeks of nothing at all. I’m telling you, it’s gonna kill me. At least swat my ass a few times. Come on, Michael!” Dean had his head over the back of the chair, exposing his entire throat and grinding his hips into nothing. Michael wasn’t sitting close enough for any contact there.

Michael kept nibbling, but he let go to utter one point at a time: “Abandoned in the middle of nowhere. Alone. In the dark. Far from anyone. Probably in the cold. Thinking you’re pissed at me. Pregnant. Is that what you had planned?”

“Fuck, Michael.”

“You’re being punished, Dean. It needs to hurt or it’s not going to be meaningful.”

“You know I’m sorry about that. I already paid for that.” Dean couldn’t bring himself to make
Michael stop nipping at him. His throat was a mess of pink and purple, bright spots scattered here and there.

“Mm-hm, but you haven’t let it go yet, and what else are you in trouble for? What else are you holding onto?” Michael shoved his own hips back a little and ducked further down to work his teeth into the divot of soft flesh at the base of Dean’s throat.

“For taking you for granted,” Dean admitted gruffly, hoping that if he kept talking, Michael would keep nibbling. “For bowling over your feelings and assuming your bond with me would make everything all right. For saying I was sorry when I wasn’t. For using you to hurt Cas. For trying to destroy my relationship with him just to see how much he loves me. For getting Charlie and Becky in trouble. Uh, should I keep going?”

“Mm-hm. Tell me everything. What else are you still carrying?” Michael bit down hard, and Dean flinched and grimaced.

“For breaking chastity with Castiel,” Dean continued. He needed more contact, and the nipping was beginning to make him crazy. The door opened, and Benny walked in with Billie and Donna. “For trying to cheat you on your lines by skipping words.” Dean ignored them, and the three stopped near the door in surprise. “For lying to you about why I want pups right now. For borrowing your underwear without asking.”

“What!??” Michael sat up straight, his hands braced on Dean’s shoulders. “When did you do that!?”

“Couple of weeks ago. All mine were dirty,” Dean confessed, hoping it would spark Michael to act.

“Did you return them?” asked Michael, hoping the answer was no.

“Oh, I couldn’t remember which pair was yours. We wear the same brand. Are you mad?” Dean’s green eyes peered at him through long, hopeful lashes.

“Keep them, Dean. Consider them a mating present.” Michael climbed off Dean’s lap. “I need to get back. We’re doing more presentation poses this afternoon. Yippee.” He nodded at the three committee members as they moved in to claim chairs.

“Oh, come on! Seriously? You can’t leave me like this!” Dean protested.

“You have a meeting, and I have class,” Michael reminded him. “Eat your snack, and think about why you’re in chastity, Dean. I love you. I’ll see you this afternoon. Swing by and pick me up.”

“You’re supposed to coddle me, man! I’m in mourning.” Dean snapped as Michael pushed through the door, but he was really only annoyed with himself. Michael was right, and the reminder helped him regroup a bit. He’d done a week in chastity just after they Mated but back then he wasn’t also on a black-out from spankings and he hadn’t been ramping up toward his Rut.

This time, he was torn up emotionally over the death of his father, he had no recourse to relieve the pressure of building back-log in a pair of testes that were much more accustomed to a very different flow pattern, and he wasn’t going to find release in a powerfully swollen backside. What’s more, Dean could feel the itch of impending Rut making him short-tempered. It was a perfect storm of epic proportions to turn Dean into a major-league pain-in-the-ass to those around him. Castiel’s stern blue-eyed gaze floated at the back of Dean’s mind, reminding him that right now was the perfect opportunity to give his alpha a real challenge to overcome; a chance to learn how to hold its ground when the chips were down. ‘Fight for it, Winchester’, the Alpha had told him. ‘Use it, and own it!’

Everyone was looking at him, waiting for him to pull it together. Between the four of them, they had
to come up with some ideas, and they had to do it now. Dean shook his head out like a street-mutt, and rolled his chair up to the table.

Billie pursed her lips and raised her brows at him.

“Yeah, I’m good. Let’s figure this shit out. I’m sick of worrying about it all the damn time. What’ve we got. Let’s start with assets and liabilities. Where are we right now? What’s coming in, and where do we fall short?”

They talked over the current budget shortfalls and the projected timeline of when income could be expected to catch up. The lag was going to be uncomfortably long, and no matter how they spread the numbers around, they couldn’t find a blanket long enough to cover the gap.

“Adding more Cons will help, Dean,” Donna declared, “But the timeline is still off. It takes a long time to get them set up. It’s a full year and a half between making a proposal to set up a new one and when we bring in the revenue from it. There needs to be a way to make fast cash. We need a stop-gap right now.”

“I don’t understand how we got into this mess in the first place,” decried Benny with a frustrated slap on the table. “We had it all penciled in, and yeah, we knew it was going to be contingent upon hitting projections on-time, but I thought we did that. Where did the money go?”

Billie looked at Donna who looked at Dean. Billie glanced across at Dean as well. “You wanna tell him?” she asked the alpha-Sub. Dean sighed and ran a hand over the back of his neck.

“Ben, we have to take Castiel’s check-book away. He’s a great visionary, and he’s an outstanding leader, but he is possibly the worst businessman on the planet. He green-lights the stupidest things without running it by anyone. He writes blank checks for every sob story with a weepy eye and a trembling chin. He’s not supposed to be doing anything substantial without Leadership Team approval, but he does all kinds of little, penny-ante shit all the time, and we don’t know about it until the budget reports come out.”

“You’re joking. That’s been Cas? I thought it was justifiable over-runs. I’ve read those reports, Dean. It doesn’t read like one guy with a hole in his pocket.” Benny seemed massively confused.

“I’ve railed on him about it for years now, but he never learns. The thing is, he’s nominal head of every department, so when he pays for something asinine, it gets ascribed to the department that Cas bought it for, not to Castiel himself. He’s listed as approver, but if you trace all the way back, he’s purchaser too on most of that shit. There’s no oversight, and there’s no check on the power. He can’t spend more than $20,000 without Team approval, but one man with a credit card can do a lot of damage and still stay under that limit.” Dean’s face was apologetic. He felt responsible. He should’ve pointed this out to Benny and Bobby long ago, but he had never wanted to throw Cas under the bus like that. If the Team or the investors thought it was dire enough, Cas could be removed from his Directorship for malfeasance – if they thought he should have known better, and he definitely should have.

“Rich boy?” Benny prompted, and Dean nodded, looking at Benny through his lashes. Castiel had fallen victim to the classic weakness of an heir whose wealth never needed to be counted. Money meant nothing to Castiel. Try as he might, he couldn’t grasp the finite aspect of income in a business setting when it flowed without end through his personal life.

Everyone took a few minutes in silence to think. They couldn’t afford to lose Cas, but to Benny, it was verging on a last straw. The Alpha had too much power, and he’d been wielding it badly in too many directions lately. Benny had seen the report instigated by Dr. Mosely on signs of potential
domestic abuse. He’d seen the pictures of Dean’s bruising. Tying that to what Cas confessed to concerning the explosion in Oklahoma and what the Keller institute accused Castiel of during Michael’s evaluation, Benny knew he needed to act. Their visions could so easily unwind on them. They were close to losing everything.

“Can you fix this, Dean? Can you talk to him privately?” Billie asked.

Dean pulled a face, and he took a moment before answering. “Guys, I’ve tried. He doesn’t get it. He’s the most brilliant man I know, and he can’t figure out how income has to be greater than outflow to make this place solvent. I don’t know what to say.”

“Okay,” said Donna. “Here’s what we do: we fix the gap, and we reconfigure the command structure so that it can’t happen again. I for one, want to keep my job. We’re doing important work, and I don’t want to see this place sink under due to mismanagement – not on my watch. Alpha?” she prompted Benny, and he startled out of his stupor. “You need to sit down, just the four of you with no one else in the room and hash this out. Be straight with him. Take the keys away. I mean it. There’s no reason he can’t direct The Facility from above it all. Every purchase needs to go through me – every last one, aside from daily consumables – and you need to remove Alpha’s name from the Approvers list. He doesn’t get a say anymore. You four do whatever you need to do with your command structure to make that happen. It sounds like the man’s ripe for a Come-to-Jesus meeting.”

“And the gap?” asked Billie, leaning in and taking every word from the Omega like sweet gospel.

Donna bit her lip. “I was holding this one in reserve because it’s way out there, and I was hoping we could come up with something else.”

Dean and Benny both sat up too. Donna had their full attention.

“Jonathon Miles called me yesterday.”

“From Keller?” asked Dean, frowning.

“Mm-hm. Carol’s out on her ass. They fired her, but not before requesting resignations from the whole fucking board. Everybody’s out, everybody who was in a seat of power. Jonathon said they’re keeping it hush-hush for a day or two while they figure shit out, but the damage is done.”

“Who demanded resignations?” Billie asked, kicking herself that she didn’t already know this. It was her job to protect Castiel, and she’d missed a major shake-up in the industry.

“The Foundation Board over there is separate from the Board of Operations. Guy named Crowley chairs the Foundation, and he’s axing Operations with a chain-saw. I think there may be one or two folks left, but it’s pretty much a total massacre.”

“I know Crowley,” mused Benny. “Wow, that’s going to be…there’s no way to know where this is going. The whole industry could change. What did Jonathon want with you? Is he looking for a new job?”

“Uh, no. Miles has been promoted to the new Board of Operations and put in charge of their flagship facility in Dayton. He had a crazy idea he wanted to float to me. Full disclosure…you should know that I know Jonathon from way back. We actually dated once after college. We’re still friends. He’s a good guy.”

“What was the pitch?” Dean asked.

“He thinks ACRI and Keller should merge.”
Silence followed the pronouncement. No one knew what to say.

“And before you lambaste me for not bringing this right to you guys, let me say that it wasn’t that kind of a proposal. He’s a friend, and he’s kind of in a whirlwind right now, and he needed someone to vent to, to try to get his head wrapped around it all. This is insider information kind of stuff. I’m no lawyer, but I think we aren’t supposed to know anything yet.”

“Insider trading only applies to publicly traded institutions. You haven’t done anything wrong, Donna,” Benny assured her. “So what are we talking about – a merger or a buy-out? We aren’t in so much trouble that we’re in danger of being taken over, and I’ll tell you one thing: I’m not ever going to answer to Crowley – not in this lifetime. How does this solve our insolvency problem?”

“It goes like this,” said Donna. “We still have the institutional and the capital cash to make grand sweeping moves if we want. You’re right, we’re actually in good shape as a company. What we’re short on is operational cash – the day-to-day spending money to keep doing what we want to do. If worse comes to worst, we can cut back on classes and take in fewer clients until the fees catch up with expenditures – and they will eventually. We’re only short because putting services together takes up-front investment, and SOMEONE keeps letting our operational cash flow down the drain before we pay our bills. That means we’re short at the end of each month and have to hold our breath until the next round of fees comes in. It’s temporary. What we need right now is a loan, but our Board has restricted us to pay for operations as we go. They won’t approve taking out loans for things like this. It’s tough-love, but they’ve made their views very clear: if we can’t buy it outright, we can’t buy it...only our Facility Director doesn’t read the daily reports.”

She paused and took a breath. “If we join forces with Keller, all of that changes. They could – and probably would – cut us an immediate interim check. We use it to tide us over, and then put it right back in the kitty once we catch up.”

Benny was shaking his head. “And what’s in it for Keller? Does Crowley know about this?”

Donna continued. “Jonathon didn’t tell me much, but I get the sense they’re grasping for anything that will save their reputation. This Michael thing is just the latest in a string of very public fuck-ups, and the world is watching. Reputation is what we bring to the table. If we look at the changes over there, and we feel like the new set-up is something we’re willing to put our name to, that puts them back on the credible side just like that...” she snapped her fingers.

“How soon could we see the money, if everything goes like clockwork, and we do this?” asked Dean.

Billie eyed Donna and spoke up. “Mergers, acquisitions, company ownership transfers...all that takes several weeks at the very fastest. It’ll be more like months most likely, even if it all goes down without a hitch, and that never happens.”

“No, that’s true, but according to Jonathon, once there was a commitment from both sides, he thinks some degree of...what did he call it...fluid greasing of inter-institutional wheels can probably happen without all the ducks lined up formally.” Donna seemed uncomfortable all of a sudden, and Dean watched Benny snap at the dangling question. He would have done it himself if the alpha hadn’t beaten him to it.

“Donna, why did he call you? Why did he bring this to you as a win-win? Does Jonathon know that we’re in a budget bind?”

“I didn’t mean to tell him, sir. We’re friends, and it just spilled out. I was griping about my stress-load, and it just spilled out.” She was very uncomfortable. She had just realized she could lose her
“You knew you’d told private company business to a competitor, but you didn’t take it to our legal department.” Benny fixed her with a stern look. “Were you planning to report it at all?”

“Yes, sir! It only happened yesterday, and I didn’t realize at first what I’d done. It was hours later, while I was mulling it all over, trying to figure it all out that I realized I’d told my good friend that I was stressed at work because I couldn’t make the numbers turn black, and it took me a while to understand that the Operational Accountant of the ACRI spilled confidential information to a Board member and Operational Director from Keller. I…waited too long, I know, but I have the draft of my report on my computer. I just needed to figure out how to put it.”

Dean bit his lip. “It doesn’t take an email, Omega. Something like this happens, we need you to pick up the phone and call legal. We can’t afford to get caught with our pants down. Jonathon may be on YOUR side, but there’s no reason to believe that Keller won’t use that information for their own gain.”

“Am I going to get fired?”

“I don’t think any of us can answer that question, Donna,” said Benny. “But it wouldn’t be justice of any kind if this leads us out of the quicksand and you take a fall for it. Hang tight, Omega. We’ll do what we can.”

Benny turned to Dean. “I want you to figure out how much of a loan we need and talk to Cas. I’ll check in with Bobby, and we’ll meet later this afternoon. I’m going to follow up with legal to see what they think of the potential damage. I expect Cas will want to talk to Jonathon off the record if he can. That door may be closed to us now, but we’ll see what the lawyers say. We still need that come-to-Jesus moment with our Facility sieve. I can’t believe you kept this to yourself, Dean. I oughta smack you right now.”

Benny shifted to speak to Billie. “You’re on damage-control. Watch the communications, and put your ear to the tracks. We need to respond to the very first rumors out of that place. That will be our point of origination for any moves we decide to make. Once the info is leaked, we can move.”

Finally, he turned to Donna. “Get that email sent, and follow it up with a call on the double. Don’t talk to Jonathon Miles if your life depends on it. Don’t text him, email him, send him a smoke signal, or answer anything he sends you. This may turn out to be our way out of the quagmire, and it may turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to us, or it may all go sidewise in the blink of an eye.”

“You remember Cas is in Oklahoma tomorrow?” Dean asked him.

“Fuck. Could their timing be any worse?” Benny slouched back in his chair. It was becoming overwhelming, and he really needed to let off some steam. Andrea was getting closer to term though, and she didn’t want him touching her right now. It had been too long. “All right. Focus, folks. Let’s take this moment-by-moment and try to keep our heads above water. Go on, get outta here. Get to work.”

It was a mad scramble for the rest of the day. Dean skipped lunch. He had another meeting to attend to finalize assignments for the newest research projects – the ones he had briefly tried unsuccessfully to use as an excuse to postpone knocking up his mate before jumping on Michael’s bandwagon and diverting it down a different track entirely. Kevin took over with a satisfied hum. He seemed thrilled.
to get the chance to put his signature on the bottom lines and take ownership of the important projects. Dean formally stepped out of every part except the upper-level oversight, and it hurt almost physically to have to let it go. Dean loved research. He loved the actual work involved: hovering in the lab, and watching the data tell a story, delving into the anomalies to understand why they were there and what they meant, figuring out how to draw a conclusion from raw numbers that tied it all together. Dean loved it almost as much as he loved teaching, but there wasn’t enough time in the day anymore to be everywhere he wanted to be, so it was with reluctant sadness that he let it go and handed it off to Kevin.

The rest of the day was spent holed up with Cas. Dean told him everything, including giving him a head’s-up that he was about to lose his spending authority. That conversation was possibly the hardest thing he’d ever had to say to the Alpha, but it had to be done. Castiel took it in, paled, blinked, and then nodded.

They spent two hours in the early afternoon with a small team of lawyers. All four owners sat together through that one. They were advised not to contact anyone from the Keller Institute, but the Leadership Team was in agreement that if a merger was on the table, then ACRI was amenable to listen to any proposals Keller wanted to float. They needed cash, and they needed it now, but none of them were going to accept any plan that put Crowley in charge. If Castiel didn’t head the newly merged joint venture, then there would be no deal, even if that meant he would end up over-seeing his own tertiary re-rate.

Donna was suspended, pending an investigation, but she wasn’t fired. It looked likely that she wouldn’t be punished further than the suspension and a document in her file, and they all felt confident it would be enough. Living on the Facility grounds as a dorm-mom complicated the suspension a little bit, but H.R. signed off on allowing her to stay with her mate under Jody’s recognizance, restricted to interacting with the boarders, but not taking any responsibility for them.

One of the lawyers pulled Castiel aside as the meeting wound to a close, and exhausted wolves trudged out. Dean pulled up beside Cas to listen in.

“Sir, have you considered the legal implications of your engagement to an employee of yours? There could be concerns that need to be addressed,” said the young lawyer whose name Cas hadn’t caught during the long meeting.

“Yes. I have. There are no concerns. He’s not an employee. He’s a co-owner. We’re getting married, and we’re doing so without changing anything about the structure of the Facility hierarchy.” Cas put an arm around Dean’s waist and pulled him in.

“With all due respect, Alpha, Dean IS an employee of yours. He reports directly and only to you. It isn’t a comfortable position to put The Facility in in terms of nepotism or conflicts of interest.” The lawyer shifted on his feet.

“You’re the lawyer,” Cas told him. “Figure it out.” He pulled Dean out the door with him, and added over his shoulder, “Oh, and I’d advise you to go back and review Chapter 27, Article 17, Statute 17-2713 of the Kansas legal code. Don’t waste my time with bullshit. I WROTE that damned law. I know what’s legal and what’s not!” Cas took Dean down the hall with a snarl, his wolf barely contained. Dean was surprised he wasn’t mumbling under his breath about upstart whipper-snapper lawyers and their ambitions, blah, blah, blah.

Had this been normal conditions, Castiel would have taken the Sub straight to his suite and ravaged his body until they were both spent and panting, but he couldn’t do that. Cas clenched his empty fist and held Dean tightly around the waist, and Dean waited him out, fighting for his alpha’s right to stay present in the face of his Dominant’s fury.
“I did this to us?” Cas asked him at last, pulling to a stop in the hallway. Employees flowed around him without pause.

“Did what, C.J.? To our budget, or to you and me?”

“Did I cause all this mayhem, Dean?”

“You already know the answer to that. You’re only asking me because you need to hear it out loud. Babe, everyone else has someone or other watching over their work, catching their mistakes, keeping all of our feet on the ground. You don’t have any oversight. I, uh, I think we screwed up on that. Let’s fix it.” Dean tried to be careful, but it was all true. Even the Board and the Investors had never tried to put a governor on Castiel.

“How do we do that?”

“Hand over the damn checkbook, for one. You suck at budgeting, and you make terrible purchasing decisions. Did you really write Henrickson a blank check to cut me loose from Dallas? Dude, he WORKS for you! Open your work up to the whole Leadership Team to review, like maybe quarterly or so. It’s not a revocation of authority, babe, it’s protection for all of us. No one man should have that much power, especially not one who can’t say no. Put it in the hands of the committees and the Board, and when they challenge you, fucking listen to them!” Castiel looked sheepish, but Dean wasn’t through.

“Look, if we’re doing this merger thing, and I think we should fucking go for it, we need to stop acting like a small-fry family-owned start-up that works outta someone’s garage. We’re still learning this stuff, and we’ve grown faster than we could keep up with, but we need to grow up. A few things will never change. One of those is that we need you at the helm. You’re the visionary, man. You point the way, okay? – and then get the fuck out of the way, and let the team take us all there. You can’t do everything, and nobody is good at everything. Let people do what they’re best at doing, and stick to what you do well.”

“Why hasn’t anyone said anything to me before now, Dean?”

Dean scoffed and herded Cas into Dean’s office. “Well, for one: I have. You just didn’t have your ears on, and for two…What’s your rating going to be once the Keller folks fix the chart? 23? 25? Are you a 30? Why hasn’t anyone stopped you from doing shit you don’t know how to do? Because your wolf scares the shit out of everyone, man. Imagine if Mussolini had been a tertiary 25, or Mao Tse Tung, or Hitler, or even George Washington? You put that much power into the hands of anyone who’s not incredibly careful and moral and just and righteous Cas, you’re gonna have chaos. You’ve handled it better than anyone else would’ve, and that’s no lie. You took this incredible power and you could have been anything in the whole fucking world. You could have taken over if you wanted to and wreaked absolute havoc, but you chose to help people. You chose to use it to advance knowledge and equity. You turned all that power to making life easier for the most vulnerable people in this country. THAT’s what you did, and that’s why people are so slow to stop you when you make a wrong turn every now and then. The mistakes we can live with. What we can’t do is keep doing THIS without you. Don’t beat yourself up, Alpha. This is no different than any other mistake you’ve made in the past. You fix what you can, you learn from it, and you do better next time. Right?”

Dean pressed himself close to Castiel, and he nuzzled his fiancé’s throat. Cas fingered his Claim mark through Dean’s pressed white dress-shirt, and he nodded, whispering, “We need you just as much as you all need me, Dean. You know that right?” He pulled back and his voice strengthened. “Look, I’m ambivalent about the idea of a merger, but I trust your instincts. If you think we should go for it, then you’ve got my vote. Benny will follow you too.”
“Yeah, Benny thinks I’m magical for some dumb reason.” Dean chuckled and pulled away. “I need to go get Michael. He should be finishing up his class. Let’s go home. Let the lawyers pull an all-nighter. Let’s go get Sam and Jess packed and look at pictures of our nephews. That sound like a plan?”

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“Do you ever think about dating again, Gabriel?” April asked him over lunch. Gabriel chuckled into his sandwich, but he winced when his laughter sent painful spikes shooting down his legs. He stood next to her at the bar, avoiding the tall wooden barstools. Castiel, as usual, hadn’t minced words.

“Why? Do you know a likely candidate who would be willing to put up with me?” He side-eyed her and took another drink.

“Maybe. I ran into an old flame of yours on the street the other day. She seemed like just your type, and she asked about you.”

Gabe smirked. “And how is Kali doing these days? She’s still working in the city?”

“How did you know…?”

Gabe’s face fell flat, all amusement gone. “Kiddo, I can count ‘Old Flames’ on one hand and still have fingers left over. There’s only one chick you might ever run into who might EVER ask about me. Dating isn’t really my thing exactly. I take what I need from the business transactions my brother contracts for me, and no one has to get hurt. That girl? Kali? She was a spur-of-the-moment mistake. That kind of life is not for me. I learned that the hard way a long time ago. I, uh…thanks for trying though. I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Love you guys!
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

Preparations are under-way: for a funeral, for a home-coming, for an FBI interview that has the potential to get dicey. There's introspection and confrontation, and a bit of both our Subs stretching their wings and trying something new.

Chapter Notes

Happy All Saints' Eve! I'm hoping for a few more Trick-or-Treaters this year than last. Last year we had none in our new house in our new neighborhood. It's sad.

This chapter is a continuation of the last. It's both dense and rambling - just like I like it. It's hard to move everyone forward at once, but I figure life works that way sometimes. We don't always take turns. And even with everything that's said outright, there's so much going on behind the scenes. Everything's in motion, but they're finally a Pack now, and they can handle it.

Trust me.

See the note at the end if you want a head's-up on my musical inspiration.

Chapter 61 – Monday, July 3, 2017

NOW:

“They’re already planning a baby shower, Sam. Charlie’s on it. Hold off on shopping until you know what her minions come up with.” Dean pulled a box off the top shelf of the closet that used to be his, but before that belonged to his parents. He handed it to his brother, and then went back for another.

Sam carried the box into the bedroom and set it on the bed. “I have no idea what we need. My head’s spinning. We need to get two cribs I guess, and some clothes, diapers, car-seats, what else? The Nursery was my bedroom up until a couple of months ago. I’m still storing sex toys and porn in there. We’re not ready for this.” Sam opened the box and began to dig randomly through the box full of loose photos piled in shifting layers.

“What do I know about newborns?” Dean protested. “Maybe you should ask someone who’s actually had pups of their own at some point.” Dean set his box beside Sam’s and pulled the flaps back. “I know one thing: I don’t think you’re going to find them digging through boxes and teething
on anal beads any time soon. Chill out. There’s time to get ready.” Michael dug through the box from the opposite side, handling a number of photos at once and spreading them out on the bedspread.

Sam didn’t respond. He’d pulled out a small pile of pictures, but he held one photo in his shaky hand, and his face revealed the struggle to hold back tears. He’d already cried enough. It was enough, and it was too much, and he refused to let the grief pull him over the edge again. “Yeah,” he said at last, setting the photo in the pile meant to be used in Wednesday’s service – John Winchester’s Marine portrait. “I suppose so.”

“Hey,” said Dean, reaching across and laying a hand on Sam’s arm. “We’ll figure it all out. Don’t think for a minute that you’re in this alone. We’re Pack – remember?”

“Yeah.” Sam shook his head out a little. “No, I know. Thanks, Dean.” He needed a break, just a quick break, and he dropped the remaining photos back into the box. He slipped out into the hallway without excusing himself, finding himself on the back porch and trying to get a grip. The pictures weren’t going to sort themselves. His dad deserved a warm, a dignified, a thoughtful memorial. He deserved to have some intention put into his farewell, and he deserved to have his sons keep it together long enough to make that happen.

But Sam’s head really was spinning. It shifted from delighted excitement to paralyzing terror to bone-deep ache in rapid circles, and he didn’t know which way was up. Sam scrubbed both hands over his face and heard the back door open.

“Are you all right?” Jess asked him.

“I’m just getting some air. I’m fine,” he lied.

She let him.

“Dinner will be ready in about 30 minutes. Do you need anything?” She stepped out onto the porch and up close to him, but she didn’t touch. Sam could be prickly when he was upset. He liked to pull people close and surround himself, but he also liked his space. He liked to be the one to initiate contact.

He took the little half-step forward and wrapped around his mate. “Just you, Jess. I need you.” He held her firmly and thanked her quietly for watching out for him, for putting a full Pack meal together on no notice and for saying yes to bringing home their boys.

She couldn’t stifle a laugh at the last one. “You don’t need to thank me, Sam. It’s my dream come true. You know that. And you’re going to be the most wonderful father. You tamed me with a snap of your fingers, right? – gave me just what I needed – and you’re going to be just what they need too. You wait and see. I know you’re scared – me too – but we can handle this.”

They talked softly for a few minutes alone, then Jess tugged him through the door and put him back to work with a touch to his shoulder. She returned to the kitchen, a little worried that her sauce might be ruined but found Castiel had picked up where she left off. He looked up from his taste-test and smiled warmly at her.

“It’s very good. Old family recipe?”

“Not really,” she confessed. “More like just something I created once when I was running short on groceries and had to get inventive or else put on pants and go shopping.”

“Mm,” he agreed. “Sometimes putting pants on is worth avoiding by any means.” Cas handed her
stirring spoon back to her and took over the vegetable slicing.

“Alpha, I apologize for missing your birthday. I have a gift for you in the other room. It’s not much, but I know you like wine. I thought… well, it’s not much.” She petered off with her back to him, but Castiel perked up like a pup.

“In the other room? Can I go see?”

Jess laughed at him. Playful was a side to Castiel that he showed no one but family – Jess was sure of it – and it made her feel warm and loved, accepted. “I’ll go get it.” She was back in no time with a tall gift-bag containing an expensive bottle of Merlot.

“This is wonderful, Jess. Thank you!” he enthused, inspecting it carefully. “Would you share it with me this evening? Can we serve it tonight?”

“Whatever you want, Alpha. Here, I’ll open it for you.” She reached for it, and he handed it over with a kiss to her cheek, making her blush.

“What else did you get for your birthday?” she asked him. “If I’d known you would be that excited over your gift, I would have wrapped up several of them for you, just to watch you open them.”

It was Castiel’s turn to blush, but he wasn’t offended. He chuckled softly. “Dean gave me a ring, and a song, and a promise.” He held his hand out to let her examine the ring. “Michael gave me a rare book. I can’t get any work done at home now because I can’t stop picking it up and flipping through it.”

“And April? Did you get something from your mate?” Jess added a bit more salt after tasting the sauce, and then she took the tray of vegetables from Cas and began to season them.

“She wrote me a song, Jess.” Jess turned in surprise and looked at him. The beta couldn’t resist turning to watch his face. She wanted to know how he’d responded to hearing April sing. He seemed lost in the memory of discovering his own mate’s unique genius for the first time, and Jess smiled in simple delight. Everything was going to be right as rain because Cas was…Cas, and all of April’s fears were for nothing.

His eyes shifted from far-away to meet Jessica’s, and he caught her smiling. Slowly, he smiled back. “She wrote me a song, and she sang it to me for my birthday,” he repeated in wonder. “It was amazing. It was beautiful. She’s very talented.” He bit his lip slightly and frowned. “She’s really very talented, Jess. You have no idea.”

“Yes, I do, Alpha,” Jess bragged. “She sang one for me the other day too. It was unbelievable. That girl’s going places if you ask me.”

They were interrupted by Michael’s voice as the Omega pulled a distraught Dean into the kitchen. “Because you need to step out for a few minutes, Dean.” Cas stepped up quickly, but Michael shook his head. “Jessica, do you have a knee pillow we could borrow? My Sub needs a time-out.” She nodded and disappeared into the hallway.

“I don’t…” Dean began angrily, pulling away a bit, but Michael held him fast.

“It’s not negotiable. I’m not going to make you strip, but you’re going on your knees until you get hold of yourself. That was unacceptable, and you know it. You’re on edge, and you need a break.” Michael’s tone was sharp, and his assertiveness held Dean in place. Castiel could see that Dean wanted to struggle free and succumb to its call at the same time. What Dean wanted didn’t really matter for the moment though. Michael wasn’t going to back down.
Jess handed Michael a flat pillow from the back bedroom, and Michael tossed it beneath the table and then pointed. Castiel watched them cautiously. He wanted to step in – Michael was supposed to be avoiding his wolf – but he’d not been lying about how smoothly the mates balanced one another. Dean risked a look up at the Alpha, and didn’t try to hide his pain. He was stirred into an emotional frenzy and was very close to tears. Cas looked to Michael, who met his eye with a challenge, daring him to try to take over.

“Sir, may I ask a question?” Dean huffed quietly at his mate, barely able to get the words out.

“Of course,” answered Michael with a bit of a snippy tone.

“Are you going to let me keep trying to find it…after? I need to find it. I know it’s here somewhere.” Dean pleaded in a small but desperate voice.

“We’ll look together. I’ll help you. For now, just focus on letting it all go. Let go for me, Submissive. Relax. On your knees.” Michael pointed again, and Dean slipped beneath the table and folded himself into place with an abortive sob.

Michael took the chair in front of Dean, pulled himself forward, and touched Dean’s hair beneath the table. “Take me in your mouth, Submissive. Do not suck. Just hold me there. Breathe through your nose.”

Dean’s shaky hands worked Michael’s cock free of his blue jeans, and soon Michael felt warm wetness surround him. Dean took hold of each of Michael’s calves. Michael sat very still and tried in vain not to harden against Dean’s palate. This wasn’t about sex, and he had no intention of getting off. He kept a hand scratching through Dean’s scalp. He could hear Dean snuffling as the tears finally released over his cheeks and made wet patches down the insides of Michael’s thighs, wetting the denim of his jeans.

Castiel nodded in approval. “Dinner is in about 20 minutes, Michael. Would you make the salad for us if I bring you all the ingredients?”

“Of course, Sir,” he said. Dean would lose the hand in his hair, but Michael liked having him find equilibrium without extra assistance anyway. Cas set him up with a knife, a cutting board, and a variety of vegetables. He handed Michael a warm wet cloth to clean his hands, and then slipped it away again. No one mentioned Dean or spoke as if they even remembered he was there. The conversation went back to Cas and his birthday, to April’s talent, to the newborns and the upcoming trip to go collect them, to Castiel’s early flight out to Oklahoma and what he expected once he got there. They didn’t talk about John for the moment, even when Jo brought a small box in and set it on the table near Michael. He shot her a meaningful look, and she nodded grimly.

Jess took up responsibility to keep the conversation light, addressing Jo who was digging idly through the pictures in the box. “Castiel says April wrote him a song for his birthday, and she sang it for him.”

“Bout fucking time,” Jo retorted without looking up.

“Wait,” Cas interjected. “Did everyone but me know about her songs? Am I literally the last to know?” He seemed so affronted that no one answered at first.

“I didn’t know,” said Sam from the doorway with a glance beneath the table. “Is dinner ready?”

“We need the leaf for the table, Sam, and we need to get the table set, but I don’t think we should move it just yet.” She shot a meaningful look at Michael who hadn’t joined in the conversation. He
was turned inward to care for his grieving over-whelmed mate, letting the pheromones of the pack bathe them both in a healing cocoon.

Sam nodded and headed for the hall closet to dig out the table-leaf. “So April’s a song-writer?” Sam’s muffled voice carried into the kitchen from the back of the closet across the hall. “Is she any good?” he asked baldly, emerging again and shaking his shaggy mane back into place.

Jess looked at Jo with a smirk, but Castiel answered. “Maybe I’m biased because we’re mates, and she sang me a song that she’d written just for me; maybe it was sentimentalism, but I believe she has real talent. The song was beautiful.”

“Huh,” Sam responded with alacrity.

Jo grinned.

“Dinner’s almost ready. Should we text Gabriel to see how close they are?” Jess asked.

“They’ll be back in a few minutes. They only went out to pick up a dessert. It doesn’t take long,” Castiel decided. “Let’s get the table set and get ready to eat. We need to be heading back home before it gets late, and I believe Dean and Sam still have a bit of digging to do after dinner.” He looked meaningfully at Michael who nodded grimly and pushed his chair back enough to slide to his knees in front of his quiet Sub.

Michael tucked himself back in his jeans and zipped up, then took Dean’s face in his hands and kissed him deeply, clearing the tears away with his thumbs. He didn’t say anything to Dean, but he pulled him carefully out from beneath the table and locked them both in the bathroom for a little while. When they emerged together, Dean was somber but he had himself back in control, his face was clean, and he wasn’t occupying his wolf any longer. Whether he could be said to be alpha was another question, but he no longer looked to be on the verge of a panic attack. He and Michael each took their places at the table as Jess and Cas brought steaming dishes from the stove.

Gabriel and April bustled in just as the pack was settling in to eat, and they scurried into place — April worried they might be reprimanded for dawdling over selecting the baked cobbler, and Gabriel worried he might miss part of the meal.

Castiel sent his mate to the sink to wash up, then he squeezed her hand and winked at her when she rejoined him. “We got blackberry. I hope it tastes as good as it looks,” she said sheepishly. Cas had felt particularly close to her since Friday night, and he wanted to see if he could keep the feeling going; see if he could keep April from hiding again.

The Winchester family kitchen table, even with the extra leaf installed, was barely big enough for eight wolves, but they made it work. In truth, sharing space as tightly packed as they were helped both Dean and Sam. Cas would be gone all day tomorrow, and there was still much to do before Wednesday’s service. Sam, Dean, Jess, and Jo were all taking Tuesday and Wednesday off work, but Michael would be with his tutors, and Castiel would be out of town entirely. Dean refused to consider the idea that he might not come back on time. The FBI had nothing on him. They would never have anything on Cas. It was all locked down tighter than Fort Knox, and this interview was all part of Bobby’s design. Worrying about it was only going to make Dean crazy, so he forced it out of his mind. Cas could handle this. He’d sat before Congress and made them all look like idiots. He could handle the FBI.

“You fly out on Saturday?” Dean asked his brother.

Sam took a deep centering breath. “Yep. We’ll spend three days there, getting all the forms figured
out and letting the pups get to know us a little bit, then we’ll bring them home.” Sam took hold of Jess’ hand and held it for a minute. As owner of the house, he had the right to claim the foot of the table while the Pack Alpha ate in his home, but he’d relinquished that right easily so he could sit beside his mate unencumbered by the corner. “We’ll know by Monday if we need some medical expertise on the flight back. Cas said he’s game to come out on Monday afternoon to fly back with us if the babies seem shaky. We want to get them home, but we don’t want the flight to stress them out.”

“What are you going to need us to do to the house while you’re gone? Baby-proofing, right?” Jo suggested. “We can get furniture assembled. You want us to paint the room?”

Sam choked a little on his salad, and Jess stepped in. “We have a little time before we need to worry about baby-proofing, I think. They won’t be mobile for a while. There’s time for the rest of it too. All we need right now is formula and bottles, blankets, diapers, clothes, and a cradle big enough for both of them. Christian said they keep them close together as much as they can. They sleep side-by-side. We’ll bring them home in their car-seats, so we will get those in Nevada.”

Sam stirred his food around with his fork and repeated Dean’s advice not to rush through it all. “Don’t go to any trouble, guys. We sprang this on you all so fast. There’s time to catch up. And, no, please don’t do any painting yet. I believe that Henry’s lungs are still too weak. They shouldn’t be exposed to any unnecessary fumes. They’re not fully developed yet.”

“Henry?” April asked for all of them.

“Oh. Yeah, we picked their names out.” He turned to Jess with a small smile. “You wanna?” Sam indicated she should be the one to make the announcement with a twitch of his head. His eyes sparkled into hers. She smiled back at him.

“The older of the two, the larger one, we’re going to call John Thomas after Sam’s father and mine. The smaller is Henry Lucas. He’s named after Sam’s grandfather and the same family friend who gave Sam his middle name. I haven’t heard the full story about that yet, but it was important to Sam.”

“Yeah,” chuckled Dean. “There’s a story there, and you should keep poking at him until he tells you. Get ready for some version of that name to follow your family for the next few generations.”

Castiel asked Dean, “What’s the story?”

“Oh, no. It’s not mine to tell. If you get to keep Cousin Bolivia under your hat, I’m not talking about ‘Luke’. You get that from Sam or not at all,” he announced with finality. Sam only smirked and put another forkful of salad in his mouth smugly.

“Dean, my cousin in Bolivia doesn’t have a story,” Cas protested in frustration, setting his fork down a little harder than he intended. “He’s American. He moved to Bolivia because he Mated a Bolivian beta, and that’s where she preferred to live, but the laws concerning Omega custody demand that he either renounce his American citizenship or maintain a custodial relationship with an alpha, stateside. He didn’t want to renounce his American status, so I agreed to keep his name in our pack. There’s really nothing interesting about it. He’s not a drug-runner. He’s not an assassin. He’s not a money-launderer dodging extradition. He’s not CIA. He’s just a second cousin once-removed who needs a pack to belong to in order to stay legal.”

“Oh. Well thanks for killing that line of fantasy for me. I was hoping he’d sweep in like James Bond someday wearing a tux and have a shoot-out on the back lawn.” Dean was clearly crestfallen at the revelation, but Castiel rolled his eyes, and Michael laughed at his mate’s imagination.
“I think you chose wonderful names,” announced April, and Jo concurred.

“So what d’you figure, Winchester?” prompted Jo looking at Dean and missing the point that nearly everyone at the table could answer to that name. She’d called her closest friend ‘Winchester’ her whole life, and she wasn’t about to stop now. “Nicknames? Too soon?”

“Nope,” said Dean, smacking his lips.

“Hey, hey, hold up. You guys don’t get to pick their nicknames!” Sam tried. “We’re going to call them John and Henry.”

“John Henry?” Dean pointed out. “Pale white wolf twins called John Henry between the two of them? Little bit off the mark, don’t you think?”

“Not John Henry, Dean…John AND Henry.” Sam caught the light in the look Dean gave Jo, and his heart sank. He knew he’d lost. He closed his eyes in defeat, waiting for Uncle Dean to decide what the world was going to call his sons. It was so unfair.

“No, relax Sam. I got this. You can’t call a namesake by the exact same name.” Dean smirked as he sat back in his chair, assuming the power that being a first-time uncle gave him. “So we’re gonna call them Hank and J.T., and that’s all there is to it.”

Sam winced, and then the nicknames really landed in his ear. He opened his eyes. It wasn’t as bad as he’d expected. It wasn’t...bad...at all. He risked a glance at Jess who was staring at Dean with wide eyes and a hand on her mouth. Her bond indicated shock, but she didn’t seem repulsed. She turned slowly to look at Sam.

“Can he do that?” she asked her mate.

“What, re-name our sons?” Sam clarified, and she nodded.

Jo forked a cheesy bite from her plate. “I think he just did. Good luck stopping the nicknames, guys. I hope you like ‘em, cause I’m betting you have no power to change anything.”

Michael agreed with a hum. “Of course,” he noted, “their mother always has leeway to call them by their given names, but you’re likely to be the only one.” He smiled gamely at her, showing his teeth.

Jess looked from Michael to Sam. “You should have warned me about your family, Sam.”

“Oh, no you don’t! You knew all about Dean when we Mated,” he shot back defensively.

“I didn’t know he would abscond with our pups! He's just going to grab them and run, isn’t he? We’ll be lucky to get visitation rights!” Jess winked at Dean at the foot of the table to show she wasn’t upset, and he grinned back in victory.

“That’s right! I’ve already picked out the theme of their room at home. It’s baseball! Hey! Can’t we call him Hank Aaron instead? Sam?” he begged.

Castiel let the sound wash over him. April pressed a hand into his on his thigh, and he squeezed, closing his eyes for a minute and feeling at home and at peace, surrounded by family and right in the midst of both heart-ache and joy. His home-life had never felt this way before, but he’d yearned for it his whole life. Dean took it for granted, assuming that everyone’s family flowed like this. All of them, even Michael, could relate in a way that Castiel just hadn’t before. Families struggled sometimes, but they were supposed to be the safest and most comfortable cushion a wolf could sink into. Cas and Gabe had never felt that in their home as pups, except when they were alone together,
and that had always felt more like a survivor’s support group than a tiny pack of two.

Dean spent a good long time castigating Castiel this afternoon in Cas’ office for his inability to handle money. Dean postulated that Cas had always had such wealth that it had lost all real value to him; maybe he’d never valued it to begin with. He couldn’t fathom its worth because it had always simply been there – that’s what Dean said, and Cas was in no position to disagree. But the voices raised in mock argument around the table seemed to Castiel to be evidence that Dean suffered from the same blindness. Dean was so wealthy in love and support, in family - and he always had been - that he was blind to how rich he was. Dean took the love that his family lavished on him, and he basked in it - when he was stable, that is, so much so that he undervalued it. Cas watched his fiancé play with his sister-in-law and wondered if the awful voices were gone for good this time. How could anyone be a part of this pack and not realize how much they were loved; how lovable they were? How could Dean EVER doubt his place at this table?

Family was the milieu that Dean swam in, and it had become so omnipresent that he couldn’t perceive it; took it for granted. Maybe the trick to defeating the voices lay in making the environment Dean had all around him visible again. Cas needed to learn money-management before his poor choices drove his burgeoning company into the ground, but Dean’s path was even more vital. He needed to learn to FEEL loved when love and support were there for him to grasp at need.

Cas felt a spike of painful heat shoot through his gut, and he winced. It had become a physical sensation now, and not just a longing. It tripped him out of his reverie about Dean, and sent him into a very present awareness of an entirely different topic. April’s mouth clenched, but she didn’t look at him. He was fooling himself if he tried to imagine that she didn’t know what he was repressing.

Cas had hoped that the promise of little ones joining the family would ease the sting in his gut, the burn that never went away completely anymore, but it hadn’t. If anything, the fire burned hotter now. Before he’d Mated, Cas had been able to suppress the intense need whenever he had to. Until recently, it only became uncontrollable when he faded off to sleep and just as he woke up. He’d caught himself dreaming about tight, swollen, round bellies and his hand pressed up to feel the squirming within. He’d caught himself touching Dean below his naval as the sleepiness faded, and his dreams evaporated with morning light. He’d never confessed why he did that, but he suspected Dean was on to him now. Castiel sighed, squeezed April’s hand again, then released it to finish his meal. He was only 36. There was time, despite being twice his mate’s age. Wolves’ life-expectancy was generally longer than that of Primates unless they self-destructed due to failed coping skills. Cas had longevity going for him if he could avoid the morass of emotional baggage that dragged at so many wolves. He could wait until his mate grew up a bit and planted her feet. He could wait.

The table laughed uproariously at something Cas had missed, and he smiled into the feeling. Dean winked at him, clearly pleased with himself. The pallor of grief had fled his cheeks for a while, but his eyes were still darker than they should be. Michael’s attention had done him good. Cas reminded himself to praise the Omega for keeping Dean so well balanced through this difficult time. They were both doing well, and they were doing it together. He needed to keep his praise simple and private though. Michael’s need to show-boat and strut sat in counter-point to his introverted side that needed to avoid raising a fuss; shied from the spotlight. Cas guessed that helping Dean mourn was likely to be a part of the Omega’s duties that he wouldn’t want acknowledged publicly.

That got Cas to thinking, and he frowned to himself as he finished eating. April and Gabriel served warm cobbler, and it turned out to be worth their lengthy indecision. It was really good. Dean ate three helpings. They didn’t stay long after dinner. The Winchester brothers went back to digging up old pictures and documents that the insurance company needed. April and Castiel washed the dishes while Jess and Gabriel dried. Jo organized everything the boys brought her and kept a running list of musical selections Dean and Sam considered appropriate to highlight their dad’s life, too short as it
was. Michael carried boxes out of storage and put them back away once they’d been cleared.

Dean finally relaxed after finding the photo he wanted tucked loosely between the pages of an old family album. It was a snapshot of John balancing both boys on his hands in a seated position out to either side, one in each hand in the sunshine. The boys were little. Sam couldn’t be older than two. Dean’s young face was alight with the thrill of the height and sitting on his father’s sure strength with no hold. Sam had hold of his father’s wrist, but Dean had his hands up, proudly trusting his alpha not to drop him. Cas assumed that Mary was behind the camera. They looked happy.

Dean’s face drew tight as he looked at the picture, showing it to Cas. He teared up again, and scrubbed angrily at his eyes to stem the flow. “Go ahead and cry, Dean,” Cas told him quietly. “If it’s not appropriate here and now, I don’t know when would be better. You’re okay. We’ve got you.” Michael nodded at Castiel and put his arms around Dean from behind as he always did when Dean was hurting. Dean leaned back, but he also reached his empty hand to Cas, who moved in and held him from his front, sandwiching him.

“Heart you have everything you need?” Michael asked him, a gentle whisper in his ear.

“Almost. Let’s go home. I can come back tomorrow with April. Charlie’s bringing some equipment over for Jo to work on, and we’ll do everything from here. I need to get on the phone to the life-insurance folks. I don’t know what they need from us.” Dean stood up and took a deep breath, letting his partners both know he was ready to stand on his feet again.

Cas put a hand on his shoulder. “Let me take care of the business, Dean. It’s not complicated. Bobby has copies of everything already, and he’s got the ball rolling. I’ll take it from him. You don’t need to do it all over again. John didn’t own much, so there’s not an estate to speak of. It’s just settling the last debts and filing for his life insurance. That’s all that’s left. May I take that burden for you? Please?”

Dean nodded. “Um, yeah, thanks Cas. Did anybody put an obit out? Do we have time to get it written?”

“Sam’s already sent it in to the paper. It’ll run tomorrow morning, and the funeral service has it up on their website,” Michael told him. “Everything’s taken care of, Dean. It’s time to go home and get some rest. Alpha needs to pack and prepare for tomorrow.” Michael took his hand, caught April’s eye over on the couch with Jess, indicating she needed to slip her shoes on and say her goodbyes. He nodded seriously at Sam who was coming back down the hall with Jo and the last box of memorabilia.

“Heading out?” Sam asked.

“I need to go home too,” Jo told him. “I’ll be back tomorrow. Get some rest, Sam.” She set the box down on the table and kissed his cheek, standing high on her tip-toes. He gripped her arm, then let her go.

Dean sat cross-legged in the middle of the enormous pack bed watching Castiel pack his suitcase – a suitcase he didn’t need if he only planned to stay for the day. Dean decidedly refused to ask about it. There could only be one reason Cas thought it better to carry a toothbrush and change of clothes with him. Dean was exhausted but not sleepy. His face felt flushed, and his gut was warmer than usual.

“Tomorrow’s the Fourth of July,” he told Castiel. “Guess we’re not going to have any fireworks.”
Cas knew he wasn’t talking about incendiaries. “You’ve done so well, Dean. Just a few more days. I knew you could do it.”

“I feel like a part of me is dying, man. Everything’s on edge. I snapped Jody’s head off today over nothing, and I took a bite out of Michael when he couldn’t find a picture he’s never seen before in a house he’s never lived in. Tell me again how this is good for me.” Dean flopped back on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

Cas chuckled. “You already know the answer to that, Dean. You’re only asking because you need to hear it out loud,” he parroted Dean’s words back at him and tucked a dress shirt into the suitcase, then disappeared to find his shoes.

“Well?!“ Dean hollered at him as he disappeared into the closet.

“Well for one, it’s a punishment. I’m not going over that one with you again. But for two, it gives you a chance to stretch your alpha. Most challenges you put him to are hypotheticals, and he doesn’t really get much exercise. This one is real, and he’s got a chance to hold the reins and see what he’s capable of. Your Sub-side isn’t your ONLY side Dean.” Castiel emerged and slipped a pair of dress-shoes into the pocket on the side of his bag and zipped the pocket.

Dean dismissed the subject with a groan. He hadn’t really wanted to talk about it, but as his Rut approached, he was antsy and short-tempered. He really just wanted to grouse. He really just wanted someone to touch him. He let out a long and tension-filled breath.

“Hey, you went weird tonight at dinner. What was that about?” Dean asked Cas who was rifling through his Dopp-kit, making sure his toiletries were stocked.

“What do you mean ‘weird’?” Cas didn’t look up.

“You tell me, Cas. You vanished on us for a while.”

“I was wondering about Michael and his 19. He put you on your knees tonight, Dean, but I don’t think that was Michael’s wolf. I was thinking about letting him know that I thought he handled it well, but it struck me that it seemed to be the kind of praise he would rather hear in private if he had to hear it at all, but that doesn’t fit with who his wolf is. I think I’m learning to spot when Michael’s front-brain is engaged as a Dominant. What do you think?”

Dean chuckled. “Yeah, I’m screwed however you look at it. You know I thought the same thing when he got lost with how to respond when I broke our table. A 19 wouldn’t be lost. Michael’s wolf wouldn’t have had any problem beating my ass black and blue over that, but Michael was gob-smacked. It didn’t make sense at the time, but I get it now. I think that was just Michael in his head, not the wolf. You think it’s something we need to figure out? He needs training for both aspects, huh?”

“Probably,” agreed Cas. “His wolf needs to be tempered, and his front-brain needs direction. If the two could work together, he would be seamless.”

“Yeah, he does that sometimes too when he stops over-thinking, but what if he combines them some day in the wrong direction? Like, the wolf gets out of control, and his front brain doesn’t know how to respond? Couldn’t that be a recipe for disaster?” Dean sat back up and frowned.

“Absolutely. I believe that’s precisely what we saw when he confronted Jody. That’s why he needs training from both sides as well as learning to occupy the Omega. Michael has the capacity to hurt someone.” Cas tucked his kit into the suitcase and closed it. “On the other hand, his wolf is clearly
the weaker of the two. All his human side needs is a solid set of tools in his tool-box, and he’ll be unstoppable.”

“I’ll talk to Hannah and Joshua, make sure they’re covering all the bases. He’s a real puzzle, isn’t he?”

Cas hummed an answer and set his suitcase on the floor. He could read Dean well enough to know that there was something on his mind, so he stood facing him. Waiting.

“Am I that transparent?” Dean asked.

“You are to me. Is that a bad thing?” Castiel sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Do you know what you’re going to say in your interview tomorrow?”

Cas paused before answering. “I don’t know what they’ll ask. I’m not volunteering any information, but they’re getting the truth from me as far as I can afford to tell them. I’ll have our best two lawyers with me. It’s going to be fine.”

Dean didn’t believe him. “You’re not planning to say anything…incriminating, are you? We need you here, man. I know how you get when you feel guilty. You don’t let it go until you’ve been publicly flayed. Babe, we can’t afford that. They’ll charge you with murder or accessory, and they’ll put you in prison.”

“Dean, I’ve got this. Please trust me.”

“Don’t blow it off, Cas. I know you, too. Where’s the justice in letting yourself take the fall for those…those…look, I don’t even have words for how bad they were. They deserved what they got. THAT was justice!”

Dean scooted forward to sit next to Cas so he could keep his eyes fixed. That motion – scooting across the bed on his ass – Dean nearly winced from old conditioning. He was accustomed to that movement hurting at least a little, but there was nothing. Nothing at all.

“We’ve been over this already,” Cas said with an annoyed huff. “How would it be anything less than justice if I paid for what I did? I’m not saying I’m going to sacrifice myself, but how can you say it’s not justice? The world is full of wealthy powerful men who jump right over the rules for their own ends because they CAN. How am I any better than any of the others?”

“Are you kidding me?! Because you’re not doing anything selfish! You didn’t do this for yourself, Castiel James! You did it to protect people – real live human beings – and not just in a hypothetical way. Gordan, Peter, Maya, and Georgia – all four of them raped, drugged, kidnapped, brutalized, and fucking SOLD human beings, Cas. You don’t GET WORSE THAN THAT!! You DON’T deserve any more punishment over this. Don’t you fucking DARE! I already punished you, and you’re DONE!”

Cas laughed a humorless laugh. “I’m not sure that extremely kinky sex would count on the Federal register as suitable punishment, Dean.”

Dean froze. “Is that all it was to you? Kinky sex?”

Cas rolled his eyes. “No, of course not, but that’s what it would be to anyone outside this house if you tried to explain that I’ve already been suitably punished.”

Dean stood up, rubbed a hand over his face. He turned to confront Castiel with blazing red eyes, but Castiel didn’t let him speak.
“Dean, trust me. I’m not going to abandon you. I AM coming home tomorrow night. I will tell the FBI everything I can tell them just as it happened, and I have enough safeguards and alibis in place to cover the gaps. My goal is not to turn myself in. It’s to satisfy them well-enough that they feel no need to harass anyone else on the staff. Relax. Bobby’s done his job well. It’s going to be fine.”

“You’re not worried at all?” Dean asked confrontationally.

Cas huffed again and stood to face him, sliding his hands to hold Dean by the hips. “I believe you’ve got that covered for both of us.” He lowered his head and looked into Dean’s down-turned face. “I’m not going anywhere, my love. I have a funeral to attend, and I have nephews to welcome home. We have a wedding to plan. I expect to have a pregnancy to manage if you do your job well…”

Dean’s hormones caught up with his anxiety again, and bubbled over onto the Alpha. “Jeez, Cas! No pressure! What if he doesn’t catch? It happens sometimes, you know! Sometimes it takes a few rounds. You gonna follow up behind me and do the job yourself? Hey, I got an idea! How about I just hand him over to you in the first place? Huh? You just go ahead and knock him up…”

“Dean,” Cas laughed. “Dean, stop.” He moved in to kiss the protest off Dean’s lips, still laughing. He kissed Dean hard, fierce, stifling the words that Dean continued to attempt to speak until he had to stop as the Alpha’s laughter bubbled back up again. He broke the kiss and pressed his forehead into Dean’s.

“I’m coming home tomorrow night, Dean. I promise.” Dean clutched his hips and rocked his forehead from side to side in anxiety. “Trust me. I’m not leaving you.”

“We can’t do any of this without you. Don’t you leave me. Don’t you dare!” Dean pulled Cas’ hips in close, wanting…

“Well, you’ll have to do the conception without me. I don’t want any part of that, Dean. That’s all on you…and Michael, of course.” Cas pulled Dean’s hips in counterpoint, and had they not been under restriction, nothing in the world would’ve kept their pants in place. Dean resisted grinding against Cas by the barest of margins, but he managed to stop the motion before it took him.

“Your mother called me on Saturday,” he whispered into Castiel’s ear, and Cas’ head popped up like he’d been bitten.

“What? Why?! That’s the worst seduction I’ve ever heard, Dean. What the hell?”

“It’s not a seduction, you doof! She called me on my cell phone. Condolences or some shit. She sounded nice of all things. Why did she call me? How did she even know about Dad?” Dean let his hands drop and stepped away, turning a little bit. Cas eyed him with a frown.

“How did she have your number?” the Alpha asked.

“Beats me. Mob connections, I assume,” Dean blurted.

Cas rolled his eyes again. “Well, what did she say? What did she want? Are you all right?”

“She said she knew Dad when she was a pup, and they were friends – dated even. She made it sound like she was nearly my mother, not yours.”

Cas grimaced and scratched the back of his neck. “Well that’s creepy,” he decided. “I didn’t realize she knew him that well.”

“How’d she even know he died?” Dean asked again. “You didn’t contact her, did you?”
“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not surprised she found out, though. She still has close ties to this town. My mother feigns ignorance frequently, but she’s never actually caught by surprise by anything of note.” Cas shuffled his feet, annoyed all over again that he’d put Dean through a faked engagement announcement when he knew that Naomi was already aware long before the press ever caught on.

“What’s she playing at, C.J.?”

“I don’t know. You said she was nice?” Dean responded with a tight nod, and Cas continued. “She’s going to lose the election, Dean, and that’s going to piss her off and make her desperate. She’s most dangerous when she’s desperate. On the other hand, if she really did consider John Winchester a friend…who knows? Maybe she has a weakness for old flames who’ve passed. Maybe you got a glimpse of some last remaining smidgon of humanity.” Cas sat back down on the edge of the bed and frowned at the carpet. “Don’t give her anything, Dean. Don’t tell her anything if she calls back. In fact, you don’t even need to answer her calls again. Did you save the number?”

Dean nodded. “Yeah, I want a head’s-up if she calls back.”

“Good. I’ll keep an eye on her, but I can’t control her, Dean. I never could.”

“Keep an eye on her? Mob connections?”

“Would you stop with the Mob connections? I have a network, okay? It’s purely grass-roots…”

Dean laughed. “Cas, you are the opposite of grass-roots! You’re privilege to your toenails…”

“Yes, I believe you covered that point adequately this afternoon,” Cas said snippily. Dean pulled up short.

“Hey, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.” Dean checked Cas’ face, but the Alpha turned away.

“It’s a grass-roots network, Dean. I help out with funding when I can, but I don’t direct them. I don’t have more votes than anyone else involved. I contribute to causes I believe in. I’m not a Mobster. I’m not leading a secret underground army of some kind, and I’m not into anything politically shady. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Cas, I…” Dean didn’t know what to say. In truth, he had long assumed that Cas had at least a little bit of Bobby in him when it came to wielding the power he’d been granted by circumstance and birth. “I’m on your side, babe. I’ll always be on your side. I’m sorry if I took the Mob thing too far. That’s not you. I get it. Really, I do. It’s just…” Cas flinched, but Dean pressed forward. “It’s just, you seem so certain that Naomi’s going to lose the election, but there are months to go before November. How can you be so sure if you don’t have a paw on the veins that feed her? How do you know for sure? Wouldn’t be the first time someone’s come from behind to win at the last minute.”

“I am part of a very tight, and very LEGAL network of volunteers, and yes, it’s all grass-roots. I’m a natural ally to anyone who’s against the success of the initiatives that my mother tends to espouse. It’s that simple. If the GRASS-ROOTS volunteers mobilize themselves to fill every seat in an election rally that my mother thinks will be filled with her supporters and they ask me to fund it, there’s no law against that. I don’t organize it. I don’t participate. I just buy tickets to events. It’s a contribution. That’s all it is.”

Dean chuckled and slid to his knees between Castiel’s. “That’s all it is,” he whispered. “Will you please fuck me now before you fly off and get yourself thrown into Federal prison?”

“You’re such a brat, Dean Winchester,” Cas breathed.
“So, spank me then. Please?”

“Go to bed, Winchester. It’s late. I’m not going to wake you in the morning when I leave. I want you to sleep as late as you can, and I need to leave early. I’ll call you after I land. My interview starts at 9:00 a.m., but I have no idea how long it might go.”

“I’m going to die,” Dean muttered standing up and heading into the bathroom.

Cas didn’t ask for it, but Dean refused to leave Cas to sleep in his bed with Michael, and Michael refused to sleep without Dean, so they puppy-piled again in the big bed. Castiel didn’t really mind. It had been another long, long day. Tomorrow wasn’t going to be any shorter. They were all snoring in short order, tangled up in knots and starting to sweat even before they’d faded completely to sleep.

Caniformes don’t sweat, Cas reminded himself as he slipped a hand slowly across April’s damp lower belly. Lupins are the only species of Canid with sweat glands and a very complicated evolutionary pathway. Darwin’s naturalist antagonist hadn’t even touched on that point in his scribbled notes—not that Cas had found yet. Vestigial nipples they still had though, Castiel ran his hand up her belly to touch the tiny divot, nearly devoid of nerves and almost invisible just above the line of her naval. April had six vestigials and two active mammaries, where Cas only had four nipples in total. Men usually carried fewer, even the Omegas, but only the upper two were functional, just like the apes.

Cas faded into dreams ruminating that his forebears would never have managed to go bipedal if they couldn’t carry their nurslings as they walked—or fled—and nursing more than two at once became utterly impossible if the mother was ambulatory. That didn’t stop them from having litters, but it made feeding more than two while on the move a challenge. The Primates did that better; restricted as they were to only one or two live births at once for the most part. The dream-images in his head shifted to a new field of view in which every woman and every Omega in his pack carried a pup on their hip—various ages, genders and sizes, various hair color, eye color. Cas saw himself, as he often did in his dreams. He held the hand of a tall, gangly girl with black hair and a fierce blue gaze. She looked up at him, angry and demanding, and he frowned. His dream had started up right in the middle of the narrative, and Cas had no idea why she was vexed. He knelt and took her face in one hand, and then the dream shifted again, and he knew no more until his alarm clock blared an obnoxious tone and woke him from a sound sleep.

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“Dean, look!” Jo shouted from the living room. “You won! You fucking WON!”

Dean skated in on his socks across the hardwood floor, wind-milling his arms to keep his balance, alarmed at Jo’s tone until her words sank in. “Won what? Christ, you scared me, you moron!”

“Be nice, Winchester. I’m helping you. Look!” She pointed at the television. His picture was on the screen. He stood next to Castiel. It was a shot from their last trip to New York, but he’d missed the story, and the commercial break took over before he had any clue what he was seeing. April sat beside Jo with a pile of photos on her lap. She looked thrilled. “You and Castiel won ‘Hottest Couple in New York’!”

“Oh brother!” said Dean, turning back into the hallway. “We don’t live in New York! That is the stupidest contest in the history of stupid contests!”
Dean’s cell phone rang as Jo yelled back to him, “You sound just like Michael! I think he’s rubbing off on you, Dean!”

“Go fuck yourself, Harvelle!” Dean was in no mood. He yanked his phone out, saw that it was from a number based in New York, and he sent it straight to voicemail. He returned to the master bedroom where he and Sam were sorting the last of John Winchester’s belongings. Sam insisted Dean keep all of John’s Marine insignia, and Dean made sure Sam kept the LP collection together, but most of it was useless detritus.

The clothing that had been stuffed into boxes and crammed on a shelf years ago hadn’t fared well. Most of it wasn’t even fit to donate, but they felt compelled to go through every box just in case. Dean took the gold watch. Sam got the pocket knife. That’s really all there was.

Cas and Bobby were handling the business. Jo, April, and Charlie were handling the music and the video presentation. Ellen had volunteered to deliver the eulogy, and Dean had nothing else to do. He and Sam kept their voices low, but he couldn’t control his abrasiveness today, and he wanted to go home.

Michael sat at the head of the bed, silent after Dean had snapped viciously at him for the fourth time for no reason. He wasn’t really even supposed to be here but spending the day in training while Dean mourned without him was a stretch too far, and he’d refused to go. His eyes tracked Dean as Jess’ did Sam. Jess sat beside Michael on the bed, their legs stretched out in front of them, crossed identically at the ankles, watching over their mates but not interfering. Jess lasted a little longer than Michael did, but of course Sam wasn’t hitting a hormonal peak that marked the onset of Rut. Still, after Sam responded to her fifth attempt to encourage him to sit and have a snack by lifting his wide flat palm before his face and inspecting it with great interest followed by a significant look into her eyes, she subsided into tacit compliance and sank down beside Michael. The brothers never snapped at each other though. They seemed to be communicating on a different plane, and wherever they were, they were there together.

April appeared in the doorway and quietly summoned the brothers out. Neither spared a backward glance at their mates. Michael and Jess looked at each other. Michael let his head fall hard against the headboard. “What are YOU in trouble for?” he asked Jess.

“Nothing in particular. It’s complicated. You?” she answered.

“He’s mad that I won’t spank or fuck him.”

“Ah. Yeah, that’d do it,” she agreed. They sat in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the lack of tension in the room. “Do you know anything about babies, Michael?” she asked suddenly, as if the question had been wanting to burst out.

He smiled at the far wall. “Little bit,” he admitted. “There were always little ones around at home. It’s a big pack, and none of them have figured out what’s causing them yet.”

Jess laughed then bit her lip. “Do you think we can do this? I don’t have a clue what we’ve gotten ourselves into, and I’m terrified. Is it too late to…”

“Yes,” he declared definitively. “It’s too late to back out now. Don’t even think it.”

“But what if we can’t do it? What if we forget to feed them, or something bad happens? What if they hate us? What if they…I don’t know, what if we kill them by…I don’t know…by doing it wrong?” She didn’t look at him, but she was obviously fighting not to.
Michael didn’t laugh this time, he sighed with a put-upon tone and sat up straighter. “You’re not going to kill them, and you know it. You’re going to make a butt-load of mistakes that’ll screw them up all to hell in totally unpredictable ways, but everything you do right is going to make up for all the fuck-ups. All that matters is that you love them, and you do your best, so get over yourself. We’re all going to help you, Jessica. You aren’t alone. You can do this. You’re a mom now. Put on your big-girl panties, stop whimpering about being scared, and get to work.” Then he added as an after-thought: “You might wanna take a nap while you still can.”

Had he told her that when she first met him, it would’ve pissed her off, but now she knew better. Michael had a way of giving people what they needed even if it wasn’t what they wanted. Jess sucked a breath in through her nose and steeled her jaw. He was right. She was stronger than that, stronger than this.

“Thanks, Michael,” she said.

“Any time,” he responded.

They stayed where they were as music drifted in from the front room, and April’s voice accompanied a slow instrumental version of an old Kansas song. It was sweet without being sappy, and it touched Michael’s irritation and soothed him where he wanted to stay cranky. Michael got up abruptly and left the room, left the house, sat in the passenger side of the Impala and waited for Dean with the windows rolled down. He’d begun to itch along his spine, and his cheeks felt hot.

April finished singing, and then turned away from the monitor. It’d been her idea to sing live to the video presentation, but she hadn’t been sure of the outcome until she turned around and looked at Sam, then Dean. They were both in tears, but they smiled at her.

“Yup. That works. Um, good work, ladies.” Dean fumbled his way off the couch, wiping tears, sick to death of falling apart again and again. “I think we should be going. Got lots left to do at home. See you early in the morning…” He was still talking to no one as he pushed the front door open and gasped a breath on the front porch. April gave Sam and Jo a quick hug each and trailed after him. She barely closed the door of the back seat before he was peeling out backward.

April left Dean and Michael arguing in the front parlor and slipped into her Conservatory. Gabriel was reading alone on a couch beneath the windows, shaded now in the early evening. She’d had a text in the late afternoon from her mom that they’d driven up from Lawton to meet Castiel after his ‘meeting’. They had an early dinner together, and then gave Castiel a ride to the airport. He told them the meeting went well, and mom really enjoyed talking to him. April suspected her mother also liked being the center of attention in a nice city restaurant with the well-known Alpha catching eyes left and right, but she didn’t say so. April was used to it for the most part, but her mother was no doubt fan-girling to beat the band.

Castiel was on his way home now, but he would get in too late to see her before morning. He’d
called her from the airport to let her know everything went according to plan, whatever that meant. The bickering was getting on her nerves, and having her mate so far from home put an itch under her skin. April set herself upon her bench, put her audition piece in place on the stand, and let her hands work through her warm-up exercises, trying to drown out the sniping voices in her head. Gabe never looked up. She was buzzing again, and Alpha had only been gone for the day. Her phone buzzed. She nearly ignored it. Castiel was in the air. It wouldn’t be him.

She took a quick look, and then sighed and opened the message. It was from Nicholas.

“Hey Chicka! You busy?”

She smiled and texted him back.

“ать practices. A’m too busy to talk. Go away!”

It took no time before her phone pinged again.

“Can’t. Need help. You’re the only one I can turn to.”

April rolled her eyes. “Now what?” she mumbled.

“Now what?” she texted.

“Sending you a POS fiddle piece. It’s fucking up the whole show. I need your help to fix it. Help me! PLEASE! Check your email.”

April stared at the text. He had to be joking. Nicholas Maraby had Grammy awards. This was a joke. She glanced at Gabriel, but he still hadn’t acknowledged her. He was reading.

“You’re joking,” she texted back.

“AAPRIL WINCHESTER, GO CHECK YOUR FUCKING EMAIL!!!”

“Okay, okay…” she mumbled, and switched her phone over to email. There was a message from him with an audio attachment that was too big for the phone. She frowned and left the piano. Her laptop was on the writing desk. She booted it up and navigated to email. The note beneath the attachment was all musical notation - phrases marked with notes about intention and presentation. April read quickly through and then opened the audio file. She listened with an eye along the page below, trying to figure out what he was trying to tell her. Her phone rang.

“Nick, what…”?

“Just listen to it, and tell me what you think,” he said. “I don’t want to poison you with my bias. Just listen.”

She listened. The first bit was all exposition, simple and clean. It was too shrill to stand alone though. Then there was a weirdness a little over halfway through that skipped strangely from one point to another in a way that didn’t fit the overall tone as it jumped into a shrieking anxiety-ridden call for help – at least that’s how April heard it. Then it happened again when the cries turned into a dance of…was it joyful or was it frustrated? Something was missing. It wasn’t a POS, though. It flew when it wanted to, and then it backed off into precise…Wait. “Why…? Is this a test? Can I play with it for a while? Do you have the full score? All I see is Violin I. Where’s the rest of it?” She muttered into the phone over the fiddle.

“That’s my girl,” he enthused. “No, it’s not a test. And what do you mean, ‘the rest of it’? This is all
there is. It’s a solo. Can you fix it?”

She felt her heart rate pick up, and she became instantly breathless. “What?! No! I’m an amateur pianist. I don’t know the first thing about violin...or fiddle, or whatever. I don’t know anything about Scottish period music or show-tunes. Why are you bringing this to me?” April stopped the playback and paced the room, disturbed at the sudden pressure. “Nick, I can’t do this! I CAN’T!”

“All right, shh, April, calm down, kiddo. I’m sorry. Look, just forget it. I’ll get it right eventually. Hey, thanks for letting me bounce shit off you. Can I send you some experiments if I come up with something? I kinda like the way you think, that’s all.”

She took a deep breath, thanked him shakily, then hung up. What a crappy day. April felt a faint nudge through the mating bond, and she sent a caress back along the line in reassurance. It echoed back again in a pleasurable tingle, too distant to feel very strong, but it was the thought that counts.

Idly, April started the audio file back up, listening to the awkward switch and wondering. Gabriel was suddenly at her back. “You gonna have a go?” he asked nonchalantly.

“No. This isn’t…” She paused. What if it had an accompaniment? The solo could still highlight the emotion of the fiddle, but with the rich support of a cello or a piano. What if that weird jump faded into someone else’s hands for the bridge? What if there was a long-trembling stroke to hold it up? What would that sound like? Would it need to be friendly or argumentative? Should the accompaniment play in tandem or in counter-point? What was the scene about? Who was talking? Was this a characterization? She checked the title, and it read, “Heather’s Theme.” Were there going to be lyrics? Did it need to have phrases that Nick could reprise again and again? Did it need to evolve? God, the thing needed a pulse! That’s what it was missing.

She picked up the laptop and carried it to the piano. April scoured the written music and the comments. The piece went from chaotic and messy, to calm and measured, and then back again into a frenzy that made her imagine beads of sweat flying from a fiddler’s right arm and brow. She pushed play and listened again. Gabriel perched in Dean’s spot at the bend, leaning on one elbow with a cheeky smirk. She ignored him – probably didn’t even see him.

Slowly, on the third round through, she put her hands on the board and began to pulse out a response. She started with a thrum which wasn’t the easiest thing to do on a piano. She needed a cello, but all she could do was pick out an answer on the rich baritone end of her grand piano. After the sixth try, she abandoned the piano and turned on her keyboard, selecting a setting to mimic a cello, adding vibrato and a staccato pulse. Her knee twitched in excitement as she and the fiddle jumped the bridge without a break, without a seam, and she pulled her hands from the keys as if burned.

“You were saying?” snarked Gabriel, and she looked up at him with wide, scared eyes.

“Gabe, I need you to help me record this. Pull the drapes! I need headphones. I need...Shit! I don’t have the right microphones! I never went back for them. All my stuff is still at home!”

Gabe jumped up and began to close drapes to make a solid acoustic recording room, and he assured her they could make it work. Cas had all kinds of equipment that he never used. There had to be some sort of microphone here somewhere. If nothing else, April could use the App on her phone for the first iteration. It didn’t have to be perfect. She was terrified she’d lose it before she got it recorded, so she let Gabe scramble while she played through a few more times with the synthesizer’s recorder turned on.

Finally, he had a mish-mash of equipment tied together, and he signaled he was ready to try to get it
down digitally. “You’re beautiful. Do you know that?” he asked rhetorically. “And I’m not talking about your face or your hair.”

She blushed, nodded for him to hit record, and she played. It was rough, and it wasn’t a cello, but all she needed to do was put pins in the right places for Nick to pick it out.

Both Michael and Dean sat up in the kitchen and waited for Castiel. Michael tried not to let Dean’s incessant fidgeting, his knee pulsing beneath the table, get to him too much. Dean couldn’t help it, and Michael was beginning to feel it too. Dean’s scent was deepening, becoming musky and rich. Michael supposed his was ripening as well.

Dean stood up at the sound of the garage door opening in response to Castiel’s remote, and he stepped toward the door when he heard the engine cut off. He was panting shallowly. His eyes showed red around the rim. Michael placed flat palms against the table and resisted.

His wolf wanted (demanded) to bind Dean hand and foot and shove him into a closet for safekeeping, but the wolf wasn’t in charge. Michael took stock of himself in a way he had never thought to do before his training started. He stilled and listened. He knew there was a golden rim around his own eyes, and that meant the Omega was in-play – in-play, but no more in charge than the wolf was. Michael shuddered. He was following the instinct of the Omega, but he was doing it through his cognitive brain. Both internal aspects of his psyche were throwing advice (DEMANDS!) at him, but Michael chose to sideline the wolf and listen to the Omega. It felt organic. It felt right in a way that made him believe this was nothing new. Had he been operating like this for years without knowing it? Had his Omega sneaked its way out of the pit the wolf kept stuffing it into along a pathway that bypassed the wolf entirely? Damn, if Omegas weren’t devious bastards.

The door cracked open and Castiel stepped in looking weary, surprised to find Dean standing before him with lust-blown eyes. They stared at each other for a moment. Castiel let a breath of relief out. Clearly, he hadn’t been as confident that he would be coming home as he’d led Dean to believe. He whimpered softly, and then he felt a pull behind his naval where Dean’s Claim locked onto him, and his eyes widened and reddened instantly. Having Dean’s Claim call to him pushed him over the edge. Cas’ suit-jacket and his suitcase hit the floor. He rushed Dean, pressing him hard against April’s whiteboard, knocking it askew. Castiel’s wolf slipped his leash, and he attacked Dean’s throat and lifted both of his thighs to wrap around the Alpha’s waist with a fierce growl. Dean threw his head back against the wall and held on for all he was worth, moaning and pressing his hips into the welcoming divot of Castiel’s widened stance.

“You smell… God, Dean! You smell good,” Castiel mumbled between sucking kisses, grinding against him.

Michael sat still, his hands still pressed flat to the table, not quite powerless to stop the couple, but choosing to let it play out – choosing to let them decide. If it was too much for either of them to pull the brake, Michael could live with it, but if they could…? He kept his eyes down-cast as the growling intensified. He watched Dean’s internal spark turn white-hot and watched his beautiful Submissive wolf grin and loll its tongue to the side, rolling over to accept the Dominant wolf’s attention. Michael felt his body flush in response. His body wanted in as badly as Dean did, but his wolf was beside itself with fury. It was the wisdom and the restraint of the Omega that stayed him in his chair. He risked a glance up at the alphas, worried they might injure each other and hoping
against hope. Castiel had a hand between them, trying to unfasten cumbersome bindings that kept them clothed while continuing to grind harshly against Dean’s groin. That HAD to hurt them both, but the noises they were making weren’t pained.

Michael gasped and his eyes flashed wide just before Dean clenched his shut with a powerful yell. The alpha planted his palms on Castiel’s chest and pushed crying out again in despair.

“RED! CAS! RED! STOP! PLEASE STOP! RED!”

Castiel flew backward, and Dean’s feet hit the floor to catch him before he tumbled to the ground. The whiteboard behind him clattered onto the tile, and the marker skittered to a stop by Michael’s feet. Michael stood up slowly, staring at Dean who was bent over panting with his hands on his knees.

“I can’t! God, fuck, I wanna, but I can’t!... I still owe Michael. Owe it to myself. I can’t.” Dean hiccupped as if he’d been crying, and it made him flinch and frown.

Castiel stared at him with crimson eyes, and he panted. He nodded reluctantly and turned sideways, looking away with his fists clenched.

“Don’t follow me,” said Dean quietly. He slipped past Michael and April standing speechless in the kitchen doorway and darted down the far hall and the stairs, locking himself into the H/R room.

They knew where he’d gone, but no one moved to follow. Michael jumped when Gabriel spoke from beside his opposite shoulder.

“We shouldn’t leave him alone. You all know that, right?”

“Jesus, Gabe!” shouted Michael.

“I’m not going,” he clarified. “He’s too close to Rut, and my ass is kinda sacred to me.”

“I’ll go,” said April, looking back over her shoulder the way he’d run. “Alpha, may I go watch over him? Please?”

Michael’s wolf didn’t like it. Michael was beginning to realize that his wolf was a real jerk when it came to anyone but himself. And it wasn’t that he didn’t know that already, but his training exercises had him focusing on impulse-control and putting names and origins to his impulses. The wolf wanted to back-hand April into next week for even making the suggestion. He choked his knee-jerk response back and looked to Castiel instead.

“Go on, Kitten. Turn on the hormone sensors. They’re beside the light-switch. If he asks you to bind him, you may do so, but do not leave him alone while he’s bound. Call me if you need anything.”

He embraced her briefly and kissed her temple, then sent her off with a tap to her lower back.

“Goodnight, Kitten. I’ll see you in the morning.” Castiel fell into a bar-stool and eyed his jacket, wadded on the floor. April and Gabriel disappeared down the hall with their heads close together.

“Welcome home, Sir,” said Michael. “It’s good to have you back.”

Chapter End Notes

I based "Heather's Theme" on an imaginary fiddle solo of "Calliope Meets Frank."
Alasdair Fraser and Natalie Haas' version is the best (not the live version - Alasdair gets really into it when he plays live, and I need a clean recording).

Click here for YouTube link to Alasdair Fraser

This section is my very intentional nod to what is possibly my all-time favorite SPN fic, Appoggiatura by ceeainthereforthat. Every version of my story, no matter which iteration runs through my head, includes both April and Dean as musicians, but the fiddle/cello combo comes from there, pure and simple.

Thanks for reading. I have two more days before I go back to work, but I may just do clean-up and editing. We'll see. You know me. Sometimes I can't stop myself from writing. ;o)
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

The magazine article preview is out, Dean's not a happy camper, April's at odds with her mate, and oh, let's see, what else...four alphas decide the fate of The Facility. Not much going on all-in-all. Plus, BAMF Gabriel

Chapter Notes

Holy shit, the Houston Astros won the World Series! Did this town need something like that or what? I haven't watched baseball in years, and I didn't watch a single pitch this time either, but it's nice to know they won. Go, 'Stros!

And I did it. I got the third chapter out with a few hours to spare before I head back into the dark tunnel of silence for the next few weeks. I really like this one y'all. It's long, and no, we're really, really close to locking our boys up and letting them have at it, but not quite there yet, but it's my kind of chapter, so I hope you enjoy.

Happy Dia De Los Muertos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 62 – Wednesday, July 5, 2017

THEN:

Dean knelt absolutely still. A drop of sweat left his hairline and tickled its way down to his chin. He didn’t know the guy – the Dom. He was a new client to the contract rooms, but Dean had safeguards in place. No one made it this far in without proving they knew a thing or two. The plug in his ass was smaller than he preferred, but it wasn’t about him.

“Up on the bed, Submissive,” grated the Dom’s voice with authority. (Now we’re talking), his wolf chirped, and Dean scrambled to obey. “Stick your ass up.”

There was a slight pause and an intake of breath from behind Dean.

"Jesus fuck!"

It wouldn’t be the first time a new Dom came all over himself without laying a hand on Dean’s skin. The guy panted loudly from across the room for several heartbeats – quickening heartbeats. Dean waited, schooling himself to patient compliance. He raised his hips just a little bit higher and then stopped moving. His was to obey, and even in this institutional setting with a guy he didn’t know, it felt so good.
They’d talked options before they began, so Dean had an idea what to expect. There would be no binding, and he hadn’t given permission for more than a run-of-the-mill strapping, but that didn’t stop Dean from clenching his butt when the strap fell with no warning. Some folks needed to sneak up on a Sub and take them unaware. Dean gritted his teeth and purposefully relaxed. This was fine with him. It was abrupt, but it hadn’t been over-the-top in power. His wolf was annoyed that Dean had jumped at the first strike. He was better than that. He was.

The strap fell again. It hit that sweet spot in intensity where the burn of the pain sparked an electric line straight to his dick, and he moaned and lifted his hips. Dean thought he was really gonna like this guy. It fell a third time, and his cock leaked a sticky line onto the sheet beneath him.

“Oh fuck!” said Dean.

“Quiet!” commanded the Dom, and Dean bit his lips to keep his mouth closed as the strap fell again, pulling not even a whimper, but forcing him to take quick breaths through his nose.

The strap was Dean’s best friend. It made him feel warm and embraced, wrapping slightly just before it fell away. Dean was so hard, he was shaking. They were nearing the 15-blow limit, and Dean wanted to renegotiate suddenly. He rubbed his face into the bedding, having fallen onto his chest somewhere around strike number 7.

At 15, Dean barely suppressed a moan of disappointment before the Dom had the strap tossed behind him and was up on his knees behind the Sub.

“Reach back, boy, and pull that plug out of your ass. Move real, real slow, now. I wanna enjoy this. Not a word outta you.”

Dean closed his eyes and panted, wishing he had a gag to bite into. He reached back slowly with one hand, letting the Dom get his money’s worth, working the plug from side-to-side a little more than he really needed to. He’d had a chance to inspect the beta’s package, so he wasn’t worried about insufficient prep, but the guy was obviously into watching. Dean gave him a show.

“Good boy! Fuck, you’re pretty. Roll over for me. Let me look at your pretty face.” Dean rolled carefully, readjusting himself into the center so the Dom didn’t need to move. This guy had real potential. He wasn’t harsh for no reason. His praise seemed heartfelt. His touch was electric, and that strapping had Dean’s ass on fire in the best way. Next time they were gonna open the flood-gates up a bit. This guy was going on Dean’s short-list.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God,” whispered the Dom, noting the tears caught up in Dean’s long lashes and sliding up between Dean’s spread knees. “Get ‘em out wide for me, boy. Real wide. There you go. Show me that ass.”

The Dom pulled up onto his knees to roll the condom on, and then he fumbled around for his tube of slick. Dean could feel it next to his thigh, but the Dom hadn’t asked for his help or his input. He bit his lip. A thing like this could go either way, and both ways were fine with Dean.

The Dom spotted the tube at last, nearly tucked beneath Dean’s leg, grabbed it and glared into Dean’s eyes. “Were you hiding this from me, boy?”

Dean shook his head rapidly. It wasn’t a lie. Not helping before being asked wasn’t the same as hiding it.

“Did you know it was there?”
Dean nodded with wide eyes, still pretending he had a gag in. Fuck, a gag would be helpful. He wanted to sass the shit outta this guy. He wanted to know what he could push him into.

“Roll up on your side,” the Dom instructed.

Dean bit his lip again, but did as he was told, and clenched his eyes as a bare hand came down way harder than they’d agreed to. Dean gasped and grunted into it. His thigh burned. It was almost Castiel-like. Almost. His cock twitched and spurted a little bit. If Dean turned a little further he could use the bedding to get some friction… But then the blows stopped.

“There we go now. All finished. There’s my good boy. Are you sorry?” The Dom’s eyes danced across Dean’s face in hunger and ownership.

Dean nodded, squeezing his eyes closed to push one of the tears over the edge. That was for the Dom. The guy deserved a reward for such a beautiful scene, and Dean knew what his face looked like with a tear tracking down one cheek. The Dom stopped breathing for a moment, then he cracked the tube open and applied a liberal dollop to his sheathed cock, and to the rim of Dean’s ass.

Dean couldn’t suppress the whine in time, and the Dom shushed him harshly. Fuck. That one was on Dean. The guy had made his instructions quite clear. The Sub was to be seen and not heard. He paused with his cock at Dean’s rim, pressing just hard enough to make his presence known, but not pushing in.

“You gonna keep quiet for me, boy?” he asked in a southern country accent. Dean nodded.

“That’s right. And you lower your fuckin’ eyes while I take you, too. You hear me?” Dean lowered his gaze to the man’s chest, to his naval. He huffed a breath through his nose. The Dom put a hand on Dean’s shoulder and pressed slowly into his body. There was a waiting list for Doms kinky enough to want to fuck an alpha, and this guy had been waiting for a couple of years now, if Dean had heard right. His hole stretched open in a painful burn, but he didn’t tear, and Dean loved every second of it. Keeping quiet was his only challenge, but he was well-trained, and he guarded his voice. He watched the Dom’s body language for any indication of whether he expected Dean to remain completely still and non-participatory, or if he would welcome a complimentary motion that helped drive his cock deep into Dean’s body. A desire for no sounds usually equated to no voluntary motion as well, so Dean lay still for his Dominant, and listened for instruction.

“Hold onto my shoulders, boy, and just take it.” Dean grabbed hold and relaxed his ass as the Dom fucked harshly into him, groaning and grunting his way into laying a solid Claim over Dean’s body. He came too soon with a shout and a last grinding thrust, filling the condom with his seed. Dean’s cock and his burgeoning knot stood painfully hard, lifted high off his belly.

“Jesus H Christ, you’re beautiful,” the Dom told him, pulling out and ignoring the Sub’s erection. Dean struggled with himself not to whimper, to shift, to call attention to their unfinished business. If the Dom wanted him hard and unsatisfied, then that’s what Dean would accept, but it was so unfair. He’d been good. Mostly.

“Next time, try to be quiet for me, and I’ll take care of that,” he cocked his head at Dean’s stiffy. “I know you can do it, boy. You’re a good boy.” The Dom stripped the condom off and tossed it into the garbage. “You want there to be a next time?” the guy asked Dean, and he nodded eagerly, but he was so fucking frustrated. If he whimpered or protested now, would the Dom remember it and carry it over to next time?
“Me too. I like you a lot, and I feel tons better. I forgot how much I like doing that. Haven’t taken a swing at a firm round ass like yours in a coupla years. Maybe next time I can talk you into lettin’ me ride that pole a’ yours. Talk about somethin’ I haven’t done in years; a stiff one up the ol’ back-door – I haven’t done that since college.”

Dean gave up and whined, sitting up. He wanted to fuck something. “Sir?” he asked, and continued on as if he hadn’t noticed the guy’s shock at his Moxy. “I could fuck you now if you want. Wouldn’t take long to prep you. I have…”

The Dom cleared his throat and Dean shut right up and looked down. Too much, Winchester.

“We agreed that our scene effectively ended when I blew my load, and that’s why you’re not face-to-the-floor over my knee, but I am still the Dom here, and you’re still my Sub. Do I make myself clear?”

Dean nodded without looking up.

“Good. Now. NEXT TIME, we’ll discuss other options.” He gathered his clothing but didn’t dress. “I don’t have any real authority, but if you’re the true Submissive I think you are, and not just playing a role, you won’t touch that,” he nodded at Dean’s cock again, “because you don’t have my permission to come. Understood?”

Dean’s eyes went wide and the smug look on the bastard’s face said he knew both that Dean would follow his instruction and that Dean had solidly planned to wait until the room was empty to finish himself off.

Oh yeah, this guy was going on Dean’s short-list. He pushed ALL the buttons. Dean probably ought to learn the guy’s name.

NOW:

Castiel handed the tube of scent-blocking spray subtly to Dean in the parlor and twitched his head toward the bathroom. Dean groaned, but pulled himself to his feet to go re-apply it for the third time that day. Cas watched him go. He didn’t need a Mating-bond to know that Dean felt like crap. The last week before Rut was always miserable, but this time Dean was in Hell.

Michael had avoided his mate ever since they got home. He’d been chewed out one too many times today, and there were tasks that needed doing to keep the guests served. John’s Memorial pulled a larger crowd than they expected, but Lawrence was small-town enough that many folks lived there all their lives, and the Winchesters had deep roots here.

“Where were all these so-called ‘friends’ when he was trying to keep his head above water?” Sam asked Michael rhetorically in the kitchen over a platter of finger-foods that Michael was arranging artfully. Michael glanced up at the crowded room, but went back to work without commenting. Sam was in a sour mood. Dean was down-right belligerent. April was in hiding with Gabriel in the Conservatory. Michael ground his teeth together and carried the platter into the dining room which was serving as the buffet.

“So, there you are!” said Billie enthusiastically, meeting Michael from the other direction. She had a digital tablet in her hand.
“You were looking for me?” he asked. “Did you need something? I don’t have any comment about the winners of New York’s Sexiest Couple.” Michael set the platter down, and re-arranged the other dishes to accommodate it.

“Hottest Couple, and don’t be snippy,” she told him without heat. “I think you’ll like this. I got an advance copy of the Rolling Stone exposé. I haven’t even shown Cas yet. You wanna see it?”

“Not particularly,” mumbled Michael, moving to cut around her.

She side-stepped into his path, and he pulled up short with an annoyed expression and refused to meet her eye.

“Damn, boy! You are bitchy when you’re close.”

Michael’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Excuse me?” he said confrontationally.

“Here. Just take a look at it.” She handed him the tablet and stepped backward toward the exit into the parlor. “And you might want to re-apply the scent-blockers, kid.”

Michael looked at the tablet in his hand and frowned. His own face took up half the screen.

What?!

Michael looked around, dodged around a couple of guests and dashed up the stairs to his bedroom before he took another look. It was the front-shot for the opening of the article, and it was a photo that had been taken off-the-cuff in the library that Sunday morning when he’d been so aggravated with Dean. He looked cocky and flirtatious with one hand on the bookshelf and the other pulling slightly at his shirt collar to touch the Mating-scar visible on the flat of his shoulder. His other one, near his neck on the opposite side was quite obvious as well. Dean was in the shot behind him, framed by his arm and his elbow, sitting at a table in the back with a pen in his hand and a look of concentration on his face, writing out lines, paying no attention to the camera whatsoever.

Michael felt a wave of heat pass through his body. His wolf howled in triumph. That was the wolf right there in the picture, and that was HIS Submissive dutifully meeting his Dominant’s demands. Michael blushed, examining the shot. He couldn’t tear his eyes off it. The light. The way his hair lay that day. The way his shirt rode up just a bit and showed the tiniest unintentional peek of the line that ran from his mid-section down to his groin in a triangle frame. The smirk on his face. Dean’s averted face. There were probably words in this article. It probably had a title and a point, and someone had been paid to design the font and the layout. Michael didn’t care.

He swiped to the next page, and he was in this one too. He was leaning across the back of the couch to hand something – he didn’t remember what, and it wasn’t in the picture – to April whose face was barely visible. The last page showed a shot of Cas and Dean posing together. Castiel had Dean pulled in by his neck, and he was planting a kiss to the side of his head while Dean grinned happily with his eyes coyly down. That one must have been taken on Tuesday afternoon. Michael swept backward, aiming for the first page again, but went one too far, and he gasped.

It was the cover. It was the cover of Rolling Stone magazine with highlights and article references down both sides, and the iconic title partially obscured – partially obscured by Michael’s headshot. Michael’s face, staring sternly into Dean’s green eyes graced the cover of Rolling Stone. He backed up quickly until his legs hit the bed, and he sat down hard. Dean’s face was as beautiful as always, but if he’d had any qualms about coming out as a Submissive to the general public, there was no stopping that now. Dean’s look, his eyes especially, could be used in textbooks for the foreseeable future to define submission.
Where had she even taken this shot? Michael had not posed with Dean that day. God, they were beautiful together. Michael accidentally activated the page turn when he absently stroked a thumb down the image of Dean’s face, and he quickly navigated back to it. Dean’s expression was indescribable. Michael didn’t remember receiving that look from his mate that day. He’d been irritable and snappish. He’d instructed Dean to sit and stay, pointing him to an out-of-the-way location and practically daring him to disobey. This face though. There was no disobedience in this face.

Everyone who followed Dean – in conventions, on Twitter, on Facebook, through his books, on YouTube – everyone knew Dean was a tertiary Sub. He’d never made any bones about making that public. But the look in the eyes of the man on the cover wasn’t tertiary, and anyone who knew anything would be able to see it clear as day. Michael couldn’t look away. This was the man that Dean kept private. It was a side of Dean that Michael had never seen in all his years of social-media stalking. Michael felt a stab of jealousy. They were going to publish this cover on Friday. Everyone would see it. How was Dean going to handle that? Had anyone asked him? Was he going to be devastated? Was he ready?

Michael wavered. Should he show it to Dean? To Castiel? Should he find Billie and have her demand they pull the cover? Should he wait and let the issue come out? He and Dean were likely to miss the actual release. He didn’t know how they were going to make it to Friday at the rate their hormones were ramping up.

It was all too much. He felt protective suddenly. His mate was easily over-whelmed these days, and he didn’t need one more thing. They’d only just returned from John’s funeral for Christ’s sake. Dean was already annoyed that Michael had flat refused to go to class yesterday, putting his foot down and sticking by Dean despite his quick temper. He didn’t need one more…

“Michael, Holy shit! Did you see it!!” Dean came crashing around the corner and threw himself at Michael. “Good God, you’re gorgeous! We got the cover, man! They put us on the fucking cover! This is awesome! Look at us! We’re beautiful, you and me…”

“Dean.”

“And did you read it? It’s all about how we’re building a new kind of pack without any framework to guide us, and we’re balancing it all on instinct. Jesus, Michael, it’s practically all about YOU! I’m so proud of you. Jamie did such a number on us… I didn’t know he was going this way. I thought it was just a fluff piece with some architecture for show, but he turned it into social commentary. Look! Look at this part…”

“Dean Michael!”

“What? Don’t you like it? Did you read it?” Dean had a printed version in his hand. The smell of his scent-blocker irritated Michael’s nose. He wanted to throw Dean in the shower and scrub it off.

“Did you look at the cover?” Michael asked shrewdly.

“Well, yeah. Don’t you like it? I think you’re hot. Shit, the look in your eye. Where did they get this picture? I’m gonna frame it and put it by my bed. If you ever let me jerk off again, this is my new go-to.” Dean sat down beside Michael holding the picture out in front of him.

“Do you notice anything note-worthy?” prompted Michael again. “Anything about you?”

Dean took a minute, and Michael knew he’d hit his target. There was an air of bracing himself about Dean’s side of the bond. “It’s good, Michael. I’m good. I’m… ready for this. I know what you’re
thinking…but not everyone is as tuned in to the subtleties as you and me.”

“There’s not a lot of subtlety to that picture, Dean. You’re not freaked-out?” Michael didn’t reach for him. Their bodies were responding to the proximity, but they had agreed to try to hold off until Friday if they could, and they both expected the timeline could accommodate them as long as they kept a little distance. “You don’t think enough people are going to pick up on this to cause a stir?”

“So what if they do?” declared Dean with authority. “I told you. I’m ready to go public. I want to do this. I…” He frowned at Michael. “Don’t you want this for me? Thought that’s where we were headed, you and me. Are you mad about it?”

“Not mad,” Michael clarified. “I just want to be careful. You’ve been through a lot lately. I never signed off on outing you like this, and you didn’t either. Are you certain this is okay? Dean, I don’t remember this moment. I don’t know how they got this picture. I don’t care if they have to scramble like crazy, if you aren’t absolutely sure, we’ll have them pull the cover and put something else in its place.”

“Are you kidding me? How many chances are we ever going to get to be on the cover? I’m not throwing that away.” Dean ran a finger down the line of Michael’s jaw in his copy.

“It’s not worth selling yourself out for, Dean. Calm down and talk to me. Think it through. Convince me you’re okay with this.” Michael stood up and faced him.

Dean grinned but Michael narrowed his eyes. “I’m done hiding, babe. I’m done with the masks and all the pretending. Anyone who can’t take me just like this,” he nodded to indicate the photo, “can go fuck themselves. If I lose fans or whatever, then so be it. I’m not in this for THEM. I’m in it for me and you and Cas. You good with that?”

“What changed?” Michael persisted. “We were at ‘giving it a try’ last time I looked, and now we’re at ‘fuck ‘em all’. What changed?”

“I did,” Dean declared, standing up but resisting the call to slide into his mate’s space. “I just got sick of fighting a battle for no reason. I can’t do it anymore, and I don’t feel like I need to. I feel like whatever happens out there with the public and all their fucking opinions about my personal life, about who I am, you and the rest of the pack have my back. So, fuck ‘em.”

Michael stared at him.

“Is the article really all about me?” Michael asked with a raised brow, changing the subject.

“Pshh! Narcissist much?” Dean teased.

Michael shot him a Sam-worthy bitch-face.

Dean clarified. “It’s basically written from your perspective; like, from the vantage point of the last man into the Pack – the one with no alternatives who didn’t get a vote, and how the pack made space for you. It reads like we were just holding our breath waiting for the last piece of the puzzle to fall into place, so we could get busy putting the finishing touches on the pack. It’s…I dunno, Michael… it’s kinda beautiful. Some of the quotes from you – it’s going to give a lot of hope to Omegas out there who haven’t found what they need yet. Did you really say…?” Dean stopped and pointed to the text. Michael leaned over and read it.

“A place to make a nest…” the quote read, “…it’s not just about a space where you are safe physically. This family took me in and they brought me home, you know? They gave me more than a space. They gave me MY space. They let me know I matter, so that I’m not just safe, I’m home.”
“Um,” Michael stepped back, blushing. Damn Jamie and his sympathetic head tilts and his pointy little pencil.

“You’re cute when you’re embarrassed,” Dean told him cheekily.

“Fuck you,” Michael explained over his shoulder, refusing to turn around.

“Yes, please.”

“Down, boy. You have to wait. We agreed to wait.” Michael used the change of topic to re-ground himself in his front-brain. He turned and rested against the dresser and faced his mate from across the room. “By the way, you owe me an apology.”

Dean sighed, irritated. Irritation seemed to be his base-setting today. “Why? Cause I pulled you up short when you got mouthy?”

“Is that what you did?”

“I don’t want to fight, Michael, but I don’t have an apology to give you.” Dean stood firm with his arms crossed.

“Is that right? You’re betting a lot for a guy who has a lot of needs on the table.” Michael crossed his arms too.

“You’re going to punish me? Really? How?” Dean went from alpha to brat in the blink of an eye. It was a challenge and a provocation, but Michael knew Dean was biting the inside of his cheek.

“Oh,” said Michael, catching on. “I get it. You know I’m not going to put you back in chastity. That’s a no-brainer. And you’re all on-board if I decide to spank you, so you think I’ve got no recourse to punish you for being a prick.”

“I’m not sorry, and I wasn’t a prick, and if you don’t lay a hand across my ass soon, I’m gonna come completely unhinged.” Dean took just a half-step forward, but Michael stood up in alarm.

“Stop. Stop right there. We’re waiting,” Michael announced. Dean stopped. “Here’s another way to look at it. You’re all kinds of pissy because you are horny and full of rushing hormones, and you are taking it out on me. No, if you don’t offer me an apology, I’m not going to punish you.”

Dean smirked, but Michael dropped the other shoe. “But I will be hurt, and that’s the truth. Think about what you said, and what I said, and think about whether either of us got what we deserved.”

Michael pivoted and left the room with Billie’s tablet still in his hand.

“HEY! Get back here! I’m not finished talking to you!” Dean followed him, his brat impersonating his alpha. Michael pulled up short in the hallway and turned back to meet him.

“I’m not going to spank you, Dean. Press all you want. Pull out your full brat. It’s not going to happen. I’ll meet you in the H/R room on Friday, and we’ll do absolutely everything else, but I’m not spanking you, so give it up.” Michael was angry and stiff.

“Do you have any idea what I’m going through here?” Dean challenged. “We just got back from my dad’s funeral. I’m coming unglued, and I need you. Please.”

Michael’s eyes danced back and forth across Dean’s face. “You safeworded, Dean. For the first time in your adult life you called out a safeword, and you did it to stop yourself from breaking your
promise to me. Or am I reading that wrong? Why did you do that?"

Dean frowned, and then he pouted, and then he grimaced. He backed up until he leaned against the far wall with a pissed-off face and a closed-off body. Michael pressed, stepping forward slowly. “You took responsibility for your actions in a moment of pure power that took my breath away, Dean. You didn’t safeword by accident, and you didn’t put it on Castiel to do it for you. You didn’t put it on me like you’re doing right now. Look at me!”

Dean snapped his eyes up to Michael’s angrily, pressing himself back into the wall. “Do you want me to fuck you? If I agree to do it right here, is that what you want? What happened to your need to get all the way through this punishment? Are you done? Did you just magically hit the end-point before you got to the end? Are you calling it quits just because it got too hard? You think this is any easier for me?” Michael continued walking slowly, very slowly. “We’re NOT going through this again, Dean, so don’t you dare walk away and call an end until YOU. ARE. FINISHED WITH IT! All of it. Do I make myself clear? I’m sorry your dad died, and I’m sorry you’re ramping up and your dick is on fire. I didn’t pick the timing. Answer me!”

“I’m…Michael, I’m…FUCK!”

“Grow up, Dean!”

“I’M TRYING!”

Michael huffed in disgust and turned on his heel, descending the stairs two at a time to find Billie and return her tablet. He nearly ran right into Castiel.

“Michael? Is everything all right?” asked Cas in surprise.

“I’m sorry, Sir. Please excuse me. Here, this is Billie’s, there’s an article…thing…” Michael pressed the tablet into Cas’ hand and started into the back hallway, looking for a place to disappear to for a while.

“Be gentle with him right now, Michael,” Cas said, correctly guessing where the Omega’s annoyance stemmed from and pulling him to a stop with his voice. “He’s not doing it on purpose, and he’s not receiving any assistance. He can’t do it on his own. If we’re going to put him all the way through this to the end, then we need to be accepting no matter what it turns him into. He has no control over that.”

Michael pursed his lips, but he didn’t turn around. “And what about me, Sir? I’m not getting any either, or haven’t you noticed? And I’m not turning into a dick.”

“Yes, and I appreciate that more than you know, as would Dean if he weren’t swimming in Cortisol, but you and he aren’t the same.” Cas stayed behind Michael, allowing him some privacy to think and process. “Hang in there for just another day. Try to be patient.”

“And let him throw barbs at me? With no consequences?”

“If you like, we can share the whiteboard. Keep track and hold him to account later,” Cas suggested.

“No. I’m not doing anything like this again,” Michael announced, spinning on his heel. “He’s got a laundry list of shit piled up in his head, and he’s not going to let any of it go until he’s catatonic and bleeding out both eyes. It’s pay-as-you-go from now on. We’re not piling a bunch of shit together like this.”

Cas eyed him, confirming that he had Michael’s wolf fully engaged before him and not the careful
and deliberate human version of Dominant Omega. His eyes showed no sign of gold, and his chin was up and haughty. Interesting. Cas wondered if Michael had any control or awareness of which aspect took front stage.

“Do you need anything from me, Michael?” Cas asked, partially to encourage him to ask for help and partially to see how his wolf would react.

“Like what?” shot Michael without thinking.

“Dean’s in lock-down from any kind of ‘impactful’ discussion.” Cas used finger-quotes and a meaningful look. “But you aren’t. If you need it, I will see to your care. Would a spanking make you feel better?”

Michael couldn’t stop the loud scoff, nor the words. “I need someone to knot me, for fuck’s sake. I’m burning up! All a spanking’s going to do is light my ass on fire too, and then everything’s burning.”

“I’m not going to knot you. I abhor condoms, and I’m not willing to risk it this close to your Heat, but please consider my offer carefully. I believe it would help you find your feet again, and provide you the strength to push through the last day before you cycle.” Something about Castiel’s voice stroked the Omega deep inside Michael, but he threw off the feeling.

“With all due respect, Sir, I wasn’t asking for YOUR knot,” Michael snapped.

Castiel cleared his throat. “That wasn’t particularly respectful, Omega.”

“Yeah, well, sue me. Everything about today bites ass, and I’m going to excuse myself and take a nap by the pool. Wake me up if I start to burn.” Michael turned, but he didn’t get very far. Castiel’s hand appeared around his upper arm like a vice and stopped his forward motion.

“Come with me.”

“Oh, Jeez, really?! So Dean gets to be an asshole to everyone, and we all have to hold him with kid-gloves, but I don’t get any leeway at all? I’m just as keyed-up as he is!” Michael’s voice went up an octave in anticipation as he stumbled along with the Alpha.

Cas took him across the grand foyer into a rarely used room off to the right side, a smaller and more intimate version of their parlor; a delicate, over-decorated room built to allow Omegas to share tea with their neighbors when they came to call, back when people did things like call on their neighbors.

“I’m frequently intrigued by you, Michael,” Cas told him, releasing his arm and planting himself before the man. “Your wolf has a brat-streak in it that deliberately elicits a response meant to soothe the Omega. I think I’ve got it now. Your Omega may not get much face-time, but your other aspects are always watching out for him, meeting his needs. It’s quite an interesting dance you’ve got going on in there.”

“Fascinating,” Michael sniped, not looking at the Alpha, not ready to concede that he had wanted to but not known how to say yes to Cas’ offer.

Castiel set the tablet on a side-table, marking where he’d left it in his mind and hoping he would remember later when Billie couldn’t find the damned thing. Cas was forever losing items in the enormous house. He sat down in the middle of the over-stuffed flower-print sofa and lifted his right hand to Michael with a single eyebrow quirked up. He waited.
Michael ground his teeth. His last experience with Castiel’s punishments notwithstanding, the Omega hated spankings. His mind flew back to every swat he’d ever taken from his father, and how angry they’d made him. He rubbed his hands over his face in frustration, caught between two designations who wanted opposite things. It had to have been the wolf who brought him here. Michael was paying close enough attention to have realized who had control of his snarky mouth at the time, but the wolf had no desire to stay for the follow-through. If he could’ve, he would have preferred to hand the Omega off to Castiel for correction, and excuse himself entirely. That nap by the pool still sounded inviting.

The Omega twitched in eagerness. Last time Cas had touched him had been an epiphany, and he longed for the freedom that came with that kind of release.

“If you make me wait, I will add to the total,” Cas told him patiently. “It’s that simple. This is a very straightforward thing, Michael. You were rude to me, and I don’t accept rudeness from Omegas in my pack.”

Still the man hesitated, incapable of moving forward, incapable of pushing the wolf out of the way. All of those exercises from his training class meant nothing in the real world. Michael growled, and Castiel’s face went dark.

“One.”

That did it. Michael lurched forward into Castiel’s reach, and the Alpha’s hand closed around his wrist. Cas made short work of Michael’s bindings and bared him one-handed in quick-time. It occurred to Michael that Castiel had obviously done this a time or two. Michael’s erection popped free as his underwear hit the floor at his ankles. The fucker had been hard off and on for a couple of days now – thankfully not during the funeral, but not every instance had been easy to hide. Castiel ignored it. He pulled Michael over by the grip on his wrist and wasted no time laying into him. Cas struck him hard with a right hand that was well-accustomed to striking. Michael went stiff, yelped, and grabbed hold of Castiel’s calf and the arm of the couch, trying to get his balance both physically and emotionally.

Castiel breathed through his nose like a runner on a treadmill, measured and deep. His brow curled into his concentration that focused down onto Michael’s reddening cheeks and his thighs. Cas struck his thighs enough to make sure the sting would follow him as he walked and sat, but he really fixated on Michael’s ass. Again and again he rained powerful blows onto the man who lay rigid across his lap. Michael grunted into it and fought with himself. The Dominant wolf was angry – angry at being suppressed for so long, and angry that he’d been saddled with an internal partner who couldn’t hold his own without getting them both flayed regularly.

“I’m not going to stop until you take it from him, Omega,” Cas pointed out, bringing his hand down over and over. “Push the wolf out of the way, so you can take what you need, Michael. He’s in your way.”

“Fuck!” shouted Michael, wincing into the pain. “OW! SIR!”

Had Michael not been mere hours from Tripping over into Heat, his wolf would never even have tried to maintain his position, but he wasn’t getting out of the way, even in-place on the Alpha’s knee, a position he wanted nothing to do with as his backside burned and turned redder and redder. His erection flagged as the burn intensified. Cas pulled his own wolf up and growled into his strokes. The wolf’s voice wasn’t Castiel’s, and he spoke directly to Michael’s 19.

“How badly do you want to hurt, boy?” he asked rhetorically. “It’s completely up to you, Michael. You want your alpha to knot you with your ass covered in bruises? How Dominant would that make
you feel?”

Michael gasped at a particularly hard swat, and he clenched his eyes. The wolf snarled, but he had no footing against Castiel, and with a final cry, he stepped out. The Omega took his place. The switch was immediately evident in his body-language. Michael relaxed over Castiel’s lap, and his vocalizations went from deep angry grunts, to breathy whines and shallow panting. He clutched Cas’ calf tighter, and tucked his head into the cushion of the sofa, his thighs spread apart just a bit in submission. Cas took advantage of the access and aimed several blows at Michael’s sit-spots, pulling those whines up even higher in tone.

He stopped and rested his hand on Michael’s ass without notice or comment. He just stopped. He didn’t rub the sting out, and his heated hand against the heated flesh was an irritation, not a comfort. Michael didn’t squirm against it. He lay still.

“Better?” asked Castiel, not his wolf.

Michael whimpered, but he wasn’t crying. “Hurts,” he said succinctly.

“Yes, I know. But do you feel more centered? That was a downward spiral in the making, Michael. Have we stopped it?”

We? Cas threw that out there so casually, but it pulled Michael to a screeching halt in his brain. We.

He was still face-down in a submissive and humiliating pose with his shiny red backside naked and upturned. How was this a ‘We’? Michael clenched his eyes again and tried to grab hold of the thoughts skittering crazily through his mind. Was he part of the team here? Had he been deliberately complicit in the tanning of his own ass?

“Take all the time you need, Michael. Stand up when you’re ready. I’m in no hurry.”

Michael fought the urge to cry as Castiel’s words harkened back to Sam’s the first time he’d been swatted here in Lawrence for misdeeds he didn’t even know he was doing. Had Sam learned it from Cas, or were they just both so similar in presentation that they mirrored each other without knowing it?

Michael took a deep breath and took stock of himself physically. There was pain of course, and the throb refused to be ignored, but Michael looked past the obvious sensations. His crotch no longer burned with need – not for the moment anyway. His head felt clearer. The twitchy nerves that had been distracting him from any ability to focus on anything were gone. He turned his head slowly to the side. His eyes watered a bit, but they didn’t overflow. His nose was starting to run a little, making his voice sound stuffy.

“I needed that, didn’t I?”

Cas chuckled softly. “Yes, you did. Do you feel better?”

“Sir, there’s got to be a better way to snap out of it. There’s got to be.”

Cas moved his hand and tugged gently at Michael’s shoulder to get him moving. “We are still searching for a better way, but so far this is all we’ve got. It works as long as the Top knows what they’re doing.” Michael slid off and onto his knees to kneel at Castiel’s feet with his pants at his ankles. He rubbed a sleeved arm across his eyes, but accepted the tissue Castiel handed him to blow his nose. He struggled awkwardly to his feet and pulled his boxer-briefs and his slacks back into place with a muted demeanor.
Cas stayed on the couch and watched him, waiting to be sure he’d put the Omega back where he belonged.

“It’s not fair,” Michael groused quietly, and Cas tilted his head.

“Not fair that you can’t escape the need to be hurt to keep yourself stable?”

Michael looked away as his eyes filled with angry tears again. “It’s not fair.”

“No, it isn’t,” Castiel agreed.

He didn’t follow the simple statement up with a ‘But’. He didn’t explain to Michael that it was all even in the end or some such bullshit. He simply agreed. That helped. It helped a lot, and Michael took a deep breath and set his jaw. His training was all about acceptance and embracing and gaining familiarity with knowing who’s in front and who should be in front. His Omega was front and center right now, but even the Omega resented the unavoidable nature of those damned spankings. The Omega wasn’t submissive either, and he hated the humiliation despite craving the release desperately.

“On the other hand,” Cas finally continued, standing up and smoothing his slacks over his legs. “You can expect to find yourself in need like this very infrequently once you and your mate find ways to avoid chastity punishments.”

“Sir, I didn’t Release. I thought that was all about keeping me Balanced.” The capital letters were audible. Cas shook his head with a frown.

“No, this wasn’t about dealing with your Omesol production. It was a release of tension and aggression. I suspect that you’ll be able to take care of these lesser re-balances through sex as well under normal circumstances. Unfortunately, your mate’s restrictions took that option out of your hands and your fertility level meant that I have no freedom to take his place at the moment.”

“ Couldn’t I have just, you know, taken care of it myself?” Michael posed with his eyes down-cast.

“Well, yes,” Cas replied in surprise. “But you didn’t. You mouthed off at me instead. You might consider that next time you’re in need of a release of tension.”

Michael narrowed his eyes at Castiel slightly in frustration. Cas laughed at him.

“Pay attention to your tutors, Michael, and learn to listen to yourself from the inside. It’ll help you catch the spirals before you have to ask for help from me or someone else in the pack – that is, if you would like to avoid the need to go ass-up over someone’s lap. Not everyone chooses to evade that. Some people prefer it.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” shot Michael, adjusting his clothes and rubbing a hand over his ass to soothe the throbbing. “If I ever look like I prefer spanking to sex, shoot me.” Michael snatched the tablet off the table where Castiel set it and strode purposefully back to his guests with a deliberate set to his shoulders. Cas followed him with an affectionate gleam of amusement in his eye.

Michael went back to the kitchen through the dining room, checking over the food offerings to see
what needed replenishing. Everything was stocked and attractively arranged. Monica ran a cloth across the buffet and looked up at Michael in passing. She nodded respectfully to him and went back to her work.

Michael found a bowl of sliced apples marinating on the counter, and signs that someone was in the middle of prep for a pie. The kitchen was empty though.

“He’s in his workshop,” said Gabriel. Michael jumped a foot into the air. Jesus, how did the little prick keep popping up like that?

“Working on the table?” Michael asked as if he hadn’t just jumped out of his skin.

“Dunno. I’m not crazy enough to go in there. You people stirred him up like this – YOU deal with him.” Gabe snatched a cream puff from one of the platters staged to go into service, and slipped right back out the door.

Michael eyed the apples. They didn’t need a pie. There was enough food, including sweets, to cover the next six parties, but the bowl had a look about it, like it had been victim of the manic sweep of a man incapable of sticking to a single task for long, but incapable of sitting still.

Michael took another deep, grounding breath, and then shoved his better judgment into a corner and pushed through the garage door.

He watched Dean work for a few minutes before the alpha spotted his shoes, and hung his head onto the table’s surface, stilling his sander.

“What!” It was pure challenge.

“We need to talk about our cycles, Dean.”

“What?” said the Sub in surprise. “Why? All that shit pretty much takes care of itself.” The motor was still on, and the noise was deafening.

“Would you turn the sander off, please? I’d like to talk to you.” Michael’s patience pulled from a much deeper well now, but it wasn’t bottomless. The noise stopped abruptly, and Dean turned to set the sander on his workbench and came back with a damp cloth to clear off the sawdust, and evaluate his progress.

“I’m worried that we might both be so ramped up on Friday that we clash again like we did the first time we met. I want to cycle with you, Dean, not give you a black eye.”

Dean scoffed rudely at the idea that Michael could get the jump on him in a fair fight when he wasn’t taken completely off-guard. “So take the edge off now. Pick a side, man, front way or back. Either way, I’m game. I can smell you. You’re as eager for it as I am.”

Michael dug deep, reminding himself Dean wasn’t himself at the moment. “That won’t be necessary. I believe we can avoid an altercation with a little planning.”

“Altercation? Fuck, Cas is really rubbing off on you. Look, Michael, you know what? Bring it. You want to play rough and let your wolf go head-to-head with me, I’m totally on-board for that. I could use a little scuffle right now. I’m dyin’ here, and no one gives a shit.”

“No, that’s NOT what I want, alpha. What I want is for you to plant a pup in my belly. I don’t really want to be bleeding when you do that, if it’s all the same to you. I figure I can keep my Omega up front at first, and give you that, so we don’t get our wires crossed. But it might be difficult for me to
hold it for long if we’re not careful. The Heat’s gonna help, but I sometimes wolf out even when I’m in Heat. It’s just something that’s going to take careful management, that’s all.” Michael stayed well away from Dean physically, and he didn’t look at him any more than he had to. Dean had his shirt off. Sweat and sawdust coated his hairless chest.

“Wolf out, huh? You been watching too much TV?”

“Would you please take this seriously? Just for a minute?”

“What do you want, Sir?” Dean asked with a cheeky nudge at Michael’s wolf. “You wanna bend me over and send boy after boy in to rim my ass for you? Fuck me open to get me ready for you? You wanna put Adam to work sucking my cock hard and slick so I can ram my knot home in your ass and fill you up?” Dean stepped forward slowly, and Michael’s heart rate picked up, pumping his cock full and tenting his slacks. It caught Dean’s eye, and he smirked in triumph.

“Stop it, Dean. Remember why we’re doing it like this. Remember what you promised me.”

God, that was a lost cause. Dean was gone.

“There’s no reason we have to cycle behind a locked door, baby,” the brat continued with a sultry step closer. “Picture it: you and me up at The Facility with an open invitation and an open door in the contract wing. Put up velvet fucking ropes and get a bouncer.”

Michael grinned at the image. He couldn’t deny it made an enticing picture. He could select each and every touch to Dean’s flesh and how it was delivered, who delivered it, how it made Dean feel. He imagined sweeping them all gruffly aside once he couldn’t hold himself back any longer and staking his Claim in front of all of the salivating, desperate plebes who would never get more than a taste of Dean’s delectable body.

“Maybe next time,” he whispered as Dean reached him and slid trembling arms around Michael’s waist. “This time it’s just you and me.”

“Fuck me, baby. Please?” Dean begged, and Michael huffed in exasperation and dropped his head onto Dean’s shoulder.

“Here’s the thing,” he said clearly, lifting his head back up and searching Dean’s eyes for any sign he was still in there. “If that’s what you really want, I’ll do it. I’m not doing your work for you. But don’t press me into this and then blame me later if you didn’t get everything you needed. What do you NEED, Dean Michael?”

“I can’t make it until Friday. I’m in Rut, babe. I’m burning up here.” Dean pulled at Michael’s waist and ground his hips forward at the same time. Their erections flashed almost painfully at the contact, and Michael put his hands on Dean’s hips, and pulled him in.

“You’re not in Rut. Not yet. You still have a day or two to go before you fall over the edge. Think it through. Get your mind outta your pants for a minute and use your upstairs brain. Can you honestly say you’re ready?”

“What’s it feel like to you, Michael? Do I feel ready?” Dean rutted into his mate harshly, but Michael stopped helping. He could feel Dean’s emotions, and there was something still off about him, not simply wound up from neglect, but hurting with remorse. Dean wasn’t ready. Michael’s ass gave a hearty throb, and Dean caught on, moving his hand lower to knead the sore muscle and re-awaken the sting.

“You lied to me,” he reminded Dean. “You used me. You broke your word to me. You took me for
“granted.”

“Michael!” Dean cried desperately, clinging to him but stilling his hips.

“What?”

“I’m sorry! God, I’m so fucking sorry! I don’t deserve you, man. I fuck up everything. I’m such a fucking loser!”

“Why don’t you deserve me, Dean?”

“I’m nothing. Nothing compared to you. Fuck, I want you so bad, but…”

“But what?”

“But I’m gonna screw it all up some day. I’m gonna hurt you so bad, and I’m never gonna be able to make it up to you. I don’t wanna hurt you!” Dean lowered his height by bending his neck and hunching his back to bury his face in Michael’s chest, holding him firmly by the hips.

“Bullshit!” Michael declared, pulling Dean’s chin up. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me. I’m not going anywhere. So you might hurt me. So what? You think you have some kind of a monopoly on fuck-ups? You think it’s all on YOU to be perfect all the time? You think we’re never gonna make mistakes as parents, or siblings, or uncles, or mates? You think you have some kind of fucking mandate to live without sin? Who the fuck do you think you are? You’re not God, Dean. Grow up.”

“Quit fucking telling me to grow up, all right!” Dean snapped at him. “This is complicated personal stuff!”

Michael raised a single skeptical eyebrow in question. “Complicated personal stuff?”

“Fuck you, you know what I mean.” Dean dropped his hold and paced away.

“Everyone’s got demons, babe. You don’t hold a corner on the market of personal anguish. You think it matters whether we ‘deserve’ each other or not? What the fuck does that even mean? God, all I ask of you is that you try, man. Just try. Try to stick it out with me. Try to raise a family. Don’t leave and don’t give up. Help me stay balanced. Play with me. Fight with me. That’s all. That’s all I ask. You don’t even have to love me, if you don’t love me. Is that too much to ask?”

“How is that any different than what Castiel wants from me?” Dean frowned.

“Well, I imagine it’s kind of important to him that you love him back because he’s lost on you. And plus, he’s not going to get any pups outta you. Hate to break it to you, but you’re not built for it.” The dig was on purpose, but Michael winced anyway when he felt how deeply it hurt Dean. He needed Dean to feel himself hit rock bottom. He needed Dean to find an end that was really the end.

“You don’t care if I love him more than I do you,” said Dean meanly, retribution for Michael’s swipe.

Michael didn’t rise to the bait. Castiel’s hard hand had its uses, and Michael held onto his patience and kept his eye on the target. “Of course I care, Dean, but you don’t owe me that. You are my Mate, not my spouse. Let’s not get the two confused. You know, you two could have married years ago. You just needed to mate a couple of bland, compliant ‘close-enoughs’ and shuffled them off to the side, keep them on as employees, keep them handy for balance and family and chemical equilibrium. This is totally on you two fucking up the dynamic by bringing in True-Mates to muddy
the water. The problem is, you like me too much. You’re getting me mixed up with him in your head.”

“Shut up. This is not helping,” Dean interjected. “We’re not like that, and you know it.”

“I know. And that’s the whole point. You AREN’T garbage, Dean Michael Winchester. You are beautiful and honorable. You are loving and deserving of being loved, and you’re carrying all kinds of bullshit around inside you. Let it go, baby. Let it all go. It’s bullshit.”

Dean looked up at him, still torn, still stirred up, but stubbornly back in place in front where his eyes had a red rim around them.

“Are we waiting until Friday?” Michael posed, sliding an easy one over the plate to his mate.

Dean took an easy swing at it. “We’re waiting. Be Omega for me on Friday, and I’ll make you feel so good, you’ll have aftershocks for weeks.”

“That’s my boy,” praised Michael, scooping Dean up close again. “I know it’s not easy for you…”

“Yeah, I noticed you didn’t wait for me,” huffed Dean with another pass over Michael’s butt.

“I’m not on a black-out like you are. Your body needs a break every now and then, alpha.”

Michael held him for several minutes. John’s Memorial service took a lot out of Dean on top of everything, and he seemed to have cried all he needed to for a while, but he was tired, and he was close enough to the edge that a light gust of wind might blow him over. He needed Castiel. Nothing Michael could provide him ever filled all the dark places the way Cas could. “We’re sleeping Pack-style again tonight, baby. You’re not working tomorrow. You smell too strong to go out in public.”

Dean snorted, and Michael guessed he had a point. This close, it was a constant struggle to keep from giving in, but they had their reasons even if their wolves didn’t understand.

“I’ll be keeping my distance all day tomorrow and through noon on Friday. If you need me, come find me. You make the call if you need to shorten the timeline. All of our rules will be suspended once we close the door. You are free to touch any part of yourself and any part of me. I’m planning to Present to you – as an Omega. It won’t be as much of a struggle once my Heat really hits, in fact, I probably won’t be able to stop myself. It gets embarrassing how desperate I can get at the beginning. Do you have anything to add?” Michael held Dean out by his shoulders.

Dean struggled. “I’m in my wolf, babe. I need a jump-start to get out of it. I don’t wanna knot you as a Sub. That’d just be…”

“Be kind of hot, if you ask me,” Michael suggested. “Me an Omega, and you a Sub…seems kinda kinky.”

“I’m serious.”

“It’s not going to be a problem, Dean. Think about it. You need a jumpstart? I’ll be on my hands and knees with my channel leaking down my thighs. You think you’re going to have a problem responding to that?”

“Oh, Jesus!” Dean keened.

“Exactly. Now, go get cleaned up. Get back in there and finish my pie. That IS for me, isn’t it?” Michael wanted so badly to lick Dean’s bare shoulder, to bite him and renew the Claim mark that
refused to scar. He would be putting it back soon.

“Yup. You want raspberries in it?”

“I want Lingonberries in it,” teased Michael, pulling away.

“Asshole. I don’t have lingonberries. What the fuck is a lingonberry?”

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Castiel found April scribbling furiously on a piece of music spread out amongst a mass of printed pages across the card table in the Conservatory.

“You’re neglecting our guests,” he told her with a kiss to her head and a one-armed side-hug.

“Ten more minutes, Sir. Please, this is important!”

“What are you working on?” Cas frowned and tilted his head to attempt to read the scratches across the musical staff. “Is this another song?”

“No, not exactly. It’s a violin piece. I’ve almost got it. I just need ten more minutes.” She dodged his eye and ducked beneath his arm.

“April, I need you out front. Dean and Michael have disappeared. Sam’s holding down the fort on his own, and he’s wiped out. Please come with me, Omega.” It wasn’t the request that it sounded like.

“Watcha need, baby brother?” Gabe swooped in, taking Cas by the arm and tugging him away from April. “You need more baby quiches? I can run the microwave.”

“We don’t need quiche, Gabriel. We need a hostess.”

“I can be hostess,” he offered cheerfully.

“What’s going on?” Castiel asked April over Gabe’s head. She’d gone back to furious scribbling.

“I just need ten more minutes, Sir. I’m afraid I’ll forget what’s in my head, and then it will all fall apart.”

“You’re composing?” he asked, pulling one of the sheets toward himself.

“No, it’s Nick’s piece. I’m just adding a little touch here and there.”

“Nick’s piece? Nicholas Maraby?”

Gabriel took Cas’ face in his hand and swiveled it to look at the Omega. “Give her ten more minutes, Cas. This is important to her, and it’s nearly finished.”

Cas stared in bewilderment. April’s emotions were awash with excitement and enthusiasm, and anxiety. He backed up without looking and sat with a plunk on the couch under the window. April glanced up and met his eye, but then went back to work. Her pencil flew over the page. Every now and then she played a snippet on the keyboard in front of her on the table. Gabriel hovered for a
minute to make sure Cas wasn’t going to interrupt anymore, then he joined Cas on the couch.

“What’s going on?” Cas whispered to his brother again.

“She’s a genius, and she’s on fire right now. Sit there and stay out of the way or get up and leave. If you interrupt her again, you’ll have to go through me,” Gabe whispered back fiercely.

Cas watched his mate work. She had to keep shoving a strand of hair behind her ear, but it wouldn’t stay. He wanted to hold it for her. He wanted to curl over her back and move with her. He caught the discreet half-smile on her face as she keyed into him, but she didn’t pause or look up.

“What does Nicholas need from April?” Cas whispered again.

“Fuck if I know. It’s some kind of folk-music Appalachian fiddle thing. It sounds like country-fair to me, but it’s got her juices flowing, and the two of them have been texting back and forth all day.”

“Fiddle thing…” Cas murmured to himself in wonder. She was supposed to be concentrating on her audition piece, but she looked so alive bent over the table, tapping out a strange pulse on the keyboard and mumbling to herself. Hadn’t Nicholas said he was writing a Scottish period piece? Had he pulled April into that?

Ten minutes came and went. “Time’s up, Kitten. I need you to put the pencil down for a while. You have Pack responsibilities.” Cas stood up. Gabe pressed his lips tightly together.

“NO! Sir, Please!” she protested, scribbling faster. “I’ll pay for it! Put a mark on my board. Put ten! I’ll pay for it. Please don’t make me stop yet!”

“APRIL!”

She froze mid-word and clamped her mouth closed.

Gabriel growled. “It’s not an Omega thing, Cas. It’s a HUMAN thing! She’s not defying you, but she NEEDS this. You know why she doesn’t talk to you? Because you put everything into a framework of A/B/O. You get to choose to break the framework whenever you need to because you’re the king of everything. Do you have any idea what it’s like to have no choices?” April never stopped working, but she sniffled in frustration. “Do you know how creativity works? Do you know what it’s like to have a muse sing to you inside your head, but then stop and refuse to give you anything more? She can’t do this later. She’ll lose it, and it will be gone forever.”

“We all have responsibilities, Gabe!”Cas protested vehemently. “I have a house full of people who want to be a part of the grief of this household. That’s not something to take lightly. We can’t ALL blow them off. Sometimes we all have to put aside what we’d rather do and go do what we must.”

“He wasn’t HER father, Cas! Go get Dean. Has it occurred to you that it’s unjust to let the alpha hide and force the Omega to step up? Has it occurred to you that you’ve got the idea of ‘doing what you must’ backwards?” Gabe challenged his brother’s sense of righteousness, but Cas wasn’t falling for that ploy.

“Dean’s not stable at the moment, and he stinks to high heaven. It’s not the same thing at all.”

“Yes, it is. You’re putting the alpha’s needs ahead of the Omega’s. I thought we didn’t do that in this pack.”

“It’s not that simple, Gabriel. Don’t you accuse me of favoritism in my own pack. I’m not prejudiced.”
“Prove it,” Gabriel jabbed. “Walk away. You don’t need her there. You don’t need an Omega that you survived perfectly well without up until six months ago to play hostess for you. You’re just being prideful.” April stifled a sob into her work, but she didn’t slow down.

Cas glared at his brother.

“You don’t have to hold the reins that tightly every second of the day, Cas,” Gabriel whispered bravely. “Loosen up a little bit. She needs this.” Cas’ eyes went distant as he listened to the frantic motion of his mate inside his head. It was all a complete mystery to Castiel, like a foreign language.

Cas snapped his eyes to Gabriel, and then focused on his mate. “You have 30 minutes, and then I expect you in the parlor. I will add three marks to your board for defiance.”

“Thank you, Sir!” she cried in relief, flipping her pencil and erasing before delving back into the keyboard.

Cas left in a huff, unsure if he was angry at his mate, his brother, or himself. Gabriel winked at April, who stifled another sob, and he followed the king of everything out the door expecting he’d probably earned a tally-mark or two for himself as well. It was worth it.

Cas held the phone to his ear and tried to keep up with Nicholas in his enthusiastic babbling – something about how he had been certain the fiddle needed to stand on its own until April threw a cello beneath it and put life into the theme. “She’s not pregnant, is she Cas? I need to fly her out here so we can work together. I need her, man. I had it all jacked up to hell. Everyone kept telling me it was perfect as it was, but it was absolute CRAP until April took a crack at it. I’ve got three other pieces I want her to look at. Fuck it all, Cas, she’s the only one who’ll tell me the truth!”

“NO!” Cas thundered. “Absolutely not. She’s 18 years old, and she’s going to school in the fall. She needs to focus on her audition. Quit sending her distractions, Nick.”

“What are you, her dad?” snarked Nicholas.

“Not your call…” Gabe whispered as he passed Castiel in the kitchen with a tray of mixed drinks. Cas slapped him upside the head, but Gabe snickered and kept the tray balanced. The post-Memorial get-together was turning into quite a party. It was rare that the manor house opened its doors to all-comers, and they were certainly coming. Neighbors who hadn’t darkened those doors in forty years despite living within walking distance poked uncertainly in. Sam and Jess had been separated by the throng, each fielding wave after wave of mournful well-wishers. Their status as newly adoptive parents leaked out and became a new topic of conversation. Bobby kept an eye on them, but he let the crowd evolve as it would. They were both young and hardy, and they needed this.

Castiel hung up the phone as Andrea approached him to say goodbye. “She’s tired,” Benny noted by way of excuse. Castiel hugged her, thanked her, and told her to get some rest. He resisted touching her belly where her twins bulged starkly between them. “I’m going to run her home,” Benny continued. “But I’ll be right back. Looks like you could use a few more hands. Where’s your boy?”

“Dean’s not feeling well,” Cas said absently with an arm still around Benny’s pregnant mate.
Benny laughed. “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

“He just lost his father, Benny. Maybe you could cut him some slack,” Cas told him with a kiss to Andrea’s cheek to ease the sting.

“You know I love Dean almost as much as you do, Alpha,” Benny said. “I don’t mean anything by it. You need me to pick up anything on my way back?”

“Michael’s taken care of everything,” Cas gloated with a look around, proud of the Omega, proud of the job he was doing. Benny accepted the answer and guided his mate toward the door.


“Hey, Benny!” Cas called, and Benny turned back around in the doorway. “Am I too controlling?”

“Oh, shit! Are we having this talk right now?” Benny exclaimed. “I’m gonna need a hell of a lot more gin, cher.”

***************

Benny was true to his word, like always, and he returned after running his mate home to rest. The party shifted into high gear once the cocktails began to flow, but it kept an air of somberness. There were still tears here and there. There were still moments of sadness when a story came out that hit a delicate spot, and the mourners shared an uncomfortable minute of awkwardness until they all pulled themselves back together. But there was laughter as well, and it felt really good. Dean emerged, still fidgety and short-tempered, still reeking despite the scent-blockers, but determined to finish strong. Michael gave him a wide berth. The Omega was close, but not as close as Dean. His scent was enticing, but not yet inciteful. Eyes followed him wherever he went, but an alpha would have to be suicidal to make a move on Michael in this house.

Gabriel stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Bobby watching him work his way through the room, and tried to lay bets on who would do the most damage to any would-be rapists: Dean, Cas, or Michael himself. Bobby put his hands up in surrender. “I’m not taking that bet, Gabe. Might just be a three-way tie, and an unidentifiable bloody carcass.”

The guests finally began to thin out, leaving a small group of stalwarts around the wet-bar in the down-stairs billiard room. It was a man-cave of classic dimensions. Dean was losing miserably at darts to Sam. He gave up after striking the plaster wall for the fourth time, and joined Cas. Cas widened his thighs on his barstool to let Dean lean back against his chest and rest the edge of his ass on the front of the stool. Cas put an arm around his waist and handed him a beer that Bobby slid to them from his place behind the bar.

Gabe leaned over the billiard table, idly bouncing balls off the far end. Benny watched him from his bar-stool with a look of concentration and worry on his face.

“Out with it, Benedict,” Cas said into the quiet.

“Everything’s about to change, fellas,” he declared. “Are we ready for that? Does it fit into the plan?”

“We don’t have a lot of choice,” sighed Dean, the multiple beers chilling him out a little. His mate
had taken April and gone to bed. Not having that scent in the room helped a lot too.

Benny nodded. “We can’t stop the changes, but we could royally fuck up how we respond to it. This is like the crossroads we stood at five years ago when we had to decide whether to expand or not. We gotta figure out who we are and where we’re headed. I know we need the cash, but if this merger thing doesn’t take us in the right direction, we’re not doing it.”

“It’s more than just the merger, though,” Cas pointed out. “We’re at a crossroads with multiple dimensions. We need to hand a large portion of the operational responsibilities to the next generation, and step out. We’ve become too large to pretend we can continue to do everything ourselves. Dean and I have a family to focus on now. Bobby’s talking retirement. Benny’s got two pups on the way.”

He nodded at each as he listed the upcoming shifts in everyone’s focus.

“God knows I’ve made a mess of things on the financial side, and I’ve put us in a hole we may not be able to dig out of.”

Dean leaned back into him, shushing him in comfort. “It’s not that bad, Cas. We can do this, I promise.”

Cas shook his head. “The point is, you’re right. We need to grow up as an organization. None of us wants to, but we need to take our own hands out of the daily work and focus on the management. It’s the only way we’re going to guarantee the survival of the Facility we all love.”

“Cas,” Benny started, but then he faltered. Everyone seemed to know where he needed to take his point, and they all went still. Gabriel caught the ball and held it. Castiel breathed into Dean’s neck.

“We got a lot of options, Alpha. We need to consider all of them,” Benny said at last.

“You’re talking about liquidating The Facility,” Cas said for all of them. “If we can’t do what we want to do, maybe it’s better to take the pieces that we can keep up with and separate them out, take each piece solo, split up our specialties.”

“Split up the team?” Dean asked. He hadn’t seen this coming, but it looked like he was the only one.

“You remember what Jim Murphy said in Boston, Dean? If we can’t do this safely, ensuring that the bad guys can never take control, then we don’t have any business doing it at all. I can’t think of any way to make absolutely sure the bad guys can’t get in and take over. You know what I did. You know what Bobby did, and Gabriel.” Gabe stood up straight, a protest on his lips, but the power of the Alpha kept him silent. “We’re the good guys. We’re the good guys, and we still lost our way. It’s not just a question of insolvency or striking a good balance between work and home. We’re at a crossroads, and we need to figure out if we move forward, or we call it off.”

“Call it off!? Do you know how many people depend on us?” Dean asked him, spinning to look at his Alpha’s face. Dean was really not in the right frame-of-mind for this conversation.

“Last crossroads,” Bobby said, “We took it down to a single question: How can we help the most people without sacrificing the ones we’re already touching? All we gotta do is figure out our question this time. What’s at issue, down at the core of it?”

“That’s easy,” said Dean, holding his alpha out front with shaky fingers on its shoulder-blades. “The question is: What comes next?”

“Does anyone want out?” Cas asked, braver than he felt. “Is anyone starting to feel their commitment waver? We still have a long way to go. There’s no dishonor is stepping back to focus on a different part of all of this. I know that each one of you has reasons that continuing forward might not be the
best thing for him personally.”

Sam leaned on the bar. By all rights he shouldn’t be here for this, but he couldn’t make himself leave. He caught Gabriel’s eye and got a confirmation. Gabe wasn’t leaving either.

Benny scoffed. “I don’t want out, Alpha, but I can’t keep taking the blindsides. If you want a commitment from me, then you need to start us off. You need me to clarify?”

“Jesus, Benny,” Dean mumbled.

“No, shut-it, Dean. He knows what I’m talking about, don’t you Cas? And it’s not just about writing blank checks.” Benny was going for broke. One of the best things about Benny was that when the time came, he never minced words. No one ever left a critical meeting with Benny unsure of where he stood or what he needed.

“Would you follow me if I accept a CEO position over Keller and ACRI in merger?” Cas asked.

“CEO? No,” stated Benny flatly. “Director of Operations over both, yes. But only if you fuckin’ clean up your act and fly straight. I never signed on for this under-the-table crap that Bobby’s got going on. I swear, if any of you pull another scheme like that shit again, I’m out for good. I can’t raise my pups and look at myself in the mirror and be a part of that. You hear me, Singer? Novak?”

“Winchester,” Cas corrected him quietly, and Sam snorted an aborted laugh.

Benny glared at Sam. “Sorry, alpha,” said Sam softly, trying to melt into the polished wooden bar.

“So, step number one of ‘What comes next’,” Dean clarified, “Is we recommit to keeping it all above-board. I’m down with that. If we can’t do it right, we don’t do it. Gabe?”

“I hear ya, alpha. I’ll behave.”

“You think it’s that easy?” Bobby asked.

“No, I think if it were easy, you would’ve been keeping your nose clean the whole time,” Dean conceded. “You’re not a killer, man. You’re weighing all the shitty options, and sometimes you make the tough call. Thing is, we’re asking you to stop making those calls on your own, when it’s all our asses on the line.”

“Exactly, only we’re not asking,” declared Benny.

“Step number two of ‘What comes next’ is how do we keep the lights on, and do we keep the band together or Blues’ Brothers this bitch?” Dean asked, looking around. “It’s a commitment of at least another five years, fellas. Bobby, you got five more years in your old bones?”

“Yes, you little prick! I’m not that old.”

“Retirement’s looking pretty tempting though, ain’t it?” Benny put in.

“I can commit to ten more years, Alpha,” Bobby told Cas, ignoring the other two. “That puts me at retirement age plus a little, but I’m in good shape, and I’m not much of a fisherman anyway.”

“With a promise to clean up your act?” Cas prompted.

“Et tu, Castiel?”

“Answer the question, Singer,” demanded Benny, not accepting any waffling.
“You two already have that commitment from me! I don’t know what else you think you need to hear me say! You need me to bend over and take the Sub’s knot too?” Bobby went red-eyed and red-faced.

Cas opened his mouth, but Benny got there first. “You don’t get to go as far off the reservation as we found you and then bitch about being pulled up tight. Answer. The fucking. Question.”

“Yes! I will toe the line. I will bring every critical decision to the Leadership Team, unless the Leadership Team evolves to include Crowley, and then Fuck That!”

Benny burst out laughing, and Castiel couldn’t help but follow him. He didn’t like Fergus Crowley either, and he could only imagine putting a rescue-strategy decision before the crafty beta. That wasn’t ever going to happen.

“So Bobby’s in,” Dean picked up the loose thread and put them back on track. “Ben? You got twin daughters on the way. You in for another 5-to-10?”

Benny looked down at his drink. “I need to cut back. Andrea needs me at home more than I’ve been. I’m not gonna leave her to do this alone. But, yeah. I’m in. Solid commitment, Alpha. I’m in. I’m hitching back up with you like I’ve always done. Don’t fuck it up.”

“Thank you, Benny. I’ll do right by you. You’ve got my word. And no more blank checks,” Cas told him seriously.

“Yeah, cause you don’t have a fucking checkbook,” mumbled Benny, taking a drink. Sam’s eyes went wide. Wow. Now THAT was a reason to stay in the room.

“All right, then. I’m in too,” Dean announced. “I’m shifting gears though. I need more time at home as well. From now on I’ve got two roles: Write curriculum, and execute curriculum. I’ll do some teaching here and there, but I’m pulling back to supervise the team more than taking classes myself. No research, no testing, no scening. You guys put me on whatever committees you want my input for, but that’s it. I’m a fucking manager now, Goddamnit. You happy?”

“What about the seminars and conventions,” Sam asked, hoping his input was welcome.

“Yeah, we still need those, Sammy. That’s how we drum up new business and keep our momentum going. I’m not cutting back on Cons.” Dean nodded at Sam, who looked relieved. The conventions wouldn’t be anything without Dean.

“That just leaves you, Alpha,” Benny said.

“Committing to moving forward seems to include a commitment to cutting back for all of us. I’m no exception. My passion and my vision have not dimmed. I’m grateful to all of you for staying the course with me, but the truth is, I would find a way to do it alone if I had to. I thank the Universe in all its wisdom that that won’t be necessary.” Cas took a breath.

“Keep it on this plane, Alpha,” Benny teased, sensing that Cas was ready to launch into High Elvish in tone as he did when the moment felt propitious.

Cas looked offended, but he tempered himself. “Thanks for sticking it out with me, all of you. I promise to redouble my focus and to narrow my field of vision. I’ve been trying to manage too much on my own, and as you’ve all seen, I suck at it. Step three of ‘What comes next’ needs to be for each of us to name a successor. I want everyone training a replacement, and I want all of us free to take a step higher on the ladder within the next two years, no matter where that ladder takes us.”
“Replacement?” repeated Dean.

“Yes. A replacement for your position in the Leadership Team, not as co-owner,” Cas clarified.

“Do we have to follow some H.R. job-posting mumbo-jumbo?” Bobby asked, thinking.

“I don’t see why. It’s still OUR company,” Cas answered him.

“Good,” said Bobby. “Then I choose Ellen.”

“Christ, that was fast,” said Dean in surprise. “You don’t wanna put a little thought in it?”

“Nope,” Bobby answered. “This is the key to keeping the keys to the kingdom outta the hands of the bad guys. You set a precedent where each Leader selects and hand-grooms his successor over the course of a couple of years. It won’t be fool-proof, but it buys us some time to chew on it.”

“Fine,” said Dean. “I choose Jo.”

“Of course you do,” laughed Benny. It was bordering very close to nepotism in this room, and the lawyers were going to have questions, but Cas was right. They were still a private company, and they weren’t liable to follow all the laws that the big corporations were bound to. “I guess it’s my turn.” Benny put a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “You ready, Pikachu?”

“Uh, yeah, I’m ready, if we can dispense with the Pokémon references,” Sam stuttered. “You mean it?”

“You got a better idea?” Benny asked. “Of course, you’ll have to stop pretending you’re part of the Training department, and you’ll have to go back to school and get your PhD. A Master’s isn’t gonna swing it, brother.”

“Jesus, Benny. I don’t know what to say.”

“We’ll figure it out later,” the alpha told him. “No pressure, Cas,” said Benny to the Alpha at the far end of the bar. “Got any ideas? Need to sleep on it?”

Castiel shook his head. He felt good about their selections. They were shifting from a team of all male alphas to a much more diverse team with a wide swing of experience and viewpoints. Ellen and Jo being mother and daughter, and Sam being related to one of the company owners…it wasn’t perfect. But it was better than where they started. And Bobby was right. None of those people would ever allow someone like Alistair or Gordon to hijack the place. They were at least as fiercely committed to the well-being of the clients as Cas was.

“I don’t need to sleep on it,” he answered Benny. “I’ve known for a long time that I wanted Billie to be my successor if I had any choice in the matter.”

“The media girl?” Gabriel asked in surprise. Clearly, he had missed something if his brother’s smirk meant anything at all. Gabe was pleased to know Cas could still surprise him sometimes.

“She’s much more than a media girl, big brother,” Cas told him.

“Are we done?” asked Dean.

“Are we serious about joining forces with the Keller Foundation?” Benny asked. Their lawyers had checked in this afternoon and confirmed, Keller wanted to start talks.

“Dean?” Cas said.
“Why are you putting this on me?” asked the alpha-Sub with a splutter.

“Three guesses,” Bobby said under his breath. Dean raised his brows at the alpha behind the bar, but Bobby refused to elaborate. Everyone was looking at him.

“Fuck. Fine. Jesus, you people are fucking cowards. Yes. All right? You wanna know which way we move from here? This is it. This is our ticket. Cas?” he turned and met the Alpha’s eyes.

“Everything you want to do lies down THIS road, even with Crowley in the mix. Don’t take anything less than the full rudder, though. You’re not chairing a committee here. You take ownership, or we walk away.”

“Guys?” Cas asked, letting Dean fall back into place against him.

“Yep,” said Benny.

“You heard what the man said,” confirmed Bobby.

“Then, I think that about covers it,” Cas declared, effectively ending the meeting.

“Good. Cause I’m about ready to peel my skin off,” Dean retorted pushing himself out of the V of Cas’ legs. “Hey, Benny, do a brother a favor and fuck me raw. What d’ya say? Please?”

Cas aborted the swift movement of his hand at the last minute and clenched his fist rather than swat his bratty Sub. “Say goodnight, Dean,” he told his fiancé.

“Nooo! Come on, Cas. I need to get laid. I’m dying here. I mean it! You’re gonna wake up tomorrow, and I’ll be dead.”

“Bed!” The Alpha commanded and didn’t try to stop the hard swat that landed on the seat of Dean’s ass. Two weeks. Dean couldn’t contain himself swat-free for two weeks. He griped all the way up the stairs as Cas followed close behind, and Gabe let the guests out the front door. Sam trudged up the stairs behind the bickering couple with a shake of his head, his mind on figuring out how to balance twins with a PhD thesis and thrilled that that was his new problem.

Chapter End Notes

A very big thank you to Melodina and majesticduenk for teaching me how to add links to my work. I'm teachable, barely. Y'all are the best!

See you on the other side, although editing is a constant, and commenting goes on all the way through, sometimes even while I'm supposed to be working. Shhh! Discuss away.

Love my pack!
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

Close. They are so, so close.

Chapter Notes

In what turned out to be a massive failure in asserting my own will over my stubborn characters, all they wanted to do was talk. Well, they WANTED to do more, but they just flat refused to get there. This puts us at a record-breaking 63 chapters of a H/R fic with virtually no H or R. WTF is up with that?

On the other hand, I had not expected to have time to eke out any writing yet anyway, so this is kind of a freebie. One more week to go before I get some real time off.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 63 – Thursday, July 6, 2017

NOW:

No one slept well. The pack bed was a snake-pit of miserable squirming bodies thumping against one another, all elbows and knees and frustrated huffs. Castiel gave up at 1:30, sending Dean to sleep downstairs in the H/R room and sending Michael to his own bed. As much as he wanted to be there for both of them, he needed sleep. Not everyone could afford to take the day off tomorrow.
“Will you be all right by yourself, Dean?” Cas asked him as the Sub paused in the dark doorway, his pillow tucked under his arm, his hair askew. Michael was already gone.

“I’m not gonna be all right anywhere, man. At least this way, the rest of you can sleep. Sorry about the smell.”

“You smell just fine to me, baby,” Cas assured him. “But this is always the hardest time of all. Just hang in there one more day.”

“Yeah. I know. I just feel like such crap. I wanted it to be good, you know, for Michael; first cycle and all. I wanted to do it right, but now I’ll be lucky if I can even keep up with him. I feel like I’m gonna puke.” Dean leaned out the doorway and glanced down the hall where the light under Michael’s door had already winked out.

“Relax, Dean,” said Cas untangling himself from the bedding and sliding up to his fiancé. “You always become nauseated just before the cycle really hits. This is normal for you. It’ll pass. Go downstairs. Turn on the hormone sensors. Sip some water, and try to get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be rough.”

Dean sighed and leaned his forehead against Castiel’s shoulder. He could feel April watching him with sympathetic eyes from the darkened bed. All things considered, her lot was so much worse than his, and he wanted to keep that in perspective, but he didn’t have the strength in his miserable exhaustion.

Cas continued. “I’m working from home tomorrow.” Dean huffed a protest, but Cas cut him off with a squeeze to his arm. “I want you with me in my office. Will you kneel for me tomorrow, baby? Do you think you can sit still for a while and practice your breathing patterns?”

Dean nodded. That might help. A bit. He wondered how Cas was controlling himself around the thickening miasma of Rut-scent. By this point in cycles past, Dean and Cas normally would have relieved a bit of the building pressure for each other. It had to be almost as much a struggle for Cas as it was for Dean. Dean supposed Cas still had April, and he didn’t exactly begrudge his fiancé the alternative. Not exactly.

“Dean, baby, if it gets to be too much…no one’s going to fault you if you want to start early, if you need that. Don’t hurt yourself just on principle. Promise me you’ll let Michael know.”

“NO! I’m seeing this through, Cas! I said I would, and I will. Don’t give me an out right now. That’s not what I need. God, please.” Dean stepped back a little to meet Castiel’s concerned eyes.

“Two hours ago you were begging Benny to do it,” Cas reminded him.

“That was just bitching because I feel like shit. I wouldn’t have gone through with it, and you know it. Jesus, it’s not like you would’ve just stood aside and let me, and Benny doesn’t swing that way.”

“Why are you so adamant, Dean? Why is it so important that you make it through one more day? I know you feel you deserved a stiff punishment, but Michael and I, we both feel you’ve been punished enough. Christ, Dean, you’re making it so much worse than it has to be. It’s enough.” Cas grimaced in frustration. His beloved brat was so stubborn. “Isn’t it enough already?”

Dean didn’t answer. He leaned in and pecked a gentle kiss to Cas’ chapped lips, and then he winked without any light in his green eyes and disappeared with his pillow. Cas sighed and shook his head, turned back to his mate and slipped into bed beside her. She coiled up into the nest of his body and went instantly to sleep. His hand traced a light circle low on her belly, but he didn’t sleep for a long
Hannah came to the house in the morning and locked herself into the play room with Michael. She tried to keep things lighter than usual, spending the day just talking – no contact, no nudity, no positions, no exercises. Michael was on edge. Halfway through the morning, his eyes glazed over, and he disappeared inside himself. The smell of fresh slick filled the room before he snapped out of it with a startle and a growl. “I closed the bond,” he confessed to Hannah.

“That’s probably for the best right now, Omega,” she reassured him. “If you’re not going to do anything about it, there’s no reason to torture each other.” There was an unsaid portion left hanging in the air between them – why wasn’t Michael moving to do anything about it? She didn’t ask, but he knew she wanted to. Dean was so close to Tripping, all it would take would be a deep, filthy kiss or a little light dry-humping, and he would topple over into all she wrote. Michael’s body would likely respond within half a day.

“Look, I know you’re not the Dom-trainer here, but can I ask you a question about D & S?” he broke down and asked.

“Of course. You may ask me anything. If I don’t know how to answer it, I will ask someone who does.” She settled onto a squishy chair and leaned back comfortably.

“Where does it become Sub-abuse if we keep putting Dean off? He can’t regulate himself, and he’s been begging for help. But then, when we talk to him about it, he keeps going back on himself and telling us he needs to see it through. At what point do we, as Doms, have the responsibility to step up and say it’s not his call? It seems clear that his judgment is compromised. At what point does it become dangerous or neglectful?”

“I thought you were on board with this punishment,” she said quietly. “You seemed thrilled at first.”

“Well yeah,” he retorted. “At first. But Dean’s…He’s not like other Subs. I don’t know if it’s because he’s so close to Tripping into Rut, or if he’s just that needy. Sorry, ‘needy’ isn’t the right word. He’s…he’s different.” Michael floundered. “Castiel seems so blasé about the whole thing, like he’s done this many times before, but Dean said they’ve never tried to pull off two weeks. And, I mean, crap, his dad just died. It’s starting to feel like way too much.”

“Michael, your concern is a good sign. You’re paying close attention to your Submissive, and you care for him deeply. Your impulse to step in and call a halt to this punishment shows that you’re flexible and responsive as a Dominant, and that it’s his well-being, not his compliance to an arbitrary time-limit, that you’re focusing on. Those are all positive signs. What you have to look at is the big picture here. As a Sub and an alpha, Dean Winchester is entirely capable, physically and emotionally, of seeing the sentence through to the end. It’s likely to push his limits somewhat, but it won’t break him, and he’s in no danger long-term.”

“How do you know that?” he challenged.

“Training and experience,” she replied simply. “Michael, I know what a true fall looks like. Dean’s not dropping, and he’s not failing. He’s horny and irrational and miserable. He’s likely bursting with twitchy energy, can’t stick to a task for more than a few minutes without getting dazed or distracted.
He’s irritable. I wouldn’t suggest you try to discuss any important topics with him just now.”

“And you’re saying that’s all just fine? What’s the point of having a Dom at all if it’s okay for the Sub to go through that? Isn’t it my job to make sure he doesn’t?” Michael’s internal battle showed clearly on his face. He was moments away from ripping the door open and putting a stop to everything.

“It’s your job to provide him what he needs and give him long-term stability. Sometimes to achieve that, the short-term is uncomfortable. What does Dean need, Michael?”

And that right there was the question.

“What if I think he needs one thing, but I’m wrong, and I hurt him? What if he needs comfort and warmth from me right now, and I’ve cut him off and left him alone to suffer?” Michael plopped down into a chair near Hannah’s and rubbed his hands over his face. “I don’t have any idea what I’m doing.”

“I think you do. I think you’ve got a better handle on Dean than you think you do. Plus, you two have Castiel. You said he’s fine about letting Dean continue?”

“It’s like he doesn’t even care, but I know he does.”

“You’ve seen him do that before,” she reminded Michael. “You’ve seen him distance himself emotionally from Dean when Dean was in the middle of a harsh punishment. That bothers you, doesn’t it?”

“It seems so fucking cold to me; like he’s withdrawing love or something; like Dean has to earn warmth from him. I’m not going to do that to Dean no matter what.” Michael was angry.

“I think you may be misreading what you’re witnessing. Michael, I’m not a therapist, and I’m not an expert on Dominants. I don’t know Castiel as well as I know Dean, but I know Dean, and I know Subs. You can bet that after scening together as long as they have and after everything they’ve been through together, Castiel has given this a great deal of attention. If he’s presenting to Dean in that way, there’s a reason for it. My first guess is that it works. I would guess that Dean needs that sense of rejection to fulfill his part of the process. That doesn’t mean that he’s going to need the same thing from you. Don’t try to be someone you’re not.”

“So, you’re saying it’s fine to let the Sub lead the parade here? It’s fine to let him fall apart and make himself and everybody miserable – just abandon him in the darkness? It’s fine to pretend we’re not all crazy in love with him and make him feel like shit over something that he probably didn’t have any control over anyway? Doesn’t that put the wrong guy in charge?” Michael stood back up abruptly and paced.

Hannah watched him stir himself up for a minute. “Michael, one thing you need to understand about Submissives and Dominants…” she paused again and waited for him to stop pacing and turn to look at her before she completed the thought. “The Submissive is ALWAYS in charge.”

He stared at her and frowned.

“Think about it carefully. This is Dom/sub 101, my friend. It’s critical that you understand this.

“But I make the rules,” he protested.

“You make the rules based upon what he needs them to be. If a rule didn’t help to balance him, it wouldn’t stay on the list,” she countered.
“But I have needs too. Some of the rules, they’re there to soothe ME, not balance him.”

“That’s true, and that’s fine, but at the heart of it, he’s the vulnerable one. Doms rarely safeword out of a scene because they choreograph it. They select the action. That doesn’t mean they are really in charge. When a Dominant does safeword, it’s more often out of concern over the Sub than it is from a discomfort they’ve experienced themselves.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Michael scoffed. “It’s a mutually beneficial relationship. It’s not just all about him. I get as much out of it as he does.”

“I’m not saying you don’t, Michael. I’m saying that at the heart of it all, keeping the Sub’s needs met and avoiding his triggers is paramount to everything else. That essentially puts him in charge. Between the two of you, he’s the one who stands to be most easily hurt. You’re the one tasked with making sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Let’s just pretend I believe you for a second,” Michael began, and Hannah chuckled. “So, you’re saying that it makes sense to let Dean make the decision to finish the punishment or not? It’s okay to let it be his call?”

“Keep an eye on him. Make sure Castiel keeps an eye on him. If you intended to push him further than tomorrow afternoon, I might worry. But he can do this. I know you understand about compensation, Michael, about making full reparations for misdeeds. You respond beautifully to punishments yourself when they are effectively applied. The trick is finding the balance-point that feels appropriate to the Bottom’s need to be held accountable. If you are punished more severely than you feel you deserve, it doesn’t work. You just get angry. If you are punished too lightly, you feel off-balance – neglected – like your Top doesn’t truly care about you. Am I right?”

Michael frowned and cast his eyes down. He didn’t like discussing punishments. “It’s all pretty new to me,” he admitted. “But yeah, I guess. I guess that sounds right.”

“And how would you feel if you and your Top agreed to a punishment that felt appropriate to you, but he called it off before you completed it because he felt you weren’t strong enough to see it through?” Hannah knew enough about Michael’s internal sense of pride to be expecting the ruffle that went through his body and the look of offense that crossed his face.

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Jesus Christ, he just lost his dad! Everything’s changing at work, he’s getting married for fuck’s sake, we’re starting a family. How much upheaval should one guy have to handle? And he’s gotta try to make up for whatever that whole bullshit-fest was that he pulled on Castiel at the same time?”

“It sounds like you don’t believe he’s strong enough to cope. Do you think Dean’s weak, Michael?”

“That’s a bullshit question. Of course not, but how much should one guy have to handle on his own – especially when he’s not wired to be able to handle it on his own?” Michael went back to pacing, annoyed that Hannah was still calmly relaxed in her chair.

“The thing about Subs is that many times they respond in the opposite way than a Dom would. It makes sense in a way, but that doesn’t make it easier to manage.” She tracked him with her eyes. “The more a Sub’s life unwinds around him, the more he needs the framework of rules and consequences to cinch down and hold him in place. Dean’s punishment isn’t merely another straw on the camel’s back that he’s trying to hold up with everything that’s going on around him, all the
changes, all the upheaval...his punishment is the mooring that he’s clinging to to keep himself from flying apart. It’s the one piece that he understands all the way to his toenails. If you take it away from him prematurely, you unbind everything. You leave him with no mooring at all.”

“I guess I misread you,” he told her. “I thought you were going to tell me to take my Sub by the back of his neck and take control of the situation. I thought you were judging me for letting this go on as long as it has.”

“I was,” she admitted ruefully. “A bit. But then it became clear that it wasn’t you or Castiel holding Dean’s feet to the fire. Once a punishment has reached the balance point for compensation, continuing it becomes abusive. I made the assumption that that was what was happening here, but it isn’t. This is all Dean. If he still needs to continue, then I think you owe him the respect of having faith in his judgment and his strength. Let him finish what he started, and you keep your side of the bargain as well. It’s only for one more day, Michael. You can do this. You can BOTH do this.”

Michael nodded reluctantly. One more day. “And then he’ll be through with it all? He’ll be able to walk away without the guilt hanging over him, poisoning his wedding day, poisoning his relationships? He’ll be through?”

“I can’t answer that for sure, my friend. That’s on Dean. But, that’s generally how it works.”

He nodded, satisfied at last that he could see an end in sight. “Tell me how to make sure Dean and I don’t clash when the cycle starts. I promised him I’d present as an Omega. Teach me how to do that when all my wolf sees is a Sub.”

“Okay,” she said standing up. “That I can do. The trick is to get there first and get yourself settled. Don’t give the wolf anything to react to. Let the sensations of your impending Heat drive everything you do. Strip yourself naked hours before you plan to begin; first thing in the morning would be best. Nudity works well to spark your Omega, Michael. Your wolf views it as a submission, so he’s averse to being nude around people who are clothed. He’ll likely go into hiding.”

“You want me to strut around the house naked?”

“I don’t want you to strut, but naked, yes.”

“There are housekeepers and shit. I mean, Castiel might even work from home again tomorrow to make sure we...what if he has professional visitors? People come to the house sometimes.” Michael ranted uncomfortably.

“And?” she asked as if she didn’t know damned well how hard this would be for him.

“Will Dean be naked too?” he asked hopefully.

“That would defeat the purpose, Michael.”

“You see? This is what I’m talking about!” He changed the subject rapidly, tying in the strands of a conversation they’d left hanging days ago. “An Omega wouldn’t feel this much discomfort about being nude in front of people. Hell, April’s naked at least half the time. Even Gabriel hardly bothers to get dressed before noon. How can you be sure I’m really an Omega at all? I don’t think I am. I don’t like any part of this.”

She suppressed the desire to sigh or roll her eyes. It was an important subject, and it was going to continue to be until he made peace with his designation.

“You’re not transgender, Michael. I know you don’t want to be Omega, but it’s what you are.” She
left off the trite, ‘the sooner you come to terms with that…’ statement for now. He’d heard it before.

“How can you be so sure? You aren’t inside me. You don’t know what I feel. You don’t know who I am.”

“I know how you behave and how you respond. Aside from the fact that you are physically a fully functional Omega, you also behave like an Omega. You respond emotionally, chemically, and in all ways outwardly as an Omega does. Michael, being Omega, beta, or alpha is not like the other two designations. It is all anatomy and response. It’s not an internal identity in the same way that the primary genders are. I know you’re unhappy about how you presented, but wishing you were alpha doesn’t MAKE you alpha, not even from a personal identity perspective. We’ve been over this.

“Secondary transgenders respond differently than they would if they were solidly occupying their birth designation. Their brain-patterns don’t match their designation, their innate chemical responses are off-pattern. Transgender alphas and betas produce far less Omesol than Omegas, and yes, I know what your output is, but we’re still talking an order of magnitude in difference. You produce very slowly, but it’s still in the normal range for a Central. Trans wolves make almost no Omesol at all. Sweetie, I hate to be the one who has to tell you this because I know it hurts, but you are Omega, and nothing you ever do is going to change that.”

“Or,” he countered adamantly, “You’ve just never come across anyone who’s trans in the way that I am. It’s all fluid, right? And the research is still in it’s infancy? Fuck, Hannah, it’s not possible for an Omega to self-Release, and it’s not possible to put a Claim on someone without fucking them, right? What the fuck do any of you people know about what’s possible? Everyone keeps telling me that all the crap I can do isn’t possible. That I shouldn’t exist.”

“I hear you, Michael,” she said, trying not to sound testy. “You’re right that you don’t fit the molds that we understand, but can you honestly tell me that you believe yourself to be alpha? Not just that you detest being Omega, but that you are an alpha trapped in the wrong body.”

He looked away.

“You’re going to be a mother soon, Michael. Tell me how the expectation that you may soon be pregnant makes you feel. Awkward? Uncomfortable? Disgusted? Do you feel fundamentally, biologically wrong about it? Does it seem utterly bewildering to imagine a life forming slowly inside you? Or does the very idea soothe something deep in you that’s been dying to be acknowledged?”

“Fuck you. You don’t know me.”

“I know you’re in pain.” She walked far enough to the side where his hard eyes glared so that he could either face her or be forced to turn petulantly to avoid her again. “I know that you could use a hand figuring all of this out. I know that trying to balance a Central O with a 19-rated Dominant wolf is going to be a feat of pure strength and will-power, but I believe you can do it, Michael, and I want to help. The first thing you need to resolve is your acceptance that nothing is going to change who you are. There are some real benefits to being Omega, Michael; the ability for a man to carry a child is one of the biggest. You get to experience something other men can only imagine.”

He glared at her even harder and turned intentionally away again.

“I know you’re looking forward to conceiving with Dean. Where do you imagine that comes from? Isn’t there a deep part of you that wants to be a mother? A mother, Michael, not a father,” she pressed.
“Dean wishes he could be a mother,” Michael said quietly, like a confession. “Does that mean he’s an Omega too?”

Hannah’s heart went out to them both. So much pulling between their deeply disparate aspects had to be exhausting over time. She spoke gently. “Dean’s wish is to be capable of providing children within the construct of his marriage. He wants to share parenthood with Castiel. That comes from a different place, Michael, but it’s a struggle that most committed long-term same-sex partners confront at some point, no matter what designation or even what species they are. If you press him about it, I think you’ll find that he still sees himself as a father, not a mother. He’s the solid Bottom in the relationship, and so he’s pulled to feel the need to provide maternally, but in his heart, he’s a dad. That’s in counterpoint to your desire to play a maternal role, as you are primarily the sexual Top between the two of you.”

Michael raised a knowing brow at her in challenge. He resented her implication that she knew Dean’s deepest insecurities better than his mate did.

She nodded in acceptance, but she didn’t back down. “Look, I’d be willing to bet Dean’s got a pretty significant chunk of gender dysphoria to deal with himself. He probably plays out an Omega-kink in the bedroom on occasion. Probably wants to roleplay having a channel and letting you knock him up every now and then. I don’t need to know the details, but I want you to understand…roleplay and kinks, they are perfectly normal ways to explore alternative expressions of who we are without being definitive. Dean’s desire to play Omega in the bedroom doesn’t mean he’s not an alpha any more than your desire to try to knot him makes you one. Playing those games is a healthy expression of your sexuality, Michael. It’s fantasy, and that’s fine. You need to be careful not to confuse the satisfaction of the fantasy and to let it convince you that you’re really someone you aren’t – you and Dean both. If we talk to Dean about it, do you really believe he’ll say he sees himself as a mother?”

Michael didn’t have an answer to that. She had a point, but he didn’t want to admit it.

“And what about you? You never answered my question. Are you a mother, Michael?”

He nodded somberly. There was no denying that the burning in his gut was a purely maternal drive. He knew he could father children too, but he felt no desire whatsoever to attempt it. Fucking women was a delight and so satisfying, but the idea of planting his seed in one and fathering a pup sent a wave of revulsion up his backbone.

“Plus,” she continued, naming the benefits enjoyed by Omegas over the other genders, as if they hadn’t gone off-track, “Omegas have more nerves in their genitals than betas and alphas put together. Sex feels magnified in sensation for you in a way the rest of us don’t get, even alphas in Rut don’t experience what you do. And as a man, you get it doubled-up, forward and backward both. You can either Top or Bottom, and both feel amazing.”

His face flattened. She wasn’t convincing him he was better off with a leash around his neck, and she knew it. She gave up.

“The fact of the matter, Michael, is that whether it’s a benefit or a burden, you are Omega. You will have quarterly Heats to deal with. You need Balance adjustments on a regular, if infrequent, basis. You need to know your place in this Pack, and as much as it sucks, you will need regular reminders of your place from Castiel, from Dean, possibly even from Sam and Jess on occasion. I hate to beat a dead horse, but we’re at a stalemate until you stop beating against the walls of your prison and settle in to learn its topography. And it might help if you learn to see it as something other than a prison.”

Michael scrubbed both of his eyes painfully hard. “I need to take a break.” He unlocked the door and disappeared before Hannah could respond. She let him go. One thing she’d learned about Michael
was that he never gave up once he was invested, and when it came to his relationship with Dean, Michael was fully invested. He would get there, and it looked like he intended to force his way straight through without dodging any of the hard stuff. It was awe-inspiring to watch.

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Castiel, Gabriel, and April had a buffet lunch pulled out on the island, and Cas was serving two plates when Michael stormed in, angry, horny, frustrated, itchy, and feverish. The Alpha glanced up as Michael pulled up short, trying to decide if he could get away with turning on his heel and disappearing back into the depths of the house. He knew a few good hiding places at this point.

“Come in, Michael,” said Cas. “Have some lunch. Hannah’s welcome as well, of course.”

“It’s not really time for my lunch-break, and I’m not very good company right now,” Michael confessed with what he felt was an award-winning level of restraint. “I just needed some air. Where’s Dean?”

“He’s in his workshop with his table,” April told him. Michael was relieved to see she’d put clothes on today. Of course, her piano tutor would be spending several hours with her later, so there was a reason. “He said you closed yourself off, and I think he needed some air himself. He didn’t look pleased about it.”

Michael grunted and cracked open the refrigerator. He and Dean had started ‘echoing’ each other again, this time from afar, and it was too distracting not to respond. Michael had no choice but to put a blinder up or else just tackle his mate and send them both into their cycle early. He’d forgotten all the reasons that was a bad idea and was just operating on automatic-drive at this point.

“Please eat, Michael,” Castiel reiterated. “You’re going to need the energy. You and Dean may be looking at five or six days rather than the usual three or four.”

Nothing in the fridge looked remotely appetizing to Michael. He slammed the door closed without taking anything. “How do you figure?” he asked the Alpha absently.

“Dean is clearly building up to Rut on schedule. He’ll Trip over the edge tomorrow. You don’t smell quite as close as he is. It may take a day or two for your body to catch up, and that might drag things out a bit.”

“Two extra days of sex?” Michael queried with an eyebrow lifted. “That’s the first good news I’ve heard all day.”

“The point is,” said Cas, a little exasperated, “You need to be eating well leading up to it.”

“Sir, may I ask you a question?” said Michael, doing just that and ignoring the Alpha’s instructions to keep his queasy belly filled. Cas nodded with resignation. He knew a lost cause when he saw it, and appetite was often the first thing to go when wolves approached their cycles.

“Are you planning to stay home tomorrow? Will anyone be in the house?”

“I hadn’t decided for sure,” Cas answered, delivering his plate and April’s to the table. “Probably. Why?”
“Hannah thinks I need to parade around in my birthday suit to maintain the Omega presentation, so Dean and I don’t rip each other’s throats out again like when we met. If it’s all the same to you, Sir, if I do that, I’d rather not have a cast of thousands in the house staring at me.”

Cas tried to keep the light of amusement on a dim setting in response to the man’s reticence. Michael would gladly jog around the block with a full erection bouncing bare before him if he could do it from his wolf’s perspective. It wasn’t being naked that Michael abhorred. It was being naked when he didn’t have a show to put on, when he wasn’t the one in control. Baring himself on Hannah’s instructions was going to make Michael self-conscious in the extreme.

“I believe we can arrange something to make you more comfortable, Michael. So, you’ve decided to approach your Heat from your Omega mindset? I must say, I’m a bit surprised…pleased, but surprised. It’s a bit risky this early on, isn’t it?” Cas topped off all three drinks and carried them expertly to the table where the Omegas both sat waiting on him. Michael would never get used to watching the Alpha serve his Omega pack. ‘Caring for’ Omegas didn’t often translate into serving them meals, only it did for Castiel. It always had for Michael too, as a Dominant, but he was strange that way. Folks always assumed he was doing it from his Omega, but that was rarely the case. Doms didn’t serve. They received. But to Michael, and to Castiel apparently, service was a natural extension of care, and it just seemed right. Cas set the glasses on the table, divided them up, and took his chair.

Michael watched him from across the kitchen. “I usually start out a cycle as an Omega,” he admitted. “You watched over us when we Mated, didn’t you Sir?” he asked carefully. “How did you know we wouldn’t spark up again at the hospital the way we did at the rest-stop? Was that just chance?”

Castiel set his fork down and turned his body to face Michael. “I manipulated Dean’s presentation, Michael,” he acknowledged as if confessing to a crime.

“You…? How?”

“I spanked him just before you were admitted to the room. I forced him into a Submissive response-pattern.” Cas held Michael’s eye firmly.

“But he was bruised all to Hell. You could’ve hurt him,” accused Michael, thinking fast, thinking back.

“I feared that you might hurt him worse. It was the lesser of two evils.”

Michael’s frown deepened. “Did you…” He thought about it for a moment. “Did you tell him why he was going ass-over?” he asked at last.

“No. I lied to him. I told him he was being punished for fighting in public, for attacking you, his Mate.” Cas didn’t flinch, but he was clearly troubled.

“Jesus Christ. No wonder he just rolled right over. God, that explains all kinds of crap. Why didn’t you tell me?” Michael was beside himself, and Castiel tilted his head in confusion.

“At what point would telling you have made any difference? I don’t understand. I wasn’t deliberately keeping anything from you, Michael, but it was over and done with before you and I really met, barring a few blows in a bathroom and my flattening you on the side of the road once. I didn’t consider those interactions part of our formal introduction.”

Michael leaned onto the countertop of the island on his elbows and steepled his hands beneath his chin, staring at Cas and thinking hard. “Would we have Mated normally, do you think, if he’d been allowed to enter that room on his own? Did our crazy backward bond happen because you threw
him over your lap and shoved him into a Sub headspace?”

“Probably,” Cas admitted. “Although nothing would have forced that to happen if it wasn’t something that could organically happen in the first place. Dean rolling for you right off the bat set up the context for your relationship, and I’m convinced it was a good thing. Moreover, Michael, it protected you both from further unnecessary injury. I don’t regret what I did, only the manner that I had to do it.”

Michael’s frown relaxed, but then deepened again. “You always frame the justification for your lies as if there is no other choice, Sir. No disrespect intended, but do you really feel that way?”

April’s eyes, even Gabriel’s eyes, were glued to the table-top before them, and both had stopped eating.

But Castiel didn’t ruffle. His head remained cocked a little, and he regarded Michael as if he’d never seen a specimen quite like him before. Finally, he sighed. “I am a flawed individual, Omega, and I have a great deal to learn from you about integrity, it seems. I ask for your patience, and I’ll admit that I could have chosen a different route that day to ensure Dean’s safety, and yours. Perhaps, the method was sound, but the justification could use a bit of a rewrite. I didn’t necessarily need to lie to him. At the time, it seemed the safest and quickest option. You’ll remember that time was an important factor.”

“You should have talked to us about what you did once it was over. We had plenty of time in the car on the drive home,” Michael suggested without much allowance in his tone.

“Oh-ho, and wouldn’t THAT have been a fun family drive?” Gabriel spoke up, peeking up through his lashes to see if he was safe to speak.

“The point is,” said Michael, ignoring Gabriel, “The point is, something like that might work again. If I had known…Sir, should we try that again? You said it’s risky for me to be Omega so soon into my training. Should we just try it?”

The smell of ripening alpha hit Michael from behind and he turned abruptly to find Dean in the open door to the garage with his hand on the knob and his face frozen and tight. He looked awful. He looked awful and angry. His eyes flicked from Michael to Cas and back again before he slammed the door and strode wordlessly through the kitchen, his sweats doing nothing to hide the extent of his need.

“Dean, wait!!” called Michael. How much had he heard? Did it sound like Michael had been trying to pull one over on him? Did he think Michael was part of a ploy to make Dean play the Bottom again after promising him he’d be Top? Michael began to follow him.

“Let him go, Michael, he’s not himself right now anyway. You aren’t going to get through to him.” Cas was on his feet, but he stayed at the table.

“This is ridiculous,” said Michael. “I’m putting an end to this right now.” He started up again, but didn’t get far.

“Omega, STOP!” said Cas, strong, but not loud; Alpha, but not Dominant.

Michael swayed with the speed at which his feet obeyed the command. Castiel entreated, “He’s so close, Michael. He’s so close to the break-down he needs.”

“Sir, I’m having a lot of trouble trusting you right now, and I really need to fuck somebody. I’d prefer it be my mate, but I’m starting to not care a whole hell of a lot.” The words would’ve been
acceptable had his eyes not flashed the way they did.

April gasped, perhaps at his tone, perhaps at the implication that he was considering the idea of…, what exactly? and Michael glanced at her. Castiel shifted slightly to put himself between them, and he held Michael in place with reddening eyes. “We’re having lunch, Michael,” Castiel told him. “Either select something to eat, or head back to your tutor.” Castiel didn’t appreciate having an Omega push the buttons that activated his wolf, but he was in-control enough to resist.

“That cold, detached tone may work on Dean, Sir, but it doesn’t do anything for me but put my back up. I’m not trying to be disrespectful. I thought you would be interested to know how I respond as an Omega.” Michael had his head down, but he was looking up at an angle to catch the shift of wind if he needed it. There was outright defiance in the steel of his voice. He wasn’t responding as an Omega at all. Cas watched him carefully. It was odd for an Omega so close to Heat to find himself stuck in his tertiary wolf. Michael just seemed to do everything backwards.

“Yesterday’s discussion was not enough for you, it appears,” said Cas, wishing it was in the Omega’s best interest to wail on him again. It would be so satisfying. But today’s lippiness was different, and Cas couldn’t pretend he didn’t know that. “Do we need another round?”

“No, Sir. Another spanking would not help me in any way right now. Do you agree?”

“Nevertheless, you’re stepping quite clearly above your station, and you can either stand down, or suffer the consequences. Decide, Michael.”

“Sir, if Dean is close to a break-through or a break-down or whatever, wouldn’t he need a Dominant there when he breaks? Does it make any sense to expect him to assume an alpha head-space at the end of this clusterfuck when we’re making him spend so much time alone right now?” Michael’s style of swiftly switching topics to catch Castiel off-guard used to work, but the Alpha learned fast. It was Michael’s way of jumping into the heart of what he really wanted addressed and hoping to slide it past Castiel’s defenses before he knew what hit him. But they weren’t going to have this discussion right here in the kitchen. Dean had already caught them discussing him in front of April and Gabe. Cas knew he was going to pay for that. He wasn’t about to be caught doing it again.

“Out, Michael. We’ll discuss this after dinner. You make a fair point, but you are also quite inappropriately confrontational. Call it a time-out. For now, you may go back to the play room or you may go to your bedroom.” Castiel was through with Michael for the moment. The boy was skating on thin ice, but the Alpha didn’t think it was coming from a place of Omega need. Michael had had enough of watching Dean suffer, and Cas couldn’t fault him there. Resettling their hierarchies could wait. Nothing was really going to settle the Omega until he could touch Dean again.

Thursday didn’t improve. Sam swung by to drop off extra baby-room supplies that Charlie had gathered from their friends at the Facility. The spare room at his house had transformed rapidly into a fully-stocked nursery, and they now owned more supplies than they could use at home. But he didn’t stay long at all. He left with a back-handed wave and a swipe at his nose to clear the oppressive musk of alpha.

Hannah gave up early, announced there was no point in speaking to Michael again until he came
back out the other side, and she drove off in her Prius at a faster speed than was safe on the curving
drive, spitting gravel out behind her tires.

April and Gabe caught Michael looking over the Rolling Stone photos again, and he took twenty
minutes of ribbing before he retreated grumpily into a good hiding place.

Billie stopped by on her way home, but she didn’t stay long either. Cas sat with her on the back
porch listening to her explain that the Rolling Stone article was going to do great things for their
cause, and that he needed to write a short blurb of appreciation for his half of New York’s Hottest
Couple. Cas grinned about that one. Forty was still several years away, but it didn’t hurt to be
reminded that he wasn’t quite over the hill yet.

“You’re adorable. You know that,” she dead-panned, and he grinned wider as she just shook her
head. “So, the article comes out tomorrow. If Michael’s been hard to live with before this, hold onto
your hat, because he’s probably going to get butt-loads worse. He’ll need a fan-page on Twitter,
Tumblr, and Facebook for starters. We need to get him validated on all of them. He needs an
Instagram account. Let him post on his own if you like, but I don’t mind serving as an intermediary if
you worry about stalkers or…you know. I’d like to make his private pages more private than they are
now. We’re already spotting a good-deal more traffic heading his way than we expected.”

Cas sighed. “Whatever you need to do to protect my family, Billie. I trust you.”

“Dean WOULD have to mate with the sexiest Omega on two legs. You know, just once I’d like to
see one of you rich, powerful, beautiful people link up with a toad. Just once.”

“Marina did,” Cas mused, remembering his sister-in-law fondly. She really had been a lovely person.
He missed her.

“Doesn’t count,” Billie decided with a firm shake of her head. “Gabe’s a toad, but he’s still cute, and
he’s rich.” Cas chuckled. “You staying home tomorrow?” she changed the subject.

“I need to be sure they don’t start badly,” Cas confirmed.

“None of my business, Alpha, but these things generally take care of themselves, don’t they?
Michael’s hormones will drive him to present, and they’ll do the rest themselves.”

Cas sobered quickly. “Mating usually runs the same way, but Michael needed six stitches after that
fiasco. Plus, Dean’s state-of-mind is… He’s really struggling to keep himself alpha. His punishment
has taxed him heavily, and he’s solidly Submissive for the time-being. They want to try to meet as
Secondaries.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize. So, are you gonna be there to spot them?”

“Um, no,” Cas was alarmed at the idea, although it wasn’t really that far afield. “I’ll be monitoring
the hormone sensors. Any inappropriate signs of aggression or distress, and Gabe and I will be there
to separate them.”

“Separate them? Good luck. You’ll want Sam here for that if it’s necessary.” She gathered her
supplies and tucked everything back in her work satchel, planted a fond kiss on Cas’ cheek, and then
passed April on her way back into the house with a cheerful nod and a wink. April, a tray of
lemonade in her hands, smiled. April liked Billie, but the beta felt to the Omega like a trusted favorite
English teacher; a mentor maybe, not a friend.

She had more glasses than they needed now that Billie was gone, but April poured the lemonade
anyway. “Michael’s looking for you. He wants to figure out the plan for start-up tomorrow. Is it
really that dangerous?” April’s voice soothed Cas in a profound way. He took the glass she offered and then pulled her sideways onto his lap. They talked as the sun set: about Dean and Michael, about April’s addition to Nick’s work and what else she had planned, about her lesson this afternoon, about Cas’ work. It felt good. It felt effortless and free. Cas was light and relaxed. And then Michael found him.

“I made dinner. It probably sucks, but it won’t kill you. It’s a chef’s salad kinda thing. You wanna eat out here?” Michael’s head stuck out the back door, but he didn’t come all the way out. “I can’t find Dean.” Everything about Michael screamed tension and confrontation. He was stress in physical form, but he had it contained.

“Dean will be too nauseated to eat right now, but I’ll check on him. Go ahead and serve dinner here on the porch. I’ll be right back. I’d like a glass of white wine. Anything you select will be fine.” Cas planted April in the seat he vacated and slipped in past Michael. He knew where Dean was. They’d been sharing Ruts together for 8 years now. He knew Dean.”

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Cas stayed near the door, speaking to his fiancé without getting close enough for his own scent to make things harder on Dean.

“I don’t understand, baby. Why do you need to start off that way? We’ve put your Sub through Hell for two weeks. You need the closure of ending it as a Sub, don’t you? Michael can give you that. He WANTS to give you that.” Cas dared not go any closer. Dean smelled delicious in the classic Thanksgiving Day way. He was everything delectable, and it made no difference that they were both alpha. Cas wanted to lick him up one side and down the other.

Dean’s voice came out from under the billiard table, muffled and slurred. “It’s his Heat, and he deserves an alpha. It’s the way it was supposed to go. I wanted him to get the full experience, especially if this is how he gets knocked up for the first time. He’s been working so fucking hard to get used to the idea that Omega isn’t the end of the world. Hannah’s got him on the line, and it was my job to reel him in.”

“Are you drunk?” Cas asked. Dean’s words didn’t sound quite right, but it could be the darkness or the table.

“I’m not drunk, I’m just tired of waiting. This has been the longest day ever.”

“Would you please come out of there, so I can talk to you?” Cas didn’t hold out much hope. If he wanted something from Dean, he would need to make it an order from his Alpha.

“I like the dark.” Dean’s voice drifted out past the tight grip his fingers had on the bottom side of the billiard table. Keeping hold of the table kept his hands off his dick. It was that simple.

“Dean, the whole room is dark. I haven’t turned the lights on. I’d really like to see your face. I want to help you get through the night.” Cas shuffled his feet. He was in uncharted territory again.

“There’s room under here for two, baby. Come on in. The water’s fine.”
“You haven’t been drinking?” Cas asked again. Dean sounded drugged.

“Maybe…I dunno…coupla…not all that much. Truth is, I puked up half of it.”

Cas bit his lip and ducked down to peer beneath the table. “You haven’t had anything to eat for at least 20 hours. Drinking was not your greatest decision, Dean.”

“It’s because I suck at decisions, man. Thought you knew that.” Dean turned his head away from Cas.

Cas changed topics again. “Dean, what you heard in the kitchen at lunchtime, that wasn’t Michael’s doing. That was all me. I want to explain it all to you when your Rut is over, but please don’t mistake Michael’s role. He was defending you, not planning a coup on your alpha.”

“Nah, forget it. Whatever. Look, it sounded like you two were putting your heads together without me again, but I’ve been thinking, maybe that’s not such a bad idea. You told me to try tantric, so I’ve been meditating and breathing, thinking, and just – you know – BEING. It’s weird, but I’m actually feeling kinda good about it all right now. This morning at your knee really helped, Cas. I still feel like shit, and I can’t stop heaving my guts up, but there’s a calmness I don’t remember feeling before. I’m watching the tide roll in, and there’s this massive fucking wave sweeping in to drown me, and I’m just, like, laying out on the beach watching it curl up and over me. It’s fucking epic.”

“Dean, your fingers are white-knuckling the edge of the table.”

“Yeah, I don’t have a lot of control over my body, but Dude, my mind is floating. I’m not drunk, I swear. It’s not quite Sub-space, but it’s…maybe it’s Sub-space-adjacent. Same universe? I feel like I can just float through whatever happens from here, like it’s all okay, no matter what it turns into. I trust you guys and this tsunami-wave to take me wherever I need to be.”

Cas was confused again. Hadn’t they just talked in a circle? “Baby, I’m lost. Do you plan to meet Michael as an alpha or a Sub? Either would work as long as you don’t surprise each other.”

Dean released the table’s edge and rolled onto a hip facing Cas. “I had such big plans, Cas. I was gonna show him how great it can be to be Omega, Mated to a kick-ass alpha who’s in love with him. But now it all seems so pointless. Why fight what we’re supposed to be together? I think I’m just gonna roll with it, let our instincts lead the way and be whoever emerges. I think we’re all over-thinking again.”

“And if you spark up and attack one another? Should I have sutures ready?”

Dean giggled. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Dean.”

“Nah, chill out, Cas. That’s not going to happen. We know each other now. Our wolves know each other. If there’s a scuffle, so be it. One of us will roll, and it’ll all be fine. It’s only the first few minutes that really matter anyway. After that, the hormones totally take over.”

Castiel sat down on the floor, still several feet from the table. Dean liked the feel of all that weight poised above him, containing him. The slate slab alone was nearly 500 pounds, and the table in its entirety weighed almost twice that. The mass meant safety to Dean. It was a pressure that never made contact but gave him a sense of being rooted to the earth anyway. As a Sub, he suffered from the intermittent sensation of being weightless enough to simply float off into space, and the solidity of the billiard table relaxed him body and soul. He came here sometimes when he was most stirred, at times when binding hadn’t been on offer.
They shared the space in solidarity and silence for a few minutes, Dean’s state-of-mind leaking out to blanket Castiel. At length, Cas felt the moment ripen, and he broke the silence.

“How do you feel about your punishment? Is it over? Do you need anything else?”

“That’s a lot of questions, man. One thing at a time.”

“One thing at a time, then: are you through with it?”

“Yeah. I’m done.” Dean’s voice barely broke the plane of the table.

“Do you need anything else?”

“No.”

Cas breathed out deeply through his nose. “Did it work?” Castiel’s voice lowered in a mirror of Dean’s.

Dean rolled back onto his back and took hold of the table again, staring up at the underside of the massive weight above him – weight enough to crush him if the supports faltered. “I told you I can’t pay for what I tried to do to you and to Michael. Babe, I can’t ever really pay for it. But I think I’m done with holding onto it. I think this two weeks was enough for me to get a glimpse of what I put you through. It was weeks and weeks for you of suffering, of wanting contact with me that I refused to give you, of wanting honesty and partnership that I cut you out of. You’re the guy with all the marine metaphors. I guess I made you steer the ship by yourself when I was supposed to be keeping a hand on the wheel too. And instead, I was bashing holes in the hull. I betrayed you, Cas. I needed to know how much it hurts to reach out for someone when you need them and find them not there.”

“It really wasn’t meant to be retribution, Dean. It was a process meant to push you through all the phases of accountability until you can walk upright inside your head again. I didn’t want you to suffer just because it had been hard on me first. You know, I’m not blind to the source of what started it all in the first place. You never deserved to suffer the way you do.”

“Yeah. I know.” Dean sounded weary and accepting.

“You do?”

“Mm-hm. I’m going to get all that crap untangled for real, Castiel. It’s played its stupid games in my head for the last time. Are you game to sit through some therapy sessions with me sometimes?”

Dean’s eyes glimmered in the low light, but he didn’t look at Cas. “I think it would help to figure out how we feed off each other.”

“I’d be honored.”

“Holy shit, I need to fuck something!” Dean burst out suddenly, pulling his knees upward but rapping them both hard on the underside of the table. “FUCK!”

“Michael’s got dinner out on the back porch. Do you think you can sit with us? Want to try to eat something?” Cas began to stand, ignoring the outburst. Acknowledging it wouldn’t be helpful at this point.

Dean sighed. “Nuh-uh, not unless you want to get a good look at the masticated version.”

“I can give you something for the nausea,” Cas suggested, but he knew Dean wouldn’t accept. He never did.
Dean didn’t answer the suggestion. “I’mma go back into my breathing and meditating. Tell Michael to meet me at noon, and not before. Tell him to meet me however he wants to, and we’ll figure it out. By that time, we’re both gonna be so horny, it won’t make any fucking difference anyway.”

“All right. I’ll tell him. I’m very proud of you Dean. I know this has pushed your limits, and you’ve handled it as well as anyone could.” Cas stopped in the doorway.

“I was a grade-A asshole, Cas.”

“Perhaps. But I said ‘as well as anyone could’. I never said you had to be perfect.”

“Will you bind me tonight?” Dean asked in a small voice. “Hands and feet so I can’t roll onto my stomach while I’m sleeping?”

“Would it be so terrible if you released in your sleep?” Cas asked.

“I told Michael I would wait for him.”

“You are the single stubbornest Goddamned man I have ever known, Dean Winchester.”

“You forgot to say Dean MICHAEL Winchester. I think that pronunciation rates all three names.”

“Such a brat…yes, I’ll bind you. And I’ll stay and watch over you too, so you can rest.”

“Go get some dinner, Cas. They’re waiting on their Alpha.”

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Billie stopped by in the morning, took one look at their red, sandy eyes and the shadowed bags beneath them, and reminded Fred to keep the coffee flowing. He nodded seriously and handed a hot cup to her, sugared and creamed like she preferred it.

She dropped off the news-stand copy of Rolling Stone, and helped Dean draft a clever Tweet about it. Billie was professional enough to work around the stifling odor of Rutting alpha that had become over-whelming. Michael didn’t come downstairs, naked or otherwise.

“You don’t have to stay home, baby,” Dean told Castiel for the fifth time that morning. “There’s too much that needs doing at work right now. We’ve got this. I promise.” Dean had a cup in his hands, and he was sipping it slowly. He didn’t try to sit, and he didn’t try to hide the state of his nether-region. This close to Rut, all modesty usually fell by the wayside, and the pack wasn’t alarmed by his presence, merely overcome by the smell. At least he still had clothes on.

“I’m staying, Dean. I can go in tomorrow and clean up a great deal of the backlog while the offices are closed. Besides, I haven’t dropped by the dorms on a Saturday in ages. I’m thinking of taking the boarders to a movie tomorrow afternoon.” Cas finished feeding April, kissed her lips clean, and cleared his breakfast plate.

April had a dreamy, satisfied look on her face and a couple of new bruises on her throat. A bathrobe hid any other damage that might linger after their evening’s escapades. Cas sat up through the night with Dean in the H/R room, but he entered it fully slaked from spending a couple of hours with April.
Cas went on, still addressing Dean. “You need to go back to the H/R room and stay there before you
stink up the whole house. I don’t know how you’re still standing on your feet. It smells like you’ve
already Tripped, and I don’t see any reason you need to wait until noon. You’re punishing yourself
needlessly, Dean.”

“Don’t talk about it, man,” complained Dean. “I can do this if you just shut up about it.”

“Do you need any help prepping?” Cas asked him.

“Jesus!” Dean broke. He flung his coffee cup into the sink where it sloshed and cracked, and he fled
back to the depths of the house where the ventilation system was configured to sweep the scent away
from the main rooms. Cas chuckled, but he also breathed a sigh of relief. His body assumed that
Dean’s Rut was a ticket to Nirvana just like always, and no amount of rubbing them out or turning
them on April was making any headway in convincing his erection otherwise.

“Welp, looks like you folks have a hell of a day in store. I’m going to run for it, change my clothes,
and try to get that smell outta my hair,” announced Billie, handing her cup off to Monica.

“Does…?” April started to ask Billie, then stopped and looked to Cas for permission. Cas nodded
and touched her Mating-scar gently. She turned back to Billie. “Does being Ace…Asexual…does
that make it easier to handle the alpha-scent? Does it not make you…you know?”

Billie pursed her lips. “We’re all a bit different, Omega. For me, as a beta, that scent doesn’t have the
same effect that it has on an Omega anyway. It’s pretty strong, and I can sense the musk and what-
not that makes wolves react. It’s not like I don’t respond to it. It’s just that I really have no interest in
DOING anything about it. Being beta helps me keep my body from taking me places my mind
doesn’t want to go, I guess. But to answer your question, even though I can smell it and respond to
it, no, I don’t have any need to go out and fuck someone. That’s just…ew.” She shivered slightly.

Billie glanced at Cas, at the fond look the Alpha was giving his mate, and she went on. “For you,
sweetheart, as an Omega in a house with a Rutting alpha – look, you either need to get out of this
house for the day or your mate there needs to keep you tied on his knot until this house gets
fumigated. I don’t know how you stand it.”

Cas chuckled and ran a hand through April’s hair. “What do you think, April? Would you like to
spend the day with Charlie or Meg? I’m sure they’d be happy to have you.”

“What about…the other?” she suggested hopefully.

“I’d love to knot you all day long, Kitten, but I need to be free to assist with Michael and Dean if
they get their wires crossed. I’ll make it up to you after they’re fully squared away and locked in. I
promise. Give me the morning.”

April almost pouted, but then realized that she’d already cycled with Cas twice, and Dean had never
crowded in on her. She was frustrated and horny, ramped up by the odor that lingered in the kitchen,
but she could wait. She and Dean had a deal, and she meant to respect it. Sometimes Cas would need
to focus on his husband, but he would always come back to her.

“Would you wait for me to dress and grab my keyboard?” she asked Billie. “Can you run me home
before lunch?”

“I’ll wait out in the car. No rush, sweetheart, I just need to get out of this house. You take your time.
And we’ll get you back here in time.” Billie stepped out into the garage where the smell was weaker.
Cas caught up to her.
“Dean’s emails have been rerouted to me,” he told her. “He got one from his wedding tailor requesting another fitting. Would you arrange that for him sometime late next week?” She nodded and pulled out her stylus to make a note.

“And Billie?” Cas said. “Nice work with the Rolling Stone article and all the rest. It’s uncomfortable for me to admit that this popular media track works, but the tide’s turning. We’re winning people over, and that’s largely due to you. Thank you, my dear.”

“Any time, Castiel.” She turned and looked at him. “Don’t be too quick to pass the credit over, Alpha. The win is on you.”

“It’ll be on all of us, if we win,” he confirmed with a hug. She sneezed.

April dashed out, fully dressed in her favorite flowing skirt with her electric keyboard tucked beneath her arm.

Cas kissed her fondly. “Spend some time today on your Chopin, Kitten,” he instructed. “I know you want to concentrate on Nicholas’ piece, but that’s not your priority, capiche?”

“Yes, Alpha,” she conceded before following Billie outside to her car.

Castiel watched them go, then straightened himself and turned back to the house, prepared for a long and trying day.

Chapter End Notes

Michael's conversation with Hannah is a result of discussions over recent weeks with Watch_the_angels_fall. Here’s the thing with that. I had never really intended for Michael's struggles with his designations to have much of a direct face in the story. All we were going to see directly was the frustration and the slow realization of acceptance as Hannah and Joshua built Michael up and led him to understand himself. But then my friend put a light on the fact that there’s not any point in the lead-up where it’s clear just how much struggling Michael still has to do over all of this, and whether it’s acceptance he needs, or if the rest of them need to come to terms that Michael might NOT be an Omega in the classic sense.

I felt like addressing the question directly fit with the story thus far. Michael's desperate to be anything but what he is, and he’s at the point of grasping wildly for alternatives. It meant something to me to have a character brave enough to face his own identity head-on and ask hard questions, even if he doesn't like the answers. That's a very personal point for me. There's nothing easy about challenging your own self for ownership of who you are.

Love to you all, as usual. I promise there's a cycle coming. I promise.
Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

FINALLY! Dean's in Rut, and Michael's right behind him.

Chapter Notes

I know, I know. I said no more for a week, but I'm weak. So weak.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 64 – Friday, July 7, 2017

NOW:

11:45am

Michael squirmed idly, letting the tip of the long plug stroke his prostate just enough to feel a slight jolt of electricity spark up to his spine and out to his dick. He stroked himself loosely, slowly. He made no move to tighten up and quicken the pace. He wanted to be ready, but he intended to wait. Even with the bond closed, Michael could sense that Dean had finally Tripped over the final precipice somewhere deep in the bowels of the house, but Michael wasn’t quite there yet. He should go to Dean. Waiting now was ridiculously cruel. What was 15 minutes in the grand scheme of it all? What was 15 minutes compared to his mate’s need?

But he couldn’t do it. It might only be 15 minutes, but it was Dean’s time. Dean knew how to find Michael. If he wanted him there early, nothing this side of hell would stop him. Michael glanced at the clock again. It was 11:48.

“What’s the longest you’ve ever had to wait once your Heat Tripped before getting some relief, Gabe?” he asked the Omega reading in the corner, just to have something to say.

“Who me?” asked Gabriel, looking up at Michael’s sweat-covered body. “Besides the time I almost died from neglect, you mean?”

“Shit, man, I’m sorry. I…I forgot about that. Goddamnit, I’m all turned around. I’m just worried. He’s down there right now, probably humping the mattress, waiting for me, and I’m just up here chilling out like we’ve got all the time in the world.” A spasm of hot pain rocked through Michael’s belly and down his legs, and he moaned and tightened his grip on his cock. Two more days. At this rate, Michael still had two more days to wait before following Dean over the cliff.
His Heat was coming early, but not early enough. Next time. Six months from now, at Dean’s next Rut, they’d be synced perfectly, even if Michael was pregnant at the time. This one was just slightly off. Gabe eyed Michael with a judgmental side-glance, then went back to his book. Gabe made no bones about his view that they were all being daft morons. No reason in the world was worth the torment of spending a single moment alone in cycle that you didn’t have to.

And you know what? Gabe was right. It had become completely ridiculous. Michael huffed and rolled off the side of the bed, landing lightly on his feet and straightening up, his hand never leaving his dick. He stood for a moment and let the sensations course through him. Close enough. He caught Gabe’s eye as the other man looked up and closed his book.

“You giving in, then?” queried Gabe.

“Wish me luck,” said Michael with a grimace, pulling the plug shamelessly from his channel and tossing it artfully into the bathroom sink. He hadn’t really needed prepping, but alphas could get rough right at first when their eyes went red and rolled up to the backs of their heads. Michael didn’t want the remainder of his time with Dean over the next few days ruined because of tearing.

“Go get ‘im, Tiger.”

“Yeah.”

***************

Dean’s gut clenched again, and he retched into the commode. Again. His skin was clammy, and shivers wracked him as he clung to the bowl and rested his cheek on the cool porcelain rim. He groaned in misery. He’d been through countless Ruts, but he couldn’t remember ever feeling this shitty before. This was worse than his worst hangover. This was worse than…he heaved again, and the trembling weakened his grip.

His thighs shook, the muscles so weak they almost failed him, but he couldn’t prop his chin over the side of the toilet if he sank back onto his butt like he wanted to do. He needed the strength of his thighs. He needed…

Oh Christ on toast…

The only part of his anatomy that retained any alpha strength at all was his firm, swollen erection, standing out huge and throbbing. A shrill voice in the back of Dean’s head urged him to take himself in hand and ease himself to completion, just gently, not too violent, nothing that would stir up the tumult in his belly. Only, Dean couldn’t. He wasn’t permitted to touch, was he? He couldn’t remember the reason. He couldn’t remember anything much that happened before about mid-morning, or…whatever. Was it still morning? Everything was swimming: his mind, his vision, his memory, his queasy stomach. Dean couldn’t figure out how he’d ended up here. Alone. Hurting. Heaving. His cock throbbed again, and he almost forgot and touched it, wishing he could remember why he shouldn’t touch it.

The hours passed slowly, a blur of fighting his urges, the demands of his body. He MUSTN’T touch. Why couldn’t he touch? His hand made twitchy abortive grabs, but he always pulled up short, taking his two hands in lock with each other, tucking them both beneath his chin. He MUSTN’T.

Every conversation fled from his memory. The only thing that remained was the certainty that he was
forbidden from easing his own pain. Holy fucking crap, he must have been really bad this time. Dean couldn’t remember, and he didn’t know why he was alone in a white-tiled bathroom, sterile and cold.

Someone was coming for him. Was that a memory or a hope? Had they all left him? Was he destined to heave his guts up and throb in need until he died of dehydration? Dean wished like hell he could remember what he’d done to deserve this isolation, this agony. It must have been awful. He knew he’d pulled some hum-dingers before. He rolled his forehead along the ceramic rim, trying to still his mind enough to think. Something about Cas. Something about hurting Cas—and Michael. Something about telling lies. Oh yeah, Cas hated when Dean lied to him. That would’ve done it.

Dean moaned again, then he tightened up and heaved again. Nothing came up, but his eyes watered, and his fingers shook in their grip.

“Michael…” he moaned. Where the hell was his mate? Couldn’t Michael feel how sick he was? No. No, Dean couldn’t feel Michael, and that meant that his mate couldn’t feel him either. Dean beat weakly against the closed bond-link. Michael must be so angry. The tears that started as wells of moisture brought about by his abortive vomiting overflowed, as Dean sank his head back down and wept pathetically.

“Dean?!?! Holy fuck! Why didn’t you call me!? Are you okay? Can you talk? Dean, baby, look at me!” Strong, sure arms pulled Dean back from the bowl to lean against a strong warm chest. Dean squawked a protest at losing his grip. He flailed for a minute, but then realized whose arms held him, whose chest supported his damp cheek, whose firm hard-on pressed against the side of his ass where he sat in his mate’s lap.

“Michael!” Dean bawled. “Where were you? It hurts! Make it stop!”

“Oh, Jesus! Look at you. Fuck! What’ve we done? God, can you stand? Dean, are you with me? Can you hear me?” Michael pulled Dean’s face away from his chest and kissed him all over. He kissed away the tears, kissed his nose, brought his trembling hands up and kissed his knuckles. He balked at the stench of vomit though, and helped Dean to stand before the sink, helped him wash his mouth, rinse it out, clean him up a bit.

“Do you feel like you might throw up again?” Michael asked him cautiously. He flushed the commode and walked Dean into the bedroom. Surreal didn’t begin to cover the feelings running through his body. Carefully, slowly, Michael opened the Mating-bonds both up again, and he nearly cried out at the intensity of pain coming from his mate. Eons might pass by, but Michael would never forgive himself for leaving Dean alone with this.

But Dean was settling swiftly. He nuzzled into Michael’s chest, turning chest-to-chest with his mate. His shaky hands tightened around Michael’s bare hips. They stopped shaking as his grip strengthened. Dean breathed in the heady scent of Mate, of Omega, through his nose, and color began returning rapidly to his face. Michael sat Dean on the edge of the bed and knelt to look into his green eyes.

“Michael,” Dean breathed, shifting his grip to Michael’s shoulders, clinging like he needed to hold on to keep himself from drowning.

“What do you need, alpha?” Michael whispered back. He gripped Dean’s face, searching his eyes, looking for his alpha. Dean’s eyes were solidly green. They had no rim of alpha red, no sign that he was in any state to take ownership of his Omega. Everything was backward. Dean simply sat where his Dom had put him, staring morosely into Michael’s frightened eyes, clinging to him.
“Need you, Michael,” he whispered. So trusting. So small. So broken. “Need to tell you I’m sorry.”

“Jesus, Dean. You don’t need to be sorry. I’m the one who…God, I fucked up so bad. I’m so sorry. I was supposed to be here. I was supposed to be here, presenting for you. I don’t know why I waited so long.” Michael stroked Dean’s ribs as he spoke, reaching lower on each pass. His touch skimmed across Dean’s cock, and Dean flinched back with a cry.

“No! Can’t touch! Not supposed to touch!” Dean crossed his legs at the knee and shuffled backward on the bed.

“Holy fuck! No, no, Dean! It’s okay. Let me. It’s okay to touch now. We need to. Let me make you feel better.” Michael gently moved Dean’s knees apart. They shook, but Dean let his Dom maneuver him into a splayed position. Michael followed Dean up onto the bed, hovering above him, keeping their eyes locked together. “Let me, Submissive,” he ordered.

Dean bit his lower lip, turning it painfully red. His eyes were huge and alarmed. Dean clearly had no idea what was happening to him. Michael took a deep breath, kept his eyes locked, and shifted his hand so slowly. At the first touch, Dean flinched again, but Michael shushed him sweetly, whispering, “Let me,” once more.

Michael gently moved Dean’s knees apart. They shook, but Dean let his Dom maneuver him into a splayed position. Michael followed Dean up onto the bed, hovering above him, keeping their eyes locked together. “Let me, Submissive,” he ordered. Dean bit his lower lip, turning it painfully red. His eyes were huge and alarmed. Dean clearly had no idea what was happening to him. Michael took a deep breath, kept his eyes locked, and shifted his hand so slowly. At the first touch, Dean flinched again, but Michael shushed him sweetly, whispering, “Let me,” once more.

Dean panted and whimpered. “Not supposed to, Michael. Gonna be in trouble again.”

“You did so good, baby,” Michael assured him. “You’re all through with waiting. You’ve earned it. Doesn’t that feel nice?” Michael kept his grip light, his strokes slow. He leaned down over his mate and kissed his lips tenderly. “I love you so much, Dean. Come on back to me, baby. Come on back.”

“Nnngh! It hurts!” Dean protested, but he made no move to shift away. Too much waiting, too much need built behind the wall had Dean aching. Michael eased him gently. It wasn’t what he wanted, but it was what his mate needed. There would be time, once Dean was pulled down from the cliff’s edge, time to do it right.

“You waited so long, sweetheart,” Michael said softly, tightening his grip, moving his fist down over Dean’s swollen knot. “Come for me, Dean. Come right now.”

Every muscle in Dean’s body ached with want and need. He felt wrong-footed. He felt like he was in the wrong room, in the wrong time, in the wrong body, but his belly and his groin spasmed at Michael’s touch, and he shouted as he came, shooting a pulsing stream across his chest and into his hair.

He spasmed again, and again. His ass clenched around nothing. Shouldn’t something have been there for him to tighten against? Something had always been there before. His hands gripped his mate’s biceps and pulled bruises up where they clung. He gasped in a sharp breath, loud and piercing. The blood began to flow again, into his brain, into his legs, into his fingers and his chest. The world spun and all the colors returned with a flash of glaring, painful light. His mind opened like the unlocking of a floodgate, and Dean came back into himself all at once.

Dean’s hips gyrated with the last pulses of his orgasm, finally able to participate again. The aches pulled forward into the same dimension his mind occupied at last, and he moaned in agony. Fleeting agony. The sharp, throbbing pain faded swiftly, and Dean watched Michael’s pupils enlarge, his mate’s irises going golden at the rim.

“Michael.”

“There you are, alpha. Welcome back, baby.”
Dean felt on fire. His blood coursed so rapidly through his entire body, that he broke out in a sweat and panted. He took only a moment to come to grips with what he was feeling. The full sensation of Rut, already in full swing, hot and demanding, swept over him. His own eyes reddened, and his cock never flagged. Purple and demanding, his cock pulsed and dribbled. The thick smell of musky, oaken, mossy, tangy alpha coated everything. Dean lay tense and primed on his back, breathing shallowly. Michael perched rigid above him, an Omega preparing for flight, waiting to see which way to flee, responding instinctively to the overwhelming scent of alpha. Michael’s golden eyes flicked back and forth between Dean’s two red ones in a twitchy rhythm. Neither wolf moved for the next few eternities.

Michael shifted first. He pulled up onto his knees at funereal slowness. He kept his eyes on his mate’s. He barely dared to breathe. Dean sat up. Neither spoke. Neither blinked.

Slowly, like the formation of the fjords, Michael shifted, turning, breaking their gazes, rotating to face away from his mate on the huge bed, falling with finality onto his hands and knees, lowering down to his elbows, angling his hips up and back, presenting himself – his Omega – to his alpha mate. Slick coated everything back there. The dash to Dean’s side, the shifting on the bed as he pulled Dean up out of his own personal hell, the quick change of designations that sparked from Dean but pulled Michael right along behind, had sent pulses of slick gushing from his channel and smearing across his cheeks and thighs, his balls, his cock – everywhere. Michael looked back, over his shoulder and met Dean’s eyes again.

All shakiness was gone. All of the weakness that slowed Dean’s mind and his movements sloughed off like too-tight clothing at the end of a long work-day. Dean huffed a sharp laugh, his pupils blown as wide as Michael had ever seen them. He seemed to be savoring the moment. Dean pulled his knees up under him and lifted himself up behind his Omega. His eyes fixed on the center of Michael’s presentation. His hands moved slowly, but with deliberation to cup each cheek, each hip, down to each thigh. He released Michael’s right thigh, hauled back and smacked down onto Michael’s ass with a resounding clap that sent Michael jolting forward with a cry of pain followed by a moan of want. Michael pushed right back up into position with a perfectly formed hand-print on his ass.

“Fuck me, alpha,” the Omega begged. “Please.” Another gush of slick issued forth from his hole and ran in thick rivulets down his thigh. Dean’s eyes fixated on the flow, and he pulled Michael in as he sank down to run his tongue through the sticky mess. Dean lapped at both thighs, and then he sank his teeth into the back of his Omega’s leg, right at the curve where it turned into tender inner-thigh flesh.

Michael screamed and pushed back harder into Dean’s grip. The skin broke and blood leaked down to join the flow of slick. “FUCK ME! GOD, PLEASE!” Michael humped himself backward, all control abandoned. How the fuck was Dean still holding out when Michael, not yet fully lost in Heat was losing it this badly? Michael’s back was drenched with sweat. Dean lifted up onto his knees again and ran a strong hand across the wet muscles of Michael’s back.

“You’re so beautiful,” Dean told him. “I’m gonna make you feel so good, baby.”

“Alpha, please…” Michael begged, shifting his knees wider apart and angling his hips even more in an utterly shameless display of desperation. He went down onto his chest and rocked backward, looking for a target, praying the target would find the arrow. Backward. Always backward.

Dean fixated on Michael’s hole, open and gaping, pulsing with need, leaking copious quantities of slick. He’d never seen anything so gorgeous in his life. He wanted to dive in head-first. He wanted to taste and bite and clutch and fuck. He wanted everything Michael could give him. The pounding of
Dean’s heartbeat throbbed in his ears and his vision tunneled down to a red field of nothing but a gaping round target, enticing and sweet.

Dean couldn’t look away. He knew he wasn’t moving slowly, but it felt like he was. He lined up and pressed in. Their two groans echoed across the high ceiling, exactly the same. April would have been proud of their tuning. Warm, wet, tight, throbbing heat surrounded Dean as he punched through the ring of muscle around Michael’s channel. Michael pushed back into him. Dean fell forward, covering his mate. He pistoned his hips, slowly at first, letting the heat and the sweet, sweet pleasure intoxicate him. Their sweat mingled along miles and miles of bare skin; Dean’s chest pressed firmly into Michael’s back. Dean’s alpha pressed hard into Michael’s Omega. Both of them grunted loudly, obscenely, with the effort as Dean’s pace picked up, and Michael’s ass pressed back into it. The alpha emerged from the reeds where it had been hiding, and it took its place unapologetically. Ownership was the alpha’s birthright, and he meant to claim what was his. Dean fucked hard. Slick splattered at the slapping of hot skin, and Michael’s chest flattened tighter against the bedding in acknowledgment. His toes dug in and his knees lifted off the mattress to help with the angle, to assist his alpha in fucking just that much deeper.

Dean’s left hand pulled at Michael’s bare shoulder, inadvertently sparking the Mating-scar, and Michael cried out in ecstasy. The alpha’s right hand snaked around Michael’s raised hip and took hold, took ownership of his Omega’s cock, and just like that, it was over.

Michael locked up, freezing with the punch of his alpha’s thrusts and grunting a deep, throaty, masculine rumble of satisfaction as he spilled over Dean’s hand and clenched tightly against the pumping cock up his ass. Dean hollered loudly in his ear and doubled his pace, shoving his knot right past the ring of tight muscle and holding there with tiny, grinding pulses, just enough to send him over the edge too.

Dean shot wave after sweet, delicious wave of hot come into his fertile mate, whispering once the first wave of oblivion passed. “Gonna knock you up, sweet man. Gonna breed you. Gonna fill you so full, you’ll waddle for the rest of your fucking life, Omega. Take it, baby. Suck me dry. Take it all. Oh, fuck!” Dean rambled and continued to thrust as his seed spilled deep inside his mate. Michael moaned underneath him in pleasure, his Omega stroked so thoroughly, his eyes rolled back in his head and his cock spurted just a bit in sympathy with the thick rhythm inside his body. His second orgasm, small though it was, sent gentle waves through his channel that swept the thick spray of Dean’s seed deep inside him, pulling the fluid up toward its target, up to where one of the little swimmers could find completion.

Dean stilled at last and panted above his mate, holding himself up on arms that had returned to shaking once again. This time, they shook from the endorphins of completion. Dean lowered himself slowly, licking along Michael’s neck and upper back, enjoying the massage that Michael’s soft giggles sent through his locked cock. Michael turned his head and flattened his knees, taking Dean down with him. Dean went right for his Omega’s lips and sucked first the bottom and then the top one into his mouth to knead them each with his own lips and his tongue.

“You taste so good, baby boy.” Dean told his mate, diving back in for another taste, shoving up with his feet for a better reach, pulling at their tie in a way that made them both moan and made Dean’s cock pulse another driving round of come home where it belonged. Michael whimpered and rounded up on his side just a bit, striving to keep Dean’s mouth on his own. “You gonna catch, love? You gonna give me a pup? I wanna share a family with you so bad.” Dean’s eyes teared back up, and Michael couldn’t help joining him. Michael snuffled into the kiss and doubled down, opening up to the alpha, and letting him in, letting him claim his prize.

Everything about the moment was right, was perfect. Pleasure passed easily, effortlessly between
them. Bare skin caressed bare skin. Kisses, promises, sweet loving assurances. The release of every
tense muscle in Dean’s body made way for all the endorphins his cells could hold, and he
overflowed with emotion even as his hips picked back up and began to thrust their way into a new
claim.

“Fuck, Dean,” Michael muttered, laying bonelessly flat. He broke the kiss and settled his cheek on
his folded arms. Dean got his hands and arms back beneath him and swept back to fullness with a
serpentine wave that culminated at the point where their bodies joined. He had almost no play.
Michael’s anus clamped tight on Dean’s knot. The Omega had no intention of releasing him any time
soon, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t mean business with the little movement he had at his disposal.

Dean’s head hung loose and low between Michael’s shoulder blades, the alpha’s biceps hard and
strong, glowing with a sheen of sweat, his shoulders bunching and shifting with his thrusts, the
muscles of his neck straining against the pull of need. His ass tightened, clenching, throbbing, too
empty. This wasn’t how Dean’s Ruts usually went, but he was growing to accept the difference.

Michael spread his thighs wide. “Yeah, alpha. Get in there, baby. Fuck me. Come on, Dean,” he
encouraged. Dean groaned, lifted his head and gripped the back of Michael’s neck between loose
jaws. Michael stopped egging him on instantly, responding to an ancient mandate. An alpha’s grip
on the Omega’s neck meant business, meant surety, meant ownership. Dean groaned loudly around
the hold of his teeth, reading Michael’s submission through their bond, and letting the pleasure of
knowing that Michael offered that degree of submission only to the great Alpha and his own mate.
Cas had it by right, by strength, but Michael gave it to Dean out of love and willingness. Dean felt
another wave of warmth flow up from his toes to his head, making chill-bumps break out along his
skin and his hair stand on-end.

He pressed in harder, faster, tighter, pulling out enough to make the knot challenge the hold that
bound it. In no time, Dean felt himself pulling in tightly again, bunching up, ready to unleash. He let
go of Michael’s neck. “I’m gonna come, baby boy,” he whispered right into Michael’s ear, tickling
the hairs deep inside the Omega’s ear-canal. Chill-bumps broke out all over Michael to match his
alpha mate, and he clenched down on Dean’s throbbing cock.

“Yeah, Michael! Yeah, baby, just like that. Oooooh, fuck!” Dean spilled over the edge, and rode the
hot waves with his head pulled high and a series of deep grunts, his ass and hips working furiously.

Sated for the moment, Dean collapsed on his mate who grunted in protest and shifted them both
sideways with no warning. Dean squawked and grumbled. “Jesus, Michael. Warn a guy!”

Michael was already snoring before Dean settled. Dean propped himself on an elbow and regarded
his mate. He stroked the damp black hair off Michael’s forehead and followed it with a kiss to his
shoulder, to his scar, to the red spot on the back of his neck where Dean’s teeth ground harmlessly
down.

“I love you, babe,” he told the sleeping form. “Get some sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“You better be,” mumbled Michael without opening his eyes. Dean chuckled and pulled the blanket
from the end of the bed where it lay folded but rumpled. He spread it out over the both of them. He
would grow too heated for it soon, but for now, he felt warm and relaxed in his nest of perfect bliss.
Gabriel stood in the doorway to Cas’ office. Cas still had his eyes glued to his computer, watching the tracer lines from the Heat/Rut room’s hormone sensors even out.

“Well?” Gabe prompted. “Are you going to John Wayne your way in there, guns blazing?”

“No. They’re fine,” said Cas with a sigh. It had been weird right at first; not aggressive, as he’d feared, but obviously backward. Dean’s body gave off different hormones when he was firmly alpha than it did when he was a Sub. Why they started the way they did, why they righted themselves so swiftly just after Dean’s first orgasm, Cas didn’t know. But they did right themselves, and now he was reading Oxytocin and Dopamine in a steady release. They seemed to have fallen asleep. Good. That was good.

“What about you, little brother,” Gabe asked him shrewdly. “How are you?”

“Why wouldn’t I be fine?” Cas deferred, closing the windows on his computer. Now that they had settled, he had no reason to spy on them. The hormone sensors were still on, and they would alarm if they registered anything dangerous. Cas had work to do.

“Oh, I dunno…maybe because you haven’t spent a July 7th out here with the rest of us in years. Are you telling me it doesn’t burn just a little to know that your best boy isn’t on the receiving end this time, and that it’s your knot that’s not up his ass?” Gabriel took a step or two into the office.

Cas tried to blow him off. “He’s alpha, Gabe. He’s Mated now, and that means he’ll want to face his Rut as an alpha. We only played it that way because we’re…us, I guess. It was never more than a stop-gap until he found a mate to knot.”

“Right.” Gabriel didn’t look convinced and his overly concerned stare was beginning to get on Castiel’s nerves.

“Mind your own business, Omega,” he said sharply. “Dean’s fine. I’m fine. Yes, I’m fidgety and horny, and the smell that Dean spread all over the house is making me crazy, all right? I plan to work it all out with my lovely mate, who is waiting for me as we speak, and I will be just fine. Whatever Dean needs this cycle, he’ll get from Michael. I have no doubt that they’ll do plenty of switching once the first waves work their way through, but that’s their business.” Cas thumped an assertive hand flat against his desk and pushed himself to his feet.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to work off some energy, so I can get back to work and focus.”

Gabe didn’t move. He was blocking Castiel’s exit. He kept his amber eyes on his brother’s blue ones. He waited.

“Gabe.”

“He’s your fiancé, Cas, and he’s in Rut.”

“He deserves time alone with his mate. He stayed clear when I spent April’s Heat locked up with her. He deserves the same…”

“Cas, that was April’s Heat, not your Rut. It’s not the same thing.”

“What are you saying?” Cas asked aggressively. “That I should barge in while they’re trying to conceive and kick Michael out?”

“Of course not,” Gabriel conceded, “But…”
“But what? Get to the point, Gabe.”

“You’re the Alpha of this pack, and Dean is YOUR fiancé. I know you want to give them space… and you should…” Gabe put his hands up, talking with his hands as he did when he forgot to try to go unnoticeable. “But you’ve noticed that Michael’s not as cowed by you as he was at first. He’s gotten cheeky and brave. He’s pushing you, Cas. He wants to know where the boundary lines are. Where does his 19 butt up against your 20? You need to show him, Alpha. You need to show them both.”

Cas glared at his brother.

“Give them a couple of days. Let them work through the densest part of the cycle. Let them conceive their pup in peace. But don’t let them forget about you. You need to make a firm statement. I can’t believe I’m the one telling you this, but you’re so focused on staying rational all the time that you forget the hierarchies don’t maintain themselves.”

Castiel frowned and looked at his feet.

“Listen to your Alpha, Cas. Forget the wolf. We all know what the wolf wants. What does your Alpha want you to do?” Gabe stepped aside, letting his brother have the door if he wanted it, but Cas hesitated.

“Dean hasn’t been through a normal alpha Rut since he was 19 years old,” Cas admitted. “I have faith that he’ll do just fine on his own, but…God, I want to be there for him, just like always. You have no idea how hard this is for me, out here…knowing he’s in there without me.”

Gabe glanced at the floor and blushed before he even asked the question. “I always wondered, Cas… He’s alpha, and you’re Alpha, and you pulled each other through your cycles. I’d be willing to bet that my big, bad wolf of a brother never Bottomed in his life…so, what were Dean’s Ruts like for all those years? Just the two of you alone for three days, horny as hell.”

Cas cocked an eyebrow at him. “You wondered that about your own brother? That’s a little weird.”

“Oh come on, Cas! The whole fucking world wants to know, and Dean, who talks about EVERYTHING at convention, won’t say a word about it. Did you let him fuck you when he was in Rut? I mean, he’s alpha. He HAD to fuck something…”

Cas laughed and shook his head. “One thing I know about Dean,” he said. “If he wants something kept private, then I’d better keep it private if I know what’s good for me. Excuse me, Gabe. You might want to steer clear of the dungeon for the next couple of hours.”

Cas left Gabriel unsatisfied in the office doorway. He made his way past the H/R room, which was silent and locked up tight, the bright red ‘Occupied’ light steady above the door. Cas paused outside the play room. He could feel that his mate was waiting on the other side. He could feel that she was ready for him.

Fucking April always felt good, felt perfectly right to his Alpha, but April was not Dean. Maybe Gabe was right. Asserting his Alpha’s rights over the mates in the H/R room sometime in the next few days could kill a number of birds with one stone. Michael did need a clarification of his proper place. Cas had been planning to do it once the door unlocked, but maybe this way was better, more real. And Dean. Cas knew Dean would be thrilled to have him there. He knew everything there was to know about Dean’s patterns when he cycled. Dean became a true Bottom when he Rutted in a shameless way that he still couldn’t outside the miasma of hormones. It was the only time he ever begged for a knot.
Gabe’s question wasn’t going to get an answer from Cas, but he smiled to himself anyway. No, even in Rut, in the thickest of his hormonal need, even at his most alpha, Dean never wanted to Top when they cycled together. They had toys that let Dean work through his need to thrust into something warm and wet. Cas willingly, happily let Dean use his mouth to alleviate the alpha burn. He took both of their hard, straining members in-hand and they fucked themselves to chafing in the tunnel of their hands. But until recently, no one, not even Dean, had ever propositioned fucking Cas for real. All those cycles, and Dean had never – not once – Topped anyone inside the H/R room during a Rut of his own. Castiel always asked, didn’t Dean want to bring an Omega in on his Ruts? Someone cute and sweet from the contract rooms? Dean just laughed and said no. He didn’t want anyone there but Cas, and he never seemed damaged by the strange way they maneuvered through his Rut.

Things were different now, and Cas hoped Dean was adjusting easily to the change. He suspected his fiancé would have no problems whatsoever, but a big part of him knew that Dean’s desire to be knotted while in Rut was something that wasn’t going to disappear entirely.

Several birds with one stone.

Cas turned the knob to the play room door and found his mate perfectly positioned on her knees in the center of her red square, her eyes watching the door. She lit up when he appeared.

“Good girl,” he praised, watching her shiver with pleasure. He sent her a sweeping caress through the bond without touching her, and watched her fight to keep her eyes open. “I’d like to strap you this afternoon, my sweet,” he told her, circling her slowly. “But you’ve been very good for me, so I have no reason to punish you. How would you feel about taking my strap just for the fun of it? It’s entirely up to you, love. Would you like that?”

“Yes, Sir,” she said immediately. “Yes, please! May I ask a question?”

“Of course.”

“Will you let me come first so I’ll be loose and relaxed for the strap?”

“Now that sounds like an excellent suggestion. What is your safeword, my Omega?”

“Beethoven.”

“Good girl. Stand and undress me. Let’s begin.”

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Michael awoke first. The bed was a mess. Dean’s knot had slipped free while they slept, and sticky fluid was everywhere. Michael recoiled and shifted away from the cold wet. Dean followed in his sleep, adjusting to search out the warmth of his Omega’s body again. Michael chuckled indulgently, and kissed Dean’s forehead. Dean mumbled nonsense syllables, and resettled into gentle snores. His face looked angelic and relaxed. Michael blinked complacently and watched his mate sleep.

The burn low in Michael’s belly was noticeably closer now, but it was still at least a day away. Dean’s body stayed flushed and feverish, even in his sleep. His dick lay flaccid on his thigh, but the knot hadn’t deflated completely. He knew that was normal. Michael was no stranger to alphas in Rut. At least this time, they didn’t need to try to remember condoms while their blood pumped deafening in their ears. Michael hoped never to need condoms again in his life. Maybe if Castiel
wanted to… Maybe at some point there would come a day when Castiel fucked him while he was fertile for one reason or other. The thought made him groan involuntarily and leak a little more slick down his thigh, putting paid to any notion Michael had that he wasn’t attracted to the top dog.

“I felt that,” mumbled Dean. “You thinking about me?”

“I’m thinking about Castiel,” admitted Michael, and Dean cracked an eye open.

“Really?”

Michael looked at him with a serious expression.

“We need to work on your lying skills, babe. I didn’t need to know that.” Dean stretched and rolled over. “Spoon me, would ya, Michael? I’m a little cold.”

Michael smiled and moved forward, then yelped at the cold wet puddle and shifted right back. “You told me to be honest about what I’m feeling. Remember that conversation?” Dean just grumbled sleepily in response. “We need to clean up, Dean. I don’t want to end up with a rash from sleeping in yuck.”

“Don’t worry, love. I’ll put powder on your bottom if you get diaper rash,” teased Dean sleepily. Michael swatted his ass, and Dean yipped.

“Up,” the Omega ordered, still fully Omega. Michael was coming to understand that even his Omega was less submissive than Dean, and too, it had a bossy streak just like his mother did. He might be able to work with this.

Dean grumbled again, but he rolled off the bed and onto his feet, stumbling through stripping the bed. Michael brought a damp cloth from the bathroom and wiped the plastic mattress liner down before pulling clean bedding off the shelf in the large closet.

“Get something to eat. I’ll make the bed. I want you to drink a Gatorade too, Dean. Your face looks dehydrated. How long were you vomiting before I found you?”

Dean tossed the soiled bedding into the bin beside the door, adding the blanket after inspecting it and realizing that it wasn’t salvageable. “Um, I pretty much puked up everything I’d eaten or drunk in the past two days, man. I still feel a little weak.”

“Still nauseous?”

“Nah. Just weak like I’ve been sick for a few days.” Dean hobbled naked to the fridge and inspected the supply, realizing he was finally hungry at last.

“I’ll call Fred,” said Michael assertively. “How does steak and potatoes sound?”

Dean slammed the refrigerator closed. “Sounds amazing! If you feed me a rib-eye, I’ll mate you, knot you, knock you up, and claim you forever!”

“Three outta four, so far, alpha,” Michael reminded him, laying a kiss on his collar-bone. Dean laughed and hugged him.

“Love you so much, Michael. Thanks for being here with me.”

“Alphas go sappy when they cycle, Dean. I figured you for one of the sappiest. Perfect timing.” Michael kissed him sweetly, then pulled away and found him a cold sports drink. Dean narrowed his
eyes, but accepted the offering and shoved his mate toward the phone so he could call out for a hot
meal.

Dean began by sipping the drink, but shifted quickly to gulping it once he realized how thirsty he
was. Michael put the order in, reminding Fred to keep watch of the hormone readings if he didn’t
want to barge in on something he might not be able to forget.

“Fear not, Master Michael,” Fred assured him. “I am familiar with the process.”

“Want to shower?” Dean asked.

“Not really,” Michael answered. “I don’t mind being a little sticky right now. We’ll just get sticky all
over again soon. We can shower after the next round. I just didn’t like laying in pools of it, you
know? It’s cold.”

They took their places in the bed again, laying against the pillows, Michael’s head on Dean’s
shoulder. Each of them tracing idle patterns on the other’s skin.

“I’m so sorry, Dean,” Michael said after a lengthy silence. “Everyone said you’d be fine, that you
needed to go through your lock-out till the end. If I’d known it would make you that sick, I never
would have agreed. I shouldn’t have closed the bonds, and I shouldn’t have let you suffer alone.
Hell, Alpha made Gabriel sit with me all morning, but he didn’t put anyone with you. I don’t
understand.”

Dean leaned down a little and applied a kiss to Michael’s head. “I’m fine, Michael. I wasn’t alone
that long. Cas was with me all night and most of this morning. We talked a lot of shit out. I kinda had
a break-down sometime around 4 a.m., I guess. I think it was partially the hormones talking, but it
felt like I finally got it all out.”

“Why wait until noon, then?” Michael asked, looking up at his mate. “Why not send for me?”

Dean sighed. “I didn’t think I could do it, but I wanted to know one way or the other,” he admitted.
“I thought I was too weak to stick it out. Everybody kept trying to get me to quit, and giving me outs,
and making excuses for why I should call it off, but I needed to know. I needed to know if it would
break me.”

“Jesus Christ, Dean, it’s just sex. It wasn’t worth the state I found you in. You should’ve fucking
seen yourself! It wasn’t worth it. You didn’t owe us your health, you stubborn bastard.”

Dean shook his head. “It was worth it to me.”

Michael chewed on that for a bit.

“You bit my thigh, you moron. That’s going to sting like hell every time you fuck me for the next
five days. What were you thinking?”

“Wasn’t,” Dean admitted. “Sorry. Want me to take a look?”

“No. It’ll heal up on its own. Or more likely, Alpha will sweep in with his doctor’s coat on and clean
it up for me, maybe put in a couple of stitches.”

“I thought you didn’t have a medical kink,” Dean accused.

“I don’t,” said Michael. “I just don’t want to die from gangrene. Your mouth is probably full of
disgusting germs. You were throwing up, for God’s sake.”
They went quiet again. Neither really wanted to bicker, and both were still so full of happy hormones, they just felt too nice to keep up their ends of the usual sniping.

“How much longer?” Michael asked at last, rubbing Dean’s far hip with a firm, massaging touch.

“Till we go again?” Dean clarified, and Michael nodded. He wanted Dean to eat something before they revved back up, but he didn’t want to press. “Uh, 20 minutes maybe. I dunno. I can feel it building, but I’ve got a little time.”

“Think there’s time to eat?”

“No,” Dean confirmed. “Fred’s going to time it carefully. He’ll have it all hot and ready when we finish up the next round. He knows how this goes. He’s been taking care of Cas and Gabe their whole lives.”

“Oh. In that case…” Michael shifted downward, positioned himself above Dean’s mid-section and kissed his belly, flicking a tongue into his navel, enjoying the shiver of pleasure that coursed through Dean at the motion. Dean hummed happily and settled himself down and back, folding his arms behind his head.

“I like being Omega for you, Dean,” said Michael between kisses and went back to work. Dean raised an eyebrow.

“That so? Have you been practicing, baby boy?”

“Mm-hm.” Michael looked up and winked at his alpha. The pull to present was beginning to tug at him again, and he smirked to himself. He knew he had it in him to drive alphas wild with his presentation. He had felt Dean respond, and he wanted to feel that power again. It was so very different than what he felt as a Dom, but power was power. There was no arguing that his Omega presentation didn’t give him power over his alpha mate.

Dean groaned when he felt Michael’s lust spike at being called ‘baby boy’. Who knew? Dean slid down further in the bed so that his growing erection stood up proud and unavoidable. Michael glanced up, the alpha cock, big enough to satisfy an Omega with a size-kink to outpace Omega standard defaults, stood between the two mates, demanding attention.

“What happened to 20 minutes?” Michael asked him cheekily.

Dean’s face had gone flushed again. Bright pink circles stood out below his eyes, and his eyes were beginning to redden once more. He panted without speaking, shifting his hips to bob his cock in Michael’s face.

“Want me to suck you?” asked Michael, just to be contentious. Dean shook himself again, striking Michael’s lip with his erection before remembering in a flash that Michael had revoked his ‘no-touching’ rule for the interim. Michael laughed, but his eyes went wide when Dean put a shaky hand around himself and gripped tightly.

“Oh, fuck!” they said together.

They both watched, eyes glued to the veiny length that stretched out and pushed back up to wrinkle around Dean’s fist as he stroked himself. Holy lovin’ God! This was why Michael put that rule on him. It felt so much better than he remembered ever feeling before in his life. Dean watched his own cock, but Michael shifted to watch Dean’s eyes.

“It was a long tease?” Dean asked, his eyes wide and surprised.
“Mm-hm,” Michael confirmed. “Was it worth the wait?” Michael leaned forward and licked the head of Dean’s cock, collecting the salty dripples on his tongue.

“Fuck, yes! Holy crap, Michael! How did you know? Oh, God, I’m gonna come!”

Michael sat up swiftly and wrapped a hand around Dean’s stilling him. “Don’t come. Not yet.”

“Are you fucking with me!?!?” protested Dean. “You made me wait all this time, just to cock-block me now!?!?”

“Just wait until I get into position. I want every ounce you can give me, babe. I want your pup, and I don’t wanna waste a drop.” Michael flipped a knee across Dean’s thighs, facing away, his ass presented to his alpha, and he used his grip on Dean’s fist to center himself as he lowered himself down. He speared himself on the top third of Dean’s length, and then he began to stroke firmly, bringing Dean’s fist back into motion.

Dean caught on quickly, and he took over, stroking himself fast and rough, just like he liked it. His knuckle and his thumb struck Michael’s sensitive hole again and again at the top of the stroke, and Michael had to let go to brace himself against Dean’s shins.

“Yeah, Dean. Oh, yeah.” Michael pulsed his body up and down on Dean’s shaft, running brutally into Dean’s fist on the down-stroke. “You’re so fucking BIG! God, alpha, YES!”

“Touch yourself, Michael,” Dean encouraged. He wouldn’t get to see anything, but he could feel it. He was wide open and straining. He pumped his hips in time with his stroke. He and Michael didn’t have the rhythm just right, so every now and then they struck badly, sending Michael lurching forward. Neither of them cared though. The sweat was flowing again, and their eyes had shifted colors. Dean’s alpha took over. He let go of his cock and grabbed his Omega’s hips, lifting him with his alpha strength and slamming him down hard against his knot, only to pull him back off again. Michael’s full weight was no more to Dean than that of a rag-doll. He man-handled the Omega without thought or strain. He thrust brutally into Michael’s welcoming channel and paid no attention to the volume of his grunts and groans.

Michael lost it first. He stroked himself fast, stripping his cock with abandon, and shooting his load over his fist to dribble between Dean’s thighs. Dean didn’t slow.

“Lie back on me, baby boy,” he instructed. Michael sighed and fell back onto Dean’s chest. Dean folded Michael’s legs up over him, bending him in half. He planted his feet flat against the bed andrammed his cock up hard and strong into the open wet channel. Dean wrapped one arm around Michael’s middle to hold him in place, and held his shins in place folded above them with the other. He pistoned his hips to reach into the depths of Michael’s channel where his prostate lay poised between his channel and his colon. Michael shouted out in overstimulation.

“DEAN! FUCK! ALPHA!!!”

“Michael! My beautiful Omega! All mine! All fucking mine!” Dean fucked hard, and the Omega took everything he had to give with a relaxed compliance so at odds with his usual presentation.

Michael’s channel spasmed, clenching down, and Dean groaned, shoving with his hips and his feet until his knot popped in and held. He came at once, throbbing out electric sparks into Michael’s body. Dean’s feet pressed hard enough against the bed to roll them both up off the mattress, curling their bodies into a tight spiral as Dean unleashed volumes of hot semen, pulse after vibrating pulse. He tightened his grip, nearly cutting Michael’s breath off completely.
Michael reached down to grasp the very base of Dean’s cock, below the knot where it disappeared into his body, and he squeezed a firm grasp.

“Oh MY GOD!!!” shouted Dean, beginning a whole new round of pulsating orgasm into Michael’s hot channel. His legs pushed upward even harder of their own accord, pressing Dean up onto his shoulders, and bringing a yelp from Michael as he folded up impossibly tight within the curl of Dean’s core.

“Alpha! Can’t breathe! Baby! Hey, Dean! Little help here! Put me down!”

Dean finally stopped pulsing rhythmically and let his legs fall slack, stretching back out flat, and Michael went with him with a deep sigh of relief followed by a deep inhale. They floated sanguine for a long while, letting the cloud drift over them, letting their conscious minds come slowly back online.

“Holy fuck,” said Michael, nuzzling backward into the crook of Dean’s neck, scenting his mate. Dean let out a long, shaky breath in response, and he returned the motion, craning his neck forward to scent Michael. Their scents had long ago taken on aspects of one another, but right now, as Dean was Rutting, and Michael was so close to Heat, it was the rich differences that shone brightly. Dean’s mouth watered, and he licked a wide stripe up behind Michael’s ear.

Michael lay bonelessly across Dean, centered right at his middle, crushing his hips and his chest. Dean didn’t mind one bit. The pressure to his physical body soothed his psychic one, and he dropped his head onto the pillow in exhaustion and satisfaction.

“I’m going to be completely ruined before I even hit my Heat, man,” Michael groused sleepily, reaching back to scratch Dean’s scalp.

“You’ve got it made, Michael,” Dean explained. “It doesn’t matter how sore or tired you are. When the Heat hits, you’ll have all the energy you need. I’m the one in big trouble here. I’m gonna be wasted and done for while you’re still trying to ride my limp dick.”

“No worries, there either,” Michael breathed out. We’ll just switch places. If you’re spent, and you can’t get it up anymore, you just roll your ass right over and take it from behind. Deal?”

Dean groaned, feeling his cock try to respond to the image.

“Can I sleep through it?”

Michael bit him on the jaw, and Dean flinched, laughing. “Did you just threaten to sleep through me fucking you?”

“I’m gonna be exhausted by then, Michael. I’m just thinking ahead.”

Dean squealed and jolted as Michael’s fingers dug backward into the alpha’s ribs.

“Stop! Shit, Michael!” Dean laughed and tried valiantly not to upend his mate, knowing it would hurt himself more than Michael if they spilled sideways. “I’m sorry! I won’t sleep. I swear! Stop!”

Michael rolled carefully, pressing his ass back into Dean to support them both, and he stopped tickling. Dean pulled up onto an elbow and began kissing Michael’s throat, his shoulder, his jaw, his scar. Dean’s Omega was the most beautiful man Dean had ever seen, and he wanted to bury him in all the kisses he deserved.

“Tell me about your punishment, babe,” Michael said, rolling his head up to give his alpha space.
“What about it?” asked Dean between kisses.

“Did it work?”

Dean stopped laying kisses across his mate’s skin and pressed upward so they could see each other. “I know you hated that, babe,” Dean said simply. “But I needed it. You understand?”

“No, I really don’t,” Michael told him, “But I understand that it was important to you. Can you promise me that it helped, and that we don’t ever have to do that again?”

“It helped, Michael. It sucked ass, and I don’t EVER wanna do it again, but it taught me so much. I wish I could promise I won’t ever be there again, but all I can promise is that I’ll try.” Dean frowned in thought. “Thank you for letting me do that, Michael. I know you didn’t want to. That took a lot of trust, and, I guess…just thanks.”

“We ask a lot of each other, Dean. Crazy to think that it’s as easy to be together as just saying yes to whatever the other asks for. Is it really that simple?” Michael turned his head to look up at Dean. The light playing over Dean’s features gave him a halo from above.

“Now who’s the sappy one?” Dean snarked, and Michael bit him again, this time on the chin.

Michael let Dean come back down from his laughter, keeping his eyes on his beautiful mate, lit from above with a heavenly glow. “Dean, do you want me to treat you like he does?”

“What do you mean? Like Cas does?” Dean settled back, laying down behind Michael, wrapping his arms around the Omega.

“Like when he punishes you, and he distances himself and gets cold and unresponsive. Do you need that from me? Fuck, Dean, do you need that from him?” Michael clung to Dean’s crossed fists at his sternum.

Dean thought about it. He breathed into the back of Michael’s neck. “I need it from him, baby. I wish I knew why. It gives me something to strive back for after I fuck up. My therapist is probably going to tell me it’s a fucked-up way to cope, but it works for us.”

“Does it feel like he stops loving you when he does that?” asked Michael. He wormed a hand into Dean’s and wove their fingers tightly together, fearing Dean’s answer, fearing that the two lovers had an abusive side that he was going to have to step between. He dreaded needing to do that, but he would.

Dean surprised him with a chuckle that turned into a groan when his cock twitched at the sensation. “Nah, man. It’s not like that at all. It’s like a roleplay, kinda.”

“A roleplay,” said Michael flatly, unimpressed, and Dean laughed again.

“Maybe, just trust us on this one. It works for us, and it’s not as broken as it seems. You know how pissy you get when he tries to tell us how we need to interact, you and me? This one is me and him, Michael. I don’t want the same thing from you. You’re doing everything I need you to do, babe. Just keep doing what you’re doing. Don’t try to be Cas. Don’t try to interfere, Michael. You need to let us be us, and I’ll make sure he stays out from between you and me too.”

Michael hmphed, thinking. Dean moved their joined hands up to where he could reach Michael’s knuckles for a kiss. “Just you and me right now, love,” said Dean firmly.

The intercom buzzed.
“You were saying?” asked Michael.

“It’s just Fred,” Dean assured him reaching over Michael to press the button on the side-table. “You got my steak?” he shouted. Michael winced at the volume.

Fred’s unassuming voice crackled back through. “Sir, your meal will be waiting for you in the hall when you are prepared to retrieve it. Please let me know if you require anything else.”

“Did you bring beer?” asked Dean hopefully.

“No, Sir. Your Alpha does not allow the consumption of alcohol during your cycle, as I believe you are already aware.”

“Crap!” said Dean, knowing the request would make it back to Cas’ ear.

“Just leave it there, Fred,” said Michael. “We’ll be out to get it in a few minutes. Thank you.”

“Very good, Omega. I trust things are going well? Would you like me to pass any messages along to your Alpha?”

Dean snickered, and Michael rolled his eyes and let Dean answer that one so they didn’t both wind up in trouble again due to Michael’s inability to contain his snark. “We’re good, Fred. Tell Cas there’s only a little bleeding, and Michael doesn’t want any stitches.”

“Shit, Dean!” Michael whispered furiously as Dean outright giggled. “He’s gonna storm in here with a full medical cart.”

“Chill out, Michael, would that be so bad? I know you have the hots for him. Would it be so awful to let him in, let him play with us both? Size-kink, remember? The dude’s hung, Michael.”

“Possessive control-freak, remember?” Michael reminded him grumpily, but Dean wasn’t buying it.

“You know, we never really talked through your kinks or your assessment. We’ve got a lot of downtime coming over the next few days. There’s time to hash out a new contract. You wanna tackle it? You can ask for anything you want, babe. You wanna try a threesome? A foursome? A fucking orgy? I’ve been thinking about it. A lot. Kind of a hell of a lot. I’ve had a lot of time to think. That article’s coming out today, and the picture on the cover is my big out. There’s no pretending after this.” Dean stopped talking abruptly, unsure how to continue. He was still knotted firmly, and his mind was stuck on his steak cooling in the hallway.

Michael’s question jolted him back into present company. “Have you been pretending with me?”

“What? No! Of course not. How would I even? You can feel me from the inside,” Dean protested.

“That doesn’t mean you’ve told me everything,” Michael reasoned.

“Well, of course I haven’t told you everything,” said Dean. “We’ve only known each other three months. We still have tons of crap to learn about each other.”

“Tell me something I don’t know then,” Michael challenged. He shifted, and Dean felt his cock loosen a little bit. Just a few more minutes, and the steak would be all his, still rare, warm and dripping. His stomach rumbled. “Dean? Are you thinking about food right now?”

“Sorry, man. I haven’t eaten in days. I’m starving.”

“Right. Here, hold on…” Michael braced his hand against Dean’s hip and squirmed his own hips
until Dean’s knot slid free on the thick, slimy mess lubing the way. Dean groaned thickly, and his hips thrust a few times on their own.

“Holy shit!”

“Go get your steak, Dean.”

They talked over the meal that Dean inhaled as if he hadn’t eaten in months. It was a bit like pulling teeth, but Michael refused to be put off. The subject obviously embarrassed Dean no end. Even just to Michael, even after coming to terms with the idea of outing himself to the world, Dean struggled with the minutiae of admitting what he wanted to try, even knowing that Michael was more than a little on board himself.

“Dean. Please. I’m not going to judge you. Just say it.”

“Jesus, Michael, you already know. You read me like a fucking book. Why do you need me to say it?”

Michael raised his eyebrows and reached across the narrow table to put his hand over Dean’s fork, holding him still. “Because this is important. No matter what I think I know, it’s too important to let me guess blindly. I’m not doing anything with you that you don’t ask me for verbally. Out loud,” he clarified. Dean still didn’t answer, and Michael leaned in even closer. “If you can’t say it, Dean, then I have to believe it’s not truly something you want, and you’re just going along to please me.”

“Well what do YOU want, then? Why does it have to be me who starts this?”

“Fine. I want to bring outside partners into our scenes. I want you stroked and fucked by beautiful men under my direction. I want to watch them take you apart while you keep your eyes on my eyes. I want to watch you come on an alpha’s knot purely because I want you to do it. That’s what I want. Don’t you dare go along with the idea just because it’s what I want.”

Dean was having trouble breathing or focusing. His Rut reasserted its presence all at once, and Dean gripped the table, dropping his cutlery to the floor.

“Dean? You’re not getting out of this without saying something.”

“Uh, yep. I...uh...can we...can we try it out...just once or twice?” Dean’s cheeks had gone crimson, and he couldn’t raise his eyes. His alpha warred with his wolf for control. Stupid wolf had no business in the middle of a Rut. Dean was mortified.

“So, that’s a yes?” Michael pressed, cutting a piece of his own steak as if he didn’t know what the conversation was doing to Dean.

“Come on Michael. Don’t make me say it again,” Dean pleaded.

Michael looked at him seriously, chewing on his tender steak slowly. “Look, baby. You’re in Rut. You are as firmly alpha as I can ever hope to get you. If you can’t say it now, how am I ever going to believe you’re truly doing this for yourself and not just for me. It’s too big a stretch from anything we’ve done before for us not to be sure.”
“It’s not that I don’t wanna, Michael. It’s just too embarrassing to talk about.”

“But why would it be embarrassing to talk about with me? I’ve admitted it all to you already. I’m not embarrassed. Wolves don’t get embarrassed about sex, baby. Explain this to me.” Michael stroked Dean with his side of the bond. Dean’s eyes fluttered closed.

“It’s…it’s not part of my wolf, Michael. The wolf doesn’t care one way or the other. This is from me, and as much as I’ve learned that I can be whoever I am no matter where it comes from, I’m just not ready to open up that much. It’s embarrassing. Help me out here.”

“But if you can’t even talk it through with me, how could you ever go through with it? I don’t want your alpha show-off running you off and taking over.”

“I can do it, babe. I swear, just get me into a Submissive state and make me do it. I want this. I really do.”

“Make you do it?”

“Yeah, just make me.”

Michael sighed sadly. “Nope. No way. Not until I’m sure you’ve got a handle on when to put your safeword out there. Learn that first, and then we’ll see.”

Michael didn’t miss Dean’s disappointed drop. That told him something, but he couldn’t risk making assumptions. Dean mattered too much to toy with.

“Pick a safeword, Dean.”

“What?”

“You’re 27 years old, dude. This is ridiculous. You can’t pretend to be an expert on Doms and Subs and not have a word of your own. I’ve been a patient man for three months, Dean, but it’s enough now. Pick one.”

“Cas never made me…”

“Really? That’s where you wanna take this?”

“What’s wrong with stop-lights?”

“Pick one.” Michael was done. He stood and cleared his own plate and Dean’s, stacking them and setting them back on the tray.

“Hey!” Dean objected.

“No good. ‘Hey’ is too common-place. Pick something else.”

“Michael…”

“Nope. No names. I expect you to call my name out in ecstasy all the time. Pick a unique word.”

Dean’s face flattened, but he was starting to get so turned on, he couldn’t make the annoyance stick. Michael was in fine form, no longer Omega, and Dean loved it.

“I dunno, baby. I never had to…”
“Now, Dean.”

“Impala!”

“Atta boy!” Michael enthused, pulling Dean to his feet. “I knew you could do it.” Michael lowered his head to Dean’s eye-level as Dean had crumpled in on himself. “All you have to do now is learn when to say it, and the whole world opens up to us. I’ll take you to Heaven and back any time you want me to, my only love. Just promise me you’ll try. Remember when we met, Dean? I told you I want everything with you. You’re my dream come true. I was hot for you for years before I knew you. I went to your cons. I watched every appearance you ever made. I studied you on YouTube. I read all your fucking books. God, Dean, I fucking wrote letters to you. Did you get them?”

“What?” Dean’s head was spinning. He blamed it on the hot blood pumping a thrum through his ears and filling his cock.

Michael pressed him against the foot of the bed, and bent over him, forcing Dean flat onto his back. “I was your biggest fan, Dean Winchester. I was in love with you before I ever met you. So in love. I was the biggest fanboy. I knew everything there was to know about you publicly.” Michael straddled Dean’s lap and hesitated not a moment before impaling himself right back where he belonged, sinking up to the bulging knot with his channel clenching his mate’s length.

“Oh, God!”

“Then I met you, and all of my dreams came true. I don’t deserve this. I never did a single thing in my whole life to deserve you. I want all of it anyway. I want everything you can give me, Dean. I love you with everything that I am, everything that I have. But all I have to give you back is what I can make you feel. I can make you feel anything, Dean, anything at all. All you have to do is trust me with your heart and your body, and learn how to use that fucking safeword.”

“Christ, Michael…” Dean lay still and let Michael fuck himself until they tied again, and Michael’s come cooled across Dean’s lap.

***************

“How long before we know, Dean?” Michael asked two mornings later. His Heat was in full swing as Dean’s Rut began to fade, but they were both spent for the moment. Spent and tied.

“Know what, sugar?” Dean asked sleepily. His thighs burned. The chafing was beginning to assert itself to the point he couldn’t ignore it, and he squirmed, looking for a comfortable position. Michael’s release congealed slowly on his belly, but he was too tired to deal with it.

“You know…” Michael seemed hesitant to say, and Dean cracked one eye open to look at him.

“Oh. A pup?”

Michael nodded silently.

“Well,” Dean began, pulling up onto a weary elbow. “In six weeks we can expect to see something on an ultrasound if the technician’s good.”

“Six weeks!?!?” Michael caught a sparkle in his mate’s eye, and he calmed. “Too long. What else
have you got?”

“In four weeks we can kill a rabbit and find out for sure.”

“No, I don’t want to be responsible for the death of a rabbit. Think of something else.”

“Um,” Dean feigned deep thought. “Well, in three weeks, you can pee on a stick.”

“Three weeks? Isn’t there anything sooner? I’ll go crazy if I have to wait three weeks.”

“Crap, Michael! Okay, lessee. I think Missouri can give you an answer after two weeks. It’s essentially the same as the stick test, but she’s got ways to smooth out the errors of the early faults.”

“Oh,” Michael said glumly. “I guess I can wait two weeks. I’m so excited, Dean. I feel like I’m made of electricity.”

“Or,” Dean started, and Michael looked up hopefully. “You know Cas’ nose is really good. He might be able to tell by scent when we come out in another couple of days.”

“Two days,” breathed Michael breaking out in a quick sweat. “Really?”

“Mm-hm. I’m sure he’ll be able to tell.”

“Dean…”

“Or.”

Dean said it, and then stopped. Michael’s heart was beating so fast Dean could feel it through their tie.

“Or?”

Dean held Michael’s eye as he swiped his fingers through the thick lumpy mess on his own belly. Michael’s spend. Michael’s.

He held it up to his own nose and cupped his other hand tightly around his fingers, huffing deeply and sparkling at his mate.

“Dean! What? No! Really?” Michael grabbed Dean’s wrist and pulled his fingers beneath his own nostrils. Dean’s green eyes didn’t blink, and he let Michael take his hands and move them.


“Shh, Michael. Close your eyes, baby. Can you smell yourself?”

Michael breathed deeply again, but shook his head. “I can’t, Dean. I can’t ever smell my own scent. It’s too close.” He huffed in frustration. Dean was teasing him. It was too early to tell.

“Our scents changed the morning after we Mated, Michael. Try again. What do you smell? Close your eyes, and let your wolf do it.”

Michael tried again. He closed himself off from every sensation and focused on scent. His come had a scent. It was musky and a little sweet, just like always.

“What am I smelling for? Are we just fishing here?”
“What do you smell, Omega? You’ve got a good, strong nose. Describe it to me.”

Michael cracked his eyes open in frustration. “I can’t smell myself, Dean. It smells like come; like come and something else…something that’s probably just me.”

“Hmm. What does this something smell like?” Dean leaned back and let Michael work on it.

“Like summer evening when it’s been raining. Maybe a little like ozone, but cleaner, fresher. Do I smell like that to you?”

“No. You don’t smell anything like rain.” Dean watched his mate’s eyes.

“Dean! You’re killing me here!” Michael whuffed again into his cupped hands.

“You can’t smell yourself. You already told me that, right? You know what semen smells like, and that’s most of what you’re smelling, but you said there’s something else? Something…other? I dunno, Michael. If it’s not you, and it’s not the scent of your come…what else is there?” Dean blinked, schooling himself carefully through his gaze and his bonds.

“Something other? Like…someONE other? Like someone ELSE? Dean! Am I…? Is this our pup’s scent?! Am I pregnant?!” Michael breathed deeply, and Dean couldn’t stop the laughter from eking its way out of his throat. He bit his lower lip and held it. Michael looked at him, mid-huff.

“I’m pregnant?”

“I thought I smelled something new last night, but I wanted to wait until I was sure to say anything. It’s much stronger this morning. I’m sure of it now.” Dean’s face was frozen in an expression of shock. Now that he’d said it out loud, it was beginning to sink in. Dean was going to be a father. Michael’s surprise mirrored him, but there was nothing odd about that. They’d both laid so many claims, one atop another in the last couple of days, that the two of them were trapped mirroring one another incessantly for now.

“Congratulations, O-pop. We’re going to have a baby.”

“Hold onto your fucking hat, Dean,” Michael told him. “You thought I was turned on before… You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Dean forgot all about the chafing as Michael tackled him, smearing the mess on Dean’s fingers everywhere, and tying them fast again before they ever unbound.

Chapter End Notes

This is basically 1 of 2. It took us so long to get here, the least I can do is draw it out to two full chapters. The second portion really will have to wait a week before I can write it.

Happy Thanksgiving to all my friends in the U.S. I am unbelievably thankful for all of you. Yes, you too.

Thank you.
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

Sam and Jess get to know the newest Winchesters, Crowley's pacing in frustration, and oh yeah, someone's still in cycle.

Chapter Notes

I have no idea how this one eked out to almost 13K words. They just get away from me.

Guys, I got quite a bit dirtier in this chapter than I usually do. Really, just know, I have like, no limits at all, but some of you might, so be aware. It's dirtier than usual.

Also, my final read-through, and no, I still don't pass my writing by a beta because I'm too possessive and impatient, I found way more typos than usual. That means I most certainly missed some. Sorry. I know typos can kill the flow of thought-images. I'll fix them eventually.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
NOW:

Jess stroked the tiny furry head gently, captivated by every tiny aspect, every tiny movement, completely besotted. She rocked him smoothly in the homey rocking chair that looked entirely out of place in this sterile white institutional space. He fit seamlessly into the crook of her arm, a perfect length to lie across the stretch of her forearm to rest his tiny head upon her palm. She couldn’t look away.

John.

Named simply, succinctly, like his uncle Dean, like his namesake, like his own father as long as Sam eschewed the lofty full weight of his formal name. It was a name of limitless possibility and rooted in the heft of historical power. Johns had been everything over the eons; everything and anything. John, Johann, Ian, Juan, Sean, Johannes. His name bought him membership in a pack of his own, and he would make his own name mean something new. He could be anything, and his name could carry the load of whatever his ambition drove him to become because it was simple and classic and strong. Jess’ own father was simply Tom, and he had turned it mighty by the drive of his own wit, strength, and power. It wasn’t a baby name. Jess had no use for baby names. She was naming people, not babies.

He mewled at her softly, and everything inside her warmed and melted. The fur on his head would gradually fall out over the next few months, to be replaced by fine, silky hair. Right now, it covered him to his shoulders, reaching as far forward as to coat his pointy ears with soft tan-colored down, and he was adorable by any measure. To his mother, he was angelic.

The pup squirmed and blinked nearly colorless eyes open, confused and annoyed. He blinked a few more times and then brought all his concentration to bear on focusing up into her face. Jess smiled down at him, all the world fading away. “Good morning, handsome,” she told him, stroking his cheek with a thumb. He turned immediately into the touch, seeking with his plump lips, and she laughed in quiet delight.

“Hungry?” she asked although his verbal prowess wasn’t yet sharp enough to answer. He blinked and managed to capture the tip of her thumb between his lips. The nurse had been watching carefully and already had his next meal prepared, sliding it quietly onto the small table at Jess’ elbow with a touch to her shoulder. Jess nodded her thanks, rearranged her hold on the infant like a veteran, and offered him the nipple with a touch to his lower lip. The baby took it, piranha-like, and set diligently to work, his eyes slipping closed again.

“Kid knows what he wants outta life. I’ll give him that,” mentioned the nurse. Brian had been watching over them both since their traumatic birth, taking the lead over their care. He knew more about these two pups than anyone else living, and he kept a wary eye on the two adoptive parents who had swooped in to assume custody of his charges – his pups. So far, he was comforted enough to allow them a little more control, but he wasn’t ready to fully trust them just yet with his twins.

“He’ll suck the whole thing down in one go if you let him,” he told Jess for the third time. “Then he cries for the next couple hours over the belly cramps. Make sure you stop at about a third of the way through to get that gas out, or everybody’s going to be feeling it. That boy’s got lungs.” Jess smiled at her son, enamored by the way his cheeks moved rhythmically and his forehead wrinkled in concentration. It reminded her of Sam.

“Speaking of lungs,” said Sam from across the room by the window where he had little Henry stretched out on the bench seat, naked but for a diaper, soaking up rays from the sun to help bring his
vitamin D levels up. “What did the doctor say about our chances of going home on time? Can we fly yet? Is it safe?”

Brian tore his eyes off John’s little face and crossed the room to check on Henry. “She’s coming by in an hour or two to talk to you, beta. It looks good. He’s made a lot of progress over the last couple of days, but it’s doc’s call.” Brian looked down at the wiggling form on the bench, and rearranged the rolled blanket to tuck it closer against his side. This pup liked to feel encased, contained. Henry hated the feel of open space around him. Comforted, the pup stilled a bit and continued his inspection of his father’s face.

Sam couldn’t look away. Those blue eyes held an eternity of wisdom and depth, as if every answer to every question were within their scope, lacking nothing but a verbal connection to his mouth to unlock the wisdom of the ages. They were the eyes of an oracle. Henry blinked slowly.

“I’m going to miss these two mutts,” said Brian, watching Henry try to fight sleep, completely oblivious that calling them mutts might incense his parents. They were mutts. Fathered in the cruelest way by an unknown rapist. They knew nothing whatever of the alpha or the man who had handed over a substantial fee to have his – or her – way with an enslaved young woman whose entire life had been nothing but pain and confinement. She had no doubt been scrubbed and polished to near respectable condition. Breeding kennels tried their best to put a happy face on what they did behind the scenes. They presented lithe young bodies to randy alphas with assurances that the Omegas in their care had chosen to be there, had willingly offered their bodies in service to rebuild the Canid population. It wasn’t true of course. No one bought the sales pitch. But the glossy sales brochures and the clean, welcoming breeding rooms - where the straps on each rutting bench were only there to help ‘support’ the Omega - sold the lie in a way that made it digestible to alphas who needed a bit of convincing to let their impulses have free-rein.

Sam didn’t see mutts. He saw sons. He let Brian’s careless nickname roll over his ear without comment. Henry and John might have been sired in the most horrific way, but they themselves, were gifts from the Universe, treasured and beloved. He touched Henry’s tiny hand, promising the pup silently to grant his birth mother a place in their home and to bring her boys up in the full knowledge of her strength and her sacrifice, in her honor.

Sam had spoken to Castiel late last night and asked him to fly home with them. Henry still had a ways to go before he was really ready to grow and thrive on his own. His lungs and his eyes in particular hadn’t developed fully yet. By all measures, he should be stable enough to make the journey back to Kansas in safety, but having a doctor watch over him as the plane reached altitude would make everyone feel more comfortable. Christian’s local pediatrician would make the final call, and Cas had already arranged his own travel to arrive just before they planned to leave. They’d pushed their departure back by two days, planning to fly home on Thursday. Two days seemed remarkably trivial to Sam and Jess, but the staff assured them that at this age, two days could make all the difference to the little bodies that were working so hard to grow and stabilize.

The mates barely left the stark nursery the whole time since their arrival, taking turns grabbing a few
hours of sleep on the miserable fold-out sofa in a dark room next door designed for the staff’s use while on round-the-clock vigils. The hours melted together, and as the sun peeked over the horizon through the little window in the corner of the breakroom, Sam couldn’t remember for a moment if it was rising or setting. He watched long enough to confirm that it was morning before slugging the last of his coffee and trudging in sleepily to relieve his mate.

Two more days. Two more days, and he’d be allowed to take his family home. Jess looked up at him with a tired but happy grin and stood to hand Hank off to his father. Crap. Henry, not Hank. Stupid Dean and his stupid nicknames. Sam shook the name out of his head and carefully worked his arm beneath his son’s little head, taking him from his mother.

“What?” she asked, noting his strange startlement from within his own thoughts.

He sighed and kissed her cheek, following the kiss with one to his boy’s forehead. “I just thought of him as Hank. I think we’re stuck with the nicknames.”

“There are worse things,” she reminded him. “Like not having him at all.”

He nodded and took her spot in the rocking chair, working the buttons of his shirt open so he could lay the little chest against his own. Sam had never known anything could feel like this. The pup was so little and defenseless, but he held all of Sam’s power in the tiny curl of his fist. Henry’s breathing came fast and shallow, his tiny diaphragm working harder than it should have to. But settling him upright, chest to chest with his father helped him gain strength, worked all of the muscles that needed to grow quickly. His little neck was strong, and although he could lay his head down against Sam’s chest, he rarely did. Henry’s eyes never stopped moving while he was awake, and his head bobbed restlessly about on his little neck. Sam stroked his back and shushed him sweetly.

Jess watched for a moment, mesmerized. Sam glanced up and met her eyes, smiled, then gestured her toward the door to get some sleep. She flashed a challenge for the briefest of moments, knowing that John would be waking soon, hangry as always, and she didn’t want to miss his feeding. But Sam put a stop to her protest with nothing more than a narrowing of his eyes and a pop to her thigh through the bond. It didn’t hurt, but it was reminder enough to get her attention, and she left the room without another word.

Sam settled in. Christian would be coming by later. Final travel plans were going to be solidified today after one more physical exam. None of that mattered for the moment. Sam was sleepy but caffeinated, and he held the whole world against his chest, feeling the shaky, determined, quick-beat pulses of a new life against his own body. He wished he could pull power out of himself and manifest it physically within his son. Watching him struggle hurt everything that Sam was. He was in awe of Henry’s determination. He slept very little for a newborn, fighting the collapse into darkness until his exhaustion literally overwhelmed him, and waking with a start and an outraged wail as if surprised and furious to find that he’d succumbed.

Already John was different. The larger of the twins took everything they offered him with a sanguine complacency, as his right and due, like divine ordinance. He demanded feedings. He rolled blissfully into sleep between one breath and the next. He awoke with an irate command for attention that spoke to Sam of alpha. There was no way to know yet. Even the physical developments that differentiated the secondary genders wouldn’t begin to be evidenced until the boys were at least 9. And the tertiary gender was meaningless during childhood. The most dominant kid could develop into a Submissive upon sexual maturity, and the quietest mouse in the school-room could grow to house a wolf massively intimidating. Sam wondered idly what Michael had been like as a child.

Henry was just as demanding, but in a different way. He seemed baffled when his miniscule squeaks of hunger went unanswered for more than a minute or two, and he upped the volume in confusion
and dismay. He didn’t get hangry, he seemed betrayed. And where John stuck to a schedule like
clockwork – a schedule of his own devising that made sense only to him, Henry defied all attempts
to map his care to any kind of timeline whatsoever. He woke at odd intervals, and slept only when he
couldn’t fight it anymore. He refused nourishment even when he had to be hungry, and then
expected the difference to be made up later, until his tummy bulged, and he spit up. Brian put a stop
to the over-feeding as soon as he caught Sam offering the pup more than he could hold. But Henry
wasn’t pleased. At all. And that was the biggest surprise of all to the new parents: Henry could pout.
Only a couple of weeks old, and he could already tantrum and hold a grudge.

Sam rocked him slowly, a large hand splayed across his back and soft words in his curious ear.
Henry was calm for the moment. He took in everything. His eyes opened wide and curious as his
head wobbled from side to side, his nose bonking into Sam’s chest as he shifted. Sam chuckled at
him and hoisted him around to face outward, so he could see better, one arm supporting his tiny bum,
and the other across his chest. Sam talked to him in a soft, comfortable voice, explaining all kinds of
things, giving him words, giving him a voice that he could learn to trust. They watched the sun rise
together.

Two more days.

***************

Dean waited until his mate was snoring deeply before sliding out of the bed and into the adjoining
bathroom for a wash. Michael wouldn’t sleep for more than a few hours, and Dean wanted to be
ready for him when he woke up. Michael’s behavior at the height of his Heat was a marvel to
behold. He switched randomly from Omega to Dominant, and on a couple of occasions already, had
seemed to be both at once. The Omega was a bossy fucker, presenting himself in all his glory and
practically impaling himself on whatever Dean had sticking outward at the time. He was utterly
shameless in his need, whining as he rode Dean’s knot to completion and anointing his alpha’s belly
with spurts of sticky semen, his head thrown back in ecstasy.

Dean was exhausted, but determined. His cock had grown sore and chafed, and it was time for
another round with the tub’s spray-nozzle up the old back chute. Alphas aren’t built to take this much
Bottoming. He’d begun to gape a bit even with Michael’s smaller size, and he feared leakage which
might turn even an Omega in Heat off if it happened at the wrong time.

Dean went through his regimen thoroughly, listening inside his head for any sign that his Omega
might stir soon. But Michael was out completely. Dean’s watch told him it was 1:00 in the morning.
His body told him it was time for another round. Dean rolled his eyes and ignored his hard-on.
(Soon, buddy. Give me a break here. I need to sleep too), he told his sore and straining cock silently.
Is it weird to talk to your penis?

Dean shrugged off the rhetorical question. He’d been advised way back in 8th grade Health class,
when the wolves were separated to attend an assembly all their own, that nothing that happens
during a cycle is weird. Everyone, everything, is normal, and there’s no shame in letting go. He’d
chortled his way through the presentation with the rest of his friends, making lewd comments and
laughing uproariously at the cartoon drawings. Dean stood indecisive in the middle of the bathroom
for a moment after his shower. He felt much better now that he was clean again. He blinked at his
phone, knowing full well that Cas wasn’t sleeping. He could feel it. There was a miniscule air of
frustration, arousal, and hopefulness leaking through Dean’s narrow Claim-bond. Dean wavered for
just another breath, and then he sighed and picked up the phone.
He texted.

“U awake?”

He watched as the message was read and the icon indicating Cas was typing activated. Dean’s dick twitched.

Cas.

A fine sheen of sweat broke out across Dean’s entire body – so much for clean.

The indicator dots blinked for a very long time, but then resolved into a terse response: “I’m awake.”

“Are you alone?” Dean texted back.

“No. April’s sleeping.”

“I want to hear your voice,” Dean texted hesitantly. Then typed, “I miss you.”

There was a long pause, and Dean began to ache. He sat down on the tile floor with his back to the wall and waited. Would Cas tell him to be patient? Would Cas tell him to try to get some sleep? Would Cas play the ever-civilized genteel and refuse to participate?

Finally, Dean’s phone rang, and he answered it swiftly.

“Cas?”

“I miss you too, Dean. It’s been a rough few days. How are things going?”

“Really good. I’m still feeling it, but I’m starting to ramp back down. Michael’s in full swing. He’s asleep right now, but he won’t be out for long.”

“Have you been eating well?” Castiel asked, unsure of what else to say and wary of land-mines. It was good to hear Dean’s voice. The Alpha settled into a plush chair in April’s bedroom. He’d kept the lights off as he crept out of the Master suite where he’d left her sleeping, and he now sprawled naked on her soft furniture, alone with his phone and feeling sneaky. He wanted. He wanted so badly.

His right hand encircled his cock which had stiffened immediately at the sound of Dean’s voice. He needed to follow Dean’s lead though.

Dean chuffed into the phone. “Yeah. Yeah, man. We’ve been eating everything in sight.” Dean waited a beat before continuing. He didn’t want to pressure Cas into something he didn’t really want, but Dean had begun to feel his state-of-mind shift in the last few hours, and he had needs Michael couldn’t meet. Urges, really. Cravings, rather than needs. Dean’s pattern when he Rutted was predictable. He started off hot and hard, alpha in every respect, needing a tight hot hole to fuck and needing to sink his teeth into something firm. Cas had always found ways to provide him what he needed for the first couple of days without either of them so much as hinting that the Alpha present himself for Dean’s pleasure. That wasn’t an option.

What Dean had just experienced with Michael had been a revelation, and a wonder, the fulfillment of a spiritual rectitude. The whole True-mate thing where cycles were concerned put instinct into a new category. They hadn’t needed words. Everything just fit. Everything.

But now Dean’s alpha urgencies were wearing off, and he had a deep desire for something he couldn’t get from an Omega. He wanted a knot. All right, fine – he needed it. The idea sparked something deep inside him, and he tried to hide it from Michael. After all, who wants to cycle
through with their own True-mate only to discover that they aren’t enough; that their own perfect match needs more than they can give?

Michael just shrugged it off though. He read Dean like a book, just like always, and he laughed at Dean’s disquiet. Sleepily, Michael rolled his sticky body over, plumped a pillow beneath his head and said, “Call him, babe. Call him in.”

Dean sat up and stared at his mate.

“What?”

“Give me about three hours of sleep, and then let’s see what the three of us can get up to. I’m totally down with having another alpha in the room with us, man. I’m on-fire here. If you can stand to let him play with us – if you’re not gonna bite his head off for looking at your mate – call him up…get his ass down here.” Michael’s voice was slurred and sleepy. He shifted on his side and snuggled into the bedding.

Dean blinked.

“You serious?”

“Have you ever known me to joke about sex, Dean?” Michael asked, looking back at Dean over his shoulder.

“I mean,” Dean spluttered, “You’re not exactly in your right mind here. I can’t take this as adequate consent, man. You’re in Heat.”

“Dean, my love, fuck your Goddamned consent rules. Here’s what I want: I’m gonna take a nap right now, and when I wake up I’m going to be horny and desperate. I want my alpha to take care of me, you get me? I want you to give me what I’m craving, and that’s cocks and knots and slick tongues and gaping holes and everybody sweaty and thrusting and moaning, the more the better, and…”

“Jesus Christ, Michael stop! I get it. Bring on the orgy. Holy shit, who are you, and what have you done with my mate?”

Michael snickered into his pillow and moaned as his channel responded to his provocative words. “Just give me a chance to sleep a bit, and then I’ll be ready again. Spit-roasting sounds nice. I’m a little hungry for a protein shot. Can we do that?”

“We’ll see, babe,” Dean told him seriously with a stroke down his back. “I have to ask him. He gets a say too, you know.”

“Pssshh,” Michael scoffed. “He’s not about to refuse you anything. Ask him.”

“Michael,” Dean said softly. “I’m not going to have a problem sharing you if it’s what you want, but he doesn’t get to fuck your channel. I know what I’m smelling, and I’m like 99% sure you’ve caught, but we’re not taking any chances. That’s not on the table, so don’t provoke me by asking for it.”

Michael turned over and opened his eyes to take in Dean’s alpha stubbornness. “Provoke you…” he said slowly, as if tasting the words, wondering what provoked Dean in a locked room with the Alpha and the 19 would be like. “Is that the only limit you need?” the Omega asked, letting the image fade.

“No spanking,” Dean reminded him. Castiel’s blackout still had a couple of weeks of healing time
before he would lift it and open the doors to allow full access to Dean’s beautiful capacity for bruising again. “And Michael, if we ask for an Alpha, we’re going to get an Alpha. You get that, right? This isn’t going to be like the time he let you direct. He’s going to barrel in here with all the scent of Rut and Heat and everything that goes with it, and he’s going to let the big guy off-leash. Are you certain you’re ready for that? Please don’t do this just because you can feel what I’m craving. You don’t owe me anything. He’s not going to let you control it, so you need to be okay with that from the jump.”

Michael groaned and reached down to put pressure on the base of his cock. “Oh God!” Dean felt a flood of arousal wash through from Michael. The Omega straightened his legs out flat and stroked himself slowly. “Fuck yeah, Dean, please.”

“You’re not going to be the Dominant wolf here, babe. Can you play second fiddle and keep your composure? I’m not saying yes to this if it’s going to mean any of us gets bit.”

Michael rolled toward Dean, up onto a hip, and he continued to stroke himself. “Will you Sub for us, Dean? I’ve got it all figured out…I can stay Omega, and take whatever direction he wants to give me. He can play with us both, tell me what to do, how to touch you, where to be and how to do, and he can run the whole show. Can you…? Can you be the Bottom? Are you…? Where’s your head right now, Dean?”

Dean felt the shiver run up his spine, and he let his emotions show to his mate. He didn’t need to answer those questions in words. Michael could feel his readiness, his anticipation, and Dean could read that Michael was genuine. He wanted exactly what he said he wanted. But Dean had another point of confusion to clarify.

“How does this fit, man? How do you go from needing full control of everything and a complete inability to share direction, to wanting to play second string? What about the whole ring-master thing?” Dean shifted to the edge of the bed, wanting a bit of physical space between them to help Michael keep his head clear. It was an important conversation. He was concerned that Michael might regret what he agreed to once the hormones wore off.

“Those are their words, Dean, not mine. I’m not going to follow someone else’s rules about what I like and don’t like. I never said I couldn’t share control. That was Pam. The thing is, I’m so fucking curious what it’ll be like to play with Castiel that it’s beginning to be an obsession. If not while I’m in Heat, then when? Come on, alpha. Take a chance. Loosen up a little. It’s just sex. I wanna play. Get me toys!”

Dean blew a deep breath out slowly through puckered lips. “I hope you know what you’re asking for, man. This could go so wrong.”

“It’s not going to go wrong, Dean. My wolf rolls for his. We’re good. I’m too horny to challenge him for control anyway. I just want to be knotted, and I want to watch you moan on his knot. God, I want to see that so bad. I know you’re not the same Sub for each of us, and I want to see you with him.”

“Did Pam and Ellen miss a kink, Michael?”

Michael rolled back over and laughed tiredly at Dean, abandoning his straining cock. He needed a nap more than he needed to get off. “Who cares. Yes, I have a kink for watching you Submit to Castiel and Sam both. You are so fucking beautiful when you take direction. Fuck, Dean, make the fucking call.”
So here sat Dean, leaning against the bathroom wall, convincing his fiancé to come down and lead a three-way. Cas didn’t need much convincing. Michael was on-board. Dean wanted it so bad, he almost couldn’t keep his hands to himself. The restriction had been lifted for the interim, but Dean wasn’t as young as he used to be, and his refractory period put limits on him that he had to live with. He needed to wait.

“Dean, you sound exhausted.” Cas’ tone crackled with command. “Get to bed. Get as much sleep as you can. I need to check in with Sam and Jess. I expect to be flying out to Nevada on Wednesday evening, but the final decisions were going to be made today, so I need to check in.”

“What day is it?” Dean asked sleepily. He’d lost track of everything.

Cas laughed gently. “It’s Monday morning, sweetheart. You’re ramping down slowly. Michael’s Heat is pulling you out longer than usual.”

“Yeah. I’m getting too old for this, Cas.”

“No, you’re not. You’re perfect, Dean. Get some sleep, and call me when you wake up. Double check Michael’s commitment. It’s really his decision that counts this time. I’m not going to enter into a space that I promised would be his. Building trust is too important right now.”

Dean laughed, standing up slowly, awkwardly. “I don’t think you need to worry about Michael, Cas. Just be ready. He’s hard to keep up with once he gets going.”

“I’m not worried, Dean.”

Oh Jeez. That voice. How the fuck did Cas switch it on that fast?

“How are the twins, man?” Dean asked, changing the subject.

“Everything looks great,” Cas replied. “John is growing fast. Henry has finally stopped losing weight, and he’s begun to strengthen rapidly. Jess and Sam are in love, and the boys appear to have bonded well with them both. I can’t wait to bring them home. I’m excited to meet them. Dean, I have to admit, I wasn’t a big fan of this plan at first, but now…”

“Yeah, man. Pups do that to you.”

“Dean.”

“Shh, I know Alpha.” Dean let the phone go quiet. He could hear Cas breathing, but there was so much between them that it bordered on too much. Cas might already know about Michael’s pup. The hormone sensors wouldn’t have picked it up yet, but the Alpha sometimes showed flashes of genius intuition. He might be reading into Michael’s willingness to have an alpha outside of his Mating-bond touch him in Heat. He might be reading into Dean in the same way. Dean was certainly starting to pick up nuances from Cas’ longing that he’d been blind to before. Every time the topic of children came up now, it was a twist in C.J.’s gut. And it had been getting worse so rapidly. “I’ll see you soon, babe. I’ll call you in a few. Any instructions for me?”

Cas drew in a breath. “Will you Sub for me?”

“I will.”
“What do you want, Dean?”

“Whew, Cas, what don’t I? Bring it on. Do your worst. Let’s start there.”

“What will Michael expect?” Cas wasn’t making it easy.

“Dude, he’s full-on in Heat. You’re not going to upset the Omega unless you stick him in a corner and make him watch.”

“Dean, stop making me pull teeth and tell me straight out what you want from me.” Cas was on edge and losing his patience.

“Jesus H, Cas! We want a full threesome. Get your ass down here and run whatever scene your wolf wants. Fuck me until I’m aching. I want filthy and hot. I wanna be debauched. Fucking make me ashamed of myself, you hear me?”

“Thank you, Dean. Was that so hard?”

“Don’t fuck Michael’s channel. That’s my only limit. I don’t want to risk any accidents.”

“Noted. I’ll stay clear. Neither of you would ever forgive me if I fathered the wrong pup.” There was more than a hint of amusement in Cas’ tone. Dean huffed, but Cas sent him to bed once more. This time they managed to disconnect with another simple “Love you, alpha,” and a promise to see one another soon enough. Dean leaned against the wall for another minute, letting the anticipation build, until he felt Michael beckon him through the bond. With a mischievous smirk, Dean rejoined his mate in the warm bed, folding in tight as the little spoon and soothing the Omega back to sleep, unperturbed that Michael’s erection settled between his cheeks. Dean loved falling into his dreams like this. It felt dirty and secretive.

Crowley had his secretary make one more attempt to contact Castiel first thing in the morning. The Alpha was avoiding him, and he knew why. The longer the lawyers hammered away at their negotiations with no response from Castiel directly, the stronger the ACRI’s position grew and the more desperate Keller appeared. Crowley had inside information though that indicated that Novak’s flagship facility was in trouble operationally, and he needed to press his advantage before any papers were signed.

She shook her head after allowing the private line to ring for a good long time. It didn’t trip to voicemail. It didn’t disconnect. Castiel had left his phone’s ringer open and unmanaged. It simply rang interminably. Crowley resisted putting his fist through the drywall with an enormous amount of personal control, but he couldn’t stop his face from twitching in frustration. He’d played hard-ball with the best of them, but he’d never faced an opponent as adept as Castiel Novak before. The guy was a fucking strategic genius.

This ‘negotiation’ wasn’t going well at all. It was Novak’s people. Crowley couldn’t find a way in. The whole institution was locked up water-tight. He needed a spy, and a sell-out. There was ALWAYS a sell-out to be had, but Crowley had come up empty-handed again and again. All those fucking hundreds of potential in-roads, and not one of them willing to crack; every last one of them loyal to a fault. How was he doing it? Did Novak have them all scared shitless to betray him? Did he have his paw pressed so tightly on their throats that they were terrified to turn on him? Crowley had
seen it before, but even in circumstances like that, there was always one or two brave souls ready to throw chance to the wind for an opportunity to strike against the tyrant.

Jonathon Miles gave him just the littlest hint of a way in, but the ACRI had cut that route off at the source. Donna, her name was Donna, right? Donna had disappeared. She didn’t even seem to have an address. Her mail went straight to the Facility itself. The whole thing was a puzzle that had Crowley ready to bash his head into a brick wall. Jonathon hadn’t cracked either. He stayed silent and slightly amused as Crowley nearly lost his shit during what was supposed to have been an intimidating ‘interview’ but had turned out merely to highlight that Crowley had no leverage over the Boy Scout who was now running Operations in Dayton. Jonathon simply blinked innocently at him.

Crowley knew what Castiel wanted. He wanted full control. He wanted to direct both organizations. Crowley twitched at the very idea. His instincts rebelled at having that much power in the hands of a man so clearly obsessed with his own supremacy. Crowley was no saint himself, but he had a mandate from the Keller Foundation, and he meant to see it through. Dismantling the old guard had taken much too long in building momentum. Once he finally wedged his fingers into the cracks and showed just how much rot lay in the groundwork, the Foundational Board finally let him swing the axe ruthlessly, but they only allowed it on the contingency that what he built in its place was stronger and safer than what they’d pulled down.

Everything could fall apart, and Crowley only had a few weeks to show that he was on a constructive track. Goddamnit, how was he supposed to do that if Castiel wouldn’t take his phone calls. Didn’t he know that this is how negotiations work?

“Arrange a flight to Kansas City for me,” he told his secretary. There was more than one way to corner his prey, and Crowley was through playing supplicant. He had one more untested avenue, but he’d have to be there in person to make it happen, and Jonathon Miles could kiss his ass.

“Yes, Sir. Would you prefer the red-eye tomorrow morning?”

“What gets me there yesterday,” he snapped.

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Michael awoke first. He watched Dean sleep impatiently, whimpering through each breath as his temperature flew into uncomfortable regions again, and every pore in his body leaked unspeakable scents. How could Dean sleep at a time like this? Where were his priorities? They were still nested together, and it seemed like so long since his last climax that Michael’s cock was straining within itself, wanting to molt through its restrictive outer skin.

Michael tightened his grip and began to rotate his hips into the welcoming embrace of Dean’s body. His mate was probably still loose enough that Michael could re-orient the angle and sink right inside without disturbing his alpha, but that’s not what he wanted at all. He wanted Dean disturbed. He wanted him sweating, trembling, writhing, and screaming.

“Wat time is it?” Dean asked sleepily, shoving his ass backward to give Michael something to grind against.

“Time for you to show me what you’re made of, Submissive,” said Michael with a nip at Dean’s shoulder near Cas’ healing mark. “Call him.”
Dean wasn’t sleepy anymore. Michael’s desperation flooded the bonds – both of them – and he flew into action. His phone to his ear, Dean had the acumen to turn over and work his way lower in the bed where he could focus on Michael’s physical pains while moving to allay his psychological ones as well. The phone only rang twice before Castiel answered it. Dean wrapped a hand around Michael’s straining cock and simply squeezed a pulse.

“Are you ready, Alpha?” he asked.

“I’ll be there in two seconds, Dean,” Cas assured him. “Unlock the door.”

Dean hung up, released his grip on Michael and bolted toward the door to release the bolt. H/R doors locked from both sides, but the door hadn’t been locked from the outside this time. Dean stood naked in front of the door.

“And what about you, Sir?” he asked his mate. “Are you ready?”

Michael pulled up onto an elbow and took Dean’s supple form in. He was in amazing shape for a guy who admittedly avoided exercise and drank a substantial amount of beer.

“Get on your knees, Submissive. Present yourself. We’ve begun, and I expect you to make me proud.” Dean’s eyes grew wide as his wolf took control behind his eyes at the signaled start of the scene. He wanted clarification. Whose pose was he to fall into? They were similar, but not identical, and each Dom would know immediately who Dean’s Submission was aimed toward by the placement of his neck and his toes. Such little things.

Dean’s hesitation made Michael smirk. The Omega stood up and crossed to Dean, running a light touch over his belly, up to his chest, along his throat to grip his chin in a very firm hold.

“Here’s the key, my boy,” the Dom told him clearly. Dean drank in the firm tone and let his tension go. Michael would see to everything. “You present to him. You obey him. You are to show yourself off for him, but it’s all mine to give, isn’t it? You belong to me more than him, and every move you make at his direction is on my say-so. Do you understand? At the end, when we’re through, and he goes back to whatever it is that Alphas do, you and I will remain behind. If you set so much as one toe out of line under his direction, you will answer for it to me.” Michael’s voice dropped to a whisper that was filled with menace. “You wanted to know how this fits, my Sub? Do you understand now? Whose boy are you, Dean? Whose are you really?”

Dean whimpered. “I’m yours, Sir,” he whispered.

“Get on your knees, Dean. Be good for me now,” Michael whispered back. Omegas in Heat weren’t supposed to have this much control, but Dean didn’t care how it was happening. It was happening.

Dean bit his lip and sank into position, Castiel’s position. His eyes found the door just as it opened. Michael stepped back with a small gasp, suddenly unsure. Castiel was fully dressed and appeared completely composed. He scented the air subtly, and let his eyes close slowly for a moment before fixing them on Dean who blinked.

“Very good, my Pet,” praised Cas, walking in, letting the door slam shut, running fingers through Dean’s hair and scratching almost idly at his scalp before walking right past him and bearing down slowly on Michael who backed up rapidly and tripped onto his back across the bed. “Lock the door, Dean.”

Castiel bent down and took hold of Michael’s ankle, lifting his foot high into the air and pressing it against his nose, breathing deeply. “Are you nervous, Omega?” he asked.
Michael’s eyes were wide, but he didn’t seem frightened.

“No, Sir.”

“I have plans for you both,” said Cas, dropping Michael’s foot and throwing him off balance. He scrabbled for balance on the bed, scooting upward. His cock throbbed and bobbed against his belly. “I need to know I’ve got your consent to play. What is your safeword, Michael?”

“Um, Cavalier, Sir.”

“Really? Interesting. Very well. Don’t hesitate to use it, no matter how much your needs call to you, dear one, we will meet them in a manner that you approve. Am I clear?” Cas towered over Michael, one brow arched. Dean had resumed his place, turning to face the bed instead of the door this time.

“Yes, Sir,” squeaked Michael. He tested the play rules by snaking a hand across his thigh and taking a firm grip of himself with a slow stroke. Cas ignored his boldness, but for the tiniest quirk of one side of his mouth.

“Dean, my Pet,” Cas spoke to the Sub behind him without looking away from Michael’s face. “Have you selected a unique safeword?”

“Yes, Sir,” came the quiet unexpected response.

“Very good, love,” Cas seemed to be speaking to Dean, but Michael knew differently. Cas was talking to the Omega, praising his management of their mutual Sub, acknowledging his success where Cas had failed for so long.

“Say it, Dean,” Cas instructed, eyes still on Michael whose hand hadn’t stopped stroking. He was so close already. He’d woken up very close, and everything in the interim was adding to the pull behind his sac. He whined.

“Impala.”

Cas chuckled. “Of course it is. All right, boys, here’s how this is going to go. All you need to do is what I tell you to do. Are we ready? Any questions?”

“Is this scene exclusionary?” asked Michael, using a term someone had told him once meant that the Bottoms weren’t allowed any action that wasn’t instructed. He had no illusions that he was Bottoming to Cas’ Top, but he didn’t want to misunderstand. Castiel ignoring his strokes indicated he had a lot of freedom, but, well, misinterpretations were always more painful for the Bottom than the Top.

“Do whatever you like, Michael, unless I’ve instructed differently,” Cas told him. “Dean knows my rules, but you aren’t required to follow them in the same way. Just follow my lead.”

Cas watched him purple the head of his cock on the upstroke, and he couldn’t hold back anymore. The Alpha leaned over with his hands to either side of Michael’s hips and took the Omega deep into his mouth. He worked his tongue and lips into a solid rhythm, humming happily and enjoying Dean’s dismay radiating from behind him. An alpha in Rut, forced to watch another alpha touch his Omega was their first test. Michael didn’t care. He groaned, lay back, and let the Alpha… He lasted no time at all. Castiel drank down every sticky drop as Michael spilled with an unmanly whine, clutching at Cas’ hair.

Cas licked his lips and released Michael’s cock, standing back up and glancing behind him. Dean’s face was a mix of contradictions. He was turned on beyond belief, but he had also found that he did
indeed have a possessive side. He breathed hard through his nose, his eyes flashing at Cas in a way that wasn’t remotely appropriate. Cas smiled sweetly.

“Would you like to play with Dean, Michael?”

“Yes, Sir!” Michael answered enthusiastically.

“Have you ever seen him desperate for a knot? That side of him only shows itself at the tail-end of his Ruts, but it’s a beautiful sight, my friend. Would you be interested in helping me work him up to that?”

“Oh, Hell YES!” Michael pulled himself up onto his knees, nearly panting in his excitement.

“First thing’s first though. You, sweet Omega, have not been knotted for hours. You are in need, and we’ll need to take care of that first.” Cas arranged Michael into a presentation, and Michael let him. It felt wrong and so right all at once, and he began to wonder if Sub-space felt like floating on a cloud of endorphins as they took hold of him and lifted him away.

“On your feet, Pet. You have work to do, and make it good!” Cas nodded toward Michael’s presentation, up on his knees, down on his chest. Dean was on him in no time. His Omega!

Submissive or not, Dean needed no further encouragement to knot the shiny, swollen channel. Dean pressed up behind Michael, walking on his knees to get centered, and he pressed deep inside him with a loud grunt and a groan of pure pleasure. His instruction had been clear: knot the Omega, so that was his goal. He didn’t have leeway to tease him or draw it out. He hadn’t been told to tweak his nipples or nip at his skin. He had one instruction, and he strove diligently to achieve it. Diligence was code in this case for fucking the Omega like a maniac.

“Oh, Jesus, DEAN!” Michael shouted, trying unsuccessfully to brace himself from the onslaught. Dean’s grunts bounced off the high ceiling as he began to sweat over Michael’s back. His thighs, already tired, burned with the exertion, but he gritted his eyes and jaw and went for it. The friction, the heat, the sounds and scrabbling from his mate, the sensations bouncing between them through their bond. Dean was Sub, but he was acting alpha, and it confused him internally to the point where every part of him crashed against every other. Cas’ eyes on him made him lose his rhythm, but he re-centered and dove right back into it. Michael stretched his arms out, reaching the head-board with his fingertips and stopping his forward migration with a bracing pressure.

Dean’s knot slipped in easily, and he let it lodge there, shifting his motion so that he didn’t pull against it. Instead, he went to work leaning way over Michael’s back, searching in his rotational motion for Michael’s sweet spot. He knew the moment he struck, and he ground down harder and faster. Michael was so sensitive at this point, that he wailed and flattened himself to the bed. Dean cried out as the bulge of his knot made its presence felt against Michael’s swollen rim. Everything about the two bodies worked in tandem to lock them together and keep them there. Dean came with a great shout, sending gushes of thick fluid deep into Michael’s body, cooling him instantly, calming his desperation, soothing every Omega impulse, and then Dean settled his body into the cradle of Michael’s shoulder blades, balanced atop his mate, panting like a sprinter.

“Very good, alpha,” said Castiel, running a finger up Dean’s back, bringing chill-bumps up in its wake. “Do you feel better, Michael.”

“Yessir…Feels so good,” panted Michael, breathless.

“Can you breathe with your alpha splayed on top of you like that?” Cas asked, amused.
“Mm-hmm,” Michael answered. He was boneless enough not to care much whether he could breathe well or not. What did that matter when every cell had reached Nirvana at the same time?

“Michael?” Castiel asked, shifting around to the side of the bed. He didn’t look comfortable.

“Hmm?”

“Sweetheart, did you come again?”

“I dunno, Sir…maybe.” Michael was clearly floating. His speech was slurred and sloppy. His body at complete ease in the soft bedding.

Cas decided he was fine like that. And besides, Dean wasn’t going to get the chance to relax for long. Cas leaned over and claimed Michael’s slack lips with his own. The Omega responded lazily, craning his head to the side to reach, opening for the kiss and letting Cas press deep into his mouth with his tongue while Dean watched. Dean pressed himself up to brace on stiff arms so he could see better, and the sight made him salivate. His cock buried deep inside his mate was all the claim he needed to soothe his possessiveness. What he saw of his mate acquiescing without complaint to having his face tongue-fucked by the Alpha made him shoot another load up into Michael’s channel, and the Omega groaned at the warmth of it.

Michael couldn’t move much, so he barely chased after Castiel when the man pulled away, but the action was there, and they all saw it. Cas petted his hair, and wiped the slobber off Michael’s lip with a firm swipe of his thumb, convinced now that he had them both on-board and ready to get serious. Cas had Dean bound to the bed, held tight by the knot locking him to his mate.

“Tell me if you get uncomfortable, Michael. I’m going to play with Dean for a bit now. You just sit tight and wait your turn. I’ll get back to you, little one. I promise.” Cas left him there, panting and wide eyed, but nodding agreeably. What was he going to do to Dean?

Cas positioned himself behind the couple again and appreciated the view with a hum and a touch to Dean’s lower back. Chill-bumps erupted from his fingertips – always a good sign. He trailed his fingertips down the crack of Dean’s ass, and watched a shiver run across Dean’s shoulders as his cheeks clenched together, tension showing in his ass and thighs.

“No!” he reprimanded with a sharp smack to Dean’s left cheek. Dean sucked in a breath and released the tension in his muscles. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten your training in only a couple of weeks, Pet.”

“Sorry, Sir. I’m not myself right now. Give me a minute. Please.”

“What’s your color, Dean?” Cas asked as he ran his fingers over Dean’s red and irritated rim, testing its give and looking for damage with a practiced eye.

“Green, Sir. I just…I’m sorry. I’m good. I won’t do it again.” Dean had his eyes open from years of conditioning and that put him looking down at Michael. Michael couldn’t see him except peripherally, but they could feel each other from the inside, and they both seemed laser-focused on their bond-link.

Cas knelt behind them, worked his arms beneath Michael’s hips and used his strength to pull them both closer to the edge. Michael yelped a bit and flailed for purchase, but Dean didn’t so much as shift. Their tie didn’t pull at all with the motion. Castiel caressed Dean’s round ass in genuine appreciation of the utterly perfect aesthetic.

“Thank you, Michael for refraining from marring my Pet’s backside. I imagine that was a challenge,
and I wouldn’t be surprised if he had pushed your limits knowing that you couldn’t do much to correct him.” Cas nipped gently at the back of Dean’s thigh. He couldn’t see Dean frown in concentration and bite his lower lip to keep from tensing up again.

“No, Sir,” said Michael, his eyes trying to peer at Dean without straining his neck. “He was good for me.” Michael was lost. Were there two alphas and an Omega? Two Doms and a Sub? Was this the Alpha-Dominant and his two pets? Michael didn’t mind Bottoming for Cas, but he didn’t really want to be a pet. He had no idea where he fit or who he was supposed to be. He couldn’t do much of anything though, so he simply lay flat on his belly and waited to see what would happen. Unlike Dean, Michael wasn’t remotely averse to stopping everything if he didn’t like where it was going. On the other hand, his Heat wouldn’t stay sated for long, and he was curious enough to kill a cat.

“Very, very good news. Looks like our boy has earned a reward.” Cas carefully pushed Michael’s feet back up onto the bed one by one and helped him to get his knees beneath him, spread wide, and then did the same for Dean, revealing both of them in all their glory. He dropped his head and ran a pointed tongue around Michael’s rim where Dean’s knot disappeared, but the angle was uncomfortable. Cas replaced his tongue with his fingers, moving his mouth up to cover Dean’s hole instead. He massaged them both, collecting the slick and come that leaked eagerly from the Omega’s wet stretched channel to anoint Dean’s rim, working his own saliva into the void and fucking him feverishly with his tongue, his fingers, his thumb.

Michael shoved back at each touch to his hole, but Dean stayed fast in place. Both of them began to sweat again in short order. A firm tug to Dean’s aching balls had him clenching up a third time, relocking in place, and shooting yet another wave into his mate. Michael cried out.

Dean began to pant, and pulled himself up and off his mate’s back, sitting on Michael’s calves and complicating Cas’ reach a little bit, but the Alpha didn’t slow. He continued working Dean’s hole open methodically with his fingers and tongue, tasting him, praising him, stroking his ass and his legs, massaging his balls, then down to Michael’s rim and the bare bit of Dean’s cock that he could reach emerging from Michael’s body.

“Don’t come again, Dean,” he instructed. “From here on, you come only when you’re told to do so.”

“Sir, I can’t help it! If you keep doing that, I’m gonna…” Cas cut him off with a hard grip around his scrotum. God, he’d missed Cas’ touch there.

Wait.

Was Cas allowed to touch him there? Dean wrinkled his brow in worry, and Michael caught the emotion at once, rolling a little onto one side as much as he could and looking up at Dean. Dean was starting to panic. What would happen if Michael realized that Cas had a fist around his balls? Would there be a challenge and a fight and bloodshed?

“Dean, what is it?”

“He’s…shit, Michael. Wha…? I can’t tell if…” Dean didn’t know what to do. Did he keep it quiet and risk breaking Michael’s trust? Should he throw Cas under the bus? The touch wasn’t going away. Cas had him firmly and he was massaging in a delicious rhythm.

“Impala!” shouted Dean, panting and panic-stricken. Michael flattened and pulled away which was the extent that he could do. Castiel stood swiftly and stepped backward two steps. Dean collapsed back on top of his mate’s broad back with a cry of helplessness, feeling terrible, feeling like a complete failure.
Michael turned his head, wishing like hell he was free to embrace his mate. “What is it, Dean?” he whispered. “Is it too much with both of us here?”

“It’s not that. God, it’s so stupid. I shouldn’t have said anything. I ruined everything. I don’t know if the rules change when we’re in cycle. Michael, you said that it’s okay for me to touch, but what about him? What if he touches me? Is that okay?” Dean hunched his back and rested his forehead between Michael’s shoulders.

Michael huffed a gentle laugh, pressing his head backward onto the top of Dean’s. It was as close as he could get to hugging his mate. He reached back with his right hand to hold Dean’s hip.

“Sir?” called Michael, and Castiel stepped around smoothly into his view. “Just to be clear, Alpha, I’ve suspended all restrictive rules concerning touching Dean’s body for the interim. Please feel free to apply yourself to any part of his anatomy that you like until we complete our cycles together.”

“Thank you, Michael. I appreciate your generosity and your clarity of communication.” Cas touched Michael’s cheek with the side of his finger. He shifted to touch Dean’s face, leaning in and propping a knee on the bed. Dean looked scared and close to breaking. “And you…” he kissed Dean’s nose, then his mouth. “I am so, so proud of you. I’ve never been more in love with you, Dean Winchester. Are you all right?”

Dean nodded into Cas’ shoulder and stifled a sniffle. He wasn’t going to lose it over something so stupid. Of course the rules were lifted. Hadn’t Michael already said so? Cas would have known. They’d probably already negotiated this scene. Doms did that kind of thing when there was a Sub to share.

Michael slapped clumsily at Cas’ knee and twitched his head at Dean with meaning in his eyes.

“Hey, hey there Pet,” said Cas softly, lifting Dean’s chin. “You didn’t do anything wrong, love. You did so good for me, for Michael. You caught something we missed, and you fixed it. You should be proud of yourself. Right Michael?”

“You did perfect, Dean,” Michael assured him with a confirmation stroke that Dean felt in his groin. “Alpha, go on back to work. He’s ready. Don’t drag this out, or he’ll drop hard.”

Dean didn’t usually like being talked about as if he weren’t there, but the first touch of Castiel’s tongue back on his loose wet hole made him forget everything else, and he gasped. Michael picked up on Dean’s irritation at being spoken over, and he doubled down, taking it somewhere else and choosing at last which persona he wanted.

“Doesn’t he taste good, Alpha?” Michael could hear Cas lapping at Dean’s rim, and he could feel the sensations through his Mating-bond. He knew exactly what Cas was up to. “Get way up in there, Sir, and he’ll lose it on you, especially if you press your thumbs in and pull him open at the same time.”

“Mmmm! Mmmph!” was all Cas had to say, but his thumbs both worked their way into Dean’s ass, pulling him open to gape pink and black and shiny. Cas pressed his tongue in as far as he could get it and fucked Dean until the Sub was writhing at the feeling. Dean thrust his cock deeper into Michael’s channel in tiny pulses, stopping abruptly when Cas’ teeth nipped his balls.

“Aaargh! Fuck!”

“Be still, Pet,” Cas reminded him. Dean took a deep breath, sitting up again and locking his arms
against the bed to either side of his mate. He looked back over his shoulder and met Castiel’s eyes. The Alpha’s chin was wet with spit and slick. He winked. Dean turned back around, willing his knot to go down. He wanted to watch what Cas was doing to him, and he wanted his mate back. Michael flat on his belly was Michael removed from the equation. Well, almost.

“And if you squeeze his balls and pull on them, he’ll whine really fucking loud,” offered Michael. Dean’s eyes went wide, but he didn’t have time to suck in a breath before Castiel’s fist closed back around his nuts in a vice-grip that would’ve killed the mood instantly for any normal alpha. That shit hurt like fuck. Dean panted through his nose, trying with every ounce of his control not to bounce on Michael’s legs. Dean whined really fucking high and loud. Cas’ tongue continued to plunder him, and his thumbs pulled wider apart, stretching him open with a burn and an ache. He was so loose and used already, that the pain didn’t begin to approach his limits.

“Nnnngh!” he whined.

Cas couldn’t get enough free slick from the leaking connection between the mates, so he pulled a tube from his pocket and opened it with a grip in his teeth, regretting his loss of contact but loving the view. Dean was loose and sore, and his hole was slick and beckoning. He hadn’t begun begging yet, though.

Cas could wait.

He squirted the synthetic slick high into the empty space of Dean’s ass, not caring that he’d soiled the tip of the tube. He didn’t plan to leave any of it unused anyway. Cas followed the slick with four fingers of his right hand, pressing hard and deep, testing Dean’s stretch, pushing in to the last knuckle and pumping in and out fast.

“Oh fuck!” Dean exclaimed. Cas was still dressed. He knew what that did to Dean.

“Have you ever fisted your mate, Michael?” he asked conversationally.

“No, not yet. Well, not really,” Michael waffled. They hadn’t asked Dean, but he could’ve answered easily. No, Michael had never done what Cas was preparing to do. Dean’s body pulsed with the punch of Cas’ hand. He winced at the pull and stretch, but his cock loved it. At this rate, he would be tied to Michael for the next 40 years.

“You should try it,” Cas suggested. “But don’t do it gently. He’s not going to appreciate an easy touch. Dean likes it rough.” Cas followed the statement by gripping Dean’s hip, tucking his thumb inside his fingers, rotating his hand as he pressed firmly, and squeezing through until the knuckles of his hand forced their way in.

Dean nearly hyperventilated in panic at the insane stretch and burn, but his rim locked tight around Cas’ whole hand.

“Come for me, Dean,” said Cas, in complete control.

He moaned in agonized pleasure and rocked backward, spurting a fourth round inside his mate, who felt the orgasm from both sides.

Michael was coming back around after his last round, his cock hardening against the bedding, but he had his knees beneath him again, and he pulled himself clear of the soft bed. He wanted to come with something more than 300 thread-count cotton sheets as his stimulus.

Castiel went still. “Did you come?”
“Yessir!” Dean replied. “Please don’t stop!” Dean would’ve popped him one if he could reach. Cas didn’t need to pause and ask that question. He knew. He always knew.

“Good boy,” Cas told him, beginning a slow, hard, punching stroke again. The walls around his hand were warm and silky, so smooth they felt like velvet or wet glass. Cas groaned. By rights, Dean should be growing too sensitive to play, but he hadn’t asked to stop. Calling Uncle once he was through and slaked had never been a problem for Dean. It was different than calling a safeword. It meant satisfaction and success, not failure. Cas knew him well enough to read that he had more yet to give. He also knew that Dean’s knot would begin to deflate soon regardless of how much they used him.

“Your mate is beautiful when he’s desperate, Michael. Do you ever push him to his limits? Do you make him keep going when his hair is plastered to his head with sweat and all his muscles are cramping?”

“No, sir,” replied Michael, getting pretty tired of being side-lined. “Should I do that?”

“Not until you’ve completed your training, but then absolutely.” Castiel had curled his fingers inside Dean’s body into a fist and was pulsing brutally in and out around Dean’s noises. He loved those noises, fistng Dean with an honest-to-God fist, pushing almost to his wrist, the slick making everything slimy. Dean groaned loudly, and suddenly, his cock popped free of Michael’s channel. Come and slick squirted out and all over the edge of the bed.

Michael wiggled his way free, pulling his legs upward and out, and letting Dean support himself on his knees. He clambered off the bed and around to the end, sucking in a gasp as he saw just how much of Cas’ hand was gone inside his mate. Michael squeezed his cock at the base. He wanted to come, and the Mating-bond wasn’t helping him hold back.

“Sir, there’s something else I haven’t tried yet with Dean that I’ve been dying to do.”

“And what’s that, Omega?” asked Cas as if he were merely preparing dinner, not thrusting his whole fucking hand into the man of his dreams, whose body wasn’t supposed to be built to take it, but most decidedly WAS taking it.

“Can we double? I think he’s probably prepped enough.”

Cas threw his head back and laughed.

“Would you like top or bottom, my boy?” was Castiel’s only answer. His eyes looked wild, and Michael realized that Cas the Alpha had no leash on the wolf at all. This was Cas at his rawest. Castiel pulled his hand slowly out of Dean, and Dean’s backside followed the motion as a high wail erupted from the Sub on his knees. His hole gaped darkly, and Michael licked his lips, ignoring the drip of pre-come that dropped onto the tile floor. Michael didn’t even try to resist bending into Cas’ spot as the Alpha stood to undress, leaving a sheen of sticky streaks at every shirt button, caring not a fig for what he was doing to his clothes.

Michael pressed Dean forward to rest on his chest and plunged his tongue deep into the mess Castiel had made. He ignored the vile synthetic taste, searching the walls deep inside him for a taste of alpha musk, Rutting alpha musk, and he lapped hungrily.

Finally naked, Cas lined himself up beside Dean and kissed him greedily, making out like a teenager who doesn’t know how much time he has until Daddy gets home. Dean was all about the kissing. He went down flat, then rolled up until he was chest-to-chest with Castiel. Michael harrumphed and smacked his thigh hard to get it out of his way, then he pressed three fingers of each hand inside
Dean and pulled him open. Dean’s whine disappeared into Cas’ mouth. He draped his leg over Cas’ hips and rutted into him, completely out of control, needing something desperately, but he still hadn’t begged.

Cas took hold of him around his torso at his armpits and rolled with him to bring Dean on top of him, letting him keep rutting, letting Michael get a good vantage to delve back in and enjoy himself. The alphas could smell Michael’s Heat ramping up swiftly. He was hard and aching again, and producing a copious flow of slick. It was enough to re-spark Dean’s Rut and enough to drive Cas to let go the last of his control. He lifted Dean bodily off his hips and brought him down to impale upon his cock, stripping Michael unceremoniously of his prize. Michael huffed and then dove right back in to suck at the tender flesh of Dean’s rim where it stretched around Castiel’s fearsome cock. Both alphas jumped at the feeling. Michael pulled his face back swiftly, but then went right back in, sucking hard on Castiel’s burgeoning knot.

“MICHAEL!”

Cas ground his teeth together, and wrapped a hand around himself, squeezing the base below his knot. Michael smirked to himself in victory, but the Alpha staved his climax off for the moment. Dean had nothing left by way of power in his thighs, so Cas held him slightly aloft and fucked up hard into him, striking his ass with the huge knot on every pass, but still Dean didn’t beg.

Stubborn bastard.

Cas growled menacingly low in his throat as he fucked his Sub punishingly hard. Michael stood at the end of the bed and watched the Alpha take his mate apart. Dean wasn’t coherent in any way anymore, but he was good. He was aloft in the clouds, riding every wave he could sense, soaring above it all, nothing but sensation, heat, pressure, and need.

Slowly Michael edged a knee up onto the bed, his eyes fixed on the Alpha’s knot, covered in slick, hard and huge and purple. He touched Castiel’s knee, seeking address, seeking admittance, a petitioner at the knee of a king.

Castiel slowed to a stop, panting gruffly, sounding canine in his breathlessness. Michael worked his fingers through his own copious flow and ran a fist around himself and the Alpha’s cock for good measure. There’s no such thing as too much lube, after all. Cas pulled out a little at Michael’s touch, and Michael took the opportunity to stroke the enormous expanse. He wanted it in him. He wanted to sit on that knot and grind down into it until… But that had been Dean’s only stipulation, and Michael could respect his decision. Michael knew he would get to feel it again someday.

The Omega let go of Cas’ dick with a bit of longing that Dean felt but didn’t respond to outside of a psychic wink. Dean wasn’t going to respond to much of anything besides the house burning down right now. He was perched on the edge of a precipice again. Dean knew what was coming, but he didn’t know what it would feel like. For all the filthy things he had done in his life, Dean had never done this before. That was pure chance. It wasn’t something he’d have done in private, but his public roles put him into all kinds of scenarios that called for an open mind and other things open as well. But it had never come up, not for Dean.

Dean leaned forward over Cas’ body and looked over his shoulder, watching Michael frown at the place where Castiel’s thick cock disappeared into Dean’s body. Michael’s cock was in his hand, and his tongue was clamped between his teeth in concentration. Castiel held very still. He had enough length to allow Michael room to maneuver while still claiming a solid presence inside the Sub. Michael reached a hand forward and pressed firmly against the taut skin, feeling for how much pressure he would need. He pushed his finger in and crooked it to open up a space. Dean’s breathing picked up, but he held still for his Doms.
“He’s taking us so well, don’t you think, Alpha?” asked Michael. “He’s such a good boy; so needy and desperate.”

“Mm-hm.” Cas answered. “Come here, good boy, and kiss your Alpha.” Dean leaned down and kissed Castiel. It was a dirty, sloppy mess of a kiss with no elegance or finesse. Leaning Dean forward gave Michael the space that he needed, and he moved up over Dean’s back and pressed himself hard against the tight pull of Dean’s stretched rim. He pushed, grunting long and ugly. It wasn’t going to work. Dean was alpha, and he wasn’t going to be able to take both of them without tearing.

Cas was bigger than Michael remembered. From here, from this angle, he looked impossibly big, bigger than the diameter of the hand that had seemed to sink so easily into Dean, bigger than anything human that Michael had ever seen. It wasn’t going to work. Dean cried out in pain and pushed back. Michael had only ever done this to Omegas. He moaned in desperate frustration. It wasn’t going to work.

Cas shifted again, raising Dean back up into a sitting position, helping to press his ass backward, and just like that, Michael’s dick was encased impossibly tightly as he popped past the ring of muscle and into Dean’s slick hole. Dean screamed and sat down with all his weight, forcing Michael’s cock in deeper. His scream became a pulsing cry as he bobbed on both of them together.

Castiel didn’t move. He was the anchor, and he could easily throw them all off if he moved too far, but Michael groaned and began to match Dean’s rhythm, thrusting in as Dean pressed down, and pulling out only slightly as Dean pulled back up again. Michael’s cock ached fiercely with the pressure. It was a vice-grip. It was impossibly tight. Dean’s Mating-bond told him that no amount of stretching would ever have fully prepped him for this. His rim had gone white around the edges, slick with lube, but stretched to its limit.

Michael braced himself on his knees and wrapped his hands around his mate’s body. He took hold of Dean’s cock with one hand, his knot with the other.

“Do you need to come, Dean?” he asked, stroking with the motion of their bodies. Dean breathed out fast and shallow, but he shook his head.

“No?” asked Michael in surprise.

“What do you need, baby?” Castiel put to him, holding him tightly by his hips to support him and keep him safely mounted.

“I don’t wanna come until I’m on your knot, Alpha. Please, God can I have it? Feels so fucking good. Can you get it all in at once? I can help.” Dean pressed down hard, trying to work his stretched rim over the bulge of Castiel’s knot. “God, please,” Dean begged, and Michael lost it. He shot his load on the up-thrust, filling the space around Cas’ enormity with a spreading warmth that made Cas dig his feet in and grit his teeth again. Not yet, please God, not yet.

Michael held on tight to Dean as he pulsed and pulsed. There couldn’t have been much fluid after the last few days they’d spent together, but the orgasm itself was epic. Michael’s cock slipped out, and he slumped lifeless all the way to the floor - out cold.

“Shit! Michael!” Dean tried to go to him, but his legs wouldn’t hold him, and he toppled gracelessly to the bed. Cas sprang up, fixed Dean in place with a look, and then picked Michael up off the floor, feeling his head for swelling or bruises. He seemed fine, and he began to come around before Cas even had him laid out next to Dean. Dean showered his face with relieved kisses.

Cas gave them a moment, but there was still one job left unfinished. He let Michael lay still in the middle of the bed, and he manhandled Dean up onto his knees straddling Michael’s hips.
"You were saying, love?" said Cas on his knees behind Dean who smelled so ripely of Rut that a line of drool fell from Cas’ lip onto Dean’s calf.

Dean looked over his shoulder, breaking off from kissing Michael. “Knot me, Alpha. Please. I need you so bad,” Dean begged simply.

Cas snarled and pressed into Dean’s welcoming body. He’d be aching and gaping for days after this. There was always a healing period, but this one would be for the record-books. Cas’ knot slipped right in. Dean didn’t cry out or gasp. He just sighed and went limp. Cas held him up by his hips and fucked him. It was direct and straight-forward. Michael lay below them with his arm tucked beneath his head watching, rapt. Dean’s cock swept across Michael’s abdomen in a ticklish tease, leaving streaks of pre-come in its path.

Cas snarled and grunted, a vein standing out in his throat. They seemed to move in slow-motion to Michael. Michael may have had an ego big enough for any three wolves, but as he watched his mate take it like a rag-doll in a hurricane, he couldn’t help admitting that maybe Castiel had ruined him for any other man, even his own mate. In the light of the happy hormones running rampant through his veins, Michael didn’t care. Dean was his. Dean would always be his. He wasn’t going anywhere, and there was obviously enough of him to share.

Dean’s face tightened up only a moment before his cock spurted. It wasn’t much, just a couple of measly streaks that didn’t make it past Michael’s navel, but Dean looked blissed out, and Michael realized that Castiel had stopped moving too. He lay Dean down on Michael’s chest tenderly, and then followed, draping himself over them both, reaching over Dean’s shoulder to offer Michael a sloppy open-mouthed kiss that was more breathless air than lips, but Michael took it. Then they both turned to Dean. The Sub was conscious, but dazed. Cas held himself up carefully on his arms, then rolled slowly so that all three wound up side-by-side-by-side. Michael and Castiel petted Dean, kissed him, praised him. Michael managed to get up on trembling legs to retrieve a warm cloth, and he cleaned the Sub as well as he could.

Dean’s Rut hormones were fading quickly. He was essentially through, but Michael still had a day or two left. He wondered how they were going to finish.

Castiel’s phone rang from somewhere deep in the pile of his clothing, and Michael tripped back out of the bed to retrieve it. Cas took it from him, but he let it ring unanswered.

“Who’s it?” asked Dean sleepily.

“It’s Crowley,” answered Cas.

“Dude, you need to answer it. Let your wolf out on him. Perfect timing.”

“Dean, my wolf is skipping stones and picking daisies right now. This would be the worst possible time for me to speak to Crowley. Just let it ring. He’ll give up eventually.”

“Jesus, Alpha!” protested Michael. “Don’t you have voicemail? Is it just gonna ring forever?”

“I don’t know how to set up the voicemail on this phone,” Cas admitted, looking askance at the obnoxious interruption ringing shrilly on the bedside table. “Usually people just try again later, or I check the missed calls log and call them back.”

“Oh my God,” said Michael, wrapping a tired arm over his tired eyes and praying the noise would stop soon. Dean just chuckled, but he was snoring between one laugh and the next breath.

Michael caught Castiel’s eye across the top of Dean’s sleepy head. The phone stopped ringing.
“Yes, Michael?”

“Um, thanks, Sir. Thanks for taking care of him, of us. He needed you.”

“You’re welcome. It was, very obviously, my pleasure. I can’t tell you how grateful I am to you. I can’t imagine our lives without you, Michael. You’re as much a part of my life as you are Dean’s, although not in the same way. I’m staggeringly proud of how far you’ve come in just a few months, but I’m also humbled by you every day. You make me want to be a better man, my friend.”

“Um, okay, wow, uh, thanks Alpha.”

“Michael, please can’t you call me Cas?”

“Um…”

“After all, we’re going to be parents together 7 months from now.” Cas touched his own nose, and then Michael’s belly.

Michael giggled. “Yeah, I guess…can you really smell it? The pup? Dean said he could, but I didn’t know if I could be sure, and then he didn’t want you to fuck me, and I thought maybe he wasn’t quite so sure. Can you smell it, Sir? Um, Cas?”

“Yes, I can. You are most certainly carrying a pup. I am only going to say once that male Omegas have the highest rate of miscarriage, and I say it only so that you’ll know that there are risks associated with what you and Dean are attempting to do. Don’t stop living your life, but your focus now needs to be primarily on anything you can do to protect this pup. Michael, sweetheart, look at me. Know this: nothing that you do between now and when you give birth will change the outcome. You and Dean, April and I, all of the doctors and nurses, all of our family and friends, we’re all going to be looking out for this pup. I want you to understand that. But the reason I ask you to be especially cautious is because I know that if for any reason, anything were to happen that is unexpected and beyond your control, you will begin to ask yourself, what did I do to deserve this… what could I have done differently. There’s not a thing that you need to do differently than what your instincts will have you do. I’m telling you this now, not to scare you, but because I know that the odds are stiff, and I need to know that you understand. If you ever have to ask yourself that question, then the answer needs to be unequivocally that you did everything you could do. Do you understand, Omega?”

Michael blinked. He hadn’t been expecting this. “You’re going to need me to be strong and pull through, so we can pull Dean through together. Expect the best, but prepare for the worst. I understand, Cas. I’m stronger than I look.”

Castiel smiled warmly at him. “I’m so excited, Michael. You’ve made us all parents. Dean will be calling me a sap again if he hears us talking, but I can’t help it. Only, please be honest…are you truly okay with sharing your pup? I want to celebrate just as hard as you and Dean, but I feel so unsure. You deserve the world, Michael, and I have no right to usurp your happiness.”

Michael reached across Dean’s shoulder to touch Castiel’s. “Sir, I don’t really know how to put it in words, or if this is the right place or time. It’s just…what you just did. Sir, Alphas don’t do that. No Alpha would share a Sub in cycle with an Omega. Nobody does that. Alphas all over the world are full of big talk about gender equality, but when push comes to shove, it’s all just talk. But you. You’re not perfect, and I probably owe you an apology for being an asshole to you about that, but you are the least full-of-shit asshole alpha I’ve ever met. You try, Castiel. You try so hard to be who you want to be even when it’s not what your instincts tell you to be. I’m so confused by you half the time, wondering how much bullshit you’re spouting.”
Michael took a breath. Any minute the Alpha was going to stop him and tell him he’d gone too far. But that was just the point. He only ever did that when Michael’s tone turned him into a confrontational asshole himself, never when Michael had a valid point or an authentic opinion.

“The thing is,” Michael continued. “You couldn’t be full of shit and do what you just did here today. There’s no other explanation for that. I have to believe in you, Alpha. And if I believe in you, then I’m ready to trust you. I trust you when you say we can do this together. I, uh, I don’t know how to imagine my life without you in it either. So, um, yeah, go ahead and pop the Champaign cork. Looks like WE’RE going to be parents. I guess I’m on sparkling grape soda, though. Have a glass of the good stuff for me.”

Cas’ eyes sparkled as they do when he’s relaxed and happy. He opened his mouth to reply, but Dean’s hand shot up and back to grip a shock of Cas’ black hair tightly in his grip.

“If you two don’t shut up, and I mean right now, I swear I’m going to castrate you both in your sleep!”

Chapter End Notes

Adding in some fisting and DP, but for some reason I don’t feel like tagging them. Maybe because if you read 65 chapters of this trash, I feel like you’re probably game for just about anything I can come up with.

Love you all. Thanks for your support, now and always.
Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

Three very tired wolves finish up a cycle. The pups are on their way home. And Gabriel.

Chapter Notes

I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I swear, I can see it. On the other hand, as you all know by now, I'm completely addicted to throwing words into my flash-drive. I'm having so much fun, I can't imagine what to do next.

We're not done yet, but I may have finally, finally finished introducing new plot points. IDK, I've said that before. It's a serial, so sometimes stuff pops up unexpectedly just to keep things interesting and/or motivated to move in the right direction.

I hope you enjoy. I won't have another chapter ready for a couple of weeks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 66 – Monday, July 10, 2017

NOW:

Dean was out for hours. He slept so soundly that he missed the next two rounds completely. Castiel stayed true to his word, but he had all kinds of methods to help ease the fire in Michael’s belly. None of it would hold him for long, but Dean needed the rest, and stop-gaps bought them time. Michael went willingly to his knees with a greedy lick across his lips and a grand effort to tackle the impossible. He swallowed only the top third of Castiel’s length, hampered more by the girth than by its invasion down his throat, but he gurgled in satisfaction anyway and wrapped both hands around what his throat couldn’t accept.

He got more than the simple protein shot that he’d had in mind when he discussed the idea with Dean. Cas gave him a virtual meal of bitter, salty liquid, the Alpha’s head thrown back in delirium from the gentle tease of Michael’s teeth. Cas reciprocated with a hand-job, his body stretched out along Michael’s back, the two of them lying on their sides facing Dean whose face was jammed into his pillow, drool sliding down from the corner of his mouth, and his nose pushed up gracelessly. Cas wasn’t hard, and he didn’t try to enter the fragrant Omega, but he simulated the motion of fucking him while stroking firmly along his length. Michael moaned, panted, and shoved his head backward to display his throat to his Pack Alpha. Cas kissed his shoulder and mouthed hungrily at his neck without biting or bruising him. He didn’t leave so much as a pinkened hickey on Dean’s mate, but the stimulation was enough to temper Michael’s Heat for awhile as he shot a white stream out across
Dean’s hip to fall in ribbons over his ass.

Castiel walked Michael to the shower and washed him reverently, caressing his lower belly in small circles with a soapy hand. Then he towed him off and sat him down at the small table in the corner, arranging fruit, cheese, crackers, and almonds on a plate for him.

“Thank you, sir…I mean, Cas. Thanks.”

Castiel stole a cube of cheddar from the plate he’d just offered Michael and popped it in his mouth. “You’re welcome. I love you, you know.” Cas ran a hand through Michael’s damp hair, and the Omega leaned into the touch.

“I know. I guess. It’s strange, but it doesn’t feel like it’s taking up any of Dean’s Claim, any of his space. I feel so at ease when you take care of me. Usually I hate to be petted and coddled. Is it just because you’re so much greater in rank than me? Everything I’m feeling is new, and I should be terrified, but I just feel so safe instead.” Michael’s voice was soft and light, almost sleepy.

Castiel smiled at him. “I have no idea, Michael. I don’t know any of the whys when it comes to you. You are such a mystery to me. I know your Omega feels safe with me, but there is so much about you that I don’t understand.”

Michael ate a few bites in silence. Cas stood by the countertop of the little kitchenette and watched Dean snore and drool. Michael followed his line of sight.

“He’s not going to allow you to study me as much as you want to. He wasn’t kidding about that, Cas.” Michael put a cube of cheese on a cracker and chewed it slowly.

Cas sighed. “It’s unfair, Michael. There’s no reason you and other Omegas should have to submit to painful re-balancing therapy just to keep your sanity. There’s got to be another way. Goddamnit! I feel like we’re so fucking close, and you might be the key that unlocks everything. How can we let this opportunity pass right by us without even trying? What if we can learn how to teach other Omegas to Release the way you can? What if there are alternatives we’re right on the verge of discovering?”

“Or,” mused Michael, “You could poke and prod at me for years, destroy everything that I am, tear me up from the inside, and be no closer to a breakthrough at the end of it than you are now.”

Cas’ tortured eyes pulled away from Dean to land back on Michael in resignation. “Exactly.” He pulled out the chair opposite Michael and sat down, pulling Michael’s plate to the middle of the table so they could share. “You’re too valuable as a person for us to sacrifice you like that. Dean’s right to put his foot down. It’s a slippery slope with no bottom. The closer we get to answers, the easier it would be to delve just a little deeper. I know how this goes, Michael, and you mean too much to all of us. I’m not going to put you through that.”

“You and I can talk though,” suggested Michael, relaxed and trusting. “No probes, no official studies…don’t assign me a test-subject number…just talk. I’ll tell you anything that might help. You can ask me anything, Cas. Would that make a difference? I never knew I was odd or that the way I do things wasn’t perfectly, you know, normal.”

Cas tilted his head and took another bite. He wasn’t ready to dig into it all right here while Michael was as figuratively naked as he was literally. “I’m fascinated by your description of the imagery you witnessed when you passed out after your second Mating. It wasn’t a dream, was it?”

“No, it was real. I can’t defend it though. I was unconscious at the time. I don’t have any proof. All I
know is that I was a wolf, and Dean was a wolf, and it was real. Kinda sexy too.”

“Michael, there are hundreds of folk-tales and grassroots accounts of imagery just like what you experienced. Most of the stories have been collected and preserved by the Universist Church. They are usually rejected by the scientific community.” Cas sat back in his chair, leaving the remainder of the food for the Omega.

“So, then you think it’s bullshit? I know what I saw, Alpha. How do you explain that I described Dean’s wolf to him perfectly? We never talked about our wolves. I swear.”

“No, I don’t think it’s bullshit, but I’m a scientist, and I have no way to validate the vision. I can’t measure it, I can’t record it, I have no way to prove that it happened at all through any of my usual means except that, as you say, Dean agrees that your description was spot-on. I don’t know. It’s fascinating, but outside of my scope. If I had to guess, I would offer that you appear to have made contact almost consciously with our species’ subconscious communal memories, the driving force behind our instinct. I’m not a religious man, Michael, but I have seen and heard enough that I believe that Canids of every species are connected at the base of their brains by a single line of ancient memory. At our deepest souls, we are still as much wolves as we ever were, or maybe not wolves, maybe pre-wolves, and there are certain types of people who retain the capacity to tap into those instincts in a direct way.”

“Jesus,” Michael breathed.

Cas thought about his next question, and then asked, “You passed out earlier, Michael, just briefly. Do you remember anything similar happening to you this time? Any visions?”

“No, sir. I guess I wasn’t out long enough.”

Cas took a deep breath and sat up straight. “Well, I’d love to get to the bottom of it someday. I’d love to know how you self-Release, how you are capable of laying a Claim on a Bottom partner without having initiated sexual contact, how you sniff out your partners’ deepest kinks, how the hell you Mated Dean backwards and left the door open for him to add his own Bond later. So many mysteries, Omega. So many questions.” Castiel’s eyes sparkled with curiosity and affection.

Michael finished his snack and looked across at Dean. “I love you too, sir. Just so you know. Even if you’re not perfect. Even if I sometimes don’t show it.” He paused. “Even though I’ll always love him more.”

Castiel smiled at him and stood to clear the plate away. He offered Michael a choice of beverages, and Michael chose water. He sipped it slowly.

“Do you need to check on April soon?” Michael asked suddenly.

Cas chuckled. “She’s fine. She’s busy writing a piece of music with Nicholas instead of practicing for her audition. I’m not sure what’s going on, but she seems to be… I don’t know. It looks like the best thing I can do is stay out of her way for a while. I do need to get back to her soon. I’ve kept the bond closed through most of today, but I promised her I would make it up to her for not bringing her along. She’s a little miffed to have been excluded. I’ll excuse myself once Dean wakes up again. I want to give him a quick exam to make sure he’s still in good enough shape to see you through. Stay out of his ass, Michael,” the Alpha warned. “He’s going to need to heal. If he still needs to Submit, find another way.”

“Speaking of Dean’s needs,” said Michael hesitantly. Dean grunted into his pillow, thrust his hips a few times and rolled flat onto his belly, kicking the remainder of the sheets off. Both Doms stared at
his perfectly rounded backside, still streaked with two white lines but unmarred by bruises, as Dean settled back into stillness with a snort and a deep snore. “I found him puking his guts up on the floor of the bathroom, practically delirious and in excruciating pain. Did you know? Did you leave him like that on purpose? He had no idea where he was or what was happening to him.” Michael’s tone shifted to accusing. Castiel met his eye without flinching.

“I knew he was close to hitting rock-bottom, Michael, but he was coherent when I left him. He wasn’t alone for more than two hours. I know that seems like an eternity, and I know that the condition you found him in was alarming. I didn’t mean to distress you. I thought you understood where we were going with his punishment.”

“So, you did know. And you didn’t tell me, and you didn’t help him. Explain this to me, Alpha.”

Cas ran a hand across his face. “It must appear so cold-hearted from your perspective. I hope with all my heart that Dean’s therapy works to help him unravel the knots in his psyche. He is so twisted up inside, he’s in danger of falling apart just as surely as his father did. We all ride the razor’s edge of sanity, Michael, all of us. But some people skirt the very edges. What Dean needs to keep his grip – it’s not healthy, I admit – but I’ve never found another way. This way works, and it’s terrifying to witness. He has to hit rock-bottom, or it’s all for nothing. He could go through the most devastating punishment and suffer terribly, but if he doesn’t eventually fall into the deepest cavern that that punishment offers, we’re just going to need to do it all again, because he’ll continue to carry the weight of his guilt and it will poison everything. Michael, I’ve tried so many alternatives over the years. Please don’t judge me harshly. I love him, and I’ll do anything for him, and this is the only thing that works.”

“You never thought to put him into therapy before?”

“He wasn’t mine, Michael. I suggested it, even offered to go with him, but he wasn’t ready. As much as I love him, and always have, he wasn’t mine.”

“Would it be disrespectful, Cas, if I tell you I think you’re full of shit?”

Castiel laughed. “What happened to ‘I love you’?”

“Not mutually exclusive,” Michael told him.

Cas nodded. “To answer your question – your first question, I’m going to ignore the one about respect – yes, I knew that Dean was crashing, but I didn’t know yet how far he fell. I knew that he wouldn’t be permanently harmed and that help would arrive in time. I knew that the full fall was necessary, even though it was agonizing to witness. Michael, we aren’t primates. You and I were raised as apes. So much of the needs of the Pack is foreign to us. We have to relearn what Dean knows already. We have to relearn how to listen to our instincts and our wolves. We have to relearn how to balance the desire to be civilized rather than barbaric with the ugly baseness that our species demands. We have to learn how to be both.”

Cas moistened a cloth at the sink and wiped the table down. “Dean gets it. He is so wide open and vulnerable, and that makes him resilient. He just opens himself up to his wolf, to his instincts, and he never hesitates to let his emotions flow out of him in a cathartic deluge. Even when everything hurts, he embraces it to its fullest and then just lets it all go. It’s mesmerizing. We can’t stand in the way of that, even when it’s scary. We have to trust him and learn from him.”

Dean snored again, loud and gruff. Michael was speechless. It sounded like bullshit, like an excuse to walk away from the Sub when handling him became too hard. He frowned in thought, then added, “Dean said he doesn’t need that from me, though. He doesn’t want the same kind of treatment
that you give him. What am I supposed to do?”

“You may be the key to understanding how to really help Dean to heal, to fix the broken twists once and for all. For all that your upbringing robbed you of the cultural wisdom that Dean learned as a pup, you are remarkably adept at accessing your instincts. I’ve been watching you, Michael, and I think that your wolf and your Omega just sloughed off everything your Alpha tried to hammer into you. Only your front brain was listening, so when you interact with Dean, he gets the best version of you no matter what. Your human side is rational, civilized, and protective, and your deep instinctive sides respond to him in a way that he understands. The two of you just match perfectly, so you don’t need any kind of manufactured response template like he and I have cobbled together over the years. Your way is always going to be better than mine, more thorough, but it won’t work for me. I don’t have the instincts for it, and I don’t have the same level of bond with him.”

Michael wanted to trust Castiel, but what if the Alpha was wrong. It sounded like bullshit. Only, Michael’s instinct was to accept it as truth. He looked internally as Hannah had been having him practice doing. He sussed out the different sources of his confusion. He dug into the painful conflicting impulses and what he came up with…

It really did seem that it was Michael’s front brain that wanted to coddle Dean. It was his most dominant aspect, the protector, but the most vulnerable to outside influence. His impulse to save Dean from himself, from his punishments, derived from the human side of him that had been formed under his father’s heel. It was the least instinctive, the least Canid part of him. Michael closed his eyes and sought his Omega. He pictured a lotus unfolding, and he sought deep inside its protective petals. (Why does the imagery always have to be a flower? Isn’t there something masculine that unfolds?) Michael huffed at his wolf’s protest, but he concentrated to pull into the depths of the Omega at his core.

The Omega, already fully fronted with Cas this close and Michael’s Heat in full swing, was highly amused at Michael’s conflict, and Michael rolled his eyes - impertinent bastard. Somewhere along the line, Michael had come to realize that his Omega was just as much an asshole at heart as his wolf was, less violent, but one snarky fucker nonetheless.

“So what it comes down to is that the punishment needs to go as far as it needs to go, even if we think it’s stupid. Even if it hurts,” Michael said, his eyes on Dean.

“The very concept of punishment defies civility as you and I were taught to understand it, Michael. We were taught to seek justice in the face of misdeeds – an eye for an eye, equal payment rendered for each infraction. While that may work for Primates, it’s a disaster for Lupins. We don’t respond to justice. We respond to punishment, and it still only works if the individual being punished feels that it’s measured and applied correctly. Dean is convinced that he can never make suitable restitution for his misdeeds, and so the only level of punishment that can provide even a degree of absolution for him is no holds barred, full-on devastation.”

“Or therapy,” Michael chimed.

“Don’t be too quick to judge, Michael. I think you’ll find that Dean’s not hurt. And yes, he’ll be committing to the therapy he promised us both. But you need to stop thinking along the lines of justice.”

Dean rolled over groggily and looked up. “Nothing like waking up and hearing people talking about you while you’re sleeping. Thanks, guys. What’d I miss?”

Cas sat on the edge of the bed beside Dean. “Michael is concerned that your punishment was too harsh, and it put you in physical and emotional danger. He’s also interested in green-lighting some
one-on-one interviews to see if we can shine some light on some of his more unusual capabilities. Does that about cover it, Michael?” Cas rested a hand on Dean’s hip and met the Omega’s eye.

“Peachy,” said Dean and rolled back onto his belly.

“Oh, and Cas loves me,” Michael added.

Dean closed his eyes. “You two are dicks.”

Cas examined Dean for damage, and as they all expected, he advised that they call a moratorium on penetration of Dean’s sore rectum.

“Rectum?” offered Dean, “Damn near killed him!”

Michael rolled his eyes. “That joke hasn’t been funny for years.”

Cas chuckled, then blushed when Michael raised an eyebrow at him. “What? I thought it was funny,” Cas admitted.

“Dorks, the both of you,” groused Michael. His head felt hot, and he rubbed his forehead to alleviate the tension, stretching out beside Dean as Cas finished up his exam.

Dean lay a palm across his forehead. “You’re hot, Michael. How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling hot, Dean. What do you think?”

“You don’t have to be snippy about it,” Dean snapped back, still tired and not really feeling up to two more days of Heat, but he maneuvered himself between Michael’s thighs anyway and pushed slowly into his mate. While Dean wasn’t really feeling it much anymore, his erection responded to the Heat-scent like a champ. Michael went boneless, lying out flat on his back and not helping at all. Cas stepped back with an annoyed expression, abandoning his exam as Dean began to thrust half-heartedly.

Michael needed it, and Dean needed to provide, but they were all feeling used and spent and done.

“Shouldn’t your Heat dissipate now that you’re knocked up? Isn’t that the whole point of Heat and Rut in the first place?” Dean griped, barely even pulling out enough to thrust back in and slumping heavily on Michael’s chest.

“Don’t blame me, alpha,” Michael shot at him. “You’re the one who said I can’t get help from anyone else. At least you got a good long nap. I haven’t slept more than three hours since Thursday, maybe Wednesday, fuck if I know. Climb off and let Cas do it if it’s such a chore for you…”

Dean growled fiercely and woke right up. His speed, his power, his possessiveness all sparked, and he snarled down at Michael and fixed his teeth around the scar on his right shoulder, clamping hard.

“Yeah, alpha! I knew you were in there!” Michael wrapped his legs around Dean’s waist and pulled him in tight. “Knot your hot bitch, alpha,” he whispered, teasing filthily, driving Dean to even greater determination. “You know what I need…”

Dean shoved his knot deep into Michael and rutted helplessly on the possessive waves that had hold of him, whining high in his throat. He came in waves, feeling dizzy with exhaustion.

“I guess that puts an end to my plan to examine your penis for chafing,” said Cas.
Dean growled at him, but Cas swatted his thigh with a single stinging blow. “Stop that. No one’s taking your mate.” Dean blinked in surprise. A flush spread from the pinkened spot on his thigh to suffuse his body. He hadn’t had a real spanking in weeks, and lying here knotted with Michael, exhausted and spent, snapped back by his Pack Alpha like an unruly schoolboy, caused a twang of arousal to run the length of his nerves, independent of his Rut or Michael’s Heat.

“Do that again, Cas.” It wasn’t quite begging, but it was more than a request.

“No. We’re waiting. You need a good four weeks to heal sufficiently before we go at it again.” Cas was dressing. Why was Cas dressing?

“Where are you going? I’m sorry. I’ll be good. Just a little spanking. You don’t have to leave bruises.”

“What you need is sleep, Dean. Michael’s out already,” Cas indicated the Omega who was dead to the world flat on his back. Cas put a hand on Michael’s forehead and confirmed that his spiking fever was falling again after the infusion of Dean’s contribution. “Roll over so you don’t crush him and go to sleep. I don’t think you have more than another round or two before his Heat winds down.”

“Don’t leave yet, baby. I barely got to see you at all,” Dean begged.

Cas sat down beside the joined couple and helped Dean to roll awkwardly to his side. There was no way to lay comfortably when they tied chest-to-chest, and Michael’s dead-weight wasn’t helping. Dean huffed uncomfortably, but Cas smiled, observing the two of them.

“Would you consider scening with us together, babe?” Dean asked Cas quietly. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot. Michael wants to put me center-stage and show me off, let other guys in to touch me, all that kinky shit they talked about at his assessment, and I’m thinking I wanna do it. But maybe start small. I’d like it if we start with an impact-play scene. I’m dying to know what the two of you might come up with together.”

Cas chuckled darkly. He had a few ideas already, and the image of Dean as center-ring of the show was enough to make Cas’ wolf sit up and pay attention. “I would like that, Dean. I would like that very much. We’ll talk it out after you both have a little time to sleep this off. I’m confident we can come up with something.”

Cas sat at Dean’s back, massaging his scalp with his fingernails. “Billie said that the Rolling Stone article is getting a lot of attention; mostly good attention. But you were right, the front cover seems to have outing you, baby. There’s a lot of talk about what it means to be Submissive as a Lupin, and it’s beginning to turn interesting, the conversation, that is.”

Dean rotated his torso around to look at Cas. “Is that good or bad? Have I fucked up our momentum, Cas? Did I sabotage our plans?”

Cas leaned down and kissed Dean’s swollen lips. The alpha-Sub was at his most alluring like this, sexed up and sleepy. “You haven’t sabotaged anything, Dean. You don’t ever have to apologize for being authentic. That photo of you is beautiful, and you didn’t even know you were being shot. It’s as real as you get, and it’s sublime. Every fucking day, Winchester…” Cas repeated a mantra he’d begun some time ago, and Dean reached up to touch his face with a soft smile.

“Is there fall-out?” Dean rephrased the question.

“The Simians don’t care, but then, they can’t tell the difference. BDSM is all titillation and taboo to them, and submission is a roleplay. We’re hearing the old guard protests about alphas and
submissives and how it’s unnatural to think the two can cross this way. It’s classic prejudice. You knew you were going to be enticing the trolls to come out from under their bridges when you decided to go public.”

Dean groaned and rolled over to embrace Michael who grunted in his sleep. “Yeah, I knew.”

“But we’ve also received a great deal of support, Dean. YOU’VE received a great deal of support. Much more than we would have only a few years ago. I think our people are ready to embrace the idea of another layer of complexity, of a more fluid notion of orientation and gender than they’ve ever had to confront before. The magazine is fielding some interesting feedback, most notably from young Lupins who appreciate the opportunity to see an aspect of sexuality that they identify with mirrored back at them in the main stream. They’re calling you brave. A role-model. A pioneer.”

“Fuck,” said Dean. “What about Michael?”

“Michael’s got his own fan-base already, and it seems to be the genesis of something big. It looks like his 19 is powerful enough to work through images alone.”

“Great,” muttered Dean.

“The fans want to meet him, Dean. They’re sending PhoenixCon waves of petitions to bring him to the Convention for an introduction, a panel alongside you, photo-ops, one-on-ones, the works.”

Dean didn’t respond to that one for a minute. “There’s not time, Cas. Plus, he needs to focus on training”

“And you don’t want him exploited. I understand, Dean.”

“Am I being too protective?” the alpha asked in a tired voice.

“It’s your job to protect your mate. But April asked me if she could go, and I said yes…provided you’ll keep an eye on her of course.” Cas played with the bedsheets, straightening it over Dean’s waist and tucking it behind Michael’s hip.

“That’s great! Yeah, we’ll watch out for her. She can play up on-stage with the band. This is gonna be awesome!” Dean pushed up just a little. “You don’t mind her playing out in public, do you?”

“No. I think that would make her very happy.” Cas smiled, then he changed the subject again. “Also, we’ve received a number of requests by some other magazines and TV programs for follow-up interviews. Think about it, would you? We’ve got time to talk it over and decide how to respond. Baby, we don’t have to keep playing the media game, if it’s beginning to wear on you. We can cut back to simple college seminars and other academic outlets. We can stop the circus. We don’t need it anymore.”

Dean looked at Michael, asleep beside him, his body beginning to shiver as his temperature dropped. Cas pulled a blanket over them both and kissed Dean again. “Get some sleep. Call me if you need anything. Congratulations, alpha. Thank you for letting April and me be a part of your pup’s life.”

“Our pup, Cas,” corrected Dean. “I want to get one thing straight right now. Co-parenting means we’re all parents. This pup belongs to all of us. That’s what we said, and that’s what we’re sticking to. Michael’s in. He’s all in. If we do this, we’re going whole hog, man. Michael’s going to carry this one. Maybe April carries the next. But these little ones, all of them, however many we spit out, they are all of our responsibility. Equally. Tell me you understand, Alpha.”

Cas frowned at Dean for a moment. “I understand, alpha. I’m staggered by your generosity. I’m
humbled.”

“Good. Get all that shit out of the way right now…honored, humbled whatever, blah, blah, blah pompous-ass tripe you need to say. We both know what we want, and this is how we get there. Michael’s in. As long as April’s in, I don’t ever wanna hear that crap again. This is what we’re doing, right?”

“April’s in, Dean. She’s as excited as I am, maybe more so.”

“If you go into this thinking that we’re doing you some big favor, and it’s all about Michael’s generosity, we’re going to fail, Cas. You need to own it. Be Alpha. Be Papa. Own it, man. Do you hear what I’m saying?”

Cas smiled and kissed Dean one more time. “I hear you, alpha,” he whispered. “I’ll be good. Promise.”

“Ya know, for a guy who was dead-set against this whole baby plan, you sure look like Christmas just came early,” Dean mused.

“You’re a brat, Dean Winchester,” Cas told him.

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“What do you mean he’s out of town?! Do you know how far I’ve just traveled into the fucking heartland of this God-forsaken country just to find out he’s not even in the same fucking state?! Where is he?!” Crowley’s tantrum bounced off the high ceiling and startled the waiting clients. Several of them backed up and took seats closer to the door with wide eyes.

“I’m afraid Alpha Winchester is away on personal business,” Becky told him, trying not to panic at the onslaught. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I don’t have a fucking appointment, you twit! Do you know who I am?!”

“Sir, I’m sorry. Without an appointment, there’s never any guarantee that Alpha will be available to meet with clients.”

“CLIENTS?! I’m not an effing client!!”

“If you like, I can call alpha LaFitte. He’s in his office. I’m sure he’ll be able to help you.” Becky was shaking under his furious scowl.

“Becky? Is there a problem?” Billie appeared at her elbow, frowning at the intimidating beta who’d been shouting loud enough to be heard down the hall.

“Billie! Um, this is beta Crowley. He’s asking to see Castiel. He doesn’t have an appointment.”

“Mr. Crowley,” Billie greeted him like a primate, letting her disdain shine through. “I’m sure Becky explained that showing up without notice is a bad way to catch our Alpha in a free moment. He’s a very busy man. Perhaps I can be of assistance?”

Crowley narrowed his eyes at her. Beta. Probably not his equal for dominance. Few were. She didn’t seem intimidated though.
“Have we met?” he asked. She looked vaguely familiar.

She seemed surprised by the question, and then she laughed. “We’ve met a number of times, beta. I guess you don’t remember. I believe you had your eyes on Cas most of the time. My name is Billie. I’m Alpha Winchester’s assistant and media manager.”

He pulled himself up to his full height, insubstantial though it was, affronted at the insinuation that he had spent an inordinate amount of time fixated on Novak.

“Winchester? You mean that Submissive degenerate? I don’t give two fucks about Dean Winchester. Take me to whoever signs the fucking checks around here. There’s a negotiation underway, or haven’t you people heard?”

“Um.” Billie exchanged looks with Becky. “If you’re looking for the guy with the purse-strings, the one you probably need to talk to is the Submissive degenerate, but he’s out right now too. He should be back tomorrow, if you’d like to come back.”

Crowley looked back and forth between the two women, confused. “This is a fucking looney bin. Look, I didn’t fly all this way just to get the run-around in the front lobby and walk out empty handed. Who IS here? You got a lackey back there with some free time between mopping the john and wiping jizz off the walls?”

Billie shook her head in disgust, but she picked up Becky’s phone and dialed Benny. “Sir, I’m sorry to disturb you. Fergus Crowley is here in the front lobby, and he’s politely requested an audience to discuss issues concerning negotiations between our institutions. … No, Sir, I don’t believe we were aware of plans to visit this morning, but I’m certain it was our mistake. I feel confident that beta Crowley made appropriate arrangements and gave us due notice of his visit considering the gravity of the issues at hand. … Yes, Sir. I will escort him myself.”

She hung up the phone and buzzed open the lock on the door. “If you’ll follow me, please, beta. Alphas LaFitte and Singer are available to speak with you. Are you interested in a facility tour while you’re here? I believe that a more formal tour is being planned, but we always welcome members of the Keller Foundation. I can have an impromptu tour arranged by the time you’ve concluded your meeting.”

“Uh, yeah, sure, whatever…” Crowley pushed past her at the door and barely waited long enough for her to gesture which way they were going. “Where is Novak, anyway? That little wad of a girl said he was out of the state.”

“Sir, her name is Becky, and I’ll thank you to refrain from insulting Facility employees while you’re here. That kind of language is not tolerated.” He started to bluster an excuse, but she didn’t wait. She knew he didn’t care. He was laser-focused on Castiel as usual. “Alpha Winchester is in Nevada on personal business. I expect him back tomorrow, but he’s not planning to be onsite until next week.”

Crowley stopped. “Winchester? You mean Castiel? Why do you keep saying Winchester? And what the blazes is he doing in bloody Nevada?”

Billie turned and slowed but didn’t stop, explaining as she walked backward, “Castiel’s taking Dean’s name, and he’s a bit impatient when it comes to things like that…anything relating to where Dean is concerned. It’s actually kind of cute.”

“CUTE?!” Crowley braced himself as a shiver of revulsion ran down his back. The bitch was smirking at him. Crowley took a deep breath and reminded himself that this visit was a snow-screen anyway. The real work was all about his secret meeting with that young ape researcher who’d
somehow finagled a full-access pass. She hadn’t agreed to anything yet, but she would. Everyone caved to Crowley eventually. She was his ticket to the inside. She would help him dig up the dirt he needed to put the pressure on Novak. Crowley wanted the ACRI under the Keller banner, but he wasn’t about to let Novak take the reins. Crowley refused to hurry to keep up with his surly beta guide, but she just looked over her shoulder and headed up a flight of stairs.

“What’s in Nevada?” he tried again.

She smiled sweetly at him and opened a broad office door. “Personal business,” she repeated.

Two hours later, Crowley slouched through an interminably boring facility tour. LaFitte and Singer accompanied him, but they let the chipper red-head do all the talking. Crowley had never been so frustrated in his life. He repeatedly felt like he was closing in on real progress with LaFitte only to have fucking Singer clear his throat or catch Benny’s eye with a subtle tilt of his head, and the whole thing would unravel. Fucking alphas were playing him. He finally figured out they were just toying with him, playing good cop/bad cop, running him around in circles. This had been a monumentally terrible idea. And now it looked as if they intended to poke their heads into every broom closet and canned soup pantry in the whole fucking place, just to drive the hot poker in that much deeper.

He needed to keep his eye on the long game. Sarah Blake and her liquid brown eyes. That’s where his seeds had been planted, where they would sprout, where they would grow to full fruition. He needed to stall the lawyers just long enough. He would approve a preliminary merger agreement and cut the ACRI the interim check they needed to keep the lights on until they pulled out of the quagmire they’d fallen into. But it was going to be in the final details where his genius would be fully and finally realized. Fuck LaFitte. Fuck Bobby fucking Singer. Fucking fuck Castiel Novak Winchester and his degenerate play-toy with his jaw-line and his sparkling green eyes and his perfectly moistened plumper-than-any-girl’s lips. Crowley was laying bigger plans than any of them would see until they walked right into them and found themselves second, third, fourth string to Fergus Crowley.

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Cas had the baby’s spit-up down his blazer and caught in the crease of his slacks. He didn’t have anything to change into in his bag. He hadn’t planned to stay over-night, and unlike when he flew to Oklahoma for a one-day FBI interview that he secretly worried could turn into a long stay, he had been confident enough in this trip to bring nothing but his medical kit and an iPod with a couple of audio-books. He scanned the airport shops, rejecting the faux-high-end designer stores, and walking awkwardly into a store selling sports apparel, J.T. resting comfortably on his shoulder. The pup was asleep now that his belly wasn’t so distended, but that hardly helped Cas.

The vendor’s eyes widened when Cas approached the counter. “Holy shit. Aren’t you…? Whew, that’s quite a smell you got there. Oh man, that baby did a number on you. You need some club soda and a stiff brush, like pronto.”

Cas chuckled. “Actually, I was planning to just ditch the whole get-up. I have a plane to catch, and I don’t really want to walk on with this smell in my bag. Can you help me out? Sweats maybe? I guess
I need shoes too.”

It didn’t take long, and the vendor insisted on taking a selfie with Cas in his UNLV regalia. J.T. snuggled down in the hollow of Cas’ carry-on, wrapped up in his swaddling blanket. Cas smiled ironically at the camera and thanked the man – Gus – sincerely. The soft clothes were much more comfortable than his standard travel clothes, but as Billie always reminded him, appearances matter. Cas checked all the pockets of the clothes he was leaving behind just to be sure, stuffed them into a bin just outside the shop, collected the sleeping pup and his bag, nodded to Gus, and hurried to catch up with Sam and Jess at the gate.

Sam caught sight of him first, and doubled over with laughter. Jess had Hank in her arms, so she stayed upright, but the two of them attracted more than a few eyes with their loud amusement. Cas conceded. He threw an arm out wide and bowed his head in acknowledgment. He even curtsied slightly. He knew parenthood was likely to change him, but he hadn’t anticipated Unclehood turning him this ridiculous this quickly.

“I told you not to over-feed him, man. I told you you were just arming the missile,” Sam said, still chuckling, collecting his son with a quick kiss to his head, right where the fur was thickest.

“Point taken, Sam. That’s a mistake I won’t make again.” Cas checked over his shoulder that his security guard had kept up and maintained his watchful vigilance. The guy hadn’t offered him any help, but then, holding puking babies had never really been in his job description. Still, he had the personality of a block of concrete. Cas didn’t even know his name.

“Here, I got you a cheeseburger. We board in 20 minutes. Go ahead and eat. Jess and I finished already. Christ, it’s so much easier when there are three of us, right Jess? No one has to eat with one hand.”

Jess didn’t look up from Henry’s face, but she nodded. “You were saying, Alpha?” she prompted. “Are you sure? About Michael, I mean. Aren’t male Omega pregnancies risky?”

Cas unwrapped his burger, settling in beside Jess and smiling down at the pup in her arms. Hank’s wide eyes locked on to the Alpha’s and his nose twitched as he scented the air. “They are quite a bit riskier than most other pregnancies, but a healthy Omega man in the prime of his vigor and health like Michael should have no substantial trouble. We’ll watch him carefully anyway. Jess, it’s going to be important that we don’t pressure Michael into abandoning his lifestyle or giving up things he enjoys. His emotional well-being is just as important to the success of his pregnancy as his physical health. Both of you,” Cas included Sam with his eyes. “Please don’t suggest that Michael take it easy and don’t try to do things for him. He needs to stay active and engaged in a full life. He may end up confined to his bed toward the end of the 7 months, but until that happens, there really aren’t any normal activities that he’s restricted from doing.”

“We wouldn’t try to make him give anything up, Alpha,” Jess said, frowning, looking at Sam in confusion.

“Thank you, Jess. There is still a great deal of misinformation about male pregnancy, and I’m just trying to head things off at the pass. I apologize if I appear to be overly…”

“Protective?” interrupted Sam with a laugh. “Don’t worry about it, Cas. I talked to Dean this morning on the phone. He explained everything. We already knew about the co-parenting. Go ahead and do the protective Papa thing, Alpha. We’re on-board with the idea. I think it’s...kinda beautiful. We’ve got your back, right Jess? And we’re going to have Michael’s back too.”

Hank picked that moment to startle at nothing and scream as if he’d been pinched. All eyes turned...
toward them, and a number of fellow passengers’ faces registered dread at the thought of boarding a plane with a wail that shrill as background music for the long flight to Missouri.

Castiel’s phone rang. He dropped the remainder of his burger back into the bag and walked several yards away from the screeching pup before he answered Billie’s call.

“He did what?!” asked Cas, sure he’d misheard, one finger pressed tightly into his opposite ear. “Why would he just show up like that?”

“He said he’s been trying to reach you for days, and there are urgent and confidential matters he can only discuss with you. He didn’t know you weren’t here, and he just about blew a gasket when he had to settle for Benny. Frankly, he was lucky Benny was free.”

“Well, what was this urgent business?” Cas asked.

“He wouldn’t say a word with me in the room, Alpha.”

“Billie, please don’t play with me. What did he want?” Cas’ ability to tell when she knew more than she was saying was uncanny.

Billie sighed. “He didn’t really want anything from us here today. He’s in town hunting for a spy. He spent an hour and a half with Sarah Blake. Bought her breakfast. He only stopped by The Facility to see if he could rattle your cage. You not being here was the best slap in the face we could’ve delivered.”

Cas mulled it over. “Billie, I don’t want his face slapped. I want to negotiate in good faith. I’m not naïve enough to believe that Crowley is going to offer us the same respect, but we can succeed without stooping into his brand of ugliness. Let’s keep our eyes on the goal, shall we? We’re looking for a mutually beneficial arrangement that leaves our clients the real winners of this negotiation. We can’t afford to get caught up in the idea of winning or losing.”

Billie’s frustration made it all the way to the satellite miles above her head and right back into his earpiece. “This is why people keep hiding shit from you, Cas. You put on your golden cavalier mask and refuse to live in the real world and set us all impossible standards. We can’t do this right without playing a little hard ball. He’ll eat us for lunch.”

“I’m not asking you to let him snow you, Billie!” Cas shouted, raising a number of faces around him right out of their phones. “I’m telling you point-blank that we’re NOT going to stoop to his level. Leave Sarah Blake alone. I’ll speak to her myself. And for the rest of it, you’re to leave it to the lawyers. Crowley is way outta line to even pop his head up and pretend he’s got any ability to negotiate directly like this. I told everyone when we started this that we’re doing it all above-board, and I fucking meant it!”

“Fine,” she said, annoyed. “I mean it, Billie. Don’t test me on this one.”

“FINE!”

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Early. I’ve got April’s Pembrandt audition at 2:00.”

“You’re welcome…” she said angrily and hung up.
Cas worked his jaw in irritation. As important as it was to have an assistant who wasn’t cowed by him, having her pissiness thrown in his face when she was mad wasn’t fun either. She had done a good job watching out for him, for his interests, but she could be impulsive in her protective instincts, and he couldn’t afford any mistakes. Cas had Crowley desperate, and that’s right where he wanted the little Scottish twerp. Jess handed Hank to him as he rejoined them, and she dashed to the restroom as the plane began boarding.

He looked down into the preternaturally wise face and tilted his head. “We’ve got this, don’t we Hank? What do you think? Should we let Uncle Crowley stew a bit more before we try to eat him? That’s right,” he confirmed to the infant. “Stew is always best if it’s been allowed to simmer for a good long time.”

“I know that face,” Sam said warily. “You’re up to something.”


Hank slept through the entire flight. Cas played happily with J.T. who was obviously not holding any grudges that his artwork hadn’t been appreciated by his Alpha uncle. Sam and Jess slept soundly, seated together across the aisle from Cas, their heads leaning against one another. Cas had a center seat with a car-seat cinched in on either side, and he found himself in a happy little island of nonverbal perfection. He held J.T. aloft and let him watch the puffy white clouds slide by as they ascended into the sunshine. The pup watched with wide, serious eyes, and then settled his tiny head against Cas’ throat, his nose twitching frantically.

The flight attendant placed his ginger ale carefully far enough from the tiny hands that they couldn’t knock it over, and she stood watching Cas for a moment. “You’re good at that,” she said. “Brave too. Flying with two newborns is risky. I’ve known passengers to go total “Lord of the Flies” over crying babies.”

“They aren’t crying,” Cas observed.

“Ah, but it’s early yet. Babies don’t like flying. You’re Castiel Novak, aren’t you? I’ve seen you on TV.”

“Yes, I am. Although I’ve changed my name to Winchester recently,” he couldn’t help correcting.

“Winchester Novak?” she asked with a wince. “Bad plan. You should stick with Castiel. It suits you better.”

He started to call out a protest as she moved off down the aisle, but she looked back with a cheeky smirk and a wink, and Cas let the knowledge that she got him settle into his skin. He chuckled and snuggled the pup closer. “An Alpha gets no respect these days, J.T. What do you think we should do about that?” The baby didn’t know. He blinked at Cas and squirmed in his blankets.

She turned out to be right. Hank didn’t so much as squeak from the moment the engines geared up on the tarmac in Las Vegas to the point where the plane slowed to a stop at the gate in Kansas City. J.T. was a different story. The whole plane became intimately acquainted with the timbre of the newborn’s cries by the time they landed. He was pissed off by midway through the flight, and he made sure everyone knew it. It took the valiant efforts of all three wolves, passing him from one to
another, changing their holds, offering him alternatives to suck on to alleviate the discomfort in his ears, offering him food he didn’t need, locking themselves in the lavatory to try a diaper change again, walking him slowly up and down the aisles with an apologetic face to the incensed expressions of annoyance from the peanut gallery. Nothing helped. J.T. wasn’t having it.

By the time they disembarked, all of them, with the exception of little Henry Lucas, were wiped out and frazzled. Hank peeked out of his carrier curiously and scented the air, wide awake and refreshed, ignoring his brother. Sam hoped that little personality quirk was here to stay. As hard as it was to handle one screaming baby, at least they weren’t feeding off each other and winding each other up. Jess had John in her arms, draped across her forearm on his belly, hoping the pressure would help him feel better. Sam took Henry out of the carrier and looked for a bathroom where he could change the pup.

Sam stalked right back out of the men’s restroom in a huff. “There’s not a changing table in there, and the countertops are sopping wet.” He looked up and down the causeway and spotted an Omega restroom, but that wasn’t an option either. There was one door marked for families, but it was in use, and another dad already stood outside with a young daughter, waiting impatiently for a turn. “This is ridiculous!” huffed Sam.

“Here, I’ll take him,” said Jess, handing John to Cas. “There will be a table in the Ladies’ room.”

Cas bounced his nephew in his arms soothingly. It wasn’t helping much, but the pup had to be exhausted at this point. Surely, he would sleep soon. “For all the progress we’ve made, Sam, there always seems to be more to do. Having a safe place for men to care for pups shouldn’t be one of the lagging items. I have contacts inside the city. I’ll see what I can do about starting an initiative to have changing tables installed in more public restrooms and increase the number of family-friendly installations.” Cas sounded tired. After that flight, anyone would be tired, but he sounded stretched thin.

Sam took the pup, laying him up upon his shoulder where John’s nose could find comfort in Sam’s scent. “I’ll help, Alpha. Give me a list of phone numbers or a place to start, and I’ll help. This is stupid.” The door to the Family bathroom opened, and the little girl dashed inside with a squeak of desperation before the harried woman managed to wheel her stroller out. She smiled at the father who held the door for her, and he smiled back, stepping clear of the pram’s wheels, and nodding at her three ambulatory pups as they tumbled after their mom.

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Dean knew Gabe would catch on before they arrived at Kali’s shop, and he twitched with anticipation – half thrill and half dread. Gabe had agreed to accompany Dean to his fitting without a second thought, but he really should’ve known better. How many Indian seamstresses - high-end artisans - owned storefront shops in Kansas City? Gabe knew about the robe, knew all about Dean’s absurd plan to dress up like an Omega and bend over to be Claimed as if he were a prized object sold to a wealthy family for the perfection of his breeding and manners. Gabe laughed so hard, he’d given himself hiccups. Dean waited him out with a look of forbearance and frustration.

In the end, Gabe just had to see it for himself. Dean put him in charge of keeping up with Michael’s measurements and the short list of jewelry items that Dean and April had agreed on. Gabriel chattered cheerfully as they drove, expounding on his plans to teach the new Pack pups how to achieve maximum mayhem with minimal consequences. Dean snickered merrily along with him until
he realized that Gabe didn’t just mean Sam’s pups.

Gabe stopped speaking mid-word as Dean turned into the parking lot before the little seamstress’ shop. It was so small and unassuming, you would have to know it was here ever to find the place. Gabe’s face paled.

“You son of a bitch,” he said quietly. “I’m not going in there.”

“Don’t be a baby,” Dean pressed. “You don’t even have to talk to her if you don’t want to. I need your help, Gabe. Just focus on me. It’s just business.”

“Business, my ass,” accused Gabriel. “How did you know? Ah, shit…April said she ran into Kali on the street. It was here? You and April met her here? What did she say about me? Fuck, Dean, I can’t go in there. I can’t believe you would ambush me like this. Do you have any idea…” Gabriel looked close to panicking, but he bit his lip and looked at Dean from beneath his lashes as a tell-tale scent struck Dean’s nose.

“What did she tell you about me?” Gabe asked again.

Dean was careful. “She said she really liked you, man. Said she’d been wondering how you’ve been. I dunno, she seemed…interested. Look, you don’t have to do this. I don’t know what happened between you two, but she seems right up your alley, Gabe. Would it be so terrible to just talk to her?”

“I’m so pissed at you right now, Dean. You owe me BIG for this.” Gabe stared up at the unassuming sign above the door.

Dean schooled his voice down into compassion but not pity. “It’s none of my business, Gabriel, but your mate…she’s gone, man. She’s not coming back. Punishing yourself for the rest of your life isn’t going to fix anything.” Dean blinked across at Gabe who was adamantly refusing to look at him.

“Fuck you, Winchester. You have no right. I don’t do this. I take what I need from frikken’ strangers, and I don’t even look at their faces. God, Dean, what happened with Kali…it was a mistake. I don’t DO this!” Gabe shifted lower in his seat, making himself small. “I can’t have someone in my life, not the way I live. I can’t be worried about whether I’ll come home again and who’s worrying for me… Dean, fuck, I can’t.”

“Omega, you already have a whole Pack of us who worry about whether you’ll come home. I hate to break it to you, but that horse is out of the barn. You’ve punished yourself enough, man. You deserve this.”

“I’m not punishing myself!”

Dean cleared his throat loudly and leveled a look at Gabe that clearly said, ‘It takes one to know one.’

Dean put a hand on Gabriel’s shoulder. “Nothing has to happen that you don’t want to happen, man. Just talk to her. Hell, work out a scene with her. It doesn’t have to be more than that. Or just keep it business. Strictly business. Come on, Omega. You’re the bravest man I know. You can do this.”

“I will get you back for this, alpha,” Gabriel promised, narrowing his eyes. He popped the door open with a mighty squeak of old hinges and stepped out of the car. Dean bit his lip and thumped his steering wheel in victory with a quiet, ‘Yes!’ before following the Omega to the door.

Kali’s assistant met them and ushered them silently to the back room with a nod and a gesture. Dean
wondered if she had vocal chords. He kept his eyes on Gabe. Anyone who didn’t know the Omega well would have missed it, but Dean saw the tension in his neck and shoulders, and watched him duck his head lower than normal. Gabe was on-edge, if Dean didn’t know better, he might even say Gabe was frightened.

“Ah, alpha Winchester, you’re on time again…” Kali stopped as she turned around and spotted Gabe with a small gasp. “again,” she finished, pulling herself together. The two of them stared at each other, motionless, and Dean worried for a moment that he’d made a monumental mistake. The air crackled with tension and pheromones that he couldn’t put his finger on.

“Gabriel,” she breathed.

“Hello Kali,” he responded, sounding more put together than he looked. “It’s been a long time. How have you been?”

She took a deep breath. “I’m…good. I’m good. You?”

“Just ducky. Uh, look, we don’t have a lot of time,” he said, glancing at Dean. “Nephews coming home today for the first time. Like to be there to meet them, all that jazz. Need to get through this kinda fast. Where do you need the pseudo-Omega?” He gestured at Dean.

“Oh. Um, right. Yes. Uh, up here, please Dean. I need you naked this time. There are still some measurements I need.” Both of them were ignoring the crinkle of potential in the air, but Dean’s mouth hung open. It felt like a True-mate Trigger. The air hung heavy and foreboding. Something was meant to be happening with all this energy, but the two of them pretended they couldn’t feel it. Dean didn’t startle when calm hands began to strip him with assurance. He ignored Kali’s nameless assistant and her deft hands as his clothes came off.

Gabriel stood in the middle of the room, unmoving, stiff and uncomfortable. Kali tore her eyes from him and began to ready her tools, but she couldn’t look away for long. Her gaze kept returning to the Omega, sweeping up and down the length of him, skirting across his face, taking in his shoulders, his hips, his broad chest, the sweep of his blonde hair across his forehead, his whiskey-amber eyes. She squeaked when she poked herself with a straight pin in her distraction. Then she took a deep breath, shook herself firmly, and focused on Dean. The alpha was bare and allowing himself to be positioned in front of a low flat table on top of a raised dais with mirrors all around.

“Um,” he said eloquently, taking in the orientation of the furniture.

“First, just bend down over the table flat on your belly. Relax, Dean. It will only take a minute. I need to find your pivot points and where the robe needs to fold. That informs where the pleats attach. Everyone’s legs and hips are different.” Kali pressed her hand against his back between his shoulder-blades, folding him over. Gabe chuckled, and she blushed crimson.

“Right. Yeah. Okay. I can do this.” Dean braced himself on his arms, then let her guide him over. She arranged his arms above his head, and put his face flat to the table, resting on his forehead. Dean felt preposterous and slightly turned on at the same time. His mind raced forward to his wedding day, and his dick started to lengthen with a series of hopeful twitches.

Kali knelt behind him after making sure that he was positioned correctly, and she huffed in amusement when she noticed a pearly drop forming slowly at the tip of his lengthening penis.
“Wow,” she muttered quietly. “I guess I don’t have to worry about how to get the measurements I need. Submissives…” she talked to herself as she worked. Gabriel moved a step closer unconsciously. “I mean, I saw that picture, but it just doesn’t do justice. Is he always like this?” she asked Gabe over her shoulder, running a tape measure down the outside of Dean’s leg from his hip where it bent, to the floor.

“No,” Gabe answered, moving one more step closer and scenting the air near the beta on her knees.

Dean’s body broke out in chill-bumps in anticipation. She hadn’t touched him yet, but she’d told him that she was going to… was going to measure him, might need to do it twice. Dean wished suddenly that Michael were here to see him being so good for the statuesque tailor with her notepad and her tape measure. A thin drop of pre-come fell to the floor from his tip, and he closed his eyes. He was fully hard and beginning to strain.

Dean began to float, lost in the sweetness of her touch, professional though it was. He panted subtly when she worked her way around to his genitals, running the tape down the middle of his sac, and then reaching between his legs to assess his hardened length. He held his breath, needing a stroke, but then she cleared her throat loudly and stood back up.

Dean groaned in disappointment, and Gabriel laughed uncomfortably again. He was closer than before.

“All the way up on the table now, please alpha,” instructed Kali in a broken voice. “Up on your knees. Stretch out and take hold of the far side with both hands. Keep your head centered and down. Bow your back. Get comfortable. I need you to find your balance-point. This is the position you need to hold during the Claiming, and the robe has to fall just right. Present yourself just like you’ll do it for the ceremony.”

“Jesus,” whispered Dean, climbing up and lowering his chest onto the cold table. His ass was on display to the shop, his cock hanging heavy and frustrated between his thighs.

“You’re a moron, alpha,” Gabe told him. “Why on earth are you doing this again?”

“You’re not a Sub, Gabe,” Dean told him in a muffled voice, squirming to find the right angles. Cas would no doubt be pressing down between his shoulder blades. Dean tried to pull his upper back in lower and let the move shift his hips upward. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand. Hey, c’mere and put your weight on my upper back. Press down really hard.”

“Ew, not a chance,” protested Gabe. “No, I’m not a Sub. I guess I don’t understand. You’re making a fool of yourself, Dean”

“Yeah well, different strokes, man. It’s gonna be epic. Just you wait.” Kali’s assistant came forward and placed both hands in the middle of Dean’s back and pressed down. “Little higher,” he advised, and she shifted her weight upward.

Kali grunted in frustration, shifting forward to begin taking measurements again. “You’re both missing the point of this ceremony. It isn’t about Submitting. It’s about ownership. It really makes no difference if the Omega submits or not. It’s not up to him. Or her,” she added quickly with a blush.

“Oh, really,” Gabe challenged, and the air crackled again in potential. “And what if the Omega has no need to be owned?”

Dean held his breath. Kali’s hand rested on his flank as if she’d forgotten it was there.

“Every Omega needs to be owned, Gabriel. It’s just a matter of finding the right owner to suit the
Omega. A ceremony like this would do you a world of good.” Kali wasn’t paying any attention to Dean at all. She had turned and was addressing Gabe directly, facing him bravely where he stood, so close to her he could’ ve leaned in and kissed her lips. That thought evidently occurred to Kali as her eyes darted down swiftly to catch the motion as he licked his bottom lip, but they darted right back up again.

“I did all the bending over I’m gonna do for a mate, Kali. I’m never going back there again. Couldn’t even if I wanted to.” Gabe sounded so small to Dean, small and broken, but there was steel in his tone.

“I’m not your mate, Gabriel,” said Kali softly. “I just want to know you. I want to be close to you. You can feel it, I know you can. I don’t care what it is. Gabe, please.”

“You need to own me, Kali. Don’t pretend you don’t.” He touched her cheek with a pained look in his eyes. He was hopeful and hurt, broken and desperate.

“Gabriel. You are who you are. You need what you need. Don’t pretend you don’t.”

Gabe scoffed and stepped away frantically, pulling his eyes painfully from her perceptiveness. “I’ll wait in the car.”

Dean let Kali find her balance and resume her work. She moved swiftly, completing the measurements, standing him back on his feet and fitting the robe, much closer to completion, across his shoulders. It was stunning. She marked a couple of spots deftly with chalk and then bent him back down to watch the robe frame him in layers of soft fabric.

“He doesn’t need a Domme, Kali. He’s not like that,” Dean told her suddenly, breaking the long silence.

“Well, that’s good, because I’m not like that either,” she replied around the straight pins between her teeth.

“You’re a Dominant,” he stated flatly. There was no denying it. She had all the tells.


But Dean didn’t let it go. “What if you Trigger with someone else after you commit to him? You can’t put him through that again. Have you thought this through?”

A shadow passed across Kali’s face, dark and menacing. She shared a look with her assistant who bobbed her head as she took the robe out of Kali’s hands and disappeared into the back room. Kali cleared her throat again.

“I can’t Trigger, Dean. I can’t Trigger again. He’s gone, and he’s not coming back.”

Dean touched her shoulder. “I’m sorry, beta. Truly. I’m very sorry.” Dean’s green eyes had the most amazing effect on people when he used them to look right through someone. Kali’s lip trembled, but she rallied and straightened.
“Dean, I scare him. I don’t mean to do that. I would never hurt him. I don’t know how to teach him he can trust me.” She was gazing toward the front room, although she couldn’t see past the beaded curtain in the doorway.

“Uh, try avoiding topics like how he needs an owner. You know, if you want my advice.” Dean began to dress.

“Aren’t you an expert, alpha?” she asked. “Are you telling me that Omegas don’t need to be owned body and spirit? That they’ve suddenly grown the capacity to manage themselves? Has the world turned upside-down since I left India? Are alphas wearing the leashes now? Is the beta population in charge?”

“Uh,” Dean kicked his boot upright and stepped into it, looking down, “some alphas like the leash.”

“I’m not talking about Submissives, Dean! Gabe is lost and hurting. He gets what he needs to survive from his brother, but he deserves more than survival!”

“Do you know anything about him, Kali?!” Dean asked her aggressively. “Do you know what he does for a living? Do you know a Goddamned thing about who he is? Or are you just riding the pheromones? Neither of you are pups here. Neither of you are young and innocent and naïve. Are you serious about him, or are you playing a game? He’s a brat, yeah, but he’s not a toy.”

“You brought him here, Dean! Who’s playing with him, me or you? Did you really think he was just going to fall at my feet and beg me to…what? What was your big plan?” Kali didn’t back down, and Dean was impressed at her fortitude.

“I dunno,” said Dean flatly. “I didn’t expect what I smelled, I can tell you that much.”

She turned to begin packing her tools away. “And what did you smell?”

“I think you two are mates, Kali. I think you would be with him if you’d met him before he Mated…you know…Marina.”

She stopped and stood up straight, but didn’t turn around, saying, “And I’m sure it’s occurred to him that had that happened, he would never have known Marina at all.”

Dean bent down to tie his boots. “I’ll get you Michael’s measurements, and we picked the arm cuffs and waist chain that the Omegas want. I’ve got the notes in the car. Give me a minute to go get them.” Dean walked backward, troubled, feeling like he’d left something unsaid.

“I’m strong enough, alpha,” she told him, turning to face him with her chin high and her shoulders back. “I’m strong enough for Gabriel. I may not look like much, and I’m not alpha. But he would be safe with me, as safe as he is anywhere.”

“It’s not me you have to convince, Kali.”

Dean opened the car door and climbed into the swelter. Gabe had his door open and all the windows down, but it was still an oven. Dean turned the engine over. “Stubborn fool,” he muttered with a look across the bench. Gabe was facing forward, sweating, stoic.

“Well?” prompted Dean.
“I don’t date, you dick,” Gabe reminded him.

“I don’t think she’s interested in dating, Gabe.”

Gabriel shook his head slowly. “It’s a bad idea, Dean. Everything’s already so fucking complicated.”

Dean scoffed. “Right, and avoiding complications is your modus operandi. Cut the shit, Gabriel, and get out of the fucking car.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” the Omega shot back testily. He had one foot resting on the pavement, and his knee twitched.

Dean crossed his arms over his chest and leaned as far back as he could. He wasn’t going anywhere, not with the Omega in the car.

“She thinks I need an owner, you prick. Have you met me?”

“Mm-hm. And you do need a fucking owner, my friend. God, you need a harness and a leash, and prolly one of those electrified collars that shocks you when you misbehave. I also know what I saw and smelled in there, and I know this girl has the potential to make you happy. Gabriel, you deserve to be happy. Now get out of the Goddamn car!”

“Who do you think you are?!?”

“I think I’m your brother, you moron, and your friend. You’re too blind to see it, so I’m doing what brothers do and planting you face-first right into it whether you want me to or not.”

“Fucking alphas and their fucking power privilege…”

“One…”

“So, you’re just going to leave me here? How am I supposed to get home?”

“Two…”

“The pups are coming this afternoon. You expect me to miss that for a little piece of tail?”

“Three!” said Dean with finality, and he pushed his door open and began to get out.

“Fine! All right! You win, you fucking cunt! Don’t you touch me! I’m going! Jesus!”

“Give her the notes I gave you to carry for me,” Dean’s mildness made Gabe blink after the high tension in the car. They faced each other across Baby’s hood. “Take care of yourself, and God, Gabriel, let yourself have this, man. You’ve been punished enough.”

Gabriel pressed his lips together and bravely faced the storefront. He steeled himself with a muttering under his breath that Dean didn’t catch, but then he nodded and stepped up the curb and disappeared into the shop without a backward glance.

Dean smirked smugly as he climbed back into the car. Then he sighed, put-upon, and climbed back out to walk around to the passenger side to slam Gabe’s door closed. He texted the Omega quickly before pulling out, “Call me if you need a ride. Text me by 10:00 am if you stay over-night.”

Smirking wider, he reversed out of the parking space, ignoring the series of four texts he heard ping through his phone in response. Texting while driving was a dangerous thing to do, and Dean knew what Gabe had to say anyway. There were undoubtedly emojis involved.
Real quick, before you log off...I just want to add my two cents: Yes, Gabe does need an 'owner', although that's not necessarily the best vocab to use with him. Yes, Dean was well within his rights to bully Gabe out of the car. Yes, alphas do have a responsibility to manage the psychological health of their charges. Subs and Omegas, in different ways, can't do it on their own. I'm dying to reach the point in the timeline where Sarah can serve as the mouthpiece for all of us primates, just to give Sam a chance to explain right there in the narrative how different we are as species in what we need.

Thanks as always. For everything. Love y'all.

Argue with me all you want. I'd love to hear an alternative viewpoint that cracks mine.
Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

An Omega's back-story, a different kind of conversation between Michael and April, pups come home, and take background to Cas' newest worry, but in the end Cas says yes to everything.

Chapter Notes

I havta admit, I feel weird about this chapter - not bad, just weird. Maybe I'll leave it at that. I don't want to bias your read.

Maybe it's sleep deprivation, and maybe I'll read over this one once I'm running on all gears again and realize what it is that seems so off about it, but for now...writing is how I cope, so you get this...

I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Christian John Campbell
beta-Neutral [A/B/O: 0], [D/N/c: 2], [Z-Scale: 39], no Pack affiliation
cis-Male, Heterosexual, b. 1978
unMated
Wolf Avatar: Red Wolf - full

Chapter 67 – Thursday, July 13, 2017

THEN:

The screech was ungodly. Jimmy half-expected the lightbulbs to blow in their sockets as he pulled
the thrashing wildcat bodily through the tight hallway and threw her into a chair in the main station processing room. She didn’t stay put, and she wouldn’t stop screaming, but he gamely soldiered on, gritting his teeth, working the handcuffs over the table clip and securing her fast.

“Caterwaul all you want, lady,” he told her loudly. “You ain’t goin’ back out there. Now just be a good doggie for me and let me get your paw-print. I’m not gonna bite you. Come on, there’s a good bitch. Down girl. Sit!” The bitch wasn’t listening to Jimmy, but everyone else seemed to be. He was garnering attention from across the police station.

“Give her a biscuit, Jims!” suggested Paula helpfully.

“You ain’t goin’ back out there. Now just be a good doggie for me and let me get your paw-print. I’m not gonna bite you. Come on, there’s a good bitch. Down girl. Sit!”

“Caterwaul all you want, lady,” he told her loudly. “You ain’t goin’ back out there. Now just be a good doggie for me and let me get your paw-print. I’m not gonna bite you. Come on, there’s a good bitch. Down girl. Sit!” The bitch wasn’t listening to Jimmy, but everyone else seemed to be. He was garnering attention from across the police station.

“Give her a biscuit, Jims!” suggested Paula helpfully.

“Hey, give her a knot, man. That’s what she’s on about. That bitch is in Heat. Isn’t that that how these mutts do it? Slip her one, Jim, it’ll calm her right down.” Joe had his fat ass parked against his desk, and he couldn’t be a more a stereotypical cop with a coffee cup in one hand and a jelly donut in the other.

“Classy, Joe. Real classy,” griped Jimmy, stepping back to reassess the situation. She was yanking at the handcuffs hard enough to scrape the hell out of her wrists, frenzied to the point of desperation. If only she would shut the fuck up a minute so he could think. Now that he had her secured and the danger to his own personal self wasn’t quite as up-front and personal, he felt a bit more compassionate. A bit.

“You get any I.D. off her?” asked Joann, stepping forward but not getting close to the woman’s feral teeth. Jimmy shook his head. If she was carrying I.D., he wasn’t about to get close enough again to find it.

“I don’t think she’s in Heat.” Joann had to raise her voice as the bitch’s wailing turned from a scream into a mournful howl. Two or three cops poked their heads in to find out what the fuss was about. “She doesn’t have that look about her. I think she’s just scared. Give her a minute, and try to talk to her.”

“Since when did you become an expert on mutts?” Joe asked loudly. “You been playin’ kinky games in your basement? Had a few secret girlfriends on the side?”

“You’re a pig, Joe,” she told him. “Don’t you have a traffic stop to monitor? I’d hate to think some suburban housewife might sneak past you goin’ 27 in a 25.”

Joe muttered bitterly, but he grudgingly admitted she was right and wandered out, grabbing another donut at the door.

“Process the bitch, or get her outta here, James!” The Sergeant’s voice carried over everything, even the howls. “If she keeps screeching like that, I’m charging her with disorderly AND resisting. I can’t fucking hear myself think.”

Jimmy exchanged looks with Joann. She shrugged and backed up a bit. “I’m not going in there. I’m not getting any closer to her teeth than right here. You need a wolf Dominant or a tranquilizer dart.”

Jimmy shot her a quick look – all ‘thanks for nothing’ – and turned back to the young woman to try again.

“Hey, hey…look. All that noise is just making things worse. Shhhhh. Here. You thirsty? Want something to drink?” Jimmy dug a bottle of water out of Joe’s desk and cracked the top. It’s not like Joe was ever gonna drink it. Joe only drank things with hops or caffeine.

She slowed her howling slowly with a decrescendo that felt like the slow release of pressure across
his chest as the volume decreased. The girl kept her eyes averted, but she was checking him out peripherally. Her blonde hair hung in dank mats. Her shirt was torn down the left side. Her belt hung loose in its loops, unfastened completely. She panted like a wild thing and eyed the water.

“Here now. I’ll give you this if you’ll sit down in that chair and stay calm and quiet for me. Can you do that? Sit on down. Shhh. Be still for me now.” Jimmy edged closer, keeping his eyes on her shoulder, hoping that if she made a sudden move, she’d broadcast it there first. He was afraid to look far enough away from her teeth to watch her feet or hips as he’d been trained to do.

The girl swallowed and glanced briefly at the chair. She trembled as she lowered herself down, braced and ready to make a break for it if she could work the cuffs loose.

“Att’ girl. Just sit right down. Here. I’m going to put this on the table. Just reach for it real slow. Nobody’s gonna hurt you. You can have all of it.” Jimmy set the opened bottle down and scooted it toward her with little nudges until she wrapped a hand around it stiffly, awkwardly, her other hand going along for the ride, held close by the cuffs. She snuffed and snorted when she couldn’t get the bottle to her mouth without dipping her head down. She didn’t want to do that. She shot him a fearsome look. A warning. He put his hands up and backed slowly away.

She drained the bottle in a few swift gulps, spilling almost none of it, then she dropped the empty plastic to skitter away beneath the desk. She continued to pant, but she lowered her head, resting her chin on the desk and keeping watch in every direction at once.

Jimmy rolled Joe’s chair closer with extreme caution and sat down, still an arm’s length away. “That feel better?” She didn’t answer. “You got a name?” She shot him a look of contempt but said nothing. “You got any identification on you? I can get you some help, but you gotta talk to me.”

“It’s not talking she needs,” chimed Paula from several desks away.

“Would you shut the fuck up?” he said, frustrated. The wolf huffed a bitter laugh. “Oh, you think that’s funny?” he turned back to her. Apparently, trying to help gets you nowhere with this bitch.

“Look, I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me. What’s your name?”

The girl jerked suddenly, painfully at her cuffs and whined high in her throat. She slid off the front of the chair and let it roll backward. Down on her knees on the floor, she began to keen softly and pull rhythmically at the cuffs, avoiding eye contact, refusing every attempt to speak to her.

Jimmy watched her with borderline disgust and pity. What were these mutts doing to each other that a creature like this wound up on the street in this condition? It wasn’t the first such pathetic mongrel, and it wouldn’t be the last. He’d come across her rooting through the trash dumpster behind the Circle K. The briefest flash of his blue lights had sent her skittering into the darkness, nearly running right into his bumper before he stopped the car, and she’d given him a hell of a chase and a hell of a bite on the back of his arm. He knew it was bruised, but he didn’t think the skin was punctured. Besides, werewolfism was a myth. They weren’t Lycanthropes, and what they had wasn’t catching. It made him feel twitchy anyway to know her teeth had clamped so tightly around his arm. She could have bitten him anywhere; he was lucky it had been his arm. She had been frantic enough to rip his throat out if she got close enough.

She wasn’t frantic now; just sad and wretched.

“You got that phone number handy?” Jimmy asked Joann. “The…Dominant guy?”

“Yeah. Just pulled it. You want me to dial?” she asked, looking down at the card.
“Yeah. You know the guy. You do the talking. I wanna keep an eye on her in case she goes wildcat again.” Jimmy backed up a little bit more. Sitting right on top of her wasn’t going to help keep her calm.

She dialed. “Is this Robert Singer? Yeah, this is Joann Duley with the Las Vegas city police department, precinct 4. We’ve picked up another one.” Joann talked briefly, and then nodded at Jimmy. “He’s sending somebody over. You know, we’re not getting them in the numbers we used to, but... Might be time we hired one or two of these wolves to park onsite. It would be way easier to handle when they come in like this. Seems like most of ‘em have at least a little bit of civilization going for ‘em now, once we can get ‘em calmed down.”

“Are you crazy?” Jimmy shot at her. “Wild animals is what they are. I don’t care how civilized they pretend to be. Put the right smell in their nose, and they all turn into feral beasts; rip your throat out as soon as look at you.”

“That’s not true, Jim. Look at her. She’s obviously been assaulted. She’s terrified. She’s hurt. She’s not an animal, she just needs someone to look after her for a while.” Joann stepped closer, and Jimmy let her have the space.

“Fine. You take her home. Let her date your son. Feed her Thanksgiving dinner. No? That’s what I thought.” Jimmy wasn’t prejudiced, but facts were facts. They might dress up all smart and clean for TV. They might hold down jobs around town like trained monkeys. He had no ill will toward any of them as long as they stayed away from his family. That didn’t mean they were the same. This one certainly made a sad picture. But they were wild at heart, and there was no convincing him otherwise.

The wolves who walked in half-an-hour later to collect the charge weren’t what he expected. One was young and cocky. She smirked at him before he even stood to greet her. The other was older, approaching slowly and letting the younger one lead.

“Um, Joann?” she asked, extending her hand toward Jimmy with a knowing smirk, and he grunted at her. “I’m Krissy. I’m here to pick up your...uh...stray.” She twitched her head toward the table. The blonde lifted her head and sniffed the air. “That there is Maureen.” Krissy nodded toward the older woman who was now leaning against a desk, simply observing.

“My name’s Jim,” he corrected her and made himself shake her hand. She chuckled haughtily. “You’re the Dominant?” he asked suspiciously.

“I’m not a Domme, no. She doesn’t need a Domme. She needs an alpha.”


“Actually, I rated a 24, but that’s a pretty close guess for a monkey.” She strode past him and walked right up to the bitch kneeling and whimpering on the floor. Jimmy glanced at Joann, then around the processing room. It was empty but for the five of them.

Krissy knelt down beside the blonde with a few whispered words and put a firm hand on the back of her neck. The change was instantaneous. The girl melted into the alpha’s side, straining her wrists in the cuffs to roll onto her back against Krissy’s chest. Krissy put an arm around her to support her weight and indicated with her head that she expected the cuffs to be removed poste-haste.
Jimmy’s eyes went wide, and he shook his head vigorously. The alpha’s eyes darkened and narrowed as her face went flat. Jimmy grimaced, but he stepped cautiously forward and slid his key into the cuff with shaking hands. Christ, get a grip Lieutenant. You’ve been shot at for Pete’s sake. Joann watched him with her head lowered and her hand on her holstered gun. Respect for the other species was one thing, but letting a feral wolf loose in the station house was something else. Neither of them noticed the change in Maureen’s stance or the red tint in her eyes.

“Chill out, you two. You’re creeping me out,” said Krissy. She pulled the cuff off and fed it through the table hook to release the girl’s hands. Her hand stayed on the back of the bitch’s neck as she slowly stood her up. Krissy looked her in the eye. “Are you carrying an I.D. on you, Omega? Answer me.”

The blonde shook her head.

“Good girl. Were you running from someone? Are you hurt?”

The girl held up her bruised and scraped wrists for Krissy to inspect. Standing this close together, it was clear they were near the same age. But they were worlds different.

“Ouch,” replied the alpha sympathetically with a stern look at Jimmy, who shrugged. “Is that the only place you’re hurt?” Krissy was passing her free hand over the girl’s shoulder and throat, pulling her shirt collar loose and peeking along her collarbone. Her nose twitched as she sniffed at the girl’s throat.

Seriously? They’re *smelling* each other, thought Jimmy. He scowled in disgust.

The girl didn’t answer at first. She kept her eyes down and her body still. “I asked you a question, Omega!” snapped the alpha, and Jimmy startled. “Are you hurt?”

The Omega whined, but she looked up a little, almost to Krissy’s sternum, and she nodded.

Krissy swallowed and leaned in closer. “Did he Mate you? The alpha who did this to you, did he Mate you?”

Oh, Crimeny! Mating? They’re talking about Mating? Jimmy backed up two quick steps and collided with Joann in his haste to put some distance between himself and the wolves.

The Omega glanced at Jimmy and shook her head. Krissy looked over her shoulder and caught Maureen’s eye. “You recognize these threads, alpha? We’ve seen this look before. It’s practically a uniform. I’ll bet you anything she busted out of one of those Omega fun-houses down off the strip. Looks like she just made a run for it.”

Maureen nodded. “We’re so close, but every time we start to get enough evidence, they scatter. I’ve told Christian – we need an Omega infiltrator. It’s the only way to get close enough without them catching on.”

“Did you see anyone with her, officer?” the alpha asked him suddenly, and he jumped again.

“Uh, no. No, she was alone, digging through a dumpster. I found her like that. I swear!” He indicated the torn state of her clothing, and Krissy sighed.

“You primates stink like hell,” she explained in what she obviously thought was an instructive tone. “If you had been the one to do this, your scent would be all over her.” Krissy sniffed again at the girl’s shirt. “I’m smelling male alpha. Not you. Someone attacked her, but it doesn’t smell fresh. She may have been wandering the street for some time.” Krissy looked across at Maureen. “Call
Christian. Tell him we’re bringing her in, and we need the standard kit and a full exam.” Maureen nodded and pulled out her phone.

Krissy focused back on the girl, and her tone gentled. “Did he knot you, sweetheart?”

The blonde nodded as tears filled her eyes.

“Son of a bitch,” she muttered, furious but trying to contain it. “Look, we need to get her to a hospital,” she told Jimmy. “She’s been raped and she’s seriously out of balance. She could have permanent damage. I’m taking custody, but if you want the papers filed legally, you’ll need to come with me. Ride along or follow in your own car, I don’t give a shit which. I’m taking her to the new Lupin clinic outside of the city. You know it?” she asked, and Jimmy nodded, then jumped again as she shouted unexpectedly in rage. “Fucking alphas! FUCK! I’m sick of this shit!”

She calmed herself quickly and soothed the Omega whose eyes went impossibly wide. She put an arm across the Omega’s shoulders and began to walk her toward the exit. Jimmy took one look at Joann, and they both scurried to grab the right forms and follow the alpha.

“What’s your name, Omega?” Krissy asked gently.

“Claire,” she said softly. “Are you going to stay with me, alpha?”

“You bet, sweetheart,” Krissy assured her. “We’re not going anywhere.”

NOW:

Dean and Gabe left midmorning to run by the tailor for a fitting. Michael had custody of April, but what supervision did she need really? With fewer than 24 hours before her audition, April planned to spend the whole day at the piano. Michael sipped a hot mug of black coffee and focused on clearing out the tasks on his weekly to-do list for the Pack. He needed to investigate alternative investments for the Pack’s operational funds. It was a dizzying responsibility, and Michael meant to do it right. They needed to make some changes, that much was clear. Someone had left the pack parked in the wrong funds as the markets shifted, and they were losing money.

His first monthly accounting meeting with Cas and Dean, cobbled quickly on the tail-end of his waning cycle had been telling. Even without all of his notes, Michael was startled to realize that while Cas looked at every purchase the Pack made, he challenged nothing. Michael had careful notes in his office to justify some of the bigger purchases, but Cas skated past without question – without any questions at all. Michael caught Dean’s eye while Castiel’s head was down and saw him repressing a snicker with a bite to his cheeks. His eyes danced, and Michael sent him confusion through the bond. Dean mouthed, “I’ll tell you later,” soundlessly.

It turned out that getting purchasing approval from Cas was easier than falling down. Dean explained to Michael in private later that the Alpha was in a growth phase where financial management was concerned, and that Michael might want to run purchasing questions by his mate first, rather than Castiel.

“Behind his back?” asked Michael, dismayed.

“No. I’m going to talk to him. He’s learning, man. We need to give him some help. He’s never needed to understand budgeting before, and he’s not good at setting spending limits. Believe me, the
Pack is in much better hands financially now that you’re in charge.”

“But I’m Omega, Dean. He’s been Alpha over this estate for years. What if I screw it up? What if I make bad decisions while I’m off-balance or something?”

Dean laughed and planted a kiss on Michael’s temple. “Can’t be any worse than some of his decisions. Did you know he owns a theater-grade popcorn stand? Keeps it in the garage under a tarp. He’s never used it. That’s the kind of decisions he makes, and don’t get me started on his investments. He showed me his portfolio yesterday. I mean, at least he’s had a competent manager for most of his life. But when you and I came along, he fired the guy. Said he wanted to build a new Pack and make a new start. He’s like a baby in a trench-coat when it comes to money. The only real danger to this whole plan is if we let you stay unbalanced for too long. So we’re not going to do that. I’ve got you, baby. I’ll do my job, and you do yours. Maybe arrange a yard-sale.”

Michael sipped his coffee and cycled through several tabs he had open at once. His head was clearer than he remembered feeling for some time. The cloud of fuzziness always descended over him so slowly as to be virtually imperceptible until it became untenable and required an explosion or two to shake it all loose. Heats did that beautifully for Michael. It was like putting on a well-prescribed pair of glasses for the very first time only then to realize how awful his vision had become. The stark difference in clarity was the best spirit uplift he could imagine. He finished in record time with the weekly items, and chose to reward himself with a break. Training lessons wouldn’t resume until Monday, and Michael was planning to make the most of his days off.

Carrying his mug, he meandered toward the back of the house, a frown spreading slowly at the sounds coming from the conservatory. That wasn’t Chopin. That was…Andrew Lloyd-Webber? What the hell was she playing?

He cocked an eyebrow at her as he came into view.

“Really?” asked Michael, unimpressed.

She smiled at him but kept playing, adding her voice to the mix with an ironic smirk.

“You’re supposed to be preparing for your audition. Can you seriously not be left alone for ten minutes?”

“I’m going to Phoenix with Dean,” she announced cheerfully. “I need to prepare some pieces to play there too. He’s going to let me play onstage.”

“And you think that a group of sex addicts are going to want to hear show-tunes?” he challenged setting his cup on the dark mahogany until April squawked in outrage. Removing the cup with a sigh, he moved behind her and looked at her sheet-music over her shoulder.

“I’m just warming up with something fun. Don’t you ever do anything fun, Michael?”

He hummed noncommittally and picked up the music book, flipping idly through it. “You’re good enough at impromptu performance that you don’t need to prepare for a band like the one they take to the Cons. Just wing it. Right now, you should be focusing on getting through tomorrow.” He closed the book and looked at her. “Oh, I forgot. You’re throwing the audition. Never-mind. Play whatever
“I’m not throwing the audition, you prick,” she huffed. “But running through that awful Sonata all
day isn’t going to help me play it well tomorrow. I need to be loose and stress-free.”

“And well-balanced,” Michael noted, eyeing the bruises on her hip where her tight crop-top left a
strip of pale, damaged flesh showing above her shorts.

April ignored the pointed remark. “Do you sing, Michael? Sit down and play with me for a few
minutes. What kind of music do you like? Can you play at all?”

He shook his head slowly, flipping through the song book again with a wistful expression on his
face. He chuckled softly to himself while studying one of the songs.

“Do you know this show? You don’t strike me as a musical theater kind of a guy.”

“And why is that?” he asked without looking up.

“It’s just that it’s hard to sing with a stick up your ass, that’s all,” she declared and turned back to the
board to run through scales.

“Google me if you like. They posted the Play-bills online. Later. Right now, practice.”

“Not a chance,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. It sounded like she meant it.

“You are such a fucking liar, Michael Quentin! I don’t believe it for a second. How would we not
have known that? You would’ve told Dean. It would have come up by now. He fucking sings for
you all the time. There’s no way!” She turned almost all the way around on the bench, propping one
knee up sideways and abandoning all pretense of playing.

Michael kept his face flat, not rising to the accusations. God in Heaven, this felt good.

Teasing. Just being. Feeling secure. Not elbowing for space or watching his six or balancing himself
against the Tops. “I’ll have you know, Little Miss Judgy McJudgerton, that I was an active member of both my high
school and college theater groups, and that I have several lead roles under my belt, thank you very
much. Turns out, you can sing with a stick up your ass. And YOU, need to get back to work.”

“I don’t do that anymore, April. I’m not that guy.” He flipped another page. Yes, he knew this one. It
was cheesy and sentimental and overly-simplistic in tone, but surprisingly complex in structure. It
was melodic, manipulative, brain-washing tripe, and he longed internally for another chance to be
that guy. But Michael couldn’t find a way to fit it into who he was trying to be now. He had more
outlets now than he had back then, and he didn’t need it as badly anymore. He had needed the
release once upon a time, back when stripping out of the dour over-layers of his weighty persona for
a few hours at a time felt like breaking out of a prison only to feel nakedly exposed once the need to
stretch was satisfied, and finding himself almost desperate to cover back up again. He never went to
cast parties. He never stopped by the local pub for drinks with the crew. Michael used them and their
outlet just as surely as he’d used an alpha’s knot when he needed one.

“One song,” she reasoned. “It’s still part of my warm-up. We’re not even breaking any rules. What
shows do you know? Do you know that one?”

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knee up sideways and abandoning all pretense of playing.

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“Shit,” he muttered, realizing that he’d just outing himself to a chick who wasn’t going to let him tuck
back into quiet obscurity.

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cast parties. He never stopped by the local pub for drinks with the crew. Michael used them and their
outlet just as surely as he’d used an alpha’s knot when he needed one.

“What part did you play?” she asked him hopefully, obviously catching on to his familiarity with the
songs.

“I played, uh, Joseph,” he said distractedly, flipping the page again and huffing a small laugh at a memory that surged up.

“You… You played the lead? You’re lying.”

Michael looked up at her. “It was just a high school production, April. I never said I was very good.”

“Prove it,” she challenged, snatching the book and setting it on her stand. She flipped through until she found a signature song and began to play, hoping to tease him out on nostalgia alone.

“You’re supposed to be practicing.”

“You’re embarrassed, and you’re stalling.” She didn’t pause, but she restarted the first phrase, slowing it down, opening it over again to give him time.

Michael listened to the repeated bars, wondering how to decide what to do. This girl. She made him feel things he didn’t want to feel, and she did it so fast. Michael’s wolf loved to put on a show, but Michael had no gateway to access the wolf when he was alone with April. He really wasn’t that guy when it was just the two of them. Rachel’s warnings about April flashed into his head. Rachel saw trouble ahead. She knew Michael’s propensity to fall into the trap of putting on his super-hero cape and declaring himself protector of the weak; of falling for damsels in distress; of needing to save them. But Rachel had it wrong. April was neither weak nor in distress. She was already saved. She was strong. She didn’t need a super-hero. But, so, why then did Michael feel such a pull towards her? It wasn’t sexual…exactly. He’d be lying if he tried to say he didn’t long to run sure hands over soft flesh. But that was different.

It’s like she already knew him inside and out, but she didn’t. What she had was a way of digging straight under all of his defenses as if they were made of mist. And she was such a child – so comfortable being handled and directed and cared for. She was naïve to the point of absurdity and yet world-wise and ancient at the same time. He really didn’t have any defenses around her.

Michael licked his lips and opened his mouth as the first phrase poised to repeat and led him into the lyric. His tenor voice was out of practice, and he mishandled the first word, but he frowned and pressed on:

*Close every door to me*
*Hide all the world from me*
*Bar all the windows, and shut out the light*

April played on, but she was barely breathing. No fucking way. The asshole with the rod up his butt and a cold word about everything really did have a voice. She giggled at the thought that they were turning rapidly into the Von Trapp family, but stopped when Michael frowned and faltered. Nah. They were never going to perform as a family. Castiel couldn’t sing a note. She knew because she’d tried to teach him, and failed disastrously.

Michael took a step backwards and turned away from the piano to face the tall windows, but he didn’t stop singing. His voice was rich and strong. His vibrato minimal, but controlled. Someone had
given Michael lessons at some point, although he was clearly out of practice. April let him lead, adjusting her tempo, her pacing, to his. It was a song that he could easily identify personally with if he chose to dig into it. It was a song any Omega could identify with. Michael didn’t play up the emotion. He simply sang.

April put support beneath him where he needed it and crescendoed when he did, pulling back when his voice lowered. He took the key-change like a champ. He was no professional, but he was confident; he was expressive without being trite. His pitch was good. He ended without trying to hit any of the high notes, and then he stalked quickly back and swiped the book off April’s stand with a silence that said more than words.

“Enough goofing off,” he told her after an uncomfortable pause, searching for his coffee cup.

“You should come with us to Phoenix,” said April. “The internet says that the fans are dying to meet you face-to-face.”

“Do you take nothing seriously?!” he charged, suddenly angry. “Are you just going to drift through your life on a cloud of endorphins and take whatever they plan for you? Do you have any fucking idea how talented you are?! Are you ever going to grow up?!”

April startled back, taken completely off-guard. But Michael was just getting warmed up.

“No! You’re not, because you don’t have to, do you? You get to stay a pup your whole fucking life, and they’ll all take care of you. What does it matter if you’re a fucking musical genius? Go on down to Phoenix and put on your stupid show. Play bullshit rock songs with mediocre has-beens and piss your talent right down the drain! You’re under no obligation to own up to what you can do and make it into something real. You and your potential don’t even belong to you. Why try? Why pretend to own something you don’t? FUCK!”

“Michael…” April frowned and cocked her head, confused.

“You live in Neverland, April! You’re going to be a pup forever. The Universe put musical genius inside a child, and you’re all just going to skate right over the surface of it playing show tunes at parties. You’ll do whatever he tells you to do. If he sells your piano tomorrow, you’ll put on an apron and bake scones, won’t you? What does it feel like to know you don’t ever have to grow up? Does it feel good? Comfortable? Is it soft and warm in there? How does it feel to know you can blow off the chance for a $100K education, and know there aren’t going to be any consequences?” Michael pointed a finger in her face. “You own that talent April. You have no right to waste it. You have a responsibility to all the unexceptional artists in the world who wish they had half of what you were born with to make something of yourself.”

“I don’t owe you or anyone else a damn thing, Michael!” She finally got her spine in place, and she retorted in indignation.

“Yes, you do. Don’t you dare squander this opportunity.”

“Oh, so, it’s wrong for Castiel to try to tell me how to live my life, but it’s just fine for you to do it? He’s got a lot more say than you do, Omega! And what gives you the right to call me a child? What makes you think I’m not going to fight for what I want? You don’t know me, Michael! I don’t care if I was born with the cure for cancer in my brain, no one has a right to tell me I owe them anything!”

Michael’s voice softened, but his intensity didn’t wane. He advanced on her slowly, perhaps predatorily, she couldn’t tell, but he was alarming in his passion. “You are a genius, April. And you’re Peter Pan. You’re about to make the biggest mistake of your life, and I can’t watch you do it
You may need someone to tie you up and drag you to the race, but no one can make you run. No one can make you cross the finish line. No one makes Peter Pan do anything he doesn’t want to do.”

Michael stood over her. Too close. Too forceful. April responded physically as a Sub, lowering her eyes. But she didn’t cave to him.

“You’re jealous,” she whispered.

“I’m jealous as hell, Pete.”

She looked up at him, into his face and read the anguish there. “Jealous of my talent? Michael, I was born how I was born. I’m not throwing it away. I work so…"

He put a finger across her lips. “Jealous that I never got to know what it’s like to be Peter Pan, not even for a little while! I can’t go backwards. I can’t feel what that’s like. Omegas…we need that a little bit…that freedom. I don’t know what it’s like to freefall and trust that someone has the tarp stretched underneath me to catch my fall. I hit the ground hard every time I ever tried it. But you…you never have to leave that place – that Neverland. Even if you go to school and become a great composer and a world-famous pianist, you don’t ever have to grow up.”

Michael took her face gently in his warm hand and ran his thumb down her cheek like a caress. She looked up at him, stunned.

“I’m not going to throw it away, Michael. I’m not standing aside and letting the alphas decide everything. I have some decisions to make, but… Maybe I am Peter Pan, but I take my music seriously. You’re wrong about that.” She blinked up at him. “I’m…I’m not going to get into that school.

“And show-tunes are what comes next?” he whispered. He held her eye. He didn’t believe her. He didn’t have any idea what he was doing here in this room, and this situation was rife with peril. The tension had become palpable. She blinked.

“For now. Maybe.” April reached a tentative hand to touch his lower belly. She licked her lips. “I can’t leave now anyway, Michael,” she told him softly. “We’ve got a pup on the way. How would it be for its mom to spend most of her time off at school.”

Michael frowned sternly. “That’s a bullshit excuse. Don’t use me as your pretext to skip out on your chance.”

April licked her lips again and sighed, withdrawing her touch, and Michael missed it immediately. Maybe it was the pregnancy hormones. “It’s not just you. It’s not just your pup. Castiel needs me here. He needs me more than you know. I can’t leave right now.” She pressed her hands into her face and groaned in frustration. “I’m not a child,” she declared suddenly, dropping her hands. “I’m not floating through my life on someone else’s winds. Damnit, Michael, I have plans! I have my own damn plans, but it’s just not that easy. I’m not the only wolf in the Pack. Who’s really the child here? I’m trying to balance all of it for all of us. I can’t just go winging off selfishly on my own just because I know how to smack out a tune on a keyboard. There are other people who have needs too, and their needs are just as important as mine.”

“No, they aren’t,” he said swiftly, sitting down beside her and taking her by the hand. “Their needs are secondary, Pete. You are special. You need to have more space, more room to stretch, more support. No one else has what you have. We have to nurture this. We can’t act like you’re just another part of the Pack and assign you a kennel and a water dish. You’re not LIKE everyone else.”
April was lost in his adamant green eyes. He was too close. She broke out in chills, her mind whirling furiously. She shook her head slowly, growing distraught, having no idea how to respond, praying someone would appear to pull her out of danger. She was in danger. He was too close. She bit her lip and leaned slightly forward, her eyes tracing his lips.

Michael sprang back as if shocked by a voltage that came from nowhere. “Shit! Fuck! God, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Don’t… I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it like that. I’m not…” Michael paced beyond the piano bench in raw frustration. “I’m not coming on to you, Pete. I…shit… I’m just scared you’re letting someone else pick your path, and you’re too talented to let it drift away like that.”

April smiled sadly, watching him pace. “I think you’ve got it backwards, Michael. Everyone’s trying to pressure me into the school, into this audition, not into walking away from it. You’re so worried I’m going to let Alpha pick my path that you’re right there on the other end of the rope, doing the exact same thing. Loosen up on the leash a little. It’s not your leash to hold anyway.”

“Why does there have to be a leash?” he asked her in a pained voice, coming to a stop.

“Because that’s what keeps Peter Pan from flying away into the clouds,” she told him.

She wondered silently what it was going to mean in the long-run that he’d finally selected a nickname for her, and that she was quietly keeping count of how many times he’d said it.

***************

Dean hurried through the kitchen alone just before noon.

“Did I miss them? Are they here yet?”

Michael looked up from the shopping list he was writing and watched his mate disappear through the door to the parlor without stopping. The Omega frowned and looked over his shoulder toward the entrance door, but Gabriel didn’t show.

“They aren’t due for two more hours, Dean. What’ve you done with Gabriel? Dean!”

“Whew,” said Dean, reappearing and flinging himself into a bar-stool. “Thought I was gonna miss the big intro.”

“Dean, Gabriel. Where’s Gabriel?”

“Oh, he’s uh, reacquainting himself with an old friend. I left him there with my tailor.”

Michael let that news sink in with a frown, and then went back to work. “I’m going to assume that’s a euphemism of some kind. Please don’t tell me any more. I don’t want to know. Just promise me you didn’t ditch him somewhere.”

“Nah. He’s fine. I really like this girl, Michael. I think she might be good for him.” Dean selected an orange from the fruit-bowl in the center of the table and tossed it carelessly into the air to catch it again.

“How did the fitting go?” Michael asked without looking up.

Dean grinned at the top of his head without speaking, and Michael stopped writing to pay attention
to what Dean was sending him. “Really?” he asked, a bit stunned.

Dean grinned wider and bit his lip. “It’s gonna be spectacular, babe.”

“You know I think you’re crazy, right? Everyone thinks you’re crazy. And tell me something: if you and Alpha add another layer of ownership between the two of you, what does that mean for me? Does he own my ass even deeper than before too? I mean, how could he not?”

“I dunno,” Dean shrugged like it made no difference. “But it’s gonna be awesome.”

“Awesome,” said Michael with much less enthusiasm. “Promise me I don’t have to be naked,” he said, standing and collecting his notes, checking the fridge one last time and matching what he saw against his list.

“You’re not going to be naked. Dude, I showed you the tunic. You said it was fine.”

“Oh. That was for the wedding?”

Dean hummed and stood to shoulder Michael out of the way to attempt to find himself something to eat.

Michael stepped aside, chewing on how to ask his next question. “Can I ask you something?” he posed, leaning against the counter. Dean turned to face him with the door to the refrigerator standing open. “Um, I heard that a lot of your fans are hoping to see me in Phoenix. Should I, maybe plan to go?”

Dean released the door to slam shut. “You don’t owe those vultures anything, man.”

“They aren’t vultures, Dean. They care about you. They care about Sam. I mean, Jess isn’t going. She’s staying here with the twins, but I wouldn’t mind really… If you want me there, that is.”

“Maybe the next one, Michael. I don’t want you mobbed, and I don’t think you know what you’re getting into.” Dean grabbed a bag of potato chips out of the pantry and pulled it open.

Michael heard April’s suggestion repeat in his head. She spent part of lunch trying to convince him to surprise Dean by showing up halfway through the standard Saturday night festivities. “…just mute the bonds so he doesn’t feel how close you are, and step out and surprise him. Oh my God!” she’d burst out with a sudden epiphany. “Come out singing. Shit, Michael, that would be amazing! He would LOVE it! His jaw’s gonna hit the floor!”

“And leave Jessica here alone with two newborns?” he’d protested.

“Castiel will be here,” she reasoned. “He never goes to the Cons. Plus, the staff here is dying to help out. I mean, Eunice is basically everyone’s Grandma. Even Fred’s had that look in his eye. Jess will be fine.”

Dean shook the chip bag under Michael’s nose and startled him out of his reverie.

“I guess. Maybe the next one,” said Michael, shaking off the chips.

“Kay. I’m gonna go work on the table. Call me when they get here.” Dean took his chips and grabbed a beer on his way through the Butler’s pantry.
Sam, Jess, and Cas arrived at the house just a little later than expected. They were tired, but glowing as Sam and Jess each carried a car seat through the garage entrance and into the kitchen. Cas followed, burdened beneath the luggage. If he hadn’t been wearing a ridiculous get-up of UNLV sweats and a blazing white pair of sneakers, they wouldn’t have noticed him at all for their fixation on the pups. As it was, each of them stifled their comments better than they did their smirks. Michael got to the babies first. He completely forgot to greet J.T.’s parents as he swooped in and stole the carrier from Sam with a grin. Michael had the wide-eyed pup out of his fastenings before the seat even stopped rocking in place on the countertop and was talking happily to him, ignoring everyone else.

“Good to see where we rate in this pack,” said Jess flatly. “Hello, Michael. Yes, it’s good to be home. The trip was tiring, thanks for asking. Your little nephew there cried for half the flight.” She parked Hank’s carrier beside J.T.’s and unclipped the pup, but after a quick hug from April and a look into the Omega’s hopeful blue eyes, and Jess let April pull the baby out of his seat.

Cas handed one of the bags to Dean, who took it without comment, his eyes glued on the Omegas and their prizes firmly enough that he forgot to rib Castiel about his clothes. Watching Michael’s expressive face as he spoke seriously to J.T. sent a wave of chills up Dean’s back. Here was yet another untapped side of Michael that Dean was hungry to watch develop. Michael as an uncle gave him a forecast to Michael as a parent, and Dean couldn’t look away.

Cas nudged Dean into motion, and got him moving through to deposit luggage, after which he distracted Dean with a very sound hello kiss from which they both emerged mussed. The homecoming shifted into the living room where Sam set up a portable crib and impressed the Pack with his newly acquired diaper-changing skills. Cas disappeared upstairs to change, emerging again looking far more like himself.

Dean snuggled in close to Castiel on the couch, enjoying the sense of rightness as his Pack came back together again, an emotion that Castiel obviously shared. The Alpha was relaxed and playful, nipping Dean’s throat and teasing his mate. Dean filled Cas in on Gabe’s absence, but got no further when the Omega himself appeared, sheepishly tugging an uncomfortable Kali into the room by her hand.

Castiel’s playfulness evaporated. He stood abruptly, unbalancing Dean and leaving him to catch himself.

“Gabe?” Cas asked.

“Hey bro!” he stepped in and met Kali’s eye with a reassuring nod. She had her head lowered and her eyes deflected away from Gabe’s, away from Castiel’s. “Look who I ran into. You, uh, you remember Kali, right?”

Cas seemed speechless for a moment. Sheepish was not on his brother’s menu unless he’d broken a rule and knew a settle-up was on the horizon.

“I know Kali,” Cas said at last. “She’s making our wedding clothes. Welcome, beta. Please come in. We’ve just arrived home with the new pups. Won’t you…”

“Yeah,” said Gabe. “I didn’t want to miss the homecoming, but someone dumped me without a ride. Kali was kind enough to drive me home.” He directed the woman to a seat and plopped down next to her.
It wasn’t lost on anyone in the room, except perhaps the twins, that the two of them reeked of sex and satisfaction. Cas bit his lip, unsure. Gabe almost never dated, and he’d never in his life brought a woman to the house besides his mate. He stuck religiously to a regimen of contracted professionals arranged by his brother. And while Cas had known about Kali back when Gabe’s fling with her sent the Omega into a downward spiral of self-recrimination, he’d never expected to see them in the same room together, much less in his home.

“You know Kali?” Dean asked from the couch, looking up at Cas.

“She’s tailoring my wedding suit,” said Cas distractedly with a frown at his brother. What was Gabe doing? “I found out that’s where you were getting yours done, and I thought it would be nice if we matched stylishly.”

“You dog. You didn’t tell me.”

“Gabriel, I need to speak with you. Would you please come with me? Excuse us everyone.”

April froze in the act of handing Hank to Gabe and stood upright without delivering the pup. Gabe sighed and rolled his eyes. “Be right back,” he told Kali. “Don’t worry. Only Michael bites. You can take him. You’ll be fine.” Gabe patted her leg, then stood and delivered a simple kiss to her lips and followed his brother out the door. Dean groaned and exchanged a look with April, but he followed as well.

Cas chose the Omega parlor and waited for the other two with his hand on the doorknob, closing it behind Dean. “What’s going on?” he asked with no introduction.

Gabe looked at Dean. Dean looked guilty.

Cas tried again. “Look, I don’t care who you hook up with, but hook-ups are not like you, and a change this abrupt is something I need to understand.”

“Dean made me do it!” Gabe burst out, pointing.

“Wow,” said Dean.

“Are you six?” Cas asked his brother.

“He kicked me out of the car, and drove off without me. I had no choice.” Gabe was shuffling his feet uncomfortably and avoiding his brother’s eye.

Dean wasn’t having it. “You had no choice but to fuck the girl just because you didn’t have a ride? Had nothing to do with electric sparks when you two get within three feet of each other? I didn’t MAKE you do shit.”

Cas ignored Dean’s petulance. “Just tell me what I want to know, Gabriel. Are you okay, and is this what you want? Is she just a hook-up? Or do you think it’s something more?”

“She makes me feel good, Castiel. She makes me feel safe. I dunno where it’s going from here. We didn’t do a lot of talking yet.”

Dean scoffed, and Cas thumped the side of his head as he stepped past.

“You should’ve been there, Cas,” said Dean rubbing his head. “I’m not kidding. It was electric. It was like a TM Trigger was trying to spark, but just couldn’t. It was crazy. I’ve never seen anything like it.”
Cas frowned at Dean then turned to Gabe. “Is she previously Mated?”

“Yeah, bro. She’s done. Her fella died years ago.”

Cas licked his lips. “And does she hold any Claims from anywhere else?”

Gabe smirked. “She’s free and clear, if you’re wondering about Pack ownership. It’s just the old girl herself.”

“She’s a beta-Domme?” Cas skated past Gabe’s jibe.

“I guess. She’s a beta, but she never got tested for the tertiary. I know. Crazy, right?”

“Gabriel, please try to take this seriously. Can she give you what you need? All of it?” Cas was looking deep into Gabe’s amber eyes, worried and intense.

Gabriel met him there. “Only Marina could do that, Castiel.” All light-heartedness was gone from Gabriel’s face. “But Kali’s closer than anyone else since Mari.”

“She’s not Marina,” Cas reminded him, almost coldly.

“No one is.”

“And you plan to start a relationship with this girl on the knowledge that she doesn’t quite measure up?”

“Don’t judge me, man. We’re not teenagers. All of us are scarred and broken, and there’s no such thing as perfect once you’ve lost a mate. She’s been there... down in that pit. She’s been there too. I never said it was going to turn into a relationship. Who knows? Maybe it’s just another one-off?”

“You brought her to our house, Gabe. You never do that. You brought her in to see the twins and meet the Pack.”

“Cas, please. I needed a ride home, and I didn’t want to miss the pups. They’re my family too, you know.”

Castiel wasn’t listening to Gabe’s words. He was watching his brother’s body and scenting the air around him. Sexual release was only one of the odors he detected, and the others were just as important. Gabe was balanced and despite his annoyance with his brother, he was relaxed. He was stable. He looked healthy. He looked good. Cas made up his mind.

“What do you need from me, big brother?” He only ever called Gabe that in moments of special closeness or extreme vexation. This wasn’t the latter. Gabe closed his eyes and let out a breath of relief.

“Just let me, okay Alpha? Just let me see where this goes, and try not to scare her off.”

“Do you have anything to add, Dean? Any concerns?” Cas turned to Dean.

“Just keep outta my toy box, man,” joked Dean. “Get your own.”

“Helpful,” Cas said flatly.

Gabriel was still pensive. “I don’t know what it is about this beta, Cas. She’s very traditional, and you know how Omegas are treated in India. She’s already talking ownership. I ought to be hitting 90 miles an hour in the other direction, but... And how do I explain to her what I do? How do I explain
all the extended absences? When’s the right time to come clean about that? How do I keep her safe if any of the douche-nozzles who are out to get me find out about her? I mean, can I even do this? Is it fair?”

“Damn, Gabe,” said Dean. “Maybe get the chick’s phone number before you move in with her.”

“It’s no laughing matter, Dean,” Gabriel rounded on the alpha. “I’m no prize, and I’m hella broken. We both are. I don’t date for this very reason. It stirs up more shit than it settles. It hurts too bad. Only, I think it might be worth it to risk a little hurt for this one. She’s not like the others. Cas, please…”

It was an Omega plea. It was the kind of entreaty that passed right over an ape’s head. Gabe needed a strong rock to cling to, and he needed the acknowledgment of his Pack Alpha that he was heading down a safe path. He closed his eyes and swayed slightly where he stood. Cas put a firm hand on his elbow and stilled him.

“You have my support, Gabe, and my blessing to pursue a relationship with Kali if that’s what you want. I trust your judgment about your own needs. Do you think she would be open to testing?” Cas moved his hand up to cradle across Gabe’s neck and upper back.

“Doubt it,” said Gabe. “She’s pretty set in her ways.”

“We’ll see,” muttered Cas, and Dean couldn’t resist a smirk. His man was bad-ass and always won these little scuffles. Always. If the beta planned to stick around, certainly if she ever thought about joining the Pack, there was no getting out of the test. Of course, it would all be academic if the relationship fizzled before it went anywhere.

“It’s good to see you hopeful again, Gabriel,” said Cas seriously. “You deserve to be happy.”

“Yeah, thanks, little bro. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, but I’m doing it anyway.”

The afternoon went by slowly. Sam and Jess slipped out to nap with the assurances of all of them that the boys would be fine. Cas disappeared with Dean into the basement for a quickie and a short snooze as well. Michael experimented with poses that allowed him to hold and feed both pups at once. April grudgingly put in a couple of hours at the keyboard practicing for real. Kali, it turned out, was just as skilled as Gabriel at sliding from a room unnoticed. No one asked where the two had gone, but her car was still in the drive the next morning, parked beside Sam’s.

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“I can’t tell you what to do, Miss Blake. The choices are yours. But I appeal to your sense of integrity. If you are remotely tempted to take beta Crowley up on his offer, I ask that you step out of the project entirely. Certainly, you must know that keeping a subterfuge going would be all but impossible. Certainly, you must also realize that the full weight of the ACRI legal department is no trifle to provoke. I take the protection of my clients very seriously, and I will prosecute any infringement of our agreement where your access is concerned.” Cas spoke calmly. Arranging to meet the woman, not merely in the same restaurant where Crowley had wooed her, but in the exact
same booth sent her a message about how likely she would be to get away with any spying for Cas’ opponent.

Cas was reading her body language, and Billie watched her eyes. There was too much riding on the safety of their endeavor to risk it over a project they didn’t even much care about. The idea’s time may have come, but there were other researchers in the world.

“Sir. Alpha. I had no idea what that man was going to pitch to me when he invited me to breakfast. He sold the meeting as a preliminary review. He said that he has standing at your Facility as a Keller representative and he needed to interview me before he approves the project. Alpha, I had no idea what it was really all about. I would never do that! Frankly, the thought that he was trying to get me to spy for him makes me furious.”

She looked and smelled as furious as she sounded, and Billie touched Cas’ thigh beneath the table in a sign that she sensed Sarah was genuine. He didn’t need Billie’s read, but it was good to know they both felt the same vibe.

“What exactly did he ask you to do for him?” Billie asked her pointedly.

Sarah swallowed uncomfortably. Billie intimidated the young researcher it seemed. That was good. That was useable.

“He said that Keller has heard rumblings that there is dissention inside your Facility, but they haven’t been able to substantiate the rumors. He hinted that there might be client abuse as well, but he never said so directly. I got the feeling that he’s more interested in finding someone on the staff who will give him dirt than he is trying to root out abuse of clients.” Sarah found her voice slowly. Looking the beta in the eyes was difficult, but Sarah couldn’t pinpoint why. She was just scary as fuck, that’s all there was to it. Sarah hadn’t touched her drink since the waitress set it before her. She could see all of her plans unravelling, and she was desperate to save her project. Fuck Crowley and his offer.

“What did he offer you in exchange for the information?” Castiel asked her, noting the relief in her eyes when they shifted back to his.

“He said he could set me up for post-doctorate work with Keller in Lupin research. He practically promised me the job of my dreams. It all seemed a little…too good to be true if you ask me. It seemed a bit unrealistic.”

“A bit?” Billie challenged.

Sarah nodded. “I didn’t trust him. I looked him up when I got home. He really gets around, doesn’t he? He seems to have been a part of the turn-around of five or six major charitable corporations. This is his first foray into research companies, but I guess I just can’t tell how much of the press about him is real and how much is bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit,” Billie conceded. “Crowley’s good at what he does. The problem is, he’s laser-focused on winning, and the way he plays it, there’s always a winner and a loser. In our case, if Crowley wins, that means we lose, and that’s not sitting well with any of us. We’ve worked too hard to lose out to that rat-bastard. There’s more than one way to play this, and frankly, we would much rather come out with a win-win in the end; if we can. If a win-win isn’t in the cards, well, we’re NOT going to lose.”

“Sir,” Sarah turned back to Cas. “I understand if you believe that I’ve been compromised. I respect that you put the safety of your staff and clients first. I’m begging you though…I told you at our first meeting that I would do whatever it takes to prove myself to you. I won’t ever betray your trust.
Please don’t cancel the project. Please, Alpha.”

Castiel regarded her and sipped his coffee. “You are here today, Miss Blake, for one reason and one reason only, and that is that you contacted me about your meeting with Crowley before I had a chance to call you. Had you not done that, this project would already be on the cutting-room floor. You deserve to know that I am extremely hesitant to allow you past the public rooms of my Facility. You walk on shaky ground at the moment, and I reserve the right to put a stop to this project on the mere suspicion of questionable activity on your part – to put a stop to it and to prosecute you as well. Do not test me, Miss Blake. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha. I understand. You have my word.” She held his stern blue gaze without flinching. She was either telling the truth, or she was the best liar Cas had ever spoken to.

“Very well. The next training session begins in two weeks. Billie will arrange to have your orientation scheduled and get your access to the Facility arranged. You will go nowhere in my building without an escort, not even into the restroom.” Cas finished his coffee and slid to the end of the booth. “Billie?” he asked. “Have you got everything you need?”

“I’ll take care of everything, Cas. Go get your mate, and tell her good luck on her audition. Call me after, and tell me how it went.”

“Will do, Billie. Thanks.” He nodded at Sarah and leaned down to leave a kiss on Billie’s cheek, suddenly a much different man than the one who had just been grilling the researcher and threatening her with prosecution. Billie winked at him, and he gathered his coat and left.

Billie watched him go with an open look of adoration in her eyes. “I’ll tell you one thing,” the beta said to Sarah. “You’re not going to find any disgruntled employees to sell out to Crowley even if you want to. Even if you tried to play both sides, the staff loves that man. Not a one of them has anything bad to say about him, so Crowley needs to find another tree to bark up.”

“Why the rock-solid loyalty, if I may ask,” ventured Sarah. “What is it about Dr. Nova… um, Winchester that sparks such fierce devotion?”

Billie raised her eyebrows and picked up her coffee cup. “Cause he’s exactly what he says he is. You find me another rich and powerful man who’s not full of himself or full of shit. Cas doesn’t just say he cares about the safety of the wolves in his care, he backs it up. And trust me, you don’t want to get on the wrong side of his sense of protection. That’s not a threat, Miss Blake. I’m not trying to scare you. I believe he probably did that well enough himself. Castiel is as good as his word. Once he accepts you into the Facility, you’re Pack, and he’ll protect you as fiercely as he does the rest of us. But cross him deliberately, and Crowley won’t be able to save either of you. Are you still interested?”

“Absolutely,” Sarah confirmed.

“Good. Let’s get started. When are you available to come in for a physical?”

Chapter End Notes

*The THEN section deserves a little explanation. Yes, that was OUR Claire before she was a bad-ass Special Ops Team Lead. This segment, time-wise, takes place a good ten years prior to current events, just about the time that Gabe lost his mate. Back then, there
was no ACRI, but the people involved in building it were already around and working. Christian, who hasn't ever been more than a shadow figure, like Maureen, is a complete dopple-ganger for Bobby. He's Bobby's protege. He's a medical doctor who dedicated his life to saving Omegas. He built the first Lupin-exclusive clinic in Las Vegas, where the ACRI would eventually be. Christian has Bobby's mentality in terms of rescuing people: anything goes if it works. He's cunning and persistent. He also built the compound to provide sanctuary for Omega refugees and it houses a training ground as well. It's strictly wolves-only. So Christian is one of the good guys, but he stays in shadow. Bobby's always been the public face. It was no accident that when the Facility expanded, they chose the places they chose. That was Bobby's doing. For...reasons.

Long final comments. My biggest issue with this chapter, other than Michael and April, and YES, they are in pretty dangerous waters, is the question of how ethical it is to rescue someone (an Omega - like Claire) from a life of slavery and then USE her experience and her psychological damage to turn her into a warrior for your side. Who better to take up the mantle of that war? But doesn't it raise the question of victim manipulation? Is it conscionable? Is it out of bounds?

Sorry for the ramble. Love to the Pack.
Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

April's auditioning today, and there are decisions to be made. Plus a bit of Naomi.

Chapter Notes

If you haven't read the previous chapter yet, just skip it. I don’t like it. It's got, like zero punch. Funny how what works in my head fizzles badly on the page sometimes. I needed it, but, I dunno. Bleah.

This one though...This one felt good. This one I've been waiting to get to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 68 – Friday, July 14, 2017

NOW:

“I was thinking of setting up shop in the Pool house. It’s quiet out there, and pretty, and… What d’you think?” Dean followed Cas up the stairs to their bedroom.

“That’s perfect, Dean. Take as much space as you want. This book deserves your full attention while you’re working on it. You won’t be disturbed there. Promise me you won’t over-do the hours though. I don’t mind being a book-widower, but you need to be more present than that for Michael.” Cas stepped through and into his closet, kicking out of his shoes.

“I’ll be good, babe. Promise. I’m going to set up office-hours. No working on the book outside of those hours. No more than two hours on a work-day, and no more than seven on a week-end. Besides, Michael won’t be here. I’m hoping to steal some time from work to sneak out and get some writing done.” Dean sat on the edge of the bathtub, watching Cas strip down. Why he felt the need to shower right after lunch Dean couldn’t fathom, but he wasn’t going to protest the view.

“It’s not sneaking if you tell your boss about it.” Cas chided him. “Don’t even think about short-changing your department. I know you rely on Jo, but she’s not the Director, Dean.” Cas fixed Dean with a strict look that sent delicious shivers up Dean’s back. “If I find out that you’ve been skipping out on your responsibilities at work to fulfill a private project on the side, you and I are going to have a lengthy discussion about work ethics.”

Dean basked in the feeling of the leash pulling up tight around his throat. He lowered his eyes and mumbled a “Yessir,” but he was floating blissfully. Cas huffed an affectionate chuckle and stepped into the glass-walled shower, already fogging with steam.
Dean wouldn’t have done it – short-change his paid job to sneak off and write books. He wouldn’t have done that. He only said it to get a sharp reprimand from his Top. They both knew it. It didn’t clarify where exactly he planned to carve out time to work on the book though. In the past, he didn’t have a family that needed him present. He’d pulled countless all-nighters, worked all week-end multiple week-ends in a row, skipped meals with friends, gritted his teeth and pushed through. He couldn’t do that now.

“I’ll make it work, Cas,” Dean called to him in the shower. “Trust me.”

And that was the thing. That was the thing they needed so badly to work on. Cas felt an uncomfortable twinge. He wasn’t sure that he trusted that Dean could take this on without leaving Michael high-and-dry. Michael still had evening projects, homework from his training that needed Dean’s active participation. How was Dean going to do both?

“Would it help if we hired a cook for a while?” Cas posed. “That way, you would be free before and after dinner. It’s a time that you usually spend in the kitchen right now. It’s not much maybe, but… would that help?” He scrubbed a line of suds across his chest and down his belly.

“That would help, man. That’s a great idea. Everyone’s busy. That’d help a lot. Thanks, Cas.”

“I’ll get Michael started looking,” Cas shampooed his hair and disappeared beneath the spray to rinse it out.

They chatted through the shower and as Cas dressed. He chose a sport-coat and casual slacks. It wasn’t his audition, but he wanted to send a solid message. He had promised April that he wouldn’t do the “Alpha” thing and intimidate everyone, but this might well be a turning point for his mate, and appearances matter.

He talked business and Pack with Dean. They talked pups and mates. Dean made Cas laugh. Cas’ steamy look through the mirror as he combed his hair made Dean hard where he sat. Dean watched Cas’ ring sparkle in the bright bathroom lights. Dean was aware that Castiel didn’t fully trust his writing plan, and he resolved to make this a starting point that they could build on. Trust takes time; time and repetition. It grows through a long series of getting it right. Dean meant to get this right.

Everything depended on him getting this right.

“What have you got planned for the afternoon, Dean?” Castiel asked, tying his shoes.

“I’m supposed to be at work right now, Cas. I skipped out for lunch with my baby. I think I’d better head back before my boss finds out and tans my ass.”

Cas pulled him in for a hard, open-mouthed kiss, then whispered, “Soon, Dean. I know waiting is hard for you. I’m so fucking proud of how well-controlled you’ve been.” He ran a firm hand down over the swell of Dean’s backside, pulling him in tighter against Cas’ body. Dean hummed in pleasure.

“I win either way, right babe?” posed Dean. “If I’m bad, you’ll punish me. If I’m good, I get a reward.”

“You win either way, love,” Cas confirmed solidly. “And so do I. I’m hoping it’ll be a reward that I deliver though. Personally, those are my favorites. I love to watch you fly, and your tantrums are hard on the furniture.”

Dean’s body was lax in Cas’ arms as if he were the one who was loose and warm from the shower. Every cell sparked in anticipation. He hummed again and ran his lips over Castiel’s throat. Alpha’s
throat. “The table’s finished, Cas,” he mumbled. “It just needs a few days to temper. Don’t go look at it yet, though.” Dean pulled away and stepped clear of his fiancé, knowing that staying longer in the circle of the Alpha’s embrace would mean a lengthy commitment they didn’t have time for now. “It’s a surprise.”

Castiel smiled. God, his smiles were adorable. Adorable and sexy and so, so endearing. Dean smiled back on reflex as he had seen thousands of people do in response to Cas’ happiness before. He went back in for one more kiss because he had the right, where all those thousands didn’t, but then he pulled back and turned away with a grounding breath. “Go on. Go help April get famous.”

Cas caught Dean’s hips and pulled into his back, looking over his shoulder. “I’m in love with you, Dean Winchester. Just so you remember. It’s still Yes.”

“Dork.”

Cas chuckled and swatted Dean’s ass hard enough to sting. “Get back to work, you slacker.”

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April’s fingers never stopped moving across her thighs as she rode beside her mate in his Lexus. She had her eyes closed, the Sonata running on repeat through her head. Cas kept quiet. She was the very picture of concentration, and he didn’t want to break her focus. She was nervous, but not exactly scared. There was a vein of finality that framed her emotions, as if to say, for better or worse, this is it. She was more pale than he was comfortable seeing her, but it seemed reasonable considering the gravity of the day.

Cas pulled up into the lot and made quick work of finding the front office, guiding her in with a hand on her lower back.

“Good afternoon,” he greeted the blank-faced woman at the front desk. She looked up, but didn’t speak or thaw. “This is April Winchester. She has an audition scheduled today at 2:00. Would you be able to direct us, please?”

“Us?” said the woman coldly. “Whose audition is it?”

Cas found her pointlessly rude, but he didn’t rise to the bait…exactly. “I’ll repeat myself,” he said. “I must not have spoken clearly. Apologies. This is April Winchester. She has an audition today at 2:00.”

“If it’s her audition, why are you doing the talking? Can’t she speak?” The woman’s gaze passed dismissively from Castiel to swipe April from shoes to head and back.

“Um,” said April. She swallowed. Cas felt her nerves spike abruptly. Damn the woman. There was no call for this. She was intentionally trying to psyche April out. Cas wrapped fingers subtly around her waist and tightened his grip. “Yes, Ma’am. Um, can you please tell me where I need to go to sign in?”

“Auditions were three weeks ago,” said the woman. “You appear to be a little late.”

“Oh, no Ma’am,” said April with a shaky voice. “I have an appointment. Please, if you could just check?” April could feel Castiel priming to unleash a wave of outrage, and she sent him a silent plea
to refrain. She had known they would respond to her this way. She had been warned. Nicholas advised her that if she still intended to go through with it, that her best chance was to play meek and passive all the way through the audition until she actually began to play, and then to say it all through her fingers. A backbone wasn’t going to help her at this stage, and neither would having an Alpha flinging desks left and right or tearing new orifices in stodgy old-guard apes with a bias so deep it was visible in the lines between her eyes.

The woman sighed, but she flipped the pages of her appointment book. That hadn’t been necessary. April had spotted her name right there on the open page when she walked up. The paper shuffling was purely for show. At last, she shuffled back to the page on which she started.

“This says Novak,” she announced.

“Yes Ma’am. That’s me. There’s been a surname change since we made the appointment.”

“This says Novak.”

“I’m April Novak,” April responded, hoping to simplify. Cas remained silent, but he was struggling.

The woman sighed again. “If you say so. It must be nice to get a whole extra three weeks to prepare when the others were expected to present on-schedule. How lucky for you. You must be very special, young lady. Tell me, are you special?” The woman snapped her eyes back up to April’s in challenge, and Cas growled in spite of himself, tensing. April put a hand gently on his chest and turned to him.

“Sir, I’ll be back. Would you mind waiting for me? I believe I need to go alone from here.” She sounded much braver than she felt, and he could tell she was barely holding herself together. He calmed instantly, and he sent her every assurance he could find within himself.

“Don’t believe them, April,” he whispered to her furiously, letting her stance block the vicious receptionist’s view. “They don’t know you. You ARE special. Don’t you dare believe them.”

April’s eyes moistened just a little before she got them back under control with an effort of monumental proportions. Castiel Winchester believed in her. She was a True-mate to the greatest Lupin of the modern era, and that had to mean something. She held his eye and swallowed. Michael believed she was a genius. Dean begged her to play for him, with him. Nicholas trusted her, and she had added real content to a show that was headed to Broadway. This was just an audition, and the woman behind the desk meant nothing. She was merely staff. She was nobody. April found the core inside herself, and she used it to wink at Castiel. Maybe that’s all she could manage, but it was enough.

April’s heartbeat didn’t slow, but she hid its racing and steeled herself. She turned back around and met the woman’s eye with emotionless passivity, giving her nothing to work with. “And where exactly…?” asked April.

With no other alternative, but clearly against her better judgment, the gray-haired woman pointed to her right. “Down the hall to the staircase. One flight up, to your left. Room 207. They’re waiting for you. I’m sorry to say that you won’t be able to have your dad play for you. He’ll have to wait over there.” She pointed back into the hallway where a stiff line of hard plastic chairs sat empty and forlorn.

“He’s my mate, Ma’am, not my father,” April couldn’t resist. And just to tweak the woman a little bit, she turned to Cas and kissed him soundly.
‘Unh!’ the woman grunted in disgust.

Cas winked back at her and led her into the hallway. They could hear disgruntled muttering about ‘Dogs’ and their ‘unsavory ways’ as the door swung closed.

“Good luck,” he said. “Hang tough, Kitten. You’re stronger than you think.”

“Be right back,” she said on a sigh. He saw her shoulders square up as she headed down the hall, looking for the stairs, and disappeared to the right. Cas settled into one of the chairs, knowing he was being watched, and took his tablet out of his case. He pulled up his Facility scheduler, but he couldn’t focus on work. He tabbed around between the different departments and reviewed their lists of meetings and events with a blind eye. All of his focus was on April’s emotions. Her bond was wide open. He could feel her reaching for him, and he sent her a constant stream of support.

April found the room with no problem, but it was locked. A firm knock brought no answer. The hall was empty. Down further, the hallway lights were dimmed. She checked her watch. She wasn’t late yet, but she’d be pushing it if she didn’t find where they were waiting for her soon. The bitch had sent her in the wrong direction. April stifled the panic that wanted to drag her under. Panicking never helped. She needed to think.

Where?

If that witch had wanted to sabotage her chances, sending her on a wild-goose chase and making her late and rattled would do it. April refused to get rattled. She looked left and right. It was a long hallway. Most likely, auditions would be held in an auditorium, and most likely, they wouldn’t be on a higher floor of the building. High ceilings and crown molding told her she was still in the public areas. All of the real work would be done on floors with narrow spaces and little extravagance – at least that had always been April’s experience, limited though it was. Maybe this place was posh enough to dress up every room – like Hogwarts, she giggled. But she assumed that the room she needed was somewhere on this floor or the one below, from whence she’d just come. She wasn’t about to swing past the main office again though. She had more pride than that.

She headed down the length of the hall quickly, rounding a corner and glancing at postings and directional signs. Coming upon another stairway, she spotted a sign pointing downward that read, “Auditorium 2.” She tripped lightly down the wide stairs, still seeing no one. It was summertime, but April was sure that there were students and faculty about. Rounding the corner back on the first floor, she nearly ran head-long into a young man and woman. They were primate, and they both pulled up sharply with an, "Oh!"

“Excuse me,” said April politely. “Do you happen to know where evaluation auditions are held?”

“You trying out? I thought auditions were last month,” said the girl. She didn’t seem put off, just surprised.

“I’m a late entry,” said April. “I just moved to Kansas, and I missed the dead-line.”

“They usually hold them in Theater 4,” said the boy. “I’ll show you. You’re about as far from there as you can get. I hope you’re not late. They don’t look well on tardiness here. You’ll learn.” He swept her up at a quick pace, leaving his companion with a casual wave, and April felt soothed that he seemed to take it for granted that she would be accepted. “How’d you get so turned around?
Didn’t you check in at the front desk? They’re supposed to send an escort for you. It gets hairy to navigate this place on your own without a map.”

“Oh, I guess since it was just me… I think I must have misheard the directions. Thank you for taking me. I’m sure I would have been late. Not a good way to start.”

“No, it wouldn’t be. You’re due at 2:00?” he guessed. “I’ll get you there. I know a short-cut.”

April prayed he was trust-worthy, and that he’d guessed correctly. How ridiculous would it be to prepare for weeks and then blow the audition because she couldn’t find the right room. Michael would never believe it hadn’t been intentional. She had no alternative but to trust him though.

“What are you trying out on?” he asked, dodging through a door that was nearly invisible. Hogwarts indeed.

“Oh, uh, piano. I’m playing Chopin.”

“Ugh!” he commiserated. “Whose bright idea was that?”

April snickered. “I know. I could kick myself.”

“Well, look,” he said, slowing. “Theater 4 is right through those double-doors on the left. If it’s not there, keep going around to the left again, and you’ll get back to the front desk. Good luck. I hope you get in. I’m Marcus. I play the bassoon. I’m late for a lesson, so I’ve gotta run. Break a leg and all that.”

“Thank you!” she called as he stepped away. “I’m April. It was nice to meet you.” He waved over his shoulder, and then he broke into a sprint.

He left her standing before tall wooden doors. She took a deep breath. Here goes nothing. She pushed through the doors and saw a man pacing impatiently in front of what were obviously doors into a theater. He was glancing at the doors further down the hall and checking his watch. He looked youngish and bookish, and her first impulse was that he might be trust-worthy in a teacher-mentor kind of way. April usually had a good sense of these things. She walked slowly toward him, assessing everything she could.

She cleared her throat so as not to startle him, and he whipped around, surprised.

“Pardon me, Sir. I’m April, um, Novak. I have an audition on piano. Is this…uh…do you know if this is where I need to be?”

He looked her up and down, and then checked his watch. April wanted to do the same. Knowing whether she was late or not wouldn’t help her now though, so she resisted.

“What the devil were you doing back there?” he wondered in surprise. “Never mind. Come right through here. We’ve been expecting you.”

This was her second real test. Reporting the receptionist’s petty trick would not endear her to the judges or teachers. April knew how this game was played. She’d been played before, and the only right answer when the world ran her like that was to suck it up and move on. Dwelling on it hurt no one but her, and reporting it only made her look weak and petty herself. It wasn’t fair, but then where had any promises of fairness toward Omegas ever been written in stone?

She followed the man with a swift glance at her watch. It was two minutes to 2:00. She was on time. Score one to April. And to Marcus, bless him. Bassoon players rock, she decided.
She sent a firm wave of what confidence she was feeling through to Castiel who had been getting more and more antsy in his seat. Everything was fine. She was fine. Just breathe. All she could do was try, and in the end, she would walk out still breathing. They couldn’t eat her.

“I’m Professor Simpson,” the man stated, turning at about halfway down the aisle where a short row of desks had been installed. Two other judges sat already in place beside an empty desk with sheet music and a note pad. “This is Professor Scoggins and Maestra Dillinger. We will be your panel this afternoon. Judges, this is April Novak.” He sat down, and picked up his pencil, writing a note that April didn’t try to read.

“Your instructions are simple, young lady,” said the Maestra. “You may ask any questions you have concerning the process, but we cannot direct you musically in any way. You will not receive an introduction once you take the stage. Simply take your place and begin. We have your piece before us, so you are expected to perform it without further commentary. Am I understood?” she raised a single stiff brow.

Holy McGonagall. This woman was fearsome. April resisted biting her lip, but she clenched both fists for a moment to give the nerves a pathway. “I understand, Maestra. Shall I take the stage?”

There. That sounded suitably passive to April. Being Submissive helped in situations like this a great deal, if that was what they were looking for. From a student, stern teachers usually wanted subservience, but as a musician, she had a different presentation planned altogether. Passivity on the piano was not going to happen.

The woman gestured wordlessly toward the stage, and April stepped down the graded aisle. She kept up a litany of positive thoughts to counteract her nerves which were giving her a surreal sense of tunnel-vision and time-lapse. The walk to the stage seemed to last forever, and yet she stood before the bench in no time at all. She took a moment to wipe her hands on her slacks. They were cold and sweaty.

Matt had advised her to take her time. Sit down and adjust. Close her eyes and breathe. Get centered. Say a prayer. Calm the fuck down. They would wait, he assured her. Confident players expected people to wait for them. Confident musicians were worth waiting for.

She sat and moved the bench into place. She resisted a glance out into the orchestra. They were still there, but she wouldn’t be able to see them. Looking into the lights gained her nothing. A wave of nausea had to be swiftly repressed.

April touched the keys with her fingers. She breathed out. She closed her eyes and then opened them. There was nothing but the keyboard and the pedals. There was nothing. She was nothing but a conduit. She released the gate on her hands, and she played.

It was over so quickly, April wondered if it had happened at all. All those dreadful weeks of repetition, and it was over just like that. Had she done herself justice? She couldn’t remember. The next thing she knew, she was seated in the Maestra’s outer office with Castiel and Matt. Apparently, Matt had been in the orchestra too, listening to her, his attendance allowed as a registered tutor attached to the school. He was expected to provide the judges’ feedback to her and help her assimilate their advice into her studies.

His eyes were warm and sure. She’d done well, he assured her with a hug. She still couldn’t feel her toes. She was floating, but not in the good way. Castiel pulled her in to lean against him, one hand
holding tightly to the back of her neck, bare now as her hair was swept up into a stern knot at her nape. He whispered calming words, bringing her slowly back to earth. The three judges were visible through the plate glass, but she couldn’t hear a word. She tried not to watch, but as the wait lengthened, and the argument within turned obviously heated, April worried.

The man – Simpson – his face was red, and he was shouting in evident frustration. The woman – Scoggins, Scroggins, April couldn’t remember – didn’t shout. She sat very still and didn’t speak much, but her face was determined and firm. Every now and then she shook her head. The Maestra was animated. She waved her arms, gesturing frequently toward where April sat and thumping the desk or stabbing her notes with her finger viciously. April tried not to watch.

“Jesus Christ, what’s taking them so long. This isn’t a hard decision, kiddo,” mused Matt. “I heard the first round of auditions, and you blew some of those cretins out of the water. I know for a fact they accepted students you can run rings around. I can’t figure out what they’re arguing about.”

April scoffed softly. He was a competent musician and a good teacher, but Matt was Primate. He wasn’t going to understand this, not without confronting it head-on. He’d never had to face this personally before.

“She’s Omega,” said Castiel simply, glancing through the window.

“Alpha, please don’t,” said April quietly. “It won’t help me.”

They all fell silent again and waited.

The door opened at last. Professor Simpson, clearly the junior member of the panel held the door and gestured April in, but he didn’t meet her eyes. She wished like hell that she could simply skip this part. She knew. She already knew the verdict, and making her listen to their manufactured excuses was just salt in the wound. What’s more, watching Castiel go through that was going to make the hurt that much deeper.

“Thank you, young lady, for applying to Pembrandt,” the Maestra opened. “It is through petitioners like you that we enrich our student body and expand our excellence as a school. As you no doubt know, we here at Pembrandt value diversity in all its variations. We make no distinctions in class or species. We value effort, talent, and musicality above all else.

"Please feel assured that you represented yourself and your species well here today, and you should be very proud of what you’ve accomplished. It is inspiring to see the level of achievement that an Omega Lupin can achieve when she sets her mind and her diligence to the task. You have clearly worked very hard on your audition piece, my dear. You showed good technicality and pacing. I found some of your musical choices interesting, even engaging in places. I believe that, with more work, your presentation could achieve a level appropriate for a recital someday.”

April fought the urge to lower her gaze. She made the woman speak into her face. She made the woman look into her eyes as she lied. April could see the lie in her eyes, and she offered the Maestra no mercy.

Professor Simpson had his eyes on the desk. His ears were bright red, and his nostrils flared. Had he been a wolf, April would say he was angry enough for defiance. Did apes work the same way? Was the young teacher pissed off? On Maestra’s other shoulder, Professor Scoggins looked bored.

“I’m sure you understand that it takes a lifetime of dedication and sacrifice to successfully tread the path of a successful professional musician,” the woman droned on. Here it comes, thought April, but she couldn’t help the quick burst of amusement when she caught Castiel stiffen over the split
infinitive. He was itching to correct the woman. April wished he would, if only to see the look on her face.

She continued. “No distractions can be allowed to interfere with that commitment. We pride ourselves here that we provide a consistently nurturing environment where musicians-to-be can flourish and blossom without the strain of distraction from the outside world. It is a refuge; a sanctuary.”

April avoided rolling her eyes by the barest of margins. What did this bitch know of refuge? When had she EVER needed sanctuary?

“It is with that in mind that I inform you, young lady, that while we greatly admire your pluck, we must maintain that the well-being of our student body as a whole is, and will always be, our highest priority. Bringing an Omega student into the midst of these dedicated and committed musicians we feel would create mayhem in the halls and foster an environment that ceases to be conducive to our mandate. Thank you, again, for your efforts. You really play very well for an Omega. We wish you the very best of luck.”

She stood. April’s tunnel-vision closed in to near blackness. She felt herself shake their hands. She heard herself thank them. She had no idea what her tutor’s or her mate’s responses were. She didn’t wait to find out. April turned on her heel and fled the office, hitting the door to the hallway hard enough to merit an outraged, “HEY!” from the bitch behind the reception desk.

April broke into a run as she headed toward the car, hitting it hard with her body and letting it hold her upright. She refused to allow her legs to give way, but they weren’t strong enough to do the job on their own. She wasn’t crying. Yet. She wasn’t thinking yet either. She was merely existing at this point from one moment to the next. Pain was coming. She could feel its descent, but she couldn’t yet feel its bite.

Three girls walked past her with bags slung over their shoulders. They looked at her curiously, but continued on without speaking.

She heard Castiel’s voice far behind her. His words were clipped, but he had himself under control. Matt’s voice followed. They were speaking to each other. April didn’t try to listen. It didn’t matter. It shouldn’t be this traumatic, she thought on a breath of lucidity. She should be used to it by now. She had known going in that it would go this way. She couldn’t remember why it had been so important to try when she’d known they would never accept her. Something about leaving no options untested. She knew she would fail, but she’d had to try. This stupid persistent fire in her belly made her try. She would die an unknown, all of her efforts still obscure, unknown, unheard, but she wouldn’t die without having pushed back against the thick walls standing between her and the rest of humanity. She wouldn’t ever stop pushing; even though it hurt, even though it broke her into a million pieces that were now gliding soundlessly apart to scatter at her feet.

Castiel would sweep them back up again. Dean and Michael would help glue them back into place. Sam would hold her steady. Jess and Jo and Charlie and Meg would support her in her frailty until she could stand alone in strength again. She wasn’t alone this time. This time she didn’t have to heal on her own, unsure if she would heal at all. She’d already been through that more than once, and she knew she was strong enough. This time would be easier. April was under no illusions that the verdict had broken her, but she found her legs strengthening and her breath coming more surely when she remembered that she had a pack to pull over her head while she came back together.

And Gabriel. April prayed that Gabe wouldn’t leave on another mission just yet. She needed him. Gabe would sit under that blanket of pack with her in the dark, keeping a hand on her, reminding her that she still existed, helping her realize that she couldn’t fly up and away into the sky, grounding her
in a way that even her beloved couldn’t do from the distance of his designations.

Castiel touched her back, and she turned and melted into him.

“Matt gave me their notes. I’ll hold onto them for you. If you ever want to read them… If you ever care to know.”

April humphed into his chest.

“He said you were spectacular.”

The sound of derision she made wasn’t one Cas had a name for, but it wasn’t polite by any means.

“I’m going to file a protest with the Board of Regents. The audition was recorded. We’ll petition for redress. They’re not going to get away with this, Kitten. It’s not right.”

“NO!”

April pulled away from him, suddenly livid.

“Don’t you dare. Walk away, Alpha. You can’t fix this, not that way. I’d be an enemy of state from the moment I walked through the doors.”

“April, you can’t just let people treat you like that…”

“Really?! Really Castiel? What world do you live in? I live in the world of the Ozzie. Aren’t we cute? Aren’t we plucky?! PLUCKY, ALPHA! I’m a cute little trained bear-cub!”

“Stop it! You’re no such thing, but letting them pretend you are only reinforces what everyo…”

“I’m not your project, Cas! I’m a real live, breathing, hurting person! And I DON’T WANT THIS!!!” She gestured wildly up toward the school.

“Damnit, April, what do you want?! We’re here because you said it was what you needed to break into music, to learn what you needed to learn! I’m not a fucking mind reader! If this isn’t what you want, then what is!?” His eyes were turning red just as hers began to suffuse with a sparkling gold. They were beginning to draw a crowd. “And don’t tell me you don’t know! Damnit, April, tell me the truth for once!”

He’d never shouted at her like that before, all of his anger and frustration unbridled, treating her like a full person capable of holding the weight of his emotions.

She’d never called him ‘Cas’ to his face.

There was bound to be a first time for everything.

“What difference does it make what I want? Huh? Alpha? When is it ever going to matter? God! Fuck! You’re such a good Alpha. You give me everything I need, don’t you? I’m safer and more stable with you than I’ve ever been in my life! But you screwed up. You made me feel TOO safe. You made me so secure that I started wanting things. Big things. Things I can never have. And I reached out for them because you told me to, and I got my hands chopped off. I KNEW this was going to happen! The world is NEVER going to accept me as an artist, Castiel! Never! And you’re never going to give me what I want, so what difference does it make?!!”

“That’s utter bullshit! Maybe I can’t change the world fast enough for you, but I can BY GOD carve a path through to this one school. Just watch me!”
“I DON’T WANT THIS!”

“JESUS, APRIL, WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT!?!?”

The crowd was getting bigger, but they weren’t pressing very close. An Alpha in fury wasn’t something even apes were immune to. And Cas was furious. He calmed himself outwardly, but inside he was still shaking with rage. “You don’t want this. You don’t want KU. You don’t want school at all. You don’t want to stay home and knit, I know that much. You NEED to play and to compose. I’ve seen it. Maybe it took me too long to catch on, but don’t try to pretend that’s not there. I’ve seen it.” He didn’t try to dispel the red in his eyes. He’d had enough of the games and the waffling. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want… Fuck, we’re going in circles… We’ve been here before. Right here, but you’re so fucking blind. When are you going to understand?” The Omega-Submissive wasn’t backing down either. Everything had been held captive too long, and there was no stuffing it back in the bottle. “It doesn’t matter what I want. It matters what WE want. You and me together.” He looked confused, and confused on an angry Alpha could go several ways, none of them good. She brought her anger down a couple of notches with great effort, but she didn’t temper her message. She needed to make him understand, not put his back up.

“We need to deal with you first, then we work on me. Cas, you can’t take care of me until you take care of yourself. Forget about my education. I don’t need it. It’s not going to happen. Baby, you need pups. You need it. You need it so bad it’s killing you, and that means that I need that too. I’m not wired for me. I’m wired for YOU. Nothing’s going to make any sense between us until we stop everything and deal with what’s burning a hole through your gut. It’s going to poison us if we don’t. I’m ripe, and I’m ready. The Universe didn’t give me to you young by mistake, Alpha. This comes first.”

“You’re mad,” he said quietly, still very much inflamed, but just whispering. “I’ve heard you play. I’ve watched you get so immersed in your work that you don’t eat or sleep unless I make you. How can you pretend that you can walk away from that? Don’t think you can hide behind me. I know this was a set-back and you’re scared, but quitting is not an option.”

“I’m not quitting, Castiel,” she said, lowering her volume to match his. “I’m redirecting. Here’s what I want…and whether I can ever get it is more than a long shot. Ozzies don’t get to have this, so yes, I’m fucking terrified. I want to write and compose and collaborate. I want to be a music-industry insider who musicians all over the world trust to bring in on projects simple or elaborate. I want to make a name for myself with the experts whose names aren’t known by the masses. I want to build a body of work that artists from all different genres record and build on. I want my epitaph to say that I was influential. I want to slowly break out as a performer AFTER the insiders know me. And, Castiel, I want to raise our family through all of it. I can work from home. I still have so much to learn, but we can hire private tutors. I can use the connections I’m making through Nick to get guidance. It’s going to take me years, Cas, because none of this is going to be quick or easy. I’ll probably fail disastrously. I’ll probably fall flat on my face, but at least this way, falling on my face will be because I’m not good enough, or I missed a window of opportunity, or I just wasn’t lucky enough, or I misunderstood the market for a particular genre, or, or, or I just don’t have the chops, or whatever, but it’s NOT going to be because I’m an Ozzie!”

She stepped forward and got right up in his face. “What do I want? I want to be your MATE, damnit, not your WARD! You made an oath to me, remember Alpha? You promised me your heart, your hand, your seed and yourself. I’ve only got one of those so far.”

He blinked, trying to work out which one she meant. Surely she knew she had his heart. Except, she
was sharing that with Dean. He wasn’t free to give her all of it. He had dammed up the full weight of his personality, just as surely as he’d dammed up his virulence. Could she take all of him? Could she bear him at his worst? Cas’ worst could be overwhelming even to the staunchest of wolves.

He looked into the depth of her golden eyes, so angry and so defiant. He reached up and held her face with one hand, not holding really, just touching. His hand trembled.


“You’re so young. And you have so much potential. I can wait. Baby, I can wait.”

“No, you can’t,” she whispered back. “And I don’t need you to.”

He frowned in doubt, but she pushed in closer, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“There’s never going to be a better time, Alpha. There’s always going to be a reason to delay. If I can make something happen with my music…if I can make even the first steps a reality, then I’m never going to have a break from it. It’s going to be full-throttle forever. You can’t wait forever, and soon enough, I’ll be feeling it too. There’s no reason to wait. I’m never going to leave you to go to school. The most I’ll ever do is leave you to tour if I’m ever successful enough to have a tour to leave you for. That’s a bridge we can cross when we get there.”

He was still frowning. “You told me you couldn’t leave your pups with Michael to fly off to Berlin. Has that changed?” She paused, and his grip on her chin tightened as his brow darkened. “Look at me! Has that changed?”

The forcefulness from her Alpha sent a trickle of slick sliding down her thigh. She needed to get them out of this public space. The crowd wasn’t dispersing. Cas had been recognized, and Primate eyes were wide as many of them caught on to what the argument was about.

“Have you seen how he is with the twins?” she asked. “I think I was wrong about Michael. I’m starting to think he’ll be the best of all of us at parenting. He takes to pups like he was born for it.”

Castiel frowned down at her, and she qualified quickly. “I’m not going to walk away and just leave them with him, Cas. I’ll do right by our family. We’ve already gone there. His pups are our pups. I’ll do my part. You know I will, but if you and Dean both get to build something monumental and meaningful with your lives outside of the Pack while raising a family, then don’t I deserve to try too? That is, if all your talk about equality isn’t bullshit. Is it bullshit, Castiel?”

“Don’t be deliberately obtuse. You know me better than that.”

“Do I? Are you not Alpha? Do you not own me, life and body and spirit? If I push you hard enough, will you not put me on my knees?” She was pressing Alpha buttons as hard as she could. “If I asked for something you couldn’t see yourself giving, would the answer still be yes? Does it work the other way too? Can I tell you no? Can I instruct you to drop a topic and never address it again? Who’s obtuse, Castiel? Which of us sees the world for what it is, and which of us lives in a bubble?”

His eyes hardened. She was accusing the wrong Alpha. “A bubble? A bubble of Alpha privilege? No doubt that’s true, but don’t lay the rest of it at my feet, April. I own you. Legally, I do. Emotionally, it’s the other way around. I am your slave, and I have been from the moment I scented you. I will give you anything that I have the power to grant you. I will hold your mantle while you ride into battle. I will sing your praises to the gods themselves, and I will walk through miles of flaming hell for you. Can you tell me no? Of course you can. Can you instruct me? Absolutely. Don’t you understand? I owe you everything. I would do anything for you. God help me, I would
walk away from Dean in a heartbeat if you needed me to.” A sob broke out unexpectedly from his chest and his grip on her face tightened a bit further. “Please don’t ask me to do that. Please don’t…”

“I would never ask that of you, Cas. That would kill you. That would kill us all. I want you happy. God, don’t you understand, I’m wired to make sure you’re happy. It’s not fair, but I NEED you happy more than I do myself.”

He chuckled gently and loosened his grip. “It’s not fair for either of us. I’m wired the same way. Deep inside me, only you matter. If you’re not secure and safe and stable, if you’re not happy, nothing else matters.”

“So what do we do about it, Alpha?” Her eyes were shifting back to their baby blue softness. Castiel wrapped his arms around her. She felt drained, wrung-out, empty.

“I made you a promise, and I intend to keep that promise. You already have my heart, love, though I don’t show it well. I’ve been tempering myself around you because you seem so fragile to me. I know what your body can take, but I was afraid of hurting your spirit. I could never harm you. You’re precious to me. If you want me to, I will be brave, and I will let you in. I would give you anything.”

“I want that, Alpha. I want to know you - all of you.”

He kissed her head and nodded so that she could feel it.

“And the rest?” she prompted.

He swallowed and looked around, noting the audience but ignoring them. His life was so public anyway, and April had never seemed to care one way or another.

“This is really what you want? To study at home while we raise a family, and to work toward building a base of works? What if you never reach beyond that? What if you never achieve success as a performer yourself? Would it be enough?” He spoke over her head, talking into the trees beyond the parking lot.

She nodded. “If I make a name for myself among other artists from the inside, it would be enough. Even if I never see another stage or audience in my life. More than anything, I want to compose. I need it. All of the music is there, just waiting for me to write it down, but until I share it with someone and hear them turn it into music, it’s just so many lines on a page. Matt knows a teacher here at Pembrandt who is willing to do lessons privately on technical composition and music theory. I’d like to keep doing the piano lessons with Matt and begin working on theory as well.”

April paused and thought. “Cas, I can do all of that while I’m pregnant. I can do it while I’m nursing pups. If I have to slow down for a couple of years until they’re weaned and walking, I have no problem with that. Please, it’s not a sprint. I want a career that spans my whole life, not a flash-in-the-pan or a one-hit wonder. It’s not the fame I’m drawn to, it’s the expertise and the respect that’s earned from years of work. I want to get there the hard way, and I’m willing to work for it. Family can come first. Baby, it has to come first.”

She took his hand and pressed it into her belly. “We’re a team, Castiel. You and me. We’re yin and yang. What hurts me, hurts you. What you need, I need. You can’t be happy if I’m unhappy, and vice versa. We give to each other. I can give you this. I WANT to give you this. I want it too. It’s less important to me that it happens right away than it is to you, but Cas, it IS important to you. Pretending you can wait is hurting us both.”
“Why did you wait so long to tell me?” He massaged into her belly firmly, relishing the softness that his Alpha supplied might soon turn to a lush firmness that was the ultimate Alpha consummation.

“I’m Ozzie,” she said simply. “You own me.”

He grimaced in frustration. “How do I convince you, love? I don’t want to live like that.” Cas gripped her in a tight embrace.

“We don’t have a choice,” she stated starkly.

“No, I refuse to accept that. That’s not how I see it. You said it yourself: we’re opposite sides of the same coin. The head of a penny doesn’t OWN the tail. They are one and the same. You and I just need to find that point between us where we give to each other, but I’m not more important than you are, and I’m not going to make the decisions without you. What you need, you will get from me. I promised to hold you safe for your whole life, and I will, but aside from that I want to be your partner, not a slave-owner. I want us to be two halves of a whole. I don’t ever want to eclipse you. You are radiant, and you deserve to shine as brightly as you can.”

The words were sweet, kind, naïve, and he meant every one of them. April’s heart went out to him in his ignorance. She snuggled into his chest, feeling warm and wanted. If nothing else, she knew he would try, and that meant everything.

“Is that what your wolf wants?” she asked, ignoring the nudge from her own to take what he was handing her and let it drop.

“My wolf doesn’t get a vote, Kitten. If it was up to him, you would live chained in the basement, safe and secure where no one but me could ever see or touch you.”

“Really?” she asked stepping back and looking up at him, surprised at his vehemence.

“He’s a possessive asshole, and he doesn’t get what he wants very often,” Cas confirmed.

“Oh.”

“You see? I’m not like the others. You need to understand. Keeping you safe doesn’t mean relying on the instinct of my Dominant designation. I don’t get that luxury like most alphas do. I have to temper his impulses. I have to keep him leashed, and I have to examine every urge that comes from him for its source before I can safely act on it. I thought you knew that.” He looked deep into her eyes, willing her to understand.

She shook her head slowly. “I thought you were just keeping yourself lidded because you don’t trust me enough.”

“Oh April! Baby, no. It’s nothing like that. It’s the asshole living inside me. He’s the one I don’t trust, and for good reason. You? You’re perfect.”

She smiled slightly. “So. Are you ever going to let me see him outside of the scene? Should I be afraid?”

Cas smiled back. “No. He won’t hurt you. He adores you. He might lick you to death. If anything, he’s more protective of you than I am. I’m sorry that I’ve been hurting you. I thought you knew. I thought you could read me. Shit, April, you see right through all of us. I began to think you had magical powers.”

She smiled shyly again. “Sometimes I can, but where you’re concerned, Alpha, I have blind spots.
Maybe it’s my Omega who can’t let its guard down that far. The world is dangerous for me, even now. I can’t trust very much.”

“Do you trust me?” he asked her somberly. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer.

“I’m beginning to. It’s terrifying,” she admitted, looking away, looking down. “It would be very easy to let go completely and fall right into you. It’s what my wolf wants to do, but the Omega is a bit wiser than that. I’m not going to be able to feed this fire inside me if I let you take me the way I want you to. What’d you call it? An eclipse? That would be so easy. But this burning is never going to go away.”

“Good,” Cas stated firmly. “Then you go fan the flames in your belly, and I’ll hold you steady while you do it. You pick the direction though. You’re in charge. It’s your career. It’s your fire.”

“Yeah,” she mumbled. “I’m sorry about that. I was too scared to move, and I needed a jump-start from you.”

He raised her head with a hand to her chin. “Don’t be sorry. Don’t be ashamed. I told you I would give you whatever you need. I won’t direct you, but if you need a jump-start every now and then, I can do that for you. Please, God, let it involve a whip.”

Her eyes darkened with lust, but she shook it off. “Maybe every now and then,” she conceded after a moment of struggle to resist dropping to her knees.

“Oh good! You haven’t left yet!” A voice called out across the walk, and Cas and April both looked around. Professor Simpson was walking quickly toward them. “What are you all looking at?” he challenged the onlookers. “Go on, all of you. Get to class or go home. Find somewhere useful to be.” They scattered like leaves in the wind. April spotted Marcus in the crowd and exchanged a small, sad smile with him. He turned and walked slowly away. The professor hustled forward, all energy and electricity.

“Listen, I’m terribly sorry we couldn’t accommodate you this semester.” There was a line of severity across his forehead that spoke of words he couldn’t say but wanted to. “I wanted to tell you that you are very talented, and it would be a travesty if you didn’t continue with your studies. Pembrandt isn’t the only place pianists succeed. You have options, April. Here’s my card. I sometimes take private students. I know you’ve been working with Matthew, and I wanted to offer my services as well. It’s very important to me that you hang in there.”

“Sir. Thank you.” April took the card he offered. She didn’t really know what else to say. By all evidence, he had petitioned for her acceptance, and had been mortified when he was out-voted. “You know Matt?”

“He and I were students together. We’ve been good friends for years.”

“You’re the one who teaches theory and composition?”

“That’s right. I do. Are you interested in composing, April?” He shot a glance at Castiel, but came right back to April.

“I want to be a song-writer for the most part, but I’m interested in all of it really. I’ve…um…” She faltered. She wanted to tell him about her work with Nicholas Maraby, but she thought it would sound too far-fetched to be believable, and she didn’t want to lose credibility so soon after he stuck up for her.

“She’s been collaborating with Nicholas Maraby on his new show,” announced Castiel, showing no
such compunction. “Perhaps you might be interested in taking a look and offering some feedback on her work.”

Simpson’s eyes flew open. It seemed ludicrous, but he knew who Castiel was. He hadn’t known that the candidate on the docket was THAT Novak until he spotted the Alpha holding tightly to April’s hand in the outer office, and he wasn’t certain his fellow panel members knew quite yet who it was that they had rejected. He felt a smug sense of vindictiveness thinking that the wheels of karma might yet prove him right about this particular pianist.

He might not be the best musician himself, but he knew raw talent when it presented itself. In fact, that ability to see it raw and in the rough and correctly predict its trajectory is what had earned him his spot on the panel in the first place. And then they refused to listen to him. Distraction! Fuck yeah, she was a distraction. She was a fucking prodigy is what she was. Hearing that she knew and was working with Maraby, Simpson’s personal idol, should have been unbelievable, but he saw her ears redden. He saw the embarrassment mix with pride as she stammered and looked away.

“Is that so?” he asked. “Well, I would be honored, if you would allow me to read through your work.”

“Professor Simpson, may I ask you a very forward question?” she said out of nowhere.

“Um, of course. Please call me Mark. It looks as though I’m not going to enjoy the honor of being your professor, to my great disappointment.” He checked in again with the famous Alpha who stood gazing at April as if she’d hung the moon.

“Sir, you know something about what it takes to be a professional musician, how to build it into the whole of your life…”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“Sir, is it possible to have a family and be a successful composer or performer?”

Castiel huffed an exasperated sigh, but she smacked him on the arm and then ignored him. The teacher looked between them for some time before he answered. This was a fascinating dynamic. They were mates. He knew that much. But he also knew that Lupin mates lived in a striated society. Wasn’t she supposed to be subservient? They didn’t seem to be following that map at all. If anything, the tiny girl seemed to have the reins in her own fist.

He decided to be honest. “It can be a challenge, April, especially for a musician who travels a great deal. And the more successful the musician, the more travel there is. However, most professionals I know have children and raise families quite successfully. There are times that they must choose to stymie their own careers for the sake of their little ones, and the reverse is true as well. Sometimes their career has to come first, or it dies. It’s all about finding balance. I have to tell you honestly that the divorce rate is high for professional musicians. I suppose that’s not a concern for mates though. I admit that I don’t really know how that works except that it’s supposed to be…unbreakable?”

She smiled radiantly at him, and it was as if the sun had just come out. He found himself smiling right back at her. She was so young and energetic. She was so hopeful, but her eyes were ancient in their depths.

“Thank you, Sir. That’s very helpful.”

He began backing slowly away, heading toward his own car. “Uh, my pleasure. So…call me if you’d like to arrange lessons, or if you just want feedback on your work. Or, you know, if you’d like
to offer me tickets to a Maraby showing. You know, I’m just saying, I wouldn’t turn that down.”

They watched him go in silence. They both knew what the next words were going to be, and they both knew who was going to say them.

“Stop taking birth-control, Castiel. We’re ready.”

He sighed heavily. “It won’t be that simple, Kitten. There are a number of complicated arrangements that need to be made at work. We’re still reeling from losing Dean in the testing pool. But I’ll make those arrangements. Give me a few weeks. You and I cycle next month. Can we get through the next cycle before we make any changes? Can you wait that long?”

“Can you?” she asked sadly. Waiting through the next cycle meant waiting for three months after that before a pregnancy could be expected to catch. It was the right answer, and she knew it, but it felt like a kick to the shins.

“I don’t really have a choice,” he confessed.

“All right,” she said with finality. “One more cycle.”

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The blood had begun to pool at her feet. Naomi flung the strap again – over her shoulder, then around her back, then across her thigh, then up over her breast. She moaned, but refused to quit. She switched hands. Her left hand couldn’t quite provide the snap that the right could do, but she bled nonetheless. She planned to continue until the bitch of a wolf stopped its incessant howling inside her head or she passed out. Silence was the goal.

She stood naked and freezing in her own basement. She had guards: a trusted few who would keep everyone else out for days until Naomi finished scourging the demon from within her very soul. So much failure to account for. So much disappointment in her own weaknesses. It was a fiasco, a catastrophe. They told her there was no coming back from this. She was going to lose.

Rumor said her ‘rhetoric’ (that’s the word Castiel used) was to blame for some psychopath sending an entire research building and four human (well, almost human) souls up in pieces. Naomi hadn’t hidden her satisfaction that they wanted to tie it to her words. If the shoe fits, after all, one should wear it with pride! But her ratings had plummeted after that, maybe before that, maybe the coffin was merely nailed shut from that. She couldn’t keep it straight anymore. Was there no decency left in the world – when the Godless beasts merited sympathy from the misdirected masses? Why couldn’t people tell right from wrong anymore? When had hedonism become simply another ‘life-choice’?

The blood-loss was beginning to make her dizzy, but she could still hear the bitch, and so she struck again. And again. And again. The bane of her life followed her everywhere, mocking her. At least she was beta. She’d asked Zachariah once long ago what is was like to be alpha, and he’d simply scoffed at her. “It’s not something you’ll ever have to know,” he’d said dismissively.

Now he was dead. Her parents were dead. Her sons might as well be dead for all that they’d turned into beasts themselves. Even John was dead now. She struck another blow over her shoulder, this one harder and eliciting a cry that she didn’t intend. That had been pure weakness, and there wasn’t room in her life for weakness. She didn’t know if she meant the cry or the thought about John Winchester.
He’d never loved her, not like she loved him. They didn’t see each other often. They didn’t attend
the same schools. They didn’t often run in the same circles, and he was so far beneath her that it was
laughable to think they might ever have had a future. She knew him though. He flirted shamelessly
with her, and he’d once taken her out for a meal when all of the others in their party filtered away to
other places. For one night it had felt like all roads of possibility led toward this one rugged face. But
it was not to be. Her father would never have approved. Even if John hadn’t been poor, he was
raised a Traditional – an uncivilized savage whose parents rutted brazenly in front of their children
and taught them to follow their impulses, not suppress them as cultured people do.

But that had never meant much in the small hours of the morning when she shamed herself out of
weakness and fatigue, and her fantasies were beyond her control. Her hand went where she meant it
not to, and John Winchester’s strong beautiful face filled her mind. Her cry of ecstasy back then
sounded very like her cry of agony today, and it ripped a new hole in her soul – a new one of so very
many.

He was dead. They’d cremated his remains. She knew. She had kept vigil silently from some
distance away. She hadn’t been seen. Only a moment of supreme weakness from which the scabs
still hadn’t healed had allowed her to dial his son and speak words of longing, had allowed her to
make an utter fool out of herself. His son had spoken to her in his grief, but it was a grief that while
shared, could never overlap. She couldn’t ease anything for Dean, nor he for her. She wasn’t sure
she could bear that. She expected it would destroy her if she tried.

He was beautiful like his father. He was a spitting image in energy and carriage. He had the same
light in his eyes and the same fervor in his speech. He was irreverent and kind to a fault, and she
hated him with her very being. He had attached himself like a leech to her son, and he wouldn’t
shake free. What she’d been denied out of breeding and expectation, Castiel got without even lifting
a finger, and then he’d brought her into the house that was Zachariah’s to flaunt everything she’d lost
in her face.

Coveting is a sin, she reminded herself fiercely with another slap across her breast. Lust is a sin!
Weakness is the absence of strength. Strength comes from pain. God’s will is that we must suffer and
endure! She struck again. And again. And again. And again. And the pool of blood at her feet grew slowly until
she slumped in beautiful respite and slept, bleeding slowly, a slow line of red snaking its way to drip
down the cold grate in her basement.

Chapter End Notes

Addictions are unhealthy things, but I think this story is the only thing keeping me sane
as my sleep patterns are now fucked up beyond reconciling.
Chapter 69

Chapter Summary

Bobby and the Alpha set the path forward re: Crowley. Cas learns his new rating. Michael and Cas lose it over a tempting mechanic. The alphas have some air-clearing to do. The Winchester Pack's first fully attended Friday Night Dinner unearths some pack baggage. April's not through standing her ground. And Sam and Jess need sleep.

Holy shit there's a lot in this chapter.

Chapter Notes

All of you who are still reading, I assume you all have a size kink, and this chapter's no small package. I over-did the length again. Whoops. My bad. I just really wanted to get them to Phoenix without skipping out on the flavorful stuff that's going on beforehand. I had way bigger plans for the mess that Sam and Jess got themselves in, but needed to pull it back due to length. I also had plans for Kali and Gabe, but that can wait a bit. Don't worry, I'll get there eventually.

Don't feel like you have to read this all in one sitting. My lack of control shouldn't cut into your free-time.

And to my beautiful German translator: Crap, I'm sorry. Congrats on posting chapter nine, here's another 14K.

And by the way, if anyone's interested, Jonathon Miles looks like Adam Scott. I have a bit of a crush on him in "Parks and Recreation."

See the end of the chapter for more notes
NOW:

The Lexus had barely stopped moving in its niche in the garage before April was out and encased in Dean’s arms. He held her securely and silently, wrapping strong firm arms all the way around her until she nearly disappeared from view, tucking his chin over the top of her head and closing his eyes to keep them both secluded in a private place of their own. Castiel made his way around the car more slowly. He touched April’s back then shifted his touch to squeeze Dean’s bicep in thanks.

“Bobby’s in the house?” he asked Dean in passing. Bobby’s car in the drive would have been tough to miss.

Dean nodded without opening his eyes. “He’s waiting for you,” he told Cas as the Alpha passed into the kitchen and left them to it.

Dean gave her a minute or two of silence before he spoke.

“We knew it was going to go like this, kid. You told me so days ago.” Dean whispered into the echoing silence in a gruff tone, and she nodded without lifting her head. His whisper sounded upset as he went on. “It doesn’t matter. You’re not going to let them stop you. We’ll find another way.” She nodded again, but she didn’t loosen her hold for a long time.

When at last she looked up, her eyes were dry. “I have work to do, Dean,” she said in a shaky voice.

“That’s my girl.”

“And…” she stopped and stepped back. He let her go, but stayed within arm’s reach, focused on her face. “I wanted to tell you first… I talked to Castiel. We’re going to try for pups after our next cycle. He said yes.”

Dean blinked in surprise. He’d expected new plans to come out as her next phase after this one, but not that.

“But…”

“I’m not going to school. I’ll be training and working from home. I’ll be there for Michael’s pup, and I’ll be preparing for little ones of my own too.” She stepped a bit further away as she spoke as if she expected an explosive reaction and needed distance. Dean frowned.

“April. I don’t know what to say. Are you sure? How is that a good idea?”

She laughed a little and looked up at his confused face. “Bit of a hypocrite aren’t you, big brother? It wasn’t long ago that you were rankled that someone told you it wasn’t a good idea just yet for YOU. I’m not asking for your permission. I’m just telling you the news.”

The mirror in phrasing pulled him up short. April had never been in the room when those words were being thrown about. She knew them either through intuition, or his fiancé was sharing his words with her. They stared at each other hard for a while, weighing. Maybe she’d been talking to Michael.
Finally, April broke the stalemate. “Look, it’s okay, Dean. I’m ready. He wouldn’t have agreed if it wasn’t right for both of us. It’s not your call any more than it was ours when you and Michael made your decision. I know what you think, but I’m not as young as my age makes me seem. I’m not the child you think I am…you and Michael both.” (Ah, so it WAS Michael…) “He needs this, and he needs it right now. I can give him that.”

“And I can’t,” Dean said decisively, finishing her incomplete thought. “Even with twins in the house and another one on the way, he’s hurting. I don’t need a Mating-bond to see it.” Dean narrowed his eyes and pointed his finger at her face. “But you need to look out for you. Don’t toy with him, kid. You don’t have to do this right now. Your spot in this house is safe no matter what. You’re not trying to sell yourself for a place in the Pack, are you?”

She smiled sadly at him. “I know where I belong, Dean. I know I’m not going anywhere. That’s not what this is about. I thought you of all people would understand. It’s my job to give him what he needs, just as he does for me.” She chuckled again, ironically. “I’m pretty weak in a lot of ways, but I was built for this. This is one thing I’m certain I can do well – better than anyone else in this pack.”

Dean shook his head in wonder. “I’m starting to see what we looked like from the other side of the aisle, Michael and me…it seems nuts from this vantage point. You’re not ready, kid. You’re just a pup yourself.”

April’s eyes flashed steel, and Dean put his palms up toward her. “Fine,” he said. “Not a pup. My bad. But please be sure. Please be careful. He’s stronger than you think. He can wait if you need him to. Think it through. Please.”

She laughed loudly and relaxed back into his arms. “Be happy for us Dean. Say you’re happy. It’s just babies, not Calculus.”

He kissed her on her head and conceded. “I’m happy for you, April. I think you’re nuts, but I’m happy.”

“Oh, and Dean?”

“Mm?”

“You need to talk to Castiel.”

“’Bout what?”

She sighed. “Find someplace quiet and private. He’ll tell you all about it.”

“Well, that sounds ominous,” he said quietly, letting her go with a squeeze.

Castiel found Bobby in the library with his feet up on a reading table and two fingers of whiskey freshly poured into a crystal tumbler.

“Tell me,” said Cas succinctly.

“How’d April do at the audition?” Bobby replied. He took a sip and watched Cas settle into a chair
“They’re imbeciles,” Cas told him.

“That’s rough,” said the old doctor much more mildly than he normally spoke. “I’m sorry.”

“She’ll manage. She doesn’t want anything handed to her. A little disappointment isn’t going to kill her,” Cas sighed, then his tone changed completely. “So? Tell me what I’ve missed. What have you got?”

Bobby smirked. This was the Alpha he knew how to talk to. Cas had a hard edge to him this afternoon that Bobby had missed. He needed that edge, and it had been absent too long.

Bobby set his tumbler down, and leaned back toward the small serving tray to pour another for Cas. “Crowley is on a hunting mission. Looks like his game this time is to dig up dirt on us – on you specifically – and blackmail us with it. He’s come up empty-handed, and it’s beginning to make him desperate. We believe he’s turned his eyes to Nevada now, hoping to figure out what’s got your attention there when both your intimates are here.” Bobby thumped the glass down in front of Cas. “It won’t take him long to find the twins’ paper trail, and track them to you and Sam. Obviously, it would be best if we don’t allow him to track that trail forward to the pups’ origin.”

“Is there a risk that he might do that successfully?” Castiel asked, accepting the drink and passing it under his nose.

“Not really,” Bobby assured him. “But there are numerous ways we can lead him around the truth and make things get sticky. How much damage do we intend to do to him, Alpha?”

“None.”

“Cas, this is a golden opportunity. If we take advantage of his own weaknesses and his own momentum, I can expose every ugly effort he’s made or thinks of making through this whole sordid process and make sure he’s got no credibility left. I can castrate the bastard and leave him naked in front of the world, an emperor with no clothes, and I can do it without revealing anything we don’t want anyone to know.”

“And that does us what good, Singer? We need Crowley. We may not like him, but he’s good at what he does, and we can use his scalpel to carve the decay out of Keller before we take ownership of it. A castrated beta-Dom is a dangerous beast, and for what? Just because he insulted our pride?”

Cas sipped the whiskey, sucking it through his teeth and relishing the smooth warmth coating his tongue. He went on in the face of Bobby’s disgruntlement. “No, I’d rather keep him off-balance but viable. Don’t give him anything at all in Nevada that he so much as thinks he can use. He’ll find the paper trail that shows Jess and Sam have adopted twin foundlings. He’ll find that all by himself, and he’ll “discover” that I’ve used my powerful connections with our Congressman to grease the transaction. A foible like that carries no weight with Crowley. He’s not looking for misdemeanors; he’s looking for real dirt. A man like Crowley has no imagination. He can’t envision a world where someone like me doesn’t have a track record of abuses stretching for years out behind him. He’ll assume I’m as dirty as they come, and that my ambition exceeds the size of my wolf at least twice over.”

Bobby raised his glass and his eyebrows in silent question.

“Fair enough,” Cas conceded. Not twice over though. “But he’s not going to find what he’s looking for because none of my crimes are the flavor he expects them to be. He’s missing the mark entirely.
That’s what will be his undoing. We are going to let him destroy himself. He doesn’t need our help, and we can’t afford to take the risk. Besides,” he said firmly after another sip of whiskey, “I’m serious about trying to make this a win-win proposition. Our lawyers have their marching orders. We need to give them time and support, and we need to stay out of the way as much as we can. I’m not above sending a nudge or two in the right direction, but we’re not going to destroy anything we don’t have to.”

Bobby up-ended his glass, draining the last of it. “You’re the boss, boss. Oh, and by the way, the clean-up in Las Vegas was easy. There’s no trail that leads back to Minnesota. All of that clusterfuck is tidied up and swept clean. The girls are stashed safely, and to your orders, they’re out of the game until further notice – at least until we’re sure they aren’t on any Federal tracking boards. Christian has the Omega rescues in a safehouse ready to get started on rehabilitation. It looks good, Cas. We’ve got a solid win on our hands with this one, even with the fire getting a bit out of control. Gabe and Claire, they pulled those sorry sons-a-bitches right out of the real fire and gave them a fighting chance.”

Bobby paused and made sure he had Castiel’s full attention. “We did a good thing, Cas; a real good thing. We only lost one, and I’m not apologizing for sponging two dirt-bags off the hit-list. We don’t ever have to worry what they’re up to again.”

Sometimes Cas needed the reminder; the reminder that real people were at the other end of the rope he had clutched between his jaws. He sighed and nodded. Another reminder that it could have (should have) been cleaner wouldn’t help. That horse was beaten to death, and no amount of hand wringing would change the past.

Cas let his eyeline wander upward as he thought it all through. “So, we’ve got Crowley chasing his tail, and a clean break from anything he might have expected to find. What have you found on him?” Cas was under no illusions. He knew Bobby played offense as well as he did defense, and that both were necessary. Using what they knew about him to aid in their negotiations was a far cry from what Bobby proposed to do to the man at the outset of the conversation.

Bobby chuckled and leaned way back in his chair, mirroring the Alpha’s gaze. “He’s a hedonist and a real piece of work with a trail of disgruntled lovers twenty years long. He’s got at least two bastard pups that we know of. He’s snaked his way out of sexual harassment indictments in three states, and an assault charge in Kentucky that he wormed out of by magic. None of that means dick in the real world, though.”

Cas didn’t respond. He waited. And he listened.

“No, I think where we’re most likely to strike gold is his income tax records. Turns out – not that I know any of this officially since that would be against Federal law – turns out he’s got an income stream that he’s never really accounted for. Might be something that a direct audit could wiggle down to the bottom of, and it might be something he’s not going to want unearthed. It’s too bad that audits are mostly random unless there’s probable cause. It’s too bad no one’s dug up probable cause.” Bobby made his voice light and innocent.

“Can we do it cleanly?” Cas posed to the ceiling.

“Well, I’d need a nod from two other alphas besides you if I’m gonna hold up my side of our latest agreement, but yeah. We can skate away as clean as a nun on Sunday.”

“How?” asked Cas, still not looking at Bobby.

“You’ve never asked me ‘how’ in your life, Castiel,” Bobby pointed out.
“I’m growing up, alpha,” Cas told his former protector.

“So you are. All right. I’ll give you the skinny when we get the band together. I’ll give it to you straight, Alpha. I’m not going to risk a repeat of your message from a couple of weeks ago. Message received loud and clear, Sir.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Cas without so much as a blink at Bobby’s tone. “Anything else?”

“Jonathon Miles poked his head back up this afternoon. He sent us the shortest note you ever saw, just an acknowledgment really, but I believe it’s a white flag and a message of good faith. We’ve got an ally there if we feel safe enough to use it.” Bobby changed the subject. “Of course, using him like we may need to puts him at risk. Are we prepared to pull him from aboard the Titanic if it starts to sink?”

“Yes,” said Cas. “Jonathon’s played every hand he’s ever been dealt as straight as it’s possible to play, and I will offer him sanctuary if he needs it. On the other hand, he appears to need no assistance from us. He’s the only member of the board who’s not only maintained his position, but has been promoted as well. Keep the lines of communication open, but don’t initiate anything yet.”

Dean poked his head in, spotted the alphas at the back table, and came in to join them, closing the door behind him. Castiel smiled warmly, but there was a tightness about his eyes that Bobby noted without comment. In typical Dean fashion, he straddled the Alpha’s lap and kissed him soundly before bothering to greet Bobby.

“What are you two in such tight conference about without me?” he asked Bobby, looking over his shoulder impudently. Cas began a slow progress of nibbles down his throat.

“Your fiancé will fill you in on the details, son. We’ve got decisions to make, but I’m not going through the whole thing again just to do it a third time once we get Benny here. I actually came by to tell you both that the new Keller scale has been finalized. We’re going all the way up to 30 now. It’s going to mean a massive software upgrade needs to get going pronto. There will be back-training required for every Keller initiate and all the manuals are now out of date. Initiation date will be November 1st, so good luck getting us compliant, Dean. This one falls to you.”

“What?! Why is this mine?! I don’t know the first thing about software.”

“All the manuals are issued by your department under your name, kiddo. YOU are responsible for staff and client training both. Pack your bags. You need to get to Dayton for the teach-back seminar. I think they’re scheduling it for mid-August.”

“Fuck!”

“30, you say?” asked Castiel, leaving the real question unspoken.

Bobby’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “Do you want me to tell you unofficially, or do you want to wait for the press release?”

“How do you know if it’s not been released yet?” asked Dean climbing off Cas’ lap and swiping what was left of his drink. Bobby smirked at him knowingly.

“Bastard,” mumbled Dean into the glass as he finished it off.

“Tell me,” said Cas simply.

“Word is they’ve re-ranked you as a 25, right where you predicted, you smug prick.”
“I need another drink,” said Dean.

*******

“The attachment includes all the details you’ll need, Michael, including the salary budget and the benefits I’m willing to offer. You may hire directly or use any one of several pre-vetted staffing services. I’d like to have the new cook in place before the next training session begins. Please let me know if you encounter any problems meeting that deadline.” Cas closed his laptop and looked up. Michael was focused on his own computer, taking notes and making plans.

“Yes, Sir. It shouldn’t be a problem. I assume you’ll want background checks.”

“Of course,” Cas replied. “No one comes into the house that we aren’t sure of.” Michael nodded and typed a bit more. “Speaking of security, Michael.” Cas continued. Michael looked around and met his eye. “I hear your social media accounts have been receiving more traffic than usual. You’re to work with Billie to get yourself under a secure umbrella. Your current accounts need to be cancelled and re-opened with better safeguards in place. Put a list together of private contacts with whom you want to maintain connections and do not accept any invitations without passing them by Billie first. This is not negotiable, Omega. Your safety is important.”

“Yes, Sir,” Michael replied. The feeling of warmth that spread from his core up his body to pink his ears was pleasant and unfamiliar. Michael wondered what Hannah would make of it if he described it to her. The warm shiver passed sweetly in a wave through his cock without stiffening it. It was simple and nice.

Stupid Omega obedience responses. He knew exactly what Hannah would say.

Cas nodded and stood up. “Thank you for taking care of this for us, Michael. It appears that even cutting his hours back at work isn’t going to free Dean up as much as he’d hoped. He will be very busy at home as well over the next few months, and lifting the burden of keeping us all fed is going to help a great deal. At least that’s my hope.”

“He likes cooking for us, Alpha. It’s a stress-reliever for him.” Michael stood up to and pulled his office door open.

“I know,” said Cas, “but perhaps you might find alternative methods to help him alleviate stress until he’s finished with his new book. He rather enjoys his time with you as well, and between the two, I believe he would choose you over cooking.”

Michael smiled. He agreed. If something had to give, it wasn’t going to be his time with his mate.

“Sir?” Michael queried from the doorway as Cas headed toward his own office. The Alpha turned. “Is everything all right? You seem…you seem a bit off, if you don’t mind me saying.”

Cas took a deep breath. “It WILL be soon, Michael. The truth is I fucked up again, and I need to fix something.”

“Something between you and Dean?”
Cas nodded with an air of self-immolation. He apparently expected to receive a flaying soon, and he wasn’t looking forward to it.

“Is it something you can tell me, Sir?”

“I thought you were calling me Cas now.”

Michael didn’t answer, so Cas went on without a response. “The last time I confided in you about our personal troubles, you put a hole in the sheetrock in my office.”

“Sir, if it involves my mate, I have a right to know what’s going on.”

“I don’t owe you the details yet, Michael. Suffice it to say, Dean will be hurt, no doubt. I intend to make it up to him, but I suppose you can expect to see some collateral discontent. If you’ll allow us the courtesy of some privacy, I promise you’ll get a full explanation after I talk to Dean.”

“And you expect me to be there to pick up the pieces and put him back together after you break him again?”

Castiel hardened. “I’m the one who made the mistake, Michael. I don’t expect you to clean up after me. In fact, I’m asking you to try to stay out of it to the extent that you can. I know that if Dean needs comfort from you, you will offer him that. That’s the nature of your relationship, and I appreciate that he has an alternative to me if he’s hurt, but I’m not asking you for more than that.”

Michael regarded the Alpha whose hand twitched on his office doorknob as if he longed to flee the Omega’s judgmental gaze, but who stood pat anyway. “This is how it works, isn’t it?” he asked Castiel on a flash of insight. “Even if I want to stay clear, I can’t. You or I or Dean fuck up in one way or another, and we circle around each other until we get our feet under us again. There’s no way for us to keep out of each other’s messes, is there? Just because it’s between you and Dean doesn’t mean it’s not going to pull me in too. Is there any other way?”

Castiel held his eye and answered him truthfully. “I don’t see any other way.”

“It’s Friday, Sir. Perhaps we could talk it through over dinner tonight. I, uh, I think we need to be on the same page about this whole Pack thing.” Michael’s trust in Castiel, so new and untested was still in place, but he’d not had to stretch it yet, and he didn’t know if it was strong enough to hold, especially if the Alpha continued to put Dean through wringer after unnecessary wringer.

“I agree,” Cas told him without reiterating the request to use his first name. “In the meantime, I need to talk to Dean. I warn you that he may be angry and hurt both, and his feelings whichever way they go, are valid. I ask you not to interfere while we’re talking.” Cas frowned and looked at his hand on the doorknob. He spoke to his hand quietly. “This is our first real test, Michael. You and I have such a delicate balance to maintain, and I guess this is the first time we’ll need to test where that balance is in truth. Everything we’ve done up to now has been a matter of feeling each other out. I’m asking you for an enormous leap of faith, and I admit that I don’t know for sure what I’m doing.”

“Did you hurt him on purpose?” Michael accused abrasively.

“Of course not,” Cas replied with no venom. “I just fucked up. It was a mistake, and I believe Dean and I can talk it through. But I know that you often echo him, so it’s vital that you have forewarning of what’s coming. We may argue. He may be angry. He will certainly be hurt. I’m not asking you to close your bonds. That is your choice.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “Good God, Castiel, it can’t be that bad. Go talk to him. Send me the pieces. I’ll have the glue ready. Is it worth all this drama? You make it sound like you’re having an affair or
Cas huffed in surprise, but then found his equilibrium just as swiftly. “Thank you, Michael.”

“I guess that means dinner is on me,” said Michael, heading toward the kitchen and diving into sarcasm. “Great. Thanks for the notice. Oh, and Castiel?” said Michael walking backward down the hall. “You’re a right bastard for putting April through that up in Topeka. She’s better than all those morons. She’s a fucking genius, Alpha. You know that, right? You need to get her into some place that will do her some real good, and you need to stop letting her play you like she does her piano.”

“We’ll talk about it later, Omega,” Cas called down to him. Dean was always telling Cas to listen to his Alpha, not his front-brain, and Cas’ Alpha was highly amused at Michael’s protectionism, not incensed by it. To an outsider, the Omega’s impudence looked prime for a smack-down of epic proportions, but Cas was beginning to see what it was about Michael that made Dean so slow to reprimand him for insolence. It wasn’t really insolence at all. Having Michael’s ire was like the look of disappointment from your mother when she caught you unwrapping your Christmas presents early. It made even Castiel feel penitent. The question was, was it real or was it some kind of Alpha wolvish response to a disappointed Omega?

Castiel fussed about in his office for a few minutes. He needed to collect his thoughts. His words kept running through his head, and he cringed every time. He’d already walked himself carefully back with April on the drive home. It was a dick thing to have to do when she was already devastated by her rejection, but her emotions felt stable. The knowledge that he’d finally agreed to move toward planning a family with her smoothed everything else over apparently.

He told her that in promising she had influence over his marriage with Dean, he’d over-spoken himself, that he had become carried away, and that he was entirely at fault for letting his emotions get the better of him. She eyed him with pursed lips and a smirk that lived nowhere but her eyes.

“You understand that I don’t mean to take anything away from you?” he’d clarified, and she very nearly laughed at him out loud. He was such a doof sometimes.

“You truly are precious to me, April, and not merely for what I get tangibly from you. You are a breath of fresh air in my life.”

“Easy there Alpha, or you’ll wind yourself back up again and jump right back into the fire. He’s already going to be furious. Don’t dig the hole any deeper than it already is.”

“It’s not funny, Omega,” he’d said petulantly. “I was worried about you. I hate seeing you in pain, and I realized that I’d never made clear to you that you are more than my mate physically. Do you have even the first idea how important you are to me?”

She didn’t continue with the teasing. She could tell he was nearing a full boil inside, dreading having to explain himself to Dean. “Yes, Cas.” She put a hand on his on his steering wheel, and he grasped hers tightly and set them near the console between them. “I get it. But don’t you know that you don’t have to choose between us? Stop trying to do that. It doesn’t have to work that way. It can’t work that way. My beloved, if you try to choose, you’re going to have to side with me, and you’re going to lose him. You remember we talked about it months ago. Stop trying to be noble. I appreciate the sentiment, and God, I hope you know I love you too, but don’t ever try to figure out how to put him first. Don’t think about it, Castiel. Just DO it. I come first for you from the part of you that needs me to. Dean comes first from the part of you that needs a soulmate. Take care of you, so you can be strong enough to take care of me. I’m not jealous of him, Cas. I never will be. I’m never going to ask
that of you. I’m never going to make you choose. Never.”

Her words echoed on repeat through his head right on top of his own…”In a heartbeat… I’ll walk away…If you ask me to…Only you matter.”

Castiel turned his computer off and went in search of his fiancé.

He found him in the first place he looked. Cas collected a couple of bottles on his way through to the garage. Dean’s denim-clad legs protruded from beneath his Impala. Cas called out to the alpha with a shrill whistle. Dean slid out on the roller-board, his bare chest sweat-soaked.

“Gimme ten, Cas. I need to check the plugs too. Is that for me?” asked Dean with a bead on the beer.

“It’ll be right here waiting for you whenever you’re ready,” Cas answered, setting it down and then sliding his butt up onto the counter-top to wait and enjoy the show. He wasn’t stalling. Dean deserved a few moments.

“You’re going to get your slacks greasy sitting up there,” Dean warned him too late. Cas shrugged it off. It was worth it. Dean stood and turned his back on his Alpha, leaning into the engine with his legs in a wide V to get his height lowered close enough without straining his back. What it did to Castiel’s view was a bonus. Castiel sipped his own drink slowly. Beer on top of whiskey was more than he usually drank outside of a celebration, but some things – an emotional confession among them – warranted more than water. Cas barely noticed Michael sliding up beside him and stealing Dean’s beer.

There was still time for the talk he needed to have before dinner.

They watched and sipped in silence for the most part, sharing nothing more than a simple acknowledgment with a touch of their long-neck bottles between slugs. Dean had to know Michael was there. He didn’t look toward them though. He worked on his car the same way he moved in the kitchen, the same way he moved on a mattress for that matter, like a liquid, like he owned every part of the environment he moved through, like he was part and parcel of the Universe that birthed him and placed him just here.

“Thought you had something pressing to talk about,” Michael whispered.

“I do,” Cas confirmed. “But Dean asked for a few more minutes, so who am I to pressure him to hurry?”

“I was going to check the outside freezer for dinner ideas, but now I’m thinking of ordering take-out,” Michael confessed, his eyes glued to his mate’s ass. Dean shifted just so, and his backside rounded up and outward enough to make both Dominants suck in a breath.

“You know this is weird…?” Michael mused. “Both of us sitting here together. I’m supposed to be mad at you, but I’m too distracted.”

“And I’m supposed to be having a traumatic heart-to-heart, but I’m too weak. He’s just so…pretty.” Cas thought for a moment that he’d drooled down his shirt, but a quick check showed he was mistaken.
Michael chuckled. “Shit, we’re in so much trouble, Alpha. Is there anything he might ever want that we wouldn’t bend heaven and earth to give him? He’s gonna get away with murder. He’s just so… pretty.”

Cas sighed. “Michael, I need to ask you for a review of our agreement. I need more. Two nights per week isn’t enough.”

Dean stood up and reached across the corner of the engine cavity to grab a wrench, and his torso stretched out long enough that the waistband of his boxer-briefs peeked out at the slim line of his narrow hips. One foot came off the ground. He paused as he stood back upright, his head cocked minutely to the side, clearly assessing his audience. Very slowly, he set the wrench on the rim of the hood, reached in front to his waist and unfastened his belt and his jeans. In agonizing slow motion, he put his thumbs inside his waistband and pushed down. His boxer-briefs went too.

Bare-assed and sweaty, Dean went back to work, leaning deep into the cavern of the engine and stretching out flat-backed without ever looking back at his audience.

“Jesus Christ,” breathed Michael. “What do we do?”

Cas side-eyed him. It was the Alpha’s call. “What do you want to do?” he asked. Michael’s chuckle was as filthy as he could make it.

“He green-lighted us both, Sir,” Michael reminded him. “Whatever you need to break his heart over, will it keep?”

“I shouldn’t,” Cas squirmed uncomfortably. “I should leave him to you and catch up with him later.”

“YO!!” shouted Dean. “What’s a guy need to do around here? Are the two of you eunuchs suddenly?”

“You’re such a fucking brat!” Michael shouted back, but he slid off the counter and left the beer sweating. He twitched his head at Cas, less in invitation and more in command. It appeared to be an order. Cas wavered, watching Michael saunter up to Dean, watching Michael cover his back and run his hands down over his hips and thighs to push his jeans all the way to his ankles.

“Alpha?” called Michael. “Am I doing this on my own? No arguments if I am, but there’s enough here for two. Thought you were hungry.” Michael placed a flat hand on Dean’s back and pressed him back down over the engine. Dean braced himself with one hand on the right side of the hood and the other holding tight near the windshield.

Michael stroked Dean’s back and sides, smoothing his hands over Dean’s sweaty skin. He looked back over his shoulder and twitched his head again. “It’ll keep, Sir,” he said. “He needs us. He needs us both.”

Cas slipped off the counter and made his way toward them in slow motion. Michael was squatting down, helping Dean out of his boots, clearing away his jeans, giving them access to everything. Cas moved up behind Michael as he stood back up, and he reached around the Omega’s waist to help him strip too.

“What’s on the table, Alpha?” Michael whispered, his eyes never leaving the chills that fluttered across Dean’s back. He chased them with his tongue, the sweat salty in his mouth. “Is he good?”

“Not yet,” said Castiel with reluctance. “Not to fuck. But you can tongue him if you want. He loves rimming.”
“Sir…” whined Dean, pushing up a little.

“What’s your safeword, Dean?” Michael asked assertively.

“Impala,” said Dean on a whine looking over his shoulder.

“Do you need to invoke it?” Michael followed up, pressing a thumb against his hole firmly.

“Ahhh! No, Sir!”

“Do you need to ask a clarifying question, Submissive?” Michael asked, putting his own thumb in his mouth and then pressing it right back and lodging it inside Dean’s body to the first knuckle.

“No, Sir!”

“Then turn back around and lay down. Be good for us now, baby.” Michael thrummed a steady pulse with his thumb, but he didn’t press in very deep. Cas stood a pace back and watched the mates find pleasure in each other, feeling for a moment like a third wheel until Michael reached over and took his hand. The Omega pulled the Alpha in, and it met no protocol in any book anywhere to have Cas tuck up tight over Dean’s side and begin to whisper filth into his ear on Michael’s encouragement.

“Yeah, Alpha. Tell him. Talk to him. Holy fuck,” Michael’s whispers disappeared into the lofty space, unheeded by the two alphas whose heads were so close together. Michael squatted down and replaced his thumb with his tongue, holding tightly to Dean’s thighs for balance. He swiped a wide tongue across Dean’s center. He let Dean’s cheeks close in on him, and he sought for the dark pucker with a pointed tongue.

Dean whined and grabbed for Castiel. Cas stood him upright without dislodging Michael. He moved carefully to release the prop and close the hood, kissing Dean’s lips all the while around a whispered stream of dirty talk into his mouth.

“Up, Michael,” said Cas breaking free. “Let me get him down on his back.”

Michael stepped out and helped arrange Dean on his back on the hard hood, his backside hanging off the end and his feet pushed high above his chest. Michael dove back in with his tongue while Castiel knelt below the Omega and turned his hips to reach his small cock with slick lips. Cas bobbed his head slowly to coat Michael with his saliva, then pulled off.

“Move, Michael,” he told the Omega, and both Michael and Dean groaned piteously at the instruction. “Fuck my mouth,” he insisted, letting Michael’s cock slide back in and begin a rhythmic thrusting.

“I wanna see!” whined Dean, beginning an attempt to roll over, shoving his feet downward and nearly kicking Castiel.

“Be still, Dean!” said Michael with a hard smack to Dean’s thigh.

“I wanna see!” Dean struggled and won out, flipping himself off the car and falling onto his bare feet on the concrete floor. Cas was forced backward, and Michael had to catch Dean and balance him. Dean’s eyes were wide. “Please, I wanna see,” repeated Dean, leaning backward against the car. His eyes flicked rapidly between Michael’s erection and Cas’ spit-slick chin.

Cas looked at Michael. Michael looked at Cas.
“Is it too soon, Sir?” asked Michael vaguely.

“It’s earlier than I intended, but I believe it’s close enough. Submissives in my house do not make demands.”

“What? No! You were sucking him off, Sir! I hafta see that. You were gonna let him fuck your face! What are you doing?!” Michael flattened Dean back over the hood of his beloved car on his belly and kicked his feet out wide. It was a mockery of the tease Dean had played earlier. This time it was serious. “No! I’ll be good! Let me watch, and I’ll be so good!”

Michael pressed a hand into Dean’s back and spanked his ass hard with his other hand. Castiel stood a pace back once more.

“Harder, Michael.” The Alpha commanded without moving to assist.

Michael hummed in agreement, and quickened the pace of his strokes while increasing the power behind his swing. Dean struggled against his mate’s hold and cried out in indignation. This wasn’t how Michael ever did things. Where was the discussion? Where was the listing out of transgressions? Where was the demand for an apology and remorse?

“OW! FUCK! I still have almost two weeks! You said I needed OW! two more weeks! Michael!”

“Make sure you get the inside of his thighs,” suggested Cas, and Michael responded appropriately. He reddened Dean’s ass thoroughly all the while holding him fast. Had the alpha so chosen, he could have struggled free. An Omega’s one-handed hold was no match for an alpha in his prime. Dean’s struggles were part of his play, and Cas wanted to be sure that Dean got as much as he could want.

“That’s enough, Michael,” Cas told him. The Omega stepped back after one more solid smack that made Dean grunt in pain. “Step up to him and rest your cock between his cheeks. Hold his ass tightly around you and make a tunnel. That’s it, just like that.” Michael wasted no time in getting himself into place just as the Alpha directed him. He pressed Dean’s red-hot ass cheeks close together around his cock, but with no slick, the friction of a hard fuck was going to mean misery for them both.

Dean groaned, face-down against the pitiless black steel.

“Sir, please!”

“You’re not going to watch, Pet,” Cas told him. The Alpha used four fingers to scoop a plentiful portion of slick from Michael’s weeping channel, and he spread it liberally over Michael’s cock, pulling him free from Dean’s ass long enough to get him slicked up before pressing him back into place. The touches from the Alpha had Michael panting. Dean was nearly rabid with desperation. His head whipped back over one shoulder, and when that one offered him no suitable view, he whipped around to check the other way.

“Sir, please! I wanna watch! I took the punishment! Don’t I get a reward for being good?” Dean’s voice rose an octave in his frenzy to find out what was happening behind him.

“You didn’t hold still for your spanking, Dean,” Cas explained. “You struggled the entire time. How is that ‘being good’?”

Michael was frozen in place, waiting. He had no idea what was happening except that it felt very, very right. His eyelids fluttered.

“Do I get to come? Sir!” pleaded Dean.
“What do you think, Pet?” Cas dropped his pants where Dean could see him, but he didn’t stay put for long. Once he had his lower half bare to match the other two, he disappeared from Dean’s field of vision and took a spot right behind Michael.

“No! SIR NO!!!” Dean began to struggle again, this time with more force, but Cas leaned low over his back, flattening Michael between them and forcing the Submissive still.

“Are you ready, Omega? Have you got a tight tunnel to work with?”

“Yes, Castiel. I’ve got a good hold.”

“Perfect,” Cas praised with a hand on Michael’s trembling back. He entered the Omega slowly, letting the slick channel engulf him incrementally. Cas bit his lower lip at the sensation. “Can you feel what I’m doing, Pet? Can you feel me through your mate? Tell me, love. What do you feel?”

“You’re fucking Michael! God, fuck, oh my God, that feels good! C’mon, Sir! Fuck him! It feels incredible! I can feel you!” Dean reached out to either side of the car, but he couldn’t get a solid grip.

Cas picked up the pace once he was sure Michael’s channel wasn’t over-taxed by his girth. Omega channels were built to stretch. He pressed in deeply, then pulled out to push back in again. Every stroke moved Michael’s cock in the tunnel of Dean’s red ass cheeks. Michael went lax between them, becoming the conduit he never would have permitted himself to be with anyone besides the two who sandwiched him here over cool steel.

“And what about you, Michael? Can you feel your mate? What is Dean feeling?” Cas seemed altogether too collected for Michael. The Omega was close to shooting his load across Dean’s back, and they’d only been at it for moments. Nothing made any sense anymore. Michael chose to let go and answer the question. He focused down into the open bonds before him.

“His ass is burning from the spanking, and my hands holding him so tightly, it’s making him sting even worse. My cock is driving against his rim, and sometimes he feels it catch, but it never goes in. It feels too good, but not good enough, like a tease. The hood of the car is slick and uncomfortable, and he’s having trouble keeping himself from sliding. Brace your feet, Dean! Hold yourself up. Use your core muscles.” Michael slid thoughtlessly from Cas’ Omega into Dean’s Dom. Dean’s answering whine sent a dribble of pre-come spurting from Michael’s tip.

“That’s not much for him to work with if he wants to come, is it Michael? Tell you what, Pet. If you can ride the sensations from your mate, and get off on what he’s feeling, you won’t be punished for coming. Your car’s going to need a good wash later.”

“Sir! It’s not enough!”

“Concentrate, Dean!” Michael chastised. “I’m going to send you everything I’ve got. Close your eyes and focus!”

Cas set his feet, took a firm hold of Michael’s hip with his right hand and Dean’s hair at the back of his head in the fist of his left, and he fucked hard into the Omega channel. The car creaked on its axles, and it bounced slightly on its shocks. They didn’t last long, but Dean came first, his eyes squeezed tightly closed, one hand grasping hard behind him on his Alpha’s wrist close to where his fingers locked into Dean’s short hair, and the other clenching the top of Baby’s hood near the wipers. He grunted his release as he painted the grill. Michael shouted a response, focused in so strongly onto his mate that Dean’s orgasm almost felt like his own. Now that was an echo he could get behind. Michael’s release left white streaks up Dean’s lower back. Cas made no sound but a contented sigh. He pulled free before he tied, and he spurted copious amounts of semen over
Michael’s sweaty back, his right hand on himself to finish up rather than holding the Omega in place. His fist he kept woven tightly into Dean’s hair. Keeping a grip on hair as short as Dean liked his shorn was an art-form the Alpha had perfected over years of the Sub’s challenge with increasingly shorter locks to work with. It was a challenge Castiel accepted, and it was one that he’d always won. Cas stepped to the side, around Michael, who sank gratefully against the hood on Dean’s far side panting.

The Alpha looked into Dean’s eyes. “You don’t make demands, Dean, not when we’re in this role. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Sir,” the Sub responded blissfully. It wasn’t much of a lesson, but it hadn’t needed to be.

Castiel’s fist relaxed and smoothed out until he was stroking Dean’s hair. “Are you good, my love? Are WE good?”

“That was incredible, baby. I feel awesome. Hey, Michael, where’d you go? Oh.” Michael put a hand on Dean’s back, and Dean turned his head to find his mate splayed out beside him. “Hey, what happened to the no-spanking rule? Not that I’m complaining.”

“You’re not bruised, Dean,” Michael told him, working his way up and inspecting the damage. “The glow will wear off in a couple of hours. It hardly counts as a spanking at all. Come here.” Michael helped hoist Dean to his feet, wiped his back messily with a shop towel, and held his pants for him to step into. Dean cried foul when he realized half the beer Cas brought for him was already gone. It was easily remedied though, and he settled into Cas’ arms in short order up in the master bedroom.

“I need to get dinner going,” he informed Cas, but the Alpha belayed his request with a quiet comment that Michael had it covered. “Then I need to get down there and wash the jizz and sweat off my car.”

“Michael’s taking care of that one too, Dean. He’s ordering out for dinner, and he’s already working on cleaning the car.”

“What’s going on, man? Why do I get the feeling I’m on lock-down in here with you?” Dean sat up and turned around to look at Cas. It was a pleasure to realize that moving about on his ass on the bed sparked up a sting again, just as it should. He’d missed it badly.

“We need to talk,” said Cas simply.

“Ominous words, Alpha. What’ve I done? Am I in trouble? I thought we were playing.”

“What, just now? Yes, Dean, we were. You aren’t in any trouble at all. In fact…listen, are you…? We can’t do this right now if I’ve thrown you into your wolf. Are you clear to talk about something serious with me?” Cas looked deeply into Dean’s green eyes. He couldn’t always tell for sure, but Dean didn’t seem stuck as a Submissive at the moment.

“I’m fine. Just me. Plain old me. You had me floating pretty high for a while there, but this close to the end of my Rut, I just pop right back out again.”

“Did you enjoy yourself?” Cas asked.

Dean laughed self-effacingly. “I marked my own car off nothing but the feelings coming through from my mate. That was fucking HOT, Castiel James. Where do you come up with this shit? Did you know I could do that?”
“Not until you did it. You’re incredible, Dean. Every single day, my sweet.” Cas leaned across the span and kissed Dean chastely, then touched his forehead to Dean’s.

“So, what’s this serious topic we need to discuss?” Dean asked him with their eyes so close they were both nearly cross-eyed.

“I fucked up royally, Dean. I need to tell you about it, and I need to beg your forgiveness. I apologize for this evening’s interlude. We really should have done this first, but you in nothing but blue jeans and a coating of grease and sweat is more than I can say no to.”

“Oh. That’s not what I expected.” Dean sat up and moved back frowning. “What have you done now?”

Cas settled in to tell the story, and Dean settled in to hear it. Neither man moved for a good while.

“After April’s audition, she was distraught. She fled out to the parking lot, and I followed after her. I meant to comfort her, but we got into a bit of an argument instead.”

“You fought with April in public?” clarified Dean. “Dude, bad idea. Did anyone see you?”

“Um, yes. We attracted a bit of a crowd. I know. Not my best move. It didn’t seem important at the time, but now that I look back, I feel like a fool.” Cas wanted to get to the point, but Dean interrupted him again.

“Baby, the apes are all gonna cry ‘spousal abuse’, and the wolves are going to say you’re Omega-whipped. What were you thinking? Did anyone film it? Crap, are we going to see it on the internet? C.J. you can’t be that reckless.”

Cas answered him quickly. “I know. Dean, I know. That’s not the point. Please let me finish. The internet is one thing, but I need to explain what I said to April, because it has bearing between me and you. And whether you ever see a recording of the conversation or not, we need to hash this out.”

“What are you talking about? Hash what out?” Dean swallowed uncomfortably.

“I was comforting April. It hit me suddenly while we were talking that she thinks I see her as nothing but my ward – a pup to raise and turn into a breeder to meet my needs and keep me balanced. She doesn’t know, Dean. She doesn’t know I love her for who she is, and I think she’s amazing. She doesn’t know what she means to me, that she’s miraculous. I needed to make her understand.”

“O-kay.”

“I got carried away, and I took it too far, and what I said to her…out loud…in public…in front of witnesses…it wasn’t what I really feel. It wasn’t what I meant. It just slipped out. I don’t know what made me say it. I don’t ever want you to think I don’t…that I think you’re…that you’re not…”

“Castiel! What the fuck did you say?!”

“I told her that all she needs to do is say the word, and I would walk away from you in a heartbeat.”

Silence.

Dean’s face paled. A hand crept up to cover his mouth. He scrubbed it across his lips, and it hid the hard bite he gave his lower lip.

“Wow, Cas. You don’t mince words when you get on a roll, do you?” Dean blinked.
“Baby, it’s not what I meant at all. It slipped out. I’m not ever going to walk away from you. Please.”

“You’re a moron, Castiel, and you don’t deserve me. I oughta walk out right now, you hear me?”

“NO! Don’t do that, Dean. Don’t ‘manage’ me. I don’t want you to handle my emotions for me, and feed me the words you think I need to hear to pull myself through the guilt. I know what you’re doing. This is different. This is bigger, and I want you to let me handle myself. I want the truth of what you’re feeling. I want the real you, Dean Michael.”

Dean huffed and started to protest, to deny, but Castiel’s eyes flashed red, and Dean got mad. Fuck Cas. He wanted the real deal? Fine. Dean’s eyes narrowed, and the planes of his face hardened.

“Why would you say something like that? Was there a context to it? Did it just slip out all on its own, apropos of nothing at all?” Dean couldn’t feel his lips anymore. He couldn’t feel his toes. All the blood was rushing to his core, leaving his extremities unprotected as if he were in a life-or-death situation his body retreating to survival mode. Was this the end?

“I was trying to make her understand how much she means to me, and the volume just got turned way too high in my mind. I lost my head. She means the world to me, you know that, but I took it too far. I don’t know where it came from. Baby, not every word that slips out unexpectedly is always truth. You have to believe me, I didn’t mean it. There’s no reason I needed to bring you up at all. It’s not like that. I love you both, and I couldn’t live without either of you.”

“That’s not entirely true though, is it, Cas? You can’t live without her, maybe. If she walked away from you while she still lives, you would go insane. You would literally waste away and die from the loss. Me? Yeah, it’d hurt like hell, but it wouldn’t kill you, would it?” Dean was floating again, but this time was a self-dissociation that made the moment feel surreal and disconnected. He watched from a place between his own eyes as his voice reacted to Cas’ confession.

“Dean! It’s not like that! You have to listen to me!”

“You know,” Dean continued, beginning to feel the rage that came on top of the hurt. “Michael challenged me again and again in the early days over you. You know what I told him? I told him the same thing every damn time. I told him to get used to the idea of having a married mate, because YOU weren’t going anywhere, that no matter what else happened, I would always choose you. You busted my ass over trying to throw you out when I was at my lowest because it left you to try to hold everything together on your own. Your words, Castiel! You told me that you were sick of having to be the only one trying to build a marriage while I couldn’t throw you away hard enough, but that’s not how it really happened was it?! What have you been telling your mate before this, Castiel James? Why did it take her permission before you came to Dallas for me? How many times have you hinted to her that I’m the optional one? How many times have you thanked her for being willing to put up with sharing you? Are you absolutely sure that you didn’t mean it, Alpha? Cause from where I sit, it doesn’t look that clear!”

“Yes, love. I’m absolutely sure.”

“Don’t call me ‘love’! I’m pissed as fuck at you! You fucking HURT me Castiel! You don’t get to call me pet names right now! I think even if you cheated on both of us, it wouldn’t feel like this!”

“Dean, please, I’m so sorry. But it was a mis-speak. Those words, they don’t do justice to what you mean to me. It’s not ever going to be April’s choice, and she knows that.”

“You dumped that on her right after she got the shit kicked out of her by a bunch of high-brow hypocrites? You bastard! What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you the ONLY person you ever
think about? Let me guess, you hate seeing your mate in pain…you hate what that feels like through your Mating-bond. You wanted to make it stop, so you just threw words at her, whatever came out of your mouth if it would just make the pain stop. You needed it to stop because it hurt YOU, C.J. You’re a dickhead, you know that? What else did you say?"

“What?”

“What else, Cas?”

“Um. I don’t know. I, uh, I said that deep down in my core I’m wired to care about nothing but her at the deepest level. I’m built to try to make her happy.”

“Nice. Thanks, man.” Dean couldn’t sit on the bed any longer. He needed to get packed for Phoenix anyway. And he needed to move. He needed away from those searching blue eyes. Damn Castiel and his blue eyes.

“That one is true, Dean. It’s true, and you can’t say any different. Tell me where your loyalties lie at the deepest part of yourself. Don’t lie to me. Where are you going?”

“I have to pack.”

“Dean, please don’t turn your back on me. I know this hurts, and I’m so fucking sorry I did this to you, to us, but we need to face it head-on. Please.”

“I need to pack, C.J.”

“Answer the question.” Cas followed Dean into the closet where the alpha was tugging a suitcase from the highest shelf.

“Why? What difference does it make? Will it change anything?”

“Dean, you’re not second-place for me. You’re in a different place entirely. Love isn’t a pie. It doesn’t run out. I don’t love you the same way I love her. Loving her more doesn’t mean I love you less. I’m not ever going to leave you. How many times do I need to say that?”

“A few more, apparently, because apparently, I can’t trust that the words you say are true!” Dean pressed past him in the closet doorway and began rifling through his underwear drawer.

“That’s not fair, and it’s beneath you to be mean. I would never hurt you on purpose.”

“No? Why did you leave the strikes to Michael just now? Why not do it yourself? Did that have anything to do with what happened last time you struck me? Are you telling me you didn’t hurt me on purpose then?”

“Dean…” Cas felt the blood drain from his face. He never imagined that Dean would realize Cas was struggling to climb back on the horse, fearful that he might do it again, lose control again.

Dean stopped and closed his eyes with a grip on his dresser drawer. He took a grounding breath. “God, Cas, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. Shit. FUCK!!!!”

Dean turned around slowly and met Castiel’s frightened eyes. “I didn’t mean that,” Dean repeated. “I trust you. I swear I do. It’s just…”

They stared at each other.

“What did you tell Michael to get him to stay downstairs and wash the car?” Dean asked astutely.
“Does he know what’s going on?”

“He doesn’t know the details, just that I fucked up, and I need to come clean without him barging in to rescue you.”

“Good call. You think of everything. I guess April has the same warning, but then, she knows all about it.” Dean sighed and went back to pulling out underwear and socks for his trip.

“I’m sorry, Dean. I’m sorry that I said that. I’m sorry I did it in public. I have no idea if my words were loud enough to record. Please believe that I was going to tell you about it even if there wasn’t a chance you might see it for yourself.” Cas sat back down on the bed and studied his shoes.

“This is where you start in with the high professions of life-long commitment, C.J. This is where you tell me I mean everything to you, and I have your whole heart at my disposal.” Dean let bitterness into his voice. Cas was predictable when he grew penitent.

“I love you, Dean. I want to marry you. I WILL marry you unless you end it. Do you need more than that? You have a life-long commitment from me. Is that enough? Do you need to know where you stand in relation to my mate? And if you do, do I get the same answer from you? Dean, do we need that?”

“You already know, Alpha,” said Dean in a flat and tired voice. “Michael reminds me all the time, even still. Without the mates’ complicity, you and I could never happen. They come first, man. They have to. You know that. What you said to her…fuck, did you really say, ‘in a heartbeat’? What you said to her hurts, but it’s not far from the truth. Trying to live without them now would be like physically trying to live without your own beating heart. It’s a physical AND a metaphysical connection, and there’s no other way to see it. The thing is, you promised me we could work you and me in around the mate connections. You swore we could make this dynamic work. Cas, can we make it work?”

“I’m convinced we can, Dean. I can see it as clearly as I’ve ever seen anything. We need to be sure we understand how all the pieces fit together, but we can make this work.”

Dean chuckled softly, but there was no joy in it. “You knew you were safe to say that to her, you know. You know damn well April would never call your bluff. Fuck me. Michael would have jumped on the opportunity in a flat second. That’s why I had to toe the hard line from day one. I couldn’t have given him a hint of daylight between you and me or he would’ve pried us apart with a crowbar.”

“I can’t live without you, Dean. I tried. It nearly killed me. I promised myself I would avoid any more grand pronouncements of love and adoration tonight, but I can’t not tell you. You are every bit as much a part of my heart as my mate is. You’re just different, that’s all. I could never choose between you, and that’s not a mis-speak. Do you understand?” Cas’ eyes blazed with fervor.

Dean met him and held. He stared into those deep blue eyes for a long time, trying to bore his way inside.

“You hurt me, Cas.”

“I’m so sorry, Dean. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Don’t do it again!” said Dean fiercely. “Don’t you ever say something like that again!”

“Baby, I can’t promise you I’ll never hurt you again. I’m human, and I make so many mistakes. I can promise that I’ll never hurt you on purpose and that whenever I do, I will stand before you and take
the full storm of your wrath head-on without raising a hand to defend myself. I love you so much. I promise you I’ll never weigh you and April against one another again. It’s not her decision, Dean. It’s no one’s but yours and mine.”

Dean stepped forward and sank to his knees at Castiel’s feet. “You’re a moron,” he said softly. “You don’t deserve me. I oughtta leave you right now.”

Cas’ broken laugh bubbled out through his wet eyes as he wrapped his arms around Dean’s shoulders and pulled him in. The late afternoon was getting away from them, but they talked for a while more, quietly.

Healing from this wouldn’t be simple. How far back inside his head had Cas just thrown Dean? He’d be meeting with his new therapist just after returning from PhoenixCon, but was the damage already done? Was Dean destined from now on to wonder constantly where he ranked for his husband? He’d said it felt worse than if Cas cheated on him.

Cas needed to change. He knew it. His knee-jerk reactions to the discomfort of his Submissive’s pain needed a new path. He couldn’t afford ever to do that to Dean again. Dean didn’t deserve it, and Cas resolved that even if he made every mistake in the book before he got it all figured out, he was never going to do THAT again. Parents didn’t try to rank their children. Children weren’t required to choose a favorite parent. Love didn’t have to work that way. It was a trap of his own making, and he’d fallen square into it.

Now he was stuck again with the damage control. He held Dean, kissed his head, sighed, and set his shoulders. He could do this. THEY could do this.

Friday Night Dinner came late that evening. They ate in the formal dining room, but Dean promised that their new kitchen table would be in place soon. Gabriel pouted over Cas’ demand that he send Kali home. The Pack wasn’t ready to welcome outsiders into their weekly regroup, and she wasn’t pack. Yet.

Jess and Sam were late, but they were given a free pass considering the circumstances of moving about with two anchors about their necks and very little sleep. Besides, dinner itself was a bit late what with Michael busy cleaning the Impala rather than ordering takeout for them all.

Michael was somber, shooting concerned looks at his mate and keeping a hand on Dean’s knee beneath the table. Dean was tense and unresponsive to the limited banter as he passed his plate up the table to be filled by his Alpha who had the variety of dishes arranged around him.

And April. Michael had never seen her this angry before. She fumed silently with her head lowered, sitting at Castiel’s right side around the corner from her mate, as Michael took the same position relative to Dean at the far end of the table. Dean’s hurt was still there, but the rage had settled into a weary sort of discomfort instead of red-rimmed fire as it had sparked up to for a while. Michael knew enough of the details now to understand why all the dramatics were necessary. He was still chewing on it all, unsure how he felt about it, unsure how or even IF to respond.

At least Castiel had faced up to his mistake rather than trying to bury it as he might have done
months ago. Michael thought they had a chance to move past this mess, if they all continued to keep themselves bared to one another honestly. He kept an eye on Dean. His mate was worn out, but he wasn’t falling. That was a first in the short time he’d known Dean.

No, it was April who concerned him more. Given all the details Dean shared with him, he didn’t understand her anger. Hurt and disappointment made sense, but anger? At the school judges? At the inequity of having to be ten times as good as the apes to be so much as considered for a place in their school? Michael didn’t think so. April wasn’t one to hide that from her pack. She was more likely to complain bitterly and take the comfort of the pack to soothe her, not cover it over in taciturn resentment.

“What’s eating you?” he asked rudely, accepting Dean’s plate back as it wound its way down the table again, and replacing it in Jess’ hand with his own. If Cas wanted to play Norman Rockwell, Michael didn’t care as long as he got the double-helping of General Tsao’s chicken that he wanted.

Everyone looked at April for a moment. She glanced up at Michael and blushed, then looked to her mate. Drawing attention to her state-of-mind in front of everyone was impolite, but Michael wanted the air clear, and he sensed something brewing.

“It hasn’t been a good day, that’s all,” she said eventually.

“Bullshit. What’s really got your panties in a wad?” he challenged as his plate came back to him.

“Michael, don’t be an asshole,” Jess scolded with a fierce snap. “She’s just had her heart ripped out. She deserves some time to mourn. Leave her alone.”

“Nuh-uh,” he said stubbornly. “This is something else. She never wanted in that damned school anyway, and now she’s got exactly what she wanted. She gets to spread ‘em wide and breed up big and fat just like her mate wants her to. This is something else.”

Castiel’s serving spoon smacked hard down onto the table. Dean growled menacingly. April paled.

“Apologize,” demanded Castiel. “Now!”

The fight drained out of Michael, and he wilted. “Shit, Pete. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

‘Pete?’ Dean mouthed at Cas, and Cas just shrugged in return, confused.

April found her voice, but she didn’t look up again. “I know you think I threw the audition on purpose, Michael, but I didn’t. It all played out just like you predicted, and I knew you would think I planned it that way. I’m not even going to try to convince you I didn’t, but…I didn’t.” Cas finished ladling food onto Jess’ plate, and traded it for Sam’s. “I really did try to do well. They just aren’t ready for someone like me. I’ll have to find another way.”

“Mm-hmm, so then why are your eyes ready to drive nails?” Michael wasn’t about to let her off the hook. “You passed right into acceptance over the audition already? You were expecting it? Then what’s got you so pissed?”

April’s cheeks flushed high, and she huffed out hard through her nose, evidently steeling her resolve. She finally looked up and right at Michael fiercely before turning angry eyes to Castiel. “You had another scene together this afternoon without me. All three of you. And I wasn’t invited. It’s not right.”

Cas stopped serving. He set Sam’s plate down. He looked at his mate, startled. “Kitten, I don’t think this is the time or place…”
“Yes, it is,” Michael interrupted. “We’re all here. You said you wanted Pack business handled at our weekly dinners, so let’s handle it, Alpha.”

Castiel assumed ‘Captain of the fucking Ship’ like a cowl pulled over his shoulders. “You will address me with respect, Omega, or will be sent to bed with no dinner and with a sore, red bottom. You can make your points without turning into a dick. That is your last warning.”

April didn’t give Michael a chance to reply. The floodgates were open, and the Pack listened with rapt attention.

“I’m one-fourth of this dynamic, Alpha. If you play with Michael, but you never let me in, I consider that infidelity. Either you give me a place, or you stop with him completely.” Her blue eyes blazed hot, streaks of gold swirling through and disappearing again. It was hypnotic to watch. The kitten’s claws dug deeply right into the heart of everything, and pulled it all open.

Cas’ mouth fell open, and he gaped fish-like.

“Kitten, I… It’s not like that. There’s nothing between Michael and me. We only touch when we have Dean’s consent, and his presence.” He blinked and looked down the table where Dean blinked back. Michael took a bite, smug and satisfied.

“Fine. Then your consent is the only thing stopping us putting together a foursome, Alpha,” April stated. “What’s fair is fair. I know Dean’s gay. I know there’s not going to be anything happening between us. That’s not what I’m asking for. I just don’t want to be locked out. If Michael’s in, I’m in.”

“Dean. She’s right. We can’t lock her out if we three are going to continue. What do you think? It’s really your call. I’m not going to ask you to sacrifice your comfort. It’s probably better we pull back into established relationships.” Cas’ frown showed how torn he was. Sam, Jess, and Gabe watched judgmentally but in silence. Sam’s hand gripped Jess’ neck tightly to keep her from jumping in with unwelcome comments.

Dean swallowed the bite he’d been holding in his mouth. His eyes were still wide with surprise, and he kicked himself for not seeing this on the horizon. He knew April wanted in, and he knew she could feel what Cas was up to. He should have addressed it more directly sooner. “Hold up, babe. Look, I’m game to try some things.”

“Dean, you stated your feelings clearly way back in Dallas…”

“No, C.J., all I said is I don’t want to have sex with her. I never said we couldn’t play at all. Hell, half the shit we get up to isn’t sex at all. Maybe we should just try. Keep the lines of contact clear, keep the boundaries solid…”

Castiel interrupted, “And you’ll safeword if it gets to be too much for you?”

“Uh…” said Dean elegantly. He knew he wasn’t at that point yet. He wanted Michael and Cas to take care of the boundaries for him, but the look in Castiel’s eye told Dean that wasn’t going to happen. “Fine. So we play impact-scenes only. No sex at all. Or!” he sat up straight, an epiphany hitting him. “We build up to it. Start at breakfast, like April already does. Put me under the table too. There won’t be any contact between the two of us, and I can get used to what it feels like to Sub with her. What d’ya say, Cas? We’d be at opposite ends of the table. There wouldn’t be any contact between us at all, but all four of us could be engaged at once. Maybe even swap sides every now and then, if you’re open to relax the rule about no one touching your mate but you.”
Cas looked up and down the table. All eyes were on him. “Dean, we already discussed this option. Michael’s in training. He needs to focus on his Omega.”

“He’s in Dom training too, man,” Dean objected logically. “He needs balance. The Omega stuff won’t work if he spends all his energy trying to suppress his wolf. That bastard’s too powerful to take a backseat that long.”

Michael’s deep growl startled Dean and made him shiver beautifully. Apparently, the wolf didn’t appreciate being called a bastard.

“See?” said Dean, invoking the obvious evidence with a gesture toward his mate.

Cas gave in all-of-a-sudden. “All right. We’ll try. I knew I was going to get an ear-full over this afternoon’s session with you and Michael from my Ozzie. I just didn’t expect it to happen at dinner.” He graced April with a rueful look, and she resumed her usual heart-eyes as she felt his emotions caressing her through their bond.

Castiel glanced down the table where Gabriel sat opposite Michael. Gabe smirked cheekily at him. “You thought Friday dinners were going to be like Father’s big Sunday meals back in the day?” Gabe asked. “All of us sitting with good posture and impeccable manners? All, ‘Yes, Alpha’ and ‘No, Alpha’ while you laid out the agenda however you saw fit? Look around you, little brother. Is that who we are?”

“I think I would suffocate if that was who we were.” admitted Castiel.

“Good. Me too.” Gabriel shifted his plate and picked up his wine glass. “Look, you’re doing fine. You’re a good Alpha. These dinners are a great idea, even if you’re a dick about who gets to attend.” Gabe ignored the spluttering from Cas. “You said you want us all free and clear of our Secondaries and Tertiaries at dinner. You said you wanted everyone empowered and balanced, so we can speak openly. You said you want honesty, right Castiel?”

Cas blushed slightly in embarrassment. It was their very first full Pack Friday Night dinner, and he was already making noises like he wanted to stifle the free exchange of issues, exactly counter to what he’d told them all he wanted.

“Some things are private and don’t belong at the dinner table, Gabe,” he said sulkily.

“Yeah, maybe, but this isn’t one of them. You four are the crucial basis of this pack, and April’s complaint is huge. The betas and I might not get a vote on who sticks their dicks into who, but we deserve to have an understanding of how your dynamic works. Witnessing that you’ve all got a voice and that decisions can be made well and without stifling anyone…it makes the pack stronger.” Gabe finished by taking a long drink from his glass.

He was right. Cas mumbled an uncomfortable retraction of his no-touching-the-Ozzie rule, but he made clear that any touching would only ever be sanctioned in his presence and at his and April’s mutual permission. Castiel had to fight the possessive clench of his gut. His wolf wanted to rip Michael’s throat out. Cas knew he would come around with time, but he worried about the interim.

They finished dinner slowly and a bit subdued. All of them had things on their minds. It had been a difficult day. Eunice watched over the twins in the parlor while they finished their meal, but the pups spent most of the time sleeping. Sam worried they wouldn’t sleep again tonight, and he and Jess were already stretched thin. One thing about the twins: they soothed each other with their presence, but they didn’t keep the same schedule. Inevitably, one slept while the other cried or ate. One demanded playtime while the other needed to be changed. It was exhausting beyond anything either
parent could have expected.  

Sam placed a firm rule on Jess, who had claimed maternity leave from her job. Any time both pups were sleeping, she was to sleep as well. Only, they rarely did both sleep at once. She was sliding badly out of balance in her exhaustion, and Sam wasn’t faring well enough to keep up with her in her need. Sniping out of turn at Michael was only a symptom of her imbalance. He just couldn’t find the intensity she needed in his sleepy state, and she’d begun snapping at him again in frustration, begging him to tuck her back under his wing with a firm slap of his hand and a terse snap from his wolf. 

By the end of the meal, Jess found herself bare-assed over Sam’s lap, laying uncomfortably in everyone’s view, taking a firm slap to her backside every now and then, but mostly simply laying out for the humiliation aspect alone. She was furious, but she didn’t defy her mate directly. That didn’t dispel the obvious conclusion that humiliation alone wasn’t going to help her find her feet again. She needed her Top’s outrage flung at her, and she needed sleep.

Michael watched from his perfect vantage point with a view down the table where Jess’ back fell bare to her shoulders from gravity pulling her light blouse. He leaned in with a hand on Sam’s shoulder and whispered to him, “You might consider asking for help just this once, Sam. I know Alpha would appreciate the trust.” Michael sat back up with a significant look into Sam’s tired eyes. Sam frowned and then sighed. He looked up toward the head of the table and realized Michael was right. He wasn’t in any condition to take care of his own mate right now, and she was suffering for it – worse by the hour. He might be able to find a way to offer her a full night’s sleep, but he couldn’t stop the downward spiral her Submissive had slid into. He was too tired. He, Dean, and April were flying out in the morning to attend the convention in Phoenix. Jessica needed help tonight.

In the end, he approached Castiel cautiously while the Alpha’s hands were wrist-deep in soap suds at the sink and just laid it all out. He asked with a nervous voice for Cas to take him and his mate in hand. He admitted starkly that he needed help.

“I’m honored that you trust me enough to put this in my hands, Sam. I was hoping that you would come to me before I felt it necessary to intervene. I’m proud of the progress we’ve made as a pack. Here’s my decision: you and Jess will stay here tonight with the pups. Michael and I will watch over our nephews tonight so that you and Jess can sleep. Before you go to bed, I will come by your room, and I will spank you both. You, just simply, just enough to allow you to feel the Pack hierarchy settle over you to allow you to relax tonight and get the sleep you need. Jess, on the other hand, needs a sound Balancing session. Do you trust me enough for that, Sam? I won’t harm her, but it will be intense and painful for her. You may stay with us for the duration. You are her mate, and you belong with her.”

Sam bit his lip. He’d taken punishment from Cas before at work, but never as a part of Castiel’s pack, and never without having committed an offense. Pack hierarchy rebalancing was new to them both. He hesitated only a moment though. “I trust you, Alpha,” he said and felt warm to realize it was true. Cas would take care of everything. Sam’s tension drained away on his next exhale. He’d been holding so much weight. Having a pack meant he never had to shoulder all of it himself. Letting Cas remind him of that in a physical way was the only part that was new. It wasn’t a foreign concept though. The ACRI’s research had been confirming the strength of a reinforced pack hierarchy in both strengthening the pack and in stabilizing its individual members for years now. Sam knew Cas was right.

“Sir, after tonight…well, I still don’t plan to move in, but I assume it would be all right if we stay over whenever we need to. The pups won’t be infants forever. Eventually, we’ll have them sleeping on a schedule, and we can catch up. Look, I just want you to know, when your pups come along,
you can ask us for help too. We’ll come and spell you sometimes to let you get a night’s rest. Deal?”

“Thank you, Sam,” said Cas feeling blessed. “Yes, you’re all welcome here whenever you like. Whether you move or not, this is your home. And I appreciate the offer. It’s a deal.”

The pups stayed in Eunice’s delighted care while Jess took a good long bath and Sam ran home to get his luggage and plane ticket and to pack supplies for his sons’ and mate’s overnight stay. Cas offered to take the pups, but Eunice growled at him almost fit for a Lupin, so he left her to it until bedtime.

The mates slept better than they had in ages, even from before the pups came home, both of them solidly warmed and throbbing a bit in the backside, and under no concern that a late-night call for a bottle was going to disturb them. Both of them were astonished to realize how deeply they trusted their packmates to take care of everything, even where their own sons were concerned. Jess hadn’t even protested. Her eyes showed nothing but relief that Cas agreed to hand out the firm punishment she needed and had been desperate for.

The apes have a saying: It takes a village to raise a child. For wolves, it takes a pack. They may not be co-parents, but they were all pack, and their pups couldn’t be in better hands. Jess and Sam both fell into a deep, dreamless sleep after Sam kissed Jessica’s tears off her cheeks and rubbed the sting from her purpling backside.

The pups, tucked far away in a room on the first floor, barely slept at all. If nothing else, it gave Michael and Cas plenty of time to talk over plans for their Submissives. If they were going there, both men wanted to do it right. In the dark hours of the night, each of them bouncing an infant on his shoulder, their tensions from dinner melted away and left them both open and real. Soft, sleepy pups have that power what with their wide trusting eyes and hungry sucking lips. Michael admitted, looking into the future with sufficient self-awareness, that he expected to tense up every now and then and throw down in challenge of the Alpha’s authority when he lost his temper. Cas assured the Omega that he could handle the confrontations as they came, and that nothing Michael’s wolf could do would hurt them in the long run.

They only spoke in passing about Cas’ row with Dean. Michael found it easier than he could have expected to wash his hands of the whole affair. Dean didn’t need a protector, and he seemed to have weathered the confrontation without slipping into a haze of self-loathing. As long as Dean held firm enough to manage himself by himself, Michael found he need not invest his own worry in their quarrels. He thought it boded well for the future. Michael would be watching though. He made it clear to the Alpha that stepping out didn’t grant full authority to abuse Dean, and he left it at that.

The plane for Phoenix took off very early. Jess dropped them at the terminal and then headed home to get a few more hours of sleep. Dean faced it with a pale but determined face. After all, he had an Ozzie to look after. He couldn’t fall apart this time. He only vomited once, and he managed to get that over with before boarding. Meg provided him a low-dose sedative, put an arm beneath his shoulder, and helped him hobble shakily onto the gangway. Charlie took over walking with April. Jo chatted with Sam. Soon they were airborne and headed to Arizona for the start of the convention season. Dean’s nerves were only partly over the flight. He had not faced his fans in months, and so much had happened. He’d changed. Would they be willing to let him? Would they turn on him?

It was going to be a long flight. Dean ordered club soda, and pushed his seat back. April lay her head on his chest and listened to the thump of his heart.

“It’s going to be fine, alpha,” she told him. “You’re magical, and you can do anything.”
Blessings to the pack. I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas or any holiday you celebrate at the winter solstice. I for one will be happy to see the sun for a bit longer in the coming months. I miss it badly.

If you're still reading, and you haven't dropped me a kudos yet, hit me up, would'ja? I hate to ask, but there's something amazingly satisfying about that little button. I don't know. I guess I'm a feedback slut. I keep saying i write for me, and that's true. But kudos makes me happy, plain and simple.

Love you all. I hope you enjoyed.
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Some of you will appreciate: April's not in this chapter. I mean, she's there. She's in Phoenix. But she's got no screen-time. Just assume she's off with the band learning their tunes and bonding. Meg's with her. How's that?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 70 – Saturday, July 15, 2017

NOW:

Jess returned to the manor house to two squalling infants and luggage arranged in the front foyer. She took J.T. from Fred and followed Castiel into the parlor to feed the twins.

“You're certain you'll be fine without us?” he asked for the millionth time. Cas settled into his squishy ‘spanking’ chair and offered Hank the nipple. The little piranha wasted no time. Eating was serious business to Henry.

“We’ll be just fine, Alpha,” she assured him. “I'll stay here at the manor until Sam gets back. I've got Gabriel to help me, plus Fred and the house staff. They really do seem to like having the twins around. Getting a good night’s sleep has made so much difference this morning.” Jess paced slowly, feeding her son as she strolled and rocked him gently.

Cas nodded. “That and our discussion last night. I notice you’re choosing to stay on your feet. Are you in that much pain?”

Her eyes widened marginally. She’d hoped that she had been casual enough about walking with her baby that the Alpha hadn’t guessed the reason. “No, Alpha. I’m all right.”

He cleared his throat and glanced meaningfully toward the couch. His instruction was clear, and it wasn’t his first iteration of it. This was a gentle reminder. Sore bottoms were expected to take the weight of the transgressor for as long as they were sore. Standing to avoid the discomfort wasn’t an option once the thunder of the Alpha had been called to action. Real injury was the only valid excuse, and if the punishee felt it necessary to use that excuse, they were expected to say so directly and to accept medical care.
She blushed and bit her lip but shuffled to the couch anyway and eased herself to sitting. It wasn’t awful...exactly. The ache was embarrassing more than anything else to Jess’ beta. Her Submissive wolf ate it up. Now that was a powerful Dominant – not that Sam’s wasn’t, but… Castiel seemed to understand what Jess needed more deeply, perhaps more instinctively, than her mate did. He’d confronted her fiercely, unapologetically, with force and meaning. He put her solidly in her place, took her squarely between his jaws, and left no room for dissension. Jess knew exactly where she belonged when she stood near Castiel, and all was right with the world.

His eyes marked that he knew precisely what she was thinking, and she blushed deeper.

“I’ll want to take a look at your bruising before we go this morning, Submissive,” he told her gently. “If you need care beyond what I left you with last night, I’ll have Bobby bring his kit over. I want you to go back to bed once J.T.’s finished his bottle, and I want you to stay there for at least three more hours.” Cas let his eyes fall back to Hank’s dewy face, and they softened. “Eunice will be here in an hour to keep watch over the little ones. Fred can handle them until then.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“I know you don’t like foisting your twins off on the staff, Jess, but you’ll be a better mother once you’ve caught up on sleep. Take the help that’s available to you. Eunice and Fred, they really do love caring for the pups. I expect it’s like having Grand-babies in the house at last. Fred never had children of his own, and Eunice’s are grown and gone.” Cas pulled the bottle out of little Hank’s mouth and lifted him to his shoulder to burp him. “It seems to me that since you flew to Nevada to meet them, you’ve not had more than three hours of sleep at a time until last night.”

“No, Alpha,” she admitted ruefully. “And neither has Sam.”

“Well then, last night did you both some good. Perhaps Sam will sleep on the plane. I’ll check in with him when I get there. If necessary, I’ll pull him from some of the events and have him rest.”

“Sir, may I ask you a question?” Jess mimicked Cas’ position and began thumping her pup softly on the back.

“Of course.”

“It’s just, I’m a lawyer. I know that adoptions don’t move this swiftly. I know you had to pull some strings to make this happen. Alpha, did you have to do anything illegal? I couldn’t bear it if there’s a chance it might all unravel. I won’t lose them.” Her voice turned to icy iron at the last.

“Are you concerned with my ethics, beta, or simply that I may have left enough loose strands that it could come undone?” Castiel didn’t seem offended, merely curious.

She frowned. “I won’t lose them,” she repeated. “No one’s going to take my pups no matter what legal justification they might throw at us.”

“I see. So then, it’s not a question of how we made it happen so much as your need for certainty.”

“Alpha.” Icy steel.

Cas sighed and repositioned the pup to finish his meal. Hank’s wise eyes couldn’t seem to focus up at Cas quite as well as his brother’s did. He stared vaguely, never zeroing all the way in. Cas watched him try. “My dear, I’ll confess that not every crossed ‘T’ and dotted ‘I’ followed the strict letter of the law. However, there are NO loose ends. We followed the spirit of every law on the books, and we did what was best for the pups. No one could ever challenge that. Hank and J.T. could not be in better hands. I want you to look at me when I say this. I want you to look me in the
eyes, Jessica Winchester.”

She licked her lips and met his eyes. He was wolf. Power dripped out of his pores; power and certainty.

“No one will take your sons. First of all, no one will ever have cause. All of the reasons that the law ever goes after foundlings and shortcutted adoptions have been well shielded. We have covered every base. We have filled every loophole. We have thoroughly greased every palm, and we have covered our tracks. There are NO loose ends. Secondly, Henry and John are my Pack. They belong to me. Don’t imagine for a moment that I would EVER allow anyone to harm them. You may not know me well yet, Jess, but I protect what’s mine with a ferocity that has the potential to border on madness.”

Jess couldn’t look away from Castiel’s wolf. What she’d experienced last night – all his fearsome power – it had nothing on what she saw now in his eyes. She’d never seen anything like it. It was endless and eternal, both depth and breadth. Cas wasn’t a wolf at all. He was monstrous. But she trusted him to her core. All that power was on HER side, and he was offering – no, promising – to use that monstrosity to protect her puppies.

“I’ll protect them, beta. And you. Do not be afraid,” said the angel of righteousness.

Her heart pounded in her chest. She nodded slowly, careful to remember to breathe. J.T. thrust a tiny fist up and swatted her in the throat. She broke her eyes away and focused on her pup.

Castiel’s voice assumed its usual tone without pause as he continued to feed his nephew. “I don’t know if you can rely on Gabriel this weekend. He’ll likely spend every moment with Kali. Maybe you can roust the two of them at some point. It might even be good for them. Nothing clarifies whether a relationship has potential as much as caring for babies together.”

“Alpha?” she asked shakily.

“Mm?”

“Thank you.”

“Any time, Jess.”

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Squared away in the green room, Sam and Dean listened as they read along with the itinerary. First up was an informal panel with just the two of them for the highest-paying sponsors and volunteers. It was a benefit really, a thank you for the assistance and the funding without which Cons and The Facility itself couldn’t really function. Questions would be welcomed. All topics were on the table, even ones that would be strictly off-limits during the big show. Sometimes these smaller panels turned downright depraved. Sometimes things happened that no one confessed to later. Cameras and cell phones weren’t allowed in for this one. So far, the sponsors had always respected that limit, lest the rules change and all access to their sex-gods be taken gruffly away.

Sam seemed troubled. There could be no more direct contact with patrons like that – not during the panels. He was Mated now, and so was Dean. Sam still had a job to do during the one-on-ones. The beta wasn’t prohibited on that front like Dean was, but there was a distinct difference between
therapeutic sex and what the sponsors had come to expect during the start-of-festivities panel.

“Charlie,” he called, once the read-through ended. He waved her over. She made her way to him, snagging Dean’s hand on the way. She knew what was on Sam’s mind.

“Relax, Sam. We’re making some new announcements right now. You go on in five. We’ll have them ready for you. All you and Dean do is talk. Hugs are allowed if you initiate. The audience is not allowed on-stage. It’s still the first panel though. We’re going to keep the rules lax for the audience itself. As long as they can play and keep it in the seats, we’re going to let them. If they start to get rowdy or too close to you boys, we call it. Be ready, but the security team has their instructions. You’ll be fine. The sense is that your fans are over-the-moon about you boys mating finally. And the pups, of course; rumors are starting to spread about the pups,” she added with a happy smirk. “Everyone wants you safe and happy.”

Dean scoffed quietly. He knew these degenerates well enough. Some of them came to every single appearance. He couldn’t imagine they’d be so easily willing to let him and his brother just step out like that.

“I guess we’ll know for sure in just a minute,” he said fatalistically. The guide arrived in the Green room to lead them backstage, and Sam, Dean, and Charlie braced themselves for the start of a new era.

They listened from backstage as the announcer completed his reading of the rules. Each Omega present had a whistle. Each was encouraged to use it at the first sign of an unwanted advance. Security was everywhere, some in plain clothes, disguised as audience, some lining the walls. Incidents had become few over the years, but no one felt that cutting back on security presence was a good idea just yet. They still had so far to go.

If anything, the Conventions had turned into a hippy ideal of free-love and mutual respect. Signs hung everywhere asserting the power of “Enthusiastic Verbal Consent.” People practiced asking one another’s opinions and preferences, even when they weren’t discussing sex. No one so much as stepped across another to take their seats without asking for consent. Meg joked that it had become a “Manners” convention more than anything else, and Dean felt there was no greater praise. Egalitarian ideals lined the aisleways fit to make the Progressives swoon. It was a false ideal, but when this many horny strangers occupied the same space to discuss the randiest of topics, sing, dance, play, and shout together, real harm could be done if the ideals weren’t overdone.

Fondling happened in the audience. Tying happened too. Sometimes Mating happened, but Security was ever-watchful for anything non-consensual. They had techniques to protect the vulnerable without spoiling the party. They had adjacent rooms to hustle Triggered couples into if Mating or presenting became unavoidable. For later events, all contact between patrons was technically forbidden. Audience members were instructed to keep it in their pants, to keep their hands to themselves, and to fucking pay attention. Of course, it was all said with a light tone from the stage, but enough gravity that the audience knew they meant business. Once the panels got going, all of them became so invested in the conversation they weren’t as distracted by their seatmates. Of course, they were still wolves at a bonfire, and there was always a bit of harmless rule-breaking, but the true boundaries were clear to everyone but the Primates.

Oddly enough, or perhaps not, it was most often the Primates in the audience who really didn’t ‘get it’. There were no Primates in the first panel’s audience, but they would be there later, at the larger events. Primates, more than Lupins, sneaked in alcohol, tried things without asking, took what they wanted, and made a big fucking mess. They seemed incapable of distinguishing between harmless play and full-on boundary jumping. Jo was starting a new effort this season to try to educate the apes.
Registrations to apes now came with a mandatory attendance to a brief training seminar held concurrently with the first panel. Skip the training, and you’d non-refundably cut yourself out of the entire convention.

Everyone agreed, if Jo’s new approach didn’t work, they would have no choice but to restrict attendance to Lupins only. No one wanted that. Ape allies, ape converts, were critical to the movement. The problem was how to weed out the reprobates from the truly invested. Apes don’t produce scent the same way wolves do.

The last of the audience was taking their seats. Peliometers passed quietly over them, watchful for anyone too close to Cycling or Presenting to be here. Nothing created chaos quite like an Omega going into Heat or an alpha’s first sight of his own throbbing knot in a packed convention hall.

The brothers’ names were announced, and each was handed a bottle of water and a microphone as they mounted the steps. Dean had his stage-face cowl pulled up tight. He liked this role. He always had fun. But a niggling wave of nerves touched his spine as he stepped into the lights. As much as he wanted everything to be the same as it had always been, it never would be. Never again. These were Dean’s people, but were they ‘Old Dean’s’ people only? Would they still recognize him? It had only been seven months since the last convention, but so much had changed. Dean was sweating. Sam turned to him on-stage, winked at him, and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the alpha’s brow with a flourish.

The lights blinded. The piped music swelled. Dean fought biting his cheek or his lip or squeezing his fingernails into his palm. He fought. He didn’t do any of those things. He craved his mate. He longed for his fiancé. It lasted forever, this sweaty uncertainty. He had Sam. Dean took a deep breath and smiled, uncertainly at first. They were cheering. They were loud. Were they always this loud? The piped song ended, but the cheering didn’t flag. It got louder. Sam squeezed Dean’s shoulder. His hazel eyes flashed liquid, and he pressed his lips together, pulling his dimples. Sam looked at Dean and mouthed, “I think they still like us.” It was meant to be tongue-in-cheek, but Dean began to really listen.

The lights were still blinding, but he began to see through them. People were standing on their chairs, cheering, shouting, stomping, and clapping. It was an uproar. Suddenly, a lump formed in Dean’s throat, and he couldn’t stop his eyes from misting over. Sam was right. Even after the new rules were explained, after Dean’s massively submissive face graced the cover of a major magazine, after he abandoned his fans and took a mate and a fiancé, abandoning every Lupin tradition at the same time, even after everything, they still loved him. Dean settled his breathing and pulled his metaphorical, metaphysical cowl tighter over his eyes. He stepped up to the microphone and tried to wave them down into silence. It took a few minutes. It took another few minutes of laughter and feigned sternness. “All right!” he admonished them. “Knock it off! Sit down before you fall down! Were you all raised in a barn?” They laughed at him, but they began to settle.

“How?” said Dean into the mic. He turned to Sam. “Wow. Did you expect anything like that?”

“That was nuts. Thanks, guys!” Sam had his sparkle on too, and they let the cheering step back up again for a minute.

“We love you, too,” Sam announced.

“Wow, I guess it’s been a while since we’ve been to Arizona. I think they missed us.” Dean spoke to Sam in a teasing lilt.
“It’s been a year,” Sam admitted. “Too long. I don’t know, Dean. A lot can happen in a year. What do you suppose? Has anything important happened in the last year that we need to go over?”

“NOPE!” said Dean confidently and succinctly. The audience laughed.

“Nothing?” teased Sam. “Nothing’s new in your life? Okay, then, maybe we should just skip right to questions…” He turned to the audience. Those in the first few rows were visible, and he recognized many of them. They were practically vibrating in their chairs, and Sam turned his devastating wink on a few of them that he knew well enough.

People began to shout questions out all over each other in their haste to be answered. It was a cacophony. Nothing made it to the stage fully formed without being drowned by something else.

“I dunno, Sam,” said Dean over the bedlam. Luckily, he had a microphone. “It doesn’t seem like anyone has any questions.”

The noise got louder, and it took several minutes to restore order, but the boys were both loving it and in fine form. At last, the audience quieted, and they both settled into tall seats on the stage with their mics in their hands.

“Actually,” Dean started, growing serious. “A lot has happened since we were here last. You guys know a lot of it, but if you wanna talk about it, well, that’s one reason we’re here. Make no mistake, this weekend is ABOUT you and FOR you. Sam and I aren’t going to spend the whole four days talking about ourselves. We aren’t that interesting, but we’re all a Pack here. I guess a little family news wouldn’t be off-base.”

Sam eyed his brother, hoping to prompt him into starting the ball rolling, but Dean shook his head.

“Let’s just take questions, Sammy. We’ll get there. How about you?”

He pointed into the murk at a hand that had shot straight upward like an arrow.

The stage lights dimmed a little, and the house lights were brought up at a signal from Sam. If they were a Pack, then this was a conversation, and they needed to be able to see each other.

He was a large man, he seemed alpha, but there was a softness to his features. He took the offered microphone with a whispered thanks. He reminded Dean of Benny.

“Thanks for picking me. Okay, uh, I guess I’m going first. Yeah. Thanks for coming back to Phoenix. I guess you can tell, we love you guys down here. There’s a lot of separate wolf-communities, but we always come together in July just for the Winchester brothers.” He let the audience respond loudly and then resumed. “My question is…will either of your new mates be joining us? I can’t tell you how excited my mate is to meet yours. I’m a little bit jealous, but he said I have nothing to worry about. It’s all just wanting to meet the new Pack.”

Dean took a moment to think how to answer. “Look, guys. I’d love to introduce you to Michael. He’s a great guy, and he sends his best. But he’s not…I mean. Whew, this is tough. He’s, um, complicated, and he never signed up for the limelight. Someday, I’m sure he’ll be ready to join us for some events. I have no doubt you’ll get a chance to meet him, but for now we’re gonna keep things real simple. What did you think of his interview in Rolling Stone? Did y’all get a chance to read that?”

Dean could have given them the political answer and deferred with bullshit, but he’d decided years ago not to do that. They would either get no answer from him at all, or they would get the truth.

They cheered as he hoped they would. Hurdle number one was crossed unscathed. A reference to
the article meant a poke at Dean’s presentation therein, and they hadn’t turned on him yet. So far, it was just a poke though.

Sam answered as well. “I’m going to mirror what my brother said. What we do here is more than our job, but it IS also our job. Don’t get me wrong, we love doing it, but it’s not what our mates do. Jess sends her love. She’s at home with the pups this weekend. She says to send hugs and kisses to all of you.”

The mention of pups sent a spark through the audience as they began to catch on. The rumors hadn’t spread very far yet, and many in the audience didn’t know. It took a while to calm the noise back down. Sam was laughing at having outed himself so casually, but he settled in to explain.

The story dropped quickly. Twins adopted. Little newborn boys already living in the Winchester Pack. Oh, and ‘The Winchester Pack’. Mention of the pack brought them round to discussing the origins of the new pack, and how it was set up. Castiel’s new name. That took them through to Castiel and his role in it all. It was a quick-paced back and forth. No matter what questions they had come to the arena with, the audience let the talk evolve rapidly into a full-throttle data dump of everything Winchester.

“Show us the ring!” someone near the front shouted, and Dean blushed crimson, but he held his left hand aloft and let the stones sparkle in the stage lights.

“Cas has one now too,” he admitted. “I gave it to him for his birthday.”

The mic passed to a middle-aged beta woman near the front. “You owe us an explanation,” she announced haughtily, looking right at Dean.

“Oh, I do, do I? What for?” he teased back.

“We’ve said for years that you and Alpha Novak were an item, and you always denied it. How do you reconcile that with your promise not to lie to us in these panels? I mean, you’re getting married!”

It was a confrontational question, but Dean knew her, and she had a point. Sort of. This is the kind of interaction he’d most hoped for, in truth. He wanted them to get real with him and let him talk. While the playful banter was fun, it didn’t cut to the heart of anything, and he and Sam and Cas had all agreed to open the windows to their pack enough to let it serve as a model for effort if nothing else. Dean desperately wanted to explain.

“I never lied about that. We weren’t together. We were never together until suddenly we were. Castiel and I have been scene partners for more than 8 years, but you all know that scene partners are just that. It was never more than that. The truth that I never shared with anyone but Sam is that I’ve been in love with Castiel for all 8 of those years. Yeah, yeah, I know. You all knew that scene partners are just that. It was never more than that. The truth that I never shared with anyone but Sam is that I’ve been in love with Castiel for all 8 of those years. Yeah, yeah, I know. You all knew it. You told me so. But it was private.” Dean rubbed a hand over his face. These were his people, and they deserved the truth. He wanted them to understand that even for the most expert wolves in the business, none of this interpersonal stuff was easy. “I just never knew he was in love with me too. I guess it was all a little too private. It’s really that simple. We both figured that alpha/alpha relationships can’t work unless the two wolves have already had a Mate-trigger that flamed out with someone else. Otherwise, it’s bound to face a nasty end when the mates come along. Both of us made that same calculation on our own years ago, so we just kept things clinical. I’ll be honest with you guys. It sucked. It sucks to be so close to the one you’re in love with, but you can’t ever move things along.”

“And what about Michael?” she asked as a follow-up before relinquishing the microphone.

“That’s the question, isn’t it? Look, none of this is easy. I’m not gonna lie. I’ve been up nights on
end trying to figure it all out. What we’re doing in our pack isn’t for everyone. But it is right for us. Michael Winchester is my mate. He’s as much my mate as any mate was ever anyone’s mate. I’m not short-changing him. He doesn’t live in the basement. I love Michael. Lemme say that again, I. LOVE. MICHAEL. Michael and I are solid. We know who we are and what we want from each other. Nothing changes about that when Cas walks in the room. It’s not bigamy. I’m not marrying Michael. Cas isn’t marrying April. It’s complicated, but it’s not impossible.”

The microphone passed to a woman Sam pointed out. “I thought you guys were a Traditional pack? How is what you’re doing traditional in any way? Can you just make rules up for yourselves then? I don’t understand. Forgive me, both of you. I’m not trying to be rude, but I was brought up to believe that wolf-packs are structured the way they are for a reason.”

“Let’s look at it like this,” said Sam. “Do you mind if I ask your designations?”

“No, sir. I’m a beta-Submissive.”

“All right. Are you Mated?”

“Yes, sir. Twelve years. Four pups.”

“Congratulations. That’s wonderful. What’s your name?”

“Shar.”

“It’s nice to meet you Shar. Okay, think about your pack - your mate. Does he or she fill an intimacy role for you? Is your mate your best friend? Can you talk to him or her about anything? And is there a power imbalance that ever gets in the way of that? Can you drop all of your walls when the two of you are alone, and just be yourself?”

“It’s a him, sir. Yes, he’s my best friend. It’s been twelve years, and we still do everything together. We’re still like new mates. My friends tease us.”

Sam huffed a laugh along with the audience. “That’s wonderful. I’m happy for you. I’m guessing he’s a Dominant?”

“Yes, sir, but we’re both Shallow. The power thing isn’t really a thing. It’s there when we play, but the rest of the time…we’re just mates. He’s my best friend,” she repeated.

“Is that him there beside you, Shar?”

“Yes. This is Gary.”

“You’re a very lucky man, Gary,” said Sam, then he turned to the audience in general. “Here’s the point of all that. Most wolves fall into a designation range close to where Gary and Shar fit. Most wolves occupy the center ranges of the Keller graph. Hopefully, you’re all familiar enough to know what I mean. Most wolves don’t have to struggle with Deeps and Profounds. Those guys are pretty rare in the grand scheme of things. For someone who is both a Deep and a Profound, the ‘Power thing’ never really goes away.” Sam used air quotes. “The power imbalance colors every interaction no matter how small. As much as Dean and Castiel may love their mates, they can never be best friends with them. It’s a very different kind of intimacy, and the truth is that for wolves out at the corners of the spectrum, far from any axis, they sort of get robbed of the chance to have an intimate relationship like most of us take for granted. Me, I’m never going to marry anyone except perhaps my mate, Jess. She’s all I need. She and I are very different in power, but we’re such a good match as Secondaries that we can easily stow that side of ourselves and just hang out together. We understand each other on the level of adults, lovers, and friends.”
Dean was nodding along with a concentrated frown on his face. He’d never thought about Sam’s need for an intimate partner before. It was a welcome insight.

“But I watched this all play out for Dean from right underfoot. What he has with Michael is different than what he has with Cas. Dean’s a bit…special anyway.” The audience laughed, and Dean slapped Sam across his chest.

“Thanks, man,” said Dean with a sarcastic roll of his eyes.

“But you are, Dean. You ARE special. There’s no way one person, one intimate partner, was ever going to be enough for you. You are too many individual people inside, and they all need something different. Cas can’t understand you from the inside and give you that deep and lightning-fast response that Michael does. Cas can’t feed your Deep alpha. He’s rated too far above you. But Michael won’t ever be able to soothe the submissive side of you that has nothing to do with your wolf. An Omega just doesn’t have that capacity, no matter how Dominant he is. You and Cas have the same Secondary match that I have with Jess. It changes the whole dynamic, and it leaves the two of you free to explore what’s in your front brain.”

And there it was. Dean knew they would get to hurdle number two soon enough. The topic would take several steps ahead before he knew for sure. That submissive side, the human one, the front-brain need to bow his head and bend his knee to a force greater than himself. They’d been generous so far. Would they let him be this?

No one picked up the dropped hint though. They were still fixated on the poly-pack.

“Can you describe how it works between you all?” asked a blond young man, an Omega.

Dean nodded and took this one head-on as well. “Cas is in charge. At the end of the day, he makes the decisions for the pack. He takes input from all of us, and I’m his second-in-command, but the final decisions are his to make, and the rest of us accept that. It’ll come as no surprise to any of you who know me that ours is a pack-discipline household. Cas is in charge, and that means that everyone answers to him, if you get my meaning. As second, everyone but Cas answers to me, even Sam here, although that’s a bit of a complication of its own ‘cause I answer to him right back. We’re almost even in rank when it comes to the discipline side. Sam’s third in rank officially, so he holds everyone below him accountable. It goes on like that. Yes, we do use corporal punishment in our home. Some use it rather more liberally than others, but you’ll all be proud to hear that I currently have no bruises at all from any type of striking implement,” Dean bragged.

“Oh, really?” Sam challenged. “When were you last spanked, Dean? I’m not buying that for a second. I’ve never known you to stay out of trouble for three days running. So, spill. When?”

“Um. Well. Yesterday. But it wasn’t like that…” Dean’s voice was lost to the good-natured jeering, so he shook his head and let it go. Sam was nothing but smug.

“Fine,” said Dean with a showy rub of his own backside. There was no vestige of sting or warmth remaining. He toyed with the idea of pointing out that Sam had a warmer butt at the moment than Dean did, but he let it go. Some things didn’t have to be waved around publicly.

Sam picked it back up and went on. “What Dean hasn’t mentioned, and I think what the question was really about, is how the multiple partners share power. That’s not necessarily a natural situation. It’s taken a great deal of careful structuring, trial and error, and being endlessly flexible for all of the parties to find a way to fit themselves and their partners into this matrix. It’s not something they’ve done carelessly. Every alpha holds a pack Claim over every Omega. Two Submissives share a single Dominant, and two Dominants share a single Submissive. They
negotiated with generosity. They listened and watched carefully. The Alpha at the head of the table has been amazing, I think we all agree. Every pack member has a place and a voice. Everyone’s needs are important. Everyone gets fed. For someone who stands inside it all, but doesn’t really play a role in the very middle of it, I can attest that what they are building is strong and stable. You, young man,” Sam prompted the blond. “You’re Omega?”

He had already relinquished the mic, but he nodded.

“Someone like you might worry that a pack like ours, with so many alphas and so many Dominants, that you might get lost, that your needs might not be of utmost importance. But it’s not like that. In our pack, you know I don’t have all the details, but it appears that taking care of Dean’s wolf has been given over to Michael completely. As mates, they need that. And that leaves Castiel free to have a relationship with Dean more as equals than he might otherwise. It’s really working. It’s not perfect, but it’s working.”

Dean scanned the crowd. There would be more people later. This audience was small really. No one seemed upset. They were listening raptly. This panel was nothing like those of the past where the elite sponsors wanted a bit of real contact with their idols, and Sam and Dean had always complied. Some were frowning, but they didn’t seem to be rejecting so much as trying to understand.

Sam was still explaining, but Dean had tuned him out to the meanderings of his own mind. “There was a very difficult time just after Castiel and April Mated. Dean moved to Texas for a while, and neither of them were doing well. Finally, Cas just dropped everything and flew down to Texas to bring Dean home. Before he left he talked to me. I asked him how he planned to make it work. I’m a bit protective of my big brother, if you hadn’t noticed. He told me he planned to propose marriage, and I thought he was crazy, just like a lot of you. He said he planned to make it work by listening closely to Dean and just giving him whatever he needed, whatever he wanted. It took me a minute to understand, but it’s a little bit of genius. In a pack like ours, the Alpha really has all the power. The top-rated mate has all the power in a Mated pair. Cas was going to turn that upside-down and give the power in their marriage to Dean…”

“Wait! What?!” Dean had tuned back in suddenly. “He said what? That little bastard!”

Sam rolled his eyes dramatically and turned to face an outraged Dean. “Don’t give me that, Dean. That’s exactly what he’s done. He let you direct everything between you. He’s been paying close attention and…”

“No! That’s the opposite of what I told him I wanted! What the actual hell? I said I wanted HIM to take the rudder. I said I wanted to turn everything over to HIM! Did he really say that to you?”

Dean was spluttering and babbling.

Sam began to laugh. “Right,” he agreed. “And that’s what you’re getting, isn’t it? Precisely what you wanted.”

“But that’s not…Wait.” Dean frowned in frustration. Had they just talked in a circle?

Sam faced his brother and ignored the audience although he held his mic up out of stage-habit. “Everything’s off balance in so many ways, Dean. He knows what he wants, and he’s got some limits as I’m sure you know. He’s not going to let you walk all over him, but the basic structure of your marriage with him…it was always going to be based on what YOU need. Even if you don’t know you need it.”

“And he said that to you,” Dean accused angrily. “He said it to you, but not me.”
“Hold up, cowboy,” Sam placated his brother. “I’m sure he never meant it to be a secret plot. Hasn’t he asked you what you want from him, from your marriage?”

“Well, yeah. Of course, but it was supposed to be a mutual thing, not just what I want.” Dean had forgotten they had an audience, and the audience was holding its breath at the dose of stark reality from the brothers.

“All he wants is you, Dean. Everything else is negotiable.”

Dean felt his insides turn to mush, and then couldn’t control it when the mush leaked from his eyes. “But…”

“He’ll give you anything, Dean. Don’t you know that by now? Even if it’s not what he expected you to want. Hell, he’ll pretty much do the same for everyone in the pack, but you and April – he’d die for either of you in a heartbeat.”

There was that phrase again. “In a heartbeat.” Only, it didn’t hurt this time. Dean gaped as Sam turned back outward and selected another questioner.

“Yes, hi. I don’t exactly have a question. I just really wanted a chance to tell you, Dean. I think a lot of us agree, you are so amazingly brave. You’re a hero to me.”

Dean stammered and tried to respond. He was still dizzy from Sam’s announcement. But she wasn’t finished. “My dad, you see, he’s an alpha-Sub like you. I think he’s also a front-brain submissive. Obviously, I don’t know all the details about that. It’s none of my business really, but that article in that magazine. God, I wish I could explain. He stared at that picture for hours – the one on the cover with you and Michael? He’s had a rough life, my dad. He and Papa Mated young, and they weren’t True-Mates. They had a good life together though. Papa died four years ago, and my dad hasn’t been himself since then. Papa was a beta-Dom, and yes, I’m adopted, obviously. I always thought I understood their relationship, but now I’m not so sure. We have a pack, and they look after him, but… When that article came out, I don’t know. It’s like it sparked something in him I haven’t seen in years. Like it gave him hope that he might still find something that’s missing, something he didn’t know to look for. He’s read the article so many times. I still can’t get him to talk about it though.”

She looked around uncomfortably, but soldiered on. “Look, I know some people here feel like grilling you guys about all these crazy changes. It might seem like we’re not on your side. But I’ve been a fan of yours and Alpha Novak for years. I followed everything you recommend in your books, alpha Winchester, and those books have been a life-saver for me and my mate. I trust you. If you say that what you’re doing in your personal life is going to work, then I’m all for it. I think a lot of us are.” She waited with a smile while a resounding cheer went up in solidarity.

“I have some Primate friends who really can’t understand what all the fuss with that picture is about. I have some wolf friends who think it’s disgusting. I won’t lie. But what I see, what my dad sees, is beautiful. I believe in you, alpha, and I want you to know that your bravery means everything to a lot of people who see themselves in that picture.”

The audience burst forth with another deafening wave of cheering, some rising to their feet.

Dean was speechless. He swallowed, but his mouth had gone dry. He scrubbed a hand across the back of his neck and tried to pass off to Sam, but Sam shook his head minutely and gestured for Dean to take the front of the stage.

“I don’t…” he croaked. “I don’t know what to say. I don’t even know when that picture was taken. It was a surprise to me the same as you all. It wasn’t posed, if you were wondering. Um, thank you.
That’s very kind.”

The audience quieted, and Dean frowned in thought. This round didn’t matter quite as much. There were no cameras. The same topic would come up, no doubt, in the full panel later, and that one would wind up on YouTube. Dean knew how it worked. But he wanted to give this group what they deserved. They’d always been like a family to Dean, and they deserved his respect.

“We got an advance copy of the article. I got to see everything before it came out, and if I’d wanted to, I could have stopped it. All of you know by now what I’m talking about. There’s more in that picture than I’ve ever shown in public before. You know me as cocky and arrogant, loud and confident. You know I have a Submissive wolf, but it’s always looked to the world like that’s kind of second to my alpha side – like as long as I get a good scene now and then, that’s all I need.”

Dean stood up and paced a little, taking his microphone with him. He was stirred up internally, in need of motion to dispel the distracting waves of energy flowing through his limbs. “That’s not entirely accurate. That’s not entirely right – not the whole picture. I mean, yeah, I’m an alpha, and I don’t pretend I’m not. That’s a big part of who I am, but…more than that… I’m… I need… That picture tells the truth of it. Michael may be an Omega, but he’s my Dom, and he owns me. Castiel owns me. Crap, even my brother Sam owns me sometimes, and I’m not ashamed of that. If I had to choose a side of me to abandon and a side to keep, I’d throw out the alpha and keep my Sub. That’s who I am. I know that won’t be a popular stand, but I’m not here for a popularity contest. I’m here to stand up in front of anyone and say, ‘This is who I am, and who I am is just fine, whether you like it or not. No one defines me but me, and this is who I am’.”

The applause was deafening again. Sam watched from behind and to the side. He knew a momentous occasion when he saw one, and he joined in the applause. He hoped like hell Dean could feel the warmth from his chest cross the distance and join the adoration sweeping up in waves from the audience below.

The expertise be damned. All the research be damned. Forging into a brighter new world by slicing through the ruins of the old looked just like this: like scared individual wolves making a stand one-by-one to declare that they and they alone could speak to their own identity. Of course, it had taken Dean years and training and research and resources and trust and faith and support to get here, but he had a resolve about him that others could emulate if they needed to. One brave explorer clears the path for others to follow. Dean looked over his shoulder at Sam, and he winked.

Always a brat. Sam laughed.

****************************************

They boarded the flight on time, and took their first-class seats. Michael had the window seat. Cas had the aisle.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

Cas gave him a withering look. “Is that five times you’ve asked that, or six?”

Michael wasn’t put off. “And the singing thing? Am I really going to do that?”

Cas huffed a laugh and reached for his tablet. He had downloaded a new ‘Scientific Journal’ edition he wanted to read cover-to-cover. “That’s completely up to you, Omega. Can you carry a tune?”
“Of course, I can!” Michael was highly offended and annoyed. “That’s not the point.” He shifted into pissy silence for a while. Cas flipped pages every now and then. The plane took off.

Michael finally broke the silence, but it took him a couple of tries before he got the question out.

“Sir, why did Dean and I never Trigger at a convention? I’ve been to four of them. I wasn’t in the front row, but I had to be closer than... than when he smelled me in Texas. He said that registered as soon as he opened his car door. I was inside the building.” Michael was still looking out the window. It was a question that had been eating at him for months, but he didn’t think asking Dean would be a good idea.

Cas set the tablet down on his open tray and looked straight ahead, frowning. “That’s a very good question. We know that the Mating-trigger is something of a mystery. We know that when people who already know one another through childhood are True-Mates, they don’t simply Trigger on their sixteenth birthdays. It’s more complicated than that. Perhaps there was a degree of maturity that needed to reach a certain point before you were both ready.”

“Sir, I’m significantly older than 16.”

Castiel sighed in frustration. “My name is Castiel, Michael. Do you need a rule?”

“What? Oh. Sorry.”

Cas let it go. Michael didn’t need a rule. “We can add that to the growing number of things that make you unique as an individual, and you and Dean as a Mated couple. I have no idea. Perhaps you needed to be in the right mindset when you encountered Dean in order to Trigger.”

“Like, I had to be thinking like an Omega?”

“It’s just a guess.”

“I thought you would know.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t. The True-Mate signals Trigger when they will. There’s really no predicting them. We have a great deal left to learn about ourselves.”

“I was Omega when he found me, but scenting him knocked me back into me. I mean, back into my Dominant. Pop had been bawling me out for the last 60 miles straight, and I was a mess.”

“And what mindset were you in at the conventions you attended?”

Michael chuckled. “I had all these grand plans of striding up to Dean and just pointing toward the floor at my feet. He was going to fall to his knees and beg to be mine.”

Castiel stifled a smirk. That would have made a very pretty picture.

“You know, Dean’s in a bit of an altered state-of-mind at the conventions too.” Castiel replied. “He’s got an ultra-alpha mask that he wears in order to cope with the attention without fearing doing just that – kneeling spontaneously for a powerful Dom.”

“No, he doesn’t. That’s just his brat playing alpha.”

Michael’s declaration hit the air around Cas like little shards of glass, and it cut as deeply. He cocked his head in consternation. “What’s that?”

Michael looked up. “His brat. The front-brain one. The little waif. The one where all the mischief
comes from. When he’s in front of a crowd, he’s not alpha. He’s a front-brain sub-brat. I thought it was an aspect of his wolf at first, but it’s not. You didn’t know?”

Cas scratched his neck, then his forehead. “The assertive, confident, cocky affectation is submissive?”

“Well, yeah, I guess, unless he’s got an alpha brat.” Michael turned back to watch the light shift as they burst through the cloud layer and into the sunshine.

Castiel stared straight ahead, thinking furiously. “Holy fuck…” he muttered.

Michael side-eyed him and laughed out loud. “Christ, you really didn’t know? He plays that game all the fucking time. His little brat poses as the alpha and gets whatever it fucking wants outta everybody.”

Castiel stared at Michael. Pieces were falling into place. “Does he know he does it?” he asked the Omega.

“I don’t know,” said Michael. “Next time I bust him for it, I’ll ask.”

They went back to their own thoughts for a while. Neither really sure how to break the uncomfortable silence. Drinks and snacks were served. Cas decided to join his pregnant seat-mate in sipping ginger ale. Both were thinking hard.

“How is your training going so far?”

“I figured you got regular updates. Do you really need to ask?”

“I get updates from the trainers, Michael. I’m asking you.”

“Right. Uh, it’s going okay. I guess. I’m getting the hang of holding onto the Omega side better. I still don’t really like it, but it’s getting easier. I don’t have to have a powerful alpha there to give me the push anymore. I still don’t like Hannah.”

”Alpha Hannah, Michael,” Cas corrected gently.

“I still don’t like her,” Michael settled. “But I think maybe she’s the best choice to teach me after all. I think Dean was right. She rubs me the wrong way, gives me something to push against. If I can succeed around her, when my wolf wants to snarl his ass off, I can do it anywhere.”

Cas nodded. He understood that Hannah’s brusque ways were perfectly suited to raise the hairs on the back of Michael’s neck.

“And the Dominant training?” Castiel asked. His tablet still lay ignored on his tray.

“It’s harder than I expected. I never realized before how intimidating my wolf is. I think I’m a little bit scared of him.”

“That shows that you’ve got some wisdom,” Cas assured him. “Never stop being at least a little bit scared. Call it respect if it makes it easier to swallow, but he’s quite powerful enough to do some real damage if you lose hold of the leash, my boy.”

Michael felt a surge of adrenalin spike through his body, moistening the bottoms of his feet. He shoved at the sense of panic and doom, pushing it back down. Where the hell had that come from?

“Cas, what is the big deal anyway? Do you really believe all that stuff about how my wolf thinks I’m
an alpha? Is that why he listens to me? Is that why I can do all that crap that they keep telling me no one can do? What if he catches on that I’m just Omega? What if I lose hold? What if I don’t stay balanced well enough to keep him under control?"

It had been some time since Michael felt himself fall apart like this. The last time it happened was in school with a mentor he thought he could trust, but the teacher was frightened by the power that Michael let him glimpse, and he struck out at Michael rather than shelter him.

“You and Dean have bought some time in the Balancing arena. Pregnant and nursing Omegas do not need Balance adjustments. You can expect a smooth disposition until your pup is weaned without any corrective actions, whether from inside or outside. Even the simple mind-frame adjustment such as we did just before you and Dean went into the H/R room will be unnecessary for the next many months. Perhaps that will encourage you to consider breastfeeding for a full year, although that is entirely your choice. We will all support you in whatever you choose.”

“No adjustments at all? No spankings?”

Cas fixed his sternest eye on the Omega just in case he’d forgotten to whom he was speaking. “Rest assured, Michael. If you misbehave, you will still be spanked, and soundly, but as long as you stick within the rules of the house and your alpha, there’s no reason your backside would need to see a paddle for more than a year.”

“Cool.”

Michael’s age sometimes reared its head at unexpected times.

“As to the rest of your concerns. I don’t take them lightly. Learning to be sure of your mastery over your wolf should have your full attention. Listen to Joshua. He knows a great deal about controlling an unruly Tertiary Dominant. He may not seem so now, but he was quite the firebrand in his day. You and I should begin working through some meditative techniques together soon as well. I wanted you to get your Omega solidified and comfortable first, but if the wolf has become a distraction, we can alter the plan. I assume he’s somewhat put out by the focus lately?”

“He’s almost rabid, Castiel. He would never hurt Dean or anyone in the pack. I mean, he snaps harmlessly at April sometimes, but he’d never take it further than that. He just likes to wind her up. But I don’t trust him around strangers. If we’re going to do this...if I’m really going to go up in front of the crowd and talk to them, let them see me, sing to them...I can’t do that as an Omega. I can’t. I need the show-off, and that means the wolf. I can leash him, sure, but what if I lose control? What if someone flirts with Dean, or, or touches him? Maybe Dean’s showman isn’t who it appears to be, but mine is. Every brash show I ever put on was led by my wolf.”

“And yet, only a couple of those brash shows, with him in front, ever led to a dangerous confrontation, and both of those when you deliberately dropped the leash.” Cas sipped his ginger ale.

“I didn’t...” protested Michael. “I mean, yes, at the test with Jody. They told me to let the wolf lead, but not the other. Back at school...”

“You were drunk and had barbiturates in your system, I believe. You were in no condition to hold a leash. Tell me there was no intent behind your decision to take drugs at that party, Michael.”

Michael didn’t answer.

“I spoke to the dean of your school. He said you spoke of being at your wit’s end and ready to throw
in the towel. Your words, I believe. Correct me if I’m wrong of course, but I imagine that you had
reached a level of exhaustion and frustration that made continuing to restrain your ever-more-
belligerent wolf a task no longer manageable. You needed a break. You had hoped, I suppose, for
mere unconsciousness, but you found yourself instead, unhinged and out of control. I don’t suppose
you need the warning any longer that drugs are an extremely bad idea for people like you and me.”

Michael was blushing and ashamed. He had confessed so much to Dean, but he hadn’t told his mate
about the downers. Dean knew there were drugs present, but he’d skipped ahead before admitting
that he’d taken them. Even further, he wasn’t sure if Castiel knew he’d bought them. It hadn’t
seemed a big deal at the time, until…First that chick had snubbed him, and then his dick refused to
respond when he needed to teach her…”

Michael whuffed a loud snort through his nose, and he buried his head in his hands.

No. That’s not how it went. She hadn’t done anything wrong. That was input from the stupid beast
with no conscience. How could the same side of him be so certain and calm around Dean, and so
utterly bestial around someone else? This trip was such a bad idea. Dean would be there, but
Michael wouldn’t have control of anything.

“Very good,” Castiel praised quietly. “You did it again. You’ll get stronger with every
confrontation, Michael. You are stronger than he is whether he becomes aware that you are not an
Alpha or not. You are very powerful in your most cognitive aspect, and all of that power is backed
up by the wellspring inside your Omega. Learn to channel the power without giving in to the
unreasonable demands. Learn to filter everything you feel the urge to do. Be a man first and a wolf
second. You and I don’t have any other option.”

“You think I can?” asked Michael with a shaky voice.

“I’m betting my reputation and the safety of everyone at this convention that you can, Omega.
You’ve already grown so much since that day in Texas. You aren’t that boy anymore. Just be you.
Funnel the wolf’s inclinations through a tight channel, and work from your cerebral cortex.”

“Easy for you to say…” Michael muttered.

“You do it all the time, my friend, even when you’re Topping your mate. That’s rarely your wolf
unfunneled. You already know how to do this. Perhaps you need to simply stop thinking about it so
hard.”

“Right. Because working through my cerebral cortex works best if I stop thinking.” The sarcasm
dripped heavy off Michael’s tongue, and Castiel cleared his throat pointedly. “Sorry,” he conceded.

“What I meant,” Castiel clarified. “Is that you should trust your conditioned responses. You’ve held
that leash firmly for years without incident. You aren’t going to drop it now.”

“And if I do?”

“We’re not going to leave you alone, Michael. Lean on us if you need to. Let the Pack be your safety
net. That’s what we’re here for.”

***************
Gabriel lay shamelessly bare on his back above the sheets as Kali dressed. If Gabe had ever known shame, it was well before that unspeakable week years ago when his baby brother had had no choice but to press his linen-covered groin against Gabriel’s leaking aching backside to attempt a pseudo-mounting that helped not at all. Gabriel was an Omega who had walked through the lions’ den and come out the other side knowing to his bones that nothing could ever be that frightening again.

Of course, he’d been dead wrong about that, but that’s hardly the point.

“Well?” asked Kali vaguely.

“Well what?” he volleyed back.

“Have you changed your mind yet?”

“About us?” he asked, reaching down to scratch lewdly behind his balls.

“About needing to be owned, you Cretin.” She pulled a light American sun-dress over her head and straightened it.

“If that was you owning me, then yeah, I’ll take all of that you wanna spring for.” Gabriel rolled over and squashed a pillow into submission beneath his head, spreading his legs into an obscene V.

“That was not ownership, Omega. That was just sex.”

“Pretty fuckin’ hot sex,” he corrected from within the pillow.

“You enjoyed yourself?”

“I enjoyed you. Come here.”

“I have to go back to work,” she told him coldly.

“What’d I do now?” he asked, rolling back over.

“You’re being a selfish brat,” she said.

“Well, duh. Being a brat is what I do! You’re supposed to correct me when I’m bad. Didn’t you get the memo?”

“You’re not a true brat, Gabriel. I would know.”

“Well then what was all that shit that we just did about?”

“You directed every step of ‘all that shit’ you moron. I didn’t do anything to you that you didn’t demand from me. You choreographed every single swat.” She sat down abruptly at the vanity mirror he’d installed for her and leaned in to begin applying makeup to her face.

“And why was that, huh? Thought Dommes liked to call the shots. Why’d you want me to do it? Fuck, my ass burns.”

“Whose fault is that? And I never claimed to be a Domme.”

“Cut the shit, Kali. You want something from me that I’m not gonna give you, and you’re exasperated enough to take it out on me.”
The beta slammed her lipstick down onto the vanity. “Oh, I’m the one who’s full of shit? You are so hopelessly in need of an owner that it’s practicallyoozing out your pores, and you’ve got your heels dug in like a fucking bulldog!”

He raised his brows at her and sat up. “That makes no sense at all. You wanna try that again?”

“Put some clothes on Gabriel. I can’t talk to you like that.”

“Make me.”

“UGH! You’re infuriating.”

“Then spank me,” he teased.

Her dark eyes flashed. “I will NOT be goaded, you, you…”

“The word is ‘brat’.”

“NO! No, it’s bloody not! The word is ‘OMEGA’!”

“You think I’m confused about what I am?” he asked in a voice that had gone as icy as hers.

“I think you’re in denial about what you need. You think you’re a free-spirit who flits around wherever he wants and does whatever he wants and stops in now and again to take sips of nectar from strangers, and you think you can keep on like that forever.”

“I HAVE an owner, Kali. I’ve got custody papers just like all the other Omega puppies.”

“No. You have an Alpha brother who dribbles food into your cage every evening and weekends. You have some other tie that I can’t quite read, but you’re clinging to it like it’ll spring you out of your Alpha’s little terrarium, but it won’t. You NEED me, Gabriel.”

Gabriel stood up and pulled a robe over his shoulders. His voice was an ice colder than anything she’d ever heard. “You don’t know the first thing about what I need.”

He delivered it with all the venom he didn’t feel, and he slammed the door behind himself before she could read how badly he wanted to cave to her offer.

The sex wasn’t THAT good. Okay, maybe it was, but Gabriel had no choice. He never should have gotten out of that damned Impala in the first place.

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The morning waned, and the energy levels began to rise as more attendees arrived and found their seminars. Part celebrity showcase, part titillating tease, and part first-aid training for lost Lupin souls, the convention hit its stride into Saturday afternoon. Sam’s E.O. demonstration was always one of the most popular seminars offered. Tickets sold out faster than new chairs could be brought in.

So many wolves needed guidance on proper discipline techniques that they always attempted to accommodate as many as they could. Sometimes, they squeezed in two rounds. Pack Alphas and alpha mates. Fathers and mothers of presenting Omega adolescents, teachers in Lupin schools,
Dominants without formal training but an itch under their skin, men and women, wolves of all backgrounds and ages came to listen and watch, came to learn. There were ways to do this horribly wrong, and Sam meant to eradicate the ignorance. They didn’t sell tickets to Primates for this seminar. It wasn’t THAT.

Dean was his model as usual. Modeling for a punishment seminar broke none of his mate’s restrictions, and he really enjoyed the attention, to tell the truth. They started by chatting comfortably about regions to target and why. When to let loose with a torrent of powerful emotion, and when to keep a stoic presentation. How to avoid injury. How to know how hard to swing. How to avoid a deep shame-response in the spankee that would prove more damaging than the behavior the Top was trying to eliminate. How to discourage an erotic response, and when you might want to encourage an erotic response. How to be sure who was Top in an uncertain pairing. So many details. Sam had the presentation down, though, and he made it fascinating.

Dean sat on the edge of the raised stage and swung his legs, chewing gum, waiting to be needed. He contributed little to the discussion. This was Sam’s baby, and Dean let him run with it. They were moving on to questions, and that was always where Dean’s pert backside found a purpose.

“Go ahead,” Sam prompted the first speaker, a young woman, obviously alpha, possibly Dominant. She was pretty. Time was, Dean would have flirted his ass off over this one. This time he simply watched from beneath his lashes. He wasn’t flirting. Exactly. He was just watching. Coyly. From beneath his lashes.

Flirting with a Domme hit a completely non-sexual note for Dean. It wasn’t about getting off. It was about getting swatted. It was about getting a response and feeling the fiery rush of completion.

“Yes, thank you. I’d like some help with my mate and my cousin. I’m not getting the obedience I need from either of them, and I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

“All right. Tell me about them.” Sam sat down and focused on her problem.

“I took custody of my cousin June when her mother died suddenly. June’s mother was Pack Alpha, and the pack hasn’t named a new one yet. I’ve got custody of her for now, or at least until she Mates. She’s Omega, but not Submissive. However, she’s unruly and disobedient, and it’s rubbing off on my mate, Christopher. He used to be so compliant, and now he’s become a bit of a brat. I spank them, but it doesn’t change anything. Do you think it could be how I’m doing it?”

“Christopher is an Omega too?”

“No. He’s a beta-Sub.”

“Were you True-Mates?”

“Yes, we are.”

“All right, and you said that Christopher was well-behaved before June moved in?”

“That’s what I said.” Dean glanced back at Sam to see how her testiness was striking his brother. Sam didn’t seem to care. Man, oh man, what a brat could do with a woman like this. She was ripe to be wound up and set spinning. Dean kept his face calm, but he chuckled to himself just a bit anyway. Just give him five minutes alone with her. That’s all he needed.

“Can you describe how you present to them when they need to be corrected? Is there a difference?”

“I read them the riot act, make them stand in the corner while they tell me what they did wrong, and
then I take them over my lap and spank them.”

“Do you show them any anger or other emotion?”

“I try not to. I can’t say they feel that I’m pleased with them, but I know that it’s a bad idea to punish when you’re angry.”

“I agree to some extent. A Top must NOT punish unless they are in full control of their emotions. Full control doesn’t necessarily mean no emotion at all. Tell me how Christopher has changed. If you’re doing the same thing, and what used to work doesn’t anymore, perhaps he’s the key.”

Sam signaled subtly to Dean, and the alpha-Sub grunted as he stood up and sauntered toward Sam.

“He used to start bawling before I even put him in the corner. Just the thought of being in trouble was enough to make him cry, and he would be on his best behavior for weeks afterward. Now he hardly shows a reaction even once I lay into him.”

“Have you tried changing the length or intensity of the punishment? Have you tried using an implement of one type or another?” Sam guided Dean into place with a hand on his waist without looking at him. The brat didn’t much like that, but Dean was on his best behavior too. He braced his arms though, not ready to assume the position quite yet.

She paused. “Well, that’s why I’m here. I’d like your advice.”

“I can give you a couple of different approaches,” Sam told her with a thump to Dean’s shoulder to get him bending down over the low table. “I’m going to use my brother as a model, if that’s all right with you, Dean.”

“Go right ahead, Sam,” Dean said cheerfully, but with a touch of the rascal about his tone. “You have my enthusiastic verbal consent.”

“First of all, save corner time for after the spanking. Make them stand without rubbing the sting out, and let the sensations throb for a few minutes while they settle down. Second, get yourself a sturdy paddle like this one.” He brandished the maple paddle so that she could see its dimensions. “You can have a much bigger effect without wearing yourself out. Wooden paddles hurt like the dickens if you use them correctly. And third…”

Sam set to work on Dean. He wasn’t really hitting him very hard, but he didn’t need to just yet. He pointed out where and why he aimed as he did. He showed her the color tones to watch for. He described what he was listening for in Dean’s breath and vocalizations.

Then he paused, and Dean realized he’d squeezed his eyes closed, and he was panting. Jesus, over a demo-paddling? He really WAS out of practice.

“Most importantly, and I want you to listen closely, Omegas and Submissives have different needs. You can’t approach them the same way. I’m going to use my own brother again as an example. Dean’s a Sub, but not an Omega. His mate is Omega, but not Submissive. It’s analogous. Dean’s behavior, and his response to punishment is mostly psychologically based. Often, it’s emotional in nature. When we correct him, he needs to feel an emotion from us. Subs respond most completely to
complicated secondary emotions like anger, betrayal, and disappointment. Secondary emotions are those that derive from a more direct emotional response. Tertiary genders are extremely complicated derivatives of our psyches, and you really have to speak in a language they understand. And while the basis of our tertiary wolves are our reptilian brains, our instinctive brains, when they respond to a stimulus, it’s often not the primary emotion that they react to, but the secondary. Do you understand?”

She shook her head in dismay.

“All right. Let’s do this. I’ll demonstrate again. Dean, may I?”

“Only if you’ll put your back into it this time. I’m about to go to sleep on you here.”

“God, you’re such a brat,” Sam snapped. “Fine. How’s this?” Sam popped his brother much harder than before, and Dean squeaked. “You like that? How about another?” He did it again, and then growled into a third, putting his back into it, but still not a patch on what he would deliver to an unruly Omega.

He stopped and looked away from his brat brother. “Did you see how I did that? My emotions were clearly on display. I was irritated, and I let him know it. I let it into my swing, and I let my wolf out just a little to nip at him too. Irritation is a mild form of anger, and anger is a secondary emotion. Submissives do NOT respond well to a stoic approach. It makes the punishment a calculatable expenditure. You need to speak directly to their emotions and pull up a sense of remorse over the effects to the pack of what they’ve done wrong. If they are jeopardizing the stability of the pack, let them feel your disappointment. If they hurt someone, let them feel that they’ve betrayed your trust. Now do you understand?”

“I’m not feeling much emotion here, Sam,” Dean called out.

Sam grunted into it this time with effort and muttered under his breath. “Fucking brat...You’ll be feeling…”

“Whoa, whoa, little brother. My bad. I was wrong. Jesus, watch the jewels, man. Goddamn, that smarts!”

The alpha woman snickered at the pair of them, but Sam wasn’t laughing. “Mouth off again, Dean. Go ahead. Test me.”

Dean made a lip-zipping motion and lay still. Sam watched him for a moment, and then turned back to his questioner as if nothing had happened.

“This isn’t as easy as it looks. Bear that in mind. When it’s someone you care about, all the training can just fly out the window. Even I screwed this up at first with my mate, and I train people to do this.” Sam was ignoring Dean now, letting him re-set his emotions.

“An Omega is different. The Secondary genders are far more ancient despite arising from a newer part of the brain. I’m no scientist. I don’t know how that happened. It’s backward. You’ll have to get the whys from my brother later. But Omegas respond to primary emotions. However, be extremely careful. There are not many primary emotions that we’re talking about, and I’m not suggesting that you cram them down your Omega’s throat like you do a Sub. Anger is not primary. It results from an initial experience of threat, pain, or loss.

“Pain, fear, joy, pleasure, and disgust are all primary. They arise directly from a stimulus. Of these, we obviously don’t punish using pleasure or joy unless to is to withhold them. That leaves disgust
and fear – which I will state emphatically must NEVER be used to punish – and pain. So you see, the punishment itself delivers the primary emotion that the Omega needs to complete the cycle. Very little emotion needs to come from you.”

Sam approached Dean again, placing a hand on his back. “You good, man?” he whispered this time.

“Yeah, I’m fine Sam.” Dean’s brat was nowhere to be seen. He was no more than a piece of bland meat.

“When you punish an Omega, try starting with a very straightforward presentation, but make sure that it bears little resemblance to what you did for the Sub. I would suggest making the change in how you do things at some point when they are both in trouble at the same time. That way, you can make the distinction very clear. Punish your Sub first, and then stand him in the corner wearing a shirt but no pants, and don’t let him rub. Make him listen to how you deal with the Omega. You’ll be sending two very powerful messages at once.”

Sam ran his hand soothingly over Dean’s butt where it was a little pink. “Oh, and just to be clear; these are not hard and fast rules. Everyone is different. Of the three Omegas in our pack, only one of them really takes punishments this way. The others are quite a bit more complicated. Since you’re struggling with your charges, this gives you a place to start. Keep trying things until you find what works.”

She nodded impatiently.

“All right. So, you’ve got your recalcitrant Submissive standing in the corner. He’s a bit weepy. His ass is glowing red, and he’s listening to everything you say to the Omega. Right? Good. Now the Omega doesn’t need any more fear in her life than she’s already got. Don’t add to that. Yours has just lost her mother and her Pack Alpha both. Those are two different things, and she’s mourning both. So she’s feeling the primary emotion of loss. To correct her, we need to let pain flare up white hot, and then soothe back down. Her reptilian brain will feel it, but the response doesn’t come from there. It comes from her Omega gland. Every emotion passes through that gland as one chemical response or another. Physical pain cleanses everything. She’s gonna hate it, but you need to crank up the power and intensity, and turn your emotions way down. Omegas can take a lot. You ready, Dean?”

“Hit it.”

“Tell me what you did to deserve this punishment, Omega,” Sam roleplayed, and Dean fell right in with him. They had both done this many times before.

“I broke your favorite teacup because I was juggling cups when I shouldn’t. I know better.”

“You do know better. I know you’re feeling guilty about that, so I’m going to help you, and then you’ll be through. When we’re finished, I want you to let it go. I’m not angry with you. Hold on now. I’m giving you 20 swats.” Sam smacked the paddle down with great force, and Dean’s face went immediately bright red. The tendons in his neck stood out, and he groaned in pain. Holy fuck, that really hurt! Sam only continued through five strokes, and then he spun the paddle casually in his hand and pocketed it in one movement. He helped Dean to rise and dress.

“What your Sub standing in the corner hears is that you aren’t mad, but you’re following through with a known punishment that’s much more severe than what he got. He feels grateful for the difference while being a little envious that the Omega got to know the count beforehand. He’s embarrassed to be standing bare-assed in the corner, and he feels your disappointment even after
“you’ve walked away.”

Sam paced as he spoke. The audience was riveted. Dean let himself sink back to his place at the edge of the stage with a surreptitious rub to his backside.

“What the Omega gets is stability. You’re going to deliver a strong reprimand every single time she needs it, and make liberal use of the Pack Hierarchy to spank her sometimes even when she’s good. She’s looking for something to hold onto. Leave your emotions out of it. If she’s watched you with your Submissive mate, she’ll know that you are capable of flaring up in anger but are choosing control when it’s her turn. That reinforces her sense of trust. Trust is also a primary emotion. It comes from repeated incidents that build stability.”

“So, what you’re saying,” the alpha said. “Is that I’m too emotionless with my mate, but too delicate with my cousin? I should hit her harder?”

“I can’t know for sure without meeting them,” Sam responded. “Are you scheduled in the one-ones?”

“No, that’s why I came here.”

“Well, I can’t be sure. But if you’re treating them the same way, and it isn’t working, try changing it up to speak to each of them differently. They aren’t the same person. Your mate may be jealous of your attention toward the new Omega, and your Omega may simply be mourning the loss of her mother and searching for a new solid structure to cling to. I’ll bet they’re both testing you. You need to step up. I recommend you read Dean’s books. There are three of them, and they all touch on different aspects of what we’ve talked about here. Be sure once the punishment ends, for both of them, you spend some real time reconnecting and letting them feel that you love them. That emotional bonding is what seals the process in a constructive place. Without it, your charges won’t feel closure. Don’t skimp on that, even if you’re still angry.”

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“If you haven’t closed your bonds yet, Michael, you might go ahead and do that. Dean will feel you approaching. Of course, nothing says that we HAVE to be a surprise, but I’m looking forward to the look on Dean’s face.”

Michael smiled gamely. “Me too. Closed it before we took off, Alpha.”

Chapter End Notes

...and another 13K hits the books. Y’all, I think I say this a lot, but this one was a lot of fun to write. Silly me to think I could get the whole convention into one chapter. Nuh-uh. I need to finish up the Con in take 2. Coming soonish. Up next, a full work-set for me on night-shift. Oh, if only I could write while I'm working. Damn that integrity. It gets in the way every time.

Love ya lots and lots!
Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

Second of two. The rest of their first day at PhoenixCon.

Chapter Notes

I have a strong feeling that you're either going to really dislike this chapter, or you're going to really enjoy it. It's going to go one way or the other. I'm trying so hard to render what's in my head into words that feel the same, and there are just moments that don't translate. Music is my Achilles' heel. I can't keep myself from needing it there, but I can't make it work the way I want.

And huge disclaimer: I know, I know, I know what THAT song means to THIS fandom. Guys, I tried to pick a different one. I really did. But there's not anything I could find that says what this one does, the WAY that this one does. It feels like sacrilege. I suffered over this decision. You have no idea.

The energy of a celebrating pack is the other thing that just doesn't wanna show itself in words. We've all felt it at one point or another, but writing it out is harder than it seems like it would be. Having a musical sound-track as you read helps, but it's still not the same. For me, I always go back to a spontaneous Cèilidh that grew into something epic over the course of about four hours one night almost 20 years ago. Nothing has ever felt like that since. If you want, imagine that you are at that one magical event that brought you out of yourself in an uncontrollable and unpredictable way and made you feel connected viscerally to everyone else there.

There's a nod to J.K. Rowling, whose character name I obviously stole. Of course, she did it first, but that's no excuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Cas, I know you think I forgot, but I didn’t…about your request…about your request for more time with him. I heard you. I’ve been thinking about it.” Michael kept one eye on the navigational map in the center of his console as he drove. The upscale hotel wasn’t far from the airport, but the directions were convoluted at best. He slowed to make a right turn. “It’s not easy for me to give up a hold I have on something I care about once I’ve got it. I mean, we’re not the same as we were, you and me. Part of me says we don’t need all those rules anymore at all. Maybe we should drop it all and talk to each other when we want something, but I’m sticking on doing that. I get all these ‘what-ifs’ running around in my head. What if I lose my footing completely, and…I don’t know.” Michael swallowed uncomfortably. Negotiating had always worked best coming from his wolf, but that wouldn’t work for this.

“Please relax, Michael,” Castiel said without looking up from his phone. He was texting with Charlie to give her their estimated arrival time and figure out where to go. “You are in no danger of losing your footing with your mate. I’m not going to agree to a complete lifting of all our structures. You deserve that assurance.” Cas clicked his phone to darkness and looked across to the driver’s side. “You’ve done everything anyone’s asked of you, Omega, albeit with some reservation at the outset. You’ve kept up your side of the bargain admirably. In truth, I don’t have a leg to stand on to request redress on the matter, except that it’s not working for me, and I’d like some help. You are well within your rights to say no. I’m asking for one more night per week. I’m asking that you allow for the possibility of a less formal limit. You don’t have to answer right away.”

“I’m not going to tell you no, Alpha, but I need to think through how to word it. I’m not good at this. I’m not good at giving up control. I want you to know it’s not you though. It’s me. I always feel like I need to keep a tight grip on every ounce I take, like a dragon hoarding his stash. I’m afraid there are thieves at the gates waiting to steal what I’ve got, and I need to keep it guarded all the time.” Michael finally spotted the high-rise hotel and breathed a sigh of relief.
Cas chuckled at him. “I believe you’ve hit an important nail on its head, my friend. Would you like assistance with that issue, or is it one you’d like to keep? Is it important to you? As an Omega, you may find it a desirable trait to hold on to, but as an Omega in my pack, I’d like to see you learn that it isn’t necessary.”

Michael’s eyes widened. Cas was forever catching him off-guard. Alphas didn’t talk like that. “I, uh, I’ll get back to you on that. I dunno. And hey, in the meantime, I want you and Dean to take some time if you need it. He’s coming up on the end of his blackout, and I know you’re antsy to get your hands on him. Look, I’m okay with a little flexibility. I know I was kind of a dick on the first run-through. I just don’t want to get locked out or make plans and then find myself alone all night beating my own meat while you two sneak off together.”

Cas nodded seriously. “I don’t want that either. Let’s talk it through when we get home. Take all the time you need. And Michael, it really is all right for you to tell me no. He’s YOUR mate.”

“But he’s your husband,” Michael pointed out as he pulled into the hotel’s drive.

“Not yet, he’s not,” Cas said under his breath. Michael glanced at him but didn’t respond. Instead he changed the subject.

“He’s going to be happy we came, isn’t he?”

“I have no idea,” Castiel admitted looking around the parking lot for evidence of all the ‘crazy’ his staff always led him to believe he would find at one of these conventions. Most of the people walking through seemed normal to Cas. “I don’t know what to expect. Charlie seems thrilled that we agreed to do this. I hope that’s a good sign. I don’t think I really understand who he is when he’s at one of these.”

“Where do I go?” Michael asked.

“Pull around back. Charlie’s coming out to meet us. She plans to sneak us in.”

Michael rolled his eyes but followed as the Alpha directed him to the back lot near the trash dumpsters.

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They were merely fiddling around onstage at this point. The room was filling gradually. Some of the events hadn’t let out yet, and the band was still in the Green room. Dean wasn’t using his microphone. He sat on the edge of the stage and chatted with the small crowd gathered casually around. Stagehands rearranged the setup for the evening’s festivities. Sam was with April as she got to know the band members and worked out a set list they could all pull off together. She’d spent much of the day with them, but as showtime approached, she was getting nervous, and she’d asked Sam to stay close.

“Everything looks good,” announced Jo, taking a seat on the stage beside Dean and smiling cheerfully at a fan’s shouted greeting. “Zero incidents so far. That’s a first. Maybe the apes are catching on.”

Dean patted her leg. “Maybe someone threatened them life and limb if they didn’t behave themselves.”
She grinned. “Maybe.”

“You guys did a bang-up job here,” he praised sincerely. “Everything’s moving like clockwork. Tonight’s gonna be fun. Who’s got the set list?”

“April’s in charge,” said Jo with a cheeky cock of her head. She expected him to protest. An Omega leading the event – one she’d never attended before, with a band she didn’t belong to. It was… unheard of. But Dean just smirked.

“Good.”

“Any questions, alpha?” Jo asked him, beginning to pull back to her feet. She was circulating to make sure everyone was in place and knew their jobs. She still needed to find Meg.

“How many songs am I doing? I only practiced a couple, but I can do the old standbys if they want that.”

“I dunno. Maybe four? Five? What did you practice?”

Dean glanced at the small crowd still hovering close-by. “April made me learn a Speedwagon song, and I want to do “The Living Years” for my dad.”

“She made you?” Jo teased.

“Yeah, she did. You ever try to tell her no when she turns on the blue eyes?”

Dean let Jo pull him up, and he waved good naturedly to the fans as he turned with her to head offstage.

“You’re such a pushover, Winchester. I think you ought to do your Keller over. I think your Deep alpha rating missed a few notches.”

He huffed and held the curtain back to let her step through. “That’s just because we’ve never fucked, Joanna Beth. I’ve got talents you’ve never seen.”

“Right,” she laughed out loud. “Talents. Dean, I’ve seen everything you’ve got in the tank, and forgive me, but none of that makes your case stronger.”

“What?! Fuck you, Harvelle. Ask Michael! Ask him if I’m Deep alpha. He’ll tell you all about how deep…”

Jo spotted Meg and moved to walk away but turned and shot over her shoulder, “Michael’s not here, though, Dean. Hey, we go on in fifteen minutes. Be ready! Don’t go anywhere.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mumbled, pouting. It was bad enough to have everyone in earshot congratulating him on just how much of a Bottom he had admitted to being, but to have his alpha negated by his best friend… She didn’t mean it. He knew she didn’t. Jo loved him. Dean sat down on an empty speaker crate and looked glumly around. He wished to hell Michael were here. Or Cas. What was it going to take to get Cas to one of these? They were fully ACRI-sponsored. It was as much Cas’ responsibility to be here as to be at any of those hoity-toity white wine seminar events for rich college alumnae.

Dean poked at his bonds, but they were still not responsive. Maybe it was the distance. He was just too far to feel Michael.

April and the band bustled in together. She looked alive in a way Dean had never seen her before. She was alight with energy and purpose. The small band was made up of three Lupins and an ape
They all followed behind her like lemmings, their eyes tracking her and keeping in earshot. She looked over her shoulder with a question, and the one furthest to the back jumped across his compadre to hand her a page in his hand. Sam, walking slowly behind the little troop caught Dean’s puzzled eye and shook his head with a shrug. He made his way wordlessly to take a seat beside his brother.

“I don’t know, man. I think they’re all in love. All she has to do is blink, and they all swoon. All of them.”

“Well, she is pretty cute,” Dean defended, watching the four stooges fall over each other in their eagerness.

“That she is,” Sam agreed. “You ready?”

“Always ready, Sammy. I was born for this.”

“You’ll watch out for her up there, won’t you?” Sam asked with a nudge to Dean’s shoulder.

“Like my life depends on it,” Dean confirmed.

“Your life DOES depend on it.”

“I know.”

The sounds from the enlarging audience were getting louder, and the pheromone wash was beginning to do its thing. So many excited people in one place built up in the air until it took them all into a new place. In battle, the phenomenon made wolves slavering brutes who killed everything that wasn’t pack. In celebrations, it led to a frenzy of giddiness and bliss. This environment, this sensation, would always be one of Dean’s favorites. Inhibitions fell away, but it wasn’t a passionate – well, not a sexual – feeling. It felt like the safest, most accepting version of pack-life. Everyone was family, and when they chorused together, they were ancient wolves howling their joie de vivre to the moon in unison. Lesser creatures went silent and still in the face of the Pack as they announced their presence, their strength and unity of purpose, into a hostile world. And to be honest, ALL other creatures were less than a wolf pack howling in concert.

Dean felt his blood begin to pound in his ears. He knew his cheeks were beginning to show a high blush, and his eyes had that sparkle that made people reflect back at him. He wasn’t naïve. Dean knew he was beautiful. Normally it didn’t much matter to him, but here, in this space that he’d claimed for himself, he used every ounce of charisma the Universe had blessed upon him. He was the funnel through which it all ran, and he felt every pulse of energy that passed through him like a feeding stroke. He vibrated with anticipation. It had been seven long months, and he was hungry for Pack.

He was hungry for his mate and his fiancé too, but there would be a next time. Maybe next time. Not yet. Michael wasn’t ready. Or maybe Dean wasn’t ready for Michael to be ready. He didn’t pause to examine that thought. His thoughts were swiftly swirling to a laser-pointed focus on where he was and what he needed to be. Sam clapped him on the back with a word of good luck and left his brother to it. This wasn’t Sam’s party. Sometimes he hung about backstage and made brief appearances to answer questions, but Sam was not the showman between them, and he wasn’t about to be talked into singing onstage. Sam was probably headed off to Facetime his mate and try to talk
to his boys. He might sing a lullaby for them if they were restless.

Dean could hear Jo and Meg take to the microphones and the crowd’s welcoming thunder. They had a little audience warmup to do. They would be playful as they reiterated the rules and pointed out the security kiosks for anyone who needed assistance. In no time, the band was stepping up to take the stage. April ducked through last without an introduction. Dean could see her through a small space in the curtain. She kept her head a little lowered and sat at the keyboard, mostly hidden from view.

She sneaked a look to the side and caught him watching her. He winked, and she blushed with a happy grin. There was a ruffle of commotion from the audience near the stage on the side where April sat, and it spread slowly, growing louder. The band punched out its first notes, but the audience was louder. Dean kept his eye on April. She looked completely at home up on the stage, playing keyboards before a couple thousand people. She’d been spotted, and as word spread from the front to the back that the pianist wasn’t just a new band member, April’s blush deepened, and her grin grew massive. Soon she was laughing openly into the song as she played.

Charlie appeared beside Dean from nowhere. “Looks like the cat’s out of the bag. Didn’t take them long.”

“How have you been?” Dean accused. “Why aren’t you onstage?”

“Had some shit to do. Benny needed me. You’re not my boss, Winchester.”

“Yes, I am,” he protested, but she blew him off.

“Break a leg out there, tonight. It’s going to be a good show. And hey, for what it’s worth, it wasn’t my idea,” she said cryptically just as his name rang through in introduction. A microphone was snapped into his hand by the stage manager, and he was pushed toward the curtain.

He didn’t have time to wonder what she meant before stepping into the lights and calling out a greeting. From there it was like riding a bike. It was a happy, endorphin-filled romp with friends he hadn’t seen in months. That’s how it felt. He was home in a sense, but this time, his little sister was there with him.

Dean joked playfully with the audience for a few minutes, basking in the back-and-forth. The band caught April’s cue, and they kicked off together into a loud pulse. Dean sang back-up, and stepped back to let his friends have the spotlight. He watched April. She took his breath away.

She was concentration. She was deliberation, intention, and perfection, but she moved with a relaxed grace as if she’d been born on the stage. She directed them all from her spot behind them with subtle grace notes and careful emphasis in deliberate places, and they responded as if they’d been playing together for years. Dean caught a raised brow and a kick of her chin, and he lowered his volume in instinctive response. How was she doing that? Where had she learned to do that? She was a Sub, wasn’t she?

Who WAS this girl?

As the song ended, Dean stepped forward again. He let the audience cheer. That’s what they were here for after all, and the more energy that poured up from the seats, the more would tumble back out from the musicians. That’s how these things worked. Dean was good at milking it.

The noise died down at last.

“It’s been a while. You guys remember the band, right? Do we need introductions?” Cheering again, and the rhythm felt good. Dean introduced Jessie, Kade, Darrin, and Bryce. They were the same four
guys who had been here since the beginning. Bryce in the back had long since become accustomed to the ways of the wolf, and he’d been fully accepted as Pack years ago, even with his rounded ears. Dean feigned finishing the intros after just those four, but the audience pulled him up short with loud protests that he pretended not to understand at first. It was silly and playful, but the energy-level was growing by the minute and would soon reach the point he wanted. He wanted revelry. He wanted that for them as much as he did for himself, and he knew what he was doing.

“Who?!” he jested. Soon they were pointing and screaming.

Dean laughed and held his hand out to April. She rose from her stool and joined him beneath the spotlights.

“All right! Shut up, already. I hear you.” Dean centered her in front of him with a hand on her shoulder, highlighting how small she stood in stature.

“We have a very special guest with us tonight. She’s generous enough to offer her talents, which are many. Everyone, Phoenix Arizona, I’d like to introduce, in her maiden performance, playing keyboards and singing for you here tonight, my mate-in-law, little baby sister, and one of my favorite people in the world…remember this name, and remember that you heard her here first…please welcome April Winchester to the stage!”

There was the briefest moment where Dean wondered if he’d misread or miss-played it. It took just a beat of silence before they erupted again en masse. Charisma was such a tricky thing. It couldn’t be forced, but it could be massaged. For the briefest moment, he thought it had gone sideways, and she would take a hit. His life was on the line, and her safety was in his hands. Dean could usually read an audience and give them the energy tone they wanted. April leaned backward into him, and he wrapped an arm around her and kissed the side of her head. It had only been a moment. They were gaining momentum now. Everything was fine.

He watched a few faces near the front that he could see, and it dawned on him. It was one thing to declare that your oddly-shaped pack was all one Kum-Ba-Yah entity, but he and April should be enemies by right. There was nothing stiff or disingenuous about his adoration of the girl, and that had to show from the stage. And also…Winchester. She’d been introduced as a Winchester, not a Novak. How strange it all must seem from the floor to people who didn’t get to see and hear them every day.

He probably wouldn’t have believed it himself if he hadn’t been there from the start.

The band didn’t wait. They kicked themselves back off into Journey’s "Any Way You Want It" as the audience continued to cheer, and April let Dean guide her this time into belting out accompaniment to back up the lead vocals. She hadn’t practiced it, but she knew the words, and she held her own. As a matter of fact, Dean thought happily, if this was holding her own, he couldn’t wait to see her solo. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. She was electric.

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Cas couldn’t take his eyes off the pair sharing a microphone. They looked like they were made for this. He was sharing a darkened room with a wall of glass overlooking the enormous ballroom. Michael was just finishing up his dinner, but his eyes were likewise glued to the stage. They didn’t have much to say to each other. Michael was caught in the net that had first ensnared him a few years
ago, into an infatuation that hadn’t flagged yet. At this point, it was a fair bet that it never would. This was the Dean he knew best, or, well, knew first at least. He was brash and confident. He was funny. He snapped comebacks faster than Michael even processed the comment in the first place. He sang with a baritone that could switch from a croon to a grind and send shivers down Michael’s spine at either tone. Michael wanted to devour him body and soul, but he finished eating instead. He waited. This time was going to be different. This time he wasn’t going home empty-handed.

Cas didn’t have words. Was there still air in the room? His mate lit up the stage and made it her home. She was a tiny pinprick of pure light that pulled every eye. And right next to her…Cas didn’t have words. He had loved Dean for nearly a decade, but he’d never seen THIS man before in his life. Dean owned the space. He directed everything and had hundreds, maybe thousands of people hanging on every word, every gesture. Cas licked his lips, nervous. He wanted a look inside Dean. He wanted to take him apart to see who he was. Wasn’t he alpha? He looked alpha.

Dean had begged him for years to come to a convention with the rest of them, but Cas couldn’t do it. A few simple words from Benny years ago stayed him. Benny came to all of them. He participated only minorly in the partying, but he welcomed the opportunity to reach out to people who couldn’t commit to the expense or the length of time – of days, weeks, or months – in Kansas. Benny knew what Dean became in these six or eight spot-lit weekends, and he worried that Castiel’s presence would dim Dean’s sparkle merely by being close-by. Benny hadn’t said it in so many words. All he’d told Cas was that Dean needed a space and a pack to call his own. Dean’s alpha spent so little time in the sunshine, shaded as it so often was by the long shadow of his Alpha, and Cas thought he understood. But he hadn’t pictured…THIS.

Apparently, he could have looked it up any time he wanted. He could have filled long empty nights when Dean was at home by perusing the internet and drinking his fill from a host of posted videos that showed everything. Michael was gob-smacked that Cas didn’t know that. But Dean had never said, and Cas had never known.

So, Cas and Michael watched alone in silence as their mates cut the audience into slivers of drooling morsels and devoured each one whole. April took the next solo. She sang the song that she’d written for Castiel, for his birthday. It was sweet and quirky, more profound than it seemed on the surface, and it captured their bond beautifully. Cas found himself pressed against the glass of the wall. His breath fogged it, and he wiped the moisture away.

Sam slipped in and closed the door behind him. The two didn’t turn to greet him. They could smell Pack, and they knew Sam by his scent.

“I didn’t know you two were coming,” he said quietly earnest, placing a hand on Michael’s shoulder. “You should have said. Charlie sent me in to let you know it’s almost time. She said you would know what that means. Cas? Time for what? I’m taking you backstage. What are you planning?”

Cas stammered an answer without looking back. “I’m, uh, supposed to go up…go up onstage. Charlie wants to surprise him.”

“Does April know you’re here?” asked Sam.

“I think so,” said Cas, distracted. “It was all her idea, if I understand it. I don’t know if she knows what Charlie’s up to though. I was only told small pieces of the plan.”

Sam whistled long and low. “He’s going to be pissed that you brought Michael. He was adamant about leaving him at home.”

Michael paled in the darkness, but he dug in and found his resolve. He knew what Dean was likely
to say, and he had his argument ready.

“It’s going to be fine, Sam,” Michael told him quietly. “I know how to handle my mate.”

Sam scoffed. “Not sure you know what you’re doing, but it’s none of my business. He doesn’t like surprises, guys. You both know that, don’t you?”

“He’ll like this one,” Michael whispered.

Sam clapped his shoulder again. “Well, it’s too late to turn back now. Ready, Alpha? I’m supposed to sneak you backstage. Michael, you stay here. Lock the door. Charlie will text you when she’s ready for you to come out.”

“Lock the door? Why?”

“Because you’re Omega in a hotel full of horny wolves, and I told you to,” said Sam sternly.

“Right. Sorry.”

Castiel touched his arm and wished him good luck, then followed Sam out the door. Michael was certain that Sam paused outside to listen for the clicking lock before escorting Cas down the back way and up through the concrete hallway leading to the rear of the stage.

Michael pulled his chair close to the glass wall and sat down to watch. So many fantasies over the years coalescing at once made him shiver in anticipation. He sent a quick prayer of thanks up to the Universe. This is all he had ever wanted. It was EVERYTHING he had ever wanted. A new life beating in shivery tendrils of hope within the depths of his belly; Dean’s pup. Dean Winchester’s baby sparked into existence within Michael Lancet’s core, growing in strength every day. Michael couldn’t feel it yet, but he caught a strange scent every now and then when there was no one else around. And then this. This evening, all of Michael’s fantasies were coming true at the same time. If he thought it through too carefully, he would chicken out. He needed to hand it to his wolf to lead, but not yet. Not just yet. Michael wanted to do something that took careful balance, and he couldn’t hold it for long.

The song ended, and the band faded back to take seats. Dean drew Jo and Meg out to help him field a couple of questions. April stayed seated behind her keyboard until Dean gestured to her. Saturday night was the longest event on the schedule. It was part panel, part concert, part sing-along, and part therapy session. It was a comfort-zone for wolves, and it was whatever Dean wanted it to be.

Con veterans knew what to do, and hands shot up as the house lights engaged. He pointed way out deep to his left, and a volunteer hustled a microphone out to her.

“That was amazing,” she gushed, out of breath from singing along. “Holy shit, I can’t believe you brought Alpha Novak’s mate with you. I can’t believe I get to be the first to tell her ‘Welcome’.”

April nodded and took the mic that Dean handed to her. “Um, thank you.” She jumped a little at the sound of her own voice, clearly back in an Omega headspace. “I don’t know if they’ve announced it, really, but I guess I can…” April looked to Dean who just shrugged at her. “We’re changing our names to Winchester. Alpha Novak…you should call him Alpha Winchester now. He’d really like that better.”

The crowd murmured, and the questioner continued. “Congratulations to you both, all of you, I mean. My question is for everyone, though. I want to talk about Harry Potter. How do you feel about the way Lupins were portrayed?”
The question took April by surprise. She had no idea what to say. She turned to Dean and found him laughing at her. “I think this one is up Jo’s alley, kid,” he said into his mic, turning to face Jo who wore a patiently annoyed face. It was an old argument.

“Actually,” she said in a huff, “it’s Charlie who has all the strong opinions, but I’ll tell you what I think. I think we make space for fantasy stories to be just that. J.K. Rowling has said that she never meant for her werewolves to resemble Lupins, even if she blatantly used the name. They are werewolves, and we are not. Lycanthropy is a monstrous disorder in her Universe, not a separate species.”

The questioner was clearly looking to stir up the controversy that had finally died back down after years of stiff-backed offense from wolves. “But it’s clear that Hogwarts is set in Scotland, and Scotland, as we all know is the original home of the first Lupins. We STARTED there, and she left us completely out of the story. It’s a story ABOUT different kinds of people learning to live together and share the same world, and she just wrote us off into the villains as monsters.”

“Nah, that’s not true,” said Meg. “I’m not a werewolf. You’re not a werewolf. Ya know, nothing in those books says that no one at Hogwarts is a Canid. I always kinda pictured the Weasleys with pointy ears. Maybe,” Meg leaned forward in her stool, “they are so integrated in the Pack homeland that it’s not even worth mentioning who’s a primate and who’s a wolf. Hermione, for instance. She’s a wolf, no doubt about it. Probably a beta-Dom. Besides, Scotland may be the place where the first signs of Lupin civilization were discovered, but it’s unlikely to be where we originated. It’s too small, too isolated.” She looked to Dean for confirmation. “They think Scandinavia, right Dean?”

“Yeah, I think so,” he nodded. “Or Siberia.”

Where the fuck was Charlie? It was probably better not to have her onstage for that question. They would still be talking about it three hours from now if Charlie got her teeth into it, but she’d been here before the show, and she always joined in for questions. What on earth was more important than this?

Meg was selecting another hand from the opposite side of the stage. It was an older woman. She stood and took the mic when it was handed to her.

“My question is for Dean and for April, if I may address the Omega.” Dean nodded graciously and put an arm around April’s shoulder. “It all seems to have happened so fast, and I don’t understand how the three of you formed whatever this is that you’re doing together. How did it happen?”

Dean snorted into his microphone. “Whatever this is? Come on guys. It’s not THAT complicated. Cas and April Triggered right at the ACRI Facility. She was there for her tests, and it goes that way sometimes. One minute they were minding their own business, and the next minute, BOOM, they were locked and biting.”

April put a hand on his arm and smiled at him. “Close, Dean, but not quite,” she said quietly. “But anyway, it wasn’t the Mating that was odd. It was afterward.” April found it easier to speak to Dean as if the audience wasn’t there, but this question was the prompt she and Charlie had been waiting for. She hoped Charlie was ready. It was going to be awesome. “You left, Dean. You didn’t see how he fell apart without you.”

April told him how she had watched Cas fall incrementally to pieces and how she came to understand what it was all about. She told him about realizing in a flash of inspiration that her Alpha wasn’t going to be fulfilled with a mate alone, even one he adored as much as he did April. She told him about pasta sauce dripping down the kitchen wall and about how she began to suspect that he was stalling moving her home with him because he couldn’t bring himself to move her into his house.
knowing that Dean would never be there to share their lives. She told him about the scariest conversation of her life, when she risked everything to convince her mate to take a chance and trust that there was enough room and enough love for everyone.

“So, he went. He flew to Dallas to get you, and he came home with you and Michael and …” Dean got a finger over her mouth before she could mention Gabriel, but he winked and made it seem as if he was merely ready to take over the story. “I don’t know what he said to you in Dallas,” she finished up, pushing his hand out of the way.

Those were the code words they had agreed to before the show, ‘What he said to you in Dallas’. Dean nodded gamely. It was going to be so cheesy, but she’d talked him into it, and he couldn’t back out now. The showman in Dean bristled. She wanted to be a performer, and most of her instincts were good, but leading into an old song with a trite love story wasn’t going to work. He’d agreed to let her lead though, and if it crashed like he thought it would, at least it would teach her something.

Dean stood up and approached the mic-stand, fitting the microphone back in place. April skirted around to her keyboard and signaled the band to get ready. Jo and Meg shuffled to one side, but they weren’t planning to leave. They didn’t want to miss this. Dean thought he was simply singing a specific song that April wanted.

“What he said to me in Dallas… Right. I, uh, I wasn’t expecting anything like what happened. I thought we were a done deal, me and Cas. I thought we were over before we ever got started. I had moved on. He had moved on. He had a mate. I had a powerful right hand – match made in heaven, you might say.” Dean was performing again. Michael watched him with narrowed eyes. He was beginning to see where this was going. “And then he showed up at my door. Knocked on the door without any notice, and I opened it, and there he was, rose in his hand, ring in his pocket. I’ll never forget what he said. I remember it like it was yesterday.”

April took the cue, and began to play. Dean shook his head. He was going to live to regret this. But he went along.

“What he said to me:”

And he began to sing. His heart went all the way into it. Hell, why not? This was for April, but he’d practiced the lyrics with her enough to have realized it fit. It was kind of perfect in its own way.

“*I can’t fight this feeling any longer,\nAnd yet I’m still afraid to let it flow.*”

Dean let his eyes fall closed, and took hold of the microphone.

*“What started out as friendship has grown stronger.\nI only wish I had the strength to let it show.”*

It’s not what Cas had said to him, but it wasn’t far from the truth. And there wasn’t a rose until dinner that night. But the ring in his pocket had been real, and he had virtually crashed through the door. He had crawled upon the floor. He had done those things for Dean.

Dean felt the audience shift, but he didn’t think about why. He just sang. April’s playing brought the band into the mix. There had never been a keyboard before. Dean liked the richness.

Behind him at the curtain, Charlie slipped up onstage and made a show of putting a finger to her lips where the crowd could see her. She grinned at April, who grinned back. Charlie turned and nodded, reaching a hand out to pull the Alpha up with her. He stepped out looking like a confection, and
smiling at Dean’s back. He had dressed carefully at the behest of his beta staff: the casual blazer with its sleeves folded nearly to his elbows with a dark button-down shirt and no tie. His hair was mussed and gelled until it looked like he’d been fulfilling Omega fantasies behind the curtain. He wore tight dark jeans, of a style he’d never owned before. He thought Meg was probably to blame for the jeans, but he couldn’t protest that they didn’t fit. They fit perfectly. And his blue eyes caught the light and glowed with a fire as he stood still behind Dean in stiff brown leather boots, listening to him sing, gazing at the shadowed figure surrounded by a halo of bright white light.

He turned to April, leaned down to her, and kissed her cheek with a hand on her neck, then he stood back up.

"My life has been such a whirlwind since I saw you"

Cas stepped slowly up toward Dean until he stood directly behind him. This close, he knew Dean could smell and sense him. He noted the instant Dean caught his scent. Dean’s voice didn’t falter, but his head canted ever so slightly to the right. Castiel stepped right into his space and put his arms around Dean from behind, resting his chin upon Dean’s right shoulder, bringing his left hand up to Dean’s shoulder so that his own cheek nearly kissed the ring that Dean had put on his finger.

Dean turned into him, and his smile was radiant. Cas had never seen that smile on the man he loved. And still he sang.

"And even as I wander, I’m keeping you in sight.”

It was a subtle shift in tone, and it wasn’t for the audience, but Dean had been quoting a fictional Castiel as he belted out the old song. Now he was singing TO Cas out of his own heart.

"You’re a candle in the window on a cold dark winter’s night.”

Castiel closed his eyes and leaned his temple against Dean’s, listening, letting himself have this moment. Michael was watching, but Michael had made the shift too, and Cas had begun to believe that he could have this – really have this.

"And I’m getting closer than I ever thought I might.”

Besides, despite the fact that it had been Dean who drove away, it was Cas who wandered first, and they both knew it. Now they were standing in the same space, bare before the Universe and everybody, and the world hadn’t exploded yet.

"It’s time to bring this ship into the shore
And throw away the oars, forever.”

Dean cracked open the scamp as he shifted again and brought an arm up around Castiel’s shoulder, cradling him against Dean’s chest, and he winked.

“You’re a brat to your core, Winchester,” Cas hissed at him, bringing a fist up to the back of his head and taking hold of his hair.

"No, I can’t fight this feeling anymore,”

Dean turned up the sap and sank down onto one knee. Cas’ fist pulled loose, and Dean caught his hand.

"I’ve forgotten what I started fightin’ for
And if I have to crawl upon the floor,"
Come crashing through your door,
Baby, I can’t fight this feeling anymore.”

Cas pulled him to his feet and kissed him hard to the joyous shouts and cheers of the audience. They broke apart laughing.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Dean asked in dismay, forgetting he was amplified. “I thought you were staying home with the pups.”

“Someone has to keep an eye on you while you’re out here surrounded by temptation,” Cas answered back. “And what was that song all about? Is that how you present me to the crowds? As a lovesick fool?” Cas was close enough and the microphone carried his voice. Dean narrowed his eyes, working out if there was real annoyance, but Cas’ eyes were laughing.

“God’s honest truth, babe. That’s how I remember it. It went just like that. In fact, I’m sure there was more groveling.”

“Groveling?” asked Castiel, taking a predatory step forward.

“Groveling,” Dean confirmed, backing up a step. “And what’s with jumping out at me like that? You could have screwed up the whole song. You scared the crap out of me. I’m supposed to be the brat here.”

“Jumping… Dean Michael, are you calling me a brat?” Cas’ eyes stopped laughing, and his voice deepened. Dean’s adam’s-apple bobbed as he swallowed. He glanced swiftly out toward the audience, and the back to his Dom. The room had grown still.

“No…no, Sir. I…didn’t mean. Shit, what…?” He dropped his eyes and blushed furiously. Cas’ heart went out to him. It was an unfair push at Dean to see where he was in his head and to check who had control. But Cas had faith in his fiancé’s strength of character. He reached out and took hold of Dean’s bicep, grounding him and holding him firm.

Dean licked his lips, took a deep breath, took a little step closer, and looked back up. His green eyes held Castiel’s blue ones without tremors. “Apologies, Sir. I was out of line.” His face broke out into a grin again, and he reached for Cas’ arms with both hands. “I’m so glad you’re here! I have so much to show you. Look, folks! We did it! We finally dragged him outta his cave! Everyone, say hi to the Alpha!”

Dean turned Cas outward and made him take a bow and wave. April squeaked in delight and dashed up to take him tightly around the middle and kiss him soundly. Castiel shook his head in frustration, but he went where Dean put him. He still couldn’t tell. He needed Michael to read it for him, and didn’t that rankle more than a little? He’d responded submissively, but it had taken a moment of adjustment to get him there. That might happen for a variety of reasons. Cas didn’t like the uncertainty where Dean was concerned. Uncertainty might lead to mistakes, and he couldn’t allow any mistakes.

Cas was ushered into a chair for another round of questions. April sat in his lap, and Dean leaned into him with a hand on his thigh. Cas liked the way it felt to have them both so close at once. He liked it very much.

“What do you see as the greatest challenge the Lupin community still faces in its fight against prejudice and injustice of the world at large?” asked a confident middle-aged woman.

“Up, Kitten. Sit in your own chair for a bit,” Cas sat forward and shifted his mate. “We still need
laws on the books to protect us in our most vulnerable states – enforceable laws,” he said into his microphone, frowning in concentration. “We need education and understanding, of course, but that will come with time. Where we are weakest is in the two life stages that befall virtually every wolf at some point, the two that cannot be predicted, prevented, or postponed. I’m speaking of Presenting and of Triggering. It’s garnering protection for us in these vulnerable states that are our single biggest challenges.”

Castiel’s hand stayed knotted in his mate’s. Dean had pulled back a little, but he still had his hand on Cas’ leg. Touching helped. Cas went on, and his passion carried through his voice. “Events like this one serve a bigger purpose for Lupins than simply fun and entertainment. Coming together like this, celebrating, singing and dancing in each other’s company, strengthens us as a pack. We bond as a larger family than our home packs. My pheromones will join with yours.” He nodded at the woman and at several others randomly. “And yours, and yours, and those scents enter back into my body and form connections in my brain that tell me from now on that you are Pack. I will know instinctively should we ever meet again, that you and I are of one family, even if I never learn your name.”

“Margaret,” she said, and Cas and the audience laughed.

“Margaret, it’s lovely to meet you. To answer your question, yes, the biggest challenge is in convincing legislators and the population who elects them that we are worth protecting when we are weakest. Where we are weakest is when we are alone as individuals who cannot rely on the strength of the larger bonded Pack to protect us when we fall vulnerable. When we hole up in our homes and small communities and forget to celebrate together and reinvigorate ourselves to the scent of the Pack, we weaken ourselves. When our youth are forced to face Presentation alone in their schools or on the streets and no one comes to stand guard and protect them in their time of need, we weaken ourselves.

“When mates Trigger unexpectedly, and we allow the coldness of strangers with their cameras to humiliate them at their most vulnerable, we are weak.”

He looked at Dean and found strength in his gaze. “If we turn against each other as we seek to learn ourselves, and we defy those of us who need to change and grow into something unexpected, we weaken our chance to become the strong community of fearsome beasts that we were meant to be.”

Dean smiled at him and touched his face. Castiel smiled back. They shared the simplicity of a private smile for only a moment, Dean grateful that Cas saw through to the basis of his trepidation, and Cas grateful that Dean turned that beautiful smile onto him. Cas looked back out at the crowd. “We have no control over when and where and how our youth Present or our young adults Trigger. These occurrences are natural and necessary steps in the life cycle of a wolf, but they are, as yet, unpredictable. The greatest challenge we face in this moment is to throw off the stigma of bestial fear that surrounds these natural events. They are both intense in nature, but they aren’t violent. Yet, again and again, primates cite these two occurrences as their greatest evidence that wolves are not civilized or civilizable. Education will get us there. Familiarity will get us there. But it is in the legal codes and the enforcement of these codes that we must act first.”

Cas pursed his lips for a moment. Proselytizing was often counter-productive, but Dean seemed to sense that his timing was right. Dean whispered encouragement into his ear. Dean was always right about these things.

“I urge you to vote in every election. All of you. Don’t miss any of them. Ever. Vote for human decency and rights that extend to all people, especially the most vulnerable. Support laws that protect the weak. And at home and in your own communities, stand vigil. Be seen on the streets and in the
shops. Be who you are. You are not primates, don’t behave like primates. But be the citizens that your communities deserve. Care for the youth. Give respite to those in need. Stand to protect those who are vulnerable, whether they be ape or wolf. If you are nearing your own cycle, for God’s sake, stay home. But if you are caught unaware in public, you deserve to have a community that will protect you, not take advantage of you. If you witness an act of violence against another person, act. Step up and be the wolves that you are.”

Dean moved his hand up to run through the hair at the back of Cas’ head. He couldn’t help himself. It looked soft and fluffy this evening, and it begged to be touched. Cas tipped his head back very subtly to take full advantage of the touch without losing his train of thought.

“Most of all, safeguard the Omegas. Still. Even today. After everything we’ve learned. After all the Pack has done to build up my home in northern Kansas, still we see raped Omegas brought bleeding into our clinic almost every day. Even in Lawrence. If our Omegas aren’t safe in Lawrence, Kansas, where can they be safe? I beg of each of you. It’s up to all of us to change the culture. It isn’t the apes who commit these foul deeds. It’s wolves. It’s us. It’s up to us to stop it. It’s up to us to speak about it. Omegas are people, exactly like everyone else. All of us have needs that must be met, but we all deserve to be safe. It’s up to us to change ourselves. No one from the ape community can do it for us.”

There was an immediate response from the crowd, a wave of cheering and applause followed by a bass drum kick that started the band off. Cas startled. Dean stood and pulled Cas to standing. “Dance with me, Alpha,” he said softly amid the applause. The band pumped into a rousing tune, and April insinuated herself against Castiel’s side, catching on to the flow and ebb of the pulse of the night. Dean was close, one leg planted between Cas’ feet, his hips driving against his Alpha’s in a crude approximation of sex. Cas was taken by surprise. Jo whipped the mic out of his hand and then pulled Charlie in to dance lewdly at Castiel’s back.

What was going on? How? Why did they shift so rapidly from a serious topic to this free-for-all? Meg snuggled against Dean’s back, and he reached back to hold her hip, keeping her heat against his back as his lips sought Cas’ throat.

“Come on, Alpha! Dance!” Dean goaded. It was a dirty grind of a tune, encouraging a bit of barely legal naughtiness from the floor that Security pretended not to see.

Dean still had his mic, so his teasing rang out over the gritty guitar music.

“Babe, no one who fucks like you do should dance this badly. Come on, Cas! Get in there!”

Castiel felt his wolf snarl and an arm wrapped all the way around April, pulling her into his body, and fastening with a hooked finger onto Dean’s belt-loop. Challenge accepted. His other hand shoved rudely at Meg and took ownership of Dean’s ass. He grabbed a meaty handful and pulled in hard. Cas didn’t bother trying to dance, he simply thrust his pelvis into Dean’s and bit down on Dean’s shoulder through his shirt with a fierce growl. Even through the fabric, he drew blood, and Dean went slack for him, trusting the Alpha to keep him on his feet. Cas released the belt loop, so he could give April’s ass and her shoulder the same treatment, although he didn’t pierce her flesh. He had them both so tightly encased, that he barely noticed the end of the song. He emerged, much calmer but without relinquishing his hold on either Sub. Cas sank back down into his chair, pulling a Sub to sit upon each knee and lean into his chest.

Charlie laughed at him and wiped the smear of blood from his chin until April growled at her and took the towel.

“Things are getting out of hand, Dean,” Cas whispered into Dean’s ear. The audience was in
disarray, and many of them were in flagrant violation of the rules.

Dean giggled. “Nah, man. We’re just getting started.”

They went through a few more rounds of music and questions. Dean convinced Sam to come up and help him explain the story of their father and how they’d lost him. Sam stayed onstage as Dean rendered a heartbreaking version of “The Living Years” that he’d prepared. He tried to keep the tears at bay, but a glance at his brother lost the battle for him. Every emotion was just too close to the surface to be stifled. Cas stayed with him too. He kept a hand on Dean’s lower back and whispered words to him as he sang. He wound it up, and then he hugged Sam. It had turned into the Winchester Follies, but Dean had a finger on the pulse, and he had them in the palm of his hand. They were right with him. He checked his watch. They had one more hour to fill, and several more rounds. It would be over before he was ready. It always was.

Then April began a tune that wasn’t on Dean’s set list. She plinked out a few notes, and Jessie joined in on a Ukulele. Dean stepped away from the mic, ready to support if he could. This one wasn’t one of his, so he fell into backup mode without a thought. April winked at him, and he leaned over to land a kiss on her cheek. As he pulled away, he saw her gesture with her chin and her eyes. If he’d blinked, he would’ve missed it. He frowned and looked out in the direction she indicated, but it was into the darkness beyond the bright lights, and he couldn’t see anything.

Then he realized what the song was. Talk about sappy. Elvis? Really? Whose idea was that?

He couldn’t find where the voice was coming from at first when the lyrics began, but it was clearly coming from somewhere at the back of the room.

Wait.

"Wise men say…"

Somewhere at the back. Somewhere in the darkness. Who was that? Dean looked across at the band. One, two, three, four. All present and accounted for.

"Only fools rush in…"

Dean squinted, but he couldn’t see anything. That voice. It was familiar, but he couldn’t place it.

"But I can’t help…"

That voice. There was a stir at the back of the room. Flash bulbs popped. People began to stand up and turn, raising phones and cameras above their heads.

"Falling in love. with. you."

It was a good voice, a smooth voice with a trace of a warble. Was he nervous? Was that on purpose? It was a simple tenor.

Dean saw him step off from the back wall, still not lit except by the occasional flash from a camera.

"Shall I stay?"

No.

No, it couldn’t be.

Michael was at home.
Michael was safe at home.

"Would it be a sin?"

What was he doing here? Dean pulled at the bond, beat at it. It wasn’t the distance; the bastard had closed it on purpose. There were too many people between them. Too many ways Michael might be hurt before Dean could get there.

"If I can’t help, falling in love, with you."

He was strolling ever closer, singing as he walked slowly up the aisle. The audience was practically having kittens. They crowded the aisle in front of him, snapping pictures and reaching out bravely to touch, but somehow no one dared bravely enough to really do it, and they cleared out of his way before he reached them, a smug look on his face as he locked eyes with Dean.

"Like a river flows, surely to the sea,"

Michael cracked the bonds back open and kept his grave pace down the endless aisle. Dean grabbed it and pulled, ready to lay into his mate in fury. He froze mid-breath and nearly trembled under the weight of what Michael threw at him.

"Darling so it goes. Some things are meant to be."

His tenor was strong and confident. Michael wasn’t ad-libbing this. He’d been practicing as surely as Dean had. And his voice. Dean couldn’t quite understand how he both knew and didn’t know that Michael’s voice HAD to sound like this. But the emotion streaming in, invisible to everyone else, it was so raw and untamed. It was wild and fierce. It didn’t fit the smoothness of the song or the stately pace of Michael’s strolling at all. Or maybe it did.

"Take my hand."

Dean’s head was swimming. His mate’s wolf held him fast where he stood by the power of his voice, but it wasn’t the wolf’s emotions. Michael sent Dean utter helplessness, an inevitability and a vulnerability that shook Dean even while the Dominant wolf paced ever closer.

"Take my whole life too."

His whole life. Dean could do that. The alpha felt it wash over him in a great wave of adoration, of commitment, of surrender. The voice might be funneled through the wolf that Michael wore like a cloak, but the love was straight from his core, from the Omega who wore that cloak.

Dean couldn’t breathe anymore. Michael arrived at last at the foot of the stage and stopped, looking up at his mate in devotion, as a well-trained Omega is taught to do, but then he sang the next line, and Dean went dizzy. It WAS his wolf’s voice. How were they both in front at once?

"Cause I can’t help, falling in love with you."

“You were supposed to stay home…” Dean mumbled. He wasn’t sure if Michael heard him.

Michael turned on his heel and paced toward the left side of the stage where a short set of steps led upward.

"Like a river flows, surely to the sea.\nDarling so it goes. Some things were meant to be.”
And then he stood directly in front of his mate. Dean swallowed hard and licked his lips once more. He couldn’t remember ever feeling so thirsty before.

Michael fitted his microphone into the stand before him, but he stayed poised toward Dean.

"Take my hand."

The Omega reached for Dean’s hand, and the alpha gave it to him.

"Take my whole life too."

There was no denying the truth in that request. It was a demand, not a request. It was a need, and Michael sent it to Dean bare, with the voice of a wolf, with the bond that came straight from his deepest core self, and through his eyes, which Dean found looking back at him in simplicity.

They were all singing now; the entire audience had joined in. The line reverberated up to the high ceiling and shook the chandeliers.

"For I can’t help, falling in love with you."

And then they all quieted at Michael’s hand raised in instruction, and he sang alone into the quiet.

"I can’t help…"

Dean’s eyes were dry, but he couldn’t understand why. It was as if his own daring, his own coming out and all the fear that went with it paled in comparison to Michael. Dean was lost in green eyes.

"Falling in love. with. you."

“Baby.” Dean didn’t manage to say anything else. Michael’s face took on a look of severe concentration. He studied Dean’s face for a moment, and then he wrapped a hand behind his neck and drew him slowly into a devastating kiss. All of Michael’s separate pieces were here too, here in this kiss that reached every corner of Dean’s dark mind. All of Michael, everything he had to give and to be, thrust at Dean to hold and to own. Dean found each pulsing part of Michael as they searched each other, and he blessed them, all of them – the Omega who was brave enough to push beyond the wall that the wolf forced him to stand behind, to face off with the beast, to stand toe-to-toe and demand his right to be seen, the simple lonely human who longed for a quiet place to be touched and to touch without all the extraneous detritus that people flung at him every day, the unyielding black wolf who needed a hand on every wheel and a supplicant at his feet.

Michael whimpered, and he doubled down, bending Dean backward, one hand at the small of his back, his face mostly lost to the devouring kiss. Dean opened everything he had to give, every locked crawlspace and hidden corridor in his mind, he pulled at the bonds to bring Michael all the way in, and he handed the keys to his mate. It wasn’t something anyone else could see, but most of them were wolves. They couldn’t know the details, but they knew a bond-renewal when they saw one.

It wasn’t like a Claim, and it wasn’t like a Mating. It wasn’t something that everyone did. Some couples never bonded this deeply. But the spontaneity of their emotions brought everything up to the surface, and they needed an outlet, or they would both overflow. Physics would demand that it couldn’t work like this, but nobody had asked physics in the first place. Dean overflowed into Michael, who was deep enough to catch and hold him, even as Michael overflowed into Dean. Everything swirled together and mixed up inextricably, but that was okay. Neither wanted their own back anyway.
The blood rushed in their ears as Michael pulled Dean back up to standing. He stepped back a pace and held Dean’s gaze for a moment longer, touching Dean’s anger with his mind in acknowledgment. Slowly he nodded. Michael knew he had to face the consequences of his defiance, and he would without complaint.

It was worth it.

Like the lifting of a veil, the noise and commotion of the space rushed back at both of them. The room was in chaos again. Michael lowered his head and looked up at Dean apologetically. Dean narrowed his eyes wryly and sighed.

“All right! Sit the fuck back down!” he shouted at the audience. It didn’t take very long to get them seated again, but they were vibrating in their chairs. They accepted his irritation as they’d accepted everything he gave them. Here, Dean was Alpha, and the proceedings were his to lead. If he wanted to shout, he could shout himself hoarse.

“MICHAEL, WHEN ARE YOU DUE?!?” someone yelled into the momentary quiet.

Well, crap. So much for keeping that one under wraps. They’d obviously scented him as he walked past them. Slowly. Close enough to touch.

“None of your damn business!” Dean responded, barely joking at all. Christ, they hadn’t even been to see Missouri yet. They could count, of course, and they knew what the due date was going to be approximately, but give a guy a break! They all went loud again as his protest confirmed the rumors, and Dean gave them a minute.

“All right, all right! Shut up, would’ja!” Dean still had an arm around Michael’s shoulders. The audience quieted. He looked from his mate out to the crowd and back again. “Michael, this is Phoenix. Phoenix, Michael Winchester.”

Michael waited until they stopped cheering and shouting questions at him. He smirked ironically into the lights. His fantasies had never included being blinded to the point that he couldn’t see the sea of people before him. He wanted to see them.

“Thanks, y’all. That welcome means a lot to me. Look, I know I’m not supposed to be here. I had to beg Castiel to let me come, and next time y’all see me, I’ll probably be sittin’ tender.” Dean mumbled under his breath, and Michael chuckled. “And I deserve it. I do. I broke my alpha’s rules, and I knew what that was going to mean when I did it. But some things are worth the price you pay. Tonight was worth it. I wasn’t about ta miss this.” Michael had his Texan accent, usually only barely noticeable, turned up to eleven, and that told Dean that his mate was still performing.

Dean decided to let him play. He was already here, and whatever damage there was to do was already on the books. Michael’s Omega was diving swiftly back into the depths, and Michael had his wolf out controlling everything the audience saw and thought. A glance at Dean confirmed it. Dean felt his own wolf take a swipe at his stage presentation and step in front. For a brief moment, he panicked. His eyes widened, and his breathing shallowed.

No.

Not here.

Michael grasped the back of his neck in a stiff hold and leaned his face in close. “Trust me, little one. I’ve got you. You can do this.” Dean’s eyes never left Michael’s as his breathing slowed back down. Michael wouldn’t let anyone or anything harm Dean. Cas was here too. Somewhere. Sam was here.
They would all hold him safe.

Michael pushed the microphone far enough away that it didn’t pick up his voice, and he turned his head away from the audience. “Are you game, baby? I want to try something simple. No sex. I’m not going to touch you. I’m just going to sing for you again.”

“Sing? Sir, you didn’t tell me you could sing.”

“You never asked,” Michael pointed out. “What’s your safeword, Dean?”

“Safeword? Oh, um, Impala.” Dean was struggling to understand what he was feeling. He was floating, and Michael’s hand was on his neck, so he knew he was safe.

“Dean, look at me. Do you want to play with me? Just say so if you don’t. We don’t have to do this.”

“Play? Yeah, of course I do. Where do you want me?”

“And your safeword?”

What, again? Hadn’t they already done that? Why was his Dom being so careful? A stern look from Michael reminded Dean that it wasn’t his job to figure out the whys.

“Impala.”

“Good boy. Do you need to invoke it?”

Dean shook his head. “No, Sir.”

“All right. Good boy. Baby, I want you kneeling at my feet. I want you on your knees right here.”

Michael pointed him to the floor, and Dean sank down without another thought. The audience gasped. Many of them stood up in surprise. They knew Dean was alpha. He smelled it. Many of them had personal experience with his knot from years past. And they knew Michael was Omega. Only Omegas moved like that; like they were instinctively sighting every possible exit from every space they entered.

It was as if all the words, those written and all those spoken, were nothing but so many intangible ideas floating uselessly through space, but adhering to nothing as they flitted about. Dean had admitted to being a Sub years ago. They knew that about him. And then he’d turned the volume up and admitted that it went deeper than a simple need to bow his neck to a standard Dominant now and then. They’d all read the article in the magazine, and the Omega and the alpha stood naked in their honest selves on the front cover, but it all meant nothing until this moment.

Those near the stage could feel the power coming off Michael in waves, but even in the back they could sense that there was no play-acting in the actions onstage. Dean’s body relaxed into Michael’s pose. His head bent down in deference. Michael placed a hand on his head, and then he nodded to April.

April cued the band, and they began a subtle pulse. Michael’s voice rang out much higher than before. April had been impressed when he showed her he could pull off an alto as well. He had quite a range for an amateur.

“When you try your best, but you don’t succeed. When you get what you want, but not what you need.”
Michael bent down enough to take Dean’s chin in his hand and angle the Sub’s head up to look at him.

"When you feel so tired, but you can’t sleep.  
Stuck in reverse…"

Michael let his eyes speak to Dean again as he let the song fall across his mate’s shoulders. Dean didn’t close his eyes, but they fluttered a little, and Michael felt a wave of contentment flow from his obedient Submissive. He went slowly through the first stanzas, speaking the lines in his mind as his voice put them to music.

"Lights will guide you home.  
And ignite your bones.  
And I will try…  
To fix you."

The band kicked in and the stage lights flashed, and that was the moment, at last, when Dean’s eyelid overflowed and allowed a single tear to track down his face. Perfect. Anything less would have been wrong, and Michael meant to control everything that Dean was feeling and seeing and hearing. He bent down and kissed Dean’s lips gently. They were red and swollen and perfect. Dean was so utterly perfect in this moment. Michael sent it all to him. How worthy he was. How loved he was. How cherished, how valuable, how brilliant, how perfect.

Michael noticed Castiel standing nearby, watching. Cas had a small smile on his face, and his eyes fixed on Dean’s face. Michael twitched his head, and Cas stepped closer. He squatted down next to Dean and leaned in close as Michael picked up the refrain and sang to Dean. Cas whispered to his Sub, a hand on his neck. No one but Dean and Castiel would ever know what he said. Dean blinked slowly, but he kept his eyes on Michael.

Everyone in the audience was on their feet by the end of the song. They had never seen anything like this before. Michael squatted down before Dean, his hand on Castiel’s thigh. Cas rested a hand on Michael’s neck as he did on Dean’s, and it was this pose, all but April in intimate convergence, that would become the headline picture in several notable celebrity and news magazines. The image spread from that ballroom into virtually every home in America, and many thousands of homes worldwide. The Submissive alpha kneeling and in tears as his Omega mate looked into his eyes in adoring concern and the Dominant Pack Alpha held both men steady.

Later, Dean would inspect the image and decry that the little Ozzie hadn’t been brought in. She belonged right there with the rest of them, and her absence was a false image of who they were. Besides, she was the only one who was really trying for the spotlight, and they looked like nothing more than an Indie rock album cover. If he had to suffer the indignity and the inherent threat to his Omega of this image, the least they could have done was get it right.

But that was later. Back in the Green room, and reeled back in from Sub-space, Dean confronted his mate.

“Explain yourself,” he demanded.

“You loved it,” Michael protested.

“You told me to stay at home,” Dean reminded him.

“You also told me that how much I participated was going to be MY choice. I have a very good memory, Dean. Maybe you’ve forgotten, but you drilled it into me. You said you weren’t going to
lock me in the house, and that I had a say in where I went and how I was seen.” Michael’s posture was confrontational, and Dean realized the Omega had prepared himself for this. Michael had the advantage. Dean was the one taken by surprise. His alpha didn’t like that one bit.

“We were meant to discuss it before we made a move this big. We had safety plans to put in place. We needed to think it through. Together! What were you thinking?”

“I thought you’d be happy to see me.” Michael didn’t try to hide that he was hurt, even if he’d expected Dean’s knee jerk reaction to his fear for his mate.

“Happy? Michael, I HATE surprises. You ought to know that by now.”

“What’s the big deal? April got to come. Why is it okay for her and not me?”

Dean ran a frustrated hand through his hair. Michael just wasn’t getting it. He was so naïve about so many things. “Because April’s an Ozzie, damnit. She’s exactly what everybody expects her to be. She doesn’t scare people.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? There’s nothing standard about her. She’s a goddamn musical genius, and you’ve got her playing fucking pop songs to a bunch of hippy sex-drunks! This isn’t her crowd, Dean. She should be working up to the big-leagues. But this IS my crowd. These are MY people too, Dean. They’re yours and mine. If you belong here, then so do I, and I want in!”

“Baby, you don’t know what you’re asking for. The media, the magazines, the cameras, damnit Michael, you can’t control them. They have a power over us that is way beyond our reach, and once that box is opened, there’s no cramping it closed again. You can’t control how they see you, what they say about you, how they present you. You can’t control it.” Dean held him by his arms and begged him with his eyes to understand. “It’s a Pandora’s box, man. They’ll eat you alive. You scare the shit out of people. They’re not ready.”

“They loved me, Dean. You saw them.”

Dean was shaking his head. “No, you don’t get it. The pictures they took, and the videos, they won’t show what it felt like in that room tonight. They won’t be able to feel it, and they’ll turn it into something it’s not.”

“Dean, listen to me. I can do this. Have some faith. I can fight this fight with you. Just let them say whatever they want to.”

“IT’S NOT YOUR FIGHT, MICHAEL!”

Dean turned away from his mate’s steel eyes and rubbed his hands across his face in sheer frustration. Nothing was coming out right. Why couldn’t Michael understand how much danger he was in, how swiftly they would turn on him if he scared them enough?

“Would you like to run that one by me again?” Michael asked coldly. “I’m Omega, Dean, or hadn’t you noticed? How exactly is this not my fight? Am I supposed to sit in the tower and wait for my alpha knight to come rescue me? I’m not good at waiting in distress. Hannah hasn’t hit those lessons yet.”

“Look,” Dean said, regrouping and turning to face him again. “I made my thoughts very clear. I said that no one was going to go poking at you with probes to figure out how you tick, and that if you want in on what we do here, then you sign onto the training classes, get your certification the same way the rest of us did, and you work in the herd. You’re NOT going back onstage, Michael. I mean it. You’re not the poster-boy. You’re never doing that again. It puts an enormous fucking target on
your back. How do you not see that?"

“And what about you?” Michael asked in dismay. “You’re the brave one? You come out to millions, and everyone’s jizzing over themselves in excitement? How is it different? Explain it to me in tiny words.”

“Because you’re Omega, Goddamnit. Fuck, I don’t make the rules! I don’t like it any better than you do, but the world is not ready to embrace a Dominant Omega, man, not one like you. They will tear you apart.”

“Because I’m O/D.” Michael’s voice was hard. It wasn’t a question.

“Do you know how many O/Ds have been tested and verified worldwide, Michael?” Dean asked. “Worldwide, since they started running the test. Take a guess.”

“I dunno. Couple thousand? Who gives a shit?”

“Twenty-seven. Total. Ever.” Dean let his voice match Michael’s for hardness. “You’re number twenty-eight, now. And none of them even began to come close to the ratings you have.”

“You said you didn’t care what my ratings were.”

“I don’t. Fuck! I don’t! But the world does. Baby, they aren’t as forgiving as they seem. There’s a real ugliness out there, and it’s starting to fight back. It’s starting to take us seriously as a movement because we’re starting to make some real changes, and it’s scary as hell – people like your Pop, Michael. They’re scared. Do you know what scared people do when you press them? Do you know what a scared dog does when you threaten it? It attacks, and it’s fucking vicious.”

“I’m not afraid of them.”

“I AM! You’re not a sacrifice! They don’t get to have you!”

“You let me do that interview. You let them into our HOUSE, Dean. I don’t understand the difference.”

“We control the house. We control who does the interviews. I trust Jamie. He’s not going to hurt us. And even with that, Cas made sure we got an advance copy. If there had been anything in there that he didn’t like, that story would never have seen the light of day, even if it meant missing a publication date for the first time in their history.”

“Alpha, listen to me. I’m not going to sacrifice myself. I know you’re scared, but you’re not going to lose me. I’m right here, and I’m going to stay here. Right here where I belong.”

“But it’s not just you anymore, Michael. We have to think about the pup. She or he, our pup, is more important than anything either of us wants for ourselves anymore.”

Michael scoffed. “Are you planning to stop making public appearances now that we’ve got a bun in the oven? Or is it just me that’s supposed to stick close to the house for safety’s sake.”

“Goddamnit, Michael!”

“Nuh-unh. Answer the question.”

“Baby, I can’t just stop. We’ve got too much riding on the commitments I’ve made. Look, we’re working on leveling the field, but we’re not there yet. I’m not saying you can’t fight too. I never said
“You have to sit at home and knit. If you want in, we’ll find you a role. But not this. It scares me too much. I won’t lose you, not to them. I’m alpha, damnit. I get to make this call. You don’t have to like it.”

“I just have to obey. I remember.”

“Michael.”

“Look, I get it. You’re scared. Let’s table it for a while, and talk it through with Castiel. Maybe there’s a way to make it work for us both without setting your nerves on fire. We’ll think about it for a bit. Put it on a shelf for now.”

Dean didn’t answer at first. He worked his jaw, and they both fell into silence. Everyone had made themselves scarce once Dean’s state of mind reared it’s pissed off head. He wiped the frustration out of his eyes, straightened his shoulders and turned back to face Michael again.

Michael looked at him and waited. He looked down and picked absently at his cuticle, then he looked up again.

“You defied me,” Dean said.

“I thought you would appreciate it.”

“You deliberately disobeyed me.”

Michael blinked. Dean waited for his response. Michael looked down again and frowned.

“Castiel thought it was a good idea.”

“Castiel isn’t the one who told you to stay at home and help Jess care for the twins. I did. Did he instruct you to join him on that plane? Was it an order?”

Michael took a bracing breath. “No. It was my suggestion. He didn’t know you’d forbidden me to come.”

“No, what?”

Michael looked up at him, startled. It took him a moment to understand the question.

“No, Sir,” he muttered quietly at last.

Dean took stock of his emotions and his control. It had been a very long day, and tomorrow would be another one, and the two days after that. Normally, he would be out to a late supper at this point, high on the endorphins of a concert well-played, but tonight all he wanted was a soft bed with Cas on one side and Michael on the other, and a chance to close his eyes.

But he had enough in the tank for this. Dean schooled himself, and he pointed to the end of the couch. He could tell there was an internal fight going on inside his mate, even without the bonds sparking violently, but he needed Michael’s attention, and he needed it now.

“Move, Omega. Right now.”

Michael flinched as if Dean had struck him, but Dean could see him from the inside, and he didn’t cave to the show.

“One.”
“I…Yes, sir.” Michael’s face flickered with his internal battles in a way it never did when he was stable in a headspace he controlled.

He stumbled awkwardly, his hand working open the buckle of his belt. It was a new belt, stiff and unforgiving. Michael hoped Dean wasn’t planning to use this one. He had meant to break it in differently. Dean stalked slowly behind him. Michael stopped beside the arm, and looked up, asking silently whether he should bare himself or let Dean do it for him. Dean flicked his eyes to the floor and back up again to let him know to go ahead and do it himself. Michael grunted unhappily, but he did as his alpha bid him.

“Over the arm. Lay out on your belly. Get your ass up in the air. I want a target."

“Did you like what I did though?” Michael asked as he laid himself out. “At least tell me, so I know if it was worth it.”

“Baby, I’m in love with you. You know that. Fuck, yes, I liked it a lot. You should have told me months ago that you have a voice like that.”

“I kept meaning to. I just never got around to it. You don’t consider that lying, do you?” Michael’s butt twitched at the thought that his timing could have been better to make that confession.

Dean chuffed quietly. “No, you’re good. We have to get to know each other over time. I’m sure there’s still things you don’t know about me yet. You ready?”

“Are you really supposed to be asking? Aren’t you the one in charge here?”

“Fuck it all, Michael. Are you remotely capable of deference? Can you just turn it off for half a minute?”

“I don’t do submission well, sir.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Take a breath. This is going to hurt.”

Dean had his own supple belt in his hand. He swished it meaningfully. He knew what it was going to feel like. He had felt this belt’s bite so many times before. Dean took a couple of deep breaths, and worked his jaw again. His face twitched as he worked his alpha into place beneath his skin. Michael deserved his full alpha.

Dean didn’t give him a count or another warning. He put power in his first swing, and he heard Michael grunt and whine, followed by a series of shallow breaths through his nose. Michael’s jaw was clamped tightly closed, as were his eyes. He was angry and hurt; as angry as Dean was, but he wasn’t scared yet. He should be scared. The world chewed up Omegas and spat them out in pieces all the time. Dean swung again, and this time there was no whine, just a loud whuff. Dean didn’t have a number in his head. He knew what he wanted to feel from Michael, and he would keep going until he felt it. He swung again. Michael shifted, and his mouth fell open into a shallow pant.

Dean let him think and feel and process between strokes. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t touch his mate. The time for that would come soon enough. Not yet. He swung hard. The belt wrapped Michael’s hip just enough to leave a welt there. And again. Again. Michael’s eyes were still clenched, but they had begun to leak a little. Dean couldn’t see his face, but he could feel every sensation that Michael did, and he knew what tears of pain felt like.

And again. It was loud in the smallish room. Michael was struggling to hold position. How different this moment was from the first time Dean put a belt to Michael’s backside. He’d needed to be careful then. He was careful now as well, but he no longer worried about the power in his arm. He knew
Michael. He knew what Michael could withstand.

He swung again. Michael’s voice broke. He yiped loudly, and then he buried his face in his arms. Again. Michael bit his arm, but the next strike had him pushing up on an arm and flailing back with the other to cover his butt. Dean swung anyway, just as Michael always did. The belt struck his palm and his curled fingertips, and he howled, pulling his hand back and sucking fingers into his mouth. Dean struck him three times in quick succession. Michael was still up on one arm. He shoved backward until his belly rested on the arm of the couch, and his ass tucked under. Dean stood still.

He didn’t reprimand him or touch him. He waited silently.

Michael’s whimper was almost inaudible, but at last he lay back out as Dean wanted him. He tucked his folded arms back under his head, and turned his face into the side of the couch. He was close. He didn’t need much more, but he wasn’t quite there yet. Dean pulled back and swung again. The belt hit Michael square across his red, striped ass. He flinched miserably, but he didn’t break position. Dean swung again. Again. Again. Michael went slack and snuffled. Tears had overflowed, outside of his control. Nothing was under Michael’s control but his placement over the arm of the couch, and that’s what Dean had been waiting for. So stubborn. The alpha popped five more swift simple welts into place. Michael’s cries weren’t damped in any way. He cried out loudly. Dean touched his back to let him know they’d reached the end. He worked his belt back into place and then sat by Michael’s head on the couch and stroked his hair while he cried. Michael squirmed his way up onto Dean’s lap, resting his face against Dean’s belly.

“I love you,” Dean told him.

“I know,” Michael replied hoarsely.

They weren’t finished talking about it yet. Dean wasn’t planning to budge where Michael’s safety was concerned, but Michael had some valid points. Part of Dean wanted to castigate Cas for being party to this foolishness, but Dean hadn’t really made his instruction clear. Michael was right that Dean had put completely opposite statements on the table. He’d promised Michael he could make these choices for himself. Dean meant to keep that promise, but he also meant to stick fast on the point that he needed to know when, where, and with whom Michael planned to go public. No more ambushes, even ones that made him feel like THAT.

Michael fell asleep across Dean’s lap with his ass still bare and bright red. Dean watched him sleep, thinking hard. Nothing in his life had ever scared him like this did. He smoothed a hand over Michael’s lower belly, turned mostly into the cushions of the couch. Dean knew it wasn’t where the pup was nestled, but there was no way to stroke him that deep. Dean’s pup was cocooned so deeply inside Michael, they wouldn’t be able to feel it from without until just before it was born.

How could he make Michael understand that the world really was just as dangerous as Michael had always assumed it was back when he saw enemies everywhere. How could he convince him to trust the Pack but to suspect everyone else? That wasn’t what Dean wanted. He didn’t want to raise a family in fear. But the world wasn’t ready yet. Lawrence, Kansas was an oasis in an unfriendly world, but even there…

When Dean first realized that it was Michael, his beloved mate, standing alone against the back wall of the ballroom, pulling every eye to him with his voice and his cockiness, all Dean could think was ‘how many will I have to kill to get to him before they hurt him?’

“Shh. You’re thinking very loudly.” Michael’s gruff voice rasped.

“Sorry. Go back to sleep, baby.”
“I wasn’t alone back there, Dean. Benny and Sam were with me. Security was everywhere. I was safe, alpha. I’m sorry I scared you.” Michael pushed up and stumbled off the couch. He craned around to look at his ass and then reached for his clothes. This was going to hurt.

Dean stood up and helped him. “Let it go, sweetheart. I’m not mad.”

“No, but you’re still thinking about it, and you’re sending out fear in visible waves. I just wanted you to know that it wasn’t like I was separated from you by an ocean of horny alphas with no one watching over me. I’m not that stupid, and Sam wouldn’t have allowed it anyway. He’s a bossy fucker, your brother.”

Dean laughed, letting Michael lean on him and opening the door. “Yeah, he is.”

Chapter End Notes

Um, songlist, I guess:

REO Speedwagon's "I can't fight this feeling"
Go with twenty one pilot's "I can't help falling in love" Michael's not pretending to be Elvis.
Coldplay's "Fix you"
April's song for Cas is NOT, (but is very similar to) Ingrid Michaelson's "The way I am"
Mike + the Mechanics' "The Living Years"
Journey (or Louden Swain)'s "Any Way You Want It"

One more thing: There is a whole lotta unnecessary verbiage in this chapter. It may annoy me at some point, and I may come back with a hacksaw and take out all the q&a.
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

A surprising homecoming. A lot of business on the table. Gabriel has an unexpected reaction. Cas and Dean break through some barriers. And Naomi.

Chapter Notes

Warning for damage from extreme self-harm.

Go out and check out "Chapter 3" of our attached Keller graph by the brilliant Melodina. It's a work of art.

So, IRL news, the new brewery is open and packed. It's beautiful. If you really like ales, this is your kinda place. If you drink Pilsners-light, not so much. The space is immense, picnic tables everywhere. It's fun and light-hearted and open. I loved it. It's a three-hour drive to get there though, so not exactly a hang-out. Too bad. It's totally my kinda place. Danneel served my flight, so that was pretty cool.

That's all. On with the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 72 – Wednesday, July 19, 2017

NOW:

“What the fuck were they thinking?” wondered Dean aloud, his eyes scanning the Keller press release rapidly. “How does this make any sense at all?”

Sam simply shook his head. He had his suitcase nearly packed. Dean was on the middle of Sam’s hotel bed, legs crossed, tablet before him. Sam didn’t reply, but he agreed with Dean. The new scoring matrix was obviously cobbled together with little thought. Something had gone screwy over on the mother ship, and the chinks had begun to widen into full breaks in the hull.

Dean went on, arguing mostly with himself since Sam had nothing to add. “I get stretching the scores out, but this over-weights it toward both ends as if the majority of the population is out on the edges. They didn’t adjust anything else. Doms and Subs don’t need a 25-point range. It’s the Neutrals we need more space for. I mean, hell, Gabe and Balthazar are only one point apart, and those two don’t have a lick in common with each other. Did these guys even read the research? Did they just throw a fucking dart at all the options? God, what a piece of crap! We’re going to have to work with this fuck-fest for the next…forever, Sam. You know that, right?”
“I get it, Dean. What do you want me to say?” Sam cleared his closet and tucked the clothing into his hanging bag, then he zipped it up.

“You know why they did this.” Dean wasn’t asking. “They knew they only had a short time before we take the reins, and they wanted it all locked up tight and irreversible before Cas stepped in and put his mark on the chart. They know which way the merger is going to go. It’s a last stab at kicking us in the nuts before they have to pretend to like us.”

“Jesus, man. Cynical much?” said Sam calmly.

“This doesn’t irk you?” asked Dean, moving to the edge of the bed. “They stuck their fingers in the pie and scrambled it just before handing that mess to us to manage. Twenty bucks says Carol led this fucking parade. She’s had it out for Cas for, like, twenty years.”

“How does re-rating him as a 25 hurt him, Dean? You’re making a big deal over nothing. Actually, this is easier to adjust to than if they re-zoned the whole chart. What difference does it make if the last five or ten spots on each side stay empty? Nothing else changes this way, making it easier to update the supporting documents, and Cas gets the rating that’s right for him. Finally. I don’t get what you’re this mad about.”

“Dude, they had an opportunity to fix everything we’ve been bitching about for years. They could have redone the whole thing – got rid of the empty space on either side of the beta zone, given the Neutrals enough range to delineate their differences, fixed the error in Z-scoring to make up for contradictory kinks that cancel each other out. They had a golden opportunity here, man, and they blew it just to get it all done before Cas takes over. Fucking children, that’s what they are, the lot of them. Now we’re stuck with a chart full of fuck-ups and band-aids.” Dean couldn’t stop looking at the new matrix.

“I mean,” he went on. “If you’re gonna change it anyway, fucking do it right. Fix it for real, you know? Write up an algorithm to help people know how their old ratings shift to new ones, and then we don’t ever have to change it again.”

Sam set his luggage by the door, draping the hanging bag over his suitcase. It had been a solid four days. He felt good about their work. Sam usually left Cons feeling satisfied in a way that his daily life didn’t do for him – maybe because the Cons were so much more intense. There were always a lot of wolves in crisis who needed immediate help, and sending them home Balanced felt good.

“I guess you’re just going to have to do that yourself once you get there, Dean.”

“And how does that make Keller look to the world?” posed Dean standing up. It was time to head down to the waiting car that would take them back to the airport. Cas, Michael, and April were already gone. The final two days were all hard work, and Cas hadn’t been on the docket for any of the events. Plus, he couldn’t miss two days at his office. So many pressing items needed his attention. It had been magical having him here though – having them both.

Dean put them out of his mind. “We’re taking ownership of Keller, Sam. ‘They’ is about to be ‘We’. It matters if we look incompetent by posting a new chart every six months like we don’t know our asses from a hole in the ground.”

“The whole effing world knows about the merger by now,” Sam pointed out. “They’ll understand that there are changes that need to be made. Keller’s been losing its reputation for years now.”

“I wanna punch Carol in her stupid smug face,” Dean muttered childishly.
“They fired her, man,” Sam reasoned. “Don’t you think she’s been punished enough? She lost her job. Let it go.”

Dean scoffed, but he tucked the tablet into his carry-on and collected the rest of his bags. It was going to be a long flight home, and Sam was crazy if he thought Dean was going to drop the subject. It wasn’t Sam’s name on all the compliance documents. It wasn’t Sam who was responsible for a shit-load of revisions that might wind up scrapped within a few months if Dean got the chance to reconfigure the matrix correctly someday.

Sam caught Dean by the upper arm just before the older brother pulled the hotel room door open.

“Let it go, Dean. I’m not going to listen to you bitch yourself into a frenzy the whole way home. You’ll be riled enough by the flight all by itself. Add this on top of that, and you’ll be a basket-case before you step through your own door. You’ll be face-to-the-floor before you make it through your own kitchen.” Sam’s face said he meant business, and Dean’s ass flinched at the threat. Although it wasn’t a threat. It was an offer.

Dean worked his jaw with his eyes on the door.

“Dean?”

“I’m pissed off, Sam, not unbalanced.”

“Pissed off is your first step toward unbalanced. If you didn’t have a plane trip coming, I wouldn’t even suggest it. You know that. But you’re about to get wound up, and I don’t want you spiraling. Talk to me, man. I’ll follow your lead here. You know what you need better than I do.”

Dean’s eyes closed. He pictured the next few hours. He pictured the rising tension and the feeling of losing his tether to the ground in more ways than one. He pictured the same scenario with and without a stinging burn to grind down onto. He knew what he needed.

“Make it fast. They’re waiting for us.”

“Yep. I can do that.”

Sam didn’t need to say anything more. Dean bared his ass without further prompt from the Dominant, and he put himself over the end of the bed. Sam had his paddle in his hand before Dean was even situated, and he popped his brother’s backside with a resounding smack that sounded amazingly loud in the small space. They didn’t have much time, so Sam chose to put some extra power into his swings. He struck swiftly too, making an impact that would snap his brother to a different plane in his head and allow him something to hold onto. Sam couldn’t relate to Dean’s need from a personal vantage, but he knew what worked. He also knew that Cas had put a moratorium on damaging Dean’s musculature and skin, and that meant Sam needed to find just the right level of intensity.

It didn’t take long, but Sam managed to deliver 100 fast pops all around Dean’s strike zone before the brothers scrambled downstairs to the waiting car. Dean didn’t limp, and he hadn’t broken into tears. He hadn’t even broken a sweat. His backside was hot, and it stung fiercely, but he wasn’t bruised. Sam had a way with that fucking paddle of his.

Dean was quiet on the ride to the airport. Every time he felt his anxiety begin to ramp up, he shifted on his seat and focused on the sting. He felt a little less fixated on the morons at Keller than he had been. He was still annoyed, but it wasn’t running on repeat through his head any longer.

In the waiting lounge, Sam tried reading but Dean was beginning to show signs of stress too severe
to handle on his own, so Sam moved to distract him. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn’t.

Sam looked over his work emails for a topic that might engage his brother.

“Bela has jumped ship,” he announced. “She’s going to work for Crowley. I guess it was taking too long to oust Henrickson, and she got tired of waiting for a Directorship.”

Dean scoffed. “Yeah, I saw that. I don’t know what she thinks that gains her. If this merger goes down the way I think it will, she’ll be right back where she started but with all of us knowing where her loyalties lie. I think she screwed herself.”

Sam put a thoughtful brow up. “No, I think she’s attached herself to Crowley personally. The rumor-mill says he’ll move on once the merger is complete. He’ll take his bonus and go find another institution that needs rapid first-aid. It looks like Bela would be going with him.”

“Like as a personal assistant? Sam, Bela Talbot is nobody’s secretary.” Dean shifted again and gritted his teeth.

“No, more like what Billie does for Cas. Like a ‘His Girl, Friday’.”

“Now that’s a scary thought,” said Dean pensively. That he was capable of pensive this close to take-off was a vast improvement over his usual demeanor. “Those two together give me a Ruby/Alastair vibe. Could be bad news. Has she signed a non-compete agreement we could use to stop her?”

“Fuck if I know,” said Sam. “You have a lot more info on that kind of shit than I do.”

“I don’t think Castiel uses non-competes,” Dean mused, thinking back. “He didn’t want to hold anyone down.”

Sam switched topics. “There’s a cryptic note from Jess here. She says to be prepared for something different at home. You got any idea what that’s all about?”

“No idea,” said Dean. He stood up and checked out the window. Spotting the plane at the end of the gangway, he paled and closed his eyes. That was the end of any meaningful conversation. Dean was in survival mode from that point on. Flying home with only Sam nearby stripped him of the safety of pack, and made dealing with his fear that much harder. Most of the Convention staff was staying behind to tie up loose ends. It meant he didn’t have Jo telling him to “Suck it up, Winchester,” and he didn’t have Meg rudely reaching for his crotch to check if he had lost his cojones. They were crude and invasive, both of them, but they knew how to make Dean feel like he might not be about to die in flames, smoke, and ash. Like his mother. Like his nightmares.

At least he had Sam. At the end of the day, if he couldn’t have Cas or Michael, Dean would take Sam over anyone else in the world.

“Come on, Dean. They’re calling us to board. You’ll be home in four hours. You can do four hours.”

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“Tell me what happened,” demanded Castiel. “How did she get here?”
Jess stood silently by the door, Hank on her shoulder, her eyes still showing shock.

Naomi Novak lay bandaged and sleeping in Castiel’s H/R room. She still had a titular room of her own in the vast house, but the H/R room was fully stocked medically, and had served multiple times as an impromptu sickroom. It seemed the best place for her. Her body was a mess.

“Security called me yesterday evening from the Gatehouse. All they would say is that there was something I needed to see.” Gabriel talked without lifting his eyes from his mother’s pale face. “Jess and I drove out there in a golf cart thinking, ‘how bad can it be?’ Her own security team had just dropped her off at the front gate like she was mail. Sal said they barely came to a complete stop. They just pulled up in a van and rolled her bloody carcass out of the van and pulled away. She couldn’t even stand. Passed out in Sal’s arms. That’s fucking loyalty for ya. She’s had the same security team forever, and now that she’s falling on her ass in the polls and losing her grip, the rats all jump ship. Sal put her in the back bedroom inside the Gatehouse and called me.”

“You’re not feeling sympathetic, are you, big brother?” Castiel asked.

“Save it, Cas. Look at her. She’s bleeding from more places than she has places. Who the fuck did this to her? She looks like a drug-deal gone bad. I’ve been in some places, man, and I’ve seen my share of awful, and I’m telling you, this is right up there.”

Castiel pulled the blanket back gently. He didn’t want to wake her yet. She was unclothed, but the bandages applied covered her almost completely. She resembled nothing so much as a mummy. She had a few bare spots at her waist and legs, and Cas ran light fingers over old scars.

“I think we have to assume that she did this to herself, Gabriel. Why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you take her to the hospital?”

Cas couldn’t put all the pieces together in his head.

“Bobby was here. He patched her up a little and knocked her out. She’s been asleep since late last night, but she was awake and talking for a few hours. She asked me not to call you. I think she wanted a little rest before she had to face you, Alpha.”

Castiel looked from his mother to his brother, letting the blanket fall lightly back into place. “What did she say?”

“Not a lot,” admitted Gabriel somberly. “She was angry that her people dropped her off here, but I got the sense they aren’t coming back for her. It seemed to me like this is the last place she wanted to be seen like this, so I assume they aren’t taking her instructions anymore. She was humiliated, Cas. She couldn’t look at me, and she answered only in monosyllables. Wouldn’t volunteer anything. All I really got out of her was that the longer I could put off letting you know she was here, the better.”

“That’s not your choice, Omega!” snapped Cas angrily.

“Look, man, you were due back this morning anyway. You couldn’t have helped from Arizona, and you couldn’t have gotten here any faster without chartering a jet. She needed to sleep.”

Michael appeared in the doorway beside Jess. He had J.T. slung casually across his arm, but he barely seemed to notice. The pup just belonged there. “The press is saying the Novak campaign is pulling out of the race, Alpha. There are hints they’re digging for scandal. They’re still trying to tie Naomi to Oklahoma, and there are rumors that she’s come unhinged over it all. Do you want me to call Billie in to put together a statement?” Michael was reading from his phone.

“Call Billie.” Cas was still fixated on his mother’s face. “Have her come here, but don’t tell her why.
Use the code-word ‘Biblical’ somewhere in your instructions to her, but couch it. You understand?”

“Yes, Alpha. I understand code-words. I’ll be careful.”

Michael disappeared with the sleeping pup and the cell phone.

Castiel sighed. He turned and looked at Jess.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Alpha. We had a bit of a struggle getting her up to the house. Sal didn’t want his men to help, and we argued with him over whether to allow her in at all. He wanted to leave her in the Gatehouse until you came home, but we didn’t have the medical kit Bobby needed out there, and I didn’t want her surrounded by strangers in that condition. You’re not turning her out, are you, Sir?”

Cas made a face. He wasn’t ready to answer that question. He couldn’t throw her out on the side of the road as she was, but he wasn’t about to put his Pack back within reach of her caustic tongue either.

“I need to speak with her. Jess, I thank you for everything you’ve done for my mother. I know you are tired and stretched thin. I know you were ranking Pack at the time, and that you had to make a number of difficult decisions. You have done well for the most part, but if you ever keep something like this from me again I will thrash you soundly, am I clear?”

“Y…yes, Alpha. I’m sorry.”

“No need. It was not something any of us expected for you to have to handle. Just know that handling it on your own was never something I would expect you to do.” He turned to his brother, and both of their faces were stony. “Where’s Kali?”

“She went home on Saturday. I haven’t seen her or talked to her since.”

“That didn’t last long.”

“Don’t be an ass, Castiel. You knew I couldn’t do a relationship.”

“Your Heat’s coming up, Gabe. If Mother is in our H/R room, do you need a room up at The Facilify?” That wasn’t the question Cas was really asking. He wanted to know if Gabe was likely to try again with Kali, or if his short-lived experiment with dating was through.

“What part of ‘Don’t be an ass’ are you not understanding?” asked Gabriel acerbically. “Can we just deal with this first?” He nodded toward the bed.

Cas kept a cool blue eye on Gabe silently for long enough to make him squirm. He was pushing limits, and Cas was in no mood for it. Coming home high off a lovely weekend of revelations about his intended to find an unconscious Congresswoman bleeding in his house and complicating all the progress he’d made with Dean over the last few days put him in a foul mood that made goading him unwise in the extreme. Gabe knew that no doubt.

Was Gabe drawing out his anger to protect someone else?

Who?

Naomi? April? Jessica? Castiel scanned his brother’s face for clues, but Gabe was too good at hiding, and Cas couldn’t read him.
“Leave me,” he ordered, Alpha in every way.

Gabe and Jess both disappeared without another word. Cas pulled all of his irritation to the forefront, so he could get a handle on it. He buried himself in it for several breaths, closing his eyes and allowing his face to twitch, his neck to strain, his fists to clench. Then he blew out a loud breath and let it go. He spent another ten slow breaths in a deep meditative state. He took stock of his body, his mind, and his emotions, breathing until he knew himself again. The wolf cracked its neck meaningfully, but it settled and put its head between its paws. Its eyes were sharp though. The leash trembled ever so slightly.

Cas put a firm hand on his mother’s shoulder and shook it a bit to rouse her.

“Naomi, wake up,” he said loudly enough to crack through the dregs of her medication. “It’s time to wake up. We need to talk.”

She shifted and groaned. He had to try again, but eventually he got her blinking up at him. Cas pulled a chair up close to the bed where he’d recently debauched his beloved Dean and the enigmatic Omega who defied definition. The Alpha felt no shame in the collision of images. He was done feeling shame in his mother’s presence. Castiel had tried to be both the good son who honored his parents regardless of their sins, and the Pack Alpha who honored his obligations to the family he’d pulled together around him. The two were mutually exclusive, and he was not conflicted about which man he wanted to discard.

“Are you thirsty?” he asked by way of opening the dialogue that was years late in coming.

She nodded weakly. He helped her to sit up enough to sip from a straw. She inhaled a pained breath at the movement. Cas knew she was probably sitting on the worst of the damage, and he’d not yet seen how bad it was.

“Can you talk? Can you tell me what happened?” Cas took the cup out of her shaky hands and set it on the table beside the bed.

“I…miscalculated,” she managed to whisper in a gruff voice. She didn’t sound anything like herself.

“Did someone do this to you, Naomi, or did you do it to yourself?”

Her eyes showed that she marked his use of her name and his pitiless tone. She didn’t answer. She met his eye for a moment, and it was clear that she was attempting to assume her cloak of power, to be who she’d always been, to cow him, but she couldn’t do it, and she looked away.

“I see,” he said. “And when I examine you will I find scars that show you’ve been doing this to yourself for a very long time?”

“I have a doctor, Castiel,” she hissed.

“You do,” he agreed. “You’re looking at him.”

“I don’t consent to that,” she tried again. Her voice was gaining tone, but her body still lay nearly lifeless. She had obviously lost a lot of blood.

“Luckily, as your Pack Alpha, I don’t need your consent.”

He didn’t move to make good on his plan to examine her body, but he didn’t say anything else either. Castiel had no intention of making any of this easy. He needed to weed down to the truth, and he didn’t trust her at all.
“It’s none of your business,” she said simply, trying to push herself more upright, but not making any progress. “I didn’t authorize anyone to bring me here, and I’m not your Pack. Your lawyer sent me a Letter of Dissolution. You’ve disowned me, Alpha. Remember?”

“The Dissolution isn’t final yet, beta. As of this moment, I have put a hold on its progress. Circumstances have changed, and as a medical professional, I believe your competence is in question. If these wounds are self-inflicted as they appear to be, I expect to have no contest in declaring you incapacitated or unfit. Either of those designations gives me the authority to assume legal custody over your care. Get used to the idea, Naomi. That’s where you are headed, make no mistake. However, the circumstances of how you spend the remainder of your life under my custody is something you have a modicum of control over. If you lie to me right now, you will find yourself very uncomfortable for the foreseeable future. I advise against it.”

“Always so noble and dramatic,” she muttered, still not looking at him. “You have no right to kidnap me.”

“How long has the self-flagellation been going on?” he asked, ignoring her comment.

She sighed dramatically. He was her son after all. He had to get it from somewhere. “Don’t you judge me, Castiel. You and your dog-pack engage in all kinds of flagellation. I’ve seen what you keep in that dungeon of yours. I thought you’d be thrilled and smug as hell to know that you’re such a chip off the block. Like mother, like son, no?”

“What I do is something that has taken years of training and practice,” he protested. “Every stroke is applied with care, and every stroke has a follow-up that brings it full-circle to a constructive place. Bleeding oneself is never a safe thing to do. You could have died. Don’t you understand the difference? They aren’t the same thing at all.”

“It’s the only thing that ever worked to shut the bitch up, Goddamnit!” She was beginning to get a fever flush in her face. “She’s a demon bitch, and I’m saddled with her incessant howling. I needed a way to silence her. God, fuck, all I wanted was a way to have some quiet in my own head.” Cursing from Naomi was a sure sign she’d lost hold of herself. She normally used foul language only deliberately to throw a target off-balance, never out of a loss of control. Castiel’s eyes narrowed in thought.

“Your wolf is a part of you. You can’t get rid of it. You aren’t Primate. I know that comes as a horrible disappointment, but you’re a dog just as much as Gabriel and I are.”

She didn’t answer him, but her flush didn’t fade, and her eyes didn’t lose their hardness. He tried another tack.

“You called Dean on the day of his father’s funeral.”

She didn’t deny it.

“You knew John Winchester?”

She glanced at Cas and then away again so quickly he might have missed it if he hadn’t been watching closely.

“You dated him?” No response that time.

“Naomi, is that what sent you spiraling down? Grief is a powerful emotion. Grief combined with regret, for a Lupin, can be deadly. Answer me.” There was Alpha authority in his voice.
“You don’t know half what you think you do, Alpha.”

“Tell me what I don’t know.” He held the water cup for her to take another sip.

“You never had to face the world that I did, Castiel.” There was a lifetime of bitterness in her voice. “Everything came easy to you. Everywhere you go, people defer to you. You don’t like the rules of the world? You change them. Never mind what that does to the rest of us who are trying to be good people like we were raised to be. It’s all so clear to you. You fuck your way through everything. It’s disgusting, and it’s wrong. There is no way that a life of base pleasure makes people more healthy, more Godly. I reject it just as strongly as I ever have. I reject it, Alpha, and you cannot force me to believe it now any more than I did before.”

She was angry, her venom spilling out not in snippets of coldly calculated manipulation, but in stark raw truth.

“Everything you stand for is evil, and you are MY SON. I am ashamed to have borne you, to have raised you, to have loved you only to have you turn into THIS.”

Cas didn’t answer. He waited for the punch to land deep in his gut as it always did when she made declarations like that, but he didn’t feel it this time. Instead, he felt pity. She was just like John; left alone to suffer through life with no pack support. She fell apart, and wolves cannot recover on their own. Castiel had enough years of research to know it for truth. She had no coping skills. It was exactly as Dean said. All roads for a lone wolf led into the void. Years of loss and grief had no possible end for a wolf with no pack but into madness and death. Wolves tried badly to cope in a whole host of ways. John had turned to drink. Zachariah had committed suicide by duel. Perhaps even Mary Winchester’s untimely death was on the cusp of some loss that she never found resolution to. Naomi tried to cope by clawing viciously at the turning societal tide until the impending wave engulfed her sanity.

Whether there was anything left of Naomi that was salvageable wasn’t clear to Castiel. But Dean was right. Whatever it might take to keep the rest of them from falling into this darkness, Cas would do it.

“Thank you for being honest,” he said simply. “I cannot apologize to you for being who I am, and I wouldn’t if I could.” He looked deeply into her eyes. “You are wrong about me, Mother. You have always been wrong. I cannot make you believe it. What I CAN do is keep you here until you have healed enough to make some choices. One option is that you may be allowed to take custody of yourself again. There are a couple of caveats to that. The first is that Dean will make the final decision on whether you stay or go. You have been cruel to him at every interaction, and he has never deserved any of it. If he doesn’t want you here, I will find a suitable rehabilitation facility for you. I reiterate, it is Dean’s decision, not mine and not yours.

“The second caveat is that if you never regain a level of mental stability that allows you to govern yourself without adding to the scars on your body, I will maintain custody of you for the rest of your life.”

“You can’t do that,” she hissed, finally showing fear.

“I absolutely can, and I will. You are a danger to yourself, Naomi.”

“I am your Mother, Castiel James Novak. I demand that you address me as such.”

“My name is Cas Winchester. You may call me Cas, you may call me Castiel if you must, or you may call me Alpha. I will answer only to these.”
He turned to stand and leave her. He didn’t expect the sob that broke from her body and shook her. He turned back, alarmed. Naomi – his mother, the Congresswoman from District 3 – was openly weeping into her hands. He’d never seen her cry before. Not ever. Not even when his father died. Not when Gabriel’s life was in danger. Not when he sat stoic before the whole country and faced her down, defeating her in a humiliating turn of phrase.

Castiel had no way to frame what he was feeling. His mother’s grief tore at something he thought long dead. Without thinking, he shifted to sit beside her, and he pulled her weak body into his arms. He shushed her tenderly. He stroked her hair as she wept. He worked a leg up high and shuffled onto the bed to straddle her body, pulling her down to lean against his chest as he often did to Gabriel in his brother’s darkest moments. Her tears continued. Sobs that wracked her exhausted body broke from her lips uncontrollably.

He wrapped her up from behind, arms and legs creating a nest that engulfed her, and he let her cry against his chest.

How much pain was she carrying? Could weeping ease any of it? Was her sobbing a pointless endeavor now that she had lost everything she cared about? HAD she lost everything she cared about? She would eventually be cleared of all suspicion over the explosion in Oklahoma, but her campaign was in tatters. She had already admitted defeat, months before the election. Her most loyal employees had turned on her, heartlessly leaving her alone and bleeding on the side of the road. Who does that? How much more humiliation can one wolf take? And to top it off, she had to crawl in and beg care from people she despised. Surely, she had lost everything.

Naomi reached up, turned into him and took hold of his shoulder, clutching on with a clawed grip as if clinging to the last remnant of the life she’d lost. She was crying hard enough to have lost control of it. It was a hard enough thing now that she couldn’t have stopped if she wanted to. Cas kissed the top of her head thoughtlessly and cinched her in tighter. This close, he scented her, and his heart dropped with the scent that met him. She wasn’t the same woman he’d known. She would never be that woman again. His mother was gone.

“Where you’ll live is Dean’s choice, Mother, but whatever he decides, I’ll take care of you. Let go of it all. I’m not going to drop you. We will need to go over the rules once you’ve recovered some. If you stay here, the rules will be very strict. You are Pack, and I’m not going to let you fall any further. It ends right here. Do you hear me?”

“It hurts, Castiel…”

“I know it hurts. It hurts so badly that tearing your body up hurts less, makes it numb. I know. We can make it hurt less. You need to trust me. You haven’t trusted me in a very long time. Do you think you can try?”

“Nobody wants me here,” she hiccupped quietly.

He huffed a humorless laugh. There was no use pretending that wasn’t true.

“You have a lot of power to change that.”

“Gabriel hates me. You hate me.”

“I never hated you,” he disagreed. “I am very angry, and I won’t tolerate the kind of behavior I’ve grown to expect from you. But neither Gabe nor I ever hated you.” He pulled her chin gently but firmly until she was looking up at him. Her eyes were bottomless despair. “You owe Gabe more than you do me. Start there.”
She sobbed again and tucked her chin down in shame, unable to answer.

Gabriel was one thing. Dean would be another. Castiel had a hard conversation ahead of him. How could he convey to Dean that the choice before him was real? Dean would be furious. He would want her out of their house. And then his own tattered self-worth would rear its head and convince him that he had no right to cast out his Alpha’s own mother no matter how much damage she had done over the years. Dean would sacrifice everything he was if he thought it was what Cas wanted. What Cas really wanted was to wrap Dean up in bubble wrap and make the choice for him to eliminate the need for his bruised esteem to take another hit. But Cas had promised to stop doing that.

In very little time, Naomi Novak was fast asleep against her son’s chest. She was a mess. Her always tidy upswept bun was gone, and her hair fell in lank strands across her wan face. The roots showed grey where she had let the amber color lapse. She was up on one hip. Cas used the position to examine her hips and thighs, pulling the blanket back a little. Very old scars showed in between the heavy bandages. She had obviously been coping this way for decades, and Cas had never known. She wore no makeup, and the deep circles beneath her eyes didn’t seem new. He didn’t know what to do or what to think. He didn’t know what to feel. He felt blindsided by a freight train. All he could think to do was to fall on instinct.

Castiel’s Alpha wanted her protected and healed. She was his mother forever, and she was Pack.

Castiel’s wolf wanted her out. Dean would always come first. And the pups. He couldn’t raise pups around her kind of vitriolic contempt. She HAD to change to have any hope of staying, and that was independent of any decision of Dean’s.

Castiel’s front-brain was utterly at a loss. He couldn’t think. It was too much.

Hours later, Cas changed her dressings, and his throat developed a hard lump as the full extent of what she’d done to herself in her desperation to rid herself of her own core self became evident. She was more than broken. Cas understood why Gabriel hadn’t phoned him. He was struggling just as much with trying to reach out to Dean. His fiancé would just have to be angry. Cas couldn’t distract him with this. Dean couldn’t help in any way, and the work he was doing was critical to so many people.

Maybe Cas was just a coward.

He let April assist in cleaning the wounds and changing the bandages. Naomi had been shifted to lay on her belly where the wounds weren’t as deep. Cas consulted with Bobby, and then decided to add a few sutures in addition to the ones Bobby put in. Naomi was deep stripes from high on her back to the backs of her knees. How she even landed some of those strikes, Cas couldn’t fathom. She lay with her head turned toward the door, blinking wordlessly while he and April worked. She wouldn’t tell him what she’d used to make the stripes, but he already had a team on its way to her Topeka house. He would find out soon enough.

Cas sat late into the night and spoke with Billie in his dining room while Naomi slept, and Gabriel sat beside her bed. Michael had taken custody of Jess and the twins in a way that was adorable and comforting. Michael knew he had no footing to assist with the Naomi-crisis, so he filled the void he could fill. Jess seemed to appreciate his presence. Her response to Michael amused Cas no end. Her wolf sought strength in counterpoint, and when she couldn’t lean on Cas, she found Michael a suitable replacement. He wondered how Sam would react once he cottoned on. Maybe he already had. Sam seemed to ‘get’ the notion of pack instinctively better than the rest of them anyway.
Cas asked Michael whether he’d spoken about Naomi to Dean, and the Omega answered with nothing but a meaningful look. They were both thinking the same thing, it seemed. Cas turned away and sipped his coffee. He knew that once Dean had his teeth in the thing, all of the steps Cas was taking to avoid telling him about it would seem ridiculous, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it even knowing that. Their wedding was in a month and a half, and it still felt so far away. Plans were all falling into place. Michael had ordered the invitations just before he cycled with Dean. Yet it felt to Cas like it might all fall apart at any moment. He had felt so secure at the Convention, and now he was right back on the brink again. Was he ever going to feel sure of anything where Dean was concerned? Did apes feel like this before they married?

Matings sometimes faltered, even True-mate pairings went sour on rare occasions over unforeseeable changes due to life-circumstances that knocked people off their trajectories or changed them in unexpected ways. This felt different. Castiel’s Mating to April was such a deeply intrinsic part of who he was and who April was that he never questioned it. She was his, forever. What he was feeling over his marriage felt like balancing on a tightrope in a hurricane. It felt like a near impossibility that it would ever come to pass in the first place and then, even if they made it through the ceremony, what was to keep Dean from changing over time and deciding Cas was no longer the love of his life?

Cas sipped coffee while Billie ran through what she knew. April was firmly seated across his lap as usual. He kept his nose in her hair as much as he could, scenting her sweetness, using her to quiet his churning mind.

Billie had a lot to share. The lawyers confirmed that the merger was right at the final crunch-point, but that Crowley himself had stepped in. He seemed to acknowledge the inevitability of the merger, and he had approved the interim loan that the ACRI so desperately needed, but he was flat refusing to sign off on the final deal until Castiel’s name was struck as Director of the joint venture. Cas wasn’t surprised.

Sarah was finished with all of her pre-employment screenings. She hadn’t even flinched at letting a Lupin doctor run a thorough physical on her as would be done for a sexually-permitted Keller tester. She hadn’t flinched once. Billie admitted she was impressed. The girl had grit. Cas had drawn the line at sexual contact. Sarah wasn’t a wolf, and touching her was assault. Billie understood, but that hadn’t stopped her from playing devil’s advocate. How better to let Ms. Blake experience what it was like to work here as a wolf than to let her really experience it? Cas reminded Billie that that wasn’t the scope of her thesis. She was here to observe, not to participate. Billie’s smirk showed him she wasn’t going to do anything to Sarah outside the limits, but she wanted those limits very clear before they started.

PhoenixCon raked in record proceeds. Next time, Billie suggested, let Marketing advertise that April, Cas, and Michael were going to be there, and ticket sales would break the bank. Taking the audience by surprise was nice, but it didn’t increase sales. Cas didn’t say anything to that. Michael wasn’t likely to get a next time any time soon. Once it came out that he had been explicitly forbidden by his mate from attending, and that April knew that as well…Cas had not been pleased, and the marks on Michael’s backside didn’t dissuade the Alpha from making his feelings about being lied to known very clearly. The flight home had been miserable for both Omegas.

Dean and Cas stayed up late Saturday night into Sunday morning talking it through. Dean was ecstatic to have Cas there, and he begged the Alpha to stay through to the end on Tuesday. Cas couldn’t do it, and he felt responsible for Dean’s fear over Michael. He should have seen that one coming. Dean was right that Michael’s extreme designation posed some new risks. Cas had been so focused on making sure April was watched and on surprising Dean that he completely missed the danger to Michael. It would have come as no surprise if Dean had been angry with Cas, but he just
shrugged Cas’ apology off, admitting that he forgot to tell the Alpha about Michael’s instruction to stay home. It was a clear case of miscommunication as far as Dean was concerned. The Omegas both obviously thought it was worth a couple of swollen red backsides. Now that the Pandora’s box was open, Dean seemed fairly blasé about it all. He still didn’t want Michael making any more public appearances for now, but he wasn’t carrying any weighty baggage over what couldn’t be changed.

What remained between them as Cas boarded his flight home with two limping Omegas in tow was a lingering unresolved cloud over how he’d told April that he could drop Dean at the snap of her fingers. No matter how Cas phrased it, no retraction really made it okay. Dean said he’d forgiven Cas and moved on, but the lines of stress around his eyes, the ones that had been there since John died, were deeper since the moment Cas admitted what he’d said, and they hadn’t lightened yet at all. It was going to take longer than a couple of days and more than an apology to convince Dean that there was no truth to the words. Perhaps that was where Castiel’s sense of impending doom was coming from. Dean’s stress-levels were taking a toll on them both.

“You need a scene, Alpha.”

Billie’s voice broke through his swirling thoughts.

“What?”

She laughed, and so did April just a little.

“You’re in La-La-Land, Cas. You need to put some marks on your boy and get both of you squared away. There’s not much point in me going over all of this if you’re not here to hear it.” Billie cocked her head pointedly.

Castiel frowned and cleared his throat.

She pursed her lips, but she didn’t back down. She knew she was right. She’d known Cas a long time. He didn’t answer her. He leaned low and sucked a bruise into his mate’s throat. April cocked her head back to let him in.

“You put him on lock-down, didn’t you? How long?”

“Another week at least,” Cas admitted.

“Castiel…Look, you’re a fucking physician. You know damn well that’s not necessary. Why do you keep doing that? Can you explain it? I hate it when you do that! Both of you get too bitchy to work with.”

“Watch it, beta,” he warned.

“No! You know what? You got a week left of this blackout? Fine, I’m putting in for a week’s vacation starting right now. You let me know when his ass is black and blue again, and I’ll be back.” Billie stood up to retrieve her bag and her keys. Cas moved faster. He flattened her against the dining room wall and breathed heavily in her ear.

His words didn’t fit his actions.

“Vacation time must be submitted for approval at least two weeks in advance and is approved at the discretion of management. Request denied, beta. Would you like to sit back down in comfort or in pain?”

“I’ll sit back down in comfort, if it pleases you, Alpha,” she breathed. Billie had a very pragmatic
He pressed his forehead against her temple affectionately and huffed a simple laugh. “Good choice.”

April knelt beside his chair. He’d unseated her rapidly when he moved, but even in his haste he didn’t just dump her. He had set her on her feet, but April’s wolf responded to the ferocity of Cas’ by folding her down into a simple Submission. He picked her back up as if nothing had happened and placed another bruise on her throat. The confrontation aroused him, and he responded to it by unzipping his fly and working his erection up into his mate’s soft and welcoming body. Billie straightened her clothes, refilled both of their coffee cups and sat back down.

“My point stands, Alpha. You get unbalanced easily when you’re stressed. Having your mother beat herself nearly to death is a lot of things, and stressful is one of the big ones. You need a scene.”

Cas ignored her completely. “Talk to me about Bela Talbot.”

Billie sighed in frustration. “It looks like Crowley finally got his mole, in a way. She’s got enough integrity that she didn’t try to fake loyalty to us while working for him, but even so… We can assume that everything she knows, he now knows. He’ll have the full skinny on everything fucked up about Dallas and how you didn’t notice for over a year that you had a criminal psychopath running your training department. It’s pretty damning Cas. We can keep him from extorting you or blocking you from the position you want by unsavory means, but there’s not much we can do if he uses our own incompetence to prove we’re incompetent.”

“He was going to discover all that anyway,” Cas said. “He has access to our records as a part of the merger investigations. We’ve promised full business disclosure.”

“Yeah, but a report doesn’t tell the same story as a live witness’ account. She can spin it into something nefarious if she wants to. If he promises the post to her, she might say anything. Cas, we may have to play hardball. I know you don’t want to, but Bobby’s dug up dirt on Crowley, too. Tax evasion or something?”

Cas nodded into April’s hair. His cock buried deep in her cunt helped him keep his wolf occupied while he put pieces in place. “That’s a last resort. When do we make an appeal to the Keller Foundational Board?”

“Without an invitation from the Chairman, you may not get that opportunity.”

“He barged into my Facility and made impudent demands of my staff. You’re telling me he has more power in this negotiation than we do? They’re the desperate ones.”

“I’m telling you that Crowley isn’t playing by the rules. If you keep insisting that we do, then it’s not a fair contest, and he’ll win by forfeit.”

Cas took hold of April’s hips, lifted her a little and took his frustration out on her diminutive body. She leaned back against him and groaned in pleasure. Billie waited, stirring more sugar into her coffee. Cas’ knot locked, and he groaned his orgasm into April’s shoulder, biting down on her scar to make sure she got hers too.

Cas released the hold of his teeth and kissed her shoulder soothingly. He inquired into her state of mind, her body, and her emotions all from within. Billie waited. April sent him her adoration and her support. She knew what choices like this did to her mate, and she tried to soothe his worries.

Cas felt her response, and he kissed her throat again. A sense of peace flowed easily between the mates, and he calmed. He looked up. Billie was looking back at him, waiting.
“Tell Bobby to be ready to strike,” said Cas decisively. “But make no moves until we all four agree. Have him request an audience for me with their Boards. I want the freedom to speak with them candidly, both the Foundational Board and the Operational Board jointly. I know most of their Operation’s new appointees. I’ve worked with many of them and trained some of them. I’ll have a better chance if everyone is there. If I’m turned down, we go public with Crowley’s little stunt here, claiming inappropriate extra-procedural influence… or intimidation, whichever will make a bigger splash.”

Billie nodded, taking rapid notes.

“I have no doubt that we will need to use what we’ve uncovered about his taxes, but I want to hold it close to the vest until there’s no other way. Do you truly believe that Crowley has promised the Directorship of an institution as monumental as the Keller to Bela Talbot? That would be a disaster. She’s by no means prepared to take on something like that. She’s never directed anything.”

Billie thought it over for a minute. “Cas, do you believe I could do it?”

“You? Billie, I would trust you to run the Whitehouse. You could do this with your hands tied behind your back.”

Billie blushed. “Thank you, Sir. I wasn’t fishing for compliments. My point is that Talbot was my counterpart in Dallas. It’s possible that like me, she played a larger role than anyone knew publicly. It’s possible that she’s more than she seems. You should call Henrickson.”

“If that’s true, then it’s very likely that the cover-up in Dallas that hid their ineptitude from us for so long might have been her work. If that’s the case, and I’m making no assumptions yet, her being named Director of Keller and ACRI combined wouldn’t just be a disaster, it would be an unmitigated catastrophe.”

“I’m thirsty, Alpha,” April murmured. The Alpha was tied fast, so Billie fetched her a glass of orange juice. She thanked the beta.

“May I ask a question?” April asked after a drink.

“Of course, Kitten.”

“Sir, your leadership of the company right now is set up like a pack, right? The deepest Alpha is in charge, and all of the other leaders below you are arranged by pack hierarchy?”

“That’s right, April. We didn’t arrange it that way intentionally, but that’s how everything fell together. We tend to follow our instincts most of the time.”

“I was thinking,” April continued. “If you promote Billie, Sam, Jo, and Dr. Harvelle to replace all of you, won’t that mess with everyone’s instincts?”

“There’s a very real danger of that, yes. We’ve talked about it, but reserving the highest positions of power for alphas only goes against everything we’re teaching here. There has to be a way.” Cas could feel moisture dribbling between his thighs. It tickled.

“What would happen if Dr. Harvelle felt strongly about something that she is an expert on, but none of the other three agreed with her?” April pressed.

Billie answered her. “There are ways to address hierarchical intimidation, April, even when it’s inadvertent. You know, Claire’s an Omega, and she’s been leading Bobby’s rescue team for the last three years. She’s the boss, and they all do what she says.”
“But you and the other three would all be nearly equal in power. Do you really believe it’s possible to keep things level if you disagree strongly? Are you a stronger Dominant than Sam? If he’s stronger, but you’re the Director…? Who makes the final decisions?”

“April, the answers to those questions lie at the heart of everything we’re trying to do here.” Billie was intent on taking the Omega seriously, not just because she was Castiel’s mate. Billie was at least as passionate about leveling the field as Cas was. She had grand plans, and she meant to see them through. “There’s a way. I know there is. My hope is that one day in the not so distant future, we’ll look back and realize that your beloved Alpha, even with all of his good intentions, used alpha intimidation rampanty to get his way at The Facility. We’re going to keep doing the research and the trials until we find a way to snuff it all out. Everyone’s personal needs will find fulfillment outside of the workplace. Once we figure that out, bringing hierarchy matters in to work with you will be a citable offense.”

Castiel chuckled. April blinked and looked back at him.

“And you agree with that?” April challenged the Alpha.

“It’s a Utopian view, Kitten, but we’ll never know what’s possible if we don’t aim for the highest ideal. I do know that Claire is the best team leader Bobby’s got. That says something.”

“Does that mean we’re trying to go back to being Primates?”

“Not at all,” he assured his mate. “We have to get to a similar place in public. That’s always been the goal. But we need to get there through ourselves as we are, not by stifling who we are and pretending to be them.”

“Your mother tried to stifle and pretend?”

Cas nodded sadly. “It doesn’t work for long, Kitten. Sometimes people make it work for a whole generation or two, but our instincts need to be fed. What we’ve done so far at The Facility has served us well, but it’s not reproducible. Billie’s right. The best candidates for each position are not always going to be four Deep alphas.”

“Dr. Singer isn’t a Deep alpha,” April pointed out.

Billie laughed. “No, but he’s a stubborn, crusty old codger, and I dare any Deep alpha he doesn’t know to try to take a stand against him.”

Cas laughed. April chuckled nervously. “There isn’t anyone Bobby doesn’t know,” Cas pointed out.

***************

Castiel had been right about Dean. He’d been right about all of it. Dean knew the instant he walked through the door with Sam. He was halfway through scooping up his tiny nephew with a grin on his face when his nose registered Naomi. He took Hank from Michael, but the grin was gone. He looked first to Michael, but the Omega had no say in whatever brought Naomi under this roof. His eyes found Cas with an accusing glare even as he snuggled the pup in close to his throat.

“I know, Dean. I should have called to explain. But I wanted to avoid distracting you while you were working. Let’s go upstairs and talk.”
Dean kissed the pup’s forehead and handed him back to Michael. He greeted his mate with a raunchy kiss and a hard swipe to his ass through both bonds. Michael’s eyes went wide, and his hand covered his backside in useless defense. Dean whispered to him. “You and me tonight, Omega. Be ready.”

“Uh, yes alpha,” Michael responded back, surprised at how easy the role felt and feeling anticipation moisten his channel.

Dean winked at him playfully as he headed through the kitchen with his suitcase, following Cas’ lead. A pass through the grand foyer told Dean that Naomi had passed this way, and might still be here. He sniffed aggressively, tucking his head around the back corner which lead eventually downstairs to the fun rooms.

She was down there. He would bet his life. Dean set his jaw, dropped his suitcase, and scowled, abandoning Cas and following his nose. The scent was strongest outside the H/R room. Dean paused with his hand on the door, noting that the red “Occupied” light was on.

Cas stalked up to him in defeated frustration. He put his own hand atop Dean’s on the locked door. It was locked from without. She couldn’t leave even if she wanted to.

“I know, Dean. Please hear me out.”

“She’s here?” hissed Dean. “In our house, and you didn’t warn me?”

Cas put Alpha into his eyes, and he wordlessly clicked the bolt. He kept his eyes on Dean’s as he pushed the door open. Dean stared at him for a moment, then tore his eyes away to look at his future mother-in-law. She was battered to hell. A light blanket covered her lap, but she was sitting upright in bed with a book in her hand. Her hair was neatly brushed, but it hung loose to her shoulders. Dean had never seen her with her hair down. A white cotton night-gown couldn’t hide bandaging around her torso. Gabriel looked up from his own book and his jaw dropped. A simple, “Oh, shit,” fell quietly from his lips.

Cas sighed heavily when he looked at her, and he pushed past Dean. “On your belly, like I told you, Mother. You are too damaged to be resting on your cuts.” He took her book away, set it on the bedside table then refilled her water glass at the sink. Dean gaped.

Naomi sputtered. “Don’t be absurd, Castiel. I cannot read lying out on my stomach.”

“NO!” roared Cas, thumping the glass back down. “You follow my instructions. Roll over now!”

She yiped in surprise and rolled over. Cas held the blanket aloft to help her resettle. Dean glimpsed bandages covering both legs and scarred skin between bandages. He took a couple of slow steps into the room, enthralled. Cas arranged a pillow above her to support her book and helped her get comfortable on her elbows. He held the glass for her to take a sip, and then he kissed her forehead. Dean recoiled.

“Cas?”

“She needs help, Dean. She needs to stay here until she’s healed. After that is up to you. Will you please come with me now so that we can discuss this? I didn’t mean for you to find out like this.” Cas’ anger at his mother seeped into his approach with Dean and spoiled everything. He kicked himself internally. Gabe cleared his throat. Cas looked at his brother. “Don’t let her turn over again, Gabe. If she insists, call Fred or call me.”

Dean blocked Cas’ exit. “What are you snapping at me for? If you didn’t want me to find out like
this, you could have called me. You could have given me a clue before I got home and smelled her in OUR house!”

Cas touched Dean’s face. “I know, Dean. Come with me. Please. I’ll explain everything, but I don’t want to do it here.” Cas led Dean across the hall to the Playroom and closed the door behind them.

“What happened to telling her she’s outta the club?” Dean asked, rounding on Cas. “Let me guess, you told her that if she says so, you’ll dump me for her in a heartbeat?”

Cas didn’t answer him right away. He had known Dean would be angry. Dean had good reason.

Dean cocked his head and raised his eyebrows. He was waiting for an answer.

“I didn’t want to spring this on you while you were in public. I wanted to be able to stand and explain. Dean, she’s broken. I need to watch over her while she heals. Once she can walk, I can move her to The Facility, but she stays here for now. That part isn’t negotiable. After that, the choice about where she goes is yours.”

“How about straight to hell? Is that a choice?”

“She did all of that damage to herself, Dean. She’s been doing it for years. It’s how she managed to keep herself somewhat balanced all these years alone with no partner and no pack. Her body is destroyed. Her emotional state is irreparable, and her mind is unstable.”

“And?”

“Dean she did this to herself because I kicked her out, and she had no pack to support her. It’s the same thing your father…”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Alpha. Don’t you dare! The same as my dad? Her? No way. You kicked her out because she was an insufferable bitch even while she HAD a pack.” Dean had his arms crossed aggressively over his chest.

“Fine. My mother is a bitch, and she doesn’t deserve medical care.” Cas’ eyes flashed. This wasn’t how he wanted to do this. “But until she’s stable and strong enough to walk on her own, she stays. After that, you name her fate. I’ll set her up somewhere suitably comfortable and passively custodial.”

“Passively custodial.” Dean mirrored Cas with an air of confusion.

“Dean, she’s broken. She’s broken in spirit.”

“Didn’t sound very broken to me,” posed Dean, but he was less certain.

“Your nose would tell you if you stopped attacking long enough to take in her scent. Her snappishness is a last-ditch effort to assert the power she no longer has. Scent her, baby, you’ll see.”

“What have I said about calling me ‘baby’ when I’m mad at you?”

“I wasn’t here when she was dumped by her own staff on the Gatehouse steps. Gabriel took her in, Dean. He’s sitting in there watching over her despite everything she’s ever done to him.”

“Well goodty for Gabriel,” snapped Dean in a childish voice. Cas stepped slowly toward him. He was softening.

“I couldn’t throw her out. You should have seen her. She’s trying to hide it all, but her mind has
snapped. She’s gone. Even her scent has changed. She smells of madness."

“Mad people don’t try to hide it, Cas. Mad people don’t know they’re mad.”

“She’s been unhinged for a very long time, and she’s clinging to all the behaviors that worked for her in the past, but the connections that made her charismatic and powerful are all broken. She’s become dissociated from her beta. She was trying to cleanse herself of the wolf, but she cut off everything. She’s got no access to any of it anymore. I can only imagine what she put herself through to make that happen. I stitched her body, but I can’t fix her broken brain. Dean, please. I should have called you, but what good would that have done?”

“Well, I wouldn’t have come through the door to a slap in the face, for one,” Dean stated.

“I wanted to call you, but I couldn’t make myself do it. I ripped into Jess for not calling me, and then I faced the same choice, and I couldn’t make the call either.”

“C.J., are you afraid of me? You stand up to every-fucking-body. Everyone rolls, man. What gives? Why would you be afraid to call me?”

Cas sighed and took another couple of steps closer. “Her Pack dissolution is still pending. It never went through. I promised you I’d never let her back, but when I was face-to-face with it, I couldn’t throw her out. Dean, she’s my mother. I needed to talk to you in person, not over the phone. I knew how you would respond to this. I didn’t want you alone in a distant city.”

Dean’s response was sarcastic. “Nothing to do with being terrified, even still, that I would get pissed off and walk out on you?” Dean hadn’t moved. Cas stepped up to him, fear in his eyes.

“Are you going to walk out on me, Dean?”

“You stupid, stupid…” Dean leaned down and snatched Cas’ left wrist. “You see this?” He put Cas’ engagement ring in front of the Alpha’s face. “You remember the night I gave you this? You remember what we said? You remember what we did?”

“I remember vividly.”

“I’m really pissed at you, because you never fucking learn, Alpha. We go through the same fucking run-around over and over and over again, and you know what? If we keep doing that forever, I am still going to be here going around with you forever. I’m not fucking going anywhere, Castiel James Winchester!”

Cas dropped his head onto Dean’s shoulder. “I can’t kick her out, Dean. She stays until she’s well enough to walk. After that…”

“I heard you the first two times you said it. That’s not really the point.” Dean tried to resist wrapping his arms around Cas’ waist, but he failed.

“What’s the point?”

“The point is that you let me walk in unaware. Do you know what that felt like? It was like finding out an enemy had attacked my family. There are pups in this house. Cas, my MATE is in this house. I just got over being caught off-guard with him showing off like a burlesque harlot, swinging his hips for apes to drool over, putting a huge fucking target on his back, and wading through a sea of them. I’m going to have nightmares about it for the rest of my life, and I come home to this?”

“I was caught off-guard too. That’s no excuse.”
“No, it’s not.”

“I’m sorry, Dean. I should have called you. I knew it the whole time I waited for you to come home.”

“But you didn’t call.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Cas’ hands were slowly wandering down over Dean’s backside. The sting had subsided to nothing. Dean wanted it back. He wanted Cas’ flavor of sting. “I should punish you again, Alpha.” Dean’s hands followed suit and took hold of Cas’ ass. He leaned in until his lips brushed Cas’ ear. “I should spank your backside.”

“Watch it, Winchester.”

“Or what?”

“Are you trying to provoke me, Dean?”

“You offering?”

“I thought you were mad at me.”

“I can be mad at you and still want you to blaze my ass. C’mon, babe, it’s been a really long time.”

“Oh, so we’re back to ‘babe’ now, are we?”

Cas nibbled the lobe of Dean’s ear and pulled him in closer.

“Can I ask you a question?” Dean said with a husky voice.

“When have I ever said no to that question?” Cas returned the volley.

“Once you’ve put a public Claim down on me, and we’re married, how would this conversation be different?”

Cas pulled his face back, confused. “Would it be different?”

Dean rolled his whole head and used the momentum to step backward. “Don’t you get it yet, baby? I want you to be Alpha. I want you to be in charge. Damnit, you were so close. You were right there. You said, ‘she stays, and it’s not negotiable.’ Yeah, baby, keep going with that thought and seal the deal. Follow it up with, ‘And I don’t wanna hear any bitching about it.’ Cas you’re killing me here. Step up and BE ALPHA.”

“Ah, so that’s what you meant. You want a tyrant to make all of our decisions for us, even when they piss you off.”

“Well, not a tyrant…”

“No deal, Dean.”

“You’re not listening.”

“It sounds great until I make a decision for all of us that you really hate, and then you’ll start to resent the hell out of me. We’ve been there before. You remember way back when we first came
together and started building our project? You made your needs damned clear then, and you’ve not taken anything lying down since. You DON’T want this, Dean. I can’t figure out why you keep asking for it.”

“I don’t want her here, C.J.”

“That’s fair. As soon as she’s healed sufficiently that I can be sure there won’t be any sepsis, I’ll move her out. I will begin looking for a suitable place immediately.” Cas watched Dean pace, wary like Dean was an unpredictable wild animal.

“How are you going to keep her from doing it again?”

“She will be in a monitored institution. She’ll be declared incompetent. There’s evidence enough. I will be sure she has sufficient Balancing care. That’s what she’s been missing. She’s had no hierarchy, status, or Pack.”

“Sex or spanking?”

“Does it matter? I plan to leave it up to her attending physician. She’ll be assessed and Balanced however she needs. I don’t intend to be directly involved in her assessment, but I’ll select her doctor carefully.”

Dean thought it over. “She may need to stay here for a few weeks.”

“She will certainly need to stay for several weeks.”

“She can’t stay in the H/R room. Gabe’s gonna need it soon. You’re not far off either.”

“Dean.”

“It’s too hard for me, C.J. I can’t do it. I don’t want to make these choices!”

“I’m not making all the decisions just because making decisions is difficult. You are a competent adult Deep alpha. You make decisions every damn day, and you do it brilliantly. Why is this different?”

Dean looked away and frowned hard. He didn’t know the answer to that question.

“Baby, your counseling appointment is tomorrow. Do you want me there? Do you want to start with this? We have fewer than two months before the wedding. We need to get some finality on what we’re needing from each other.”

“I’m not changing my mind about the Claim, Cas.”

“Thank fuck, Dean. I’ve been painting my own palm over fantasies about that since you brought it up.”

“Really?”

Cas sighed. He looked up at the ceiling, pulled his thoughts together and settled his eyes back on Dean. “Tell it to me as simply as you can. Tell me exactly what you want from me. I know you’ve said it before, but say it again.”

“I want you to take the wheel. I want to be beside you, and I don’t want you to keep anything from me. I want to know how many times you have to wipe your ass to get it clean. I want to know before I walk through the door that there’s a dragon in my house, even a broken and bloody one. But I
want YOU to steer this ship. You make the final decisions. I trust you. You’re not going to make blind decisions and forget all about the rest of us. I want you to consult me, find out what I think, gather all the info about whatever the fuck needs a decision, and then you base your choice on your best judgment. If you do that, even if I don’t agree with you, I’ll stand right by you every time. Every fucking time, C.J.”

“And if I had told you that Naomi stays for good? If I decided that I can’t trust farming her out to someone else?”

Dean swallowed. “If you made that decision with all of us in mind, Cas, it’s yours to decide. I’m not gonna fight you on it unless you leave us in the dirt.”

“And if I decide that you’re better off not knowing about something? Safer not knowing?”

“No deal. I wanna know all of it. You make the calls, but you make all of them out in the open with me looking on. You answer to me in a way, babe, because you have to live with me knowing how you chose.”

“You said you would support me either way.”

“And I will, but that doesn’t give you free license to make harmful choices just because you know I won’t protest.”

It was a swift back-and-forth. Cas was stirred up and more vulnerable than he normally was, and Dean was fresh from a Con. Both of them were sharp.

“Why would I ever make harmful choices?”

“You’ve never made a decision that effects all of us that you lived to regret?”

“Only those that I didn’t talk to you about fir… Oh.”

“You get it now? Talk it through with me. Talk it through with everyone if you want. Depending on what it is, I’m sure everyone has a few things they’d like to be consulted about. If you plan to move us to Borneo, you might talk it out with each of us, even Cousin Bolivia since he’d need a new Alpha. But then you weigh it all and YOU make the choice, not me, not US.”

“Dean, my mother…”

“You did fine there, Alpha. You forgot to tell me first. That’s all. You made a good choice. She needs to be here for a while. I can live with that. You wanted to know what my feelings are about her staying for good, and I told you. Call it my decision if you want, but it was in your hands all along. You listened to me; let me in on what’s going down. You make the decision from here based on what’s best for the Pack, and we’ll all live with it, even if it means Naomi hears me moan on your knot.”

“Dean, if we do this, I have to be sure. I WILL make decisions that you disagree with. We aren’t mates. I have no intrinsic authority to do that.”

“I’m giving you that authority, Castiel. I’m GIVING it to you willingly. That’s what Submission means. I Submit to you as my husband and Alpha. It’s a true power-exchange, and I’m stepping in with my eyes wide open. Cas, I can’t say it any clearer. I WANT this.”

Dean couldn’t keep the desperation out of his face. If they were mates, he could shove all of his sincerity through to Cas whether the Alpha wanted it or not. He attempted a pale facsimile effort
through his tiny Claim-bond, but it didn’t seem to do much. He remembered Sam revealing that Cas wanted Dean to guide the structure of their marriage.

“Cas, is this not something you can do for us? What do YOU want, man? It’s not just about me.”

“I can do it Dean. I don’t have any concerns about making decisions for the Pack. I can bear that weight for all of us. It’s what I was built for.”

“But is it what you want?”

Cas licked his lips. “Dean Michael, if I get to have you for the rest of our lives, I will do it however you want me to.”

There it was. Exactly as Sam had said. Dean blinked against an endorphin wash that coursed through his body. He shivered. His eyes snapped to meet Cas’ as if they’d signaled the start of a scene, and he swayed.

Cas read him and moved in quickly to hold him upright. “Stay with me alpha. Stay here with me. It’s not time for that.” Cas’ intent eyes pulled at Dean’s alpha. Dean blinked hard and fought for it. He’d had a bit of practice lately, and he was stronger than he’d been in months, ever since Michael knocked him on his ass in a bathroom near the TX/OK border.

Dean found his feet. “Is that a yes, Castiel James?”

“It’s a yes, Dean. I will marry you, Claim you, and I will be your Alpha and your Dom every day for the rest of our lives.”

“Thank God. I thought you’d never get it.”

“I’m a slow learner.”

Dean relaxed into Cas’ embrace. Simple kisses followed.

“I want a strapping, Cas.”

“I know you do. You have one more week to wait, and then I’ll give you a good one.”

“Damn. I knew you were going to say that.”

“Will you play with me tonight, Dean?”

“With you? It’s Michael’s night. Isn’t it?”

“It is, if we follow the old pattern. We’re going to be shifting things a bit.”

“Oh. Um, I already promised him…”

“We’ll make plans for tomorrow then,” Cas told him simply.

“Can I have you both?”

“Not until we finish negotiating how foursomes work. I’m not putting you at risk, and I’m not leaving April out.”

“C’mon, Cas. You’re Alpha. You can do whatever you want.”
“There’s the brat I love.” Cas kissed his nose tenderly. “You put me in charge, and you told me to make choices that make the most sense for the pack. Correct?”

“Oh, come on!”

“Did you feel that you weren’t duly informed about the specifics of this decision before it was rendered?” Cas teased. “Have I failed to meet any of the standards we agreed to?”

Dean pouted.

Cas swatted his ass lightly, heading toward the Playroom door. “Come on, Dean. Everyone needs to hear what we decided. It affects the whole Pack.”

“Yes, Alpha,” he mumbled with a smirk, following the stubbornest man in the history of ever.

Chapter End Notes

I hesitated to flesh out this convo between Cas and Dean. It might seem like they’ve had the same discussion and reached the same conclusion several times already, but this one was a new nuance. Remember they don’t have the instincts for marriage. They are wired differently, and what we might take for granted baffles our poor puppies.

I don’t expect a lot of sympathy for Naomi. It’s not about her though. It’s about how Cas handles her, and what that does to Dean and Gabriel.

More soon I think. I’ll try.
Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

The scene doesn't quite go as planned. Dean's contract is finalized, and he meets a new Sub. There's more Dean analysis than the poor fellow is comfortable with, but he's tougher than he looks. Naomi's nightmare is just beginning. Four wolves make plans to meet in the middle. And Gabe makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

This one didn't quite go as planned. Shocker. Actually, I included my surprise at the turn it took in the text - right where Dean blinks and thinks to himself, "That had not gone as planned." That was me. What the fuck, Michael?

Which leads to a warning for dub-con stuff coming up below.

Also, lots of talking. Really, wordy. It happens.

By the way, I am not any kind of a therapist. This is my approximation of where that conversation starts. I liked the chemistry between Dean and Tessa at the beginning of Season 2, and I attempted to match their back and forth a little here.

I plan to get to comments tomorrow, and then it's back into the gristmill again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Tessa Mulligan
beta-Submissive [A/B/O: 0], [D/N/s: -5], [Z-Scale: -7], Pack Rank: 6
 cis-Female, Asexual, b. 1982
unMated

Wolf Avatar: Domesticated Dog, Breed - Collie

Chapter 73 – Wednesday, July 19, 2017
THEN:

Castiel ducked his head and cinched his knapsack back up high on his shoulder. They were loud and obnoxious, but they weren’t going to hurt him enough to matter. The enormous pickup revved menacingly and jolted forward only to screech down to a speed even with the young alpha’s pace on the sidewalk. Jocks hung over the sides and tailgate, whooping at him. A beer can clattered to the pavement in front of his feet. Empty. Plus, they had missed him this time.

Castiel ground his teeth together, but he kept his eyes forward, and he didn’t flinch. His head was lowered to keep the snarling wolf inside him from meeting any of their eyes. Bad things happened when he met their eyes. The alpha set his jaw and refused to change his pace. He wasn’t far from home. Dillon, the sheriff’s son, drove the truck as usual. He laid on the horn, and Castiel nearly forgot himself. He side-eyed the asshole behind the wheel who was taunting him, goading him to respond, and Castiel scowled. He could feel his heart rate kick up. He could feel his cheeks flush. He knew there was red in his eyes.

Ignorant fools, the lot of them. Castiel took a deep breath and focused on the sidewalk in front of him. It was a good time to practice containing the fierce urge that beat against the inside of his breast. He pictured a black wolf, blue-eyed and calm; majestic, powerful, and stately, and not remotely cowed by loud unruly children making noise in his direction. It took the better part of the block to shove the slavering beast into the image in Castiel’s mind. The wolf balked at calm and stately. It wanted blood.

Castiel raised his head, turned and looked right at Dillon without slowing, and then dismissed him with a haughty roll of his eyes.

The ape crowed in delight and ignorance. He gunned the engine again, shooting forward aggressively and giving the brutes in the back another shot at the alpha. Somehow, they never ran out of beer cans.

“Dillon, watch out!”

Brakes screeched. The truck skidded to a diagonal halt in the middle of the road, stopping inches from Dr. Singer’s kneecaps. The doctor stood imperiously still for a breath or two. He stood his ground and glared promise at the Primate reprobates. Castiel nodded politely to him and continued walking. He pretended he couldn’t hear Dr. Singer manhandle Dillon out of the truck with a grip on his ear, couldn’t hear Dillon’s outraged shouts as the good doctor laid into him right there in the street, didn’t notice as three or four of them scurried past Castiel down the sidewalk without a backward glance. Castiel didn’t need to see behind him to know what was happening. His own ears turned red with remembered embarrassment. He knew first-hand how Bobby worked. He knew Bobby didn’t give a fuck that it wasn’t his own kid in need of a flaying.

Castiel needed to get off the street. Far worse than dodging empty beer cans and vulgar epithets was the unfortunate bulge in his trousers that he couldn’t suppress in time. He was mortified, shifting his knapsack around front uncomfortably, but the sound of loud repeated smacks from the street behind him accompanied by yowls of pain struck a powerful chord that made his blood sing. Castiel didn’t look back. He walked fast, ducking in the back door by the pool once he arrived home, dodging Fred, heading to his room and locking the door behind him.

The wolf snarled and slobbered. Castiel’s clothes didn’t even make it to the bed. He lost hold of the beast completely by the time he was sprawled out on his comforter. Eyes tightly squeezed, hand in furious motion, Castiel’s wolf painted him a picture in his mind. Dillon was in it, and in this story,
Castiel didn’t need Bobby running interference for him. He knew he could hold it back in real life, when the heat made it into his eyes, and he wanted to rip their throats out, but here in his solitude behind the locked door, with his angry dick in his hand, and his mind lost in the pleasure, he couldn’t hold it back any longer. In his mind’s eye, Dillon’s reddened backside sank down onto Castiel’s fierce thrusts with a moan of raw lust and obesiance.

White streaks hit Castiel’s chin, his eyelashes, the fall of his hair over his forehead, and he grunted loud and ugly. The alpha knew he was depraved. He knew better than to allow images like that to infiltrate his mind. Father explained that responding to the call of the wolf in his private time was his own business, but that too much imagination was the work of the devil.

He panted slowly and tried to wipe the picture from his thoughts. It was easier now that he was spent. He could pretend it had never been. He could pretend that it wouldn’t happen again next time just like that. Granted, it might not be Dillon caught on the freshly minted knot in his next fantasy. It might be anyone. But, Castiel was coming to understand that once caught in the sweep of the wolf, he controlled nothing. Shame and guilt followed every time, but there was no stopping the onslaught once his wolf slipped its slender leash.

Castiel was afraid. If he couldn’t keep the beast under his control, he was going to hurt someone. Maybe it was time to try again to speak with Father.

NOW:

“That’s what you call, ‘Being ready’?” Dean challenged, closing the bedroom door behind him. Michael was shirtless, but he wore thin black sweats that rode low on his hips. He was digging through a dresser drawer.

Michael looked round. “Undress, Dean, and get on the bed. I’m going to tie you.”

“How very wolfish of you, Omega,” Dean responded thoughtfully. “I think we’ve had a miscommunication about what’s going to happen here this evening.” Dean sauntered forward. His eyes were drawn to Michael’s hips. Those damned pants cut across his abdomen just shy of too low to do any good. How were they even staying up?

Michael had a soft length of hemp rope in his hands. “No,” he said simply. “No miscommunication. Up on the bed.” He jerked his chin toward the bed in case Dean didn’t know how to find it on his own.

Dean’s alpha smirked. There was a glistening red ring around his hungry green eyes. He stepped slowly closer and took the rope out of Michael’s hands. Slowly, he stretched a bit of it out and used it to embrace his mate, working it under the curve of Michael’s ass like a swing.

“Look at me, Omega,” Dean whispered. “I want you. I want to lick every inch of your skin and take you apart slowly. I’ve got what you need, and I’m going to feed it to you like the crawl of a glacier until you’re begging me to slam home and make you shake into shards of shattered glass.”

Meeting Michael’s eyes was Dean’s undoing. There was no gold despite Dean’s pulling out all the stops his alpha knew to pull. His breath caught in his throat at the look in Michael’s green eyes. Out in the kitchen, in the workshop, the garage, in a classroom or a boardroom or an office, Dean’s Deep alpha couldn’t be topped. He had those places owned, and Michael was powerless to fight him. In
“Give it back, Dean,” he whispered softly. Dean didn’t comply, but when Michael’s hand traced down Dean’s arm to the rope coiled around his fist, he didn’t fight Michael for it either. His arm broke out in chill bumps. The Dominant slipped the rope free, and he put a hand on Dean’s cheek. Slowly, with meaning in his gaze backing up his action, he slid his hand down to span Dean’s throat, and he took a very firm hold. One thumb clutched just behind the alpha’s ear, and his fingertips reddening the flesh beneath his other ear. Dean’s chin lifted high, but neither man could have said who did the lifting.

“You were saying?” prompted Michael.

“Up on the bed, Sir?” Dean croaked with his eyes lowered.

A Sub’s lowered gaze while his face pointed upward always did things to Michael. This was a presentation that made the Sub work hard to maintain it. It was uncomfortable. It was intentional.

“Yes, please. Undress first.”

Dean dropped his chin when Michael released him. He stripped out of his clothes swiftly. Cas would have made him fold them neatly. Michael didn’t say a word about the lumpy pile of laundry Dean left behind him.

“Flat on your back. Hands on the headboard.”

Dean adjusted himself downward with his feet and squirms of his hips. He watched over his head as Michael tied his wrists comfortably but securely to the bed. Michael ran a cord across each palm and pressed Dean’s fists closed.

“Struggle if you like, Dean. You’re free to let go of yourself. I will hold you. What is your safeword?” The black sweats hit the floor. Dean was never going to get used to the beauty of Michael, bare as he ought to be.

“Impala, Sir.” Dean clung to the rope and pulled hard with both hands. A quick struggle convinced him that the ties weren’t too tight, wouldn’t hurt him beyond whatever bruising he did to himself, and wouldn’t come loose either. He was bound fast to the bed. He was Michael’s to do with as he pleased.

“Do you need to invoke it?”

“Michael, please.”

“Answer me.”

“No, Sir. And I don’t have any clarifying questions either. Can we get on with it?”

“I’m not going to spank you, so you can drop the pokes right now. Be good for me, and I’ll make you feel very good. Mouth off, and I’ll take my pleasure from you and give you nothing in return.”

“yessir.”

“What did you have planned for us tonight, baby? I might be game to roleplay Omega with you next time, if it sounds like fun.” Michael climbed up and straddled Dean’s hips. He sat in front of Dean’s cock, but reached behind him to stroke it slowly.

Dean pouted. It was bad enough to lose his footing with his mate without so much as a struggle, but
to have it rubbed in his face. He wanted everything Michael had planned, but it stung just a little that in his own bedroom, his alpha had almost no voice.

“You’re pretty when you pout. You know that. Stop showing off.”

“Not showing off.” Dean closed his eyes. Michael’s strokes were getting firmer. Dean was losing the thread of his irritation. “Wanted you Omega. Wanted to knot you as an alpha. Need that sometimes, man.” Dean tried to suppress a moan, but then he abandoned modesty and groaned out loud and long, shifting his hips.

“I know you do. I do too. I need my alpha. We’ll do that, Dean. But you gave mattress-time to me. You said it was my domain to manage, and I’m not the kind of guy who gives territory away. You wanna do something special, you need to ask me first.” Michael lifted up, oriented himself, and sank down slowly on Dean’s dick, stopping short of the bulge of his knot.

“Ask me, Dean,” he whispered.

“Can’t ask right now, Sir. Don’t want it anymore. Oh, God. Do that again! Please…”

Michael rode him slowly and sensuously. He bent low over Dean’s chest and nipped his flesh hard enough to leave angry red pinch-marks.

“You don’t want it anymore?” Michael pressed. “You want to be good for me instead?”

“Mm-hm. Wanna be good. I can be good.” Dean’s eyes rolled up as the sensations that rocked between them carried him into a happy place. There weren’t any words in that place. It was warm and sweet.

“So good. Look how you trust me, baby. All tied up and wide, wide open just for me.” Michael spoke easily as he shifted his weight up to hover over Dean’s lovely face and back down to grind hard against his knot. Every time he pressed into it, it was thicker, firmer, wider. The pressure ached. The swelling ached. The knot’s purpose couldn’t be fulfilled from the outside, and that was an ache of its own.

Michael dismounted abruptly, and Dean’s alarm and disappointment hit the air in a shout and a thrust.

“Be good, Dean. Lift your ass.” Michael wedged a pillow beneath his hips. He ran a slick thumb over Dean’s hole and a hand over the curve of his butt.

“Who spanked you?” asked Michael with an edge to his voice. His thumb plunged in hard and pumped almost brutally. It was only one thumb. It didn’t hurt much, but there was a wordless threat to the sendings from Michael’s Mating-bond.

“S…Sam. Before our flight. I needed…to calm…down.”

“He didn’t ask me for permission to do that, Dean. We had an agreement.”

“Shit. I forgot.”

“You forgot what?” Michael replaced his thumb with two fingers, and he didn’t ease them in. Dean yelped, but he held still. His grip around the ropes turned his fingers white.

“I forgot to tell him about that rule, Sir. He didn’t know.”
Michael froze. His fingers slipped out.

“We made that agreement two months ago. You mean in all this time, Sam has never heard that he’s supposed to call me if he wants to paddle you?”

“I guess I thought you would talk to him.”

“No, Dean. You said YOU were going to do that.”

“I forgot. Michael, please.”

Michael pulled Dean’s legs up high, centered himself with a grip around his cock, and he slammed in hard. Annoyed at his Sub, wishing he could make a firmer statement, he put his back into it. He wasn’t endowed for a D.F., but Dean reacted as if he were. Dean threw his head back and yelled a deep protest. His legs locked around Michael’s hips, tying at the ankles. Even in dissent, Dean’s hips rocked up to meet the angry thrusts from his mate.

He was back in that happy place where he floated, but the fluffy white clouds had grown dark and menacing. Dean let go. His fists released the ropes. His mind released intent. His body accepted the Domination of the greater power, and its scents shifted with the breeze to send acknowledgment to the back of Michael’s brain.

Michael huffed hard above him. No more little nibbles to his chest. No more softly teasing words. Dean wasn’t prepped enough, and it hurt. Michael Claimed him ferociously, and he owned Dean’s body and spirit. Dean whimpered, not afraid, but chastised from the inside out. Michael shoved in hard and deep, came with a tight grimace, breathed for a moment with his eyes closed. Then he pulled out, leaving a dripping trail across Dean’s belly. He wordlessly released Dean’s ropes and disappeared into the bathroom.

Dean blinked into the wide empty space, the room bigger and emptier than it had been a few minutes ago.

That had…not gone as planned.

He rolled up on a hip and looked back over his own shoulder. His ass was unblemished. How had Michael even known? Had he felt it at the time and been waiting for Dean to admit what happened?

Unfortunately, Dean’s cock didn’t understand that playtime was already over. He grunted and reached for his phone.

He texted Sam:

“Hey, bud. Michael wants to get a say-so when you wanna paddle me from now on. Mate stuff.”

He got a quick answer:

“10-4. I’ll do that.”

Dean stared at the phone. But for a two-line text, he would still be floating in his happy place. As much as Dean loved being Submissive, he hated certain aspects of the training. He knew it was all necessary, but that didn’t make it any more pleasant. The muscles inside his core throbbed with Michael’s statement. He lay still and let the throbbing and his own arousal fade slowly. Sex-related punishments processed through his brain differently than spankings. A spanking spoke for itself. It washed everything along in its fiery wake, requiring very little input from Dean.
A D.F. gave him something to think about. It wasn’t passive in the aftermath. He had to process the sensation, the emotion, the guilt intentionally. He had to chew on what had happened to him and why before his mind could let it go and move on. Dean chewed quietly. He heard the shower come on in the bathroom, and he stared up at the ceiling, thinking about Michael.

Slowly, he eased to the side of the bed and stood up, walking carefully to keep any excess fluid from dripping on the carpet. Fred shampooed the carpets frequently, but there was only so much body fluid they could take without getting gross. Dean closed the bathroom door behind him, slipped wordlessly into the shower, and tucked like a child into Michael’s wet chest, his head ducked, and his shoulders rounded. He pulled his arms in close, palms flat to Michael’s chest. Michael chuckled.

Michael wrapped soapy arms around him.

“I texted Sam. He knows now. He said okay.”

“Thank you, Dean.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“I’m still sorry.”

“All right. Thank you.”

“Cas wants me tomorrow.”

“Yes, I know. We’ve renegotiated our agreement. I’m allowing him up to three sessions with you per week, up to and including three full nights alone with him in the master bed. Pack sleeping doesn’t count unless we have sex. Think about it Dean. We want your input before we finalize the deal. We can do a couple of trial weeks if you like. Cas and I both agree – what you want matters to both of us.”

“If all four of us scene together, does that count against his three?” Dean was beginning to feel relaxed and sleepy in the hot water.

“I think it depends on who initiates and who leads. I’m willing to be flexible. I want all of us to feel like we’re getting enough from each other.” Michael began to shampoo Dean’s hair, shifting a massaging hand over the back of his neck and out to one shoulder. “I don’t want you overused though. You need to speak up if you’re sore or tired or just not in the mood. You’re not our fuck-hole.”

Dean snickered. Then he imagined telling either of them that he wasn’t in the mood, and he snorted. Soon he was giggling uncontrollably.

“What’s so funny?” asked Michael, squirting a dollop of body wash into his hand and swiping it across Dean’s belly.

“When have I ever?”

“Not been in the mood? Grow up, Dean. Honestly. You’re twelve years old sometimes, I swear.”

Dean slept very well that night, tucked between Cas and Michael in the big bed. He was rapidly
becoming addicted to sleeping with the scent of Pack Alpha and pregnant Omega to either side of him.

Cas practically glowed with pride. Chuck shook his hand warmly in Castiel’s office. Dean looked a little bit shy, a little bit nervous, but his hand didn’t shake as he signed the book deal for Chuck’s account manager.

“Thanks for sharing him with us again, Alpha,” Chuck told Cas. He was teasing. It was an old joke, and Dean rolled his eyes.

“I make you a lot of money, Shurley,” Dean pointed out. “One of these days you’re going to want to show me some respect.” On the other hand, Dean’s scampish roleplay for Chuck had more than once charmed the man into donating millions to the ACRI as it grew. Dean figured that he’d been the one who started this little dance-skip they always did between them. It was his own fault if Chuck had been gracefully fooled into thinking that’s who Dean really was.

“You make me a lot of money, Dean,” Chuck agreed smugly. “Nobody puts things the way you do. Nobody breaks all this complicated stuff down and makes it digestible the way you do. We owe you a lot, and I think you’ll find that appreciation – that ‘respect’ if you will – is reflected in the royalty checks we send you.”

“Take our money and shut up about the ribbing?” asked Dean with a tilt to his head.

“You know we love you, alpha.” Chuck was sincere, but his quick and nervous glance at Cas broke the moment.

Dean sighed.

Cas didn’t intervene for him. He knew Dean well enough to know when to step in and when to leave it all in Dean’s hands.

Cas walked Dean out to the parking lot after lunch. They held hands across the blacktop. Dean’s grip was tight. Once standing before his Impala’s door though, he dropped his hold, dug keys from his pocket and pretended he wasn’t nervous.

“I’ll be back in a little over an hour,” he told Cas without looking up. He worked the key into the lock and sprung the door.

“Dean.”

“Ya know, when you just say my name, but you don’t use a verb, it’s not much of a sentence, Alpha.” Dean swallowed and squinted down the road, away from his fiancé. Fuck, it was hot out today. Dean hoped he’d left his sunglasses in the shade or they were going to burn his face.

“Dean, look at me please.”

“There now. That made more sense.” Dean looked around and barely had time to focus on Castiel’s
face before he had to scramble for balance at the press of Cas’ kiss.

“Whoa,” he intoned, wiping his lower lip once Cas put him back on his feet.

“Don’t be nervous. She’s not going to eat you. This is for you. You take from it whatever you can. Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

Dean looked down at their joined hands. “I want to start it on my own. I need to feel her out; find out if she’s right for me.”

“I’ve got free time this afternoon, Dean. Come by my office when you get back. We can carve out some time in the suite if you need to blow off steam afterward.” Cas lifted Dean’s chin gently and kissed his lips.

“Okay.” Dean’s simple response showed his nerves more than his fidgeting fingers did.

Cas watched him pull out of the parking lot with a spray of gravel. Dean and that car. Cas was never going to understand.

It was an old clapboard house. The area had been re-zoned through some kind of community revitalization project. It was old, but it was freshly painted and well maintained. To either side were law offices with white picket fences out front. It was kitschy. Dean didn’t like it. He studied the sign out front. “Tessa Mulligan, Certified Counselor”


He pushed through the short white gate, letting it clatter closed behind him. Something about this whole block made him think of tea parties and cotillions. He kinda wanted a football to carry, or a shotgun. Was that jasmine draping over the doorway?

The bell jingled cheerfully as he pushed his way through the door. The front room was full of sofas and squashy armchairs. It used to be the home’s living room, but now it was a waiting room. It was empty except for Dean. He looked around. A toybox tucked in the corner next to a bookshelf filled with children’s books looked out of place, but he couldn’t have said why. What did children need with a counselor? Maybe they came with their parents.

“Some kids have emotional issues they need to work through, just like adults do.” The voice startled Dean. She was younger than he expected and pretty. She watched him with an appraising air.

“Uh, yeah. I suppose that’s true.” Dean walked up to the counter where a visitor’s window had been cut into the wall, and the next room served as the receptionist’s office.

“Sign in here,” she suggested. “You’re Dean?”

“I’m Dean,” he confirmed. “Are you Tessa? Uh, Dr. Mulligan?”

“Tessa is fine. I’m a counselor, but I’m not a doctor. I do personal therapy. I understand you have some things you need to work through? Well, that’s what I do.”

Dean signed in. “Is it just you here? Don’t you have any staff?”

“I have a part-time office manager who organizes appointments and billing for me. Other than that, it’s just me.” She was cheerful, but not overbearingly so.
Dean looked over his shoulder at the empty room. “Business not going so well?”

She laughed. “Are you concerned that my empty office indicates a problem with my competence?”

Dean blushed. “Um, just getting a feel for the place. I’m a little nervous. Never done this before.”

“I’m going to take good care of you, Dean. Would you come on back? Right through that door there.”

Dean opened the door and met her in the narrow hallway. “You know, usually when someone tells me they’re going to take good care of me, I can expect a physical sensation or two to follow.”

She lifted her brows as she fell into step beside him and indicated with a gesture which room to enter. “Is that so? So, ‘care’ means sex to you?”

“Or spanking. I’m Lupin,” he responded.

“Yes, as am I, but being cared for isn’t always physical.” She closed the door. She didn’t seem to care which of several chairs he sat in, and it flustered him.

“Look, I get it,” he said, still standing awkwardly in the middle of the room. “Emotional care is important too. That’s why I’m here.”

Tessa sat down in a wide armchair. She tucked both feet beneath her and a little to the side. Her long skirt folded beneath her knees. She looked cozy. Dean could imagine her spending hours like this with a cup of tea and a novel. She reminded him suddenly of Michael’s sister Rachel.

“Why don’t you tell me what you hope to achieve here with me, Dean. What are you after?”

Dean scratched the side of his nose and finally selected a perch, but he sat well forward in the middle of the soft sofa. “I need some help working through some shit. I’ve got a fucked-up way of coping with crap in my life, and it’s not working for me. It hurts people I care about, and I need help making it stop.”

“That’s much more direct than most people are able to state right at first.” She wasn’t looking at him. She was reaching for her glasses.

“I don’t need you to shine sunbeams up my ass,” he said. “I don’t really give a fuck what anyone else does.”

She regarded him. “Are you angry, Dean?”

He scoffed. “All the time unless I’m following my Doms’ directions, and then only half the time.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Same answer.”

“Really?” she asked.

“No, scratch that. I’m not scared when my Doms take me under.”

“Being a Sub makes you feel safer?”

“I mean, that’s kinda the whole point.”
“Dean, why don’t you tell me a little bit about what’s bothering you. We’ll go from there.”

“Aren’t you supposed to ask me if I had a crush on my mother?”

“Did you have a crush on your mother?”

“What?? What kinda question is that?”

Tessa thought for a moment. She looked like she had something to say but was holding back. “Dean, if you can find a way to relax and let down some of your walls, we’ll make progress a lot faster. I’m here for YOU. What you get out of these sessions depends on what you’re willing to put into them.”

He grimaced and sat back on the couch. “You know who I am.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, I do. I know Pam. She told me a little about you. Nothing private or personal,” she was quick to point out. “She told me you’re getting married. It’s likely to be a big media affair. Yes, I know who you are, Dean. I know you don’t trust me yet. That makes a lot of sense to me. Revealing private information to a stranger is hazardous in the simplest of circumstances. For a celebrity to do it, well, I understand where you’re coming from.”

He nodded, biting his cheek slightly. He was thinking hard.

“I’m not ever going to reveal anything you tell me to anyone if you don’t authorize me to – not to your mate, not to your fiancé, not to Pam, not to anyone. You don’t have to trust me yet, but I hope that you’ll give me a shot at least. Otherwise this is going to be an hour of your life you’ll never get back. It’ll be a complete waste of time.”

Dean swallowed. He rubbed a finger over the soft skin above his upper lip. His eyes fixed on a sculpted ceramic turtle on the window-sill. He didn’t answer.

“Think about what pushed you into coming here today. I’m going to make some assumptions about you. I suspect you had to fall into a state of terrifying desperation that you couldn’t see a way out of before you considered therapy. I suspect that you have very little faith in any part of this process, but that you trust Pam, and you’re giving it a shot, knowing that there’s barely a snowball’s chance it’s going to make a lick of difference.”

“Something like that.”

“But you promised your Alpha you’d give it your best Boy Scout try.”

Dean swallowed again. “How did you know about that.”

“I didn’t. I told you – assumptions.”

“So where does that leave us?” Dean asked her, feeling unmoored.

“The power is all yours. Think of it this way, use me as a sounding board. Think of me as a Friend-for-Hire. Bounce shit off me, and let’s just see what happens. You don’t have to say anything you don’t want to say. I’m not a Domme, Dean. I’m a Sub. I’m not going to try to coerce anything out of you.”

“You’re a Sub?”

“I’m a negative five.”

Dean scoffed rudely. “That’s not Submissive.”
She chuckled. “When I enrolled for training at your Facility, they assigned me to Sub class.”

“I’ve never met you before. I know every Sub student who rolls through that joint.”

“I never attended. My Alpha pulled me. Had my registration all ready to go. Aunt Jenny cancelled it. I took some seminars through the clinic at college, but I never got the full training.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Dean. “A negative five doesn’t need training. You’re a Neutral more than a Sub.”

“You’re proud of your extreme rating?”

Dean eyed her. He thought about it. “Yeah, I guess. I like knowing I have power over people. I can pull them to do shit. A lot of them never know I’m the one holding the reins.”

She smiled. “And your mate? Who holds the reins there?”

Dean blushed again. “He does. He’s got me dead to rights.”

“And yet you still enjoy being Submissive for him even though you can’t manipulate him?”

“Can we talk about something else?” Dean was feeling antsy. His heel tapped rhythmically on the floor.

“What would you like to talk about?”

“Why do I keep trying to burn down every bridge between me and everyone I love?”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Good. I’m glad you told me. That helps a lot. You ready to work for it?”

“Sure. What the hell. Sitting here playing tennis with you is making me crazy.”

“Tell me what you already know, then.”

“I don’t trust that anyone loves me, and taking love feels like stealing.”

“You’re not lovable?”

“I’m garbage.”

“First off, that’s categorically untrue, but until you understand that, what everyone else thinks is irrelevant. Secondly, I want to dig into your childhood. Can we do that? Tell me if we go into an area that you’re not ready to revisit.”

“Um. Okay. I didn’t have a crush on my mother.”

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Dean moaned and clawed at Cas’ back, leaving angry red stripes. Castiel pounded into him hard,
leaving no room for any of the stress that Dean brought back with him from his first appointment. It would still be there once they’d come to completion and mopped the sweat from their faces, but for now, Dean didn’t need to feel anything but pressure and pleasure.

“Cas, God…I’m gonna…Come…Fuuuuuck Me Harder. Oh, God!”

Dean bit down on his own lip and bloodied himself as Cas went still and tense above him. Dean could feel the knot pressing close, not pushing in, just tight up against his rim. He could feel the pulsing as Cas lost control too and shot thick warm waves into him.

Cas pulled up, looked at Dean’s tear-streaked face, and then drowned him in sweet kisses, smearing the blood from his lip.

There was work yet to do of an afternoon. They had an important Upper-Level Staff meeting, and Cas had called the four heads to speak intimately before that. It was time to put Bobby’s plan to the four of them for a vote. It might turn ugly down at merger headquarters. It might need to.

“Take your time, love. We’ll make them wait if you need to stay here for a while longer.” Cas had a hand running through Dean’s hair, his nails scratching dreamily against Dean’s scalp.

“I’m okay. I was all right when I got here, Sir, but I’m not gonna turn down sex if you’re offering.” Dean grunted as he sat up. His thighs were a mess. Both of them smelled like a brothel. “Shower with me real quick.”

“What’s with the ‘Sir’?”

“What d’you mean?” Dean pulled him up.

“I mean, why are you calling me ‘Sir’?”

Dean fumbled the water to flowing and tested its warmth. He stepped in. There wasn’t a lot of space, but they always managed.

“I don’t know. Does it bother you?”

“I guess not. Am I going to hear ‘Sir’ from now on any time we sleep together?”

“Fuck, I don’t know Cas. Do we have to analyze every word that comes out of our mouths?”

Cas followed Dean in and wrapped arms around him from behind. He nuzzled into Dean’s throat. “No. We don’t. Put your hands on the wall. I’m going to mark you.”

“Fuuuuuuuck, yeah…” Dean tipped his head over, braced himself against the wall, and hollered an echoing wail as Castiel bit a bloody mark into his shoulder. Dean trembled in Cas’ grasp, but the Alpha held him. The wail turned into a loud whine that Dean couldn’t quite shut down. The pain in his shoulder anchored him to the ground, but it also loosed all the straps he’d tied around his emotions. They began to leak out everywhere.

“I’ve got you, Dean. Hold onto me. I’ve got you.”

Dean made a grab for Cas’ arms where they crisscrossed Dean’s torso. The Alpha probably hadn’t meant it literally, but Dean couldn’t stop shaking, and he needed something to dig his fingers into. Before he knew it, he was sobbing. Cas turned him and held him in the hot water, letting the shower clean the fresh wound. Dean broke apart under the spray, but Cas kept all of the shattered pieces close. He knew where all of them fit. He’d reassembled them many times before.
“It’s okay, baby. It’s all going to be okay.”

Castiel cleaned Dean top to bottom, dried him, dressed him, brewed him hot tea to help with the trembling. Dean calmed slowly. He was ashamed, but he let Cas see his shame instead of hiding. They didn’t talk about it. Michael texted, then he called. He wanted to take a break from his class. Hannah didn’t release him. He was furious about being kept from Dean. He spoke to Dean briefly, but it was a word to the Omega from Cas that put him back to work, not mollified, but no longer belligerent.

Bobby and Benny arrived in the suite a suspicious ten minutes late. Dean was quiet, but he wasn’t shaking anymore.

“We’ve got some decisions to make, fellas. Y’all put your thinking caps on,” said Benny, settling in.

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Dean installed the kitchen table that evening. It took Sam, Michael, Dean, and Cas all grunting and arguing their way through the narrow passage to get the huge expanse of wood in place in the kitchen without scarring the walls. Once there and reassembled, all of their crankiness fell away. Michael stayed very close to his mate.

Dean fiddled with a few of the locking screws to make sure the supports wouldn’t give way, and then he ran a damp cloth over the surface and stood back to assess the effect. The light in the morning would be better to bring out the amber tones, but even in late afternoon, it looked…

“It’s perfect,” said April on a breath with a kiss to his cheek. She had to stand on tiptoe.

“It’s beautiful, Dean. Thank you.” Castiel kissed his lips.

Michael kissed him too. “My mate is an artist,” he whispered.

Sam didn’t kiss him, but he handed Dean a beer, and that was almost as good. “You did good, man. It’s incredible. Dad would’ve been proud.”

“Did you see?” asked Dean pointing underneath. “Plenty of kneeling space. The legs are set wider than standard to give us room underneath, and the height is an inch taller than usual, so I don’t have to hunch over as much. We’ll need taller chairs.”

“Where are we going to get chairs one inch taller than standard?” asked Michael.

Sam laughed. “Someone probably needs to build them.”

“Promise me, all of you,” begged Dean. “Don’t ever cover her up with a fucking table cloth.”

“Her?” asked Sam.

“She’s sealed well. You’re not gonna hurt her with a wet cup or a bottle.” Dean set his bottle right on the surface to demonstrate his confidence in his varnishing job. “Use place-mats if you want to get fancy, but don’t hide her completely. All right? Promise me.”

“I promise,” Cas told him seriously with a kiss to his nose.
“Come on, Martha Stewart, let’s get dinner started,” said Michael. April giggled. “You’re helping too, Pete,” he directed. “Stir fry. We need veggies peeled and chopped.”

The three of them worked together easily for a while. It was unusual for dinner prep to require work from more than any two of them, but Michael had clearly culled April out of the herd. Dean cast a questioning look at Michael, and he glanced meaningfully at the Ozzie peeling carrots. Dean frowned and shrugged. Michael cocked his head and spoke urgently with his eyes. Dean frowned harder in flat confusion. The mates Gus-and-Shawn’d their way through a puzzling silent conversation, but Dean couldn’t figure Michael’s motive.

“You can stop with the charades, guys,” she said without looking around.

“Well, I clearly suck at charades, kid,” protested Dean abandoning the gesture battle with relief. “I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Oh, for pity’s…” Michael said wiping his hands. “Alphas!”

“Excuse me?”

“I haven’t had a chance to check on you,” Michael told her. “We’ve been busy. I want to know how you’re doing after your audition. I want to know if you’ve thought about what’s next.”

She sighed and turned back to her carrots. “I’m just fine, thank you very much.”

“Pete, you were amazing in Phoenix. I was so proud of you. But you aren’t going to make any progress playing gigs like that.”

“That was just for fun, you doof,” she said over her shoulder. “I’m still working with Nick. He wants me in New York for a couple of weeks. He said he wants me there during the first live run-throughs. Apparently, they make a lot of adjustments to the music on the fly right at first. It’s still a long way from ready to put on a stage, but he says he wants me in the room when he adds his cellist in to play it for the first time.”

“Are you going?” asked Michael.

“No,” said Dean and April at the same time.

“Why not?” Michael asked, plugging in the rice cooker.

“Because I’m Ozzie, and my mate is needed here.”

“Dean?” prompted Michael, not missing the vehemence of Dean’s interjection.

“Yeah. What she said. There’d be no one to…”

“To babysit the Omega?” Michael said aggressively.

“She’s eighteen, Michael. She’s not going to New York alone.”

“So, you or Cas fly out there with her and get her situated with suitable oversight. I don’t see the problem. Don’t tell me you don’t know any trustworthy alphas in New York. You’re the hottest couple in the city after all.”

“It’s not that simple.”

Michael abandoned Dean and turned to April, who squeaked at the sudden burn of his focused
“Do you want to go?”

“I’m not ready for that. I have a lot of learning and growing up to do.”

“That’s not what I asked. Did you think you could be a world-renowned musician and never leave Kansas? If you’re not going to school, how do you plan to achieve all this ‘learning and growing’?”

“Leave her alone, Michael.” Dean told him. “You’re not her manager. It’s not any of your business.”

“All I’m saying,” he shifted to face Dean. “Is that it’ll be too easy to keep putting it off. One year turns into two. Pups come along. Distractions get in the way. Life happens. Before we know it, we’ll all be middle-aged, and she’ll still be sitting here on her ass dreaming about big plans that are going to happen any day now.”

“Why does my success as a musician matter so much to you?” asked April in genuine dismay.

“What? Because you’re an amazing talent. Pete, you’re incredible. I heard you play your audition piece, and it was mediocre crap because you hated it. But then I heard you play Beethoven, and it made me… It made me cry. I haven’t ever felt like that over a piece of classical music before. You can’t keep that kind of talent stuffed in a box in a basement. It needs to breathe. It needs to be heard.”

She blinked at him, speechless. Dean stood at the apex of the triangle and looked back and forth between them. He felt weightless. He felt the tide of inevitability begin to tug at his legs. He wondered if they could feel it. He wondered about Cas.

“All right. We’re not going to Madison Square Garden tonight. Let’s get dinner cooked.” Dean steered Michael back toward the rice, and April turned back to her board of vegetables with a jarring shake of her head.

Dinner was very nearly a Friday Pack-Dinner for all the discussion they needed to wade through. Sam and Jess were heading home right after dinner, ready for their own bed and a chance to prove they could cut it as parents of two mewling needy pups.

Michael made sure that Gabe and Jess both had links to the best media coverage of the Convention. Amateur blog-posts had some of the most insightful reviews. He passed around the kitchen tablet set on that picture with a smug and delighted face.

“Where’s April?” Gabriel asked, peering at the picture.

She leaned over and pointed. “See there? That’s my foot.”

“Generous of them to include you,” Gabe snarked.

“It’s fine,” she said dismissively. “It wasn’t about me. Besides, I was playing. You see all that drippy emotion on their faces? I orchestrated that.”

“You made my brother look like a dime-store romance novel?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Good girl.” He turned to Michael. “So, it was worth the double-strapping?” Gabe asked him shrewdly, handing the tablet back.

“Who says I got strapped?” Michael volleyed back.
“Uh. Right.” Gabe knew better. No one had told him exactly, but he had ears that caught everything in this house.

Michael started to defend himself with a claim that he’d faced no such humiliation, but Cas cleared his throat without looking up from the large bowl he was spooning rice out of, and Michael changed his answer on the fly.

“Fine. But that’s private. And yes. It was worth it."

“I wanted to ask you about that, man,” Dean slid in smoothly. “You had three gender designations all pulled front at once while you were singing that song to me. It didn’t hold for long, but I swear they were all present. How the fuck did you do that?”

“It takes concentration,” Michael answered. “But I think anyone could learn to do it. I’ve seen you do two of them before. When you’re deep in a punishment that you really need, sometimes you’re alpha and Sub at the same time.”

“That’s true,” agreed Castiel. “It’s not all that rare a phenomenon for Traditionally-raised or Aboriginal Lupins. The more embedded we are in our deepest selves, the easier it is to access multiple designations at once.”

“Well, then how do you explain Phenom over here?” asked Dean. “He’s about as far as you can get from Traditional or Aboriginal.”

“Michael’s upbringing left him floundering for coping skills, much as mine did. We both had to find ways to control our Tertiary sides, and neither of us had much assistance in learning how to do that. We didn’t opt for the same methods, but I believe Michael’s technique of funneling both his Omega and his wolf directly through his front-brain is a far more elegant solution than my subjugating my wolf with brute force. I’ve been meaning to ask him if he would explain what he does – to the extent that he’s aware what he does – to me to see if I might learn to emulate it.”

Michael’s jaw dropped. “You want to learn from me?”

“Yes, Michael. Very much. I think watching you work in Phoenix clarified some points for me about both of you.” Cas nodded his head to include Dean. “Your insight into where Dean’s stage persona draws from opened my eyes to a new possibility or two.”

“My what?” Dean broke in.

Castiel explained. “Dean it’s obvious that when you are in front of a crowd, you assume an identity that is not reflective of your daily persona. This is not a point of contention, is it?”

“No. I know I’m different up there. It’s self-defense, I guess, like a mask.”

“Indeed, and I had only witnessed glimpses of it, such as during interviews, book-signings, seminars, or Broadway premieres. Usually, I’m as engaged in the event as you are, so I’m too distracted to observe you closely. I’ve always believed that your mask, as you say, is an overtly alpha construction that prevents any evidence of Submissiveness from showing in public.”

“Well, yeah.” Dean didn’t much like where this topic seemed to be leading, but he was surrounded by pack, and that made it doable.

Cas continued. “Michael and I had an interesting conversation on the plane to Arizona. He is under the impression that that mask isn’t truly alpha at all, but a brat affectation.”
“Oh, really?” Dean scooped another mouthful into his mouth and talked around his food. “And what makes ‘im think that?”

“Because I can see you from the inside, Dean,” answered Michael. “Your Submissive brat is a tricky little blighter, but he’s got a tell-tale color to him, and I’m learning to spot where he peeks up. Sometimes, when you seem alpha, it’s really him play-acting.”

Cas broke back in before Dean could respond. “Michael’s insight is very helpful, but I was watching closely as well, and I believe it’s more complicated than that. As I’ve said before, you two are True-Mates for a reason. Dean, I believe that you may have a very similar set of connections in your front-brain. I think your wolf and your alpha sometimes work together in tandem, and I think they both funnel through your neocortex to do it. You’re in awe of Michael’s ability to present all three genders at once for a short time. My love, I think you’ve been doing the same thing for years.”

“What?” That’s all Dean could think to say.

“I think he’s right, Dean,” Sam put in. “I’ve spent a lot of time interacting with you when you’re onstage. There’s at least a piece of everything you are to that ‘character’ you play.”

“It’s not a character, Sam.” Dean was annoyed. He felt spotlighted.

Sam wasn’t put off. “Okay, fine. But the point stands. Your alpha may be the front presentation. He’s the aspect that you work from, both when you’re researching, and when you teach, so that makes sense. The humorous side isn’t alpha though, and neither is the performing. Dean, that’s gotta be your brat. It’s gotta to be. How they come together to make one seamless personality, I don’t know, but I swear they’re both there together.”

Dean scoffed. “Alphas can be brats too, guys. It’s a personality trait, and it’s not exclusive to Subs.”

“I agree,” said Cas. “But your alpha is no brat. He’s thoughtful and analytical. He’s considerate, empathetic, protective, assertive, and kind. He’s not a brat.”

“I dunno, fellas. I think it sounds like a stretch.” Dean ducked his head, embarrassed at the attention.

“And your front-brain is the part of you that keeps the other two aspects portioned at the right ratio. It all makes sense.” Michael was alight with the enthusiasm of epiphany. “I do it consciously. It takes a lot of focus to get it together and hold it long enough to put on the show I want to do. You’ve been doing it so long, you don’t even think about it anymore. Christ, it’s amazing, Dean! That’s it. I couldn’t put my finger on it before, but that’s it!”

“Well, goody. Glad we got that straight. Can we eat now?”

“I’m sorry, Dean,” Cas responded quickly. “Too much personal analysis for one day. That was thoughtless of me.”

“It’s fine, man, but can we move on to something else?”

Cas took a deep breath in through his nose. “I want you to speak with Benny about a research study. You don’t have to be involved, but this opens a whole new vista of behavioral exploration.”

“Is it all right if I finish my dinner first?” Dean’s expression was so intently genuine that it couldn’t have been anything but sass at the heart of it.

April laughed abruptly enough that several half-chewed bits fell into her lap, and Gabe whacked her back as if she were choking, making her laugh harder. Michael chuckled softly with his head down.
Jess looked rapidly between the ends of the table, from Alpha to alpha, expecting an explosion. Sam rolled his eyes.

“That would be fine, Dean,” was all Castiel said.

“What can you tell us about your mother?” Sam asked, switching topics.

“I’m going to move her upstairs in a couple of days,” replied the Alpha. “She’s badly injured, and it will take her some time to heal and regain some strength. We have not determined a course of action once her body has recovered.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked him back.

Cas chewed a bite. He looked at Gabriel. Gabriel met his eye, but then looked away.

“She has damaged her psyche severely, Sam. I can’t be sure until she’s been examined by an expert. I plan to ask Pamela to take a look. But I believe she’s done irreversible damage. I believe the trauma she inflicted upon herself has dissociated her from both her Secondary and Tertiary psychological aspects. I believe the damage may be irreparable.”

“That’s possible?” Jess asked, alarmed.

“It’s rare, but it’s most definitely possible.”

“Isn’t that what she’s always wanted? I mean, it sounds awful to me, but doesn’t that effectively turn her Primate-like?” Jess guessed the answer to her question. Everyone’s faces were ashen gray.

Cas answered somberly. “A wolf cannot function rationally in separation from its own Secondary gender. She may have killed the wolf, and while that’s a tragedy and a crime against herself, it isn’t a threat to her sanity. It would simply mean she loses the side of her that arises from the wolf. Tertiary genders fade with age anyway. It’s something of a surprise to know that at her age, Mother’s wolf was still vibrant enough to be a nuisance to her.”

Cas caught and held Gabe’s eye again. The level of pain in the Omega’s expression worried Castiel. His big brother was feeling his mother’s condition on a far more personal level than Cas would have expected. “If she’s permanently cut herself off from her beta though, she will lose her sanity. There’s not much anyone can do if that’s the case but make her comfortable and keep her safe. An adult Lupin is an alpha, beta, or Omega above all other aspects of self.”

“I’m not going to make any premature pronouncements. I have alerted her office in Washington that she is here and will remain here for the foreseeable future. They reached out to me when she failed to contact them. I’ve told them that she needs to be considered on medical leave, but I’ve given them no details. She cannot legislate like this. She, um, she needs to be examined by a physician unaffiliated with the Pack. There will be an investigation. Her wounds are severe. They are self-inflicted, but that will need to be validated by an unbiased party.”

“FUCK!” said Dean throwing his fork down. “FUCK!!!! When do you catch a fucking break!??? They’re going to think you did that to her.”

“Shhh, shhhh, Dean. Relax. It’s not that bad. There are witnesses that place her far away from all of us when the injuries occurred. Yes, I will be a suspect. You may be as well initially, but we are innocent, and there is plenty of evidence to prove that. Let the investigation run its course. Answer honestly any questions you are asked. Our focus needs to be on figuring out what she…needs from us. I hate to ask that of you.” Cas wanted to cave to the fire in Dean’s eyes, to eject his mother bodily, and to kiss the fury off Dean’s face, but he couldn’t do that.”
Dean’s jaw twitched with unsaid words. “You know why I can’t go along. You know why I hate her so much.”

Cas nodded. “Yes, I do. You are righteous and protective, and it hurts you to have watched what she’s said and done to me over the years; to me and Gabriel both. I know, Dean.”

“So, you get why she can’t stay.”

“She’s unlikely to change her personality as she loses her grasp on reality,” Cas said quietly.

“That’s right. You thought she was bad before; just wait. She’s going to turn vicious in a way that has no purpose and no filter. We’ve seen this parade before, man. People don’t suddenly turn into sweetness and light personified when they lose the Secondary. They get ugly. I’m not having that around my family.”

“No, and nor am I. It will take some time to evaluate her condition and place her into a suitable facility. While I do that, once she’s stable, we can make space for her at the clinic.”

Sam didn’t much like that idea. “Alpha, is it right to make your employees have to deal with her? She may become a real handful over the next couple of months if what you say is true. I mean, the beta is still in there. You can’t kill a Secondary. All you can do is isolate it. Now it’s stuck in there with no way to find balance. She’ll get worse and worse over time. The Pack hierarchy won’t mean a thing to her. Balancing won’t have any effect.”

“That’s not quite true, Sam. Her beta is still alive, and there are techniques to reach it and provide some of what it needs. The problem is that her front-brain won’t be able to feel the rebalance. The beta might get what it needs, but without a connection to her brain, she won’t have any access to it.”

“Fine, then,” announced Dean coldly. “Spank the crap outta her beta, then flip her back to cognitive and spank that aspect too. You looking for volunteers?”

“No.”

Gabriel pushed back from the table and walked silently out. Jess gasped quietly, and April rushed to catch up to him.

“Fuck,” said Dean quietly.

“It’s not your fault,” Cas told him as softly.

“Is she really gone?”

“I think so.”

“Cas, I’m sorry, man. I’m…sorry.”

“I don’t know what to feel, Dean. She was a hurtful and bitter woman long before any of this happened. She drove my father up the wall. Nothing was ever good enough. She probably never should have had pups. She was a terrible mother. She’s a terrible person. But if it hadn’t been for her, Gabe and I wouldn’t be here. I can’t pretend that’s not relevant.”

“I get it, C.J. She’s your mom.”

“No, Dean. She’s my mother. The closest I ever had to a mom is Ellen. There’s a big difference.”

“Will you play with me tonight, Alpha?” Dean asked. “You need it. I want to be yours tonight. I
want to be what you need.”

Cas set his utensils down and lowered his eyes to the plate before him, still half-filled but unlikely to be touched again. “Michael?” asked the Alpha.

“I already told you yes, Castiel. You don’t need to ask again. I’m good. And just to put it out there, I’m interested too. You know…just in case that wasn’t clear already.”

Cas gave him a thoughtful look. “We’re not ready for that yet, Michael. But I’d be willing to discuss it this evening. Let’s get April and go outside.”

“We’ll clean up, Cas,” Jess volunteered. “You guys go talk. We’re gonna pack up and head home in a bit, so don’t worry about us.”

Cas swept out of his chair and planted a warm kiss on her temple. “Thank you, my dear. Call me when you get home. Please keep me informed of the pups’ progress. They have an appointment on Thursday?”

“Yes, Alpha. Thursday.”

“I’ll be there. Come and spend the night any time you need to catch up on sleep. We’ll rearrange to make sure you get a full eight undisturbed. That’s not an offer, Jessica. It’s a rule.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He left her with a stroke to her hair, stopped by the bouncy chairs arranged side-by-side and leaned low to touch his lips to each furry head before heading out the back door onto the side porch.

Michael eyed the door through which Castiel had slipped. “Should we…?”

“Give him a few,” said Dean. “Pass the rice.”

“Don’t worry that everyone else is finished, Dean,” snapped Sam, taking the rice bowl out of his hands after only one scoop.

“I won’t, Sammy.” Dean reached for the large bowl of stir-fry in the middle of the table.

Michael smacked the back of Dean’s head. “What do you know about the merger?” Michael asked Sam, helping him to clear the table.

Sam filled him in as three of them worked on the mess, and one of them continued eating.

April returned. Apparently, Gabriel was ensconced back in the H/R room, keeping watch over Naomi. She didn’t know if he was holding vigil, preventing her from slipping out unremarked, or guarding the silver. He wouldn’t talk much. His eyes sent her apologetic regret, but that didn’t move his tongue.

Dean wiped his mouth, dumped his plate in the sink with a splash that unnecessarily drenched his brother, and took April by the hand.

“C’mon, kid. Change of mood. We’ve got something much more interesting to discuss. Michael, you coming?”

“Not yet, Dean, but I’m hopeful.” Michael touched Jess’ arm on the way out and followed his mate, closing the door with a bang behind him.
Cas was sitting at a picnic table by the duck pond. He had four bottles of water sweating in front of him. He must have raided the patio kitchen fridge. There were too many damn bars in this house.

“I don’t drink water unless I have to, C.J.”

Cas chuckled. “You don’t have to drink it, Dean, but if we’re playing later, you’re not having another beer.”

Dean made a smacking noise with his lips. “No reason the O’s can’t have something with more punch than cold water then, is there?”

“You’re vote is registered, Dean. Tonight is you and me alone. I have no intention of inviting anyone else. To be honest, I prefer a duet this evening as well. But Michael isn’t drinking alcohol tonight or any night until his pup is weaned.”

April took a bottle and cracked it open. “You don’t mind if I have a glass of wine when we’re through here?”

Cas broke into a goofy grin and pulled her to sit on the table before him. “You are so good for me. No, Kitten. Your restriction is no alcohol before noon. No alcohol before scening. Permission required to have a drink before dinner. After that, you may do as you like.”

She leaned down and kissed him hard. Apparently, ‘do as you like’ included making out in a series of wet slurps. Dean cleared his throat. Cas broke away, still smiling like a lovesick pup, still studying her face.

She smiled back but lifted her legs and swiveled up and over the top of the table, climbing down the other side to settle beside Michael.

“I want a foursome,” she stated assertively, opening the topic abruptly.

“Me too,” agreed Michael.

The Omegas both rested their cases, hands folded before them on the table, faces confident.

“Wow,” said Dean taking up a spot at the end of the table, leaning on his wide straight arms.

Cas put his palm up toward Dean to prevent him from adding a snarky remark.

“I want that as well,” he added seriously. “What do you want, Dean?”

Dean scrubbed a hand across his face. His eyes darted to April. “Look, folks, I have no idea what it’s gonna feel like. I’m not against the idea in theory, but I don’t know how I’ll react. I’ve never tried anything like this before.”

“We start slow,” said Michael. “We start as two couples in the same bed, but restricted from crossing the center line. If you find that unobjectionable, we try something closer.”

“Whoa, buddy! Hold your horses,” said Dean. “I think you skipped a few steps. What happened to breakfast BJ’s under the table at the same time? I’m sure I can do that.”
“Nobody wants you pressured into anything, Dean,” Cas soothed.

“HE does!” accused Dean, pointing.

“For the record, for everyone’s information, if anything we attempt makes Dean uncomfortable, we stop. Do you all understand? Full stop.” Cas spoke in an Alpha voice that cut through everything.

April set her bottle down. “Dean, do you even want to try this? If you don’t, that’s fine. We don’t have to. It’s not going to kill anyone.”

He looked at her and crumpled. “I feel like the wrench in the works here. All of you want this. I don’t want to get in the way. Maybe it would be better if I just sign off on you three partying without me.”

“No,” Cas stated unequivocally. “I’m not touching Michael without you there.”

“Cas, come on. He’s got the hots for you. You know he does. Don’t do that.”

“Jesus, Dean!” Michael’s face was beet-red.

“Look, here’s the deal. I have no idea what it’s going to feel like, but I’m willing to give it a shot. Here are my limits: we take it slow, and we discuss it to death after each step forward. I’m not going kiss a girl, stroke a girl, stimulate a girl, receive from a girl, fuck a girl, or anything else that any politician has ever been accused of doing that was ever described as a scandal – with a girl. I love you, kid, but you’re not my type. No offense. If I don’t get weirded out by one try, we can take a step deeper and try something else. If every step goes easy, then the way I picture it working is everybody gets to get sticky with everybody else except me and April. It’s a daisy-chain that doesn’t circle closed. The thing is, I can’t predict if being right there in the thick of it is going to be fine when the juices get flowing, or if it’s going to freak me the fuck out. I just don’t know.”

“Thank you, Dean.”

“Wait, Cas, let me figure some things out.” Michael was thinking hard. “Do April and I get to fuck?”

“April?” Cas asked her.

“It’s my choice?”

Cas startled. “Of course it is. Do you imagine I would try to force you?”

“Um, no, I guess not. I mean, yes, I think I would enjoy that. I want to play with Michael.” She blushed furiously.

“April, no part of this discussion includes coercion in any way. We are four adults stating our preferences and our concerns. Do NOT acquiesce to anything you don’t want to do.” Cas looked on the verge of angry. It wasn’t the best way to be sure she was in a voluntary consent kind of mindset.

“All right, Alpha, cool it a little, would you?” Dean said in a stern voice with an eyebrow raised.

“It’s all right, Dean,” she said. “I get it. If anyone thinks I’m just going along with this, it could lead to all kinds of trouble. But I’m not. Alpha, I WANT this. I never even had sex before I met you. I never knew I could feel like that. If it can feel even wilder, I want to know what that’s like. I want you there, Cas. I don’t want to do it without you, but if you can say yes, I want to. I want to know what it’s like with Michael. To be honest, I didn’t think it was my choice because you never wanted to let me. I wasn’t worried you wanted to try to make me. It was the other way round. You’ve said
“You know, guys,” Dean pointed out. “We need to take this slow for more than just me. You two have a couple of Hell-beasts to kennel. If we throw down too fast and too raunchy and get those mutts pissed off, it could be a bloodbath. I’ve got first-aid training, but if one of you knicks an artery, we’re fucked. Cas, you really believe you can stand by and watch Michael fuck your mate?”

Cas growled.

“My point exactly.”

April sighed. “You’re not the wrench, Dean. I am. The three of you work seamlessly. You don’t need me. I’m the one throwing it all off. Just forget I said anything.”

“NO!” said Cas loudly. “You want in. You already said so, and I can feel that it’s true. I’m not leaving you out of this. Either we find a way to make it work for everyone, or we call it off. Like I said, full stop.”

“Then we start slowly,” Michael said simply. “Breakfast tomorrow. April kneels for you. Dean kneels for me. I’ve been wanting a cock warmer at breakfast anyway. I’ll go into training tomorrow with a well-fed wolf, and I’ll be Omega enough to scare the shit out of the Deepest Ozzie. You two do whatever you want at the other end of the table. Both Subs will be naked, and both will be moving at their Dom’s instruction. If being naked and getting me off seven feet from a girl makes Dean feel weird, I’ll know it. Sound like a plan?”

“Dean?” Cas asked.

“Yeah. Sounds good to me.”

“April?”

“Cock warming doesn’t get anyone off, Michael; not if it’s done correctly.”

Dean huffed again. He stepped behind her and leaned low to put arms around her belly.

Cas smiled indulgently. Michael pursed his lips.

“You know what I mean.”

April looked up at Dean in concern. “If you don’t like it, you’ll tell us?”

“I’ll be fine under the table, kid. Where it will get hairy is when we’re all there together and all your soft and moist parts are in play. I don’t even much like thinking about it. I don’t like ‘soft’. I can’t explain why.”

She huffed a sharp laugh. “You don’t have to explain, Dean. I don’t either. I don’t like girls any more than you do.”

He squeezed her tightly. “I never even thought about you and me having the same orientation, April, but we do, don’t we? I love you.”

“I love you too, Dean. You’re important to me. Please don’t do this just to please us. I get enough from my mate. This isn’t for my health. It’s just fun.”
“All right. I believe we’ve reached a decision,” stated Cas assertively. “Small steps. One step at a time. All of us understand that everyone’s comfort is required before we move forward. Each step will be clearly planned. And by the way, I need to clarify that Dean is not the only one who has the authority to call Red. If any of us finds anything we attempt uncomfortable, we stop. Understood and agreed?”

They all agreed.

Cas headed back up to the house with April to check on Naomi and give his mate an hour of his undistracted attention before bedtime. Dean took Michael’s hand and pulled him to stroll along the edge of the pond as the sun disappeared.

“Well, it’s getting closer,” said Dean quietly.

“We’ll be ready,” Michael told him. “We’ve got everything lined out and most of it is already locked.”

“Not my point,” Dean answered.

They weren’t looking at each other. They were both keeping an eye on the dimming path before them as it struck off into the trees. Michael thought about it. He ran through the life-changing whirl that was his life over the last two months.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, Dean, but I think I’m good with it.”

Dean chuckled softly and squeezed Michael’s hand.

“I mean it,” Michael reiterated. “I never could have imagined a life like this. Your happiness means more to me than my own. That’s probably the Mate-bond or whatever, but it’s the truth. Whatever it is, it doesn’t feel like a sacrifice anymore. You told me when we Mated that this could turn out to be the best of all possible worlds if I would only give it a chance. I wanted to bash your head in. God, I was so mad.”

“I know you were. I never blamed you for that. Ya know, when I thought you and I were going to cut and run, that hurt like hell, but keeping you made it something I could see myself living through. I am so fucking gone on you, Michael Quentin. I love you so much, it scares me.”

They walked on for a few minutes in silence. It would soon be too dark to stay out among the trees, but the path wasn’t long. It would deliver them back to the house soon enough.

“Today was really hard, babe,” Dean admitted. “But if I’m going to make any headway through the crap that runs through my head and holds me hostage, I have to do this psychoanalysis thing. I don’t have a choice. I can’t do that to either of you again. I’m a father now. I need to be the guy all of you need.”

Michael released Dean’s hand and put his arm around his mate, pulling him in. “You’re that guy already, Dean. What you talk about with your therapist is for you.”

Dean scoffed. “Simplify it all you want, Skippy. I’m a fucking basket case, and I’ll drag everything down with me if I can’t get this figured out.”

“Dean, if you ever call me ‘Skippy’ again, you won’t get the opportunity to fuck up anything.”

Dean laughed. It felt good to laugh.

“Are you going to keep him waiting?” Michael asked with an eye on the house as it came back into
view. It was pretty from the back too.

“Nah, he’s not ready yet.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because he and his ‘Dred brow’ aren’t perched on the porch staring at us.” Dean scanned the horizon to be sure.

Empty.

They began the slow climb back up to the house.

“I need to ask you something, alpha.”

Nothing that followed that sentence was likely to be good, and Michael snickered at the sense of dread he felt from Dean. They’d become predictable to one another, and Michael liked it.

“All right. Hit me.”

“I know you don’t want me to make public appearances until the public gets used to the idea of me…”

Dean snorted loud enough to scare a dove from her perch. Michael watched her take flight.

“But I’m asking you to find a way to be okay with the idea eventually. Dean, I want to be a part of what you and Sam and Cas do. I want in. I know it’s going to take time, but I want in.”

Dean stopped walking and sighed hard. He rubbed the back of his neck and squinted into the trees. He couldn’t refuse Michael outright. He’d promised. Plus, he had no justification to say no. God, he wanted to say no.

Dean lay a hand over Michael’s lower belly. Michael gripped Dean’s wrist lightly.

“Have you thought about a name?” Dean deflected.

“We’re not ready to pick a name yet, my heart.” Michael lowered his head and looked up through his lashes at his mate.

“I can’t do this today, Michael,” Dean whispered.

“We don’t have to. I know you’re not ready, and I’m not pushing you. I need you to know. That’s all.”

“Why are you so ambitious? Why aren’t you content to sit in the house and balance the budget? Why can’t you learn to make jelly and can pickles and shit? Fuck, Michael! Do you have any idea how terrifying this is?”

Michael grinned, and he was beautiful. Dean prayed the pup inherited Michael’s smile.

“Come on, Dean. Alpha wants you naked and sweating.”

“What else haven’t you told me you want?” Dean accused, stepping quick to catch up to his retreating mate.

“I want to go to church, Dean. I miss it. There’s a Universist Church in town. I want the pups to
have a spiritual upbringing.” Michael was walking up the slight grade backward in the dark, and Dean hustled forward to get a hand on him and turn him so that he could walk and look in the same direction.

“You do? Church?”

“Yep. Don’t try to hide from me, babe. I know you have a spiritual side. You don’t show it much, but it’s there. Do this with me.”

“Cas never goes to church,” Dean muttered. “He thinks the whole idea is stupid.”

“Well, then he can sleep in on Sundays or watch the babies while we dress up and go. Maybe I’ll join the choir.”

“I’d miss a lot of services. I travel a lot.”

“Dean. It’s not contractual. You attend when you can. Come on, did you really want to raise your pups with no spiritual guideposts?” Michael shifted so that they were holding hands again.

“Let me get this straight,” Dean enumerated. “You want to fuck the Alpha’s girl, set a herd of men on my ass, but tell Sam when he can or can’t set it back to rights, let thousands of people who think you’re a freak get to know everything about you so you can convince them you’re not strange when you are, send April to New York alone, start going to church, and sing in the fucking choir. Is that everything?”

“You’re a moron,” stated Michael. “Do I need to take birth control if we do a foursome? Is there one that’s safe for the pup?”

Dean stopped walking, bent his head back to face the warming stars, and moaned pitifully.

Michael laughed in victory, collected his mate, and got him moving again.

“Come on, drama queen.”

“You’re a dick, Michael.”

“You love me though.”

“Yeah, well, keep it up, and that might change.”

“Not a chance, Skippy. I’m irresistible.”

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Gabe watched his mother sleep, laid out flat on her stomach with her arms cradling her face to one side. She was out cold again, knocked dead to the world by something Cas administered. He couldn’t make himself leave her for long. Somehow, he knew she needed him, although she’d never needed him before. Never. But everything she’d ever done receded as he looked at her pale face. He wanted not to care. She had been a terrible mother. She’d failed him at every pass and then coped with that failure by pretending he wasn’t there at all. If she never confronted him, she never had to acknowledge her shortcomings. It was so ostrich-with-its-head-in-the-sand, the metaphor was nearly perfect.
She was going to slowly lose her mind, and that was going to be terrifying for her until she’d slipped so far under there was nothing left of her that could feel fear. Gabe knew what it felt like to stand at the top of that steep cliff and look down. Gabe had dug his heels in and refused to go, but it had always been the strength of his Omega that kept him rooted at the edge until he found the courage and will to turn his back on the ravine and walk a different way. Naomi no longer had her beta to hold her steady. She was going whether she still had strength or not.

Gabriel sat still with his phone in his hand for more than two hours. Sam and Jess said goodbye on their way out with the pups. Cas and April, and then Michael poked their heads in and shared a few simple words to check on him. Somehow, a hot cup of tea appeared at his elbow. Gabe didn’t drink it. Naomi didn’t move in her deep sleep.

Gabriel’s thumb moved by itself. The connection clicked, and as the ringing began in the earpiece, he lifted it to his ear with a shaky hand.

She answered after three rings.

“Gabe?”

“Kali, I need you.”

“Are you at home?”

“It’s not home if you’re not here.”

She took too long to answer. He could hear her breathing. He knew she had heard him.

“Kali?”

“I don’t know, Gabe. I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”

“Please come home.” Maybe it was the open pain in his voice. Maybe it was the finality of the word ‘home’. He didn’t take a breath until she answered.

“Sit tight, Gabriel. I’ll be there in 45 minutes.”

Chapter End Notes

My assessment of this chapter that only crept forward once more is that it's awfully scattered. Characters reacting in strange ways had me pulling up short and reevaluating if that's what they needed to be doing, and again and again, I decided, yep, it's weird, but it's right. It's another of those that feels like it might not grow on me later, but I'm happy with it for now.

Quick shout-out that I'm adding as an edit after-the-fact: If y'all don't know BellaRisa's work, esp Bunker Hall & Summer Hall, go check it out. It's amazing. I have incorporated *her* phrase "Dred Brow" so thoroughly into my own internal characterization of Dom!Cas that I threw it right in this chapter w/out even noticing that I did that. It's not my phrase, and *she* deserves all the shout-outs and all the recommendations I can throw. Thankyou, Ibelieve333 for pointing it out.

I love you guys and continue to be honored that you're still here. At this rate, I may
never reach an end. If that's okay with y'all, we'll just keep chugging along.
Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

Dean explores a new vista, Gabriel takes a poke at his options, and two Subs under the table.

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry. ****Flings chapter and runs to hide****

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 74 – Thursday, July 20, 2017

NOW:

Dean headed straight to the Master suite. Stepping in, he found April with her back to him, sitting high but hunched over on a vanity stool in a silk robe. Cas knelt at her feet looking down in concentration. Alarm sparked swiftly in Dean’s mind but was replaced by amusement as he rounded the scene and realized Cas wasn’t kneeling to his Ozzie. He was carefully applying a deep purple lacquer to her toenails. A shorter stool sat between them supporting both feet. The look on Cas’ face as he worked, so tender with frown lines across his brow made Dean smile. April tore her gaze from her own feet and grinned at Dean happily. Cas hissed, his hand slipping with the motion that traveled the length of her leg.

“Be still, Kitten,” he admonished with a grip to her calf and a Kleenex swipe to the side of her toe where he’d gone off course.

Dean leaned over her and left a kiss on her forehead. “Pedicures, Alpha? Really? Are your toes purple, too?” he teased, watching the Alpha work.

“Mind your own business, Dean. It works for us, and it makes her happy.”

“Yeah, I get it. As long as your boats are floatin’, man. Makes no difference to me. You, uh, missed a spot there…”

Castiel didn’t respond. His grip on her calf turned into a gentle stroke as he went back to work. He looked up into his mate’s eyes and smiled softly at her. Yes, his boat was floating nicely, thank you very much. Dean crossed the room and stood gazing out the window into the deepening darkness.

“Where are we tonight, Alpha?” asked Dean into the pane.

“Across the hall from yours and Michael’s room,” came the surprise answer.
Dean turned and looked at him over his shoulder. April stifled a snicker. It wasn’t really funny at all. Dean took a minute to take the answer in, his eyes on Cas’ back, his hand still on the sheer curtain.

“That’s Naomi’s room.”

“Yes, it is.” Cas capped the nail polish and set it down on the floor. He blew gently across April’s toes and assessed his work.

“Cas…you’re…Is that a good idea?”

“Are you questioning me, Pet?” The Alpha looked around, craning his head to catch Dean’s eye.

“no-sir…”

“Can I get up now?” April asked.

“Sit still for a bit, Kitten. Let them dry.” Cas turned back to her and leaned in to plant a kiss atop each kneecap, careful to avoid touching her wet nails. Dean turned back to the window. He watched a car pull into the drive and stop off to his left near Gabriel’s suite of rooms by the Conservatory. The headlights winked out, and Kali emerged into the darkness. She barely took half a dozen steps before a short dark figure met her and folded into her. She stopped walking and embraced Gabriel on the gravel drive. She seemed to enfold and subsume his body completely, although Dean knew it was just a trick of the light.

“Kali’s here, Cas. Did you know she was coming?”

“No, I didn’t, but I don’t require Gabe to send me a visitor’s log.”

“What’s going on with those two? Do you know?” Dean was still watching them from the second floor, tucked close to the side of the window where he wouldn’t be obvious if they should look up.

Cas sighed and stood up. He gathered all his supplies in one hand, and he touched April’s cheek with the other. “I’m not sure, Dean. He’s troubled, and he’s clearly terrified, but I think if he’ll give her a chance, she may wind up being very good for him. I just don’t know if he can make that big a jump anymore. His reaction to our mother’s condition has me worried. Perhaps Kali can help. God knows he’s not talking to me about it.” Cas set the pedicure tools on the dresser by the door.

Dean watched the couple outside disentangle and make their way into Gabriel’s side entrance. He turned around and rested his butt on the window sill. He smiled once at April, and she shared a look of camaraderie with him that Castiel couldn’t see. The Subs were beginning to understand one another without needing words. April passed Castiel off to Dean’s custody with a solid trust that her beloved was in good hands, and Dean returned a confirmation that he intended not to drop the ball. Cas caught Dean’s side of the exchange and felt warmed from the inside by the faith and adoration he saw there.

Dean broke away and cleared his throat, standing up by the window and locking his eyes on his Dom’s.

“Sir?”

“I’ll meet you there, Pet. Go on across and wait for me. I need to collect a couple of items.”

“Yes, Sir.” Dean stopped beside April and knelt. “Don’t mess up your pretty toes, kid,” he told her in mock seriousness.
“I love you too, Dean,” she said in reply. “Good night. Have fun.”

“Will you sleep in Michael’s room tonight?” asked Dean, touching her cheek.

“Probably.”

“Good girl. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’m looking forward to Subbing with you, Dean,” she whispered.

“When too,” he admitted and found himself surprised at the truth of it. He kissed her cheek once more and left them both. Cas didn’t get so much as a glance on the way out. The Dom had already dismissed his charge, and Dean needed to work himself into the correct space in his head.

Naomi’s room was starkly elegant. Every item was in the best of taste and well-constructed. It was neither too much nor too little, and it was very Naomi. Dean tried to find a way to be repulsed, but there was nothing untoward about its classic colors and well-appointed simplicity. It was also spotlessly clean despite having had no occupant for years. Dean stood in the doorway and worked slowly through a breathing routine meant to help him relax and slow down. He took a step into Naomi’s space and began the routine again.

Castiel wasn’t fucking around. There was no good reason to use the beta’s space tonight except to make a statement of rank and ownership. Dean felt a tingle of anticipation and unwholesome pleasure at the thought of his Alpha slamming Naomi into place with a statement this powerful. He took another step inside and closed the door behind him. Dean removed his clothes in slow motion. Each item was carefully folded and placed in the correct order on top of the bureau. He set his soft belt beside the pile of clothes exactly as he’d been taught to do, but he didn’t expect Cas to take the offer this time.

Dean regarded himself in the mirror. The anticipation firmed his cock just a little. He tensed the muscles in his groin and watched himself shift with the tension and chub out a little bit more. Dean smirked at himself, then began a new slow count and went back to work. He took a few moments in the bathroom checking that every part of him was ready for whatever the Dom wanted. He peed and washed his hands. He patted warm water onto his cheeks and used Naomi’s expensive towels to dry his face.

Back out in the bedroom, the crossbar hanging from the ceiling kept drawing his eye. That was not Naomi’s. Neither the bar nor the hardware anchoring it to the ceiling had been here last time Dean looked into this room, but admittedly, that had been quite some time back. Maybe Cas brought April in here at some point. His nerves jumped, but he was old-hand enough to quiet them himself. Dean took another deep breath and looked around with a critical eye, determining where he should settle.

He kept clear of the bed. Beds were his only at invitation. Without clear instructions, he knew better than to touch the soft coverlet. In the end, he chose to acknowledge the unstated threat and knelt directly beneath the dangling crossbar. He faced the door, crooked his toes beneath his body and settled. It felt good as the peace of Submission draped easily across his shoulders. He wasn’t cold. His knees rested lightly. His slow breaths came into a rhythm of their own without thought. His eyes blinked on occasion, but they held no tension.

Dean settled.

He waited.

He could hold like this all night if that was what his Dom wished of him.
He didn’t have to wait long.

The door opened and then shut. Blue eyes caught and acknowledged, but then broke away again. The Dom didn’t speak. Green eyes followed the man’s progress around the room, in no hurry.

Dean’s body was relaxed and still except for the turn of his head following the stately circuit of the man he loved. His mind though, never stopped moving. He judged every step, every muscle twitch, every glance for intent and direction. He anticipated, and he waited. What did the Dom need from his Sub? Which of the two needed this scene more? Whose wolf had the most to gain? They’d begun to dance, and Dean knew to follow the Dom’s lead, but he wasn’t about to follow passively. Alpha had never once wanted him passive.

What Dean’s perception picked up was only partially conscious. Years of working together meant they knew each body-tell from an instinctive perspective. Dean’s body would react as the Dom wanted him to without either of them needing to put much thought into it. What made their play so satisfying for them both though, was that neither of them ever leaned on instinct or familiarity. They both worked through their scenes with every faculty engaged, using every layer of intent they possessed to give and receive through every look, every word, every touch. Despite how their years together made scening easy, neither of them ever turned lazy.

“So you know why we’re in this room tonight, Pet?” the Dom asked while he moved slowly behind his Sub.

“Sir?” It was a request to speak freely. Dean knew better than to assume an open-ended question meant he could speak his mind.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, Dean.” Ah, yes. Permission granted then.

“Sir, it seems to me that you would like to mark this room as yours before your mother takes up residence.” Dean caught the Alpha’s eye as he strolled back around to stand before his kneeling Sub.

“It’s already my room, Pet.”

“Yes, Sir. It is, but she may not realize that. Marking it clearly with your scent will send a message.”

“It isn’t MY scent she needs to smell, Pet.”

Dean blushed. He almost lowered his gaze from the fierce possessiveness in his Alpha’s eyes. “No, Sir.”

On the plus side, if casting Dean’s scent about Naomi’s room was the primary goal of the scene, Dean assumed that at the very least he was likely to be granted at least one orgasm tonight. Alpha chuckled softly, ominously, reading Dean’s line of thought from the gleam in his eye. Dean’s blush deepened. Castiel could still take him apart with little more than a look.

“So on your feet, Pet. Raise your arms. I’m going to bind you to the bar above your head. Get comfortable. You’re going to be here for some time.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Dean stood and allowed Alpha to lock his arms in place with a custom pair of padded cuffs. The cuffs didn’t impede his grip on the bar. Each locking cuff held a wrist out to one side of the bar, far from the other. Dean’s knuckles tingled where a kiss had been placed before his fingers were pressed around the heavy steel bar. It felt solid in his grip. Dean flexed his biceps and pulled himself to his tiptoes to check the stretch. Cas let him find his balance. The Sub’s arms were high enough above
him that his head cleared the bar when he stood straight. It was going to be a challenge if he held position for long.

And then Alpha raised the stakes. He pulled the binding cord at the wall, attached through a series of pulleys to the bar itself, and raised it several inches before tying it off. Dean was up on the balls of his feet. His skin broke out in a thin sheen of sweat in anticipation.

“Spread your feet, Pet.”

Alpha produced a spreader bar with soft cuffs at each end. He knelt and fastened a cuff to Dean’s left ankle, and then he prodded the right one far enough outward to bind it as well. Dean teetered, using his grip on the bar above his head to balance as the spread of his feet forced him onto his toes. Dean was naked and spread-eagled, powerless to protect his body. His penis hardened, standing out starkly in anticipation, at the thrill of the threat. He huffed a few deep breaths under his Dom’s judgmental eye. Alpha waited impatiently for Dean to get himself under control.

It didn’t take very long. Dean wasn’t feeling any fear, just an energized sense of anticipation. The inherent helplessness of his position, heightened by the knowledge that nothing that might befall him between now and when his Dom released him could ever make him call Uncle. Michael might insist on having a safeword between them, and he might someday push Dean enough that he used it. That’s a thing that could happen. Not here though. Not with Castiel. If Dean couldn’t trust Castiel to shepherd him through the hard, scary space in his head without trusting him to find the path for them both, there was no point in going there at all. That complete and unhindered release of all of his own power was the whole point. It was the opposite of what he taught his students, but here in this room, all the rules of safe play were abandoned at the door. It’s what fed them both.

Once Dean had his breathing smooth again, his feet planted as well as he could get them and his wide eyes back where they belonged, Alpha continued. A blindfold was fitted over his eyes and secured in place. It had darkened cups that closed out all light but felt comfortable against his face. Dean hummed in pleasure. Castiel chuckled again and patted his cheek.

“I want you to talk, Pet. I want to hear you tell me everything that occurs to you while you stand here in the dark – what you think, what you feel, anything that comes to mind. I won’t judge you. Let your mind go and just talk to me. Don’t be concerned if I don’t answer you back. I am not going to interfere with your thoughts. Just talk.”

“Sir?”

“You won’t be in trouble for anything you say, Dean. You have my permission to say anything at all. Please begin.”

“Begin? This is a monologue? When do we get to the part where you touch me?”

Castiel huffed a quiet laugh, but he didn’t answer. He DID walk around behind Dean and press up close with his hands running warm across Dean’s shoulders and up each arm. He breathed into the back of Dean’s neck.

“That feels nice, Alpha,” said Dean, lowering his head to stretch out his neck. “I love it when you touch me. Love it. Look, I’m gonna be honest, this talking thing is weird. I’m not sure what to say.”

“Just talk to me, Pet. Tell me what you feel.”

“I feel a little silly, if you want to know. Like, I’m naked and tied, and my dick thinks it’s playtime. And, hell, I’m on board with that, Sir. Any time you wanna get going, I’ll be right here.”
“Yes, you will.” Cas dropped his right hand to massage the roundness of Dean’s ass. “Oh, I nearly forgot.” He stepped away from Dean’s back, and the temperature drop sent chills down Dean’s body. Dean mumbled to himself, not loud enough for the Alpha to hear and earned himself a stiff swat once his Top returned.

“I said talk, Pet, not mumble.”

“I apologize, Sir. I said it’s only cold when you disappear on me like that. I like having you stand close.”

“Very good, Pet. Now, this is going to be a little cool. Relax yourself for me. Let me in. I want you to wear this for me…” Alpha pressed two lubed fingers into Dean’s rectum and pulsed them, spreading them as wide apart as he could. He was up close to Dean’s back again.

“Forgot? You didn’t forget. You’re playing mind-games. Don’t get me wrong,” Dean commented, taking the instruction to speak his stream-of-consciousness out loud quite at its face. “I love the games. I love it when you side-sweep me and leave me gasping. Knock yourself out, Alpha. Yeah, get in there. Can I push back?”

Cas hummed but didn’t speak. Dean took that as permission and used his limited leverage to press back into his Dom’s fingers. A tight grip on Dean’s hip stilled him, and he groaned a protest.

“Really? Come on, Sir. Oh. Oh, shit, what is that?” Cas’ fingers disappeared and a wide blunt head of something lube-covered pressed up hard in their place. Dean abandoned his initial hope that it was the Alpha himself as whatever it was was twisted and rotated into place with a constant pressure. The head of the…thing slipped in with a moan from Dean and a clenching of his muscles around the much smaller neck.

“A plug, Sir? Is it the red one? You know I can take the second bulb of the red one. Push it in deeper. Please? Does this count as making demands? Am I good to keep talking? I’m a little confused.”

Alpha stood close to his Sub and fixed his teeth gently around the flesh at the back of his neck, silencing him and making him shiver. Releasing the painless hold, Castiel whispered to him. “Say anything you like, Pet. Ask for whatever you like. You are free to demand to your heart’s content. That doesn’t mean I’ll change my plans, but I want to hear everything that goes through your mind. Are you comfortable?”

“Yes, Sir. I feel good.”

“Good. Let’s get going then.” It took a moment for Dean to realize what he meant by that. The plug, the vibrator, in his ass sprang to life, and Alpha removed the warmth of his presence from Dean’s perception, stepping back far enough that Dean couldn’t feel his body heat at all. After a short time, the sound of floor fans starting up filled the room with white noise and drowned the sound of Castiel’s movement, his breath.

Dean voiced his surprise at each change. His fingers white-knuckled the bar over his head and he shifted his feet in his shackles. He turned his head from side to side, trying to pick up signs of where the next change might come from, trying to find his Dom. Somehow, knowing where Cas was seemed monumentally important. He wouldn’t leave, would he?

The vibrator picked up speed, and Dean jolted in surprise. He huffed in frustration. Cas hadn’t returned with his warm breath even as the moist spot on the back of Dean’s neck dried.
Dean began to talk in nonsense phrases, speaking whatever passed through his head. Most of it was about what he perceived and what his body’s sensations felt like. The air moved in wisps around him. Clearly the fans weren’t pointed straight at him. They were there for the sound, not the wind. The vibrator lost a power notch, and Dean breathed a relieved sigh. He hadn’t realized how much the damn thing turned him on until it leveled back down. He talked about that, too.

He babbled into the darkness, letting his flighty mind streak off into strange places and take tangents off into new places on a whim. He told Cas about his fear that his book would fail miserably, that he expected to be a terrible father, but he was thrilled at the chance anyway. He wondered aloud when Michael had had the time to prepare the songs he’d performed. He expressed his amazement that his celebrity seemed to have taken a boost from his coming out, not the hit he expected. He described how he envisioned the wedding, and why certain aspects mattered. He told Cas that not a day had passed since he found and lost his father that he didn’t grieve. He ranted at length about Keller and their moronic graph. He forgot he was nude and bound. After some time, his shoulders settled into the discomfort, and his fingertips stopped tingling. The Dominant never said a word.

Time wore on. Dean tried to catch anything from Castiel, but he didn’t make a sound, and he never came back to touch Dean’s skin where it stood so ready to be touched. Dean passed through a number of emotions as the clock ticked silently on. At first, he was intrigued, hopeful, anticipatory. As the night stretched on, he grew frustrated, bewildered, dismayed. He began to feel abandoned. Was Cas even still in the room? Had he left altogether? Every thought, every doubt tumbled over Dean’s lips. Was Alpha sitting at his desk in his office with his feet propped up and a tumbler of Scotch in his grip, watching the tracer lines on his screen tell the story of Dean’s discomfort?

His erection long flagged, Dean slumped forward and let the pull against his shoulders hurt a bit. “Alpha, I need you, man. Come on, just let me know you’re still here. You wouldn’t really leave me like this, right?”

Silence.

Dean was beginning to feel angry. “All right, look. If this is some bullshit training exercise you dreamed up to get me to call a safeword, you can fucking forget it! You hear me, Alpha? You can forget it. I’m NOT GONNA DO IT! FUCK YOU! You can’t just tie me up and fucking leave me here!”

The vibrator didn’t even respond. It continued to pulse at a middle-rate, egging Dean’s prostate into a dull, tingly throb that he chose to ignore.

From anger, Dean shifted to despair. He began to talk more to himself than to his Dom, convinced at last that he’d been left alone to suffer.

“Not fucking surprised. He’s probably taking some time to catch up on fucking ‘Downton Abbey’ or some such bullshit. Tie up the needy Sub and buy himself some free time. Goddamn nuisance is what you are, Winchester. Why the hell does he even bother in the first place? Why does he love me at all? I mean, God, he’s gotta, right? He’s gotta love me. Wouldn’t have done what he did if he didn’t.” Dean was absolutely sure by this point that he was alone in Naomi’s room, tied to the ceiling, uncomfortable and humiliated with a vibrator up his ass and his legs spread wide, and it was at that point that it occurred to him that if Naomi ever saw him like this, he would die on the spot. And here he was in HER room.

He felt the tightening in his chest before it really hit his lungs. His breath wouldn’t come fully, and he gasped. His lungs squeezed against every attempt to fill them, and he wheezed a miserable whine at the rising panic that whitened the blackness behind his eyes. Where the fuck was his Alpha? He huffed, and he struggled, pulling hard against the cuffs on his wrists. Tears sprung up at his eyes.
“CAS!!” he managed, bellowing as loud as he could. “CASTIEL!!”

Nothing.

“Cas, you sorry son of a bitch! Untie me! Fucking CUNT! I HATE you, Motherfucker! You hear me, ALPHA? I fucking HATE YOU!!”

Nothing.

Dean sobbed and panted. He quit pulling after a while and hung loose in the cuffs, trying to catch his breath.

“Cas. Alpha.”

He hated himself for needing so much.

Dean hung very still, his head bowed, his feet no longer bearing any weight, his knees loose. He stopped talking. His voice was raw anyway. It felt good to stop working it. How much time had passed? Hours? He focused on getting his breath back and calming himself. Naomi wasn’t here. She wasn’t going to see him like this. He was safe.

He was safe.

Dean caught the mantrum as it scurried through his head, and he clung to it. Whatever this was that Alpha was putting him through, it would make sense to him in time. Alpha would explain and hold him close. Alpha would never harm Dean. Never. Dean couldn’t remember a time when he hadn’t known that for truth.

The tears didn’t slow, but his breathing came back to its normal rhythm. Dean picked his head up and got his feet back under him. He stood still and quiet, simply feeling his body in the space his Dom wanted him, wondering why. His shoulders burned and throbbed.

As he stood in black silence, Dean began to feel the strangest sensation. Right at the small of his back there was a warmth that wasn’t his own. It was so faint as to be barely perceptible. Nothing touched him. The fans continued to stifle any sound, and the vibrator in his body hadn’t shifted speeds in some time. Dean pulled all his focus in to prove to himself that the warmth at his back was real. Something was there. Was it Alpha? It could be a hand – held still a few inches from his skin. Was it a confluence of body fluids that pooled at his back from holding one position for so long? Was it nothing more than his imagination?

And then it was gone. Dean keened and shifted back to chase it. Even as he mourned its loss, a new warmth bloomed across his right hip. Dean startled and pressed into it. Something was there. He knew it was. But his hip touched nothing as he thrust it out to the right.

“Alpha? Is that you? Baby, I need you to talk to me if it’s you. Are you there?”

The warmth at his hip vanished. It was replaced moments later by a feeling of some kind of presence by his left cheek. Dean sobbed loudly and turned his head into the feeling.

He felt so alone, and he whispered that thought into the void of darkness that had claimed him. Everything was darkness and solitude. Every frightened impulse Dean had ever had was sitting right at the surface of his carefully constructed defenses. One push, and he would shatter.

“I’m alone,” he whispered again. “I can’t do this alone. I’m too weak to do it by myself.”
Warmth like a hushed promise bloomed at his lower belly and spread slowly upward. Dean’s voice in his head was louder than it had ever been. “Too weak. Not worth the effort. Not worth anything. Broken. Garbage. Why do they bother? Why does anyone care? If they only knew. If they could really see inside me they would know, and they would all leave. They only stay because they don’t know.” Dean realized sadly that he was repeating out loud what he heard in his head.

Dean didn’t know if he was talking to himself or the phantom presence. He knew for a fact that his Dominant was gone. He knew that.

The warmth was still moving, slowly but no longer fading and shifting to a new location. It stayed, travelling over his skin, leaving chill-bumps where it passed: up to his chest, over his shoulder, down his back. It wasn’t real. If it had been real, had been substantial, then crossing over his shoulder would have meant breaking away to work around his arm, but it never flagged. Dean focused on the sensation that his mind created for him, and he listened.

Voices in his head chanted at him; chanted the same tired refrain he’d heard his whole life, and suddenly Dean was exhausted. He let them chant, and he pushed them sideways. He slumped again and tried to pull the warmth to the front of his mind. It had travelled down his back, over the swell of his backside, and was now moving very slowly down the back of his left thigh. It wasn’t real. People’s minds…under duress they concocted all sorts of figments to get a person through trauma. Dean wanted his Dom HERE, and so his mind built him a facsimile. It was an intriguing sensation nevertheless. At his heel, the warmth broke away, only to take up its journey again over his right heel and begin the migration upward.

Dean wondered aloud for the fiftieth time why he was here. What was Alpha up to? The pointlessness of the exercise made him sigh once again, even as the spark of heat shifted around his right hip, wandered down over his pubis and very nearly cupped his genitals. Dean twitched. Maybe it was a ghost. A perverted ghost. The warmth had stopped moving, and Dean struggled against the thought that it might not be a figment of his imagination.

Then it was gone, and his whole body shivered as chill-bumps erupted everywhere.

Into the dark despair in his head, an odd thought spoke very quietly. One side of his mind was still chanting rudely that he was no more than worthless space where someone notable could have stood, but the strangest thought piped up softly on the other side.

“He would NEVER leave me.”

But he had. He had left. He had, hadn’t he? Dean estimated that he’d been standing silently bound for at least three hours. At least. Even in a warped mental state, Dean could usually keep a good sense of time. It was a useful skill for a Sub to develop, marking the passage of time. During all that time, all the shouting, and the awful things Dean had allowed to come spilling from his mouth, from the moment his Dom started the scene proper, Dean had been alone in this room. He knew it with such certainty now, that that odd voice and its strange pronouncement nearly made him laugh.

But then he heard it again, and his mouth, long since stripped of any filter, pressed the words out into the air.

“He would NEVER leave me. He promised.”

At that, Dean began to shake. His tears flowed so freely, they sought a chink in his blindfold and flowed over his cheeks.

Rule Number One.
He had a rule, and as a well-trained Submissive, the rules were everything to Dean.

“Hold onto Alpha,” he whispered. “He said hold on. He made it a rule. He would NEVER leave me. He promised.” Dean’s shaking almost made him miss the warmth that spread across his back and down his legs all at once.

The voices, the shrill and demanding ones, the ones that carried razor blades and hacksaws roared back in a vengeance, shouting at him, shouting right in his face. Dean grimaced against the onslaught, but then he straightened. He took hold of the tiny fellow at the side of his head, the one with the strange ideas, and he wrestled him into place, a shield against the barrage.

“Say it again,” he demanded of the odd little guy.

“Hold onto Alpha. You were never meant to try to do it all yourself,” came the reply, said to Dean but focused out into the void where the voices were so loud.

“AGAIN!”

“Hold onto Castiel. Let him lend you strength. You don’t need to stand alone.”

“HE LEFT ME!!”

“No, he never did,” said the little voice with such certainty, Dean frowned. Warmth from his back spread over both shoulders and dripped like a shower down his front.

“I’m alone,” Dean insisted.

“You’re never alone, Dean,” said a tiny voice inside his head. It was quiet, but it spoke with such sureness. The loud ugly voices wavered. “He loves you,” the little fellow said simply.

“I don’t deserve to be loved.” There was no response to that. “Who are you?” asked Dean into the darkness.

The tiny guy didn’t answer that question either, but his amusement tickled. “Rule number One, Winchester,” it said as if that clarified everything.

“Hold onto my Alpha,” Dean responded, feeling warm all over. He was still trembling, but the sobs were slowing.

Dean stood in silence and let the warmth sink in. Slowly, it began to dissipate.

“Alpha?” he tried hoarsely. He cleared his throat and began again, this time without the questioning tone.

“Alpha. I know you can hear me. I trust you, Sir. I…I love you. Please, Sir, I need you now. I need your touch. I think I’m done. Would you unbind me?”

From behind him, Dean heard a rustle of fabric, as of someone standing from a seated position. He felt deft fingers at the back of his head. “Close your eyes, Pet,” Cas whispered tenderly. He pulled the blindfold away and tossed it behind him. Both hands and both feet were quickly released, and Castiel caught his Sub before he fell. He arranged them both on the bed with Dean sitting between his knees, facing the foot, hunkered over to let Alpha work the sore muscles of his back and shoulders.

Cas lay kisses all across the back of Dean’s shoulders and up his neck. “You’re amazing, Dean,” he
praised. “That was incredible.”

Dean huffed into his own lap. “You were there the whole time,” he said.

“I was never more than four feet away, my love. I would never leave you alone to face something like that on your own. Never.”

“Never,” Dean agreed. He sat up and leaned back against Castiel’s chest. “What time is it?”

“It’s a little past two. Do you need to sleep?”

“No, Sir. I want to leave Naomi a welcome home gift.”

“All right. You’ve earned quite a reward, Pet. What would you like?”

“What’s our record for one night?” Dean asked cryptically.

“Four,” replied the Alpha.

“What? I’ve done more than four. You’re shitting me.”

“I’m not,” Cas protested. “Based on the parameters YOU set, your highest count to date is four. And by the way, I’m nixing any attempts to break that record tonight. We both need to be functional tomorrow, and that limits our time here.”

“Whose fault is that? Who tied me up for hours and wasted all our time?”

“Wasted?” posed the Alpha.

Dean sobered and slumped against his fiancé. He had no idea if they were still scening, but he felt too vulnerable to play games at the moment, and he knew Cas would follow his lead. “I don’t know what that was, baby, but I think I needed it. I guess if you were here even after I was sure you’d left, I guess you heard everything I said.”

“I heard you, Dean. You have nothing to be ashamed of around me. You don’t need to hide who you are and what you’re feeling from me.”

“I don’t really hate you.”

“I know.”

“I just said that because I was…scared, I guess.”

“And angry, no doubt,” Cas finished for him. “You don’t like having your trust abused.”

“No, I don’t. It’s hard to trust, and it’s even harder once it’s been abused.” Dean rolled and squirmed until he lay with his chest to Castiel’s belly. He rested his cheek against Cas’ chest. Alpha ran soothing fingers through his hair.

“Was it too much?” the Alpha asked hesitantly.

“An hour ago, I would have said, hell yes. But now…I found something new, babe. I fought them off with your little rule and shut them up for a bit. Might never work again, but it worked once.”

“You were astonishing to watch, Dean. Astonishing and heartbreaking. I’m glad you fought your way through, but it’s more than I intended to put you through. I never dreamed you would dive as
deeply as you did. I nearly put a stop to the scene several times.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Are you sure?”

Dean pulled his knees up beneath him and eyed Castiel’s fly. “Why are you still dressed? I want you to get this fucking plug out of my ass and pound me until I come untouched all over Naomi’s pretty linens.”

“Answer my question first.”

“Yes, I’m sure. Now get up. You undress,” Dean hoisted Castiel to his feet and began to strip the bed. “I’ll get the bed ready. Let’s make a mess right on the mattress. I want the whole room to reek of alpha.”

Cas laughed and obeyed. Dean stripped all the bedding off, leaving the bare mattress.

They didn’t break the record, but they spent the night working together to cover as much of the bed in sweat and come as they could. Dean panted heavily, his cock heavy and bobbing untouched between his thighs. His back covered in a fine sheen that Cast couldn’t resist running the point of his tongue through as he paused every now and then to catch his breath. He didn’t share with Dean where his newfound stamina was coming from, but April’s self-improvement project to learn total orgasm control was going swimmingly and had begun to bleed over to her mate. Cas could hold himself at bay for much longer than he used to be capable of doing. He found a whole new set of whining sounds that Dean made once the rim of his ass wore tender with use. As long as Cas dragged Dean along with him in staying right on the brink without tipping over, Dean’s pain/pleasure ratio stayed on the positive side.

In the end, they scored two each, but they both slapped angrily at the alarms when they blared obnoxiously in the morning. Somehow, even without linens, a blanket lay draped over their sticky bodies and the stinky mattress. Each thanked the other for the consideration of digging out the blanket, but neither remembered collecting it.

“Whatever,” mumbled Dean, stretching sore muscles and covering his head with the blanket. “Gimme ten more minutes.” Castiel spooned up behind him and agreed silently. The best part of being in charge at work was getting to come in late after a hard night without needing to bother with a flimsy excuse.

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“Do you want to talk about it?” Kali asked cautiously. Gabe shook his head silently, sadly.

“Do you want me to make you forget about it?” she tried again. She didn’t yet know what “IT” was, but she knew what a traumatized Omega looked like, and the haunted look didn’t suit Gabriel at all.

“I, uh, just want you here, Kali. I need you here. We don’t have to do anything. Would you please just stay?”
“What changed, Gabe?” She took a chair in his tiny sitting room, resisting his efforts to get her into his bedroom. He sighed and gave up. He’d been fooling himself to think she would just go along without demanding answers.

He sat close to her and folded his hands across his face but stood right back up again and found himself at his little bar pouring Bourbon.

“Why you, Kali?” he asked confrontationally. “Why does it have to be you? I’ve fucked a lot of girls in my life. Why did it have to be you who got under my skin?”

“I’m not going to apologize to you for being attractive to your wolf, Gabe.”

He snarled and turned away, slamming his drink back before pouring two more.

She took hers when he handed it to her, but she grabbed his wrist before he pulled away. “I’m also not staying if you drink yourself into a stupor. Whatever’s going on, you need your wits to talk about it.”

“Last one, Ma’am. I swear,” he sassed, and she released his wrist.

“You called me, Omega. Are you planning to make me regret driving all the way into the middle of nowhere?” It was a calculated risk to press him, but she needed to know where his pressure points were. Obviously, she’d misread that one. Gabe sagged back into his chair and ignored the jibe.

“I don’t know. I don’t know up from down right now. I just know I shouldn’t be alone, and the whole fucking Universe help me, I want to be not alone with you.” He looked across the short space and met her eyes bravely.

“How ‘not alone’ are we talking? You said you want me to ‘come home’. That sounded kinda permanent.”

Gabe took a sip that was a bit more than a sip. Then he did it again. “I can’t answer that until I tell you everything, and neither can you.” He blinked at her.

“You’ve told me a good deal already, Gabriel. There’s more?”

“There’s a shitload more,” he confirmed. Something about his expression hinted at the flavor of the talk that was coming. She took a sip of her own, bracing against the heat that followed her more-than-sip.

“Illegal shit?” she asked, leaning forward.

“Some of it,” he agreed with a stony face.

“And if I say I don’t need to know? That I’d rather you don’t tell me?” She braced her elbows on her knees and leaned in quite close to him.

“Then we say goodnight and goodbye, Kali. I won’t hide who I am from you if we’re going to be together. If you’re willing to try, then you can stop me and walk out at any time. But if you stay, you’re going to hear all of it.”

“You’re scaring me,” she admitted.

“Good. That means you’re paying attention.” Gabriel knocked his drink back and set the glass down with a thump. Kali weighed him for a moment, then she copied him, shifted down onto the floor
before him on her knees, took his hands, and nodded with a deep breath.

“My mate died years ago,” he began. “It was just a stupid car accident. It didn’t mean anything. I already told you that.”

She nodded, frowning.

“I didn’t tell you that it wasn’t an accident, and that in the aftermath of the wreck that killed Marina, I had to fight off a couple of thugs with a burlap sack who tried to grab me.”

Kali gasped. “Gabriel.”

He looked at her sternly. “They wanted Mated Omegas, Kali. Mated but without mates. They wanted someone who would be so lost to grief they wouldn’t put up a fight, and they wanted someone who could never Trigger with a customer and accidentally Mate during a transaction. They fucking murdered my Mate to get at ME, Kali!”

“You escaped.”

“I struggled free. I’m pretty sure I broke more than one of their kneecaps on my way out, and I left the love of my life in a smoking car with blood dribbling down her face and blank eyes.”

Kali’s grip on his hands tightened. “I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s more. When Cas found out…He and Bobby, Christ, Kali, I thought he’d gone mad. I don’t even know what he did, but he told me I never had to worry about that syndicate again. He said he took care of them, whatever that means, but damn, I believe him. And my mother. Jesus, all Mother cared about was picking the best shrimp for the funeral and figuring out who not to invite.”

Gabriel paused, working out how to go on. “Castiel…he…it was the first time he ever did that to me, and I thought I would die right then and there, but…it helped with the pain and the burden. It helped to have that link to his strength. My brother is stronger than he looks, Kali, and not in the usual Alpha way. He’s quietly strong, like an Omega. I don’t know where it comes from. If he hadn’t Claimed me, I never would have made it. It was like he tied a rope around my waist to keep me from falling. Even if I had given up on everything, that tie would have held. I can’t begin to tell you how terrifying that is. I promised myself I would never let anyone have that much control over me ever again.”

Kali frowned. “But you did, Gabriel. Someone else has a Claim on you, don’t they? Can you tell me who?”

“My mate died a long time ago. I’m not the person I was then. I’ve changed. I’ve hardened into something I don’t recognize anymore. There’s not anything in the world I wouldn’t do anymore, if I feel it’s justified. Do you hear me, beta? I would do ANYTHING if it gets me what I want.”

“And what is it you want?” she asked almost at a whisper.

“I want to destroy them all. I want them all dead and buried and roasting in Hell. You want to know who holds my leash now? It’s not my brother. He won’t shift with me. He’s dug his heels in, and I can’t change his mind. So I knelt before the one alpha who won’t tell me no. I still hate the fucking leash, but if it frees me from my brother, and lets me keep battling the assholes who think they have the right to fucking OWN another human being, then that’s where my ass bends over. Don’t talk to me about irony. I went down of my own free will. I made that choice. No one chooses for me, Kali, and I don’t need a goddamned OWNER! Do you hear me?!”
“Gabe! My God, I never meant it like that! Baby, no! Please, can we start over? Let me be whatever you need me to be. Call it anything you like. Call it mates if you want. Call it partners. Hell, Gabe, I want to marry you, you stupid oaf, not own you.” She was crying hard by the end, pushed up high on her knees, leaning intimately into his space as he clutched her head tightly to his chest and wept with abandon.

He snuffled unexpectedly and looked up. “You do?”

“YES! I thought you knew that! In India, Omegas don’t marry. If they can’t Mate, they sign an ownership contract, but it’s really another word for marriage. I would never…”

“Kali, I need you. I don’t know why, and I don’t fucking WANT to, but I need you. I’m lost and out of control.”

“I’m here, baby.”

“My mother is broken. She’s downstairs right now, healing from the horrible things she did to her body, but her mind will never heal. I can’t… I can’t watch her go through that, but I can’t look away. I DID that to her, Kali. I wished it so hard for so long that it happened just like I wanted it to.”

“Gabe, that’s a child’s response. You know you can’t wish hardship. You know better.”

“I don’t know jack shit. I know that I didn’t deserve to lose my Mate and my pup and my Father. I know I didn’t deserve to be so weak inside that I need someone to hold my leash for me. Now I’m losing… Do you know? Out of everything that’s ever happened to me, there were two constants in my life. Each of them polar opposites of the other, but both sure like the Northern and Southern stars. My brother and my mother. Both so strong, so immovable. Neither of them could ever fail. In the end, scary as it is to be Omega, I can live with it because there is NOTHING on Earth below or the Universe above that could ever shake either of them from their foundations in the firmament. And that means I’m safe because one of them loves me. It should have been her, but I was luckier than that.

“It never mattered that Mother doesn’t love me, because Castiel does.”

“He’s not going to abandon you, Gabriel. He’s much stronger than she ever was. You still have two constants in your life. That is, if you’ll have me.” Kali had moved back incrementally in mirror of Gabriel’s shift, but she was still close enough that their breaths created a hot, humid space of intimacy between them. “I won’t Claim you. We don’t ever have to play like that. If you like, you can continue to scene with contractors when you need Balance or Release. Gabe, I will be whatever you need me to be. I don’t know why you wormed your way under my skin either, but when you sent me home last week, I thought it was the end of me. I need you, too, you little brat.” She chuckled on her last words, and he clutched her hands and chuckled back.

“What if I want you to?”

“To what?”

“If I want you to Claim me and take my Release? If I don’t want contractors anymore?”

“Then we’ll do that. I love you, Gabriel.”

“Marry me, Kali.”

“Bit sudden, don’t you think?”
He laughed. “I’m not going to quit my job, beta, and I’ll arm-wrestle you for whose name we use.”

“What IS your job, Gabe?”

“Oh. Um. We need to talk to Bobby about what I can tell you. It’s covert a lot of the time, and there are people we need to protect.”

She laughed and shoved at his chest, but his iron gaze didn’t soften.

“You’re serious.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Are you in danger?”

“Kali, there will never be a time that I’m not in danger. You have to know that, and you have to find a way to live with it. I’m not giving my work up. Not for you, not for Cas, not for anyone. I need it like I need oxygen – like I need you.”

She sat back on her heels, pensive.

“Is that a deal-breaker? I don’t ever want you hurt or scared. I don’t want you to go through what I did. God, Kali, please understand, this is why I never looked for anyone to stay with. I can’t do relationships. I can’t be sure I’ll come back home when I leave. But you broke everything about me. You and your deep brown eyes. I don’t have any defense against you.”

“Gabe.”

“I WON’T give it up. People need me. Someday, you’ll get tired of waiting on me to come home and wondering if I’m dead and floating in a lake somewhere, and you’ll beat it back to K.C. or all the way back to India just to be shot of me.”

“Or…” she said coolly. “I’ll deal. Just like the rest of your family does.”

“You’re going to try to make me…”

She interrupted with a loud belly laugh. “Gabriel, one thing I’ve learned about you is no one ever MAKES you do anything. Look, I can’t predict the future, but I know what I want right now. You’re good for me. I think I can be good for you, if you’ll let me. Promise me you won’t tell me who to be, and I’ll do the same for you.”

He hesitated, frowning severely.

“You don’t get to decide MY side of it, Gabe. You’re not in charge of me. Don’t act on what you THINK is best for me. Only I get to do that. And I’ll only go as far to care for you as you ask me to. Deal?”

He scratched his eyebrow. So many things bounced around inside his head, but none of them were excuse enough to send her away. He looked at his lap, thinking hard, but his head snapped up at her next question.

“Do you still want pups?”

“Kali, I’m… I can’t… I told you about that already. I broke my…”

“You can’t carry them, I know. But I can. We could still try if you want to. You don’t have to know
right now.”

Gabe huffed humorlessly. “Omegas don’t make good fathers.”

“Says who?”

Gabe stared at her for a while in silence. “We’ll fight all the damn time if we get married.”

“Probably.”

“Why would you want to live like that?”

“Damnit, Gabe, you just proposed to me. Are you taking it back?”

“No. I’m not.”

“Good. Shut the fuck up. Take the YES, and let’s have some old-fashioned angry sex. Get up. Quit moping.”

“I’m not moping.”

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Dean didn’t get ten more minutes. Michael burst through the door and collected him, hustling him bodily back to their room. Dean tried to stay cranky, but Michael in a snit was funny. Castiel didn’t lift a finger to stop either of them, the dick. Dean broke out of Michael’s grip once the door shut, and they rounded on each other. “What the fuck, man?” asked the alpha.

“How late were you up last night? You have work today, and we had a morning scene planned. Now you want to sleep through it?” countered Michael.

“No, babe. I’m up. I’m good. Yeah, late night. Probably need to hit the hay early tonight, but I’m good now. Shower with me?”

“You’re holding your shoulders funny. What hurts, Dean? Are you all right?” Michael turned Dean around and ran hands across his shoulders and back, checking for new marks and sore spots. Dean hissed as he worked the muscles high up on his shoulders, but he had no marks other than his usual healing bite marks. Cas’ newest ones were barely scabbed over.

“I’m fine, and the rest is none of your business.” Dean pulled away, but turned and took hold of Michael’s wrist, leading him into the bathroom.

“What were you doing in Naomi’s old room?” Michael grabbed two towels and left them by the shower entrance.

“Stinking it up,” said Dean with an evil smirk.

“Jesus, Dean! Gross!”

Dean merely laughed. They showered and prepared for breakfast. Michael dressed, but Dean merely laid his clothes out on the dresser. Michael nudged Dean to reopen his side of the Mating-bond. Dean kissed Michael hard enough to remind him there was enough to go around and no reason to be
jealous. Michael kissed back as a reminder that Dean need not go looking elsewhere for satisfaction, and they lost a few extra minutes making out on the bed.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this morning’s plan, Dean? I’m not putting you in any situation I’m not convinced you want.”

“Didn’t stop you from making a spectacle of me in the lunchroom or whacking my ass in the garage, or lessee, in kneeling me in front of a gazillion people at the Con. Why get all protective now?” Dean was laying on his side next to his mate.

“Did any of that involve sexual actions from a woman in the near vicinity?”

“She’s going to be at the other end of the table, Michael. I’m not even going to be looking at her. Fuck, we were both naked and plenty sexual when Alpha fucked all of us and whipped our asses at once. It’s not a big deal, and the bigger you try to make it a big deal, the weirder it’s going to feel.”

“I just want to be sure. You’ll tell me if you’re uncomfortable?”

Dean rolled his eyes and rolled backward off the bed.

Michael forestalled him, catching him around the waist and pulling him to a halt. “I know I’ve got a lot of our shit turned backwards, alpha. I need you to be patient with me. I’m learning. But I need YOU to promise me that you won’t let me push you into anything you don’t want to do.” Michael’s eyes held earnest concern, and Dean softened.

“I want this. I can’t promise I’ll wanna do everything on the wish-list you and April are putting together, but I do want to do THIS. I’ve been dying for a spot under the table for weeks. Babe, I’ve been thinking. I think one reason you’re struggling so hard against finding balance with me as an alpha is because we’re trying to force it. Your wolf’s not getting fed. That was stupid. Let’s feed us both. You and me. Both of us, at breakfast, and then we’ll see what we can manage for the rest of the day. You know I meant it when I said we needed to go all the way into the A/O dynamic. I AM your alpha, Michael, and we need to start figuring out what that means. You with me?” Dean rested his forehead against his mate’s.

“I feel like if I give an inch, I’m going to lose the whole mile,” Michael admitted.

“I would never let that happen. I’m too needy a Sub for that. I’m always gonna need to kneel for you sometimes.”

“You’ve got Castiel for that. What if you get all you need from him?”

Dean chuckled. “I just had one crazy night, Michael. If that didn’t kill my desire to kneel this morning, nothing will. Don’t you worry your pretty head about me getting filled up without you. That ain’t gonna happen.”

“You sure?”

“Are we doing this, or not?”

“Do we need any rule discussion beforehand?” Michael asked. His wolf was right at the boundary line, waiting to be allowed across.

“Hit me,” answered Dean.

Michael began rattling it off as if he’d practiced long into the night. “No speaking except in an
emergency. You are to kneel upon a pillow in silence, unclothed, and without taking any unnecessary actions of your own. I am the only person authorized to move the pillow, and you are the only person authorized to kneel on it. You will not feed yourself. I plan to ask you yes or no questions only so that you can answer by gesture. If I request sexual favors from you, you will perform what I’ve requested and nothing more. You will be attentive. You will NOT sleep. I expect good behavior from you, Dean. This is not a good place to unstopper your brat. I don’t want to see any sign of him at breakfast. Am I clear? Do you have any questions?”

“What should I do if I need something from you, but it isn’t an emergency?”

“You may tap my leg, but be advised, I will judge the necessity of the interruption, and if I deem it frivolous, you will be punished. Don’t ask for seconds. I choose your portions.”

“How do I safeword?”

“You may speak your safeword, Dean. I’m not going to gag you.”

“How do I safeword?”

“Do I need to know any hand-gestures?”

“No, not yet. Let’s just see how this goes first.” Michael answered as he stepped toward the door. Dean followed.

“Will I be expected to anticipate your needs?”

“Absolutely not. I don’t want you to do anything without my explicit instructions.” Michael’s hand was on the knob, but he didn’t open the door.

“Good,” answered Dean, relieved. He breathed deeply and released the breath with his eyes already down.

“Hey, alpha.” Michael raised Dean’s chin with a hand and met his eye. “We’ve not started yet. Tell me one more time.”

“I WANT this, Michael. Wanted it for a very long time. Please let me be good for you.”

Michael’s face was dead-serious, searching Dean’s eyes as he dug through Dean’s emotions more deeply than usual inside his head. “After breakfast, I’ll bring you back here to dress, and that will mark the end of the scene.”

“I understand,” said Dean.

“Be good for me, Submissive,” Michael whispered, leaning in for a kiss before Dean lowered his eyes.

“Yes, Sir.”

They arrived for breakfast before Castiel came down with April. Dean was a bit relieved to have the awkwardness of their first attempt at placement in private. Michael couldn’t find the pillow and wound up sending Dean for it even though he’d only just explained that Dean wasn’t allowed to move it. They both blushed, but Dean handed it over with enough deference that Michael vowed to keep that part as a ritual from now on. The Dom set the pillow on the floor beneath the table, centered before his chair. Michael pointed at the pillow sternly, but Dean didn’t even twitch. Dean was probably a ringer at “Simon Says.”

“Kneel for me, Dean,” Michael told him simply, and watched in muted awe as Dean folded himself
gracefully and found his mark with no scrabbling whatsoever. His movements streamed so fluidly Michael was tempted to bring him out just to watch him do it again. Michael’s eyelids fluttered in pleasure as the oxytocin hit. He hoped Dean was feeling the same, but he was so flushed with it, he couldn’t read his mate. Michael set about making breakfast as swiftly as he could. He found hot coffee already brewed (Thank you, Fred), but he had to do the rest of it himself. Michael poured himself a hot cup, and he tipped the mug carefully to allow Dean a sip every now and then. Cas and April arrived as he spread cream cheese on toasted bagels. Strawberries, melon, and grapes were already in a bowl on the table. Castiel brought out yogurt and served two large bowls.

“Orange juice or apple for Dean, Michael?” asked Castiel.

“Um, orange, I guess. I’m not sure he likes juice much.”

“You’ll find it easier to serve from your chair than coffee. It’s up to you but be aware he’s naked. Don’t spill hot coffee in his lap.”

“I won’t,” promised Michael, feeling like a newbie.

It was strangely awkward and quiet having Dean beneath the table as April had always been. Michael wondered for the first time if he wouldn’t rather have his mate on equal footing simply to have him for company. When he looked down between his knees though... Dean’s face was rapt. Michael might never understand what about this simple submission that so fed his mate, but he couldn’t deny that it did. Dean’s eyes were bright and attentive. Michael slipped a whole strawberry to him, holding the green leaves so that Dean could bite through it, and then wiping the red juice from his chin. Dean smiled and sent gratitude to him through their bonds. Both bonds. Dean was happy, and he felt serene in a way that most people don’t experience on a day-to-day basis. Michael smiled back and winked.

Breakfast moved slowly. Michael fed Dean more than half the food on his plate, discovering that handing over bite-sized chunks worked better than trying to let him bite off of the whole bagel. Conversation with Castiel jumpstarted and then petered off, only for both of them to try awkwardly again. Michael got the feeling Cas was laughing at him just a bit, but when he looked up, when he could tear his eyes away from Dean’s, Cas’ look was fond, not critical.

He reminded Cas they had a finalist for the cooking post coming in to prepare and serve them dinner in the evening. It didn’t take a genius to know that it was Dean who would make the final decision. If Dean approved of the cook and allowed use of his kitchen, they’d found a keeper. If not, the search would continue.

Coffee was a no-go. Once he sat down, the angles were all wrong. Dean would have to grab a travel mug on his way out. For now, he was going to get juice. Michael might already be knocked up, but Dean’s family jewels were precious enough to protect anyway. Michael realized as he cared for his Sub, that he’d never really paid much attention to how much Dean usually ate. He concentrated on feeding Dean first, and once a little more than half of his serving was gone, he addressed his Sub.

“Have you had enough, Dean?”

Dean swallowed his last bite and shook his head.

“Do you need more yogurt?” No. “Fruit?” No. “I can toast another bagel. Would you like that?” No. Michael pursed his lips. He knew where this was going. “Juice?” Emphatic no. “You’re not getting any more coffee until you are released to hold the cup yourself.” Emphatic no. “Dean, that wasn’t a question. Do you need a reminder of our rules?” Grudging no. “Very good, then can I assume you’ve had enough to eat?” Grudging yes. “Good boy. Take me out now and hold me in your
mouth. Do not suck. You may use your hands to work my pants open today.” Michael shifted his chair forward and felt Dean’s hands take hold of his belt.

It didn’t take long, but there was a brief pause and a skittering through Dean’s thoughts that was jarring enough for Michael to pick it up through their bonds. Soon the skittering stopped, and Michael felt warm moisture surround his cock. Dean rested his chin on the chair’s seat and moved in to be comfortable. He planned to hold this position for some time if his posture was anything to go by. Michael sighed, then opened his eyes and began to feed himself.

Castiel was watching him. Soon it became evident that Cas’ instruction to his mate, nonverbal though it was, involved a great deal more activity on her part than Dean was permitted. She moaned lasciviously as she sucked her mate off. Several times she hit her head on the bottom of the table, and she made no pretense that she wasn’t grinding down hard on her own fingers as well. Cas’ cheeks developed pink circles, and his eyes dilated rapidly, going red at the edges. His breathing deepened a little with his arousal, but he continued to eat at the same measured pace that was normal for him. Michael couldn’t help staring. The noises, the sight, all that he imagined he would see if he crouched to look beneath the table, and Michael was lost. His cock hardened, and his pupils enlarged. Cas gripped the edge of the table and moaned once, very loud, but then brought himself back under control. He wasn’t looking at Michael any more. He was staring straight through his own breakfast at his lap and breathing harder by the second.

Michael put a hand on the back of Dean’s head. “Get me off, Submissive. Make me come down your throat.” April’s whines began to get louder. She cried out.

“All four fingers, Kitten,” Cas reminded her. “I can feel it when you cheat. Get all of them in. Deeper. You come before I do, or you don’t get to come at all.” Castiel had abandoned his breakfast. His upper body jolted with his Sub’s enthusiastic work. “Oh, Light and Heaven, Fuck!” cried Alpha. He snarled and ground down, both hands disappearing beneath the table as he came hard. “Oh, God!”

Cas went still and pulled his chair backward, looking down. Michael heard the little Ozzie’s cry of dismay. She sounded close, but she dared not fulfill herself now. She didn’t even beg. Michael admired her fortitude. Dean’s lips, tongue, and jaw worked on beneath the table, and Michael sent him everything he was feeling. He soothed the rough side of Dean’s psyche that might be a reaction to April. Dean seemed fine, and his tongue was magic. Castiel reached below him and pulled his Ozzie up gently, placing her face-down over his lap.

“How many?” he asked her.

“I don’t know, Sir. You never told me a number.”

“What was your instruction?”

“Suck you off while I work four fingers in my channel and touch myself. Get myself off and then make you come as soon after as I can.”

“And what were the consequences for failure?”

“I don’t get an orgasm, and you spank me.”

“Correct. I believe you know me well enough by now, Kitten. Tell me how many.”

“Fif…fifty, Sir.”

“Jesus,” whispered Michael. Dean didn’t slow as the strikes rained down. Cas had moved his chair
out to the side enough that Michael had a good view. April’s ass turned a brilliant shade of red as fifty of Castiel’s finest landed hard and fast on her firm round cheeks. She whimpered, but she didn’t cry. Michael came with a grip in Dean’s hair to the sound of April’s Release as it shocked across the kitchen.

Dean went back to holding Michael’s flaccid cock still in his mouth. April went back to her pillow. Gabriel left the doorway where he and Kali had paused at the height of the intensity and handed his new fiancée into a chair next to Michael where Jess normally sat.

“Morning folks. Is there anything left to eat?”

It’s all in the kitchen, Gabe” said Michael with a shaky voice. “Serve yourself. We had fruit and bagels. Good morning, Kali. Did you sleep well?”

Kali snorted at him, but admitted she’d slept like a baby. She got up to pour coffee and help Gabe with breakfast.

“How’s Mom?” asked Gabe once he had a plate full.

“She’s better this morning,” Cas reported. “I checked on her once during the night. I think she’ll be up to eating a regular meal today. Are you planning to be close?”

“Yeah, we’ll be around. I need to get out today and go, um, ring-shopping at some point.” Gabe reached past Michael to hand the tub of cream cheese to Kali who declined.

Cas set his spoon down. “Excuse me?”

Gabe looked sheepish, but he smiled shyly. “Got an announcement, Alpha.”

“An announcement,” repeated Cas.

“We’re engaged.”

“Gabe you have to get my approval before you…”

Gabriel interrupted, “Alpha, do I have your approval to get married?”

Castiel’s jaw stopped working correctly. There was a thump against the underside of the table in front of Michael. Kali looked nonplussed. She tore a small bit of bagel off and popped it into her mouth. She raised one eyebrow.

Alpha addressed her instead of his brother. “You would belong to me,” he told her, not mincing words.

“Omegas usually leave their birth-packs and join the family of their…spouse,” she countered.

“Gabriel is a special case. He’s not going anywhere. If you want him, you join us. That’s final.”

“And if I refuse to speak the vows to you?”

“Then there is no marriage.”

“HEY!” protested Gabriel jumping to his feet. “You can’t do that!”

“Sit down, Omega” ordered Cas as another thump sounded from below the table. It was not a good day to decide to pull the alpha from the conversation. Cas thought about tabling the discussion until
Dean could join him, but Gabe… Gabe was HIS brother. Dean really had nothing to do with it.
Castiel cleared his throat. “Michael, would you be so kind as to ask your Sub if he has any problem
with my taking this situation in hand without input from him?”

“Uh, sure, Alpha.” Michael pushed his chair back and looked down. Dean’s eyes were wide, his
breathing harder than normal. “Dean? Is it all right with you if Castiel tackles this one on his own?”
Dean’s wide eyes narrowed a little in thought. He shrugged, and then he nodded. Michael passed the
answer to the Alpha.

“Very good. Gabriel, SIT DOWN!” Cas told him, and Gabe sat. “You are forbidden to leave this
Pack. You belong to me, and for reasons we both understand, you always will. Kali, if the price to
marry my brother is that you relinquish your independence and join this pack for life, binding any
progeny you have to the pack as well, do you still wish to marry Gabriel?”

Kali regarded him coldly. “Where would I rank?” she asked.

“That would depend upon your Keller score. I understand you haven’t yet been tested. That would
need to be remedied. You can expect to be ranked between Sam and Jess if my guess is correct, and
it usually is. That puts you fourth overall.”

She looked from Cas to Gabe to Michael and back. “You would take in a virtual unknown, a
foreigner, a stranger, and rank her above your own brother? You don’t know anything about me.”

“Nor you us.”

Gabe sat still with his hands in his lap and strange twitches crossing his face. He couldn’t look at
anyone.

Kali kept her eyes locked on Castiel’s. “Will I regret saying yes to you?” she asked shrewdly.
Multiple concerns were wrapped up in that question, but Cas knew what she wanted to know.

“Do you love my brother,” he countered.

“Yes, I do,” came her simple answer, and then she added, “He’s my True-Mate.”

Gabe’s eyes shot up to hers, and he gasped.

“How he told you everything?”

“He’s told me enough.”

Castiel looked at his brother. “Gabriel? Does she know what she needs to know?”

Gabe’s eyes clouded with pain, and he nearly lowered them again. “I told her all of it, Cas; all of it
that I can before I talk to Bobby.”

Cas looked back at Kali with new respect. He conceded that any woman who’d heard the whole
gamut and was still there in the morning deserved to be taken seriously. “You know that my Claim
over my brother will never be allowed to dissipate. You know that he suffers from occasional lapses
in emotional health that require intervention. My brother is not for the faint of heart, Kali. I would be
far more comfortable if the two of you dated for a good while before making a decision like this.”

Gabe ruffled. “Your comfort level isn’t part of the equation, Alpha.”

“Gabriel, you and I put you back together after the accident. You and I rebuilt you after your
miscarriage. I’ve seen you when you fall apart, and I know how dark you can get. Don’t presume to
tell me that it’s not my place to protect you.”

“I’ll swear to you, Alpha,” stated Kali into the uncomfortable silence. “I’ll swear to you and join
your pack. I lost Gabe once. I’m not going to let it happen again. You want us to wait? Fine. You
name the date. Make us wait twenty years if you want. I don’t need the paper anyway. I’m already
his, and he’s mine. The rest is just words.”

Gabe put a hand over his mouth. Michael hauled Dean up by an arm and pushed him naked into his
usual chair on the end. Cas rolled his eyes, and then did the same for April, pulling her up to sit
across his lap.

“And the test? Will you take the test?” prompted Michael. Dean kicked him. “What?” he asked his
mate in offense. “You made me do it.”

“I’ll do the stupid test.” Kali wasn’t looking at Michael. She was looking at Gabe.

“You would do all that for me?” he asked.

“In a heartbeat,” she said quietly.

Chapter End Notes

Y’all, it got way darker on me than I expected, but nothing I did would lighten it up.

BUT

Gabe's engaged. I know some of you are hating on me right now for putting him
through all that, but it all worked out in the end, right? Right? And don't worry, Cas
won't make them wait twenty years.

My usual week off work won't be happening this month. Lucky me got roped into a
week of training instead of resting and writing at home. yippee. I expect to be able to get
one more chapter done before March, but that might be all I manage.

Peace, bitches.
Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

What Bela is up to, the Alphas get a slap on the wrist, and Dean meets and embarrasses the hell out of the new cook.

Chapter Notes

This chapter's THEN section is all Melodina's fault. Once the suggestion was made, I couldn't focus on anything else.

Little disclaimer and a recommendation: (And there's an irony here) That scene hasn't ever been written down before, but the structure of it has been there for a long time. Right now, the astonishing Hit_the_books is in the middle of writing a magnificent fic called, "Back to School" that puts out a similar vibe to this THEN scene. Go read it. It's amazing. The timing felt weird to me considering we're both posting at once. My contribution came second, just so you know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 75 – Friday, July 21, 2017

THEN:

Dean looked up from his note taking as the door to his Calculus class opened following a brief
knock. Professor Balfort stopped speaking with a huff of annoyance and regarded the young man coolly but didn’t say anything.

“Um, ma’am, I have a note I need to deliver. Uh, do you have a ‘Dean Winchester’ in your class?”

“I don’t allow interruptions while I’m teaching, young man,” she snapped. “You may deliver your note once my class is over.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be outside. I’m sure Professor Novak won’t mind waiting for a response.”

Dude, thought Dean, perking up and blushing at the mention of his name. Everyone was looking at him. His heartrate kicked up, and he sank lower in his chair. This was bad. It was very bad.

Balfort’s head popped up when she heard Novak’s name drop. Her face changed in an instant. “Did you say Novak?” She glanced out at the class and looked right at Dean. A quick flick of her head sent him stumbling reluctantly out into the hallway to answer the request, whatever it was. Dean was fairly certain he already knew, and his gut squirmed. This was bad.

Dean closed the door behind him and took the envelope with a shaky hand. “He wants a response,” the aide told him. Dean opened the note and read.

“Mr. Winchester, your presence is required in my office this afternoon. There is a critical issue that needs our attention at once. Please do not neglect any of your prior commitments but make yourself available as soon as possible. I will be in my office for the remainder of the day and am capable of staying into the evening if necessary. Kindly allow me to know when to expect you by sending a return response.

I await your reply,
Dr. C. Novak”

“Shit,” mumbled Dean. He looked up from the page and met the bored aide’s eye. “I, uh, I guess tell him…”

“Just write it down, man. I don’t care. Don’t make me memorize it. I ain’t your pigeon.”

“Right. Sorry.” Dean scratched a response below the note. He was free all afternoon, which was a good thing. Now that he was busted, trying to focus on Calculus was going to be hard enough. It would be impossible to get through other classes without biting a hole in his cheek.

Dean returned to his seat with an apologetic nod to his professor, but she barely glanced at him. He tried to pick up where he’d left off. He glanced to his right and left to mark the page in the text they were on and pick out the steps he’d missed. Somehow, all that his mind would feed him was a string of words on repeat: “Expelled. Cheat. Plagiarized. Expelled. Failed. Failure. Expelled. Busted.” The rest of the class was a total loss. Dean kept his head down and waited the interminable fifteen remaining minutes. He scooped his bag off the floor when the class finally dismissed, and he fled, tucking book, pencil, and notes in anywhere he could fit them in his desperation to get to fresh air before he lost his lunch.

This was bad.

Dean knocked quietly right on top of the lettering, “Dr. C. Novak, Sociology Dept.” He worried his lower lip with his teeth until it was swollen, red, and sore.

“Come,” the gruff voice called, and Dean couldn’t not respond. This was it. He hadn’t even made it through his freshman year. He was about to be out on his ass. The university’s zero-tolerance policy
for cheating was well known. There was no getting out of this. He already knew. Even before he closed the door behind him, Dean was listing mechanic shops in his head. He could get a job. He wasn’t going to lose everything. He could still make things work. He could still support his dad, support Sam. College had always been a long shot anyway. He just needed to keep his wits about him.

***************

“Close the door, please, Mr. Winchester,” Castiel said tonelessly. Cas was both dreading the coming conversation and desperately anxious to learn what the boy had to say. None of it made any sense. Scared green eyes met his cold blue ones, and Castiel knew in an instant that his assumption was correct. Dean Winchester had not authored the paper he submitted. But why? He was plenty bright enough to fulfill the assignment on his own, and after more than half a semester, had never done anything like this. The danger, for the young teacher, was going to be in keeping his fascination with the complex mind behind those green eyes separate from what needed to happen now.

“Have a seat,” he gestured. Dean sat on the wide couch beneath the hallway window. Castiel walked to the front of his desk, leaned against it with his ankles crossed, and tossed Dean’s mid-term paper on the coffee table between them. It was marked with an ugly, stark zero at the top. “We need to discuss this. I need an explanation, and you deserve a chance to be heard.”

Dean’s eyes locked onto the zero, and his face lost all color. He abandoned his lower lip, biting hard into the upper one instead. He couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Do you understand why you failed the assignment?” Castiel asked him, praying he wouldn’t deny it, praying he wouldn’t have to pry every detail out of the 16-year-old freshman like pulling teeth.

“Yes, Professor,” Dean answered softly.

“And?” prompted the teacher.

“I, uh, sir, I bought the paper. I didn’t write it. I cheated.” Dean’s admission rushed out like it had been pushing against the jam in his throat since he first thought of the idea. “Am I going to be expelled?” He risked a quick look up at his professor’s blank face before ducking his head back down. Castiel’s wolf stood and locked onto the target, but Cas signaled him back down. He hoped like hell his face was still blank. Those green eyes. Jesus fuck.

The boy was obviously Deep alpha. Cas could read the power beneath his skin. He was strong enough that coming into his full power as he matured would be something Cas would kill to witness. This pup would BE something someday. For now, he was gangly and awkward, unsure of how to wield all that power, how to contain it, where it fit. He was beautiful, and he was so young.

Castiel had never felt anything like it before in his life. From the first moment he saw Dean Winchester leaning against the side of the brick building in the sunshine, bracketed by a lovely young woman’s braced arms and flirting his ass off, Cas had marked him. There was something special behind those long dark lashes that batted seductively, but never seemed to promise anything. Cas had watched the girl lean in to claim a kiss, and he smiled discreetly when the boy dodged with a laugh. The girl was barking up the wrong tree with this one, but the boy was right there with her, playing a game of his own, in control of the rules, and pulling her along behind him with a crook of his finger and a wink of his eye.
Finding that same boy near the front row of Castiel’s “Intro to Psych” class sent a satisfied smugness sparkling through his wolf’s possessive side. The beast wanted this boy front and center where he could see and watch over him. Castiel kept it all muted though. He wasn’t about to make a move on a student, especially not a freshman. Jesus, he wasn’t that desperate, despite Marina’s pokes at his bad run of luck lately. She could really just fuck off with all that shit. Just because she had the perfect life and the perfect mate and…yeah. He still had a ways to go before he hit desperate enough to raid his own class roster for likely partners.

That didn’t stop him from paying close attention during that first roll call to who responded to which name. It didn’t stop the name, “Dean Winchester” from lodging in his long term memory faster than any student’s ever had before.

Cas already knew the kid wasn’t straight, but clearing the orientation roadblock didn’t provide a straight shot for selecting a suitable scene partner, and Dean’s age and position in his class brought every other impulse to a screeching halt. Although he was pretty – that was undeniable – Cas’ tastes had always been particular, and “inexperienced pup” wasn’t really on his preference list. But he was also a brat, and Cas’ wolf just wouldn’t stop responding to it.

“You know the rules, Mr. Winchester,” present-day Professor Novak reminded his student sternly. “There is no excuse for cheating. From whom did you buy this paper?”

“I can’t tell you that, sir. I’m sorry.”

Cas took a deep breath. He’d known he wouldn’t get that answer, but he didn’t need it. Dean Winchester obviously didn’t know that the paper he’d purchased was already in Castiel’s database, having been submitted three semesters ago for a similar assignment in a different class. The boy needed to compare notes with his seller better if he wanted to get away with something like this. Cas knew who wrote it, when they wrote it, and what grade it had received on the first run-through. It wasn’t a bad paper, but it wasn’t Dean’s.

“Mr. Winchester, you leave me in an uncomfortable position,” Castiel said into the dragging silence. “Your performance in my class up to now has been exemplary. Your grades have never dropped below an ‘A’ – not once. Your papers are well-researched, well-thought-out, and extremely well-written. Truth be told, it was the mediocrity of this paper that raised the first red flags. By now, I know your writing style and your leanings. I must say, your attempt to pass this fluff off as your own work insults me. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Dean couldn’t look at him. Novak knew his style on sight? What the fuck?

“Sir, I did the research. I know the subject. I have all the notes done. I’ve got it all outlined back at home. But I never do the final writing of a paper until just before it’s due. That’s what usually works best for me. I dick around with the outline until just before, so I can write it in one fast session. It isn’t that I skipped out. It was that an emergency came up the night before it was due. I couldn’t get home, and I panicked. I called an old friend for ideas, while I was stuck at the…uh…away from home, and he told me about this guy who gathers old term papers and sells them. I’ve never done it before, but I couldn’t afford to fail the mid-term.”

“And how does that plan look to you now?” Castiel asked him.

Dean blushed again. “It looks stupid, sir. I’m a moron. God, I’m sorry. I fucked up so bad. Please don’t kick me out.”
Cas latched on to something Dean said. “You’ve done all the research and you had the paper outlined?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Castiel ignored the thrill that passed through him at the pup’s tone. Deep alpha he might be, but this pup was a Submissive or Castiel needed to have all of his senses recalibrated. He could hear Dean shift from a lower-case to the upper-case ‘S’ in his ‘Sir’. Shit.

“Mr. Winchester, the faculty are granted a small bit of authority to exercise our own judgment in cases like this.” It was a lie. The policy was zero tolerance. There was no leeway whatsoever. Castiel should be thanking him for his honesty and escorting him out the door with his regrets. “You have been a model student, and that allows me to offer you one chance to clear your name.”

“Sir?” Dean’s head snapped up.

“If it’s true that you’ve already put in the work, then I have an idea.” Castiel’s face offered no softness. “Do you have time right this moment to sit in my office and write the paper in full?”

Dean’s eyes widened comically. “Right now?”

“Right now. You would not be allowed access to anything but a pen and paper. You will not be granted a break until you are finished. You would be required to suffer my presence the entire time. If you need to empty your bladder, you do it now, leaving all of your possessions here, and I will escort you to and from the restroom. You forfeit 20 points from your grade right off the top. Whatever you submit to me stands as your response to the assignment. I will not expect you to remember your sources, so no citations will be expected right now, but you will submit them to me tomorrow morning.”

They stared at each other. Dean blinked in consternation, thinking fast. Cas tried desperately not to look for signs that the boy had read the tingling tension between them as anything but what it seemed on the surface, his only chance to save his ass. Dean’s eyes were anything but blank, but they held no hint of the awareness Castiel couldn’t stop searching for. Dean was either not interested, or he wasn’t aware.

“How long do I have, Sir?”

“You may stay as long as you need to. As long as you don’t leave, and you continue to make progress, I will stay and allow you to keep working.”

“I don’t have my notes.” Dean seemed to be talking to himself more than to Castiel. “I don’t remember the statistics. I need those to make my points.”

“You’ll have to make do without them. This is a take-it-or-leave-it offer. If you accept, and you fulfill my requirement, then even if you don’t pass the course, I will allow you this one time mistake without submitting your name to the Board of Discipline. If you leave without trying, you can expect to be expelled. Does the offer seem fair to you, Mr. Winchester?”

“Yes, Sir,” Dean snapped with military alacrity. “More than fair. I’m so…thank you so much. God, I’m so stupid. I’m really sorry…”

Castiel interrupted him to cut off the painful blather. “I have paper for you. Use your own pen. Do you need to make any arrangements or use the restroom before you begin?”

In short order Dean flicked a text to Sam that he needed to find his own ride home after practice, then
he surrendered everything in his pockets and his bag to the professor’s custody. Dr. Novak let him get a cup of water on their way back from the bathroom. Dean’s nerves sent him reeling for far too long as he tried to sketch out a rough outline on the first page in the stack he was given. His heart hammered. He wasn’t expelled, but he still needed to pass. His plan to graduate in three years depended on advancing each step as it came. He already had his summer classes picked out, and there was no room for any repeats.

Castiel watched him sweat over steepled fingers. He sat behind his desk and scented the air. It smelled of Terrified Submissive. Cas found it impossible not to stare as the young man worked hurriedly, evidently afraid of losing his train of thought before he got it sketched into his outline. His anxiety washed over everything. Cas’ office would reek for weeks unless he found a willing partner who would let him plant a new scent over this one.

Every attempt to get work done fell flat. He couldn’t grade papers or tests. He couldn’t concentrate on his own PhD work, the day’s planned work left half-finished after switching to grading mid-terms. Every time the pup ran shaky fingers through his hair, Castiel looked up at him.

He’d begun to repeat his mantra in his head, and then he’d started copying it out over and over again on a blank sheet of paper. From where Dean sat, it would look as if Cas was working on something vital, not scribbling, “rama, rama, rama, rama,” again and again. “Rama.” Light and joy on repeat through his head. Meant to calm his scurrying mind and bring him back to center. Usually it worked. Often, a runaway mind needed little more than a quick tug at the leash to come back to meditative stillness, but not today. Not with this boy anxiously scribbling on his couch.

It didn’t help that Castiel’s PhD thesis was going to be all about the necessity of ignoring classical lines of authority in seeking a scene partner. His research was beginning to paint a clear picture that hierarchical institutional relationships could not be allowed to stand in the way of individual need. If a boss and her underling were the only good match in a hundred miles, then there needed to be a pathway to allow them contact. The ramifications of settling for ‘not good enough’ were too great. It was all beginning to come together. Teachers and students weren’t immune to it either, but they were years away from legislation that would make it acceptable for Cas to proposition a freshman pup he’d just terrified within an inch of his life.

God, he wanted to though. Dean was young and ripe. Every mannerism screaming Sub and alpha at the same time, Dean needed a lap beneath his hips and a hard hand reddening his ass. Cas had already imagined that ass many times, sometimes while right in the middle of a hard session with his usual partners. He was more than a little ashamed that his mind stopped obeying him in those moments. He’d thought himself past that level of immaturity. He needed to be better.

The simple truth was that Castiel Novak wanted Dean Winchester desperately, and Dean didn’t even realize that the teacher existed as anything but a stone to be crossed on his way to meet his goal. Dean didn’t know he was alive.

“Rama, rama, rama, rama,” Cas’ pen scratched divots into the page. He glanced at the clock.

“Can I ask you something, Professor?” Dean asked without looking up or ceasing the motion of his pen.

“Oh course,” he answered in his teacher voice.

“Not that I wanna go there, but isn’t this a corporal punishment kinda school? What I did…does that usually come with…you know?”

Cas licked his lips. Holy fuck he wanted to add a good hard spanking to the process before he let it
“You’re partially correct, alpha,” he said instead, highlighting the boy’s designation. “If you were Omega or beta, that might be on the table. But you are alpha. Corporal punishment isn’t effective for adult alphas. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. Just kinda wanted to know how it works.” Dean paused and glanced up. “I got my butt busted in high school even after I Presented.”

Cas chuckled. (I’ll bet you did), he thought from within his wolf.

“We’ll be covering a unit on Lupin development later in the semester, Mr. Winchester. As pups, even after Presentation, young wolves all respond as Submissives. After puberty and full maturation, alphas lose that capacity. So, even though this is a Lupin institution, and corporal punishment is part of our discipline structure, as an alpha, you wouldn’t be expected to receive that kind of consequence.”

Dean nodded, referenced the outline he’d set to the side, then began to write again. “Not that I want that, but I just wondered. I’ve had classes where some poor kid got hauled up and wailed on. I think I’d rather take a strap than get expelled. I mean, if it was a choice.”

“It’s not, Mr. Winchester. That’s not an option. Please continue your work.”

“Yessir.”

At last, with a deep breath, Dean set his pen down and sat up. He rifled through his papers, assuring himself he’d covered everything he could remember and that they were all in the right order. 20 points off the top only left him a 10-point margin to pass the test. Of course, his high average would buffer him against all-out failure somewhat, but that didn’t mean he could really afford a failing grade on his mid-term. It was his own stupid fault though. He never should have listened to Balthazar in the first place. He looked up sheepishly, stood slowly, and handed the stack to his teacher with a nervous hand.

“Please remain while I read and grade your work,” Professor Novak told him. Dean sank back onto the couch in defeat. His heart was hammering once again.

Castiel went quiet as he read. He frowned in concentration, re-reading passages, and rechecking a table of statistics the alpha had sketched out, using the edge of a page as a straight-edge. The numbers weren’t right, but the ratios were, and that meant that his conclusions were still logical. Cas pointed that out to him before leaning back down to lose himself in the fascinating mind again. Dean’s way of seeing things, of drawing conclusions, of explaining where those conclusions fit in the big picture – it didn’t fit with the thought patterns of a freshman. Dean had a lot to learn, but he wasn’t the thoughtless robot that most students at this stage were. His mind was quick and innovative. He regularly took two or more seemingly unrelated concepts and tied them together in a way that seemed obvious only after-the-fact. He pulled a reader into his way of thinking without ever seeming to be expressing a bias about the subject at all. Castiel was entranced.

At last he set the paper down.

“Mr. Winchester, I am impressed by your research and your memory. I can only mourn the fact that we’ll never know what you would have submitted to me if you’d done the assignment correctly. To be fair to the other students who would all have been docked for incorrect statistics, I am subtracting five points, but aside from that, you get full marks. Congratulations. You passed.”
“Thank you, Professor,” Dean said quietly.

Castiel hoped he had a pathway in his personal life to release the guilt that obviously still weighed him down. His eyes looked tortured now that the trial had passed.

“Dean, may I ask you a personal question?”

“Yes, Sir.”

The air held the tension of conflicting pheromones. Castiel ignored the discomfort of an unbalanced Sub. Dean wasn’t HIS Sub.

“What kept you out so late that night that you didn’t have time to write the paper? You don’t have to tell me.”

The boy looked down and frowned at his lap. “It’s not a big secret. I don’t want anyone’s…you know…pity. I don’t want you to think I need some kind of special… You know what, forget it. It’s not your problem.”

Cas frowned back at him, willing the pup to look back up, but he didn’t. “Dean, you know there are resources at this school that can provide you with assistance if you need help with personal matters.”

“Won’t help with this,” he muttered miserably.

Castiel was on the verge of giving up and dismissing Dean when all the tension melted out of the student, and he looked up with desolation in his eyes. “My dad, Sir. He drinks a lot. Usually, I get him home just fine, but he passed out on me that night, and he was worse than usual. It wasn’t like normal. He wasn’t just out. I thought he might be in real trouble, like alcohol poisoning or something. I was up at the E.R. until six in the morning. I couldn’t leave him. It’s not your problem, Professor. I know I shouldn’t have bought that paper and tried to pass it off as my own. I’m really grateful you gave me a second chance. It won’t happen again. Dr. Singer said he would have died if I hadn’t brought him in. I’m so sorry, but it scared the shit outta me, and I panicked.”

“Shh, shh, alpha, it’s all right. I don’t hold grudges. It’s forgotten. It’s over. Don’t do it again, but other than that, you can let it go now.” Castiel watched the pup think it over, his eyes distrustful. Cas knew that if he really was a Sub, letting it go wouldn’t be easy, but shit, the boy was already carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He didn’t need this too.

“Did you mean Bobby Singer?” Cas asked him, not sure why he wasn’t simply sending Dean on his way. It was getting late. Writing the paper hadn’t been a quick process.

“Bobby Singer,” Dean confirmed. “Yes, Sir. He’s a good friend of my dad’s. He looks after my brother and me sometimes. Kinda been a shadow around our house since my mom died.”

Castiel nodded and smiled to himself. Dean was obviously another of Bobby’s strays. Did that make Dean a brother of sorts? Perish the thought.

Dean shot him an affronted look, and Cas realized it looked like he was laughing at Dean’s misfortune. He explained simply.

“Dr. Singer did the same for me when I was your age following the death of my father. I was 12 when he died. Bobby helped my older brother and me a great deal. I owe him more than I can ever repay. He served as my faculty advisor through my residency, and he’s my advisor while I work toward my PhD as well. I wouldn’t be who I am without him. Just so you understand, alpha. I get what you’re saying. I’m glad you told me, and don’t worry, you won’t be getting any special
treatment after today.”

Dean cocked his head. “You don’t have a PhD already? You’re not a professor? The sign on your door says Doctor.”

Cas laughed. God, the boy was adorable. “No, I never claimed to be a professor, but I gave up correcting students and trying to explain. I hold a medical doctorate. I’m a licensed physician, and I’m currently working toward a PhD in Lupin Development from a social perspective. I am a graduate student here, teaching classes to meet the requirements of my grant.”

“Oh. Could’ve fooled me. You seem like a full-on professor from where I sit.” Dean blushed to the tips of his ears.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. I know you need to get home. I do as well. You’re dismissed, Mr. Winchester. I’ll see you in class. Don’t forget to bring in your citations. I look forward to your next paper.”

“Thank you, Profes…um, Sir.”

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Bobby could tell something was eating his favorite PhD candidate at their check in meeting that evening at Zeke’s bar. Castiel was quieter than usual, and he didn’t want to shoot the breeze. Bobby pressed him.

Cas sighed in defeat. “I’m fucked, Bobby.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Apparently, yes. I have a student in my class who knows you.”

“That so?” asked Bobby, leaning back and throwing an arm up along the bench seat of the booth. His eyes sparkled mischievously.

Cas caught on at once. “Did you set me up? Is this your doing?”

“I don’t light the fire, Alpha,” Bobby defended. “I just put the match and the kindling in the same room.”

“Do you ever do anything that isn’t part of some scheme or other?” Castiel challenged in frustration.

“Rarely,” Bobby admitted. “So, why are you fucked?”

“He’s a freshman,” Cas admitted. “He’s going to be a student for three more years. Plus, he doesn’t even see me. He looks right through me like I’m not there, and I can’t stop thinking about him.”

Bobby didn’t laugh at his plight. “He’s planning to finish in three. He’s a kid, Castiel. Give him a little while to figure himself out. He’ll see you one of these days. You know, the course he’s on parallels yours. He’ll be your student the whole way through. All it’s gonna take is the right moment, and he’ll get swept under whether he wants to or not.”

Cas scoffed. “I’m not even sure he knows he’s gay. I see him all over the place, Bobby. Like fate’s
teasing the shit out of me. He’s always with a girl. Always. Usually a different girl. Is he…? Is it his father?”

“Nah. John’s kind of a prick about a lot of stuff, but he doesn’t care about that.” Bobby took a long drink and his face grew troubled. “Dean’s no virgin, Cas, and he knows what he likes. He doesn’t flaunt his hookups, but he’s not hiding them either. He’s not into college boys though. You won’t ever see him holding hands with a fella out on the green. The girl-thing. That’s something else.”

Castiel watched Bobby’s eyes. Hearing him say Dean’s name without prompting locked it for Castiel. Bobby was manipulating them both, but Cas was too intrigued to protest for the moment. “He’s a Sub.”

Bobby smirked. “Yeah, he is. But don’t confront him with it yet. He’s still a pup in a lot of ways. Some of it’s probably residual. There’s no telling where he’ll land in the end.”

“Does he at least have someone to look after him?” Cas asked pointedly. He knew Bobby would catch that he wasn’t talking about making soup when Dean had a cold.

“He’s got a younger brother. It’s a strange relationship. I get hints sometimes that Sam might’ve taken a swing at Dean’s backside more than once, but I think that stopped a couple years ago, right around when they lost their mom. Even if what they were doing was just pups experimenting like pups do, it always seemed to help Dean find his feet. John never liked it. Tried to put a stop to it, but… wolves’ll do what they’re gonna do.”

“So, the girls? He’s looking for a Domme?”

“I don’t really know, Castiel. If you pressed me about it, I’d say he’s ashamed of what his wolf wants. He’d love to get it from his sex partners, but he can’t let himself go that far. It’s too risky, and he’s not ready to fess up to it yet. He takes little sips from dominant women out of safety. He’s not in danger of letting go of his control completely because there’s no sex involved. I’d be willing to bet he’s not even letting them strike him. He just winds them up until they call him down and give him a taste of the tone he’s craving. It ain’t what the pup needs, but it’s all he’s willing to allow for now. Give him some time.”

“Bobby, if he’s that far in the closet, I’m the last thing he needs. I would be a disaster for him. Better I just forget all about him. Stick to being his teacher. He’s got a brilliant mind.”

“He thinks a lot like you do,” Bobby agreed.

“He’s sixteen,” Cas responded.

“He won’t be sixteen forever.”

Cas explained what had happened with Dean’s mid-term paper and how he’d responded. Bobby raised his brows at Castiel’s admission that he’d blatantly broken policy for Dean. He let Bobby read Dean’s spontaneous submission. Bobby whistled as he finished it.

“He wrote this off-the-cuff?”

“No notes, no resources, nothing but a pen and his memory – purely extemporaneous.”

“It ain’t Nietzsche, but for a freshman… His numbers are wrong,” Bobby pointed out.

“That’s hardly the point. He connected Pelios with Jung in a way I’ve only ever seen grad students do. It’s either his original thought, or he’s been reading way above his level. Either way, it’s pretty
fucking impressive. And he did it under a hell of a lot of pressure, improvised on the spot. You should read the papers he has time to get right.”

Bobby had an odd look on his face. “Alpha, I put that boy in your path to feed your wolf. He’s supposed to be your supper. If you’re heading where I think you’re heading, you really are fucked.”

Cas looked up from the papers he was still holding. “That’s what I said.”

NOW:

Bela watched him pace down the length of the room, all energy and nerves, ready to pounce on any unsuspecting waif stupid enough to poke its head up. Bela wasn’t stupid, so she watched him without comment. They’d been here for some time already, and Crowley’s tension wasn’t improving. Bela couldn’t help comparing his style with Victor’s. Where Victor was warm smooth honey, Crowley was a spikey cactus. Only Bela’s eyes moved as she tracked his pacing.

Nevada had been a bust. Nobody gave two shits if the Winchester Pack wanted foundling pups. Poking at the Primate research student was dragging out into its third week of unreturned calls. Bela suspected Castiel was aware and had intervened, but she didn’t volunteer that information. She’d already said her piece. Barring Novak from taking control of both companies was a matter of function and competence, both of which could be called into question easily enough merely by reviewing the records from the ACRI facility in Dallas. Crowley shut her up fast. He didn’t want Novak squeezed out of the top post for now, he wanted him obliterated so that he couldn’t just bide his time and come back for it later. He wanted Castiel Novak destroyed. Bela couldn’t get a read on his motivations, and that made him an unknown variable, something dangerous in her world.

Crowley insisted that Novak had ties to the bombing in Oklahoma. The idea was laughable to Bela. Fergus could dig for evidence for the rest of his days and would never find anything. Castiel Novak was a fucking Boy Scout. Now, Bobby Singer, on the other hand. Bela knew him. He played in that sandbox, but he’d be doing it on the sly, not under the Alpha’s nose. Besides, Bobby was too good at covering his tracks. Bela knew some things that she was certain Castiel didn’t, but she suspected heavily that they were things Bobby wanted her to know for whatever reason. It was nothing that would help Crowley.

The problem at hand was that Bela had promised him she could deliver Castiel on a steaming plate with an apple in his mouth, and her success under Crowley’s umbrella depended on her coming through with the goods. She had everything he needed, but he refused to listen. Bela fumed quietly. Destroying people didn’t always have to mean flames and freefall. Sometimes it took patience. Not that it mattered. Novak was a big boy. He would take care of himself. There were more pieces moving than any one wolf knew about.

The meeting was winding to a close, and Crowley had nothing. The “Loan” check was already cut. The merger was practically a done deal at this point. All that remained to finish was two signatures at the bottom of the page and a name scribbled in at the top. Bela knew it wouldn’t be hers. She wasn’t naïve enough to think they could float her past the three Boards necessary. It wasn’t Crowley either. He laughed at the idea. But who?

Suit Number Four had been thinking the same thing, apparently. Bela didn’t bother learning all their names. He spoke up into the lingering silence, pulling every eye and earning Crowley’s harsh glare.
“Maybe we’re going at this backward,” he suggested. “If we’re sure we don’t want Novak, we should simply nominate someone else, and then put out a hard sell. Make him look like the pope in comparison and never bring up Novak at all.”

“We don’t have a bloody pope, you moron,” Crowley snapped at him.

“Well then, pardon my confusion, but why are we fighting so hard against Castiel?” asked Suit Number Six. “He’s really not that bad. He’s pretentious as hell, but he’s got some good ideas.”

“OUT!” Crowley ordered. “GET OUT!”

Suit Number Six’s eyes grew round as saucers and he stumbled to his feet and a short but painful walk of shame with every eye on his back. The door clicked shut behind him.

“Anyone else?” challenged Crowley. He turned back to Bela. She met his eye passively, as if interested but not particularly invested. “Well?”

“Sir, Jonathon Miles is the only possible alternate candidate. We’ve been over this. Nominate Jonathon and level Novak with evidence of malfeasance. It’s not glamorous, but it will work if you do it right.”

“Is that all you’ve got?” he asked her, leaning threateningly over the table. “You made a hell of a lot of claims to get me to give you a shot. I took a chance on you, Talbot. Where’s the goods? Is that it?”

“That’s all there is, but it’s not my fault if you’re too dim to take advantage of it. You want a big show, but you’re out of your depth with Castiel. He’s leagues better than you, and he’s protected from every side. You have no idea what you’re doing here. Your usual tactics won’t work because he has no enemies on the inside.”

“Balderdash! Everyone has enemies. I want DIRT! Not actuarial tables. Don’t give me a missed budget deadline and a smattering of whiny customer complaints. I want real DIRT!!

“There isn’t any!” she shot back, supremely frustrated. “They LOVE him, Crowley! Any one of them would die for him. He’s their fucking Messiah! God, why are you so blind?!”

“Sir?” a small voice piped up from the other send of the table, and Crowley whipped around, then visibly gathered himself and closed his eyes.

“Yes?” he asked with false calm.

“I think you might want to listen to the beta. Everything she’s saying fits what our squirrels have found out. He’s squeaky clean. The alleged abuse in Dallas over the last year is all any of us have been able to find. Hell, I mean…” the young alpha, Suit Number Two, eyed the door through which his colleague had been ejected. “Under the right circumstances, I might even vote for him myself.”

Crowley roared at the ceiling with his fists clenched.

“Everyone OUT!” he shouted. He didn’t have to repeat himself. They scattered, and soon the room was empty except for Bela and Crowley.

He glared at her, but she held her ground.

“Do you have anything to hide, Fergus?” she asked him boldly.

He frowned.
She continued. “He may be a Boy Scout, but I wouldn’t put it past him to know your Great Grandmother’s knitting club’s meeting times and what brand of oats you use when you cook Haggis.” She blinked.

Crowley’s breathing was still heavy. He didn’t answer.

“What?”

“Anything? It would help me to know where the bodies are buried if you want me to protect you. Who do you think covered for Henrickson for a year?”

He didn’t seem capable of deciding whether to strangle her or fall to his knees and confess his life’s sins.

“You’re not going to win against Castiel. You know that, don’t you? If you insist on going it the way you always have, you’re going to look like a fool, and you’re going to hand him the keys to the empire.”

His jaw shifted as he ground his teeth.

“You can save your reputation and move on to your next victim without too much damage if you jump sides right now, throw your full support behind him, and celebrate the win-win as if it was all your idea in the first place.” She leaned forward to be sure she had his full attention. “Or you can continue digging for dirt that isn’t there and ruin yourself. If you go down, I’ll go down with you. I’ve picked my team, and I’m not changing now, but whether we flame out or not is your call now, Fergus.”

“Don’t call me Fergus,” he said with a full-on pout.

Crowley fumed inside his head. She didn’t understand. Winning was everything. Capitulation was failure. Failure was not an option. Bela shrugged as if she didn’t care one way or the other, and she collected her bag and left without a backward glance.

Crowley’s phone buzzed. He looked at it. It was Miles again, looking for an update. Deadlines were approaching fast, and he needed to know to whom he would be reporting as each one passed. Jonathon was a fucking gnat buzzing around Crowley’s face. He didn’t answer it.

Crowley tried to imagine Jonathon Miles in charge, and it sent a wave of disgust through his body. At least Novak was a proper Alpha. Where had all these wimpy mealy pathetic excuses come from? Where were all the real men of old who ran businesses the way they were meant to be run, with guts and grit and testosterone? When had the wussification of business hit his own species? Wolves were above all that shit. Wolves had Alphas, damnit! Alpha-Dominants, for fuck’s sake. If Novak was an ambitious snake who wanted to own and rule it all, Crowley could respect that, but he couldn’t HAND it to him. He was either going to win it like a man, in the full fight of a straight up free-for-all, or he didn’t deserve the bounty at all. And if he couldn’t claim it with teeth and muscle and dirty underhanded force, Crowley wanted him destroyed completely. It was the law of the Pack. It always had been. Why wouldn’t anyone give him a battle?

It wasn’t on Crowley to come up with an alternative to Novak. That was the Board’s job. Christ, what a cluster-fuck! The only suitable candidate wasn’t even going to fight back? What had the world come to?

***************
Cas and Dean took their places at the table before the Internal Review committee which consisted of Missouri, Benny, and Sonny. Being good friends with the committee members was no guarantee they wouldn’t have their hands smacked metaphorically, so it was a somber mood they sat down to.

Missouri opened the proceedings. “I thank you both for coming. This won’t take long. We’ve concluded our review, and we’re ready to present our findings. Do either of you have any comments before we go on?”

Cas shook his head and spoke for them both. “Go ahead, Missouri. We’re listening.”

Benny opened the folder in front of him and handed a small packet to Cas. “We’ve got all the findings documented, Cas. It’s going to stay in your personnel file, as you know. Pictures of Dean’s bruises, Dr. Mosely’s assessment. Look it all over. Once the folder’s closed, you lose your chance to comment.”

“No, Dr. Mosely,” said Cas simply. “I’ve made all the statements I plan to make for the record already.”

“Just tell us what you found, Benny” said Dean in a pained voice. Cas took his hand and squeezed.

Missouri answered. “We found evidence that your play together ranged into territory unsafe enough to be considered dangerous and abusive in the incident in question. Dean experienced level 3 contusions over both of his buttocks and the majority of the back of both thighs. Evidence of lengthy blood seepage was found in both calves several days following the incident in question. In short, Alpha, you beat the crap out of your Sub, and you crossed the line of what’s acceptable. Do you have any comment on the medical findings?”

“No, Dr. Mosely,” said Cas simply. “I’ve made all the statements I plan to make for the record already.”

“All right,” said Benny. “From the Psych side, Cas, you and Dean, I get it, brother. I do. I know why you two do what you do. But…you have to have some safeguards. What we found, you two stepped into a punishment scene where you did something brand new and risky as hell and neither of you had any idea that Alpha was as pissed off as he was. Neither of you did any assessment of his emotional state. You checked on the Sub. I commend you there, but no one looked twice at the Dominant. He walked in that room in no condition to hold a belt, and he lost control. Any disagreement there?”

They looked at each other, but they both shook their heads. No disagreement.

Sonny leaned in and took it from Benny. “So, you two had a powder keg ready to blow, and you stripped off the one safety wire a couple has in an intense scene. You…” he leveled an eye on Dean. “You are one stubborn son of a bitch. I know that from personal experience. If you refuse to use the safewords that are there for the very purpose of halting an out of control scene, you’ve got no brakes at all. Let me ask you something, boss,” posed Sonny.

Dean considered correcting his moniker. He wasn’t Sonny’s boss in this meeting. Instead he nodded.

“If you had called ‘Red’, would Alpha have pulled up?”

Dean didn’t have to think about it. “Yes.”

“Then this is on you just as much as him. Did you know at the time that Alpha was crossing the line?”

“Crap, Sonny, I already answered these questions,” Dean protested.

“You filled out a report, boy,” said Missouri with no hint of compassion. “I want you to say the
words out loud. I want you to hear yourself say them.”

“Yes! I knew it was too much, but he needed it, all right? He needed the release more than I did. It wasn’t abuse! Fuck! I’m not broken. I healed up just fine. You really think I would just lay there and let him hurt me to where I couldn’t heal from it?”

“Would you?” That was from Benny.

“Ben, come on, man. You know me better than that. Cas didn’t ‘lose control’.” Dean used air quotes to highlight the absurdity. Castiel had already been grilled within an inch of his life, but Dean had only faced a few questions, a lengthy survey report, and a physical exam with pictures. “He didn’t go so far that he really harmed me. He DIDN’T HARM me! I don’t care what your medical standards are. I’m not abused. This didn’t cross my boundaries, and it didn’t break my trust. NO, okay? I didn’t use a fuckin’ safeword. And you know what else? I never will where my SIR is concerned. I trust him with my life, and that didn’t change that day. He got mad, and he hit me harder than he knew he would, and I took longer to heal from it that we planned on, but I have no complaints about what happened. It’s between him and me and no one else unless I say it is. So, write your report. File your pictures. Close the fucking case. And let us get back to work.”

Benny blinked at him.

Dean rolled his eyes. “Benny, for the love of God and all the Universe and stars, if you say ‘Methinks the lady doth protest too much’, I’m gonna land one across your face. Let it go. It was ONE fuckin’ time. I’m fine. He’s fine. Let’s close this.”

“Have you scened since?” Sonny asked.

“Of course!” shouted Dean, offended at the idea.

“Castiel?” asked Missouri.

Cas hesitated. He glanced at Dean and swallowed. “Not really,” he admitted. “Dean’s been on Lockout since that night. He’s only received minimal impact, none of it bruising, and none of it from me except for a swat here and there. Nothing that could be described as a scene.”

Dean shook his head. “No. You put me on Lockout before that night. You’d already said. You said we had this one more to do, and then I was locked out until two weeks after Rut. The Lockout had nothing to do with what happened in there.”

“That’s true,” said Castiel. “But the answer to the question hasn’t changed. I have not struck you more than minimally since that night – whatever the reason.”

“And we’re still in that two-week period,” said Dean confidently. “It doesn’t mean anything. We’ll be good-to-go, locked and loaded, ripe and ready as soon as Alpha says the word. See? No harm, no foul.”

Sonny held a calming hand out to Dean. “Don’t get me wrong, Dean. I’m not slinging any accusations. There’s no need to feel defensive. No one’s attacking you. You two are not on trial here. Mostly, I want to be sure that when you do get back up in the saddle, you’ve both got all the resources you need in case you aren’t as copacetic as you think you are. Would it help to have a third party there?”

Dean scoffed. “Michael would love that.”

“Michael’s Omega, Dean. I don’t recommend him. He’s shown a reticence to interfere with Castiel,”
Benny pointed out.

Dean said, “Benny, everyone’s reticent to interfere with Castiel.”

“All the more reason to be careful,” said Sonny calmly. “Look, the report is pretty short. It’s just the facts and a couple of recommendations. The first recommendation is that you both get some refreshers. You, Dean, get counselling on use of safewords. Pam can walk you through some scenarios to help you judge where to use them.” Dean’s glare had Sonny’s palms up again. “We want Alpha to take a refresher on anger management to keep him from bottling it up so tightly he doesn’t know it’s there. The second recommendation is that at your first try back in the ring, you do it here onsite with a spotter in the room and monitors. No one thinks it’s going to happen again, but the concern is focused more on the effect this event may have had on Alpha. Castiel? Do you feel any reservation about stepping back into that role?”

“Dean needs me to be his Dom.”

“That wasn’t the question, with all due respect,” Sonny persisted.

Cas sighed heavily, but admitted honestly, “We’ve talked about it a little. We did a scene several days ago that I could have taken the lead on, but I gave it to Michael. I think I’m a little nervous. Nothing like this has ever happened before, and as you all know, I could have done much more damage than I did. I can’t ever let that happen again.”

“Cas…” Dean squeezed his hand and leaned in to scent his throat and lend comfort through the warmth of his body. Castiel disentangled his fingers and wrapped both arms around his fiancé.

“The first recommendation is a formality,” Missouri told the couple. “Dean, go talk it through with Pam. That part’s not negotiable. But what you actually talk about…well, let’s just say no one here believes that a refresher course on safewords is going to do you any good. You already know everything there is to know about the subject. You just choose not to use it. Let Pam have a say on the matter, but then, you make your own choices, alpha. You always have.”

“The second recommendation is the one we really want to press,” said Benny. “Cas, brother. I love you like my own kin. Listen to me, please. Take this offer. Don’t go it alone. Bring Michael if you want, but the next time you hold leather, I wanna be there. I won’t let anything bad happen.”

Dean turned his head without leaving the cave of Cas’ throat and chin. “You?” He felt all the defensiveness leave him at once.

Benny nodded. “Just say the word, fellas. Tell me when and where.”

Cas pulled Dean’s head up with a knuckle under his chin. He had crinkles around his eyes. “Dean?”

“Sounds good to me, C.J. But I’m not the one who’s off his game.”

Cas gave him a reproving look. He turned his eyes on the committee across the table. “Very well. We accept the recommendations. I’ll be making an appointment with Pam. I appreciate the sincere efforts you’ve all put in, and I know how difficult this was. There are extenuating circumstances. I’m not the easiest man to investigate. I understand that.”

“You done?” asked Benny with a teasing lilt, always ready to note when Castiel’s pretensions slipped out.

Dean snickered quietly.
“I think that about covers everything,” said Missouri. “Sign the bottom, both of you. You’ll have copies placed in your file. Recurrent events will not be considered exclusive. You need to understand that, both of you. If it happens again, the next incident will be considered a second occurrence of the same issue, and penalties will likely be enacted, up to or including charges filed and potentially termination.”

Cas nodded and signed. Dean smirked. The exact wording came from the legal team, but it was Dean who had constructed the structure of this kind of documentation in the first place. Missouri was spouting his lines back at him verbatim. He took the pen that Cas held out and scribbled his name at the bottom.

“This concludes the review. The matter is now closed pending fulfillment of the two recommendations. Thank you, alphas, for your cooperation.” Missouri could do businesslike when she needed to. Everyone stood, but they didn’t get out of the room without hugs. Missouri could also do concerned Mama when she needed to.

They walked back with Benny. It was a little awkward, but it was Benny.

“Look, Cas,” he started. “Are you really okay with…”

“Yes, I am. In fact, Benny, I find the idea a great comfort. It’s a good plan. Thank you for your willingness to do this for me.” Cas didn’t stop walking. His left hand was locked onto Dean’s. Benny walked at his right side.

“Hey, Cas, hold up a minute,” Benny stopped and pulled Cas by his shoulder. “Look, I didn’t wanna bring it all up in there where it might be considered official or anything. You and I’ve known each other a long time. You know I’ll always watch out for you, so you would tell me if anything big was brewing, right? Brother, are you really all right? I’m worried about you.”

Castiel looked at Dean and then back to Benny. “Yes, Benny. I’m fine. It’s been a rough few weeks, but we’re all in a good place. I just had too much on my plate for a while, and I forgot to lean on those who stand around me in support. That includes you. You’re the best friend I’ve got, and you’ve always been there for me.”

“He’s your best friend?” asked Dean provocatively. Cas released his hand and swatted him hard. Dean laughed happily and accepted the embrace Cas offered.

“You dropped a lot of balls lately, man,” Benny told him, taking the pace back up slowly. Cas fell in beside him, Dean still cinched up close to his side. “You made some scary choices. Is all that over?”

“It’s over,” said Cas. “We need to make some decisions about Naomi, but I don’t expect any of that to tax me to the extent that hammering out my relationship with my brat did.”

“You’re blaming me for all that?” asked Dean.

“Mm-hm. Seems fair to me.”

Benny laughed. “It’s good to have you back, Castiel. Come over for dinner on Sunday. We haven’t spent any downtime together in ages. Andrea misses you.”

“All right,” agreed Cas. “All of us?”

“If you want,” said Benny turning off to head upstairs to his office. “Or just bring Dean. Or, hell, leave the brat at home and just bring April. Call me and let me know how many. Come all by yourself if you want. I don’t care. I miss my best friend.” He was practically shouting by the end,
walking backward toward the stairs, and then he swiveled gracefully without tripping on the first step, dodged the impromptu punishment that was underway by the railing and skipped up two stairs at a time.

“Asshole,” muttered Dean. Cas laughed and pulled him closer to land a kiss on his head.

“Come talk to me about last night, my love,” Cas suggested, leading Dean toward the hallway where their office doors stood across from each other. Cas chose Dean’s space and passed right through the office and into his small suite. The space seemed odd to him after having not used it for so long. The fridge was disappointingly empty, but the couch was soft.

“I’d rather talk about this morning,” stated Dean as Cas filled two glasses from the sink.

“All right. About this morning.” He handed one to Dean. Dean sipped without comment. “What do you think about Gabriel and Kali?”

“I already told you, C.J. They’re True Mates. I could feel it. I thought I was going to be electrocuted for all the sparks flying around.”

“They can’t Mate though. Marriage isn’t the same thing, and I’m worried about how things might go if they don’t make allowances for how it’s…different.” Cas settled beside Dean on the couch and faced him.

“Gonna have to let them work that out, babe. The hard work isn’t your job. Your job is to watch over them and deal with what comes up as it comes up. Anticipate, but don’t get too caught up in all the possibilities. They’re good for each other. I like her.”

“I do, too,” Cas agreed, smiling. “I’m hoping that having a wife might pull him away from his dependence on Bobby at least a little. That may be wishful thinking though.”

“You planning to set their wedding date?” Dean asked.

Cas shook his head. “I’ll tell them tonight at dinner. I’m not completely sold on the idea, but I agree with you. They need to be allowed to set their own boundaries and build their own structure. I’m not going to limit that as long as our wedding clothes are ready in time.”

“Priorities?” laughed Dean.

“Exactly.”

Dean shifted to an easier topic. “The media are swooning over us, C.J. Have you been watching?”

“Mm-hm,” Cas responded simply.

“What with your new God-like Dominance rating, the news about the big merger, and our last Convention, we’re the darlings of the pointy-eared set again. We’re getting all kinds of interview requests.”

“Pick what you want to agree to, Dean. I’ll go along. Tell me where you need me, and I’m there.”

“No way. Not my bag, man. Billie’s the one to pick the gold from the shit.”

Cas smiled. “Billie wants you to do one for ”Classic Car” with a photo spread of you topless covered in sweat and grease discussing your obsession with Chevrolet.”

“Oh. Well, maybe I’ll take a look and weed some stuff out.”
“That’s what I thought,” Cas said with another private smile.

It was quiet for a while longer. The Alpha-Dom knew Dean was working on how to bring up what they really needed to talk about. Finally, he took a bracing breath and opened it up.

“Cas, last night was really hard for me.”

Castiel took another deep breath. He took stock of all the emotions that scampered through so fast they were hard to catalogue. Concern was the one that lingered. Remorse hid right behind it, but Dean dissolved that one with his next admission.

“I’m so glad we did it. I never would’ve thought of it. I guess if I knew what was coming, it wouldn’t have had the punch it did. I thought you were gone. Thought you’d slipped out, but then, I mean, it all flowed over me like a waterfall, how much you’ve done for me, how much you’ve proven you love me, everything you’ve sacrificed for me. Suddenly, the idea that you would abandon me right in the middle of a scene… It was laughable, and I just knew. I could even picture you there. Just sitting on the floor listening to me work it out.” Dean huffed a laugh at his own frailty. “You’ve never left me in your life. Why would that start now?”

“I left you when I Mated April,” Castiel confessed with an air of regret.

“No, you didn’t. I’m the one who pulled away. You tried a bunch of times to reconnect with me before I pulled the plug and took off. I didn’t wanna hear you. I mean, yeah, you were all gaga over your pretty sweet young thing, but I knew that it was more hormones than anything else. In the back of my mind, I knew you were still there for me if I just gave you some time. But that’s not what I wanted, man. I wanted to be your MATE. It’s all I’ve ever wanted from you.”

“And yet, you’ve come to love my mate as much as I do,” mused Castiel. “I don’t really understand why.”

Dean made an uncomfortable face. “I don’t know either. She makes you happy, C.J. That’s enough for me. All I need is for you to never leave me, and for you to be happy. Last night hit my biggest fear, but I got through it, and you were there for me the whole time.”

“I worried that by letting you call for me without responding, I might be feeding that fear.” Cas took his hand and held it.

“Yeah, it kind of felt that way at first, but… There will be times when you can’t be with me. Times you need to focus on her. I’m okay with that. I don’t need to be joined at the hip. You’re always there. That’s what I needed to know. You never left me. Never.”

Dean tugged on Cas’ hand, pulling him to rest his head in Dean’s lap. It would have been an impertinence from anyone else. Cas relaxed into the touches through his hair and hummed.

“Dean, let’s not gloss it over. I want to be honest with you. There were a couple of weeks after I Mated that I can’t remember thinking of you much at all. Rose-colored glasses won’t help us if we want to be open about what we all four have with one another. I don’t think you ever had the same experience that I did. I can’t imagine it feels very comforting to think that even as you were in the midst of the Mating-drive, you still reached for me, and I can’t say the same. That knowledge eats at me. I can’t account for it, and I worry about what it says to you.”

Dean leaned down and kissed Castiel’s temple sweetly, then pulled Cas’ left hand to apply a soft kiss to his ring. “It doesn’t matter, Alpha. We’re not the same person. We don’t have to do everything the same way. It doesn’t mean anything. You love me.”
“I do.”
“Then that’s enough.”

They stayed like that for a short time, Dean soothing his battered Alpha with gentle strokes through his hair and down over his cheeks. Cas let himself be cared for. It felt wonderful.

“How’s our mole getting along?” Dean broke the silence.

Cas didn’t answer right away. He was enjoying the way Dean’s nails scratched his scalp. “We haven’t heard from her yet, but the signs are good.”

“Is that all you’re going to tell me?” asked Dean without slowing the scrape of his nails.

“It’s all I’m going to say here,” murmured Cas in a comfortable voice.

“You’re getting paranoid in your old age,” teased Dean.

“Mm,” hummed Cas. “At least I’ll have an old age.”

“Fine,” groused Dean. “Tell me later if there’s more.” He shifted beneath Cas, spreading his knees a bit and angling his hips up. “Ya know, while you’re down there…”

Cas smiled, but didn’t take the offer. “You have a meeting to get to. There’s not enough time.”

Dean pushed up a little further. “Try me. Set your timer. Let’s see if I can do it.”

“No. Talk to me. What did you think about your breakfast?”

“Orange juice is for pups, Cas. Michael was perfectly fine with giving me coffee until you scared him off.”

“You’d rather suffer second degree burns to your penis?”

“If it’ll get me caffeinated, yes!”

“Fucking masochist,” muttered Cas with a kiss to said penis through Dean’s slacks. He worked himself back up, collected their water glasses and took them to the sink. “Tell me truthfully,” he tried again.

“We should wait for the Omegas.”

“I’m asking you now.”

“It was fine. Michael’s a wreck when he doesn’t let his wolf run it, but it was cute. He’ll get better.

“And April? I put her to work more than you. How was that? I know you were aware, even if you weren’t looking our direction.”

Dean joined Cas by the sink and leaned against his chest, resting his forehead to Cas’ shoulder. “It was okay. There was a minute there, right as I went to work on Michael. Didn’t feel awful. Just a little uncomfortable. Just because I’m not used to it. I’ll be fine. I’m sharing everything with Michael. He’ll tell you. He can tell you exactly what I was feeling.”

“That’s unlikely,” said Cas wrapping Dean back up again. “I believe he was more than a little bit distracted this morning.”
Dean laughed outright. “Yeah, he was. Poor guy.”

“But you were all right?”

“Yeah, babe. I was good. I feel good about it. I wanna try something else. What’s next?”

“Now that discussion DOES need to wait on the Omegas.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Come on. I want to sit in on your staff meeting. You’ve got a new teacher to introduce, right? And Sarah is here today. Will she be there?”

“Yeah, they both started yesterday. Orientation. Lisa will meet the whole team today. Have you not met her yet? And Sam’s got Sarah sewn into his pocket. I hope they get along. She’s going to be his best friend for three months, thanks to you.” Dean scrounged through his cabinets looking for a quick snack, but there was nothing.

“Are you still angry with me about that?”

Dean clapped the cabinet door closed and worked his jaw before words that would get him in trouble tumbled out. Finally, he turned around and looked at Cas with an innocent face.

“Little bit. Yeah.”

“Dean, I’m sorry. I was wrong to snap Sam up like that without talking to you first. You had plans laid, and I barreled right over them.”

“Forget it,” said Dean shortly. He really didn’t want to dredge it all back up again. He had no idea if his team could cover the classes well enough this term. They were stretched to the limit. They needed Sam, and if Lisa turned out to be a dud, they would be lost. “It was your call, man. We’ll manage. He’s not part of the training department anyway. Not really.”

Cas herded him toward the door. “How about I make it up to you later,” he offered suggestively with a nibble to Dean’s earlobe that sent sparks down his spine.

“You’ll make it up to all the students who get shortchanged too?”

“Watch it, Winchester.” He released Dean and opened the door. Dean smirked happily at him, and Cas rewarded him as he’d been hoping for. The walk down the hall wasn’t far, but Dean rubbed the sting out of his backside the whole way. That man. What he could do with one swing.

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“Well? What’s your vote?” Michael asked his mate as he took another bite. Michael was pleased. The lasagna was perfect. It was just the right kind of meal for a Friday night Pack dinner. Everyone else had already weighed in, in the affirmative, but only Dean’s ruling really mattered. Dean had his eyes and his bonds closed. He wasn’t leaking any hints to what he was feeling as he savored the pasta.

“Come on, Dean. You either like it or you don’t. Give me something, or we’ll make the call without you.”
“You’ll do no such thing,” Alpha told him sternly.

The cook candidate hovered in the doorway, nibbling on his thumb. Michael hoped he planned to wash his hands before he served the mousse. Dean finally opened his eyes, and took another bite, a look of intense concentration on his face and a touch of amusement peeking through the bonds along with his pleasure at the tastes and textures. Michael huffed and shook his head.

He waved the candidate in and nodded for Dean to go ahead. If this guy was going to be using Dean’s kitchen, he needed to withstand facing the alpha’s questions. Michael prayed Dean kept it professional.

Michael watched his mate work the poor guy over, questioning his training, his methods, questioning his sources for the freshest foods and his preferred tools. When Dean asked after his lineage of all things, Michael rebuked him with a reminder that the law forbade invasive questions. Castiel cleared his throat pointedly, and Michael changed his tone.

“Dean,” Michael tried again from an Omega frame. “He’s Italian. His name’s Tony Del Vecchio for pity’s sake. He’s the real deal. Do you like the food or not?”

Dean ignored him.

“You’re not Lupin,” he said to the short lean man. “Do you have any idea what it’s like in a wolf pack household?”

“Yes, alpha. I’ve worked for wolves before.”

“Really? Where?”

“Three years for a Lupin resort in Florida, and two years for a pack in Rhode Island.”

“Did they fuck on the table in front of you?”

“Dean.” Michael took hold of his arm. “Not like that, babe.”

“It’s okay, sir,” the chef directed at Michael. “I don’t have a problem with what I might see, as long as you leave me out of it.”

“Tony, I’m not ‘sir’,” Michael corrected gently. “You can call me Michael or Omega. Sir is for the alphas.”

“All right,” he accepted smoothly.

“What about spanking, Tony?” Dean went on. “Have you ever had to watch as somebody got strapped or whipped in your kitchen while you cooked a meal?”

“Dean, seriously…” said Michael with more vehemence, but Dean waved him off.

“No, sir. I heard it down the hall in the other Pack house sometimes, but never in front of me. I’m telling you though. As long as no one’s going to do any of that to me, I don’t care what you do to each other.”

“Mm-hm,” Dean responded noncommittally. “Your lasagna is good. Can you do meals that aren’t Italian?”

“Of course, alpha. I can prepare anything you like.”
“How do you feel about sharing the kitchen with me? What if I still want to cook in my own kitchen from time to time?”

“Sharing? Sir, it’s your kitchen.”

Sam sighed in exasperation suddenly and slapped the table. “Enough. Quit torturing the guy. We all liked the food. Just tell him he’s hired and let’s get to dessert.”


Tony blew out a relieved and pleased breath. “Sir, I will make you any kind of pie you want.”

“Thank you, Tony,” Cas told him. “Let me add my welcome. Thank you for a delicious meal. We’ll let Michael fill you in on the details, and we’ll expect you on Monday to meet the rest of the staff. Feel free to come to me if you have any concerns. My office door is always open. Please take any questions to Michael first though. You’ll report directly to him in most matters.”

The rest of the pack put in their thanks and their welcoming words as Tony waved and ducked out to serve the mousse. He looked happy.

“What was that all about?” Michael asked his mate, thoroughly irritated.

Dean chuckled. “I wanted to see if I could piss you off enough to try to call me down. You did pretty good. Better than I expected. Well done, Omega. You’re getting better at restraint.”

Michael glared at him. “Someone I know needs a good sound spanking.”

“Maybe, but I’ll wait and give it to you later,” teased Dean. He leaned across the corner. “Come ‘ere. Lay one on me. You did good. I like this guy.” Dean kissed Michael simply on the lips. It was little more than a peck. His hand found its way beneath the table to press against Michael’s belly. “And how’s our little one?”

“It’s already making me fat, Dean,” griped Michael. “My hips are bigger already. How is that possible? It’s only been two weeks.”

Dean laughed, but Castiel answered seriously. “It’s an early response to the pregnancy hormones,” he told Michael. The uterus will expand and begin to force its way above your intestines. Before it makes space for itself, it can press against your spine enough to cause pain or even damage. One of the earliest changes a pregnant Omega usually notices is a gathering of fluids around his hips and across his lower back. The fluids will be replaced by fat deposits over the next few weeks, creating a cushion between the uterus and the spine, like an airbag in a car.”

“Great,” said Michael. “Just great.”

“It’s temporary, Omega,” Cas assured him. “And it’s worth it, is it not?”

Michael couldn’t argue that one. He couldn’t pretend that the tiny spark of warmth in his core didn’t seem to solve all the problems of the world at once.

“I’ll still fuck you if you get monstrously fat,” Dean promised him.

Michael’s flat expression told Dean his offer wasn’t appreciated, and Gabe kicked the alpha beneath the table.
“OW! Fuck, Gabe!”

“Oh, was that your leg? Terribly sorry, alpha. I slipped,” Gabe gushed. Kali leaned into him laughing.

Castiel nodded his thanks as Tony set a tall flute of mousse before the Alpha. He learned fast, watching as Michael cued him to let him know the order they should be served. He had Cas and Dean already figured out, but everyone else was a mystery. Serving April last, he handed over her dessert, and he added a touch more whipped cream from a little bowl on his tray. April beamed at him, and he couldn’t resist a smile back at her.

She looked from Tony with her grin still in place to catch a sweet smile from her mate as well. Seeing her happy made Castiel glow. He dipped his finger in her whipped cream and tapped her nose with it before she could dodge with a squeak.

Hank chose that moment to awaken and begin squalling miserably. Sam signaled that Jess could finish her dessert. He scooped the pup up into his arms and dropped him into Michael’s waiting arms. The Omega immediately began cooing softly to his nephew while Sam worked to prepare his meal. He collected the pup back on his way back into the dining room from the kitchen.

All in all, aside from Dean’s near merciless tweaking of his mate, it was a perfectly peaceful meal. Castiel was satisfied. His eyes rarely stopped moving, taking them all in, noting their tensions and their pleasure, looking for anything he might’ve missed, watching for anything they might be hiding from him. But everyone seemed relaxed and happy.

Sam grilled Kali good-naturedly, and she shot right back with a zinger that made Jess spew her wine. April couldn’t stop admiring the ring Gabriel picked out for his new fiancée. Sitting side-by-side, the two women started a little awkwardly, but Gabe whispered a few words into Kali’s ear, and she visibly lightened up for April. The news that they were released to set their own date put Gabe and Kali both firmly on cloud nine.

Michael asked Jess all about the pups, obviously taking mental notes about life with a newborn. He had babysitting down, but 24/7 care would be something else, and Jess still looked tired. Cas offered to watch over the pups again and was pleased when both Sam and Jess accepted with no prodding.

Castiel began to relax a bit himself. Was this what he’d been building toward? It was, wasn’t it? A peaceful, happy home. Everyone has a place, and everyone knows it.

“Omega, Michael, Sir?” asked Tony softly.


“Sir, one of the housekeepers collected a meal from me earlier. I wondered, should I summon her back for dessert too? I made nine flutes to go with nine dinners, but I have a mousse left over. Is there someone else here?” He couldn’t seem to get the gist of the idea for the word, ‘Sir’. They could work on it later.

“Oh. Yes. We’ve got a Pack member convalescing in one of the lower rooms. She won’t be needing dessert, Tony. If you like, you may enjoy the last one yourself.” Michael spoke with authority, and Tony couldn’t have known to check with the Alpha before bowing politely and ducking out.

Dean contained his laughter until Tony had gone, but then it burst free. “Damn, Michael.”

“What?” he asked, bewildered.
Cas was laughing softly too. “Remind me to stay on your good side, Omega,” said Castiel. “I’d hate to be sent to bed without dessert.”

Michael’s eyes widened, and he blushed. “Oh! Shit! I’m sorry, Alpha. It just came out. I should have asked. I can call him back.”

“No need. I’m happy with your decision. It’s a delicate balance sometimes, and I’m not offended. You’re right. Mother doesn’t need dessert in her condition anyway.”

“You told him to come to me with questions…”

“Yes, I did. We’ll get better at when those questions should be funneled to me or to Dean for answers. Don’t worry about it.”

Michael’s embarrassment lasted longer than Dean liked. The alpha wove his fingers through Michael’s on top of the table and tugged gently to pull Michael’s eyes to his. He raised his eyebrows, asking.

Michael frowned slightly and glanced up the table. “I get so comfortable sometimes,” he said softly enough that only Dean and possibly Jess heard him. “I forget all about the strata. It’s hard to keep it all in place when I’m happy and relaxed. I go back to just being me. I respect Alpha, and I don’t want to challenge him, but it slips out.”

“Practice makes perfect, Michael,” Dean whispered back. “He can tell when you’re being a dick and when its just your control freak peeking out. He’s going to give you time. It’s a hard balance for all of us. You’ve got the hardest role of all. He put you in charge of the staff, and you do it so well, they all come to you whether it’s your call or not.”

“How do I tell the difference?” asked Michael in return, leaning even closer until he was practically leaning against his mate.

“Think of it like this. If it’s about management of the ‘stuff’, like the house or the supplies or fixing the toilets, then you make the decisions. If it’s about the ‘people’ in the house, then take it to him.”

Michael squeezed Dean’s hand and sent him a grateful look. “That helps a lot, babe. Thanks.”

“No problem. It’s what I’m here for. Well, that and making pups.” Dean slid his hand back down over Michael’s belly and around to evaluate the padding on his hips. They did feel softer, and Dean gripped, liking the feel.

Michael’s eyes went wide, sensing the direction his mate’s mind was rapidly going. He shook his head minutely, but Dean was already gone. His eyes became hooded and dark. His fingers clutched rhythmically at Michael’s hip. His tongue poked out to swipe slowly across his lower lip.

Dean shoved backward in his chair to make room. He shifted his hand to catch Michael’s again, and he gave a little tug along with an instructional pat to his own lap. Inside the bonds, Dean slid a short pulse offering Michael an out if he didn’t want a part in Dean’s idea, but Michael didn’t take him up on it.

Slowly, while the rest of the table was still chatting happily, and no one had yet noticed their change in mood, Michael pushed back and switched chairs. He straddled Dean’s lap, facing outward as Dean guided his hips, leaning back against his mate’s broad chest. He could feel Dean hardened against the upper divot of his ass, and he let Dean shift slowly into motion below him.

“Hands on the table,” the alpha whispered. “Don’t touch.”
Michael breathed heavily and whined on his exhale. Eyes had turned to look at him, but the chatter continued. Michael could tell Kali was making notes in her head, watching them for clues about what might be allowed out in plain sight. She appeared to be pleased to know that she was joining a pack that hid little.

Dean’s hands surrounded Michael’s middle and deftly opened his belt, his button, his fly before reaching inside and bringing Michael’s hard length out. “I’m following your rule, Michael. If you want more from me, you need to be the one to call for it. I’ll bring it out and let you ride it, but only if you tell me to.”

The tease of a Dominant’s authority in an all-out alpha/Omega encounter sent shivers down the Omega’s back. Even as his alpha, Dean honored Michael’s rule of law. It made him gasp and pant as he pressed back into the hard line of Dean’s erection.

“Yes, alpha,” Michael gasped. “Please. Do it.”

Dean took Michael’s pointed ear between his lips and sucked lightly, sending Michael to bucking up with his hips.

“Pregnant Omegas get very, very horny, my love,” Dean whispered. “It’s important to keep them well cared for.”

“Mmmmmnnnggghh!” said Michael.

Dean pressed him forward with a hand between his shoulder blades until he was flat to the table. Gabe snatched the tableware and dishes out of the way at the last minute. Kali’s hands were both below the table’s surface, and her pupils were enormous. Michael’s legs had to be rearranged to bring them together enough to work his pants and underwear down both legs. Dean bit him gently on his right ass cheek as he leaned low to get his clothing all the way to his ankles, and Michael responded by thunking his forehead against the table.

Half standing behind his mate, Dean worked his own pants low with one hand, keeping the other roaming over the flesh of his swiftly heating mate. In no time he was sliding a hand around to Michael’s chest and guiding him back up and slowly backward. Dean kept his eyes on his work, his grip on the soft bulge of his knot supporting his aim as he brought Michael back and slid him slowly onto the target whispering, “Keep your eyes on your audience, Omega. Look at them. Look them right in the eye and moan for me.”

Michael’s moan was loud and unfettered. Shameless. He reached back and clung to the side of Dean’s right thigh for support, but he obeyed the instruction. He found April missing entirely, clearly slipped beneath the table if Alpha’s reddening face was anything to go by. Castiel looked right back into his eyes with power and passion, his nostrils flaring. Kali was panting quietly. She had Gabriel pulled in to lean against her chest. His face looked pained, but it wasn’t discomfort that pulled a grimace across his features. Kali’s hand whipped swiftly in his lap. Michael couldn’t see without shifting, but the pulsing of their torsos in tandem gave away their actions. Gabe craned his face up and into her throat, squeezing his eyes tightly closed with a pained whine. Kali met Michael’s eye. The challenge in her dark brown gaze sent another jolt of pleasure through him, and he groaned again louder.

Sam and Jess were cuddling against one another, Jess wrapped in the enormity of Sam’s embrace, but they appeared to have decided against letting the rush of pheromone sweep them away. Both looked sleepy, happy, and content to breathe in the oxytocin without taking part. Pack-bonding would work on them either way, and the show was enough in itself.
“You see what you did?” Dean said to Michael, no longer bothering to whisper. “You’re so fucking hot, it swept everyone up with it. Look at them all, Michael. Scent them. This is your pack. Everyone adores you, baby. Let go of your control and let me make you feel good. Let yourself feel like the Omega you are.”

Dean stopped talking as his hips took over. He shoved Michael back over the table and got his feet beneath him, shaking the glassware and the silver with the force of his rising power. One hand snaked around beneath the edge of the table and stroked his mate with the pulse of his thrusts. Michael kept his elbows beneath him, so he could keep watching everyone else. Castiel finally closed his eyes, and his hands left the table to tangle in his mate’s hair and press fiercely against her Mating-scar.

Gabe pressed his shoulders back hard into Kali’s chest and lifted his hips clear off his chair, bringing her firm strokes high enough for the table to see as if it was critically important to him that the pack knew how well cared for he was. He reached up and back and held the side of her head, pressing her cheek into his temple, seeking every point of contact he could get.

Sam and Jess were making out slowly. Their eyes closed softly. Jess’ hands ran easily through Sam’s hair. Sam still cradled Hank in one arm, letting the hormones of contentment and family sink into his little body too. Michael whined. Dean’s thrusts were becoming forceful, but the alpha maintained control. He pulled Michael backward into him rather than shock the table into spilling its breakables all over the floor.

“Oh!” One simple exclamation from the door turned Dean’s head, and he grunted louder, and he drove his knot right into his mate, his eyes locked on Tony’s. The chef dropped his tray and backed out mumbling apologies. His face went bright red. Dean clenched his eyes, and felt his orgasm lock his knot in place and warm Michael from the inside in hot spurts of liquid balm. Michael groaned, ducked his head, and let go. Dean’s hand finished him off with a line straight to Michael’s back right between his shoulder blades.

Dean slumped back into his chair, pulling Michael with him. He used his linen napkin to clean his hand and Michael’s thigh. The Omega was boneless, maybe even asleep. Dean looked around and discovered that his family were all finishing up as well. Some orgy that was. One shot each, and they were all wilting like day-old flowers. When had they all gotten staid and boring, Dean wondered with a chuckle and another kiss to his mate’s shoulder.

He caught Cas’ eye and smiled sheepishly.

“Was that for Tony?” asked the Alpha, arranging his mate comfortably on his own lap.

“That was for Michael,” answered Dean.

Fred appeared in the doorway with a nervous cook at his back and directed him gently to collect his tray and continue his task. Tony was clearly embarrassed, but he cleared the empty dishes without a protest, and Fred wasn’t harsh in his correction. The chef would learn.

“Will that be all, Omega?” Fred asked a sleepy Michael as he helped Tony collect glasses.

Michael looked up at Dean with a quizzing expression, and Dean chuckled. He whispered down to his mate, “Is it about the house or the people?”

Michael nodded slightly and directed back to Fred, “Unless Alpha needs anything more tonight, you
and Tony are excused, Fred. Thank you. Dinner was delicious.”

“Very good, Michael,” Fred answered, ushering the shaken cook back into the kitchen.

“Playing like that didn’t bother you, did it, Dean?” asked Michael sleepily.

“The girl was under the table, man. That’s not the kind of thing I’m worried about. It was fine. I keep telling you, it won’t be a problem until we’re really playing together.” Dean was too well fed and sleepy to go into it now. They had all day tomorrow.

“Oh, by the way,” Castiel broke in as they stood to leave the table. “Michael, Dean, the impact lockout has ended. Starting tomorrow, everything is back to normal. Let’s make plans accordingly.”

“Yes!” crowed Dean.

Chapter End Notes

I'm at the point where there are so many loose ends, that some of them are going to have to be abandoned. I don't see any other way. A lot of this chapter was fluff and flavor. Gonna need to stick to meaty action from here on if I'm going to finish in this lifetime.

Love to the Pack. I'm out for a while, but I'm still around.
Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

Dean's blackout meets a fiery end, to good extremes and bad. Castiel's right arm gets a workout he didn't expect. Naomi gets examined, and surprise visits aren't the best way to find yourself welcomed in a Pack home. And Dean's shoulder - is that a...?

Chapter Notes

"But Nudge, you said there wasn't going to be another chapter before March."

HA!

Not just one. I'm throwing down two. How 'bout them apples.

I hope you've got lots of time on your hands (Seriously, I'm certain that's a Styx song). Settle in. Neither of them are short.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nicholas (Nick) Maraby
Omega-Submissive [A/Ω/Ω-12], [D/N/s-12], [Z-Scale: -44], no Pack affiliation
Cis-Male, Pansexual, b. 1981
unMated
Wolf Avatar: Red Fox - full

Chapter 76 – Saturday, July 22, 2017

NOW:

Michael awoke first, stumbled into consciousness at the blare of his alarm. Dean didn’t so much as shift. They were alone in the room they shared as mates. The sex last night – the sex after dinner and
then again before bed – left Michael’s backside sore and his nipples tender. Maybe it was the pregnancy. He couldn’t be sure. He wandered clumsily into the bathroom.

Dean had put him through a firestorm late into the night, turned on, oddly, by the revolting love handles that had sprung up overnight. What happened to ‘I don’t like soft’ Michael wondered, examining the bruises along the soft lines of his hips where he’d once been firm and masculine? Not that rough sex was ever going to be a red-card for Michael, but Dean had requested an A/O night, and the Omega thought he was going to get away with roleplaying his Omega part. Instead, he folded completely, turned into a mewling lamb and begged his big, strong alpha for a knot loud and long enough to turn his voice raspy this morning.

He blamed the mild wave of nausea on his disgust at his own pathetic weakness. Sure, he was coming to find a few not-so-awful things about being Omega, but that didn’t mean he wanted to turn into a desperate bitch in the bedroom. How fucking embarrassing. He needed to set things right, and he needed to do it now before he tried to serve breakfast to an alpha snarling at him from beneath the table. If it was an embarrassment to lose his grip in private, how much worse would it be if he couldn’t maintain his Dominance in front of Castiel and April? How ridiculous would it be to try to playact a D/S scene with Dean in his alpha state, and Michael stuck as an Omega?

He tried a snarl in the mirror, but it only made him cringe.

Nope. He needed to shake off this sensation that settled all too comfortably across his shoulders. Michael growled. Okay. There. That was better.

He breathed in and out heavily a few times, reaching for his wolf and feeling the beast send energy out to his fingers and his toes. And other places. Michael looked into the mirror again. His eyes were green and sharp. His cheeks brightening. (There you are, handsome), he teased himself, feeling less emasculated for the moment.

Fuck Hannah.

Michael strode back out into the bedroom. His Sub was naked and had kicked the comforter off. He usually ended up sleeping on his belly, and this morning was no different. Michael felt his nausea dissipate as his mouth watered. His mate was beautiful in a way he had only imagined he would be all those months ago before he knew for sure. Nothing he’d ever imagined came close to the truth.

How long had it been now since Dean’s body last bruised up nice and tender? Three weeks? Four? Pristine and pink, Dean’s shoulders, his back, his butt and legs, one knee pulled up at a sharp angle from the other, spread out like a perfect smorgasbord. Castiel’s last bite mark hadn’t fully healed yet. Simple scabs peeked from the curve of his shoulder surrounded by a dark ring beneath the surface. Apparently not all forms of bruising had really been verboten, but Michael didn’t care. His sleeping mate shifted, pushing his knee straight before snorting softly and rolling onto his back with a sleepy blink.

Michael lowered his chin darkly at the end of the bed and watched him wake up to a particular sense between them in their bonds. There was intent in Michael’s mind. In his heart. Dean blinked, lifting his head and seeking his mate blurrily.

Michael took hold of Dean’s ankle and pulled, seating himself on the bed in one smooth motion and lifting Dean’s body expertly before the alpha knew what was happening, arranging him facedown across his lap in a sharp “L” that left his thighs flat across Michael’s lap and his hips bent sharply, head all the way to the floor. Michael braced him with a strong arm across the backs of his knees.

“Uh, Sir?” Dean was good at this. Even in his sleepy state, he took no time to adjust his mindset. He
hadn’t fought or scrabbled at all. He’d allowed Michael to put him exactly where and how he wanted the Sub. “My in trouble?”

“Have you misbehaved?” asked Michael cryptically.

“I… don’t think so. Been good, right?” Dean’s voice was heady with the stuffiness of blood rushing downward, turning his face bright red – not that Michael could much see his face.

“So good,” the Dom confirmed, swishing light fingers across the backs of his thighs which brought chill bumps in their wake.

“Mmm,” hummed Dean in satisfaction, folding his arms beneath his awkwardly bent head and looking for a way to get comfortable in the strained position. He didn’t try very hard. His Dom clearly wanted him uncomfortable, and Dean could accept that. He hoped to the stars this was going where he wanted it to go. The target zone Michael stroked gently wasn’t exactly right, but it was really, really close.

The tender caresses went on a long time, long enough for Dean to feel the throbbing of his pulse in his temples as his heart fought to accommodate the strange position.

“Sir, please…”

Michael hauled him up abruptly with a soft laugh. “So needy…” he whispered, arranging Dean to straddle his lap facing him and watching the color of his face change. “First thing’s first…” Michael held his chin lightly and kissed his lips with a soft touch. “Tell me what you want, Dean.”

Dean’s eyes were low, but his lips responded. He didn’t try to deepen the kiss. Morning breath. Soft kisses were all he needed by way of oral stimulus this morning. Soft, sweet lips touching just so.

“I wanna sting at breakfast, Sir. Want it so bad.” Dean whispered desperately between kisses.

Michael’s hands roamed Dean’s naked body, up and around and over his shoulders, spanning his mid-back, pulling him in in soft pulses. His forehead took to resting against Dean’s as the kisses petered out, but his hands kept moving. Michael took a deep breath through his nose, scenting both his sleepy partner and the oddly intriguing scent from his own body that he was coming to know as pup.

If he could only live right here in this moment…

His fingertips crossed Dean’s shoulder again, lightly skirting the crusted scabs where Alpha made his Claim on one side, and passing over the spot, fully healed now where… Wait. Michael looked up as his thumb pressed in against Dean’s right shoulder, high up near the curve of his throat. He focused in the dim morning light and ran fingertips over it again.

It was faint; barely the slightest raised bumps in a broken ring. In the soft light he squinted closer.

“What?” asked Dean, puzzled.

“My mark.”

“Healed up,” Dean confirmed. “I need you to put it back.”

“No. No, it’s… Dean, you have a scar. I thought you couldn’t scar, but there’s… There’s definitely something there. Here, feel.” Michael put Dean’s fingers against the spot and encouraged him to press in and feel the faint knot of scar tissue under the surface of his skin. “You hadn’t noticed?”

Dean moved his fingers all around and tilted his head to the left to stretch the skin taut. “Nuh-unh. I
didn’t think it was possible. Are you sure?”

“Get the light,” Michael instructed.

Dean climbed off his lap and hit both the overhead light by the door and the bedside lamp before kneeling back in front of his mate for inspection. Michael frowned, still not certain, and dragged him into the bathroom where the light was brighter. He put Dean upon the counter and pushed his head unceremonially sideways.

There.

Right there, clear as day, faint but unmistakable.

Michael’s slow smile spread into a wicked grin.

“Holy shit, Dean. We did it. I marked you.”

Dean looked back at him in wonder, his own fingertips taking it in over and over again.

“Can I…?”

“Turn around and see for yourself.”

Dean pivoted on his ass, crooked a knee up and leaned way in. He didn’t know what to say, but that hot spike of possession and satisfaction and outright pride he was feeling from Michael found answer echoing back from the alpha. Dean wanted more. If a faint scar, barely visible without close inspection was possible, what would it take to achieve a proper one?

“Bite me again, Michael. Do it again. Do it again and again until it fucking glows, man. I want your mark on my body. I wanna show it off to everyone. Want them all to know I belong to you.” Dean felt dizzy with exhilaration as Michael crowded him and mouthed at his shoulder just short of the mark.

“Let’s show Castiel first,” Michael mumbled. “Then we’ll redo it.”

“Kay,” said Dean, unable to stop touching the scar or looking at it. How had he not noticed? It was faint, but it was there, right there on his shoulder. He had touched the spot so many times, wishing desperately he could lock it in place. His eyes flicked to the bruised wound on his left shoulder. Was there a chance that one might linger as well? Had a toggle switch been flipped in his body that meant he could keep them both?

Michael was watching him with a fond, soft look. He knew what the longing in the bond meant. He knew.

“You ready?” he asked. They’d slipped out of their scene roles in the excitement of the moment. Michael deepened his voice, letting his wolf speak for him. “Dean?”

Dean’s wolf heard the change. “Yes, Sir.” He straightened, pulling his eyes reluctantly back to the front and keeping them below Michael’s chest. They came to rest at his navel. Michael’s bellybutton was an ‘innie’, and Dean found the little pucker nearly irresistible. He resisted for now.

“Come with me.” Dean took the proffered hand and slipped off the counter. Those words sent tingles all the way to his toes. His backside clenched in anticipation. It was delicious.

Finally.

And it wasn’t like it had really been that long. He’d had licks from Sam. He’d taken some from
Michael. He’d pulled a few here and there from Cas. But there was a difference when they were using all their power to keep from leaving marks in his muscles and just under his skin. It made them pull back in a way that meant he wasn’t going to feel the exhilaration of a full meal. He wanted it to \textit{hurt}. God help him, he wanted the pain of a powerful strike against his flesh that sent adrenalin coursing through his veins and set him alight.

Michael didn’t speak again until he had Dean back over his lap. Dean was boneless already, his wolf and his conscious brain in total agreement. It was time, and he wasn’t in for a punishment, so he didn’t need to process anything but the sensations, letting them send him soaring. He began to float almost immediately. Michael had his butt centered across his knees this time, and he sat at an angle to let Dean relax his torso and head on the softly crumpled comforter.

“I love you,” said Michael.

“I love you, too,” Dean’s wolf answered.

Michael lifted his arm and brought it down hard right on the globe of his left cheek. He repeated it on the right. Not holding anything back, not building slowly to bring a warm layer of blood close to the surface, Michael set up a steady rhythm and put his shoulder into it.

Dean gasped and buried his face in his arms. He concentrated on keeping his muscles lax. The strikes warmed him rapidly. He breathed in a steady runner’s pace. Pain and pleasure circled each other as he rose swiftly into the sky and spun into the clouds on wave after hot wave. Adrenalin and oxytocin combined to set him reeling, making it hard to keep his wits about him at all. Everything else fell away – the lap beneath his groin, the bed and the comforter, his physical body and his mate’s – everything disappeared but the pulsing brightness of relentless pain, heat, and floating, floating, floating.

“You with me down there?” asked Michael from a universe away and from right inside the Sub’s head. Dean had no idea what the words meant. He couldn’t have identified the concept of words if pressed. He knew the voice though, and there was comfort in knowing he wasn’t alone, even in his place of bliss. The strikes never flagged.

Dean didn’t know he was moaning and whining in a long, nearly unbroken string of vocalizations that rose and fell with the tides of his flight. He didn’t know anything but warmth, pressure, pain, and delirious pleasure. It felt like it would go on forever, but then the floating began to feel like soaring and then rose quickly to a crescendo of climbing speed as hot wind rushed by him. His breathing turned shallow, out of control. The heat in his flesh spread to his whole self as a monumental wave built above him, crashed over him, tumbled him head over heels amongst the clouds to a freefall through space. His whines became a gruff shout of ecstasy, and he came against Michael’s firm thigh, his erection pulsing hot spurts into his mate’s skin. Everything went white as clouds of pleasure enveloped him, then everything went dark.

He’d not passed out, but his eyes had closed so tightly they shut out all the light. Dean drifted. His muscles eased slowly. His eyes relaxed but stayed closed. He may have snored just a little. The floating feeling remained as a heated hand swept tenderly across his heated flesh. If only there was a way to bottle this feeling without having to turn to the scary drugs to get it. Nitrous Oxide sometimes came close. It was why Dean never disliked visiting the dentist. Floating like this, with the hot pulse from his ass reaching every dark corner of his mind with a soothing comfort, it was the height of paradise.

“Dean?” The touch in his head was tentative but insistent. Dean hummed and shifted his arms to cradle his head more fully. The soft floating feeling had begun to dissipate, leaving him feeling like a puddle of Jell-O. Michael chuckled.
“You are amazing. You know that, right?” asked Michael, using his inside voice. It was his wolf speaking, but the tone was nearly Omega. It seemed Dean wasn’t the only one who had a ventriloquist in his designations.

“Feels good, Sir,” Dean rumbled deeply. Michael worked him upward onto the bed on his tummy, careful of the mess dripping off his thigh. “Can I take care of you now?” asked Dean. Sleepy green eyes looked up at Michael. How could a Dom say no to a request like that? He smiled down at Dean and nodded, although Michael didn’t think Dean had much left in his tank.

“I got you, sweetheart,” Michael told him. He climbed off the bed, grabbed a handful of tissues from Dean’s bedside table and cleaned his leg as well as he could. Michael assessed Dean’s condition. He might be willing, but he didn’t much look able to participate. No matter. Michael could handle it. He didn’t need any further encouragement himself. Watching Dean fly had aroused him so that both his masculine equipment and his maternal plumbing were ready. He slicked himself up and knelt between Dean’s knees. Tab A into slot B wasn’t rocket science.

It hadn’t taken the mates very long to learn that the full size of Michael at attention wasn’t enough to be a hazard to Dean unprepped. As long as he was well-slicked and careful, it wasn’t much different than working two fingers into Dean’s body. It would stretch and burn, it might hurt some, but Dean wouldn’t tear unless Michael was violent about it.

Dean whined and spread his legs wide when Michael pressed his cock against Dean’s puckered hole.

“Shh. I’m going to make us both feel good. Open up to me, Dean. Let me in your body and your mind. Open way up, baby.”

Michael pressed forward very slowly, and Dean let him in. His bonds were wide open. Parts of Michael that had swirled into Dean back at the Convention when they overflowed into one another recognized the Dom and rejoiced. Dean’s wispy tendrils that now lived in Michael did the same. Dean clenched his muscles to bear down against Michael’s intrusion, embracing him in slick heat. Michael moaned loudly and pressed in deeper.

“Move, Sir,” said Dean in a broken voice after Michael bottomed out against Dean’s fiery ass and stopped there. “Please move.”

Dean lay flat. Michael covered him, heavy against the length of his long body. Michael mouthed harmlessly at Dean’s faint scar, playing with it, savoring it.

“Please…move.”

Dean wanted hot flesh slapped by thrusting hips. He wanted the fire in his ass awakened. He wanted grunting and sweating, heat and motion. Michael remained still and possessive, sucking a bruise behind his mark, keeping him pinned.

Dean submitted to his Dom’s will. He lay still and let Michael do as he liked, his cock buried in Dean’s ass, his body pinning him to the mattress, his teeth and his tongue playing over Dean’s back and shoulder, his groin soaking in the heat from Dean’s reddened butt. It wasn’t about what Dean wanted. It was about being what Michael wanted him to be, and Michael wanted him owned and controlled. Dean felt right in his submission. He felt virtuous. He felt adored. He felt powerful, simply from knowing it was within his power to tumble the man above him and take what he wanted, but he’d chosen not to.

At long last, Michael braced his arms on either side of Dean’s body and began to move in him.
Slowly at first and then gathering speed and power, he panted loudly in Dean’s ear and worked himself into a fast, hard near-frenzy of slapping thrusts. Dean’s ass burned. His asshole burned. The muscles deep inside him tightened, held fast, and burned. Michael was loud. He groaned and grunted, murmured nonsense syllables at Dean, he may have drooled a little. No one was keeping watch. No one protested. Michael tightened up and stuttered then stopped with a high whine and pulsed in tiny little shivery thrusts as he unloaded into Dean’s body.

Dean felt every orgasmic pulse of pleasure from every synapse in his body and his brain. He squeezed his eyes tightly once again and took advantage of his chance to stow away on Michael’s ride. Maybe if he were ten years younger, he could have made it aboard again himself, but refractory times like that were relegated to the past, and Dean didn’t mind when he could feel it almost as if it were his.

Michael collapsed beside him, pulling free with a squishy sound and a slick rush of fluid. Dean smiled at him drowsily. It was a hell of a way to wake up.

“You stopped talking to me this time,” Michael said quietly with a hand running through Dean’s damp hair.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” came the lazy reply.

Michael frowned and hoisted himself onto an elbow. “No need to apologize. It’s fine. I could still see you from the inside. I’ve just never seen you go that deep before. I don’t think you could have answered me if you’d wanted to. And you came untouched just from being spanked. That’s new between us.”

Dean didn’t answer. He pulsed contentment and gratitude to Michael through his own bond and felt Michael’s amused warmth touch him back.

“It’s not new for you though, is it? You’ve done that before?” The Dom’s hand was still making lazy sweeps through Dean’s hair, and it felt amazing.

“Mm-hm. Quite a few times. Mostly with Cas, but sometimes one of the contract clients would get it just right, and I’d shoot off like a bottle rocket.”

“Was there anything about what I did that you want me to change?” Michael’s wolf had a sweet side. Dean hadn’t seen a lot of it yet, but he couldn’t resist curling up inside the embrace.

“You were perfect, Sir. You were…just…perfect.” Dean slipped into a light doze. Michael didn’t let him stay asleep for long. He rousted the Sub with a kiss to his cheek and a light smack to his ass.

“Come on, Dean. We have things we need to get to. Let’s get breakfast. I volunteered to watch the cubs after we eat so Sam and Jess can get some shopping done.” Michael sat up and stood, holding his hand out to help his mate up too.

Dean sighed with regret, but Michael was right. Here in the in-between, they weren’t really sceneing anymore. But Dean was still drifting a little, so he figured he may as well stay passive and compliant. Michael owned breakfast-time, so there was no real reason not to keep aligned in that role. Dean’s alpha wasn’t needed at the moment.

“Sir, may I make a request?” he asked, taking Michael’s hand and letting himself be pulled to his feet on shaky legs. Wow. Really?

“Of course, Dean.”
“Would you mind, at breakfast, I mean, I liked what we did yesterday, I’m not saying anything against how that went, but would it be all right…? Would you maybe lead today with him?” He meant the confident wolf, not the tentative front-brain Dominant.

Michael’s wolf chuckled happily. “Absolutely.”

Dean felt suddenly shy in the glow from Michael’s eyes. “Um, thanks.” As much as Dean liked Michael’s cautious human Dominant, the wolf had an assurance that Dean wanted today.

“Come on. Let’s eat.” Michael wrapped Dean in a bathrobe. Dean’s puzzled expression resolved when Michael explained he was looking forward to watching Dean peel it back off. The Dom donned a robe of his own. He refused to let Dean shower, wanting their scents to interrupt normal operations in the kitchen just enough for everyone to notice.

“It’s still early,” he explained. “You have time to come back up and shower in a little bit. Get your shopping done after breakfast, stock the Pool house with whatever you need and then make yourself a nest over there. I’ll stay out of your way.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Michael shot him an exasperated look. The scene was over, but Dean seemed to be clinging to the dregs of it. While his wolf loved it, it made planning their day a bit difficult. He switched topics as he led Dean into the wide corridor that led to the grand staircase.

“You know, we still haven’t had the talk. Is there any reason you’re putting it off? I’d like to get our cards back on the table and talk through what we both want now that my test results are in. You haven’t shown me yours yet either. What gives?”

Dean puckered his lips a moment thoughtfully. “Sir, the negotiations…that’s a sex thing. That’s not my responsibility. It’s yours. You’re the one who owns that stuff.” Dean dragged behind Michael heading down the wide stairs.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. You were waiting on me? Why didn’t you say so?” Michael turned and waited for him at the landing of the sharp 90-degree turn.

“Um…”

“Never mind. You aren’t in the right frame of mind to do this right now.” They entered the kitchen to find everyone else already eating. Dean noted that Kali was still here and wondered if she was planning to move in. Someone had filled several serving plates with a rich bounty of breakfast foods. Michael leveled a sharp look at Dean. “We’re doing it today though. Hear me? Today.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Michael took the green pillow from Dean’s hands with a soft thank you and a touch to his cheek. He sat in his usual chair beside Jess, who wrinkled her nose at the scent from the mates. Michael set the pillow on the floor beside him at the corner rather than below the table. He didn’t need any extracurricular touching this morning, having had his fill already and having skipped a good clean up afterward. He didn’t want to risk letting Dean take his dick in his mouth without cleaning it first. Besides, he could see those beautiful green eyes better with his Sub next to him.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. You were waiting on me? Why didn’t you say so?” Michael turned and waited for him at the landing of the sharp 90-degree turn.

“Um…”

“Never mind. You aren’t in the right frame of mind to do this right now.” They entered the kitchen to find everyone else already eating. Dean noted that Kali was still here and wondered if she was planning to move in. Someone had filled several serving plates with a rich bounty of breakfast foods. Michael leveled a sharp look at Dean. “We’re doing it today though. Hear me? Today.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Michael took the green pillow from Dean’s hands with a soft thank you and a touch to his cheek. He sat in his usual chair beside Jess, who wrinkled her nose at the scent from the mates. Michael set the pillow on the floor beside him at the corner rather than below the table. He didn’t need any extracurricular touching this morning, having had his fill already and having skipped a good clean up afterward. He didn’t want to risk letting Dean take his dick in his mouth without cleaning it first. Besides, he could see those beautiful green eyes better with his Sub next to him.

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soon, Michael knew, he would need to grant Castiel permission to take a turn with Dean at breakfast. The alpha couple needed to keep their bonds strong as well. But maybe not just yet.

“Good morning, Michael. Dean.” Cas had set his fork down and nodded serenely. He looked pretty good for a guy who couldn’t have slept much last night, hosting the pups all night on his own.

“Good morning, Alpha,” Michael responded. “Dean, our Alpha said good morning.”

Dean looked up in surprise but reacted quickly. “Good morning, Sir,” he said clearly. He noticed Kali’s calculating expression before his eyes found the floor again.

“I’ve been thinking,” Michael announced without introduction, while serving a handsome portion of everything onto his waiting plate. “Cas, I feel like it’s time I lifted the restriction I put on you early on, the one about handling Dean’s penis.”

Sam choked abruptly and grabbed his juice glass to assuage his coughing. Michael glanced at him but continued. “I believe we no longer need it. I authorize you to touch him however you like. He’s not allowed to handle himself though. That rule doesn’t change, and no one other than you and I have access to his dick. Especially if we plan to move to a full foursome, it seems pointless to try to keep him off limits.”

Castiel seemed both surprised and very pleased. “I appreciate the offer, Michael. Are you certain?”

“I’m sure.” He cut a small bite from his waffle, dredged it in syrup and handed it down to Dean. A sticky dribble landed on the Sub’s thigh. Michael leaned low and ran his thumb through the drop before presenting it to Dean to suck clean. Dean’s behavior was impeccable. Michael paused to enjoy it, then he recovered and sat back up.

“Also,” Michael said, throwing it out as if it had only just occurred to him. “It looks like Dean’s starting to scar on his shoulder – on one side at least. We’ll have to watch the other and see what happens.”

Castiel froze. He stared at Michael. All the other chatter around the table ceased. The Omega went on as if he hadn’t just shattered another well-known “fact.”

“I’m planning to renew the mark later today, but I wanted to wait until you had a chance to see it first.” Michael wasn’t looking at the Alpha. He was focused on his breakfast and on Dean. Cas’ face flickered. Their tablemates were watching a tennis match again, looking rapidly between the two Doms. What Michael said – it could be taken so many ways. Was it a throw-down at his rival? Was it a hopeful sharing of good news? Castiel gave away nothing of what he was feeling, and even a glance at his mate told them nothing. On the ground, Dean flicked his gaze up to April’s for the briefest moment before lowering it again.

“That is astounding news,” said Cas at last, quite evenly. “May I look now?”

Michael indicated in the affirmative with a gesture, following it up with, “You’re the Alpha, sir.”

Cas stood and rounded the table, squatting beside Dean and studying his shoulder carefully. He didn’t touch. Dean leaned his head minutely to the side. “Remarkable,” Castiel said at last. “Alphas don’t scar like this. I don’t know what to think. You two seem to break every rule in the books. Is it sensitive?” His fingers hovered above the scar, but he didn’t connect. They twitched longingly. He obviously wanted to.

“Not that I could tell,” Michael answered. “Dean?”
“No, Sir,” said Dean. “Not yet.”

The ‘not yet’ was a powerful statement. Cas looked up at Michael, and Michael looked at Cas. The Alpha used Michael’s thigh to push himself back up before taking his seat again with a deep sigh. “Fascinating,” was all he said.

Michael knew that Cas had seen the tell-tale redness of a hard-spanked bottom peeking around the edges of Dean’s seated backside while he was down there. He saw the quick up-and-back of his glance. Probably, he’d already spotted the damage in the brief moment when Dean dropped his robe. Cas hadn’t remarked on it though. The Omega-Dominant would need to be careful. One wrong move and it might all still unravel. How far could he push? He’d granted the Alpha more access. Did that buy him a little more room of his own? His Omega seemed to think this Alpha was settling in nicely to a balance point that suited them both, but Michael’s wolf wasn’t buying it. Alphas didn’t share possessions with Omegas. A reckoning was coming, and he waffled back and forth between provoking it on his own terms or putting it off as long as he could. He wouldn’t win. All he could hope for was to retain enough of Dean for himself that he wouldn’t starve slowly.

“I’ll be moving Naomi upstairs today,” Cas announced to the room at large. “Pam is coming this morning to do her evaluation. I haven’t been able to confirm if she’s coming alone, or if she’ll be bringing an investigator with her.” He paused to let it sink in, taking a bite and washing it down with coffee. April received another bite. Cas could obviously feel his fiancé’s disquiet. “Dean, go ahead and proceed with the shopping you and April planned for this morning. If they need to speak with you, they’ll wait.”

“Is Pam part of the investigation?” Jess asked. “Do you need a lawyer present?”

“Not to my knowledge. She would be obligated to tell me that beforehand. I don’t expect any legal issues. The situation is cut and dried.” He stroked April’s hair as he spoke.

“Regardless, Alpha. I’d advise you bring your legal team in just in case. At a pinch, I could stay and take notes. She works for you. It could be a conflict of interest.”

“I appreciate the offer, Jess. Go ahead and stick to your plans, too. We’ll be fine.”

After breakfast, Dean showered, met up with his little sister, and slipped out for a quick supply run. It didn’t break his heart to be out of the house while whatever was happening with Naomi happened. Michael set himself up in the parlor with both pups, settling right on the floor on a large blanket spread beneath them. He was looking forward to the peace of solitude with nothing but his own thoughts and a puppy-pile of little ones.

Cas lingered at the table, reading the Saturday edition of the paper and sipping a third cup of coffee. His dawdling over breakfast in his bathrobe was a rare enough occurrence that Fred raised a brow at him when he swept in half an hour later. Nobody mentioned it. Even the hardest working, most diligent people deserved a lazy day every now and then.

***************

The front bell rang early enough that Cas wasn’t dressed yet. He answered his own front door with a cup of coffee and wearing his bathrobe and a pair of slippers. Pam stood calmly between the stylized stone wolves before the door and smiled at him. Cas didn’t know the man beside her.
“You forgot, didn’t you?” she prompted. He grunted noncommittally and stepped back, ushering them both in. He hadn’t forgotten, he just hadn’t realized it was already 8:30.

“Cas, this is Dr. Havish. He’s with the state. He’s going to be doing the exam for the investigation of Naomi’s injuries. Allen, this is…”

“Castiel Novak,” the man interrupted, thrusting his hand out for Cas to shake. Cas switched his coffee swiftly to his other hand and took the man’s hand in a firm handshake. “I know you, sir. I am quite familiar with your work. Is there somewhere we could talk?”

“This way, Doctor Havish,” Cas said, gesturing to his office down a short hall off the main foyer. “I should tell you by way of introduction that I no longer go by the name ‘Novak’. I’m Castiel Winchester now. You may call me Castiel if you like. I will also answer to Alpha Winchester.”

“I see,” said the doctor in a vague tone. “But your mother remains a Novak?”

“Of course. My mother isn’t engaged to marry Dean Winchester.” Cas ushered them into his office and onto the soft couch before his massive oak desk. The joke fell flat. He briefly considered letting them both wait while he dressed but dismissed the idea. It was HIS home after all. “May I offer you something to drink? Coffee? Tea?”

Dr. Havish declined but Pam asked for coffee with cream. Cas called Michael on his cell phone and asked him to deliver her drink.

“Dr. Novak,” began Havish, but Cas corrected him again.

“Alpha Winchester if you please, doctor.” The guy was a beta-Neutral. He must have been sent from Topeka. Cas had never met him before, and that was rare for medical professionals in the local area.

“Alpha Winchester, then. All right. Do you understand why Dr. Barnes and I are here this morning?”

“Yes, I do. I understand that the circumstances surrounding my mother’s condition are suspect. I agree wholeheartedly. She was abandoned in critical condition on my doorstep with no regard to the repercussions to her health and no follow-through to ensure she was transferred into safe keeping. I demand the perpetrators of this crime be prosecuted.” He left it right there. Even in his robe, the Alpha’s presence took up the whole room.

“All of the particulars of you mother’s case and condition have yet to be determined, Alpha. Your concerns will be taken into consideration, but today’s visit is to assess your mother’s physical condition and attempt to determine if any type of assault is likely attributable. I advise you that my work is part of the investigation and as such, there is no assurance of confidentiality in anything you or she might say in my presence. You are under no obligation to cooperate without the presence of a lawyer, but I would advise that you do. It is my understanding that the Congresswoman’s injuries are believed to be self-inflicted. As you know, verifying that will be a simple matter. Do you have any questions?”

“I have no questions for you, Doctor Havish.” Cas perked up as the door cracked open with a soft knock, and he nodded to Michael to hand off the steaming cup to a smiling Pam.

“Thanks, Michael,” she said. He nodded politely without a word and stepped back out. The door clicked shut behind him. Pam sipped her mug. “You have questions for me?” she asked Cas astutely.

“Not questions about Mother, exactly. I want to know what part you’re playing in this investigation and if there are any conflicts between that and my personal request for you to evaluate Naomi’s
Castiel sat back in his chair, making himself even more an owner of the space. Pam rolled her eyes. “I’ll be evaluating your mother for the state’s investigation, and you get to ride along too. I can share everything I find with you as her Alpha.”

“Once I’m cleared as a suspect?”

“You’re not a suspect, Castiel,” she said a little bit annoyed.

He neither blinked nor looked away. The moment lengthened.

“It would behoove you, Alpha, to cooperate with this investigation,” Dr. Havish interjected. “A reticence to do so is notable in my findings.”

“Indeed?” asked Cas. “A medical examination of a woman you haven’t yet asked after nor established is even on the premises includes a comment about my irritation at receiving no forewarning that my own employee has been hijacked by the state and my dislike of receiving misleading answers to my questions? Please tell me why it’s relevant.”

“Cas…” The Alpha raised his palm to silence his employee, and she stopped. His eyes were on the doctor’s.

After a moment Havish went on. “I intend to conduct a preliminary interview with both you and your fiancé. Is he available to speak with me?”

“Dean is out this morning, running errands. He will return shortly.”

“I will begin with you then. My questions are simple and straightforward.”

“Request denied,” said Cas sharply.

Pam sighed heavily, then scooted back more deeply into the couch and sipped her coffee. Cas flicked a glance at her, then back to the doctor.

“Sir, this is an investigation into potential criminal wrongdoing. You are advised to cooperate.” Havish’s irritation sparked in response to Castiel’s.

“And I intend to cooperate fully,” Cas replied simply. “Once a fully licensed investigator arrives to speak with me. You, beta, are a physician. Shall I show you to my mother now?” He stood up, paused only a moment, and then swept from the office without a backward glance. Pam rubbed her brow in frustration. He was pissed, and she’d be hearing all about it soon. She hadn’t been given much notice herself though. The simple choice had been either her signing on to the investigation team, or their bringing in some barely trained half-wit. At least this way, Cas had an experienced professional who knew her job. Anger management counselling was going to be great fun in the wake of this morning.

Pam stood up too and followed him, leaving Allen Havish waffling on the couch. (What a buffoon,) Pam’s wolf sent out to her, almost percussive enough for her to mumble it out loud.

Stopping in the doorway of what was clearly Castiel’s Heat/Rut room, Pam gaped. She’d never been down here before, and the room was amazing, but the woman lying uncomfortably on her stomach was far more astonishing. Naomi Novak – stripped of her charisma, her power, her mask, her costume, her miasma of efficient energy and charm lay like a wounded animal. Her eyes were nearly blank as she gazed back at Pam. She was clearly just waking up. A soft wedged cushion supported her torso from her lower belly to her chest, lifting her so that her elbows and shoulders didn’t strain.
with the weight of her body when she was awake enough to read. A book lay abandoned on a frame in front of her head.

Dr. Havish caught up. “Oh,” he said as he too pulled up short.

Gabriel stood from a soft chair in the far corner. Castiel leaned low over his mother with a hand to her forehead and another along the back of her neck. He looked every bit the physician he was, not her son.

“Naomi,” said Cas rather loudly, attempting to break her from her fog. “This is Dr. Barnes and Dr. Havish. They are here to examine you. Be polite to them and cooperate with everything they ask of you.”

Her wide eyes managed to focus on his face. She frowned, cleared her throat, and then tried to turn over. He stopped her with a gentle hand on an undamaged part of her shoulder, and she stilled.

Cas gestured both of the doctors into the room and indicated they had his permission to begin their work. Dr. Havish moved in first with a quiet “Humph,” and a re-squaring of his shoulders.

“Mrs. Novak,” he said softly by way of an ice breaker. Gabriel’s face said he didn’t like this guy one bit. Cas caught his eye with a slight shake of his head as he moved across to stand beside his brother. Gabe raised his eyebrows then narrowed his eyes. So much could be said between them without either of them saying a word.

“Congresswoman,” she croaked.

“I beg your pardon?” asked the doctor, folding her blanket back to bare her to her calves.

“I am a duly elected representative of these United States, young man.” Her voice strengthened as she spoke. “You will address me as such, or you will be shown the door.”

Gabe pressed his lips tightly together. Cas remained stoic. Dr. Havish glanced up at him. “I see where you get it from, Alpha. The apple didn’t fall far from the tree, did it?”

Cas didn’t respond.

The exam was thorough. He asked her questions as he poked and prodded her entire body. He asked about medications, checked her sutures, catalogued her injuries, and finished up with photographs that he assured her were entirely confidential and necessary. She cooperated such as she was able. He checked the pupil response in her eyes and commented that the sedative appeared to have worn off enough to rely on her answers. His work didn’t require much help from her. Finally, he handed her over to Pam with a nod, and a snap of his case.

“Congresswoman Novak,” said Pam, stepping up to the bed. “Do you remember me? We’ve met a few times here at the house at parties that your son held. My name is Pamela Barnes. I’m a psychiatrist.” Pam brought Cas up to the far side of the bed with a nod at the blanket, and they covered her back up together. Cas’ face didn’t show any thaw. (Shit,) said Pam’s wolf succinctly. She glanced at Gabe, and he shrugged.

Naomi didn’t reply. She turned her face away and appeared to be settling in for a nap, cool as you please. (They really are just alike,) Pam’s wolf noted. Pam almost laughed but caught herself. She walked around to the far side, pulled the soft chair Gabe had been sitting in right up beside the bed and sat down.

“I need to ask you some questions about what happened to you. Congresswoman, I need you to
answer them truthfully and to the best of your ability.” Pam managed to catch her gaze and hold it. Naomi looked sheepish. Maybe it was the lingering drugs. Sheepish was an odd look on the woman who normally exuded confidence and power. Pam pulled her notebook out and opened it. She jotted a few quick notes right at the top.

“Send everyone away,” said Naomi.

“I can do that if you prefer, but I need you to understand that our conversation will be recorded. No one will hear it but the investigation team.” Pam showed her the small recording device.

“And him?” Naomi didn’t need to explain who she meant.

“Your Alpha may have the right to request an opportunity to hear our discussion as well, but that hasn’t been decided yet.” Pam looked over shoulder where he still stood in the corner. His face was finally registering emotion. She saw pain there. He closed his eyes for a moment and then left the room without another word.

She heard Dean’s voice in the hallway and Castiel answered him, but she couldn’t hear what they said.

“Gabriel, would you please take Dr. Havish to the kitchen for a cup of tea while I talk to your mother?”

“This way, Doc,” said Gabriel in a sober voice that Pam wasn’t accustomed to hearing.

Once they were gone, Pam turned back to the wounded and humiliated woman. “Nothing I’m going to do will hurt you, ma’am. I’m not even going to touch you. Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?”

An abortive sob broke from her lips, and a single tear escaped her control before she reined it all back in again. She shook her head. With great effort, she pulled herself up, turned and worked herself up to sit with a grunt and an unexpected cough. Pam helped her pull the bedding up until she was covered and as comfortable as it was possible to be while all her weight rested on the nightmare of damage across her backside and hips.

“I need to scent you as part of my evaluation,” Pam told her. “I apologize for the intrusion. I won’t touch you. You have my word.”

Naomi didn’t look happy about it, but she lifted her chin and turned her head, giving Pam room to lean in close and assess her scent. What she found wasn’t encouraging. The scent seemed incomplete, like a part of it was missing. It was badly melded, like odors from a kitchen that arise from two different directions, not from the same pot as they should. Pam sat back up.

“Thank you, Congresswoman. From here, all we’ll be doing is talking. I intend to keep it short. I know this is difficult for you.” Pam scribbled short-hand notes while she spoke.

“I don’t need your pity,” Naomi wheezed.

“We’ll start with some background questions and a quick history,” Pam said, ignoring the comment.

“I was Mated once, but my mate left me 25 years ago.”

“He left you? I thought he was killed in a duel.”

“Yes,” said Naomi vaguely. “He left me to go play games with that idiot friend of his and got himself
shot. It wasn’t a duel. It was just two men who couldn’t remember they were men and not children. Never mind pups and wives at home. Never mind that it was the middle of the night…” She slowly stopped speaking and looked up at Pam, startled.

“Can you tell me, ma’am, when was the last time you experienced intimate relations?”

Naomi frowned and licked her lips. “Sex? Do you mean sex?”

Pam nodded.

“I just told you. My mate left me a quarter century ago.”

Pam stared at her. Prudish or not, Lupins couldn’t live celibate. Even the aces like Billie needed a certain KIND of sex every now and then. She cleared her throat and wrote it down before continuing.

“When was the last time you experienced any type of pack hierarchical activities?”

“What the hell does that mean?” asked Naomi, sounding much more like herself than she had before.

Pam cocked her head. “Claiming, ma’am, or spanking. Can you tell me how long it’s been since you played any part in…”

“NEVER! Not once. I don’t engage in ANY of that nonsense, and I never have!” Naomi pursed her lips and crossed her arms over chest.

Pam looked down at her notebook. “You have a Keller score on file, Congresswoman. If you’ve been evaluated, then you’ve experienced hierarchical sex. Surely, there have been moments since then, perhaps spontaneous ones?”

“Oh, good lord! That again? That was the worst day of my life! Zachariah’s father insisted that I go through with that humiliating travesty you all call an evaluation before we married. I’ve never been so mortified in my life, not before or since! Pam had read her Keller report. She’d copied down a couple of notes in the margins of her book already. The report was old, but the test hadn’t changed substantially since then. Whatever the beta said now, at one time she was a willing participant. Nothing in her file indicated she’d been anything but enthusiastic during her test, just like the vast majority of Lupins. A revisionist view seemed to be clouding her memory.

Pam thought carefully, and then changed direction. “May I call you Naomi?”

Naomi’s face cleared, and her arms uncrossed as if only just aware of how angry she looked. “I suppose.”

“Naomi, how did these wounds come about?” She nodded to indicate the beta’s torso and legs.

The Congresswoman shifted down in the bed and broke her eyes away. It took a long time and a whole host of expressions crossing her face before she finally answered. Pam waited quietly, giving her space.

“I struck my body to silence my wolf.”

Pam nearly stopped breathing at the admission. There was nothing of the stormy confrontational Congresswoman. This was pure beta speaking. Pam watched her eyes and the muscles in her throat. Something was very wrong, and she thought she knew what it was, but she needed to be sure.
When she finally left the room, she found Cas leaning against the wall waiting for her.

“And?” he asked without looking up.

“We need to talk.”

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Dean parked in his usual spot, but he and April skirted the kitchen entrance, heading outside instead, passing the patio kitchenette, and carrying their burdens straight through to the Pool house. Dean instructed her to dump everything on the little table near the fridge. Fred would have supplied everything if Dean drew him up a list, but there was a tradition to maintain. Filling the pantry with snacks and the desk with writing supplies on his own was how he always started the process. He was superstitious enough not to want to break any part of the cycle that had served him so well. He hadn’t had a butler last time he wrote a book and that one had topped the New York Times Best Seller’s List for four straight weeks.

“Was that Pam’s car in the drive?” April asked him, pulling Cheezits from a bag and handing the box to Dean to stow.

“Yep. Looks like the gang’s all here. I need to get over there before Alpha breaks somebody. You, uh, getting anything murderous from him?” Dean continued to unload groceries, hoping the answer was no. Cas was a tangled mess emotionally when it came to his mother, and Dean just had a feeling.

“He’s not happy, but he seems to have it under control,” she responded. Story of Castiel’s life, they both thought at the same time.

“The rest of this will keep,” Dean decided, tucking the last six-pack in the refrigerator. “Let’s go see if we can help. Grab that bag, there. It’s for Michael.” Dean pointed, and April snagged it.

They rounded the still pool and slipped through a wide French door into the short hallway that opened into the rear of the dining room on one end and the main parlor on the other. Dean nearly ran into April’s upturned hand. She had frozen at the arched entranceway, the plastic bag swinging on her wrist as she caught Dean in the chest. She put a finger to her lips. Her eyes were wide and amused.

“Dim your bond,” she whispered. “Don’t let him know you’re here yet.”

“What…” Dean wondered, matching her volume, but he did as she asked, trying to be subtle about it. He touched Michael’s bond to check on him, but it was peaceful and still. Then the song reached Dean. Michael was softly singing.

Dean leaned across April and peeked into the parlor. Michael had J.T. laid out on one arm. He stood swaying slowly and singing to him with a look of concerned adoration that Dean had seen aimed his way once or twice before. Michael’s wolf was out front. That much was clear. He was a Dominant caring for a charge, and J.T. seemed rapt. Wide eyes, too big to realistically fit his tiny face gazed unblinking at his uncle’s face. Michael’s voice was soft but clear. He was singing… Dean looked at April.

“What song is that?” he whispered.
“It’s from an Andrew Lloyd-Webber show,” she whispered back. “Have you ever seen, *Jesus Christ Superstar*?”

Dean shook his head. Michael still hadn’t spotted them. His voice was confident and clear. He really seemed to know the song, to be trying to communicate something to the pup. Their eyes were locked together. J.T.’s tiny legs folded neatly below Michael’s sternum, and they rocked face-to-face. From this distance, it looked to Dean like everything about the pup was in awe of the wolf singing to him.

Dean didn’t know what to say or what to feel. Some of the song’s lyrics began to filter through. It was a song about loving a man but getting lost in the tide of emotions that went with it, of fearing doing it wrong, of fearing messing it all up, of anticipating losing him or never getting to have him in the first place, of being all wrong for him. Dean couldn’t fathom how it fit into a story about Jesus, not that he was any great expert on the subject. What the hell were they putting into musicals anyway?

He didn’t remember moving, but he found his arms circling his mate’s waist as his chin came to rest on the Omega’s shoulder. Michael didn’t pause. He didn’t seem embarrassed in the slightest. He leaned backward into Dean and kept singing. The pup’s eyes blinked three times slowly and then stopped opening altogether. Michael smiled through the last line and then laid him in the portable crib beside his sleeping brother with a soft sigh.

“J.T. likes show tunes,” said Michael, not as quietly as Dean would’ve done. “Hank prefers Elvis. You should’ve been here for that.” He turned and winked at April. Dean stood speechless.

“What?” asked Michael when neither of the others had anything to add.

Michael smiled, full of happy hormones. He kissed Dean’s nose. “I hope I’m still surprising you when we’re both cranky old men.”

“You’re going to be one hell of a mother,” Dean told him, still in a bit of a daze.

Michael just huffed, gathered the empty bottles from the table, nodded at the baby monitor to get April to grab it, and headed toward the kitchen.

“That’s what I’ve been telling y’all for ages now,” snarked Michael. “I’m good at this.”

“At least you’re humble about it,” said April good-naturedly. She fiddled with the monitor until it crackled to life.

“Humility is for people who don’t have the goods,” Michael teased back. He was in a wonderful mood.

“I’m not sure that’s true,” she countered playfully. “I think it works the other way.”

“Whatever,” said Michael, dismissing the subject. “Dean, the doctor’s here to look at the dragon-lady. Pam and some douche-nozzle from the state. Alpha’s going to need serious soothing after this. I think he’s close to ripping Pam’s head right off her shoulders.”

“Why’s he mad at Pam?” Dean asked, rummaging through the bag he’d separated for Michael to be sure he’d pulled out everything he needed in the other house.

“I’m the Omega, Dean. They didn’t exactly ask me for a consultation. All I know is I could feel and smell the tension when I went in to give Pam her coffee, and Alpha was shooting eye-daggers at her.
I was surprised she hadn’t melted where she sat.”

“Nah, Pam’s tougher than that. She’s probably been roped in to help file the state’s case, and he’s pissed she didn’t tell him straight out ahead of time.” Dean handed the bag to Michael. “He’s kind of whiner sometimes when he doesn’t get what he wants.”

Michael snorted. “And how often is that?”

“Almost never,” Dean laughed. “I better get back there… just in case. You two got the puppies?”

“They’re fine, alpha. We’ll keep an eye on them. They should sleep for a while.” Michael took his bag from Dean and opened it to inspect its contents.

No one missed that beta Dr. Pamela Barnes suffered a full dressing down before she was allowed to shuttle the state’s physician back to his car outside The Facility. Jess, back from running errands, and ready to help Sam pack the pups back up and head home, listened worriedly at the top of the stairs leading to the basement.

“Someone needs to tell him,” she said. “He can’t say that to her if she’s working an official investigation.”

“Well then, tell him,” said Dean. It seemed simple to him. Cas was a reasonable guy. He probably already knew all about it but had let his irritation get the better of him. Gabe had Dr. Douche-nozzle squirreled away in the kitchen.

Jess shook her head. Dean rolled his eyes. “Seriously? Fine. I’ll do it.”

He brushed past Jess, trotted a couple of steps down the stairs and bellowed, “HEY, CAS! Knock it off before you fucking break the law again! If you get arrested, I’m leaving you in jail!”

Castiel’s voice stopped its harangue. Dean nodded smugly at Jess on his way back into the foyer. Sam had the pups tightly bound in their car seats. He was squatted low in front of Hank, adjusting something when he turned and nearly fell backward in startlement. Castiel, full of Alpha fury, advanced coldly on Dean at a fast clip, caught his collar in one hand before the alpha even had time to turn, and disappeared with him down the short hall leading to his office. The door slammed behind them, knocking one of Castiel’s certificates off the wall with a crash of breaking glass.

Pam came back upstairs slowly. She looked worn, but solid.

“Was he angry about your role in the investigation?” Jess asked her tentatively.

Pam shook her head. “No, he’s upset that I didn’t tell him we were doing the physical today and that I knew who the case had been assigned to. I should have called. He’s right. He’s allowed to know ahead of time, but it all happened so fast. I didn’t know the details until early this morning.”

“So, he wasn’t reprimanding you for splitting loyalties?” Jess prodded.

“What? No! Cas would never do that. Look, this was my fault. I fucked up, and he called me on it. The law is clear. Investigations like this, I should have called him, even if it only gave him half an
hour’s notice.” She glanced at Michael. “Dean didn’t need to do that. I can handle my own punishments.”

Michael flinched when he felt the strap begin to land. It was Dean’s pain, not Michael’s, but it was close enough for him to feel sympathy for his mate.

April was sitting on the stairs close to the pups. “He’s still mad as hell. I’m sure he’ll have enough left over for you,” she mused. “Maybe even me too. You might want to take the opportunity to disappear for today. If it’s coming, he’s not going to forget about it.”

Pam glanced down the hall and then back at April. “April would you be able to tell if he was too angry?”

“Too angry to strap someone?” she asked. “He’s not. He knows what he’s doing. Dean’s fine. Or, well, not fine exactly, but he’s going to be fine. Eventually. This isn’t like that night at all.”

“Michael?” asked Pam, shifting her eyes and her focus.

“I agree with Pete,” he said, with glassy unfocused eyes. “Dean’s okay.”

Pam nodded and then settled beside April on the stairs. “I’d better wait.”

It wasn’t a long wait. The alphas emerged from the office to find every eye but Gabriel’s and the abrasive doctor’s on them. Dean stumbled to Michael with a swipe of his eyes to dry the moisture there. Michael held him without comment.

Castiel looked around, settled on Pam and stopped.

“If it’s all right with you, Alpha, I’d like to go ahead and get it over with,” she said calmly.

He didn’t answer, but he stood aside and indicated she should precede him back into his office. There was a sternness about his face that made April shiver. As the two wolves disappeared back behind closed doors, April wondered for the millionth time if being turned on by her mate when he got like that was abnormal. He never seemed to think twice about it, but what did it say about her? She closed her eyes and focused on the eroticism of Castiel’s state of mind, imagining what was happening in his office, and feeling a tingle spread through her lower regions.

Pam collected her colleague with a stiff gait that he didn’t notice, and the two of them left before the clock struck mid-day. Naomi, carried carefully up the stairs by Gabriel, sneezed several times in quick succession when she was taken into her room. She put up a God-awful fuss about the smell, but Castiel didn’t so much as acknowledge it. The bedding was clean, and some of her personal effects had been delivered from Topeka, although not the flail with thistled tips that was found hardening in a pool of blood in her basement. For all Cas cared, it was her room, and it had everything she needed. She would soon be strong enough to move about on her own, at least within her own bedroom and bathroom. The rest was inconsequential. If it just happened to smell like two alphas fucking, well, so be it.

The Novak brothers left her to her dissatisfied mumbling and chose to lunch with the Pack instead. April and Michael had whipped up sandwiches in the kitchen. Cas didn’t miss the way all their eyes tracked him.

“Relax, everyone. I’m fine. Let’s have lunch, and if no one has any objection, I’ll retire for a nap with my mate after we eat.”
“You don’t look fine, Alpha,” Michael told him with his mouth full. Dean kept his mouth shut. He was bruising up nicely now, but he wasn’t really eager to add to it again just yet. Alpha’s message had been thoroughly received. Dean didn’t think a simple strapping for mouthing off was tantamount to a full scene, but he planned to suggest Cas call Benny after lunch and let him know what had happened. Dean couldn’t fathom why his mouth had betrayed him like that.

Cas was clearly having a rough day. He didn’t need a brat stoking the flames. Wasn’t it Dean’s job to soothe the man? Instead, he’d turned up the gas. Dean’s teeth had already begun to work into the divot inside his left cheek when he realized what he was doing. It had been quite some time since he’d felt compelled to apply a punishment to himself, and it suddenly felt very odd. He realized he didn’t need it – hadn’t needed it in some time.

Will wonders never cease?

Castiel returned Dean’s enigmatic smile with a puzzled one of his own, and Michael ran a warm hand over Dean’s shoulder on his way to dig out a bag of chips from the pantry.

The front doorbell rang just at that moment. Quick looks around the table revealed no one was expecting anyone. Voices could be heard after a minute or two, and then both alphas were on their feet and snarling as three complete strangers walked boldly right into the kitchen, chatting happily without a care in the world.

Cas and Dean put themselves between the strangers and their three Omegas. Michael collected April and pulled her around so that the table stood between them. All three intruders froze mid-sentence.

“Who are you?” demanded the Alpha.

“Um, we’re with…”

“Ho! Hold up, Alpha! Jesus Christ!” Nicholas Maraby jogged into the kitchen and threw himself between them. Neither of the alphas lowered their guard or stopped snarling. The smell of aggressive pheromone packed enough of a punch to make their eyes water. “Cas! Earth to Castiel! Put the daggers away, man. These are my musicians. They’re musicians for fuck’s sake!”

“Nick!” April shouted in delight and dashed toward him which turned out to be the wrong move. Dean caught her before she’d taken three steps and practically threw her back at Michael with a fearsome growl. He never took his eyes off the three strangers.

Cas shifted until even Dean was behind him.

Gabriel edged slowly to the far side of the table as well and began to encourage Michael and April toward the garage exit, thinking it best if there were no Omegas in the room at all.

“Alpha, come on. Hey! Listen to me!” Nick tried again. “Mu-si-cians!” he said, enunciating every syllable so that Cas might find his way out of the rage response that had him in its grip.

Castiel snapped himself free of the rage-cloud, but his anger didn’t abate. “Nicholas, what the fuck are you doing here unannounced?! Frederick!!!” he hollered past the terrified trio.

Fred appeared instantly, a couple of travel-bags still in his hands. He looked taken aback himself.

Castiel rounded on him. “What’s the meaning of this?! Since when do you allow unknown persons to wander unescorted through my home while it houses my mate, my brother, and my pregnant mate-in-law? Are we running an open house?”

“My deepest apologies, Alpha,” said Fred bravely. “I believed you were already aware of their
imminent arrival. They arrived with Omega Nicholas, and I’ve never known you to limit his comings and goings before this. I should have considered the changes to the household since he last visited.”

“You think?” shot Dean. He stood down, took a deep breath, and dismissed Fred with a wave of his hand and a stern nod. The fight-attack-kill-destroy hormones drained slowly, leaving his hands shaking a bit in their wake. “Jesus Christ, Nicholas,” muttered Dean, sinking carefully into the closest chair. “What the actual fuck?”

Nick was unbothered by the suffocating scent of alpha in the air. He opened the fridge in the butler’s pantry and helped himself to a beer. “You folks have my muse on lockdown in the middle of nowhere, so I had to bring the tunes to the muse. I don’t know what all the fuss is about. Cas, you want a beer?”

“Where is your alpha?” asked Castiel stiffly, suffering from the same overstimulation of hormones that had Dean sagging.

“She’s back in New York. She sent you a Release of Custody. You want it now?”

“No problem,” Cas asked by way of response.

“I told you, they’re my musicians. Keira is my violinist. Damon plays the bodhran and whatever other percussion we need. Jackson is the cellist. You weren’t going to let April come to New York, Alpha, and I need her if I’m gonna get this right.” Nicholas plopped into Michael’s chair.

“Nick, did you ever think of calling ahead?” asked Dean, mystified at the Omega’s recklessness. He could only imagine how the Alpha would have responded if the pups had still been here – how Sam would have responded. What if they’d wandered in while one of the Omegas was caught on a knot, binding them in place so they couldn’t be scuttled to safety and the alpha in question couldn’t protect the Pack.

“Wanted it to be a surprise,” Nick answered, still baffled by the tension. “Come on in guys. It’s fine. They won’t bite,” Nick called to the three still hovering in the doorway.

No one moved until Castiel reluctantly acknowledged that they didn’t present a hazard to his pack and nodded. They each came forward slowly, the alpha girl first. She approached Cas with her eyes lowered and her head cocked to the side in case he wanted to scent her. The absurdity of the mess struck him, and he stuck out his hand instead to shake hers in a proper introduction. After he’d greeted all three of them and invited them to places at the table, he turned to Dean.

“Would you please track down Gabriel from wherever he’s got them all hiding? They may be halfway to Topeka by now. Tell him it’s all right. They can come back in.”

Dean chuckled and texted Michael. They weren’t headed for Topeka. They were in the garage, waiting for the all clear. It didn’t take long before everyone was gathered around Dean’s table and getting to know one another. Cas leaned over Nicholas and spoke softly into his ear.

“It’s already been one of those days, my friend. Some days are like that, if you’ll remember. It looks like the day isn’t changing much for me. Perhaps you’ll accompany me to my office and show me this Custody Release that Jenn sent with you. Perhaps we can call her together.”

Nicholas blanched, but he nodded gamely, excused himself from the table without letting on that he was moments away from getting his butt blistered, and followed his college roommate out of the kitchen. How an Omega and an Alpha ever managed to share a dorm room, much less successfully, was a story all its own. They had become deep and lasting friends so fast neither could really explain
it. Each had pulled the other out of several sticky situations, both internal struggles with their own psyches and external struggles with other wolves. They had always had each other’s backs. For Nicholas to waltz unannounced into Castiel’s home where he had no idea who might be present or whether his timing was acceptable, and then put three innocent bystanders at risk too, it was reckless to the point of insanity. As much as he adored Nicholas, and he hated to have to play this role, Cas couldn’t not respond. If there was one thing Castiel knew, it was brats, and Nicholas Maraby was screaming for a response.

Dean watched them go with a hand absently kneading his shoulder and the subtle knot of scar tissue beneath the surface. He felt eyes on him and a pinch to his hip from Michael through the bond. A flick of his eyes found his mate twirling car keys by the butler’s pantry.

“Let’s go for a drive, Dean,” Michael said provocatively. “Bring the first-aid kit.”

Dean’s fingertips pressed into his scar, searching for any sign of heightened sensation, but there was nothing. It was just a scar. He wanted more.

“You’re on. You drive. As soon as Cas gets back, we’ll go. I know a great place not too far from here.”

Chapter End Notes

Huh. When I wrote it, it didn't feel like there was much movement in this chapter. Then I had to put the summary together. Not much movement in the macrocosm, maybe, but back at the ranch, too much all at once. My head's spinning. How about yours?

Love you bunches!
Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

Nicholas is after something. Dean and Michael get their gears aligned, and get a little sunburned doing it. Michael has a great idea that turns out to be, maybe not his best idea.

Chapter Notes

Quick note: I want to take another minute to say how MASSIVELY grateful I am to every one of you. Shout-out to KreweOfImp for talking me down again from hyperventilating about the word count. I'm a bit of a basket-case right now.

As a writer of this mammoth, I of course love every chapter like my own children, but like my children (don't tell them I said this), I love some chapters more than others. This chapter is suddenly one of my favorites. I hope you aren't sated on smut and spankings yet. There's more in this twofer. I hope you like it too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 77 – Saturday, July 22, 2017

NOW:

Waiting for Cas to get back taxed Michael’s patience. He wanted to take Dean somewhere remote out in the sunshine and Claim him just like he’d done a couple of months ago, riding him until the alpha knot locked them together and piercing his flesh with sharp canines. He wanted Dean’s bite on his own body renewed too. How much sweeter would it feel on top of all the sensitive nerves that had grown up into his Mating-scar? Michael grew hotter just thinking about it, but Dean was adamant that they not leave the Pack Omegas without suitable supervision. Dean didn’t know any of these people, and he wasn’t about to leave them alone with April.

Cas would kill him.

“Why are you here, Nicholas?” Castiel demanded. The Custody Release sat unfolded on his desk, and Nick’s face was still blotchy from his strapping. He sat uneasily on Castiel’s couch. It had taken no effort to win Jenn’s agreement that her Omega deserved a solid punishment, and she herself had apologized profusely for not calling the Winchester Pack to make the arrangements. Apparently,
Nick told her he would take care of everything.

Nicholas was a true brat, like Dean, but he always grew dead serious where his music was concerned. Cas saw that side of him win forward to answer the question.

“She’s got the freshest ear I’ve come across in ages, Cas. I really do need her for this. Look, she’ll get full credit. I’m not exploiting your mate. This’ll be so good for April, for her career, and she’s going to help write a smash hit. She’s got the chops for this. I just need a week with her – two weeks tops.”

Castiel didn’t reply. He waited. There was more.

“She told me they rejected her,” Nick said at last. “Those pricks have no idea what they just let dribble through their fingers. She could play circles around the rich, tight-ass, run-of-the-mill…” He stopped and sighed. “She needs a manager, Castiel. She needs an agent.” Nick shuffled his feet and shifted with a grunt. “She needs a plan.”

Cas frowned at his friend. “You’ve barely even heard her play. Why are you so confident in her potential?”

Nicholas laughed abruptly. “Barely even heard her play? Cas, we’ve been in contact since you left New York. She sends me snippets and full-length renderings of all kinds of stuff. She’s got a range and a scope like you wouldn’t believe. She’s 18-fucking-years-old, and she can play the full breadth of the American songbook from memory and make it better than it’s ever been covered. She’s got a huge classical repertoire. She knows how to adjust her style to any genre, she plays music, Castiel. She’s the real deal, man. You need to let her move on it right now. This industry eats prodigies if they wait too long.”

“She said she doesn’t feel ready. She wants more training. We’re working on setting up some in-home lessons on music theory and composition. She wants to start a family before she really goes for it.” Cas was uncomfortable discussing April’s career without her, but Nick was a confidant, and Cas wanted an honest opinion.

Nicholas grunted again with a grimace and stood up, rubbing the ache out of his butt. He’d forgotten Castiel’s strength. It had been a long time. “A family,” the Omega repeated. “That could fuck up everything.”

“I promised her,” said Cas flatly. “I’m not going back on my word.”

“All right. Let me think about it. Hey, at least give me a week or two to work with her. Start her career off with an addition to her resume that’ll give her instant credibility.”

“Nicholas, I can’t let you prop her up. She doesn’t want that.”

“Hold up, Alpha. Who said anything about propping anything. I’m telling you, big guy, she’s really got it. She’s the real deal. She’s doing me a huge favor just by advising. If I can convince her to stop being intimidated by the idea that she’s not a professional and just take a go at the tunes…Fuck it all, Cas, she’s brilliant.”

“That’s what Michael keeps telling me,” mused Castiel thoughtfully.

“You’re no philistine, yourself, Castiel. You know talent when you hear it. Are you telling me you had no idea she’s talented?”

Cas thought about it. “I figured I was biased,” he admitted. “I’ve loved everything she’s played for
me, but the truth is, she could sculpt soap bubbles in the bathtub, and I would think she was a prodigy."

Nicholas laughed at his old friend’s discomfort. “You said she’s got private tutors?” He waited for Cas to nod. “Get ‘em here. Bring in everyone you trust to weigh in on the subject, and let’s brainstorm a path forward. If you’re going to insist on knocking her up, then we need to plan around that.”

Cas regarded his old friend. “You know I love you dearly, Nicholas. You don’t owe me anything. You don’t have to do this. I know you’re busy with the new show and the one you’re writing…”

Nick waved him off. “Two things, Alpha. One. She’s Omega. She’s Ozzie. The world’s not going to give two fucks for her unless she gets a springboard from somewhere. Two. She’s really fucking talented. I would be out of my mind not to try to jump on her train before it leaves the station. And don’t think this is altruism, man. I expect a cut when she hits the big time.”

Cas laughed, and the crinkles around his eyes told Nick he was genuine. “Are you going to pay her for her contributions to your current project?”


Cas’ face deadpanned, and Nick broke. “Of course I’m going to pay her. It’s a standard contract. I’ll get the business guys to send it over. I hate that stuff. Don’t make me talk numbers.”

“It’s really good to see you, Nicholas. I’m glad you came,” Cas admitted softly.

Nick rubbed his backside, and Cas chuckled, saying, “You probably should have called us first. But, hey, at least you’re fully Released now and primed to get to work. I assume you’ll want to stay here? I can offer you and your musicians our Guest house. Make use of the Conservatory however you need to.”

Cas opened his office door and started down the hall, but then stopped and turned. “I expect guests in my home to meet the usual standards of civility while they are here. Do you see any reason we might not meet that goal?”

“We’ll behave, Alpha. I got an alpha with me though. Is that going to ruffle your feathers?”

“I will arrange to have a chaperone with my mate while she’s working,” Cas decided and then added sarcastically, “She’s going to love that.”

Castiel was pleased to find that Dean waited for his return before scooting out for whatever rendezvous he had planned with Michael. He kissed Dean’s lips gently and sent the couple on their way with a half-hearted reminder to behave.

The day was finally looking up if his mate’s glowing expression was anything to go by. She was deep in discussion with…uh…the drummer, whatever his name was, and she had that special liveliness that he’d first seen while watching her onstage in Phoenix. The two of them tapped out rhythms with their fingers on the table, seemingly at random, and Cas couldn’t look away from her face. Nicholas cleared his throat pointedly from beside Cas, catching the Alpha in a moment of sappy bliss. Cas nodded and turned, pulling out his phone. He stepped into the parlor as the phone connected him to Benny.
“Hey there, brother. You figure out who you’re hauling over with you for dinner tomorrow night?” Benny answered the phone with almost no preamble.

“It’ll be Dean and me only this time, Benny.”

“Done and done, my friend. I’ll tell Andrea. She’s right here. Hold on.”

Cas waited for him to return. “You know, you don’t sound your usual chipper self, Alpha. Something eating you?” asked Benny as he came back on the line.

“I had a rough morning,” Cas admitted. He laid out the whole thing to his friend, admitting that he’d already had cause to apply a strap to his brat’s backside without the supervision he’d agreed to, but Benny just laughed.

“Look, as long as you’re both good with it, that’s all that matters. The offer still stands though. I was really more worried about a full scene than you getting your panties in a wad over Dean’s smart mouth and taking him out to the woodshed. I’m still game if you are.” Benny’s calm, cheerful voice was a balm to Castiel’s nerves.

“I would really appreciate having you there, Benny.”

“All right, then. It’s a date. And what else can I do for my Alpha?”

Cas laughed again. “I need to put together a chaperone rotation while Nicholas is here. I’m not comfortable leaving April alone with his colleagues. I don’t know them, and I won’t risk her safety.”

“I can imagine there’d be a waiting list for folks wanting to sign on to that detail, brother. Call Charlie. If we can spare the folks, I got no problem with sending some of them to work from your house next week. I doubt Bobby would mind either.”

“Thanks, Benny.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow. Tell Dean he’s bringing the pie.”

***************

It was hot, but Michael and Dean rolled the windows down rather than running the A/C. Chevelles weren’t supposed to have A/C anyway. Someone had sneaked in a retrofit somewhere along the way. To a purist like Dean, it touched on sacrilege. Dean admired the way the lines of his mate melded with the lines of the car. Michael held his lower body more stiffly than usual, but he looked relaxed and happy as he steered with one hand.

The Omega cocked an eyebrow and nodded at the folder between them.

“It’s my Keller report,” Dean told him. “It’s got all that Z-stuff in it too. You wanted to know, so I figured now was as good a time as any to come clean.”

“Come clean?” Michael asked.

“You know what I mean. I’m strange, Michael. I feel pleasure when someone hurts me. I don’t care
how you spin it. That’s weird.”

“No weirder than wanting to watch the man you’re in love with get gangbanged by a roomful of strangers,” Michael pointed out.

Dean cocked his head in acknowledgment and turned to look out the window. His sense of shame was right there on the verge of taking him again, and he searched valiantly for a way to do this without plowing right through it for once.

“Hey.” Michael tapped his leg. “It’s just me, Dean. What could you possibly be afraid to tell me?”

“Read it for yourself,” Dean said cryptically. “I got that report when I was 19 years old. My dad had taken off. I had Sammy looking to me to keep a roof over our heads. I was a month away from having no income to buy groceries, and some schmuck in a lab coat tells me I’m a Profound Submissive. What the fuck was I supposed to do with that? And that’s not even taking the Z-score into it. Turns out I can actually get off on virtually anything. Anything, Michael. You knock me into a Submissive state, and I’m like the world’s most suggestible Sub. You wanna see me come from shooting Roman candles outta my ass or licking wallpaper? I can probably do that.”

Michael was grinning at the windshield as he directed the car. “I don’t see the problem,” he said happily.

“It’s fucking embarrassing!” Dean protested loudly. “I’m an alpha for fuck’s sake! But get me on my knees, and I’ll literally do anything.”

“That’s not true,” Michael told him seriously. “You have limits. I’ve seen them. You don’t like the enema, for one. That much I know. Plenty of people get all kinds of hot over a good warm clean-out.”

Dean shook his head. “Michael, if you were one of those people, and you put me in a scene with a hose and a bag, I would pop a boner and come just from the idea of it. Just because you wanted me to.”

“Really?” asked Michael, splitting his attention between the road and his mate.

“I don’t really have any limits,” confessed Dean. “I mean, there are things I really like, you know, just for me, but the fact is, if my Dom wants something from me, I’ll do it without blinking.”

Michael frowned, not at the idea that Dean was so malleable, but at Dean’s discomfort about it. “You’re going to be bored to death being Mated to me, then,” Michael told him. “I’m really pretty simple. Most of the time I just want a good hard fucking. How vanilla is that?”

Dean turned back to look across the bench seat at him. “What about all that ring master gangbang shit?”

Michael smirked. “Yeah, that’s there too. But not every day, Dean. Crap, I couldn’t keep it up long if I tried to pull that off all the time.”

They fell back to silence. Dean directed Michael to turn off into a high field of growing corn. It was just the right season to hide in the corn field. The stalks were just starting to top out. They were green and pliable, and they smelled sweet. They left the car on a tractor path clear of the road and hiked in among the earthy stalks. Michael carried the blanket while Dean clutched the folder.

“Are we trespassing?” Michael asked, looking around.
“Uh, obviously,” Dean told him. “Do we own this field?”

“Could’t we get arrested?”

Dean scoffed. “You don’t have cornfields in Texas? Where do teenagers go to make out?” Michael didn’t answer him, so Dean tried again. The Omega looked nervous. “Relax, man. Everybody does it. The farmers don’t care as long as you don’t wreck anything, leave a big mess, or hang around at harvest time. Hell, there are folk songs about what goes on in the cornfield.”

“When’s harvest time?” asked Michael, suddenly alert as if a tractor might appear at any moment with swinging scythe blades.

“October,” laughed Dean. “I think we’ve got time.”

Dean found a clear space where a few stalks had failed to take root, and he spread the blanket on the warm dry dirt. Sunlight dappled between the leaves and made it a gentle, hidden place, cooler than out by the blacktop, and quieter than Michael expected. It felt intimate. Dean pulled his T-shirt over his head and unbuttoned his blue jeans while kicking at his boots to work his feet free.

“What are you doing?”

Dean grinned. “You haven’t lived until you’ve fucked out in the sunlight, my Omega. There’s nothing in the world like feeling the wind on your skin and the sun on your cheeks. Come on. Get naked.”

“But…”

“Fine. Just down to your skivvies, then. We’ve got talking to do first anyway,” Dean left his boxer briefs in place, plopped down on his belly on the blanket and let his toes hang off the far end to rifle through the soil. “Hurry up or I’m gonna fall asleep. This feels really good, and it’s gonna make me sleepy soon.”

Dean cradled his cheek in his folded arms and closed his eyes. The dappled sunlight played chase with the freckles on his back, and the strong muscles beneath the skin on his shoulders rolled as he adjusted.

“Jesus H. Christ, Dean. You are such a show-off.”

“And you need to loosen up.” Dean didn’t open his eyes. He could feel Michael watching him, and the accusation was totally true. Dean loved being admired by his mate, and he was under no illusions that Michael didn’t find him irresistible like this.

Michael sighed and looked around one more time before evidently deciding if he couldn’t beat his mate, he might as well join him. He shot Dean a fierce look that promised death and dismemberment if their tryst ended with them both naked in a jail cell, and he stripped down to match the alpha. Dean’s pride captured Michael right behind his sternum as he sank to the blanket beside his mate.

“You’re going to be the death of me, Winchester.”

“Look at you,” Dean responded conspiratorially, leaning in close. “All trespassing and behaving lewdly and saying ‘Fuck the law’ and everything. I’m proud of you. If we get this talk over with fast, I’ll let you play pirate, and you can capture me, overpower me, and take me right here, you big strapping beast.”

“Shut up and open the folder. I wanna know what I’m buying.” Michael reached across him and
made a grab for the folder, but Dean shifted it out of the Omega’s reach.

“BUYING? Run that by me again and remember who bears the seed for every pup you’re ever going to have.” Dean juggled the folder unsuccessfully, and a rain of papers showered him as Michael wrestled for custody of it. Both giggled like children and soon they abandoned paper and lost themselves in kissing and rolling, each seeking the advantage of the high ground.

“I won’t need any more of that seed for another couple of years at least,” Michael teased, his voice low. “I’ve got what I need from you for now, thank you very much.” He rolled Dean and pinned him, hovering over him and moving in slowly for a seductive capture of Dean’s lower lip. Dean winced as Michael tortured his lip with his teeth almost hard enough to draw blood.

Dean wrenched away from Michael’s vicious teeth and faked a move to the left enough to dislodge Michael when he shifted back to the right and slid out from under his mate. Dean got the better of him, ending up flattening Michael on his belly into the dirt, the blanket crumpled and discarded. “Big talk,” he whispered in a menacing tone right into Michael’s quivering ear, “From a guy who was begging for my knot all fucking night long.”

Michael laughed. “Begging!? You wish!”

Dean used the strength of his designation and their relative degree of disrobe-ed-ness to press his advantage. He growled like he meant it and rolled his hips against Michael’s ass. “Beg for me, Omega. Say you can’t live without my knot. Tell me how much you need me to breed you. Say it, Michael.”

“Make me,” Michael whispered.

And then it was game on.

Some time later, after an unfortunate line of crushed stalks had taken killing blows, papers had scattered to rest here and there against stalks that remained staunchly defiant, and both men nursed wounds they hadn’t started with, they lay side-by-side in the dirt, panting, covered with grime and sticky fluids of various origins. Michael touched the broken skin on his shoulder carefully. Now that it was opened again, even a simple touch made his groin tingle.

“We were supposed to do that AFTER we talked.”

Dean laughed, and then moaned as his abdominal muscles protested. “You started it.”

“Did not,” huffed Michael. “You tripped me!”

“Well, you punched me in the fucking stomach!”

Michael rolled over, hauled himself to his hands and knees and laughed victoriously. “Yeah, I did. Worked too, didn’t it?”

Dean groaned as he stood up, bare to the sun and the birds, searching for his clothes and the scattered contents of his most private personal folder. “I’m getting too old for this, man.”

“No, you’re not. That was first rate work, alpha. I’ve got no complaints…except maybe how much grit I have in my hair…” Michael stood up too and shook his head out like a dog.

It didn’t take them long to settle back down, dressed again and having recovered the missing pages. Dean hoped he had them all. It was private shit after all, and each page had his name at the top. He shuffled through them looking for page numbers.
“Did we bring anything to drink?” asked Michael leaning back on his hands.

Dean snorted. “How long have you known me?”

“It’s back in the car though, isn’t it?” He looked longingly down the track.

“Hold on, kiddo. I gotcha.” Dean struggled to his feet and set off jogging. “You want water or Gator-aid?” he hollered back at Michael.

“Water’s fine!” Michael called back. He picked up the folder and opened it. There was a headshot of Dean at 19 stapled to the top corner of the first page. Michael smiled at the boy in the picture, covered in soft freckles, and obviously scared out of his wits. He read the preliminary notes and the admittance assessment. It looked to Michael like the prelim team were all smitten with Dean before he ever disrobed. A ping of prideful ownership hit Michael’s solar plexus again, and he blushed even though no one was around to see him.

All those envious girls, all those covetous boys, they all wanted what Michael had. And he’d won Dean fair and square. He’d won him the way nature intended. Dean belonged to Michael by divine providence, by absolution from the Universe, and Michael felt like if he didn’t get his ass to church to start giving thanks, he might well be struck dead where he sat.

He turned the page. A lengthy written report followed Dean’s vital statistics. Michael skipped it for now. There wasn’t likely to be anything in that section he didn’t already know. The next page was the familiar, although soon-to-be-outdated, Keller graph showing Dean’s placement relative to standards. This version was shaded and labeled to highlight how deeply Sub Dean was. Michael studied it, and then traced with his finger where his own point would be. A line drawn between them would almost run perfectly through the 0 of both axes. They were near perfect off-sets. Michael put his thumbnail in his mouth and chewed absentmindedly on it while he studied the chart. How perfect were they together, really? Could data like this really tell a couple whether one would be driven crazy by the other’s snoring or if they would bicker over who left the empty mayo jar in the fridge? Could numbers describe who was suited enough to put that indescribable warmth behind someone else’s breastplate?

Michael turned the page again just as Dean strode up with several bottles of cool water and a swipe across his forehead to clear the dripping sweat.

“Holy fuck, it’s hot. Whose idea was it to do this outside?” He crumpled in a heap beside his mate and then fell backwards onto his back spread-eagled.

“Mine,” said Michael placidly, focusing at the report and trying to make heads or tails of what it said. Dean jabbed him in the side with a water bottle, and Michael took it without looking up.

“You get to the good stuff yet?” Dean asked him.

“Mmm,” said Michael. “What does it mean?”

“You see this part?” Dean pointed at a sentence about halfway down. Michael read it. “That says that I’m a brat to my very core, and nothing anyone can ever do will change that. I’m kinda proud of that sentence. Might embroider it on a throw pillow and keep it on the couch.”

“How is that related to kinkiness?”

“It gets tangled into everything I do except when I’m alpha. It colors a lot of the scenes I do. It affects how I take to punishments. Everything, Michael.”
Michael nodded. “And what about this here?” He pointed. Dean looked over his shoulder.

“That’s the stuff that wigged me out when they read it to me,” he told his mate, leaning back again to stare up at the clouds. “It says something about abhorrence to manifest control, or something like that? It means I want to let go of everything and trust the freefall. They told me I could get myself in big trouble trying to play like that, and they’re right. If I hadn’t had Cas…fuck, I don’t want to think what I might’ve let some douchewad do to me.”

“Dean, your dislike of calling a safeword; is that from this ‘abhorrence’ thing? I mean, is it that you can’t call it when you should, or you just don’t want to?”

Dean sat up, leaned far forward and plucked a grassy weed that he began to slowly strip into separate strands. “I tell myself that I’ve got a Dom who is so good at what he does, that I’m safe to put it all in his hands. I don’t ever even consider the idea.”

“You have ”A” Dom who’s good at what he does?”

“Don’t get jealous, Michael. I formed these bad habits way before I knew you.”

“What about if something that happened in a scene triggered a panic attack? What if something hurt you in a way you hadn’t agreed to? What would it actually take for you to stop the play?” Michael frowned at Dean’s back, but his mate didn’t turn around.

“You don’t get it, Michael. He would NEVER do that. That’s why it works. He’s got me. He’s always had me. I’m safer in his hands than anywhere else on earth, even if he’s taking me apart slowly and my whole body’s screaming in pain. If I had to keep one eye open the whole time and watch out for where the boundary lines are, it would ruin the whole thing.”

“Dean, I don’t want to play like that. I’m not as good at this as he is. I can’t keep doing this without knowing you’re watching out too. I can’t.”

Dean took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He sat up straight again and turned to face Michael. “I know. And I’m okay with that. You and me are different. And, hey, I’ve called a couple of ‘em now. See? I’m getting better.”

Michael gave him a sidelong glance before returning to the report and mumbling, “You safeworded for me, not for you. Don’t think I didn’t notice that.”

Dean made an offended noise, and Michael rolled his eyes. “Not that I didn’t appreciate it. Of course I did. You made the right call both times, but I’m still not convinced you’ve turned a new leaf. Looking out for me is one of the things you do without having to think about it. I want you to value yourself just as much as you do me.”

“Well, that’s what the therapy is for, man. One thing at a time. Oh, and I gotta go talk to Pam about it now too. Seems like the committee thinks I was wrong to stay mum when Cas flayed my ass off a few weeks ago.”

“They’re right, Dean. You should have. You say he would never, but he did.” Michael’s eyes were hard to hold, and Dean looked away.

“No, he didn’t. Everybody’s wrong about that night, even Cas. We needed that. We needed it just exactly how it went down.” Dean stood up and rubbed his butt to get the blood flowing again. Funny how the sting turned into a dull, aching numbness after a few hours.

“You don’t deserve to be the whipping boy for his catharsis, baby. Nobody deserves that, but
especially not you.” Michael craned his neck and squinted as he tracked Dean’s passage across the sun. Dean noticed when his shadow shaded his mate, and he stopped there.

“It’s not like that.”

“Tell me to stay out of it, and I will, Dean. But be honest. Can you tell me honestly that you and he have a healthy sex-life? There’s no coercion going on? You’re not talking him into digging deeper than he should out of a sense of penance? Don’t try to hide it from me. I know how deep that shit goes inside you.”

“I want you to stay out of it,” Dean told him firmly. “We’re not in dangerous waters. We know what we’re doing. I promise.”

Michael chewed on it, but then he conceded with a nod. Except for that one night when he’d helped Cas practically carry Dean to bed and he’d sat up in earnest worry for most of the night, he’d seen or felt nothing that really seemed out of line for an extreme-rated practitioner of the Lupin version of BDSM lifestyle. They seemed happy together. At least, now they seemed happy. It had been a weird and warbley journey to get this far.

“All right, Dean. Let’s talk about us. You and me.”

“You lifted Castiel’s lockout from handling my junk, but you left me banned,” Dean stated by way of opening negotiations. He sat back down and selected a bottle from the small cluster he’d tossed onto the blanket.

“I did, and I’m sticking to that. I like the way it works when you have to think about what’s available to you rather than run straight to jerking off.”

Dean nodded. “Fair enough. You’ve got a point. In fact, you’ve got such a good point, I’m going to match that rule. Hands off, Omega. From now on, your dick waits on me or whoever I give permission to. Same limitations, same allowances.”

Michael pursed his lips but didn’t say anything. He was surprised, honestly, that he’d made it this long without having that rule applied. It was standard Mated Omega fare. He saw an oversight, but it wasn’t his job to tighten the noose.

Dean went on. “I think what you’ll find that report tells you is that you and I are a perfect match. You like to morph into whatever your partner wants you to be, so you can make them feel good. I’m exactly the same. As long as I don’t have to take the reins, I’ll tumble for any kind of scene you think up.”

“What if I was into golden showers?” Michael put to him.

Dean smiled at his feet. “Never tried that. I put it on my ‘hard no’ list mostly so there would be something on the list. People look at you weird if they hear you have no limits.”

“Dean, be straight. No limits?”

“You can’t fuck with my face, Michael. Like, you can’t make me get a tattoo on my cheek. That would screw up my career. How I look helps sell the message, and we need that.”

“And that’s the only thing off-limits? What about girls?”

Dean rolled his eyes and sighed. “I really am gay, baby, so that one’s a no-brainer. But if it really came down to it, under the right conditions?” Dean blushed. “It’s embarrassing. This shit is fucking
hard to talk about, man. When I go way under, like really deep inside whatever part of my psyche loses verbal ability, all that matters is being whatever my ‘Sir’ wants me to be. You could put me on the rack and pull me in two, and as long as you were really into it and getting off, I will too.”

“How does that reconcile with being a brat?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Tell me about it.” Michael closed the folder and shook his head out again. He looked at Dean and watched his Adam’s apple jolt as he chugged the whole bottle of water. “So I’m cleared to set up a gangbang for you? You’re good with that?”

Dean spluttered. “Yeah,” he choked out on the tail end of his coughing. “Yeah, I’m good. Look, you don’t have to ask each question four times. We talked about this already. Go. Set it up. I’ll be there.”

“How do you want input on who we bring in?”

“Pick guys I already know for the first try. I think that would be good. Call Balthazar in the Contractor’s Department. He knows who I work well with. He knows who to steer you away from.”

“Balthazar. Okay.”

“Tell me what you want to do,” said Dean playing with his empty bottle.

“I want to bring you into a room with a bunch of horny guys like you’re catnip. I want to stand back and direct everything they do, from undressing you, to positioning you, to working you over. Prep, rimming, teasing, spanking, some fucking, the whole nine yards. No one does anything I haven’t told them to do, and you behave yourself and take whatever you’re given. When I’m ready, I’ll shoo them off like flies around a Sunday roast and make them watch while I ride your knot to the very end. Maybe you’ll have a cock in your mouth, your ass, and both hands while I’m getting my ride. I haven’t decided that yet. You can expect some humiliating language. You can expect some pain. I might have them bind you somehow. In the end, if you’ve pleased me, you get to come, but come before I authorize it and there will be consequences you won’t like.”

Dean blinked at him. His water bottle was mashed in his fist. Michael smirked. “Sound acceptable?”

Dean cleared his throat. His hard-on, with the way he was sitting, would be impossible for Michael to miss. “Um, yeah. I, uh, I think I could get behind that plan. How many guys?”

“5 or 6?”

“And all of them professionals from the Facility?”

“If that’s what you want. It’s not like I know a lot of people in town to go propositioning. I’m not putting out a Craigslist ad.”

Dean smiled again. “I’m in, Michael. Let’s do it.”

Michael leaned in and kissed Dean’s lips. “Thank you, Dean,” he whispered. “I knew you had it in you. I knew it from day one.”

“Know-it-all,” accused Dean with a pout.

Michael straightened. “You still haven’t really told me what you like, Dean. I get the whole partner-pleasing thing. Believe me, I do. But what are the highest items on your personal menu?”
Dean picked at his fingernail. “You’re going to think it’s stupid.”

Michael scoffed. “Really? After everything we’ve said and done? What could you possibly tell me that would sound stupid?”

Dean blushed again. “I’m really a man of very simple pleasures, Michael. I like to be fucked. That’s my number one. No frills, no scene necessary. Second is I like a good hard hand-spanking. Third, let me choke on your cock every now and then. That’s really it. That’s all there is to keeping me happy.”

Michael gaped at him. “But what about all the Submission stuff? All the Balancing and kneeling?”

“Well, yeah, for my wolf. He needs to kneel, and scrape and bow, and all that. Yeah, that’s true. But if we’re talking about sex, and what gets me off…It doesn’t take a complicated map to find my big O. I’m really pretty straightforward.”

Michael leaned back on his hands again, thinking, working it all out, trying to put the puzzle together. “You need to Submit,” he stated, working from the beginning. “That comes from your wolf and your human brain. You need to kneel and turn all your power over to a reliable authority so that you can freefall. It’s exactly like me, but in reverse.”

Dean nodded.

“And your alpha needs to Claim its bitch and knot the hell outta the Omega mate – that’s me – every so often to keep it satisfied and score it some puppies.”

Dean nodded again with a chuckle. “Also exactly like you, but in reverse.”

“But once all those urges are met, OR” he added as he saw Dean start to interrupt, “In the meeting of those urges, a simple face-to-face mono-a-mono or a reddened ass will fit the bill. You don’t really NEED wax candles or handcuffs unless your Dom does, and then it’s all systems go. Is that about it?”

“I can’t manage my own emotions sometimes, Michael. Sometimes it’s easy, but there’s a scary dark side of me that I had to hand off to Castiel. I can’t do it. I wasn’t built to do it. And my need to kneel and to tweak and provoke…that stuff pops up more often than I ever wanted for myself. It makes me feel like I’m not a full adult. If you want the straight truth, being this submissive is emasculating. I hated it for a long, long time.”

“And now?”

“It’s better. I can’t pretend it doesn’t feel right to get on my knees for the right guy. Redefining how that fits with what I think of as masculine. I mean, it’s not easy, is it?”

“No, it’s not.” Michael felt he and Dean were one and the same on that point too.

“Can I ask you something?” Michael queried with a tilt of his head.

“Anything,” answered Dean.

“I asked Castiel, but he didn’t know. I attended four of your conventions. Sat right there in the audience, not twenty yards from you. Why didn’t we Trigger then?”

“Cause that would’ve killed the whole Con!” Dean joked, but Michael was serious. It had been eating at him.
“Would you have been ashamed of me? If it happened in front of your fans, I mean.” Michael looked like he didn’t want to say that out loud.

“Jesus! No! I could never be ashamed of you. I probably would have dragged you up onstage and Mated you right there in front of the cameras. Fuck, Michael!”

“But you didn’t Claim me. Remember? I Mated you. What if it happened in front of everyone, and it went backward like that? That would have outed you before you were ready.”

“Now you listen to me Michael Quentin Winchester,” Dean said in a hard voice. “There is nothing the Universe has ever thought to create that could make me ashamed of anything about you. You want proof? C’mere.” Dean pulled his T-shirt back off and settled himself in front of Michael so that they were back-to-front. “Put it back,” he said.

Dean leaned his head to the left to offer the little scarred space to his mate.

“But we’re not…Don’t we need to be in the middle of a Claim for it to catch?” Michael fingered the little bumps affectionately.

“We will be,” Dean assured him. “Claim me, Michael. Do it with nothing but a bite. Make me yours and make me feel it.”

Michael leaned in and kissed Dean’s shoulder right over the mark. It would take a while to heal and discover if the scar had deepened, but there was no way to know without trying.

“I’m yours, Michael,” Dean assured him, sending him confirmation through their bonds. “Take me, Sir.”

Michael growled. His body flushed with the rush of the quickening in his blood. He felt alive and omnipotent. The cornfield disappeared. Everything disappeared. His growl thickened and deepened, and he clutched Dean’s ribs as if the man had been trying to escape. But nothing could be further from the truth. This man – this Submissive – belonged to Michael, and he wanted to belong to Michael. He felt dizzy with the rushing blood. He felt powerful. Michael lowered his head slowly and opened his mouth around the spot where his Claim tied. His teeth locked in place as if drawn there by a powerful magnet, and he bit down with a mighty snarl that pulled his lips back. Teeth broke flesh. Blood spilled. The Sub screamed, but Michael tightened his grip. Michael’s Claim pulsed into place, and he closed his eyes to the sensation.

(Mine, mine, mine, mine…) the Dominant wolf mumbled on repeat. Michael ignored the beast. He didn’t have many interesting additions to most conversations, and this was no exception. Michael kept hold with his teeth and pulled up onto his knees. He reached for Dean’s belt buckle and began to work it loose. He couldn’t figure out why the Sub was still dressed. What a frigging nuisance clothes were.

Dean got his hands beneath his mate’s and finished the job for him, pulling up onto his knees too and pushing everything down below the curve of his ass. Michael went to work on his own jeans, his teeth still embedded in his mate’s shoulder. It had to hurt, but Dean wasn’t screaming anymore. He was panting and desperate.

Michael pushed into him on their knees with his arms holding Dean tightly around his chest. He moved in short, hard thrusts that soon toppled them both forward, and Michael lost the grip of his teeth. A long, ropey string of saliva and blood linked the wound to Michael’s lip, but he didn’t notice anything except the feel of Mate beneath him and the need to own. Dean was forced onto his elbows, his face pressed into the dirty blanket. Michael took him violently with no care for his
bruised flesh or the tenderness of his overused hole. They had no lubricant but what remained from their previous tryst, and Dean grimaced at the friction. He was floating too high to think clearly enough to understand that it hurt. He didn’t know pain. He didn’t know pleasure. He knew Submit. He knew he was owned. He knew better than to try to do anything but take it. His knees hurt. His elbows hurt. There were rocks in the soil, and they were making their presence known, but the Dominant had a job to do, and so did the Submissive.

Michael pulled his chest up high, clutched Dean’s bruised hips, and screamed his climax to the sun and the clouds. A flock of grackles picked up noisily from thirty yards away and took off into the sky.

He collapsed beside his mate in exhaustion, flat on his back, while Dean flattened onto his belly. Neither of them moved for some time.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” muttered Dean at last. “I don’t ever want to have sex again. I’m done. Forget everything I said.”

Michael tried to laugh, but all that came out was a silty wheeze. He turned his head. “We should just sleep here tonight. I don’t want to move.”

“Me either,” agreed Dean.

“You okay?” Michael nudged at Dean’s shoulder with his knuckles without bothering to straighten out his hand.

“If that fucker doesn’t scar…” Dean trailed off.

Clouds rolled peacefully by.

“You wanna know why we didn’t Trigger at the Cons, man?” Dean said lazily, renewing their train of thought.

“Hmm?” asked Michael without turning.

“I wasn’t your mate yet,” said Dean.

“What do you mean, not my mate? You’re my True-mate, Dean. We’re perfect together.” Michael rolled onto his side with supreme effort, so he could see Dean’s face.

Dean shook his head. “No, we weren’t. Not then. Not perfect enough. I mean…YOU were. You were spot-on. You’re perfect just as you are, but I was lacking.”

“Lacking what?” Michael furrowed his brow in confusion.

“What did I have at the rest stop where we Triggered that I didn’t have at the Cons?” posed Dean like a riddle.

Michael shook his head. “No.” He rolled back down onto his back.

“Think about it, babe. You hadn’t changed. You got your hand slapped and got kicked out of school, but you were the same person you’d always been. I wasn’t. Between the last Con you went to and when we Triggered, my life changed. Something shifted to put you and me into alignment that wasn’t there before.”

Michael set his jaw, or at least, his wolf did. Dean watched the storm of denial cross his face.
Michael’s wolf didn’t like the implication one bit. Dean wondered if he still held out a morsel of hope that one day Dean’s connection with their Alpha might slip into something less intimate. Plenty of Packs had more than one alpha, and none of them were married to each other.

“It’s the only logical explanation,” Dean persisted. “I know you don’t want to think that I was only ready for you because of him, but…It’s the only thing that changed. Michael, I got engaged.”

“Don’t.” Michael was staring at the sky.

“I need more than I can get just from Cas. No matter how much I love him, he could never be enough for me. Baby, I don’t say this to hurt you, but you need to understand. I can’t get it all from you either. You know that. You’ve seen how it works. I need you both, and you wouldn’t be my True-Mate if I didn’t have him.”

A tear tracked slowly down the side of Michael’s face to stop in his hair. He reached up and wiped his nose with his hand. “Fuck! FUCK! Why does it still hurt so bad? I thought I was over this crap.”

Dean shifted up onto his arms and fumbled his way to wrap around his mate. Having his pants down around his knees didn’t make the embrace exactly dignified. It wouldn’t have been an Academy Award winning cinematographic fade-out, but no one was around except Dean, Michael, and a few settling grackles.

“I’m never going to leave you, Michael. You own me forever. This is my pup growing inside you.” He pressed a firm hand onto Michael’s softening belly. “We’re going to open up our little circle to include the ones we love, but you and me are one flesh. Forever. Nothing is ever going to change that.”

“So, does that mean Cas and April wouldn’t have Triggered if you hadn’t been around?” Michael asked in a gruff voice after a while.

“Probably. Truth is, we’d just finished a massive marathon of a scene that morning. Went all fucking night. Tore me up one side and down the other. I don’t know. Maybe him coming fresh from that put all the pins in place to unlock the two of them.”

“Did you come?”

“Back in February?” asked Dean, puzzled.

“No, dimwit. Just now. Did you come just now when I Claimed you?”

“No. Give me a bit.” Dean looked down at his own stiffy. “It’ll fade on its own. I ate my fill earlier. I think I’m too sore to do anything with it anyway. It’s been a hell of a day or two.” Dean noticed the darkened spot on Michael’s shirt where his erection had rubbed precome into the fabric by Michael’s hip.

“We suck at negotiations,” Michael observed. “Isn’t there supposed to be haggling and bickering and a shitload of rules?”

“Maybe for some people,” suggested Dean. “But we’re True-Mates. We basically lean the same way anyway. Look, now that I’ve thought about it and opened the gates on public scenes, I’m easy. Don’t take me by surprise too much except at home. God, baby, you can do anything you want at home when we’re on your time. But don’t spring something on me in public.”

“I’m sorry, Dean. What I did in Phoenix. That was careless. I was stupid. I just couldn’t get over those ridiculous fantasies in my head. I got carried away.”
“It’s fine. Really. A lot of people who know me well and should’ve known better went right along with it too.”

“Come on, Dean. Let’s get home. I have an idea for your substantial problem there.” Michael nodded at Dean’s boner, still frustratingly stiff.

“Your ideas are not always good ones,” Dean pointed out. “Remember the airplane?”

“Trust me,” said Michael with a wink as he kicked up to his knees and then his feet and pulled his pants back up. They collected their detritus. Dean checked his folder to make sure he had the whole report, and he took Michael’s hand as they limped slowly back to Michael’s car.

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“Wait,” said Dean, still confused, but also still hard as a rock and beginning to ache with unfulfilled promise. “You want me to?” He cast a glance in every direction and scooted low on the bench seat as if passing motorists could see his intention. It’s not like Dean had never gotten his happy on in a moving car before, but his backside was still hot with his Alpha’s last round of irritation and Castiel’s thoughts on the matter of public indecency had never been unclear to Dean. They had a lot riding on their reputations, and one little moment of weakness could tumble it. Dean knew he was photogenic, but no one looked good in a mugshot.

“Here’s the deal,” Michael clarified as he picked up speed down the two-lane highway. “You get permission to do it yourself, but only until we get home. If you haven’t finished by then, you lose the chance.” Michael wasn’t looking at Dean. He was exhibiting good driving behavior by focusing on his path ahead and his mirrors. Only, Dean could feel his intent attention on Dean’s state of mind from inside – intent enough to make Dean blush again.

So not fair.

Dean’s sweaty palms rubbed up and down the denim on his thighs as he licked his lip and considered. It was risky, but not horribly so. There wasn’t much traffic out here. There wouldn’t be any stoplights for ages. Nothing but wide blue sky and birds for the most part. It wasn’t really a public thing at all. And he had permission! His hand itched to circle and stroke. Holy hell, he’d missed it.

“It’s your choice, Dean.”

“Fuck…” Dean muttered, adjusting his hips to ease the strain of pressure against the front panel of his jeans, and incidentally shifting himself a little bit lower onto his tailbone and lower back.

It really was no choice at all. Theories of Parallelism might say that for every possible moment of decision, every choice conceivable is made in a Universe somewhere, but there is not a Universe yet contrived in which Dean Winchester would opt not to act when given an option like this.

He shot Michael a ‘challenge accepted’ glare and had his pants at his ankles before Michael finished checking his side mirror. Dean remained shifted low in the seat, his knees braced against the under panel below the glove box. He closed his eyes and went assiduously to work. He could feel Michael’s digging into his head to pull the sensations straight out of him, and he opened himself to the invasion.
“Pay attention to the road,” he mumbled to Michael as he ringed the upper portion of his dick, up near the head with light, quick strokes. The sensitivity at the top beat anything else, except when he applied hard pressure right on the knot. And, in fact… Dean bit his lower lip, still swollen and sore from Michael’s bite earlier as his left hand grasped his knot and squeezed. That position left his pinky and ring fingers free to explore lower, nudging the flesh of his sac aside, and rubbing firmly along his perineum. It was a little like patting his head and rubbing his belly at the same time in terms of coordination, but Dean was motivated.

He avoided the sore, friction-worn span in the middle, and focused only on the spots that would pay the big dividends. His right hand increased in speed once it picked up the necessary lubrication from rolling across the tip, but he kept his touch light. He didn’t need pressure up top. That was for… Oh, Jes…Mary Mother…Oh, Hell and…!

“God, Dean, you’re so fucking beautiful!” Michael’s awe-filled whisper barely reached Dean, but it made his forehead wrinkle with need and desire.

“Watch the fucking road,” Dean whined back without opening his eyes.


Dean was panting and squirming in his own grip. As great as it felt to have his lovers’ hands on his body, nothing ever felt quite like the certainty of his own. Partners could pull things from him he didn’t know were there, but his own fingers, his own palm, well, it was just different, and Dean missed it. He moaned and smacked his temple against the window by his seat, lifting his ass off the leather to press into his own touch.

“I’m gonna make a mess all over your car, baby,” he told Michael, as if it mattered at this point. “You good with that?”

“Dean…” Michael was trying to assure him there were tissues in the glove box, but those words wouldn’t come out.

“Aaaah!” Dean’s whine topped out in the inaudible range. “I’m gonna… Michael!” His right hand froze in place and squeezed, and his left hand pulsed. Ropes of white shot in pulses from the tip of his penis, landing on his knuckles and the floorboard. Dean’s cheeks were bright pink, and his eyes glazed. His breathing shifted into long deep huffs.

“Holy shit, Dean. I should let you do that…OH SHIT!” Michael’s eyes caught the flash of blue and red lights in the rearview mirror, and they widened. He turned his head and looked to be sure.

“Quick, Dean. Tissues in the glove box! Get your pants up! What the… How did that guy even…?”

Dean was working furiously to make himself presentable, but he didn’t have anywhere to put the evidence, so he crammed the soiled tissues beneath his seat. “Was it me or you?” he asked Michael. “Were you swerving? How fast are you going?”

“Crap!” said Michael with a glance at the speedometer. It was rounding down now, slowing as he responded to the siren and flashing lights, but even as he looked, it was at 79 mph, much too fast, and that was AFTER he had already started slowing.

“Shit! I was speeding. Damnit!”

“I told you to pay attention!” Dean said in panic and irritation, lashing out at the only target he had available.
“I was watching the road! I just didn’t realize we’d picked up that much…Shit! I have no idea how fast I was going when he clocked me.” Michael’s terrified eyes met Dean’s, and the alpha took over.

“Let me handle this,” he told Michael. “Pull over. I’ll talk to him. It’s probably someone I know. Don’t panic. We’ll be fine. It’s just a speeding ticket.”

Michael pulled onto the wide shoulder and came to a stop, putting the car in park. “Alpha’s gonna kill us,” he said on a shaky breath.

“One thing at a time,” said Dean staunchly. He eased his door open and got out with his hands in plain sight. “Stay here.”

The cop was already parked behind them. He’d disengaged the siren, but his lights were still on, a warning to passersby to give them a wide berth. He too got out of his car.

“Sir!” called the brown-uniformed cop, a county guy, Dean determined. “You need to remain IN your vehicle.”

“Omega Mate!” called Dean, using the simplest terms he could to avoid misunderstandings. “The driver is Omega! Don’t approach! Please, officer. I’m not a threat to you, but I need you to come to the passenger side.”

The cop pulled up short, his hand on his weapon, but his face didn’t seem alarmed – wary, but not alarmed.

“He’s Omega, sir,” Dean repeated. There were allowances for interacting with a Mated couple when one of them was Omega. Dean had a right to stand for Michael, but it was always those first few tentative moments of communication where things could go rapidly wrong. Also, dealing with an ape officer sometimes made all the difference. This guy was pack. That could be a help. Dean squinted.

“Dale?” asked Dean, moving toward the back of the car. “That you?”

“Jesus Christ, Dean!” said the cop, relaxing as his brain caught up to the passing of events. “What are you doing? You got any idea how fast you two were moving? This isn’t your car. I had no idea that was you.”

“Uh, yeah. Sorry about that. Got away from us. Big open road, pretty day. Look, we’re just out for a ride.”

“Yeah, I smell that.” Dale was close enough to Dean to scent his recent release and to judge just how recent it had been. “You know there’s laws against gettin’ busy on state highways. We’ve had this discussion before, son.”

“No, no. It’s not like that. I mean, yeah, we did some parking a little ways back, but we buttoned it up before we hit the road. Swear to God.” Dean couldn’t resist placing himself between the cop and his path to the driver’s side.

“You’re a terrible liar, Winchester. But seeing as I didn’t actually see anything, I think we can let that one go with a warning.” The officer paused to let the implications sink in. He fixed Dean with a powerful beady stare, and Dean swallowed.

“Yessir.” He’d known Dale for years. The officer was probably some 15 years Dean’s senior, and they’d always respected each other. Dale White was one of the good guys. His family had roots as deep in Lawrence as the Winchesters did, and that made them Pack in a way. It had never meant
Dean caught much of a break from getting busted pulling stupid stunts though.

“So, your mate is the driver?”

“Yes, sir. His name’s Michael.”

“Dean I need to see Michael’s license, and I need to talk to him. How do you suggest I do that, alpha?” Asking for Dean’s direction was a good way to navigate the miasma of tricky potentially deadly vulnerabilities where cops and alphas and guns and Omegas all occupied the same space. Dean looked back up toward the driver’s side, where he could see Michael watching them through the rearview with both of his hands on the wheel. The engine was still running.

“Michael,” Dean called. “Cut the engine and toss the keys out onto the pavement.” He looked to the cop to make sure he was good with those instructions, and Dale nodded. The car went silent, followed by a jingle/clank of keys hitting the road.

Dean began to circle slowly back to his side where the door was still open. “Come this way, man. I’ll get in, and you can talk to him across me. Don’t get any closer than you have to.”

The officer nodded again that the suggestion was acceptable, and he followed Dean to the passenger side. Dean sat down, but he left both feet on the asphalt, and he kept his body turned toward the cop. Dale, for his part, wisely chose to stay a foot or so clear of the open door where he could see over Dean’s shoulder.

He looked at Dean. “Alpha, do you grant me permission to speak directly to your Omega?” Dale may have known Dean for years, but he was smart enough to follow the protocols in place where A/O confrontations were relevant.

“Go ahead,” said Dean. “But don’t touch him.”

“Relax, alpha. I don’t mean your Omega any harm. I’m just going to talk to him.”

Dean cocked his head to the side, so he could talk to Michael without taking his eyes off the man with the gun. “Give me your license, Michael.”

“I’ve got it right here, Dean.” Michael touched Dean’s shoulder with the card, and Dean took it without looking and handed it to the cop.

“I need yours too, Dean,” Dale told him, shifting his weight to stretch forward and take the license. Dean huffed unhappily, but he pulled his wallet out slowly and handed his license over.

Dale sneezed and then rolled his eyes. “Good God, Dean. There’s no way that stench is older than a minute and a half. Did you shoot your load while you guys were already pulling over? I mean, I know risky situations are a kink for some folks, but that’s cutting it a bit close, don’t you think?”

Dean’s ears went crimson, but he didn’t answer.

Dale was still mid-huff, trying to clear his nostrils and probably only making it worse, when he stiffened and looked right past Dean straight at Michael.

“He’s pregnant?”

“What?” asked Dean and Michael at the same time.

“Son, are you pregnant?” the cop asked Michael directly.
“Um, yes, sir,” Michael admitted.

“Do you know how fast you were travelling when I clocked you?”

“No, sir.” Michael resisted admitting he’d been too distracted to check his speed.

“My radar gun registered 94, son. That’s miles per hour. You know what the speed limit is on this stretch?”

“Uh, I think it’s 60,” said Michael softly.

“That’s right. It’s 60. You were going 34 miles per hour over the speed limit with a distraction in your passenger seat and a bun in your oven. You got anything to say about that?” The cop was pissed. Dean could feel anger wafting from his pores. Suddenly, knowing that a pup was part of the equation had changed the equation substantially.

“No, sir.”

“Look, Dale. Man, it was my fault,” Dean said bravely. “He’s good. I swear. He’s a good driver. Never had any kind of trouble before. God, please.”

Dale looked at Dean with a clenched jaw. “Stay here,” he told them both, and he stalked angrily back to his squad car.

“We’re fucked,” said Michael, staring straight ahead.

Dean rotated and put one foot in the wheel-well, leaving the other on the ground. It was hot as Hades, and they had no air flow. Both men were sweating from more than the temperature. Dean put a hand on the back of Michael’s neck and squeezed. “It’s gonna be all right, baby.”

“34 miles over the limit, Dean. I’m either going to jail or I’ll lose my license, or…”

“No, you’re not. This is a Lupin town. We’ve got P.C.A here.”

“And you think that’s better!?” asked Michael, alarmed. He shot a look in his rearview mirror. The cop hadn’t emerged yet from his car. Michael could see him speaking into his radio.

“It is,” insisted Dean. “It might not seem like it now, but I’ll request Pack Custody Authority, and he’ll take us home and turn us over to Alpha. Nothing goes on your record. No media circus, no jail, and you get to keep your license. It’s a first offense, Michael.”

“Dean.”

The tone of Michael’s voice pulled Dean’s eyes to his mate’s. “It’s okay, Michael.”

“The pup. Dean I could have killed it. I could have killed you. How could I have been that reckless?”

Dean pulled his right leg in and leaned across to nuzzle his forehead against Michael’s temple with a tighter grip to his neck. Their sweat mingled uncomfortably. “It’s okay, Michael. No one’s hurt. We’ll go home, face the music, take the blistering we deserve, and we’ll be more careful next time. This is why P.C.A. is better. It’ll help knock some sense into both of us, and we won’t do it again.”

“We…” observed Michael softly, comforted by his alpha’s proximity even in the heat. “It wasn’t you, alpha. It was all me. I’m so fucking cocky all the time. I’m gonna hurt someone one of these days.” Michael sobbed into his palms which had begun to tremble.
“Shh, shh…” Dean moved closer and put both arms around him. “Hey, it was too ‘we’, baby. I was right there with you going just as fast as you were. Don’t think I didn’t know we were flying. It’s part of what got me off. Come on, Michael. Take it easy. We’re fine, all three of us.”

“Castiel is going to be furious,” Michael noted.

“Yeah,” agreed Dean solemnly. There was no getting around that one. Castiel was going to be furious.

“Here he comes,” Michael warned, with an eye on the mirror.

Dale approached slowly, and Dean took up his position again. He accepted the two licenses back and handed Michael’s over his shoulder.

“Here are your options, boys,” said the cop. “I can arrest Michael and take him in pending release based on making bail, yadda, yadda, yadda.”

Dean growled low and menacing in his throat at the idea of handing his mate over to be incarcerated alone and unprotected.

“Chill out, Dean. I know.” Dale really was a good guy. “The other option, and the reason you both have your licenses back, is you can request P.C.A., and I’ll take you home and turn you over to your Alpha. The Omega will get a flag in the system against his license as a first offense, but it won’t include any details, and there won’t be any jail time. I’m not stupid, boys. I know which route you’re gonna take, but I had to lay out both options. Thing is, for it to be legit, I have to witness your Alpha taking corrective measures. You understand?”

Michael didn’t answer. His face was deathly pale, and his hands were shaking. Dean nodded. “We understand, Dale. Yeah, run us on home. Let’s get this over with.”

Dale backed up a little. “Switch places with Michael, Dean. He’s in no condition to drive. I’ll follow you. And, uh, you might consider keeping it within the limit this time.”

Dean nodded again. “I’ll walk around, sweetheart,” he said in a silky voice to Michael. “Just scoot across. Don’t get out.” Michael nodded morosely. His trembling was getting worse as the gravity of the situation washed over him.

Dean took the most direct route home, obeying every traffic law on the books. The Douglas County cop followed at a measured distance without flashers engaged. Pulling onto the circular gravel drive, Dean parked out front and helped Michael walk on shaky knees to the front door. Dale met them there, and it was the officer who rang the bell. He had his citation pad in his hand, and he was going over tick-marks with the eraser side of his pencil as if clarifying for himself all the points he needed to make. He looked nervous.

The door jerked open suddenly, and Dean found himself looking at Nicholas Maraby instead of Fred. Nick took in the cop and the two pale faces, and his eyes widened comically. Or, it would’ve been comic if any part of this was even a little funny.

“Ho! Shit! What the fuck? CAS!!! HEY, CAS!!! Get your ass out here!! There’s a cop!!”

“Thanks, Nick,” muttered Dean acerbically, helping Michael into the foyer. Nick closed the door behind Dale who removed his hat and his mirrored glasses. Castiel appeared from the hallway on the right that led to the Conservatory and Gabe’s suite. He had April in tow, and his face drained of color when he saw a policeman standing in his foyer with two of his pack.
“Dean? My God, are you hurt? Are you all right? What happened?” Cas practically collided with Dean, his hands touching everywhere, checking for injuries, making sure he was in one piece, before he turned his attention on Michael, who swayed under the Alpha’s focus. “Michael?”

“We’re all right, Castiel.” Something about Dean’s tone, his use of Cas’ full name, his downcast eyes, communicated to the Alpha, and he stopped feeling for broken bones. He turned still and stern eyes on his fiancé and backed up a step.

“What happened?” he asked again, but this time in a very different voice. Dean couldn’t meet his eyes, and that was bad. It was very bad.

“Alpha, if I may?” Dale broke in with a clearing of his throat. He ran through the situation swiftly and concisely. When he got to the statement of Michael’s registered speed, Castiel’s face darkened, and he pointed at the hard tiles.

“On your knees! Both of you!”
They sank down together. Michael wasn’t the only one shaking now. April clutched the stairway bannister post and appeared to be trying to hide behind it. Nicholas was nowhere to be seen.

Dale finished his recitation with an explanation that he could waive the charges if the Alpha would assume responsibility for doling out reasonable punishment according to established standard severity codes. Castiel’s nostrils flared as he signed off on the citation and took his copy. He assured the cop that he was fully capable of handling their punishment. He turned to regard them both, and they flinched under the weight of his judgment.

Cas’ jaw worked beneath his skin, and since his jaw was as high as Dean could force his gaze to go, he saw every flinch and pulse. “You had MY pup in the car with you,” Castiel stated. Dean noted in a dark and forgotten place in his head that Cas had taken his words to heart and fully adopted the idea that their pups were all of their pups. If he hadn’t been terrified beyond thought, it would have warmed him. As it was, the chill in the air gave Dean the decided implication that only parts of him might ever be warm again.

“Explain yourselves!”

Michael tried to speak. It took him a couple of attempts, but he managed to whisper, “I can’t, Alpha. I have no excuse, Sir.”

There wasn’t really a right thing to say in this situation, but that was probably as good as they could’ve done.

Dean added his response. “It’s both of our fault, Sir. We fucked up, both of us.”

“You did,” agreed the Alpha. “You put three of the people I value the most in needless jeopardy just for a thrill. It was stupid. It was reckless. And it can never happen again.” Cas let the silence lengthen around his pronouncement. It seemed to echo endlessly from the high ceiling.

Finally, he turned to the officer and thanked him for his care and cautious diligence. Working with Omegas out in public was always going to be a touchy situation, and he’d handled it well.

“On your feet,” he said coldly to Michael and Dean, offering them no assistance. “Come with me.”

God. There were those words again. Dean couldn’t help rubbing his ass with the hand that wasn’t clinging to Michael. Cas took them the short distance into his office, signaling April to follow along. It would be tight in there with five people, especially if Alpha wanted to apply a full swing, and
Dean knew he did. They filed in, and Dale closed the door behind them. Cas pointed April onto the far end of the couch, furthest from harm. She looked miserable, but Dean knew Castiel would put her through worse than witnessing his punishment before the Alpha would leave her unattended with strangers in the house.

A quick shuffling of bodies had the officer standing by the door, Michael in the corner with his jeans and boxer-briefs at his knees, and both elbows touching the wall by his ears, and Dean heaving uncontrolled breaths in front of Cas’ desk. Castiel rolled his chair into the far corner.

He opened a drawer of his desk and considered the options. “Tell me why you’re in this position, Winchester.” He selected a thin, stiff cane, about two feet long and springy enough to sting like hell.

“I broke the law, Alpha,” said Dean, trying to sound like the adult he didn’t feel he was in this moment. “I broke Pack rules number two and six. I was reckless with my safety, that of my Omega mate, and that of our unborn puppy. I put sexual pleasure ahead of good sense. I was stupid. Please punish me, Sir.”

“Get into position, Dean. I don’t want to hear another word from you until I ask for it.” Castiel didn’t ask if he understood. He didn’t care. Dean had fucked up beyond the point of talking things through. He stripped himself bare, letting his pants pool at his ankles, and he grabbed the far side of the desk. He closed his bonds with Michael. He closed his eyes, avoiding burdening April as much as possible. She didn’t deserve to hurt, but he knew she would, just from being close.

The Alpha’s first stroke put Dean up on his toes, and it only went downhill from there. He squeezed his eyes so tightly shut he feared he might pop a blood vessel. His fingers turned white where they shook and clutched at the desk. His backside burned with the building heat of strikes laid one on top of the other without pause. Dean cried out wordlessly against his arm, bent his knees, flexed up onto his toes, and he turned into flames of penitence. Cas used his whole body to set Dean on fire. That pencil-thin cane, almost a switch, came down again and again, leaving thin, angry stripes on Dean’s already abused ass.

His whole world sank into pain and fire. This was fire even a masochist didn’t crave, because it brought judgment, disappointment, and disapproval with it. Dean was a shaking, crying mess by the time Cas stopped. His hiccups shook his whole body, and snot ran freely over his lips. Castiel pulled him to his feet by his shoulders, wiped his face with his own handkerchief, and looked sternly into his remorseful eyes.

“Don’t ever do that again.”

“yessir.”

April sniffled wretchedly. Cas glanced at her but offered her no comfort.

“Michael Quentin,” said the Alpha in a voice only the Alpha had access to.

“Sir.”

“Right here.” Cas didn’t even bother to point. He waited until Michael shuffled over to stand in front of the desk, his junk dangling dejectedly between his legs, humiliatingly bare. Castiel had Dean by his upper arm, more to make sure he could stand than to control him. He nodded toward the corner Michael had just vacated and released Dean to shuffled across without pulling his pants up. Dean was shaky, but he got his elbows up, his fingers laced behind his head. He stood in the corner and listened. A touch to his bonds showed him Michael’s side was closed too. Neither wanted more to filter through than they HAD to feel. They would be there for each other soon enough.
Castiel put his hand on Michael’s back and guided him over. He placed his foot in the crotch of Michael’s pants and forced them all the way from his knees to his ankles. Michael whimpered in distress. He clutched desperately for the far edge of the desk.

“Why are you in this position, Michael?”

Michael took four or five panicked breaths before he got any words out. “I was speeding, Alpha. S…S…So fucking fast. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to… I could’ve killed some…one. Could’ve…” He trailed off. He didn’t know how to put it into words. “My baby,” he whispered at last.

“That’s right,” said the Alpha. “Our baby.” He let Michael stew in it for several minutes. The clock ticked loudly on the wall. Dean’s tears started up again in the corner as the burn settled into his body. He could feel the welts swell. He could feel the blood seeping beneath his skin from broken capillaries and minor veins all over his ass and thighs.

At long last, with no warning whatsoever, Cas whipped the cane across Michael’s backside, and the Omega screamed. He did it again, putting a mark just below the first, then he crossed both red lines with a third that cut across them. He struck the Omega over and over as Michael wailed, up on his toes, every muscle tight. Michael’s Release was miniscule, barely noticeable at all amid the sound of the blows and his desperate cries. April was crying in earnest too by this point, and Dean’s tears dripped from his chin, but he dared not wipe them off. Michael’s caning went longer than Dean’s had. Castiel meant to send a message that would never need repeating, and the Omega needed to hear it the first time.

As much as Dean loved every variation of his mate he’d yet known, from grouchy introvert, to cocky showoff, to sweet and temperate Omega, he would happily live the rest of his days without ever having to hear Michael like this again. His wails were heartbreaking and so loud, so uncontainable. Michael was clearly angrier with himself even than the Alpha could put on him. He was beside himself with recrimination turned inward, and the only path forward for an Omega Lupin in that state of mind was to whip him until the pain was so intense it burned the self-flagellation out of him. He was heart-broken and mourning what might have come to pass, grieving for a lost pup who wasn’t lost. Cas’ cane showed him no mercy. He landed a stripe or two across his shoulders, well clear of his soft lower back where kidneys and uterus were vulnerable, and he paid careful attention to Michael’s thighs as well, leaving no area untouched that Michael might need to sit upon.

When the flaying ended, Dean was shaking against the corner. April had her feet up and her arms wrapped around her knees. Dale was pale but resolute. Michael lay limp and trembling, his cries had faded to near silence as sobs wracked his body from the inside. Cas touched his lower back tenderly, sweeping gentle fingers across the width of his back, as close to a caress of the life Michael carried within him as he could get.

“I love you, Michael,” Castiel told him. “I love you as much as I love our pup. As much as I love your mate. Don’t ever put your life in senseless danger like that again.”

“s..s..sir.”

“You are grounded from driving for a month, Omega. Leave your license with me before you go. I’ll give it back to you in a month if I feel you’ve earned it.”

Michael nodded wordlessly.

Cas let out a loud exhale and tucked the cane back into the drawer he’d pulled it from. “Officer White, this concludes the extent of the punishment I mean to dole out. Does it meet your requirements?”
“It does, Alpha. Douglas County appreciates your taking the matter seriously enough to handle it appropriately. I, um, I have to say…Sir, I’ve got a daughter who’s expecting my first grandpups. When I smelled pregnant Omega in the car, I saw red.” Dale frowned at his feet, but Cas cleared his throat.

“As did I, Officer,” Cas told him, Alpha-to-alpha. His hand was still lightly stroking Michael’s back.

“So, anyway…I’ll be going now. You know how this works. I’ll file it as a P.C.A. We’re all done here.” He moved to open the door but turned back in the doorway. “Dean, son, I don’t wanna see hide nor hair of you any time soon. You hear me, boy? I’ve seen enough of your backside to last me for years. It’s time you grew up and started acting like an alpha.”

Dean nodded stiffly without looking around.

“And take care of that mate of yours. You are one lucky son of a bitch, Winchester. Don’t blow it.”

Dean sobbed into the corner as the officer took his leave. Cas’ face was hard, but he didn’t say anything as he let the man go. He helped Michael stand, and he helped him kick his pants off.

“Open your bonds back up,” he told the mates. “I want you checking on each other. April, help Michael upstairs and put him to bed. Don’t speak to anyone. I’ll be right behind you.”

“My wallet, Alpha,” said Michael gruffly. “In my jeans pocket. My license.” He put an arm across April’s shoulders and let her bear some of his weight as he limped to the door.

“Thank you, Michael. I’ve got it. I’ll bring the rest of your belongings up in a bit. Go get some sleep.”

“yessir.”

“Dean, come here, please.”

Dean was still crying, but he pulled himself together enough to face his Alpha. Cas sat on the edge of the desk and looked at him without touching. Dean was still hobbling with his pants at his ankles. Cas licked his lips.

“I don’t enjoy having to do that. I don’t enjoy it at all. You know that.”

Dean nodded.

“Can you look at me yet?”

Dean sucked in a breath. Of course Cas had noticed. He noticed everything. Slowly Dean worked his eyes up until they found Cas’. He had a ring of red still showing at the edge of his irises.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

Cas studied him critically, looking for any sign that Dean’s emotional strength was faltering.

“I’m okay, Sir,” Dean told him.

Cas studied him some more.

“I would go insane if I lost you,” the Alpha said simply. “If I lost you over something this stupidly
pointless, I would die.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“No. It won’t.”

***************

April curled up with Michael in the big bed, and he clung to her and wept. When she felt him leave kisses in her hair and at her temples, she didn’t stop him, but her heart hammered in her chest.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! ***Wipes sweat off forehead and grabs something sturdy until the vertigo passes.*** That was a wild ride for me. I think I need to go sit down.

Love, love, love this pack (the one in the fic and the one out in the real world).
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

There's a bit of a reckoning for the boys. One of them is on board, but the other, well... April's got all the crew lined up to help her make some big decisions. And they're thinking of adopting again.

Chapter Notes

This damn chapter has given me FITS, and I'm done with it! Hurray! Thanks to KreweOfImp and Melodina for talking me through the chinky bits. I have no idea what went weird on me, just that it so did, and I needed help to untangle myself. That's what Pack is for. I am blessed to know you - all of you. Sorry I couldn't get it posted before the effing middle of the night. Go to bed!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 78 – Saturday, July 22, 2017

NOW:

All Gabriel really had to tell Bobby was that he was engaged and that he didn’t plan to reduce his work load. He needed to know how much he could tell Kali. He needed to assure Bobby that he had
no intention of pulling back to a desk job. The alpha’s fierce ultimatum that he wasn’t about to send an Omega who had a wife waiting for him at home into the pits meant that Gabe was forced to pull out an ultimatum of his own.

Nothing like that was easy anymore – not with Bobby’s Claim holding his mid-section on a leash – but he struggled through it. In the end, Bobby could work with him, or the Omega could go back to working alone.

Neither of them was very happy with the other when Gabe trudged back out of the alpha’s plain house, but Gabriel Novak had won.

Of course, he had.

***************

Michael didn’t sleep long. Alpha had the comforter pulled back to his knees and was working balm into the angry stripes on his body. The ointment hurt at least as much as it soothed. April was still napping between them, and Michael noted with cracked-open eyes that Cas’ hair was sleep-mussed as well. Apparently, they’d taken a much-needed late afternoon nap together. The light through the wide windows told him evening was upon them.

Dean’s back was pressed up against his far side. Michael didn’t want to disturb him. He could feel the heat radiating off Dean’s thrice thrashed backside even through his own pain. Lying inside the pack sandwich for once rather than on the outside was a new pleasure. And now, with the Alpha leaning across his own Omega mate to hover above him as well, Michael felt encased. April smelled young and sweet. Omega. Harmless. Defenseless, but safe, with a Dominant on either side and alphas outside that. He wanted to ignore how powerful that sensation of her perfect rightness was, but he couldn’t. Jesus, her mate was right there for fuck’s sake. He was insane to take another deep breath just to scent her.

He shifted to prop his cheek in his arms, trying to keep the movement subtle. His ass throbbed. That had not been a fun ride. It wouldn’t kill him, but he thought he could live another 50 years without ever wanting to go through it again. Michael still felt the weight of his flagrant stupidity pressing him into the bedding. He heard Castiel sigh.

“We’ll talk about it after dinner, Omega,” the Alpha said very softly. “I know you haven’t let it go yet. I’m glad.”

Michael started to speak, but Cas stopped him with a look, and a quiet, “Later.”

Dean rolled away with a miserable groan. “Need to lop off everything from my waist down,” he griped. “What’s it called when the surgeon removes your lower half, doctor? A…waist-ectomy?”

“There’s no such surgery,” Cas informed him without a trace of humor. “You’ll have to grin and bear it until you heal. It’s your own fault, Dean. You were in such a hurry to bruise up again. Well, congratulations, mission accomplished.”

“Not supposed to stay mad at me once I’ve taken my licks,” Dean reminded him. “There’s that anger management thing again.”

Dean was in pain and still out of it, Cas reminded himself. He wouldn’t have touched the sore point
that way if his brat hadn’t been sulking and in need of lashing out.

“It’s possible that I missed a few spots, Pet. Would you like me to review my work for thoroughness?”

“No, Sir,” Dean said darkly. “You got ‘em all.”

Cas woke April with a touch to her cheek. She startled awake, confused at finding herself beside Michael. A quick touch to her mind calmed her. She wormed her way into Castiel’s lap, and he let her body sink into his where it belonged.

Now that they were awake, Cas had a few things on his mind. He drifted fingers through Michael’s hair. He watched Dean struggle to find a position that didn’t hurt. No one seemed in a hurry to leave the security of the bed. Cas decided to start with his mate.

“Kitten, I’m sorry you had to see that. I know it upset you, but I needed you to take part. If we’re going to try for a deeper connection amongst all four of us, you need a chance to take in those pheromones too. Being present for Michael’s and Dean’s punishments will strengthen your bonds. Do you understand?”

April nodded into his chest and held him tightly. He embraced her with his salve-covered fingers held awkwardly outward. He kissed her hair. He let her essence soothe the beast inside him, and he felt calm replace his tension. He took as much from her as he gave back, and the balance formed effortlessly.

“As for you two. If today’s escapade shows me anything, it’s that you both need a firmer hand. Your training isn’t moving fast enough to keep you from hurting each other. I intend to take matters into my own hands starting now.”

Both of them stiffened and looked up at him. Dean sat upright on his swollen butt with a pained expression.

“Me? What’d I do?”

Castiel looked at him with no emotion, considering. “I want you to answer that question, Dean.” He shifted his gaze down to the Omega who still lay flat on his belly. “Michael, you and I will begin regular work together. I’ve been patient with you, but I cannot allow you to continue to put Dean into situations from which he can’t extricate himself if you insist on ignoring his safety. We’ll start tonight after dinner. Our first session will be short; just setting the context.”

Michael didn’t protest. He let his body relax back into the mattress so that he wasn’t looking up anymore. He seemed relieved. “Will I still work with Joshua?” he asked gruffly.

“Yes. Your training with Hannah and Joshua is important. I won’t get in the way of that. This is different. This is you and me. I have a great deal to teach you about carrying the weight of responsibility of an extreme-rated wolf that even Joshua cannot know. As I’ve said, I also hope to learn from you. Most importantly, Michael, I need to teach you Dean.”

Dean rolled his eyes and sagged back into the iron headboard. “Great,” he mumbled. “And you want me to learn to put my foot down…?” He wasn’t exactly sure he had it figured, but that seemed the most likely destination.

“Very good, alpha,” Cas told him.

“I can’t do it, C.J. You know I can’t.” The admission cost Dean something, and it was obvious in the
“It has to stop, Dean. You’re a part of the equation. You know better. You have no right to put the full weight of responsibility on Michael. He’s Omega! He cannot bear that weight for you both. That’s not fair to either of you, and someone’s going to get hurt. I won’t have it!”

“Cas…”

“I won’t have it, Dean Michael!”

Dean flinched at the vehemence, and he looked at Castiel with startled eyes. “Yes, Sir.”

Cas continued in a calmer voice. “You’re to speak with Pam, and I want you bringing the topic up in therapy as well. You and I will work on some exercises. You can do this, baby. I know you don’t want to.”

Dean took it in with a troubled face. “Do I have to do it when it’s just me and you?”

Cas softened visibly. “I’m going to take care of you Dean. I’ll always take care of you.”

Dean nodded. He turned over and stretched out beside his mate, reversed from the position he’d slept in, right up tight against him. He buried his face in Michael’s shoulder. Cas took the opportunity to look them both over. Dean didn’t need medical attention. A little arnica wouldn’t hurt, but he didn’t really need it either. Michael’s flesh was more damaged. The Omega had taken worse once before and healed without permanent damage. His punishment after confessing to his subterfuge with Dean and the birth control pills – that had been harsher by a bit. He would recover just fine.

April was examining them both critically as well. A shaded side of April wished she’d been along for their ride too so that her ass could lay side-by-side-by-side with theirs and glow just as brightly. Cas felt her longing, and he kissed her head once again before shuffling her off his lap.

“Let’s get dinner started, Kitten. These two need a few minutes alone to talk it over.” Then he addressed the melted bodies on the bed, “And you two are filthy. Get showers and change the sheets before you come downstairs. I’m not going to ask why you’re both caked in mud.”

April followed him off the bed. “Sir, can we get a puppy?” she asked. Michael cracked up and buried his face again. Where the hell had that come from? Cas swept his Ozzie from the room without a backward glance. They didn’t hear his answer.

“Are you all right?” Dean asked.

“I’m an idiot,” Michael responded flatly.

“You’re not an idiot. You made a mistake.”

“Stop doing that,” said Michael, pulling up onto his elbows so he could look down at Dean who shifted to his hip. “No matter what’s going on, you always think about how it affects me. You watch out for me. I don’t do that for you. I need to though. I need to start putting you first. Dean, it never even crossed my mind to think about what we had *JUST* talked about – how hard it is for you to… to…tell me no. I saw an opportunity, and…”
“Can we not? Can we not do this right now?” Dean interrupted. He rolled off the bed. Cas was right, there was filth smeared all over his and Michael’s side. They’d brought the cornfield home with them. “I just asked if you’re okay, not if you have the answers to “War and Peace.” Come on. Let’s shower. We need to doctor our bites up and get your ass coated in arnica again. How do you feel?”

Michael rolled up onto his hip, but he didn’t move to get off the bed. He was in pain and getting irritated. “I feel like a right idiot, Dean. Why won’t you talk to me about it? Deflecting isn’t going to make it go away.”

“Because I CAN’T! Okay? I can’t do it! Fuck it all, Michael, I don’t WANT to do it! I don’t want to crack one eye open all the time and make sure we’re still between the rails! That’s YOUR job!”

Michael stared at him.

“FUCK!” shouted Dean, and he disappeared into the bathroom, slamming the door on his way in.

Michael groaned as he worked his way off the bed. He limped around it, stripping it as he went and leaving the bedding in a wadded pile beside the door. He could feel that Dean’s mind was in turmoil, and his shower was too hot. He fought his impulse to snap back. He calmly took his place beside his mate, lowered the temperature of the water with a look of admonishment but no words, and began to clean Dean’s skin and hair.

Dean growled at him, but Michael ignored the posturing completely. He settled into his Secondary designation and found it fit much better in this moment. His Omega was no threat to Dean’s cranky brat. The touch soothed them both. He cleaned across Dean’s bruised and striped butt and hissed at him to stop dodging.

“Thought you liked it when it hurt,” he muttered as he chased Dean’s flinching backside.

“No. Not like this,” Dean told him, giving in and settling against the wall.

“Will I ever understand you?” Michael asked, much more somber than before. His irritation replaced by concern. Dean’s turmoil boiled in his head.

Dean stopped moving altogether, pressed flat against the tiles with his back to his mate, nearly panting into the wall. Michael stilled too. He stood close enough that his breath tickled the back of Dean’s neck. The hot water flowed over them and between them.

“I should have told you no, Michael,” Dean said to the tiles. “I wanted to remember what my own touch was like. I wanted your eyes on me. God knows I wanted to come. But I knew better. I knew it was risky – too risky to be worth it with you and the pup both in the car. I should have said no. I should have made you pull over.”

Michael set his forehead on Dean’s shoulder from behind. “I have to stop, Dean. How many times is it now? How many times have I done that to you? We’re having a baby. We’re going to be parents. We can’t afford to keep things the way they are.”

“Turn around, Michael. Let me wash you.” The momentary stillness vanished as if it had never been.

Michael gave up with a sigh. Dean wasn’t ready to try another step forward. He could hear the truth in it, and he knew he had a responsibility to take that step, but the wall in front of him seemed insurmountable.

“Think we’ll get a dog?” he asked Dean to lighten the mood.
Dean snorted. “April wants one, doesn’t she?” he asked back in response.

Nick was laughing before he got to the end of his story. “And then she said, ‘But I already bought the tickets! What am I supposed to do now?’ So, I told her, ‘Frankly, my dear…’” He didn’t need to finish the sentence. Everyone did it for him, and they laughed merrily. Nick got a high five from Keira, who had been there.

They ate in the kitchen at the new table despite having guests. It was a tight fit, but without Sam and Jess there, it was doable. Kali swept in late, just home from a long day stitching perfection into artistically crafted custom garments. Nicholas kept them all laughing at his stories from Broadway, and even Michael relaxed a little, although his face couldn’t hide his misery at having to sit on his still-forming bruises. Dean fared better. He was accustomed to the process, and while it wasn’t exactly easy for him, he had a compartment in his head to filter the pain.

After dinner, Dean, April, and their guests took up residence in the conservatory to jam. The cello, the fiddle, and the bodhran all came out, and soon a thrumming pulse filled the high space with life. Dean was encouraged to get his guitar out while April settled at the piano. He sat next to her facing outward, so he wouldn’t be in the way of her reach. They didn’t use sheet music. Songs never really started or stopped except when someone had something to say, and they broke through with a shout. Mostly, the music simply flowed, each player picking up cues from the others. Nicholas had his own keyboard, which he set up alongside the one he borrowed from April, but he listened more than he played. Everyone did some of the singing except Jackson, who insisted his talents started and ended with his cello. Dean kept an eye on Nick, so he knew that his focus stayed primarily on April. Unlike Michael, Nick didn’t seem to be having any trouble sitting, and how was that fair?

“Sir, I told you I can’t control him. I knew this was going to happen.”

Cas’ head snapped around to fix the Omega with a fierce stare. “Don’t even think about blaming this on your wolf, Michael,” he said without quarter. “You propositioned him. It wasn’t a domination. It wasn’t your wolf at all, was it?”

“Of course, it was!” Michael protested. “It was a rule-driven scenario with firm boundaries and a success or failure matrix. It might not have been a domination, but it was a scene. That was my wolf leading. I TOLD you this would happen.”

“Well, consider my attention fully riveted to the topic, then,” Castiel told him.

Michael shrank. That’s not quite the reaction he’d been hoping for. “We were riding the high, Alpha,” he admitted. “I got carried away.”

Cas didn’t thaw. “No excuses,” he said. “You told me you understood this issue. I need to know he’s safe in your hands. I need to know you’ve got both hands on the wheel for all our sakes. I’m not going to let you hurt him. It hasn’t escaped your notice, I’m sure, that he’s rather important to me. But, Michael, so are you.”
“I’m sorry.” Michael sounded every bit the novice that he was under Castiel’s hard look.

“Sit.” Cas pointed him to a firm but wide chair near the back of the play room. Michael winced as he carefully sat, and Cas followed more slowly, thinking as he approached.

“You’re not in trouble, Omega. We finished with that, and it’s over. That doesn’t absolve any of us of the need to address the recurrence of the problem. Dean has a great deal of hard work to do, and so do you. I intend to facilitate the journey for both of you. Dean’s put that authority in my hands, and I’m going to do my job to the best of my ability.”

“Yes, Sir. What are you going to do?” Michael peeked up.

“I’m going to train you myself to be Dean’s Dominant. We’ll work through the concepts and scenarios in private, and then you will practice them under my direction with your mate. You will practice a variety of meditation techniques daily. You will come out running with me four times a week. You can expect to have only limited access to your Dominant side until your training has progressed to a level that I feel shows you’ve reached stability.”

“Sir, you’re too busy. You have so many…”

“That’s not your concern, Omega.”

Michael frowned. Dean told him that their attempt to repress the wolf had been the cause of some of his strife, and now the Alpha seemed to want it bottled again. “I’m very confused, Alpha.”

“I’m not going to starve you, Michael. We’ll practice perhaps more than you really prefer. You’re going to learn to control your childish impulses. Just because something feels good doesn’t always mean it’s safe. That little miracle inside your belly needs you to get a handle on this. Dean needs it, too. And you. Michael, you need to learn control.”

“I’ll do my part, Sir,” Michael assured him. “But Dean won’t. He’s going to resist kicking and screaming.”

“Indeed,” Cas nodded. “And how do we react to a tantrum-throwing brat?”

Michael shook his head. “This is different.”

The Alpha ran a hand across his face. “It is, and it isn’t. It’s a deeply ingrained habit, not a need. He’s frightened of changing. He thinks learning to keep a judicious eye on the proceedings weakens his Submission.”

“Should I try to push him into calling a safeword?” asked Michael tentatively. He’d been thinking about it a lot.

Cas licked his lips. Christ, they were going to have to start at the beginning.

“Michael, when you play, you and Dean, what’s the point? What’s the goal?”

“To, um, to feed our Tertiary wolves?”

“Partly correct. What else?”

“It feels good.”

“It builds trust, Michael.”
“Oh. Right. I knew that.”

“It’s fine to push his limits within safe confines, Omega,” Cas clarified. “But absolutely never push him until he calls a safeword just to teach him to do it. You’ll lose his trust in an instant, and rightfully so. We’re not asking him to watch out for his own safety so that you and I don’t need to. We’re asking him to take his share of the responsibility for keeping all of us safe. Even you can’t know what he’s thinking. Only he has that view, and only he can speak up when he knows something is wrong.”

Michael thought about it. “He says he’s okay with taking that responsibility when he’s with me, but he never stops me. He’s only stopped the action twice and both times to protect me, not himself.”

“It’s a start.” Cas could tell that Michael didn’t have much left in his tank tonight. “That’s all we’re going to discuss for tonight. I’ll get you up at 4:00 to come running with me, and we’ll do some breathing exercises after breakfast.”

“Yes, Sir. Is breakfast still the same?”

“You need practice, Michael. Expect breakfast to be a constant for the foreseeable future.”

“Thank you, Alpha.”

“And Michael?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t ever show up on the front porch with a policeman again. You two scared the fuck out of me.”

“Yessir.”

Dean got the guests squared away and heading toward the Guest house with a portable headlight and a golf cart. He met Michael coming out of Naomi’s room with an empty tray.

“They got you playing wait-staff now?” Dean asked playfully. Michael didn’t bite. He could still feel his mate’s unease. Playing with the musicians helped, but seeing Michael brought him right back into his fears and his tension.

Michael set the tray on a sideboard at the top of the stairs and joined Dean in their room. “She’s just another Pack member to me, Dean,” Michael told him gravely. “I don’t have the long history of baggage with her that you do. I don’t mind. She won’t be here long.”

Dean didn’t reply. He shrugged off his shirt and headed slowly for the bathroom, but Michael surprised him by appearing in the doorway ahead of him and blocking his path. Michael held Dean with solid hands on his hips and his forehead touching Dean’s. Dean waited for the familiar feeling of his wolf responding to Michael’s. He waited for the sensation of falling into merciful bliss, but nothing happened. Michael’s eyes were too close to capture with his own, but he could feel the closeness of him. He could feel mate, and he whimpered a lost sound into the air they shared between them.

“Michael, what are you doing?” he asked as his mate just held him there, stopped in the doorway
with his shirt dangling from one hand.

“I need you, alpha,” said Michael softly, closing his eyes.

“Well, you got me,” Dean responded, feeling unsure. They hadn’t planned anything for tonight, and that meant the night was Michael’s to do with as he wished. Dean didn’t expect always to know what was coming ahead of time. But Michael was clearly NOT in his wolf. And unless Dean was grossly mistaken, he wasn’t Dominant at all. He was soft, despite his grip on Dean’s hips. There was a neediness about his intensity.

“No, Dean. I need you alpha. I need you to BE my alpha.”

“Baby, I’m all yours. What do you want to do that we can get away with? Cas would skin me if I try to knot you before your ass heals a little.”

“I scared myself today,” Michael admitted, stepping closer and tucking into his mate’s embrace. Dean’s arms responded on their own. He wrapped himself around the Omega who smelled like home and hearth and adventure and rainbows and dragons and puppies and lightning…and rain. Dean whimpered again. Michael was distressed, and it was Dean’s overwhelming responsibility to soothe him. “I could have killed all of us, and you let me do it.”

Dean’s knees nearly buckled as the words hit his ear. “God, baby. Shh, no, you’re all right. I’m all right. Our pup is fine.”

“I don’t need you to comfort me, alpha,” said Michael with a sniffle, and Dean realized he was in tears. “I need you to promise me you won’t let me do anything like that again.”

“Michael…”

“If your own safety doesn’t matter enough to you, does mine? Does the puppy’s? I fucked up bad, Dean, but you did it with me! I need you, alpha! I can’t do this on my own. I wasn’t built to do it alone. I need you to try!”

Dean squeezed his eyes closed. “I can’t be an alpha when I go under, babe. I can’t watch with that eye. It’s either a full sink, or it’s nothing. I can’t do it.”

“Dean.” Michael stepped back out of his arms and wiped his eyes with both hands, sniffling. “Damnit,” he huffed at his own tears. “I’m not asking you for a miracle. I’m not asking you to be the one with his hands driving the bus. I just need you to try. I need you to know, even when you’re all the way under, that the world isn’t always a safe place. I need to know that there’s a part of you watching out for us. Baby, I’m not him. I could hurt you. I need you to see that. Being Omega, it makes me dependent. I hate it, but there it is. You won’t ever be able to trust that I’ve got you the way he does.”

Dean grimaced tightly. “I lose myself when I’m in there. I don’t know up from down, words from numbers. I don’t know what year it is. I don’t know if your touch hurts or feels good. All I know is what you need from me, and I respond. I can’t take a watchful eye into that. I’m not that guy!”

“Yes, you can! You did it for me twice. You’re in there somewhere. Fuck it all, alpha, you watch every move I make. You say you don’t know numbers from words, but there’s a part of you that’s six steps ahead of me and anticipating everything. You’re doing Calculus in your head to stay ahead of me. Don’t tell me you can’t. I know you think you’re too weak, but dammit!”

“It’s not the same thing at all,” Dean protested, but Michael rounded on him.
“Tell me that if you were floating in subspace, and a coyote appeared and tried to drag Hank off into the bushes, that you wouldn’t snap-to and kill the thing with your bare hands.”

“What?!” Dean snapped.

“You’re in there, alpha. Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid!”

“You’re fucking terrified. Don’t lie to me. I can feel it!” Michael tried a last resort, wondering if it was a low blow, but feeling confident he could justify it. His ass throbbed, and he was worn out. All he really wanted was a warm comforter and the smell of alpha wrapped around his aching body.

“Tell me, Dean. When you think about our pup, when you imagine what kind of life she or he or whatever is going to live, do you want to think that maybe it’ll be an alpha-Submissive, like its Dad? What kind of life are you hoping it’ll live? What kind of world do you want for it? Do you owe our puppy anything? Don’t we all owe it a chance to grow to know us as our best selves? Don’t you want to be the wolf that your pup can model after?”

Dean started to scoff, but he hesitated. He wanted to protest that their pup would never need to know about its Dad’s particular frailty, but he knew that wasn’t the case. Lupin Traditionalists didn’t hide their play from the pups the way Primates did. Often enough, because it was how his Pack worked, Dean would be nude and on his knees in the kitchen or expected to service his Doms while they all watched “Game of Thrones” in the living room. Like it or not, his pups would pick up a lot from their parents.

Dean’s blank face encouraged Michael. “You already know all the reasons not to play like that, baby. You teach this stuff to young people every day. Why do you do that?”

Dean didn’t answer him. Facing disapproval from Michael’s Omega was harder than from his wolf.

“Why, alpha?” he persisted.

Dean cleared his throat. “To keep them from getting hurt,” he muttered.

“But I thought that was their Dominants’ job?” Michael pressed.

Dean’s mind warred with itself. “None of those students are me, Michael. I go deeper than they do. I lose myself. I need that depth to get what I need from the scene. I tried it before, and it’s not the same.”

“I told you today that I can’t play like that with you if I don’t know for sure we’re both on the same page, and you said that was fine.” Michael grimaced as he took his own shirt off and it rubbed against the welts across his shoulders. He examined them in the mirror with a look over his shoulder. “You said you can get enough from Cas. Did you lie to me?” Michael caught Dean’s eye through the mirror.

“NO! I didn’t lie. Shit! I just…”

“Just what?!”

“When I’m out here like this, it feels different. It feels like I can do it. It feels like I can make the calls I need to, but…When you pulled me under and told me I had until you turned into the drive to get myself off, I didn’t even hesitate. I didn’t think of anything but making it happen.”

“Bullshit!” said Michael angrily. “You told me twice to watch the road. TWICE, DEAN! And, yeah,
I fucked up and lost focus. I get that. But you’re saying you don’t give two thoughts to what’s around you, and I’m calling bullshit! You told me not two hours ago that you knew it was too risky to try. You just wanted someone else to take the blame if it went wrong. You don’t get to do that with me, alpha!”

“As soon as I sink under, I don’t know how to tell if I’m safe or not. I can’t tell, Michael! It all feels the same to me. That’s what I’m saying.”

“Well, then, that’s what you need to work on first,” said Michael approaching his mate with his head lowered and his forehead wrinkled in concern. His green eyes bored into Dean’s. “Castiel has put a lock on me anyway. We can’t play without his approval until he sees progress. He wants us to practice under his supervision.”

Michael stepped out of the soft sweatpants he had on and helped Dean lower his own. Neither of them had been brave enough to attempt underwear after their shower. Dean sighed heavily.

“That’s just great,” he muttered, taking their clothes from his mate and tossing everything into the hamper behind the bathroom door. “What about the big scene you promised me?”

“I guess we’ll have to make progress quickly and convince him we’re ready. I mean to give you that scene, my sweet. I’m tired of imagining it. But if you can’t take your training seriously enough to learn when to use a safeword, we’re never going to get the chance to find out if you like it or hate it.”

The threat made Dean pause. It figured. Leave it to the brat to kick up a fuss over every argument Michael threw at him until he dangled the carrot. Michael’s face told Dean he was busted, and Dean had the grace to blush. He rubbed the back of his neck and buried his lower face in his crossed arm, thinking hard, working back into his head where he needed to be.

“I care about our pup,” he said at last, braving Michael’s anger that it was the threat of losing access to the good stuff that drove him to switch designations for real. “You know I do. I care about keeping it safe now and forever. I care about being the man our kids are going to need to see me be. Baby, I hear you. But you gotta know how hard this is for me. It’s not just about what I’d rather do. It’s something that, right now, this moment, I can’t do. I know that makes no sense to you considering who I am and what I do for a living. I would beat the living thunder out of you if I thought you were doing the same thing.” Dean’s alpha noted the change in Michael’s designation too, but it stood pat. He had things to say.

“I put Castiel in charge for all of us, and I don’t regret that. I may not like where he’s taking us right now, but I trust him far more than I trust myself. If he says we pull up until he’s ready to let us go on again, then that’s what we do. I’m going to miss kneeling at breakfast though. I was just getting into that.”

“Breakfast stays the same, Dean,” Michael told him. Dean took his place on the far side of the bed, and Michael killed the light.

“Oh. Good,” he muttered on a yawn. “Well, then, when do we get the training wheels off?”

“Whenever Alpha takes them off,” Michael told him slipping under the soft blankets. “It’s going to depend on both of us sticking to our commitments.” He turned over beneath the comforter and eased backward, assuming the small spoon position to Dean’s big spoon. Dean cinched him in back-to-chest with an arm around Michael’s torso, but he avoided putting any pressure against Michael’s lower half. Michael would only want to cuddle for a few minutes anyway before he would shift onto his stomach to sleep. If they weren’t both so sore, they could expect to awaken tangled together, but on nights like this, it would be a benefit to have the big bed.
“I need this from you, Dean.” Michael’s soft voice in the darkness, the voice of his wolf backed by an urgency through their bonds, felt far more intimate a confession than anything they’d discussed so far.

“Yeah.” Dean’s answer was just as soft. “I know.” His hand lowered to span across Michael’s belly as his nose sought the scent of puppy at Michael’s neck. He could do this. The truth was much simpler than he wanted to admit, and Michael was right. There was often a moment of judgment that Dean stepped intentionally over. When he was in Alpha’s hands, that step meant everything. With Michael, it was an abdication of who he was as an alpha, and it was massively unfair to the Omega. No Omega could be expected to carry a load like that, even an anomaly like Michael.

“So, you’ll do the training exercises?” Michael turned his head sharply so that the jut of his jaw touched Dean’s chin.

“Is there any other way I get my gangbang, and you get your foursome?” Dean whispered like a seduction. Michael laughed softly, unable to hold onto his wolf and finding he didn’t mind.

“The foursome isn’t on hold, I don’t think. In fact, I wouldn’t put it past Castiel to work that into our exercises in one way or another.”

Dean’s hand slipped lower, sliding down Michael’s belly to grasp his cock in a loose grip. He pressed his mouth right up to Michael’s ear and went to work bringing him alive with a rocking of his body against Michael’s that matched the smooth shift of his fist. “Thinking about it, baby? About getting Alpha’s huge knot while you go down on that little slip of a girl who sleeps just down the hall?”

Michael whined, and his body responded. Dean smelled slick even before he felt Michael’s penis harden. “Yeah, you are, aren’t you?” he teased, tightening his fist a bit. “You want it bad, don’t you, Omega?”

“Mm-hm,” hummed Michael with his eyes closed and his head thrown back against Dean’s shoulder.

“Now picture it this way,” whispered Dean with a rasp. “Imagine that Alpha’s so pleased with you that he’s rewarding you with a chance to share his mate’s body. Imagine me, blissed out and exhausted on the couch in the corner with a plug keeping me stretched and holding in the come from — what did we say — five or six of them. I’m too spent to play anymore, and you did that to me.”

Dean’s touch intensified as he laid out the image clearly enough for Michael to see it in his mind. A bedroom with a couch in the corner — that was Castiel’s suite up at The Facility. “You did it so well that Alpha’s overwhelmed. He needs you, needs to reward you, wants to share with you. And April — baby, she’s so ready to feel you touch her, she’s shaking. Can you see it? Can you feel my eyes on you? Can you feel how proud I am to be yours?”

Dean was careful not to touch Michael’s swollen ass, but he couldn’t avoid the stripes on his shoulders. It didn’t matter. The imagery was too much. Michael didn’t last long, and there was nothing elegant or dominant about his climax as he spent into Dean’s fist with Dean’s teeth against the pulse in his throat.

“What was that for?” he groaned once his vision cleared and his heart stopped racing.

Dean kissed the side of his throat sweetly then sucked a bruise beneath his ear. “It’s been a long day. I want you to sleep well,” he said smugly.

“I don’t believe you, Dean. I sleep just fine as long as you’re beside me.”
Michael shuffled a hand beneath the covers to clutch at Dean’s hip, earning him a hiss. Neither of them suggested he move his hand.

“I don’t want you to give up on me, Michael. You and Cas are right, and I already know that. I know it, babe. And I deserved every single whack from that damn cane of his.”

Michael rolled over to face his mate. The dim light was just enough to zero in on Dean’s face. “Yes, we both did, but we don’t deserve more than that. Don’t punish yourself, Dean. Commit with me to the training, and let the mistake go.”

Dean nuzzled Michael’s forehead. “It scares the ever lovin’ shit outta me,” he admitted, as if that wasn’t already patently clear. Michael laughed softly.

“No shit.”

Michael kissed the tip of Dean’s nose and then rolled back over to press his back and hips into Dean’s warm body despite the sting. “Go get a cloth to wipe us off, and then get to sleep, alpha. We’re not going to solve it tonight.”

It didn’t escape the Omega that he never got Dean’s commitment out loud.

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Sunday meant Michael found himself quietly roused for a pre-dawn two mile run along silent streets. He was up to the distance, but Cas informed him he usually followed a circuit of five miles. The Omega wasn’t certain he wanted to try for five right off the bat. They didn’t talk as they both breathed fluidly through the rhythmic steps. He showered before Dean so much as shifted, sliding back into the bed next to his mate without the alpha ever realizing he’d been gone. Well, that explained how Cas managed to get the miles in without Michael ever seeing him hit the treadmill in their small gym.

Breakfast felt smoother than either of the previous two. Dean eating bacon out of Michael’s fingers nearly caused them to be late to their first try at attending church together, but they made it on time – and ruffled remarkably few feathers considering their celebrity. It was the Winchester’s home town church, and they knew him here as Pack. Dean graciously accepted several smug looks from people he had known all his life along with some version of, “It’s about time you darkened these doors again, Winchester,” and “We missed you, boy. Sorry about your dad.”

Michael watched him closely for signs that the alpha wasn’t as enthusiastic about the plan to make themselves a part of the life of the church as he seemed to be, but Dean thrived under the attention, and Michael got a chance to see him work his magic with the people of the church. Many of them hadn’t seen Dean in years, but he called them by name, asked after their families, remembered old stories, moved right in as if he was home, and he brought Michael along effortlessly. The Omega felt one more weight lift off his chest at the ease of their acceptance. These were Dean’s people, his Pack from long before Cas ever thought to claim Dean, and they were clearly thrilled to have him back.

Michael sang the hymns of his childhood. It fed a part of him that he’d only glanced at in years; a side that had nearly starved from neglect. As a pup, it would have been tied to his childhood Submissive, but now…now it went straight to his Omega designation, and it vibrated with emotion he wasn’t prepared to feel. Dean didn’t hesitate to put a hand around his shoulders and pull him in
“Would it help if you kneel?” Dean asked in a whisper. Michael shook his head. Not yet. He wasn’t so comfortable being overtly Omega in public yet that he could take solace on his knees. He clung to Dean and waited to get his voice back. The song went on around him.

Sunday also meant a full day-long work session in the conservatory. Nicholas and April argued over pacing and emphasis, tone and voice. April forgot all about her reservations in standing up for her opinion as soon as she immersed herself in the sounds of Nick’s show. It didn’t matter that she lacked training or credentials. She was too naïve to worry about bartering for his good graces. She was passionate; and very often she won out. She and Nick put the three hapless musicians through round after round, with subtle shifts to the score. They’d all worked with Nick before though, so they knew what they’d signed up for. In no time, they were watching April for cues more than Nick. She didn’t notice, but he did, and he slowly stepped back and began more and more just to watch her work. She listened to everything – every note, every nuance, every subtle suggestion, every silence, and she brought the three tones together as if sculpting or baking. They became one entity under her hands.

Jo and Charlie stayed out of the way but watchful as the messy work of pounding together a bafflingly complex musical theater piece moved chaotically around them. Where Charlie winced when the shouting became heated, Jo giggled happily. Her pride in her little ingénue practically dribbled out of her. Charlie nudged her with an elbow to her ribs and reminded her she was the chaperone and supposed to appear intimidating.

Both Pack alphas were deep in conference all morning with the wedding coordinator. Michael had insisted on a Primate consultant, declaring that a wolf would come in with too many preconceived notions. That was turning out to be a questionable decision as many things that the pack took for granted culturally needed a full explanation before the woman grasped what they wanted. Most of the details were already in place, but several decisions still needed to be made.

Cas deferred to Dean on nearly everything. He didn’t care about the menu or the flowers. April had custody of the music. Michael was managing the guestlist. Kali was in charge of everything textile. Pastor Jim had agreed to officiate, and both men had already asked their respective brothers to stand for them. They were down to the details. Sharon talked them through the plan to empty the space of most of the guests following the formal marriage ceremony without engendering offense by those who might feel slighted that they weren’t invited to watch Dean get plowed. Neither man particularly cared whether anyone was offended. Everyone who mattered to them would have a red invitation and be welcome inside the curtain.

For a Primate, she was handling the whole thing remarkably well, Cas thought, watching her carefully. He wasn’t entirely sure she understood that the “Claiming” wasn’t a euphemism for another sort of vow exchange. It didn’t much matter though. She wasn’t invited to that part anyway. She seemed competent and organized now that some of her ignorances had been dealt with. All that was left was photography. She’d struck out, as the date they selected was already booked for every photographer in her rolodex, and none of the rest of them knew any photographers who weren’t invited to attend as guests already.

Cas let her scramble and struggle for a few moments, then he calmly caught Michael’s eye. “Call
Bobby,” he said. “Tell him what you want and tell him it’s all on him to get it taken care of.” The coordinator sneezed. Cas and Michael both turned to Dean, whose cheeks had gone pink and whose body was giving off decidedly inappropriate scents considering the topic.

“Really?” Michael asked his mate.

Dean licked his lips and shrugged. “I like it when he takes charge. Sue me.”

Matt and Mark both arrived together shortly after lunch. They’d been asked to come by for a strategy meeting. Mark Simpson was clearly out of his element, having had no more exposure to the Omega’s talent than hearing her hated audition piece in front of a hateful audience. But Matt knew her well, and he assured his colleague that he didn’t want to miss an opportunity like this if it was freely offered.

Introductions were made. A certain amount of fawning was excused by Nicholas, who not-so-secretly reveled in the adoration. April glowed as the center of attention. The three exhausted musicians were released on break and sent packing back down to the Guest house where no one had to worry about a strange alpha in the house. Charlie and Jo both stuck around, claiming spots at the table as April’s personal advocates. Castiel joined them with a grand sweeping entrance once he finished with the interminable wedding plans and set Dean to preparing a pie for Benny. Michael hovered in the doorway, leaning against the door jamb inconspicuously. Fred nodded to him as he strode in with a tray of beverages, and Michael blushed but didn’t leave.

April shifted visibly from virtuoso mastermind to humble Ozzie as she realized all eyes were on her expecting her to talk about her future rather than untangle a harmony that needed fixing. She wilted in the spotlight, lowered her eyes, and pressed flat to Castiel’s chest before he had a chance to choose a seat. “Alpha, do we have to?” she whispered just for him.

He put a hand beneath her chin and lifted her face. He met her eyes as a man gazing down at the woman he adored, not as an Alpha upon his Omega. There was gentleness there. And acceptance. And kindness. “We’re all friends, Kitten. It’s all just talk right now. And it’s for you. Everyone here cares about you. Don’t hide yourself. Please? April, please?”

She nodded and leaned her head in to sponge strength from his body and his scent. He guided her to a place at the table, but when she refused to release him, he let her settle upon his lap. Sensing she wasn’t ready to participate just yet, Cas started the ball rolling by asking Matt for his opinion of her potential. Matt enthused to the point of near absurdity, and Cas turned to Mark who’d only heard her once before today, although he had witnessed a good twenty minutes of her interplay before the musicians were dispatched. He had less to say, but he backed his praise up with the objective observations he’d included in his notes at her audition.

As a classical pianist, all she needed was time to season and a chance for exposure.

Nicholas went next. He told the group that she’d not merely adjusted some of his already written pieces to clean them up, she’d turned some of them upside down, scrapped whole passages, and added three completely new themes, all from her house, and all in her spare time. Cas felt her tremor and suck in a deep breath. He could feel her nerves.

“But what about the original songs she writes?” Charlie interrupted. “She can play any style. She can perform anything. Just ask her. She wants to write and perform. She wants to sing. Ask her!”

“Charlie,” Cas chided quietly with a look. Charlie desisted, but her frustration was evident. She knew April’s mind and her dreams better than anyone here but Jo, and it looked like the
professionals were preparing to shunt her off into a long black gown and a string of pearls whether she wanted that life or not.

“She’s really good, Sir. That’s all we’re saying, and the songs she writes – they make her happy,” Jo added softly.

“You can’t waste a talent like hers on pop songs!” declared Matt. “She belongs in front of a symphony.”

“She belongs in the composer’s chair,” Nick disagreed in his iconic huff.

“Guys! She belongs wherever SHE decides she belongs!” shouted Charlie, already angry.

Cas put his hand up, palm out. “Enough.”

The two Primates startled back in their seats at the manifest power that they could only sense obliquely. The others simply stopped.

Meeting their eyes, he spoke to all of them with one hand sliding up and down her back and his head cocked so that her nose rested near his scent glands, “Whatever the path, there are a few common steps we need to take first. She’ll need representation. She’ll need a business manager.”

April jolted and sat upright in startlement. She looked up at him. “Business…” she muttered. She looked confused.

“Yes, April. Business. You are the artist. I can’t help you directly with that. I’m not suited to more than appreciation. But I can support you, and I can provide you the resources you need to make a go of it. Or try to. You need to understand from the very start, if it’s success or influence you desire, you need to see it as a business, not just an artistic endeavor.”

She frowned and bit her lip. He carefully extracted her lip. He touched her cheek. “I can feel how uncomfortable that makes you.”

Nick sat forward again. “Kid, there’s a billion and twelve talented performers, composers, artists out there. Some of the ones who make it big are complete crap with no talent to speak of at all. And some of the best of the bunch will never make it out of the church basement. If all you want is to write and play and sing…the truth is, you can do that right here. There’s nothing wrong with that. Play for yourself. Play for the Pack. You don’t need to ever leave this house to be an artist…”

“NO!” It came from April and Michael in stereo. He emerged from the shadows, red-faced and fierce just as she found her voice. They startled each other, and both stopped, eyes wide in surprise.

“What I mean is…” Michael tried to finish the sentence, standing awkwardly. He couldn’t make the words come, and his face flinched in discomfort. “I…I’m sorry,” he said, and he fled.

“April?” asked Castiel. That had been real passion pulled from her depths at the idea of whiling her years away in obscurity.

“All right, Alpha,” she told him, speaking only to him. “A manager.” But she was quick to follow up, and her confidence grew as she pulled from that deep reserve. “I still need the lessons though, and I’m NOT ready to try to perform except for small things…Pack things…like the Conventions. That was fun.”

“April,” tried Mark, carefully, with an eye on the Alpha. “You need to choose a direction. What kind of artist do you want to be? A pianist? We can work on composition. I can introduce you to a good
many local musicians.” He chuckled and cast his glance sideways at his idol, whose presence still seemed surreal. “Not as many as he can, I’m sure, but it’s a start. We can get you in to work in Topeka.”

“I don’t want to choose a direction,” she told him. “The music – it comes from all different places. I can’t just be one thing.”

Nick tapped the table with his knuckle. “Look, you be whatever the fuck you want to be. It’s your music. I know. I know how it works. But if you want to be taken seriously, you can’t be a shotgun. You gotta be a laser. Piano-guy is right. It doesn’t work that way in the real world. You remember Michael Jordan playing professional baseball? You remember Billy Joel putting “Nocturne” in one of his first albums?”

She shook her head. Billy Joel? What?

“No. You don’t. You don’t remember that stuff because it wasn’t what they do. Not that Jordan can’t play baseball and Joel can’t write a hell of a piece of instrumental music. But imagine if they had stuck to a career like that – little bit of this, little bit of that, no commitment to their true calling. You wouldn’t even know their names.”

She shook her head. “I can’t choose. I can’t give up something I love. Nick, it’s not just that I like the music – ALL of the music – it’s that it flows through me. I don’t control it, but it needs a way out. And it’s ALL like that. No one genre more than the others. The songs – they may just be pop songs, or whatever,” she looked fiercely at Matt and Mark. “But they’re a part of me just like the piano is. And the more I learn, the faster and wilder it comes to me. I’m just a funnel! Please!”

Castiel wrapped tight arms around her, holding her with intense pressure against his body, encasing her, calming her.

“Guess that answers that question,” said Jo. “You wanted to know what she wants.” She shot an irritated look at Nicholas.

Nick’s eyes were hard. He ignored everyone in the room but the Ozzie, and he leaned across the table. “April, pare it down to basics. Pretend you can have anything, be anything, do anything.”

“I want to be an outlet,” she said without hesitation. “I want what’s flowing through me to find a voice that can be my gift to the Universe. I want people everywhere to hear the sound of eternity rushing like a river through my body. I want to change the direction of musical creation forever, like The Beatles did, like Beethoven. I want new artists to study what I’ve done and build something greater. Nick, I NEED that!”

“I hear you, little Ozzie. Problem is, it puts us back at square one.”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Castiel. “April, tell me what you think of this: let’s put polishing your performance skills on the side and focus on the composition work. You tell me what you need, and I’ll make sure you have it. Keep working with Nicholas, but don’t stick strictly to that. Set up a stringent output goal, make it any genre you want to focus on, but get lots and lots of notes on the page.” He looked across the table to Mark. “Are you up to the challenge of coaching her full time?”

“Full time? Sir, I still have commitments to Pembrandt.”

Nick scoffed, and Charlie kicked him.

Castiel nodded. “Yes. I’m asking if you would consider tendering your resignation with the school you respect so much and come and work for an Omega-Submissive instead.”
Cas had heard enough opinions about her potential by now. It was time to test the veracity of those statements. Mark looked at him, clearly shocked. Matt whistled and nudged his friend beneath the table.

“For how long?” he asked. A private coaching gig couldn’t be expected to continue perpetually.

Cas looked at Matt. “You speak highly of Mr. Simpson’s aptitude for a position such as this, do you not?” Matt had already proven his worth. April adored him, fought with him, broke down in his arms, beamed at him when he guided her through something he wasn’t sure he could have managed himself. Matt’s opinion held weight in this house.

“Yes, Alpha. If she’s getting serious about composition, whether it’s classical or the songs she won’t quit singing when she’s supposed to be working on her fundamentals, this is your man.”

Cas nodded. “And you would tell me that even if you and he weren’t romantically involved?”

Both of them spluttered. “WHAT?! It’s…We’re…” Matt looked rapidly between the staunch Alpha and his friend. Cas waited. Finally, with a look passing between them that calmed Mark, he turned resolutely to face Castiel. “I would, Sir,” he said firmly. The shift of his arm at his side, mirrored by Mark, told April that they’d clasped hands. She smiled and tucked back into Cas’ chest shyly, happily.

“Nicholas?”

“Alpha, she’s already better trained than most of the morons out there making a shitty living as musicians-for-hire. Get her a coach if you want, but it’s a crutch. You need to know that. It’s training wheels, and she doesn’t need them.” He looked at a blushing Mark, who had pulled Matt’s hand into his lap. “No offense, mate.”

Castiel nodded. “Will it hurt her to learn musical theory?”

Nick hesitated to answer. “Waiting could be a big mistake, Castiel.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s how it works in this industry. It’s an early bird kind of gig.”

“You think she’s prepared right now to jump out onto the big stage? Take it on head first?”

Nick caught April’s terrified face peeking out, and he knew she needed time to come to terms with the idea. “Fine. Hire the guy. Hire ‘em both. But I’m with Michael on this one, guys. If you try to let her wait until it’s not scary, she’ll never jump.”

Cas nodded decisively as if another tick mark had fallen. He kissed the top of April’s head and sent her calm Alpha assurance through the bond. “Mark, if you are interested, I will double the salary you’re currently receiving from Pembrandt. I will sign a five-year contract, payable in full if we feel she would be more successful without you. You will receive full standard benefits, comparable to my household staff. Work hours and responsibilities are negotiable. Are you interested in becoming April’s tutor full-time?”

“Fuck, YES! Shit. I mean, yes, Alpha. Yes, please. Thank you! I won’t let you down. I swear!”

Mark Simpson was in shock, but all he could think of was the look that would soon be on that old bitch’s face when he resigned.

Cas nodded solemnly, not offended by his effusive swearing. “Matthew? Same offer.”
“Alpha.” Matt’s face paled. He’d been living a dream since he first stepped foot in this house, and now…

“You don’t have to decide today,” Cas told him, misinterpreting his speechlessness.

April didn’t. She knew Matt well enough. She giggled despite her nerves. “He’ll do it, Alpha,” she spoke upward to Cas.

“Oh. Very good. Excellent,” said Cas, relaxing. “We can discuss a relocation package if you need to find closer accommodations. You can expect to be putting in a full day’s work, both of you. I assume you have no issues, working…together?” He made it a question.

“No, Alpha,” said Matt. “We hadn’t announced it yet, but we’re engaged. We really work well together.”

“Engaged. Congratulations,” Cas deadpanned. He was a little annoyed at the idea that Matt never thought to mention his relationship when Cas approached him first to talk about Mark’s qualifications. “And you didn’t believe that your relationship would be obvious?”

“It’s not a problem, is it?” asked Mark, tensing. He wasn’t about to work for someone who tried to tell him whom to marry.

“Of course not,” said Castiel. “I’m merely surprised that you weren’t aware that you broadcast rather clearly.”

April clicked her tongue at her frustratingly stuffy Alpha. “They spend all their time with apes, Cas. Apes don’t read things as clearly as we do.”

Matt looked around the table. Jo and Charlie hadn’t spoken for some time, but they both nodded in confirmation. “You ALL knew?” Nick laughed outright. “Even my mother doesn’t know.” Matt was astounded.

Nick nudged Mark sitting beside him. “You might consider cluing Mom in before it’s time for her to dress up for the big ceremony.”

Everyone laughed.

“Michael,” Castiel called. “Stop hiding in the hall. I need you to arrange a couple of contracts.”

Michael edged back in. He looked first at April, and his face was pale. She dodged his eyes by hiding her face again in Castiel’s throat. “Yes, Sir. I’ll get hold of the same form we used for Tony and have the lawyer adjust it. Email me the details?”

Cas ignored the growing tension between his Omegas. Soon, they would find an outlet to express and release the sexual tension that nearly made occupying the same room with them both impossible. Dean had a point it seemed. They were Omegas after all. He was delusional to think they would be able to resist one another forever.

Cas dismissed Michael with an assertive gesture. “Are you pleased, Kitten? We’ll start with a strenuous training schedule, and I want your tutors to begin to explore avenues to get your work published. Nicholas is going to explore avenues to get you exposure. We’ll reassess your progress regularly.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” she said sincerely. It was meant to convey gratitude for a great many things. “It’s a lot to think about. I’m scared.”
He chuckled. “I know. But you’re safe. I’m not ever going to let anything disastrous happen to you. But whether your musical career succeeds is not in my hands. I will help you all I can, but I’m not going to pull a committee together every time you feel stuck. You have people you can reach out to. You won’t ever have to do any of it alone, but I’m just the cheering squad and the scaffold.”

“Are we still planning…?” She shot a look across to Nick. She knew he thought it was foolish to think a litter of pups fit in the middle of what was already sure to be overwhelming by itself.

“I promised you, didn’t I? We’ll make it work. Do you understand that the hard work is on you? You’re committing to continue that even after you’ve conceived.”

“I understand, Castiel. I can’t tell you how grateful I am. I never imagined I could really try. I never dared to hope for any of this. Father wanted me to learn the piano to keep me occupied. He thought I’d be a church organist one day. I’ll work hard, Sir. I know it’s going to cost you a lot of money.”

“The expense is not your concern, Omega. It’s mine.” His voice hit the Alpha register that communicated directly with the back of her brain. She shuddered, tucked under, and nodded.

***************

It was wonderful to spend some down time with Benny and Andrea as well as their sleepy beagle, Rudy. In the past, Cas and Benny spent most weekends together, often doing very little besides share space unless a project deadline loomed. They hadn’t dined together, outside of Facility functions and John Winchester’s funeral, in months. They both agreed that new family responsibilities couldn’t be allowed to dissolve their close connection. It was a friendship that had survived the stormiest seasons of their lives, and they both valued it more than they knew how to express.

Andrea glowed, and Dean was adorable as they laughed carelessly around the table. Cas announced that the invitation for ACRI to address the joint Boards and the committee members in charge of nominating a suitable Director for the newly merging institution had finally come through. They were flying to Dayton next week. After next week, they would all know which way the wind would blow their little fledgling movement that had grown into a groundswell and was rapidly becoming a typhoon. Castiel allowed a toast for good luck, but then he forbade any further shop talk.

“So, have you decided if April’s getting a puppy, Alpha?” Dean asked as Benny sipped his wine. Benny laughed merrily at the very idea.

“Hold up, brother,” said Benny to Cas, working to contain his chuckles. “Before you answer, I wanna lay a little wager on this one.” Benny tore off a corner of his paper napkin and scribbled a short message on it, folded it in half, and slid it across to Dean. Dean opened it, showed it to Andrea who rolled her eyes and poured him more wine.

“You’re on,” said Dean. “Cas? Dog or no dog?”

Cas closed his eyes and buried his face in his hands. They heard him answer, though it was muffled.

“She wants a Springer spaniel.”

“Yeah?”

Cas looked up. “I’m not buying a dog, Dean.”
Benny crowed, and Dean slumped until Alpha continued, “I’m not doing anything that divisive without talking to you about it first. And anyway, there are hundreds of dogs in need of homes through the county shelter. We’ll see.”

“Ha-HA!” exclaimed Dean. “‘We’ll see’ means Yes! I win, jackass! Pay up!” Dean held his hand out.

Benny wasn’t impressed. “When I see that man,” he pointed at Cas, “take a dog into his house and let it stay, when I see him taking the rascal out on a leash to crap on the grass every morning with a little plastic baggie, then I’ll owe you, not before.”

“You wouldn’t mind?” Cas asked Dean, more than a little surprised.

“Maybe not a Springer, but, I mean, I love dogs. We never had one before because it was just Sammy and me, and we traveled too much, spent too much time at work. Now? Hell, we got a house full of people most of the time, even when there’s a Con on.”

Castiel got lost briefly in the sparkle in Dean’s eyes; until the brat winked at him and turned to bring Andrea into the discussion.

“You may as well pay the man now, Benny. He’s right,” Cas admitted ruefully. “I’m defenseless against her when she pulls out all the stops. Dean knows that.”

Benny waited until they were working their way through Dean’s decadent pie before noting how twitchy he was in his chair. “Alpha gave me the news that you broke your clean sweep with a bang the first morning he lifted the ban, cher,” he said with a forkful poised by his mouth. “But I didn’t think he leveled you down that hard. He made it sound like a quick and tight strapping. Why are you so squirmiy tonight?”

“Yes, Dean,” said Cas smugly. “Tell Benny all about yesterday afternoon.”

Dean put his fork down. His ears and face were bright enough to scald water.

Andrea snorted. “Dean! What on earth? I thought you two were going to wait for an alpha spotter. Ben said…”

“Oh, we had an alpha spotter, didn’t we Dean?” asked that smug bastard with the perfect tie and the perfect chin cleft and the… Dean got up to fetch the coffee carafe.

“No?” Cas goaded him when he remained silent. “All right, I’ll tell them. Dean and Michael had a bit of a P.C.A. incident yesterday. Rang the front bell and everything; standing there in the front foyer looking like a couple of truant waifs with,” Cas looked back to Dean. “What’s that guy’s name?”

“Dale White,” Dean muttered, setting the carafe on the table but not taking his seat again. His face was on fire.

“Right. Dale White. Nice guy. Seemed a little ticked off to catch them topping 90 miles per hour with a pregnant Omega behind the wheel.”

Dean braced for the impact of Benny’s disgust, but the alpha’s eyes were kind when he forced himself to meet them. Benny searched his face and then smiled sympathetically. “You’re not as lost as you feel, brother,” he said simply. “You’re climbing the north face of the mountain right now with no gear and no safety net. It’s okay if you slip a few feet every now and again. We’ll keep you from falling all the way to the base. You just keep your chin up and keep moving upward, all right?”
Dean stifled a laugh that was more sob. “Thanks, man.” He left all the rest of the words in his head unspoken. Benny nodded and went back to his dessert.

“And how was it?” Andrea asked Cas. She knew all about his trepidation to lay into his Sub’s body again. “Are you all right?”

He thought about it. His eyes glazed as he turned inward. Then he focused on Dean, and he melted a little. “I think we’re good.” He reached across for Dean’s hand, and the man gave it. He would always give it. Castiel’s eyes asked Dean for confirmation.

“Yeah, boss,” said the brat. “We’re good.”

Chapter End Notes

And, because I can't contain myself...go back and check out the comments section of Chapters 1 & 2. The inimitable LizardWhisperer has graced us with a couple of astounding pictographic summaries. They are, you know, NSFW, so as she advised me, don't get fired. Thanks, beautiful. I'm honored!
Chapter 79

Chapter Summary

The ape gets her horizons widened, and she's not even into the good stuff yet. Cas takes another look at Dean, and finds it all makes sense. Kali used liberal artistic license, and then has to stand to account for it. And then things go squirrely. Again.

Chapter Notes

Happy St. Patrick's Day, even if you aren't Irish. Erin Go Bragh! My maiden name is pure Ireland, and so is my love of the froth and foam! I will raise one to my lovely Pack this day.

Oh, and there's not a split infinitive reference in here as I promised someone there would be. I forgot. My bad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 79 – Monday, July 31, 2017

THEN:

“No, Cas. Next time I’m picking the movie. You don’t get it. You don’t start the franchise with Michael Keaton and then ‘evolve’ to Christian Bale. This one’s a train wreck. Trust me. It’s gonna tank like the Titanic.” Benny headed toward the exit with the other moviegoers. Cas walked beside him in a bubble of open space that somehow moved along with him. Benny didn’t get a bubble like that. Someone knocked against his shoulder as he brushed past.

“Titanic was a huge success, Benny.”

“God, you’re such a dork. Not the movie, Alpha, the ocean liner. By this time next week, this flick won’t even be showing. That’s three hours of my life I’m never getting back.”

“Don’t hold back on my account,” Cas grumbled in irritation, pushing the movie theater door open and holding it for Benny to precede him into the muggy evening. “Go ahead and tell me what you really think. Personally, I enjoyed it.”

“That’s because you were raised to appreciate high art, Cas, not pop culture.”

Cas stopped walking and tilted his head, offended. “You think I’m a snob.”

Benny chortled and turned around. “You want the truth, or you want to go grab a beer and get the final steps for the project lined out?”
“You’re buying,” said Castiel in a snit, sweeping past his friend, turning toward the pub, and continuing to mutter churlishly under his breath. “And I rather enjoy watching Christian Bale. He’d make a good alpha.”

Benny couldn’t help grinning. Baiting Cas was a critical part of his commitment to keeping the Alpha humble. That’s what he told himself. Or perhaps it was just fun.

Turning the corner, he ran into Castiel’s back. Cas was frozen in place, locked up with tension, listening and scenting. He frowned and squinted into the darkness ahead. There was no one else on the street at the moment, but Benny sensed it too. Distress. Omega distress. It hit his nostrils first, and then he heard a faint cry.

“Benny…” Cas’ hand pressed against Benny’s chest. The Alpha didn’t turn his head. “To the left, I think. Down the next alley.”

“Or in one of those storefront alcoves,” Benny whispered. “It’s too dark to see. Go slow. Don’t put her at risk. Cas, wait…”

Castiel flowed forward. He lowered his head to aid his eyes against the glare from the streetlight, and he flared his nostrils. A firm thump, followed by a muffled grunt and a low whimper came from his left. Down the alley. He could smell the alpha now. Jesus, the smell. The guy reeked – practically rancid. How had he missed it? A detached part of his perception noted Benny behind him, holding back with his phone to his ear, calling for emergency assistance. Castiel dismissed him. He didn’t need to tell Benny to watch the alley’s exit. No one would get past Benny.

Rounding the corner, he could make out the hunched figure, already low to the ground and scuffling, bent over a shadowed shape that was far less cooperative than the fetid alpha wanted her. She wasn’t screaming, but a muted and persistent mumbling matched the rhythm of her struggles. She was either gagged or the alpha had her mouth covered tightly with a hand. He was grunting as he subdued her, vicious strikes aimed at her head from his bulky right arm, while he tangled her legs up in his to prevent her landing a kick. Cas’ eyes lost all color but red.

He didn’t remember crossing the distance between the mouth of the grimy alley and the desperate Omega, but suddenly he was there. A startled scream bounced across the narrow space, echoing into the night as Castiel threw his weight into the collision with the massive attacker. The Omega, freed of his grip, skittered wildly on her back, trying to practically climb the wall in her desperation to escape. The two grappling alphas landed hard some four feet further on. Castiel didn’t give the beast any time to get his breath or his bearings. He wrestled him onto his belly rapidly, using his weight to pin the man. One hand tangled in his greasy hair, Cas slammed his head into the wet, oily pavement. Then he did it again. And again.

Cas lost track of time and purpose. His rage boiled, his need reduced to blind destruction. He smelled blood, but he wanted enough blood spewing from the man’s nose and mouth to bathe in it. He didn’t hear fleeing footsteps. He didn’t hear the firm but calming words of his best friend as he caught the terrified woman and sought to soothe her, convince her she was safe, help calm her until the ambulance arrived. He didn’t hear the approaching sirens. He turned the wretch over onto his back and planted his fist into a cheekbone that shattered on impact. The body jolted with the impact, but the only sound it made was a gurgling from deep in its throat.

“ALPHA!! Cas, man, STOP!” Hands grabbed him around his upper chest and pulled. The Alpha roared and managed one final thump of the bloodied head against the pavement before he was pulled bodily off and set against the wall on his feet. Benny’s face appeared inches in front of his own. Benny’s eyes were as red as his own. They both panted heavily, staring at each other. Castiel found the alpha searching his face for signs of recognition. Cas snarled, but he didn’t fight against Benny’s
“You back with us, brother? You good?”

Cas wrenched his breathing back under control and issued a long shaky exhale with his nod. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the brick wall at his back. Benny released the grip he had on Cas’ shirt, patted his chest, and stepped a couple of paces back. He looked down at the bloody lump that used to be a virile alpha.

“Jesus, man.”

“Oh, sorry,” said Cas with his eyes still closed. “I slipped a little.”

“Slipped?”

“Is she okay? Where is she?” Cas opened his eyes and looked toward the mouth of the alley, only then registering the flashing lights and scurry of activity. Two cops were jogging toward him. A gurney was being unloaded from an ambulance in the street.

“Cas, brother,” said Benny under his breath before the police arrived. “If we lived anywhere but here, you’d get arrested for that.” He turned his face away and downward, hiding the movement of his lips.

Cas’ eyes darkened. “Then it’s a good thing we live where we do.” He straightened and met the cops. “Gentlemen.”

“Alpha,” the older of the two greeted him. “You, uh, have a disagreement this evening?” He looked around Cas’ body at the rumpled dark coat that had begun to shift miserably on the ground and groan.

“I did,” Castiel told him. “Do you need a statement right away? I’d like to accompany the Omega to the hospital.”

“Stan, that’s Maury.” The younger cop nudged his partner with his eyes glued to the face in the muck.

“You know this man? Castiel asked him, going on alert.

“Well, I’m not sure I’d call him a man. More of a brute, really. But yeah, I know him. Looks like you did his face a favor. The new look suits him.”

Cas flicked his eyes back to the more senior cop with his brows up in question.

The grizzled officer sighed, turned, and waved the EMTs forward with their gurney. “Go ahead to the hospital, Alpha. I’ll come by as soon as I finish here.”

“Thank you,” said Cas, pushing off the wall and striding purposefully toward the street without a backward glance. The young Omega sat hunched over on the curb with a concerned medic wrapping a blanket over her shoulders. When Castiel and Benny emerged from the alley, she launched herself at the Alpha. He caught her gently and allowed her to nestle beneath his chin. His arms wrapped around her. He stopped walking and went still and solid.

“Shh. It’s over. You’re going to be all right.”

“Alpha…” she whimpered.
He looked down and lifted her face. Her eye had already begun to swell and streak with angry red. Other than that, she looked relatively unscathed. Cas firmed his expression and spoke to her with an Alpha tone. “You’re all right. Just breathe with me for a minute. You’re all right.”

The EMT had the ambulance ready to take her, and he approached slowly. “Alpha, we need to go.”

Cas ignored him. Benny stepped past to intercede. “Do you live close?” Cas asked her. She nodded and pointed up the street. “Do you have a mobile phone?” She shook her head. “All right. Here. I have a piece of paper. Give me your number, and I’ll call your alpha, have him meet us at the hospital…”

“How about me!” she cried, clinging tighter to his shirt.

“I won’t. I’ll stay with you until you’re ready for me to go.” He walked her slowly to the ambulance and helped her climb up into the tight space. She whispered her numbers to him, and he jotted them down. Benny assured him he would take care of getting the woman’s family notified when Cas passed the slip of paper with name, number, and address scribbled messily on it.

Benny caught his wrist as he began to move into the ambulance. “Castiel. Man, you could have killed him. You…”

“Well, I’ll try harder next time,” said Cas coldly, pulling away.

NOW:

“And as I said, everyone’s going to get a chance to show off for Ms. Blake as much as they can stand this session.” Dean addressed the assembled teachers just before they dispersed to welcome their new classes.

“I’m telling you all right now: I don’t want to see any posturing or special…um…what would you call it?” He turned to Sam.

“Um, showing off?” Sam guessed.

“Right. Showing off. Don’t do that. She’s here to get a real look at what we’re doing, and we’re going to give her ourselves, exactly as we are. Capiche?”

They all assented in various ways.

“We’ll be escorting her everywhere. When we come in to your classroom, just ignore us. Keep doing what you’re doing. If she has questions, they’ll go first to Sam or to me. I want the interruptions to your classes to be minimal. Everyone, if you have any concerns, my door is always open. Come and talk to me.”

“Alpha?” Garth raised his hand like a middle-schooler. Dean nodded. “How real are we talking? I mean, are we following any of the public protocols at all?”

“No. We’re not. Get this straight, guys. She’s NOT here. Just ignore her completely.”

“Wait,” said Sonny. “Are you serious? DFs? Canings? Dean, you can’t mean that. She shouldn’t see
that stuff. Apes can’t handle it.”

“Guess we’ll find out, won’t we? Here, folks, listen to me. If I get wind of anyone pulling their blows because they don’t wanna upset the pretty lady, you’ll answer directly to me. You all got that? I don’t like this any more than you do, but if we’re gonna do it, we’re gonna do it right. She wants to see what it’s really like behind the steel doors, and Alpha wants to show her. Anybody want to go tell Alpha it’s a bad idea?”

General amused naysaying followed that question. All of them knew that Castiel would hear them out if they had real concerns to voice, but they also trusted that he’d already carefully assessed the risks.

“Me neither,” he laughed. “All right then, commercial time. Y’all know I’m going to say it, so just shut up and let me get through this.” They shifted communally, shuffling papers and easing shoulders, the mass release of tension of a group that knows they are shortly to be dismissed.

“This training academy, this one right here in Lawrence Kansas, is the best in the business. We got that way by keeping two tenets at the top of our minds always. Those are: ‘Nothing trumps student safety’, and ‘Every student’s need is the most important need’. Those remain our guiding principles. This session is going to stretch all of us to our limits. Guys, that’s my fault, not yours. Do what you can, and keep talking to me about what you need, but I’m not gonna lie, it’s going to be rough. Next session will be better. We’ve got the juice to hire four new trainers, and I’m on top of it, but that’s not going to help us right now. Stay focused. Watch out for your students and each other. Nobody said changing the world was going to be easy. Let’s go kick some ass! Get out of here, all of you!”

The start-of-session pep talk always energized Dean, but he felt off this morning, high-fiving his staff on their way to mold impressionable minds and bodies. Dean had no class of his own, and it was eating him from the inside. Soon the space was empty except for Dean, Sam, and Jody.

“Are you all right, boss?” asked the beta who would soon escort the boarders down for their first day of classes.

“Jody, don’t call me that.” Dean began erasing his notes off the whiteboard.

She touched his shoulder and looked into his eyes. It took him a minute to acknowledge that she could read his stress level.

“I don’t like it,” he said. “I’ve got a bad feeling.”

She nodded, grateful that he hadn’t tried to pretend he wasn’t bothered. She patted his shoulder in assurance and smiled at Sam on her way out.

“Come on, Dean. It’s time,” said Sam holding the door. Dean had never felt so useless. The first day of a new session was always an exciting time. There was more to do than could get done. There were fires to put out, and lost waifs to direct. There was always a new class, rife with potential to learn. Dean was empty. He followed Sam through the door and down the hall, around the corner, down two flights of stairs to Castiel’s office.

“I don’t like it, Sammy,” he said again with his hand on the knob.

“It’s going to be fine, Dean. We’ve never had cause to think we couldn’t trust Cas before. This is no different.”

Dean opened the door, but the office was empty. At the far end, the door to his personal suite was propped open. Dean shoved the feeling of possessiveness of the space beyond that door into a box
inside his spleen and jumped up and down on the lid for good measure. He and Sam went through to
the suite and found Cas sitting at his kitchenette’s table with Sarah Blake, a plate of Danishes, and
fresh coffee.

“Come in,” said Cas enthusiastically. “I brought breakfast. I don’t know about you, Sam, but I know
Dean never eats on the first day of a session. This morning, he barely ate four bites. Come in and
have something. Sarah and I were just chatting.”

Dean shot him a look that he hoped communicated how much he DIDN’T want his failure to eat
what Michael presented to him this morning, and the subsequent response from his Dom, openly
discussed at work. Cas’ face didn’t tell whether the message was received, but he did change the
subject. Sam filled a mug with black coffee and slid it to Dean before rifling through the fridge for
cream to put in his own.

Dean stared at the steaming brown liquid and chewed his cheek. He could feel Castiel’s eyes on him
as he listened to Sarah talk about her planned thesis.

Dean flagged his brother. “Psst, Sam. Shoot some of that creamer over, wouldja? I don’t feel like
drinking it black today.”

“Sure, Dean.” Sam didn’t seem to think anything of it, but Dean could feel smugness pouring off the
Alpha.

Fine. Call it growth. So, he hated black coffee. The bastard didn’t have to smirk like that.

“But the most important point we need to clarify this morning,” Cas answered Sarah. “Is how we can
support your work in a way that meets all of our needs without putting any strain on the students.
Their safety will always come first.”

“I understand, Alpha,” she said. She didn’t sound nervous to Dean, and he figured that either meant
she was bad-ass or irretrievably naïve. “I don’t want this project to interfere with your work in any
way.”

“It will though,” said Dean after testing the potency of his mix. “No matter how we do it, just your
being here changes what you’re studying. It’s called ‘The Observer Effect’. I looked it up.”

Cas’ hand suddenly found need to cover his mouth and nose, but his eye crinkles gave him away.
Dean winked at him.

“Then let’s discuss how to maximize my exposure to the subject while minimizing my interference.”
She was all business this morning. Spoilsport. She hadn’t even accepted a Danish. Dean pulled one
off the plate and stuffed a large part of it into his mouth at once. Cas raised a brow at him, and Dean
shrugged back. Someone should be polite and eat the offered sweets, right?

“That’s easy,” said Sam, sliding into the fourth chair. “You and I stick together like flypaper. You
talk to me or Dean. No one else. You stand where we tell you to stand, and you don’t say a word to
anyone.”

“Good morning, Sam,” said Sarah. “It’s good to see you again.” He acknowledged the greeting with
a lift of his Danish.

“You know my brother?” asked Sam with a tilt of his head.

“I do. We met briefly at one of my pre-employment appointments. Good morning, Dean.”
“Mornin’. Look, this stuffy, stick-up-your-ass attitude isn’t going to work out on the floor,” Dean announced. “You need to loosen up a little. Just talk to us, Sarah. We’re not going to bite you. You’re completely safe with us.”

“I come across as frightened?” she asked, diving into her bag for notepaper and a pen.

Dean thought about it. “No. You seem like a bank teller exchanging twenties. This isn’t that kind of place. If you go into a classroom smelling like a tax accountant, you’ll throw off the vibe of the class.”

“How do you suggest I correct that?”

“Have a Danish,” said Dean, scooting the plate toward her. “Tell a joke. Argue with Sammy about whether Stone Temple Pilots sucks more than Nickelback.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Really, Dean?”

“Let’s start with this, Ms. Blake,” said Dean, leaving the Danishes in front of her. “What do you expect to see in there?”

“I’m trying to keep an open mind and not fill my head with presuppositions,” she answered.

“Okay, but surely you have some kind of an idea. We never let apes past the second set of doors. Why do you think that is? What are we hiding in there?”

“Well, of course,” she said, “I’ve read all of your studies. I know the basic premise behind the training process. I know of the interactive exercises that allow exploration into certain sexual practices. I know that corporal punishment plays a large role in the classroom structure.”

“Have you ever witnessed a DF in person?” asked Sam.

“No,” she said. “I’ve seen videos and, um, documentaries.”


“Sam,” said Castiel quietly.

“That’s why I’m here,” she said. Dean was pleased to see her cheeks gain a little color and her eyes pick up intensity. “It may come as a surprise to you, but wolves aren’t very forthcoming in public displays of hierarchical behavior. Ever since the last purge during the Second Cultural Revolution in 1818, Lupins have kept their more disturbing behaviors behind closed doors and high hedges.”

“Disturbing?” prompted Dean.

“Yes, disturbing. You know they are or you wouldn’t lock Primates out. That’s what we’re talking about, isn’t it? We’re talking about hierarchical and training uses of sexual penetration?”

“It’s called fucking, Sarah,” said Dean. “Go ahead and get used to it. If you say, ‘sexual penetration’ in there, you’re going to get laughed out of the building.”

She blushed.

“Like I said, I’m keeping an open mind.” She was back to bank teller, and Dean figured it out.

“You’re afraid that watching what we do is going to turn you on. That’s why you’re buttoned up tighter than an Asbestos Hazmat suit.” He half expected to be called down by Cas for that one, but the Alpha said nothing.

“The thought, um, HAD crossed my mind. I have to ask, how do you keep it from affecting you when it’s right there? The corporal punishment isn’t what I’m worried about, but…look, I’m as red-blooded as any woman, and I could use some pointers on how to stay objective.”

Sam and Dean both laughed. Cas sipped.

Sam was the first to manage an answer. “Objective. Hmm. Okay, well, for one, we do this every day, and our focus is on the students, not the sex. Most of the time, if it’s not a scene we’re involved in, we’re a little too jaded, I guess, to react.”

“And for two,” said Dean, taking over from his brother smoothly, “Sometimes you can’t – stay objective, that is. We’ll give you a tour in a bit. I want you to pay attention as you walk through the halls and count the doors that have a blue light above them. The doors themselves will be blue too. We call them, um, Blue Doors.” Sam’s bitch face begged Dean to smack it off him.

“And what’s in those rooms?” she asked, looking like she didn’t really want to know.

“If the light’s off, nothing. Just a padded mat on a raised table, a trashcan, a sink, a tube of AstroGlide.”

“Like an exam room?”

“Yeah, but the table’s wide enough for two. It’s not really a bed. How it works is, if you find yourself worked up for whatever reason, and you need to deal with it before you go to your next meeting, you slip in one of the Blue Doors, lock it – that triggers the light – take care of yourself, clean up you and the space, and then hustle to your meeting before you get spanked for being late.”

She stared at him. Dean popped the last bite of his Danish in his mouth and chewed with gusto.

“Please tell me that’s hyperbole.”

“Which part?” asked Sam. “It happens to everybody sometimes. You’re free to use the Blue Doors too, Sarah. As you say, red-blooded woman and all.”

“You promised there would be no hazing,” Sarah accused Castiel boldly.

He set his mug down. “And there won’t be, or the culprit will answer to me directly. I assure you, none of the staff wants to answer to me directly.”

“This Blue Door thing…that’s real?”

“It is. I recommend you carry whatever toys you prefer in your bag. We do not provide vibrators or dildos in the Blue Doors. The expense and upkeep wouldn’t make sense. We do provide lubricant and moist wipes. The rooms are sanitized several times a day, but there is no guarantee that they’ve been freshly cleaned between each use, just like a common restroom. It is impolite to leave a mess behind.”

Sarah’s eyes flicked about the room, responding to her internal argument. Her lips moved for a couple of moments before she nodded gamely. “All right. Understood. What else am I going to freak
“That’s the spirit,” said Dean. “I knew you were in there somewhere.”

Sam slapped the side of his brother’s head without much force. “Back to the DFs,” he scooted forward in his chair. “Ms. Blake,”

“Call me Sarah. Please.”

“Sarah. You’re going to see DFs here. You’ll be here for twelve weeks. You’ll witness things that you find very disturbing. I want to assure you that I will be right beside you every step of the way. I’m going to answer all of your questions. I’ll be able to talk you through what you’re seeing and help you understand it.”

“Thank you, Sam. I think I’ll be all right. I have a good grasp of the importance and the relevance of the DF. I understand that it’s necessary.”

“You do,” Sam said, obviously unconvinced.

She took his response as a prompt to dive into her standard argument amongst her classmates and some teachers. “Well, yes. It sets up the context for the pack hierarchies when they become unclear. It stabilizes individuals within the Pack structure.”

“Uh-huh,” said Dean. “You read that in a book?”

“Dean, don’t be rude,” said Castiel.

Dean scrubbed his hands across his face hard enough to redden it. “All right. Let’s break it down. You know what ‘fuck’ means. We’ve already established that. It’s the ‘sexual penetration’ stuff you were talking about earlier.”

Sarah sighed. “Yes. We agree. I know what ‘fuck’ means.”

“And the other part of the phrase? Domination? You know what that means?” Dean asked. He and Sam were both pressed forward at this point, fully engaged.

Sarah sat up and further back, putting distance between their intensity and herself unconsciously, but she answered them gamely. “Well, that’s the part that establishes the hierarchy. One individual has the power or standing to claim a higher rank, and that makes her or him the Top. The act of aggressively dominating the body of the other through…fucking…that creates a structure that both individuals can feel psychologically.”

“All right,” said Dean. Her answer was still textbook. “Here’s the rub.” He glanced at Cas. They’d agreed on how they wanted it presented. It was time to take the hood off. If they were doing this, as Dean had announced to his staff, they were going all in. “What makes it different from what you call rape?”

“There’s a submission from the Topped individual,” she asserted.

Dean shook his head slowly and held her eyes. “There’s not.”

“What?”

“The dominated wolf can submit if they want to, often they do before it’s forced on them, but it’s really irrelevant. Makes no difference. Being forcefully subdued is not the same thing as submitting.
Sarah, if there’s a \textit{willing} submission, then you’re probably witnessing a \textit{Claim} Fuck, not a DF. Domination fucks are pure aggressive force. There is NO consent requested. It is forcible. It is violent. It is intrusive. It is destructive. And it is in every way nonconsensual.”

Sam interceded. “Come on, Dean. It’s not destructive. That’s the whole point. Yeah, you have to go through all that to get the positive result you need, but the end result is \textit{CON}structive.”

“Did you see Henrickson’s face after Cas got through with him?” he looked across and challenged Sam. “Pretty damned destructive if you ask me.”

“But,” Sarah interrupted frowning. She didn’t continue. They couldn’t be saying what it sounded like they were saying.

Castiel came to her rescue as she tried to piece the puzzle together.

“Domination fucking is rape, Sarah. By the standard Primate and legal definition, it is. It is nonconsensual forceful, violent, and aggressive sexual assault, to the point of genital penetration and completion. Physical injury occurs most of the time, and Dean is correct, the occurrence of a willing submission is not relevant. It is also, utterly indispensable as a pack hierarchy tool. Believe me, I detest the practice as much as anyone.”

Dean scoffed. “Says the guy who’s never HAD to \textit{take} one up the ass.”

Cas’ head was down as he sipped his coffee, but his blue eyes flicked up and met Dean’s in a smolder that made Dean suck in a quick breath and thank the Universe he wasn’t Omega. He was wearing khakis. Slick would’ve gone right through khakis.

“I don’t understand! I’ve argued this point with my teachers and classmates for years. You and your staff have said it countless times! It’s not prior consent, but you’ve always insisted there’s a submission. That implies a degree of consent in Lupin terms. Now you’re saying that’s been a lie? All this time? I must’ve sounded so stupid. God, even to Dr. Meyer! How could I have been so naïve? I stood up for you!”

“Karl Meyer is interested in eliminating the practice altogether, Sarah, not in correctly defining it,” said Castiel.

“Why lie about it?”

Sam answered her. “Because there IS a distinction between DF and rape, but no Primate was ever willing to listen long enough to understand that distinction. We’re very much hoping you’ll be the first. Give us a chance to show you how it works. Please.”

Dean shrugged his broad shoulders. “No one wants to lie about it, but the Primate world wasn’t ready to hear us out. You think that’s changing. That’s what you told Cas.”

“Cas?” she asked, tasting the nickname.

Dean assumed an annoyed, put-upon face. “Fine. \textit{Alpha DR.} Winchester. Whatever.”

“I’m sorry, but that was adorable.”

“Oh, Christ, she’s a shipper.” Dean’s wide eyes appealed to his fiancé.

“I’m not sure it’s still shipping once we’re openly engaged, Dean. And yes, I agree with Sarah, you are rather adorable.”
Dean buried his face in both hands.

“Um, shipping? I’m not familiar with that term.” The dusting of a blush on her cheeks and the faint scent of adrenalin gave her away.

Sam choked. Dean looked up. Castiel finished his coffee.

“You, uh, you know that a Lupin can tell when Primates are lying, don’t you Sarah?” Sam asked her carefully, glancing at Dean. “You guys broadcast your lies way too loudly to get away with it around us.”

She smirked and jotted another note. “I’d heard that. Thought it best to test it out.”

“Oh, you know what?” said Dean. “You’re following the wrong wolf. You need to shadow THAT guy.” He pointed at Cas. “You and he would make a perfect team. You’re birds of a feather.”

“So, what’s the distinction?” Sarah asked, returning to the topic and selecting a Danish.

“The purpose and the end result,” Castiel told her simply. “It’s very much what you already told us. Wolves are hierarchical Pack creatures. We are far less removed in our nature to our progenitors than the higher Primates are. Caniformes of all types respond to gestures of dominance. And rather than being damaged by an act of aggression that creates a hierarchical matrix, a wolf is comforted when a suitable Top sets that matrix. In fact, all wolves require a place in that matrix, so it is truly his obligation to provide it.”

“His?” she asked, pen poised above her notes.

“Or hers,” Cas corrected calmly.


“I’m surprised to hear you use a Universal masculine pronoun, Alpha. I’d assumed you of all people would be more sensitive to the distinctions.” Sarah refused to back down, holding his eye despite feeling clear warnings sliding in from the other two men in the room. She had been warned not to challenge an Alpha directly, or to hold direct eye contact for long, but she needed to know for herself.

“How me, of all people? I’m as much a hostage to the English language as the next man.” He smirked at her. He was baiting her on purpose, then. They were testing each other. And he was laughing at her test. He wanted her to know he saw through it. And yet…

“Sir, I realize that you mean to point out how obvious I’ve been in my attempts to lure you into revealing some of the aggressive nature I’ve heard so much about, but I beg you…”

His eyes lost the humor, and he became a much simpler man instantly. “My apologies, Miss Blake. That was not clumsy of you. It was unkind of me. You deserve better.”

“But may I just ask? Sir, I hope that you realize that small changes in language from people as influential as you and Dean are, those can make a difference. People hear masculine words from you, used in an off-hand manner, and it sends a message. Words matter, Alpha.” Sarah didn’t let her nerves show. She had no control over her scent though, and she suspected he could smell her.

“Indeed, Miss Blake. I agree.”
“Oh, crap!” grumbled Dean. “Wipe that look off your face, Cas. You can’t keep her, even if she sounds like Jodie Foster.”

Castiel restrained his urge to smack Dean, but he made sure his fiancé saw him suppress the impulse. “I believe that my colleague with the insolent tongue has a fair point,” he told the young student. “You remind me a great deal of myself when I was younger. You’re not hesitant to stand your ground on issues that matter to you, and you stand up for people you believe to be disenfranchised. I’ve read your work since we last spoke, Miss Blake, and I am very impressed.”

She blushed mildly. “I wondered why you didn’t cancel the project after the whole Fergus Crowley thing. I would have been devastated, but I would have understood.”

“Let’s just say that I know a great deal about Crowley and his negotiation tactics,” Cas answered.

“All right, you two. Get a room already. Can we move on, please?”

“Are you ready to give Sarah the tour?” Cas asked Sam. “Dean and I have something to discuss.”

It was only surprise at hearing that phrase that made Dean blurt, “We do? But, Alpha, my ass is still bruised to hell from Saturday. What’d I do? You’re not gonna punish me for getting a little mouthy. You have to admit it was getting a bit deep in here.”

Cas turned to him, assuming an air of interest. “You jumped to guilt awfully quickly there, Winchester. Perhaps YOU need to tell ME what you’ve done.”

Dean shrank down and blushed crimson. Fuck it, he decided, she was here to see the real deal. Might as well take all the blinders off. Besides, this stuff crossed over species lines well enough. She might not partake in the lifestyle herself, but surely, she knew how Domestic Discipline relationships worked.

“I haven’t broken any rules, Alpha. I swear it,” Dean protested sincerely.

“Hmm,” Cas answered him shrewdly. “I do so want to believe you, Dean.”

“Are you ready, Sarah?” Sam asked, scooting his chair back and helping her gather her items. “Once we go through those double doors, it’s anything goes, really. No one’s going to touch you. Everything that happens is for a reason, and I’ll talk you through all of it.”

“You make it sound like a free-for-all,” she told him. Surely it wasn’t THAT wild.

He laughed. “No, most of it is as mundane as any Primate school or research setting. We’re just people at heart. It’s just that the stuff that you’re likely to freak out about, well, that stuff happens without a lot of notice sometimes. There’s no sex allowed in the halls or restrooms. You WILL see it in the classrooms. That’s a part of every class. And spankings happen right where the offense takes place a lot of times.”

He spoke as he ushered her slowly to the main entrance of the suite. “We spank both students AND staff, so I have to expect you’ll witness more of that than most anything else that’s different between our two species.”

“Sam,” she said, stopping him at the door. “I’m interested in everything that goes on back there, from a research perspective, but from a personal one, I want to try to understand how Lupins communicate nonverbally. There seems to be so much that is commonly understood that I can’t pick up on. Do you think you can teach me some of that?”
I can try.” He opened the door and let her pass him. “A lot of it comes from scents, so I can’t help…”

The door closed on them.

“I thought I was meant to go with them on the tour, Alpha. What gives?”

“Michael told me this morning that you still haven’t explicitly committed to learning the skill I set you to practice. Is that true?”

“Yes, I did!”

“Did you? Are you certain? Do you remember the words?”

“I said I was going to try!”

“That’s not good enough, Dean! I’m out of patience with you on this issue!”

“Wait! Alpha, wait!” Dean backed up several steps and put his palms up. “I didn’t just mean I would try, I meant full commitment. I’m in this thing with him. I just don’t want to set his expectations too high too fast.”

Castiel eyed him. “You’re on a very short leash right now, Winchester. I don’t know what your game is. I have witnessed your use of safewords firsthand. You trained as a contractor with me, remember? You’ve passed every certification test since then, and you are a first-rate Contract Submissive! You know damn well we would NEVER put you in a dungeon with a newbie if we didn’t KNOW that you can care for yourself and the Dom appropriately. You would never have been allowed near students, and you’re their Director, damnit!”

“I know, Sir. I’m really sorry. I don’t know what’s going on. I can’t seem to put myself in that Contract mindset when I’m with him. It’s more like being with you.”

“Do you expect me to be flattered?”

“I’m being serious!”

“You realize that Michael has done everything you’ve asked him to do.”

“Okay, he’s a saint, and I’m an asshole.”

Cas had Dean flipped over his knee and bared past his knees in an instant, and he aimed for the sensitive but muscular backs of his thighs. He didn’t spank long. Mostly he wanted Dean to stop throwing up destructive roadblocks that were hindering his progress.

“Try that again,” said Cas, cool as you please.

Dean panted at the abrupt change of position. He braced his hands against the floor. “I owe him my best effort, not this half-assed brattiness.”

“Much better.” Cas set Dean upright again. “What did you think of his reaction at breakfast to your refusal to eat?”

“He thumps hard, Alpha.” Dean rubbed his head at the memory, but the pain had faded. “Did you teach him that?”

“I didn’t. He may have picked it up from Joshua, or it may be a skill he brought with him. What I
meant was, do you believe the punishment was deserved?"

Dean didn’t much like the look he was getting. What was Cas saying? Should Dean have protested a simple correction for not following instructions while he was on his knees?

“I mean…”

“Why weren’t you eating this morning?” asked the Alpha. The face wasn’t getting any softer.

“I always get nervous on the first day of a session. Doesn’t excuse me from following directions.” Dean frowned.

“Only you know where your head was this morning, my love, but if you needed soothing from your mate and received correction instead, then that is something you need to define for yourself. I’m not going to chastise either of you. I don’t really know what the right answer there is. It wasn’t my scene.”

“No, I didn’t need to be coddled, Sir. My head was throbbing like fuck, but Michael did it right. I don’t have any doubts about what he did, how he responded.” Dean took a seat at the table.

“All right. I’ll leave it at that. Here’s what I need from you; your first exercise. After every scene you do with Michael or with me, I want you to think it back through at least three hours after it ends, or after you awaken – after you’ve had time to process – and I want you to write a journal entry in which you consider carefully each emotional or physical impact you experienced and defend your decision to or not to employ a safeword.”

“What?!”

“Do you understand the assignment?”

“I don’t have time for that!”

The spanking lasted longer this time and crept up to the sensitive junction of his thighs and his butt. Some of his bruises took a hit or two.

“Shit! OW! Son of a BITCH!”

“Do you understand the assignment?”

“YES! I’m starting with this one! I call RED! Fuck!”

“Don’t tempt me to start over again. You know better than to attempt to safeword out of a spanking that you’ve earned through unacceptable behavior.” The Alpha up-righted him once more but left him straddling his fiancé’s lap.

“Isn’t that what you wanted me to do this morning?” Dean sniffled. Damned sinuses.

“Stop pretending you don’t understand the difference. It’s tiresome.”

Dean sighed and lay his forehead on Castiel’s shoulder. “I feel itchy all over, Sir. I feel like breaking something. I feel like wreaking havoc on something. Make it stop. Please.”

Cas scratched his head down near his neck. “You’re in dire need right now, sweet one. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Shouldn’t need more than I’ve already had,” muttered Dean. “I mean, I didn’t do most of it on
purpose. The mouthing off when you were with Pam...that was on purpose, but the rest of it wasn’t. Still should have scratched the itch. What are we supposed to do now? Are you going to start bruising the front side too?”

Cas huffed. “I admit, I’m surprised that you can take a caning like you did and come out of it unsatisfied.”

“Not unsatisfied.”

“Dean, you’ve dropped your personal pronouns again. Do you need me to address that?”

“No.”

Cas didn’t ask again. He could smell Dean’s scent. He got his hands up under the man’s not-unsubstantial weight and lifted him easily, carried him to the wide cushioned chair and rocked him slowly. He shifted Dean so that both legs draped over one side of his lap and he could curl into Castiel’s chest.

“Have work to do,” Dean protested weakly even as he snuggled in.

“It will keep. Relax, Pet, it’s just a Rebound. It won’t last long. I’m going to take care of you.”

“Rebound?” Dean sat up in surprise.

“Are you sure?”

Cas quirked a brow up at him and smiled. “It’s three weeks since your Rut started. Let the hormones flush out, and you’ll be yourself again. I apologize for not noticing earlier.”

“Always something.” He collapsed back against that warm chest and closed his eyes. The rocking did feel nice. And Alpha’s hands stroked his body just right. No one ever did it quite like Castiel did. God, the Rebound. Of course. Mister Smarty-Pants Alpha had to be the one to figure it out though. That was embarrassing. “Sex would help too, Sir,” Dean suggested sleepily.

“Take a short nap, Dean. I’ll stay with you.”

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“I’m going to keep it with me until the wedding,” Kali told him judiciously. “I don’t trust you not to put it on between now and then, and if you ruined it, I would have to murder you. Arrests, jail time, scandal and ruin. It’s not worth the risk.”

Dean stood completely naked in front of her tall mirrors waiting for the garment to be fitted over his frame. He squawked in offense but then had to concede she had a point.

It was all one piece now. He couldn’t resist stroking the ivory silk outer layer as she draped it over his head and settled it in place. Fuck, it was heavy. With a deep breath, Dean waited to feel her fasten the back of the left shoulder before looking at himself in the mirror.

“What?! What did you DO?! Where are the epaulets? What happened to the cut?! KALI! You changed it!! What the fuck?! Change it back! Who gave you the right?!” Alpha mode fully engaged, he stormed through his shock, and she nodded subtly, waiting him out. What had been a strong nautical torso with subtle shoulder epaulets was now blank and simple. The shoulder padding was
gone. It made him look smaller. His hands were covered to the fingertips, and the high collar on the sides restricted the turn of his head. He could bow it but little else.

“You don’t like it?”

“Why didn’t you ask me before you changed the design?”

“Because I would have had to talk you into it. Now it’s done. And you’ll see. It’s going to be perfect.” Kali’s failure to get upset was pissing Dean off. She stood back and assessed the fit. She stepped up with a frown and tugged firmly a couple of times on the waist to adjust the fall of the pleats, and then she put a few pins in her mouth and got to work.

“I’m not wearing this, beta. You can take it right back off. This is not what we agreed to.”

She ignored him and continued pinning.

“What gave you the right?!” he tried again, crossing his arms and forcing her back when the long sleeves interfered with the drape across his hip.

She sighed. “When you hired an artist, not a sewing machine, alpha, you gave me the right. You came in here with a flawed idea. I fixed it.”

He sneered. “What are you talking about? Look, if you didn’t want the job, you should’ve said so!”

“I DO want the job, Dean! Making this robe has been one of the most rewarding projects I’ve ever worked on. You think I get to do something like this every day?”

“You fucked it up!”

“No.

I didn’t.”

They stared at each other, but his eyes kept drifting back to the mirror. His hips were accented more than he’d planned, and his chest less. It was so simple, just a solid flat panel down the entire front. The heaviness of the layers meant there was no bulge as the fabric descended past his groin to where his bare toes poked out. It was a blank slate with the subtlest hint that a body hidden beneath it might offer...anything at all. From the front, that is. Dean bit his upper lip and fought the desire to turn and see what the back looked like. Omegas were only truly interesting from the back after all.

The outer silk layer shone. It was sheer enough to seem ephemeral. Something about Kali’s sure touch and the way she pinned without even appearing to be looking at the robe. She knew every inch, every seam, every stitch intimately.

“Then explain,” he said into the lengthening silence.

She finished pinning without answering him. She stroked a couple of chalk lines at his armpits. She pushed on his shoulder until he bent forward at the waist, and he blushed when he felt the panels part across his ass. She didn’t look at the back though. She was frowning at the waist. Finally, she stood him back up, unfastened the robe, and pulled it over his head without a word, leaving him naked again and very uncomfortable.

Kali handed the robe off and gestured that he could get dressed.

She made tea while he stomped back into his boots after pulling Levi’s back over his healing backside.
“Come sit, alpha.”

“This better be good. I’m really pissed at you right now. This is my fucking wedding we’re talking about.”

“Have some tea.”

“I don’t want any damned tea!”

“Dean, when you think about the ceremony you are planning – not the wedding, the Shareer ka Daava ceremony afterward – when you picture it, who ARE you in that moment? In the moment just before it really all happens, in the moment when you present yourself to him?”

It wasn’t what he expected her to say, but he had his answer ready anyway.

“I am his.”

“His what?”

“Just…his. His husband, his Sub, his everything.”

“No. You can’t be those things in that moment, or you’ve selected the wrong ceremony. I warned you about this, Dean. This is an Omega ceremony. It’s an ownership rite. Even the idea that you could consider presenting yourself is an abomination of the sacrament.” She stirred a lump of sugar into a cup of tea and handed it to him. He took it with a frown.

“I know that.”

“No, you don’t, or you wouldn’t have put epaulets on the robe. Are you a Commandant or an Admiral?”

“I’m an alpha, Kali. How can I not make that part of the rite?”

“But that’s just it, Dean. In that singular moment, you aren’t an alpha. You stop being anything at all of your own. You aren’t an alpha, or a PhD. You aren’t Sam’s brother. You aren’t an owner OR a Director of the ACRI. You aren’t a published and honored author or scholar. You aren’t a celebrity. You aren’t an uncle. You relinquish everything you are to him. You do it fully, or you’re just playing a scene. You told me you wanted authentic, Dean.”

“Yes, but…you mean I’m not me?”

“It’s all still out there, alpha. None of it stops existing. It just doesn’t belong to you anymore. It’s Castiel’s to do with as he pleases. Now, if I understand what you’re both envisioning, he’s going to hold it all for the briefest of moments, just long enough for the ceremony, and then he’s going to hand it all back into your custody. Is that correct?”

Dean was blushing. “Something like that.” He drank a sip of the tea he didn’t want.

“If you’re truly relinquishing yourself to him, how does it make sense to present yourself during that transition as an alpha? You are nothing, Dean. You are nothing but a blank slate, a body.”

Dean’s blush had dissolved into a greenish pallor. His hands shook.

“What about Michael?”

“Your mate is a part of your body, just like your kidneys and your esophagus. He’s a part of the
package that you’re handing to Castiel. You need to understand that, too.”

Dean was struggling to understand the nuance. He already knew what he was doing, didn’t he? Did Michael? Did Cas?

“It’s not too late to cancel that part of the wedding,” she told him kindly, setting a firm hand on his trembling cup.

“No. I’m going through with it. I want to do this. It’s just, I had never thought it all the way through like that.”

“Ownership isn’t something to be taken lightly, alpha.” Kali noticed his eyes register her flash of discomfort. His powerful strength of subtle perception made that statement echo between them.

“What would you do if Castiel turned the table on you and refused to return custody of what you just signed over to him? Would you still kneel for him? Would you honor your commitment?”

“Yes,” Dean croaked. For some reason, his voice was gone.

“Are you sure? He would most likely never even consider doing that, but he could. He has that authority.”

“I trust him, Kali. Either way, I trust him.”

“Do you understand now why your design for the robe wasn’t going to work? You put too much you into it. That’s fitting for your wedding and for the reception afterward, but not for this.”

“The nautical theme was to honor his family,” Dean mumbled.

She smiled. “I know, but until he grants you the rights to his family history, even that isn’t yours to touch.”

They sat together for a considerable time without speaking, sipping hot tea, thinking.

“You think I’m nuts,” he said at last.

“Doesn’t matter what I think, Winchester.”

“We’re not the first alpha couple to get married,” he reminded her.

“No, you’re not.”

“No one’s ever done it under this kind of a spotlight before though. Everyone’s watching. We want to get it right.”

She laughed, patted his thigh, and stood up. “You know better than to worry about what anyone thinks outside of your Pack, Dean.”

“Easy for you to say,” he griped. “You’re not responsible for the reestablishment of the entire lost culture of Canids. What we do in our Pack matters. We may not like it, but we’re a model for a lot of people. If I do this ceremony, and Cas and I fuck it up, it’s going to hurt people who try to mimic us.”

“Oh,” she rebutted, taking his empty cup. “You could do the best you can for you and let that speak for itself.”

“Mouthy beta,” he muttered with a sigh. The tea was good. She poured him some more.
“Are we keeping the robe?” she asked. She settled back down beside him.

“Let me try to get it straight,” Dean said, setting his warm cup beside him, and leaning onto his elbows in thought. “If my presentation needs to be devoid of personality, then what is there to hand over? If I’m already assumed to be featureless at the outset, what’s he getting?”

She nodded. “The Turks have a ceremony that’s similar to this one. In their version, the Omega is presented in full regalia, wearing many symbolic representations of everything they bring to the union. At the moment of presentation, the alpha removes the robe, and attaches it by a cord to his waist. It’s easier to understand what’s happening, but there’s an elegant grace to the way the Hindis do it. The Omega can’t rightfully take anything with him from his birth Pack. He owns nothing, not even his own accomplishments, not even his name. To be presented at his Claiming with any ties to who he used to be is an insult to his new alpha. It’s the alpha who will grant him all access to an identity from there on.”

“Oh not,” added Dean. The full weight of what it meant to be Omega was not something he would ever truly experience, but just touching the edges of that space set him reeling again.

“Oh not,” Kali agreed. She looked at him passively. What must she be thinking, he wondered, searching her dark eyes for clues. She offered none. Only her words. But those had been powerful.

Dean pondered the enormity of the risk he was taking. To go through with it so publicly cinched it tightly as irrefutable. It would be tantamount to a legal contract. The details of their power exchange would be private. How they interacted together was no one’s business but their own – and their mates to some extent. But there would be no take-backs if Castiel betrayed his trust and refused to acknowledge him as alpha in their marriage after the ceremony. Dean’s status in the pack would drop below Michael’s. For all intents and purposes, within the confines of the Winchester Pack that bore his name, he would be Omega. He would be Omega-Submitive. He would be Ozzie.

Everything stopped moving for Dean. The clocks stopped. The air stopped flowing. He stepped outside of himself and existed without substance. Who was he really? An alpha? Did that even mean anything? Would it matter if Castiel owned him body and soul? Was he crazy to believe he could trust anyone that much?

In the dark, still, vacuum space, Dean floated into a place so deep within himself, it had no dimensions. There was nothing there but the certainties of his life. It was a vault of definition, and everything that could be pared back as transient or ephemeral sloughed off at the barrier to this place. Michael was here. Sam was here. Dean felt himself all about himself, all of the sensations familiar, but not all of them pleasant. Still, he knew who he was in this place. Here, he would always be safe. This was the void from whence the wolf built its forests and the mountains that it roamed. This was the wellspring of strength that the alpha shored itself with in times of passion. This was the core. Dean was no stranger to this place. It was both a vacuum and anything but.

He started to chuckle, and then to laugh. Pure relief, certainty, and validation set his shoulders shaking, for right there where his mate and his blood family had claimed their rightful places in Dean’s psyche – right there stood the stodgy blue-eyed man, wearing a smirk on his tilted face and a rumpled trench coat. Cas was here too. Of course, he was. He always had been. Castiel could no more betray Dean’s trust than Dean could deny him home and hearth in this cozy space at the center of himself. The idea was laughable, and laugh he did.

“Dean? You’re weirding me out,” Kali said with concern.

“The robe’s perfect, Kali.” He blew out a long breath to bring his near hysterical mania into control. He wiped his eyes. “You’re right. I didn’t know what I was doing. Thank you for setting me straight.
I need to talk it through with Cas, but I’m more certain than ever that this is what we need. I can’t take care of Michael if Cas isn’t shoring me up. It’s like my instincts understood what we needed without bothering to explain it to the rest of me.”

“Like I said,” she told him, pushing herself up with a hand on his thigh and collecting the tea cups. “This is the most interesting project I’ve ever done. I’m glad you aren’t backing out, if only so I can see you wear the robe. You’re going to be devastating in it, Dean. Alpha may faint when he sees you.”

“You think so?” Dean imagined his fiancé becoming overwhelmed at the sight of him and wilting to the floor at Gabriel’s feet. It made him flush. Much more likely was the image that replaced it – an image of Castiel’s eyes darkening as they met his once he finally looked up to face the Alpha. Cas’ nostrils would flare. His shoulders would pull up. His jaw would set. He would lower his chin, and smolder, and Dean would be the one in danger of losing his feet.

“You’re getting stinky again, alpha,” Kali told him rudely. “Go home. Get someone to help you with the smell. I don’t want it in my shop.”

He laughed again and got her back for the rudeness with a long, firm hug and a kiss to her cheek. “Get used to it, beta. We’re Pack now, in-laws, you’re my sister. Nothing you can do about it.”

“I don’t need a bratty brother, Dean Winchester. Gabe is brat enough for anyone. Go on, get off of me. Get out!” She shoved him off, and he let her, still chuckling, but testing her scent for signs of real distress. There were none.

Dean thought about Sarah’s request to learn the Lupin forms of nonverbal communication as he started his car. From an outside view, it must be impossible to read the interaction he’d just had with Kali. Even just the hug might not have registered as the simple play it truly was if not for the scents that flowed between them, connecting their back brains subconsciously. Wolves could read trepidation and discomfort, versus warmth and welcome without needing the words. Verbal consent was still necessary when certain lines of intimacy were to be crossed, but Dean didn’t need Kali to tell him that her words to the contrary were playful. He could read her. He could smell her. How did apes get through life without that? How did they ever know when to move closer, and when to pull back? It was said that much was communicated through the eyes, and that was true. He frowned in thought as he drove home to his Pack. Body language, facial expressions, and a commitment to clearly spoken language could all help transmit a person’s intent, but to have no deep, neural connection through scent… Dean could think of no more painful handicap than to be so brutally cut off from the people around him, the people he loved. He sent a prayer of gratitude to the Universe that he had been born a wolf. The Universe sent him warm sunshine and light traffic.

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Castiel was already home and changed into comfortable clothes when Dean arrived, but he was holed up in his office with Michael. The Alpha was reorganizing his action list on the computer in his office. Michael sat on the couch, taking notes. Cas had his list divided into personal and professional tasks. It felt good to strike through a number of items as he handed them off to the Omega.

They weren’t only talking shop though. Cas interspersed the job of orienting themselves for the week
with grilling Michael over the exercises he’d been assigned, and the Omega was on top of both. He jotted unrelated notes in his book even as he carefully described to Cas every instance he’d catalogued through the day of his wolf’s impulse to suppress the Omega and how the interaction had turned out.

Castiel was pleased at the prudent judgment he showed, even when stressed, any time he wasn’t with Dean. They talked a little about what might be blocking his access to that practicality when the mates came together.

“I don’t believe it’s merely lust, Michael. Everyone loses his head every now and again when the blood gets flowing, but you two appear to be deliberately testing each other to me.”

“It’s not deliberate, sir,” Michael answered without looking up from his writing. “I won’t argue that we’re merely lost in the heat of the moment though. It feels like something deeper.”

“It may not be conscious,” Castiel said, also keeping his hands moving and his eyes on his monitor. “But that doesn’t mean it isn’t some form of deliberate provocation. Can you take April to the Facility with you on Thursday? I need to meet with the lawyers very early, and she’s got an appointment with Missouri.”

“Of course, Alpha.” Michael flipped a page and continued to write then set the notes aside and switched to his phone’s calendar. “If it’s provocation, what are we trying to provoke? Each other?”

“Your Omega has been lost since it first emerged years ago,” said Cas, flicking his eyes to the Omega himself to catch his response. “It needs to know the alpha it’s attached to will protect it.”

Michael glanced up. “My Omega is using my wolf to push Dean into acting like an alpha? Christ, how am I supposed to keep any of this straight?”

Cas chuckled. “I suspect it will get easier once Dean finds the balance he’s been lacking.”

“Why is everything hitting him so much harder than the rest of us?” asked Michael, setting his phone beside him and focusing on the Alpha.

“He’s the only one of us who is both caught between contradictory designations AND caught between two partners he loves. You and he both share the struggle of balancing opposite pulls from within, and he and I both have to balance the needs of two intimate partners, but he is the only one to have to handle both at once. It would set anyone back on their heels.”

“I want to soothe him, Castiel, not add to his burden,” said Michael in a small voice. “But every time we touch, I forget everything but taking all that he’ll offer me and gobbling it up. What he shared with me from his report…that seemed to be saying that he will offer everything he has to give. If all I do is take with no restraint, and all he does is open the floodgates to me… Crap, I’m afraid to touch him, sir. I don’t know what to do.”

Castiel nodded gravely. “It’s a dangerous situation,” he agreed. “What I want you to do for now is to plan everything ahead of time. Don’t try any D/s scening spontaneously. If you have an idea you’d like to try, run it by me first. You and I will address the tactics and the risks, and I’ll have you demonstrate your response to a few unexpected issues that may arise. Then talk it through with Dean while he’s in a cognitive frame of mind. Whatever you want to do needs to go through the part of Dean’s psyche that he uses to make responsible decisions. You’re to stick to that agreement like it’s Federal Regulation. Don’t go off-script, even by a little. However, I authorize you to try some spontaneous A/O prompts. Those would be good for you both.”
“We want to try a Ringmaster scene, sir,” Michael almost whispered, sure it was too intense for the stage they appeared to be stuck at.

“Yes, I know. I believe Dean would respond beautifully to that. I have some suggestions if you’re interested in rounding up a few players.” Cas turned back to his computer and began searching the database.

“You mean you would allow us to go ahead with it?”

“I think it’s exactly what Dean needs right now, yes. Of course, I want to help with the planning and prep, and I want to be present when it happens. We can use one of the Playrooms in the Contract wing that has a two-way mirror. You don’t need my scent in the room. But we can take the opportunity to kill multiple birds at once. Let him know he has an audience. Let him know that April will be watching with me. That allows us to test his response to having her close.”

“She’s seen him perform plenty of times, Cas. It’s never bothered him.”

“This would be different,” Cas told him. “This time, her presence is not passive. She would be behind the mirror, but deliberately watching and potentially aroused by what she was watching – well, this is April we’re talking about, I don’t think there’s any chance she wouldn’t be aroused. Dean would know that his performance was stoking a response from her. That’s the test.”

“I don’t want to spoil it for him. It’s our first try,” Michael protested.

“Understood. That’s fair. But talk to Dean. You may find that he’s game to try it. Just don’t try to get a rational opinion from him if he’s not balanced.”

“You said this Rebound thing should be ending soon?” asked Michael.

Cas nodded. “It usually only lasts a couple of days or so. I ran a Peliomometer reading on him after he slept a little this morning, and he looks to be about back to normal. His hormones are still a bit higher than what’s usual for him, but they’re most likely nearly leveled out by now.”

“And he always goes through that after his Rut?”

“Yep. About three weeks later. A good hard scene often works wonders. I honestly thought the strappings I gave him on Saturday did the trick, but, Michael… Look, if his hormones were still out of whack when you and I tried to address his safewording problem with him, his stubbornness may have had less to do with an unwillingness to bend and more to do with the raging hormones drowning out rational thought.”

Michael slumped in his seat, a look of despair crossing his face. “I can’t do this, Alpha. It’s too much. He’s too complicated. He seemed perfectly rational to me. We talked about all kinds of important things. We set some new goals and some limits. Do we have to throw all that out and start over?”

Castiel regarded Michael with kindness and patience. “You don’t have to do anything alone, Omega. I have a share in keeping him upright for you both. We all need to be working together. If it makes you feel better, go ahead and open up that conversation again now that he’s coming back to balance. You will probably find that nothing you decided together needs to change.”

“The key is going to be holding a lot of frank conversations,” said Michael as he thought it through.

“Yes. Be honest with him and accept nothing but honesty in return.”
Dean knocked once then poked his head in. “Tony says dinner’s ready. You two talking about me?”

“Always,” Cas said standing to greet him with a smile. Michael let himself be pulled to his feet.

“Who’s keeping an eye on April?” Dean asked them. “Not Gabriel…”

“No. Benny and Andrea are here as chaperones this evening. He wanted to hear for himself what all the fuss is about.” Cas took Dean by the hand and led him to the dining room. Michael found himself dragged along behind like a puppy on a leash, and he trotted to keep up, switching his hold from Dean’s hand to his waist as he came alongside.

Dean’s simple acceptance of the touch was never going to stop feeling like an affirmation from the Universe.

“Cas, I need to talk to you tonight after we eat,” Dean told him, letting Michael pass him as they arrived at the doorway together.

“Any time you like, alpha. I thought you were working on the book this evening.” Cas released him to take his place. The others began to fill in the empty spots. Benny put a firm hand on each of Cas’ shoulders as he passed behind, and Cas touched the alpha’s fingers easily.

“I am. This won’t take long. It’s about the ceremony after our wedding. Just want to get a few things on the table.”

“Y’all are really going through with that?” asked Benny, holding Keira’s chair out for her.

“I really want to, Ben,” Dean told him. “But we need to be sure we understand the implications. I learned a few things from Kali at today’s fitting. It was nothing that put me off,” he assured Cas across the length of the table when the Alpha’s surprise showed. “But we need to be sure both of us know what we’re doing.”

“Pshhh!” scoffed Nicholas, reaching for the bread basket. “The big dog knows what he’s doing. Question is, can you take it.”

“Hey, Nick,” Dean said mildly, turning to face him after saying his name. “Mind your own fucking business.”

Michael and April both cracked up, and Tony began to serve them with help from Monica.

“If you two are doing the deep conference thing after dinner,” Michael said blithely. “Can I slip in after you’re through and discuss the idea of me going to the Convention in Charlotte?” He took a bite without looking up.

“You’re not going to Charlotte, man. It’s too soon,” Dean told him.

“You said we could talk to Cas about it.”

“I said we could discuss the idea of finding you a place in the public campaign eventually. I never said you could come to the next Con. That’s a hard no, Michael.”

“But, Dean…”

“No, Michael!” Red eyes flashed, taking the Omega by surprise. He turned and looked at Cas, hoping for help.

“Don’t look at me,” said Castiel. “I believe your alpha already answered the question.”
“You could overrule him though, sir.”

Cas looked between Michael and Dean for a moment, reading carefully, looking for signs pointing out their motivations. It was an interesting picture. Michael always pushed too hard. Dean never acted until his hand was forced. Was that simply their dynamic, or was it still an intermediate stage of shuffling to find their balance?

“You know very well I’m not going to do that,” said Castiel dismissively, assuming a posture of disinterest. He continued eating through Michael’s subsequent tantrum and Dean’s removal of his Omega. The scent they left in their wake made Castiel smile, and he was alert enough to catch April’s appreciation too. Her admiration for Michael notched up one rung, and Cas had a hard time containing his appreciation of his own mate’s perception. The intricacies of the bonded connections were forming like a spider’s web between all four of them and all around them.

Michael wasn’t unbalanced. He wasn’t a brat, per se, but he’d just deliberately pushed his mate into a fierce alpha response that would drive out the last of Dean’s Rebound hormones. Deliberate. That was the subtle lingering scent that had both Cas and April smiling secretly at each other. It wasn’t Michael who was in need; it was Dean. But the alpha wasn’t good at asking for help in that direction. And it had taken only a simple suggestion from Castiel to put the idea of a provoked “scene” into Michael’s head and move him to action.

Cas knew Dean well enough to know that the touchpoint that Michael had chosen was a poor one for the purpose. Dean wasn’t going to take kindly to being purposefully stoked with an issue that brought him to his knees in fear, but Michael would learn that for himself, and he would be wiser next time. Somehow, even in his callous self-absorption, and his clumsy efforts, Michael always managed to stumble into pushing the buttons Dean needed him to. Granted, he sometimes pushed the wrong ones too, but it was Michael’s authenticity that made him so right for Dean. He might be self-absorbed, but that made his efforts to care for Dean that much more endearing – because they cost him so much.

One thing Cas knew for certain – Michael wasn’t going to be attending the Convention in North Carolina in a few weeks.

Conversation continued around the table. The two mates didn’t return. Cas quietly directed Monica to remove their plates onto trays and serve them in their room. He advised her to give them fifteen minutes and to knock first.

April touched his knee beneath the table, and he took her hand and squeezed. Her phone buzzed at the same time Cas’ did. They both reached. They both read. They both looked up at one another.

“Gabe,” said April.

“He’s in Heat,” Cas agreed, pushing his chair back. “He’s early. Get Fred pulling supplies for the H/R room. Get Tony busy making a tray of protein-rich snacks. I’m going to get him. Benny, text Dean and tell him everything’s under control. Can you stay until I get back?”

“No problem, Alpha.”

“Nicholas, once you four have finished here, please return to the Guest house. I will let you know if it’s clear for you to return in the morning.”

“If!!”
“Don’t push right now, Nicholas. I don’t know what shape he’s in yet.”

“You want me to phone Becky and see who’s on call tonight?” Benny asked.

“Yes. We’d better be prepared.” Castiel kissed April. “Stay here, Kitten. Get the H/R room ready. I’ll take care of him and bring him home. You be good for Benny.”

“Isn’t Kali with him?” she asked, following her mate into the kitchen.

“Sweetheart, we won’t know if Kali is up to handling his Heats until they try. Marina was a wizard at it, but most beta women struggle to meet an Omega’s needs.”

She nodded, wide-eyed and scared. “I’ll pull some toys from the Playroom, Alpha. That might help.”

Cas stopped in the doorway and took his keys from the rack by the door.

“Good girl.” He kissed her hard and looked at her with meaning. “He’s my brother, Kitten. I’m going to bring him home safely. But having an Omega in Heat ride in my car…I’ll need you when I get back. It’s not going to be a comfortable drive for any of us. Be ready for me?”

She nodded again. “Sir, don’t forget about Dean. He needs to talk to you tonight.”

“I’ll remember. We may have to put that off until tomorrow morning, but I’m not going to forget.”

She turned back to the kitchen after he left and began talking Tony through what a cycling wolf needed to eat to stay functional. To his credit, he only blanched, but got to work. April found Fred already at work, checking for clean spare linens and stocking the refrigerator with drinks. Michael appeared beside her as she stressed over which toys Gabriel might want. He wasn’t a very big guy, but she didn’t know his taste. Michael chose four items from the small stock of sealed, unused inventory, handed them to April with a confident nod, and then began to look through the paddles.

April checked what she was holding. None of them were small. Two of them vibrated. She dug out a stash of batteries as well. Did Michael know what worked best first-hand? April felt her face flush. She felt her body respond as if to the scent of her Alpha, and she felt slick issue from her channel. She knew he could smell her. He froze with his back to her and a hand clutching one of the stouter paddles. He didn’t look around. Images of Michael naked and desperate for a knot, even a silicone one…April didn’t know how to banish them, and she was rapidly losing her self-control.

She was moments from calling out to him, from asking him to help, from forgetting everything. She was going to fail, and she needed someone strong to catch her, and Alpha was gone, and Dean was nowhere to be seen, and Benny was…? There was only Michael. She could tell his chest was heaving, but he still had his back to her. She clutched a firm knot. It wasn’t real, and it wasn’t a patch on Castiel’s. Her eyes fluttered. Michael’s head fell to his chest, and he rocked on his heels. He huffed in aggravation. He shook his head, ‘no’. Then he spun on his heel, turning away from her, leaving the paddle, and practically ran for the door.

“Take him that one,” he croaked, pointing behind him at the paddle he’d abandoned, and he disappeared. April cried out in dismay. She dropped her burdens and fell to her knees. Where was everyone? Why did she feel so hot? Why was she dizzy? Where was Michael? She didn’t know she was keening until she realized he was back, cradling her against his chest and shushing her softly.

“You’re Tripping too, Pete. Crap! It’s too soon. What the fuck is happening in this house?”

“Michael,” she whimpered and clung to him, rolling into his chest until he was forced to hold her bridal-style or fall over backward.
“Come on. Up you go. Let’s get you to the bed.” He carried her. She could feel and smell his body respond to hers, and she reached for him when he set her down. He flinched back, and gasped.

“Baby,” he whispered. He touched her cheek. There was emotion in his eyes. “Not me, Pete. Not me. Hold on. He’s coming home. Hold on a little bit longer.” He scrambled back and rummaged through the drawer marked with her name as she began to tug at her clothes. Michael picked out the biggest dildo, which happened to be nearest the front and set it on the counter. He closed his eyes and huffed, trying to clear his nose. He dug his phone out and touched Dean’s number, set it to speaker and set it next to the toy.

“Michael, babe, I’m what? Sixty feet away from you? Use your legs, man.”

“No…Dean…Come to the Playroom. Need you right now!”

“Wow, we doin’ a thing? I thought we were taking the night off?”

“It’s April! Dean, get down here now! She’s Tripped too.”

“What!? Fuck! Stay there. Stay with her. I’m coming.”

“Alpha…” Michael panted into the phone. “Help. I can’t…she smells…Oh, God help me.”

“I’m coming, Omega. Hold on!”

Michael heard him before he saw him, thumping wildly down the stairs, shouting for Benny, cursing up a storm.

Dean reached him first, but Benny, right on his heels went straight for April. Andrea waddled in behind, assessed the situation, and gestured frantically for Dean to take Michael away. Dean guided him, but Michael waved backward at the countertop, trying to signal that the toy was for April. Dean just grabbed the phone and left the rest for Benny to untangle.

“Still need to outfit Gabe’s room, Dean. We had some stuff pulled. We were working on it together, but then she…she…God, alpha, I’ve never smelled anything like it.”

“Benny can take care of everything until Cas gets back with Gabe. Here, sit. I need to let him know. Jesus, what a mess. What happened? She’s not due for, like, two more weeks.”

Michael sank down on the cushioned bench in the foyer. “We all live here together,” he muttered. Dean heard him as he held his phone to his ear and listened to it ring. “We’re syncing up; all us Omegas. Probably me pulling Gabe early, and Gabe pulling Pete. Next round we’ll all Trip at once. Shit, what a clusterfuck.”

Dean had a hand to his ear as Michael droned on in a monotone. He paced the length of the foyer. The scent he’d pulled Michael from was working its way up the stairs. Fred bustled by and flipped the vent switch at the top of the stairway. Tony trotted right behind him.

“Hey, Fred!” called Dean. “Make that an order for two! We gotta handle a double this round!” Fred acknowledged with a wave of his hand but didn’t slow. Dean hung up and punched the button again. It rang once, and then Castiel’s irritated voice answered.

“What? I’m a little distracted right now, Dean. Whatever it is, can’t it wait?”

“Do you have him? Is Kali with him?” asked Dean.
“Kali will meet us there,” said Cas. “She was working late.”

“Alpha, your mate Tripped too.”

“What!?? April? Is she all right? Dean, who’s with her? You didn’t leave her alone? No, Gabe! Leave it!!”

“Cas, calm down and drive.” Dean pulled a slow, deep voice from somewhere. He stopped pacing and let his eyes settle on Michael’s. The Omega looked awful. “April’s fine. Benny’s with her. She’s in the Playroom. You can cycle with her there. Take Gabe to the H/R room. We’re good, babe. Leave it all to me and Benny. And Michael,” he added, realizing how much of the slack the Omega could carry. “Just get home safely, baby. Don’t you dare wreck that beautiful car.”

“Dean, you hate my car.”

“It’s a joke, Alpha. Please be careful. Nothing bad’s going to happen. Andrea is in there with Benny. If he needs it, he’s got an outlet. What’s your E.T.A.?”

Dean heard Cas take a slow deep breath. “Maybe seven minutes,” he said in a calmer voice. “Gabriel, if you do that again, I’m going to cut that hand right off!” Or maybe not so much calmer.

“We’ll be ready. Just get here in one piece! Or, two pieces…since there are two…of you. Whatever. I love you, Cas.”

“I love you, too.”

Dean hung up. “Are you all right?”

Michael shook his head mutely. Dean crossed to him and knelt down. “She’s going to be fine, Michael. I know it doesn’t feel like it right now.”

“You don’t understand, alpha,” Michael whimpered, twitching.

“Baby, I have your feelings inside my head. I live within your body. We’re bonded tighter than any mates I’ve ever known. Michael, shh, it’s okay. I already know. I know, love. It’s all right.”

Michael shook his head again violently. It was so not all right.

“I never meant this to happen!” he wailed suddenly.

“I know. It’s okay. We’ll figure it out.”

“I can’t be here when he comes through, Dean. Please get me out of here!”

“Can do, baby. Come on. Stand up. Lean on me. Let’s go upstairs. I can help you out once we get clear of the smell.” Michael’s slick-covered backside and his prominent bulging erection took Dean to a place where he doubted his own ability to walk. He only needed to go a short distance though. He could make it with the suffering Omega up the grand stairway and down the long hall.

Kali came crashing through when they were halfway up, and the mates both stumbled but didn’t fall.

“Where is he?!” she demanded.

“’Bout five minutes behind you,” Dean told her without stopping. “Go down to the room and get it ready. Call Fred for anything you need.”
She disappeared without a ‘thank you’.

“Well, that was rude,” Michael grunted, and Dean managed a laugh.

He looked up the stairs then and found a robe-clad Naomi standing imperiously at the top. He didn’t speak to her, but as they crested the stairs to the landing, she took Michael’s other side and began silently to assist him to his room.

Dean closed the door in Naomi’s face, but he forced out a meager “Thanks,” just before it clicked.

When Castiel arrived, the house was quieter than he expected. He hustled Gabe through to the back and nearly threw him down the stairs in his hurry. The Omega didn’t need much encouragement. He scented Kali, and whatever Cas had a mind to tell him would have to wait. The door slammed, and the ‘Occupied’ light blinked on.

For his part, Cas barely paused. He lurched down the last few feet to the door where he could already smell her. Benny’s release hit his nose, too, and Cas’ eyes went wild. Rationally, he knew that Benny hadn’t touched his mate. He couldn’t have left her alone, but he couldn’t take the smell of young, ripe Omega Tripping into Heat without reacting like a healthy alpha in his prime. Andrea looked decidedly rumpled, but both wolves were dressed by the time Cas found them. Andrea put herself bravely in front of her mate, and the sight of pregnant beta soothed the Alpha’s wolf enough for his brain to kick back in.

Andrea and Benny edged along the wall, keeping their eyes down, and keeping as far from Cas as they could. Benny guided Andrea out of the forefront. It didn’t matter. Castiel only had eyes for his mate.

He was naked and on her before the door closed with a bang.

From the foyer, Fred and Nick listened to the house settle. Benny swept Andrea up the stairs. He shared a few words with Fred, and then he took her home. The silence in the foyer was eerie after the flare-up of excitement. Only the Grandfather clock’s ticking as the pendulum swung broke the quiet.

“Guess that’s it for me, then,” Nick told the butler. “May as well head home.”

“Very good, Omega,” Fred told him. “Please be sure to let me know what assistance you require as you prepare to depart. And please accept Alpha Winchester’s regrets that your time with his mate was cut short. You are welcome in his home any time, Omega Nicholas, although we do request that you kindly inform us of your next visit so that we may suitably prepare.”

Nick snorted.

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to leave a comment if you're so inclined. I LOVE them so much!

Normally, I am responsible and restrained enough to respond to comments from previous chapters BEFORE I post new ones, but sometimes you just have to live crazy. I'll get to every one of them. I haven't forgotten.

Love y'all!
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

Two Omegas in Heat make for a fairly quiet house, all things considered. There's news from Crowley's camp. And Dean and Michael have a new conversation. Dean's finally ready for the big pivot, and Michael's going along for the ride whether he wants to or not.

Chapter Notes

THIS is where I tried to drag Dean a couple of chapters ago, but the stubborn ass wasn't having it. FINALLY! Sheesh. 80 chapters in we get to see his Deep alpha side emerge for real. ****grins happily****

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 80 – Monday, July 31, 2017

THEN:

Dean could hear the row inside the house from the sidewalk as soon as he was within a half-block. The backpack on his shoulder became instantly heavier, and he missed a step. He missed another. He stood still on the sidewalk staring at a crack before his feet, listening. Weariness tied his feet to the pavement. For a moment, he wondered what would happen if he just walked right on past the two-story house and kept going.

He heard a loud yelp, followed by the sound of shattering glass. Dean swore and broke into a run.

“DAD! Fuck it all! Put that down! You lay a hand on my brother, and so help me…!” Dean didn’t think twice about what stepping into range of John’s belt might mean to his own safety. He wrenched the belt out of his father’s grip and threw it on the table. Broken glass was everywhere in the kitchen, but the floor was dry. He put two and two together in his head, released John’s shoulder and rounded on Sam who stood defiant and pissed near the hallway door.

“I told you to stay out of it, Sam!” Dean said, not as coldly as he meant to.

“He’s drinking himself to death,” Sam responded bitterly. “If you’re going to stand by and watch it happen, I’m not!”

“So, you took it upon yourself to raid his stash and dump it all?”

“I’m sick of this, Dean. Dad was supposed to come by the school and talk to my English teacher. He promised. But he didn’t show. Again. And it’s not like he’s working. It’s not like he doesn’t have the
“You little…” John growled, but Dean forestalled him, stepping aggressively between his brother and his dad, where he’d been stuck ever since that terrible day more than two years ago when everything had gone to shit.

“Don’t.” Dean didn’t need to elaborate. He was young, strong, and sober. His eyes flashed red. His palm up toward his father was both a plea for calm and a warning to take not one step closer to Sam. John met his eye with a sallow, liquid alpha stand of his own, and for a moment, Dean expected they’d finally reached the point of challenge that had been so long in coming.

Dean’s nostrils flared. He’d had one helluva day at the university. He was beat up mentally and emotionally. He needed a good hard fuck. He needed to sink to his knees and let some nameless guy fuck the exhaustion out of him, but that plan slipped right out the door. John was no trifle to stand against even when he was drunk. Right now, he was as sober as he ever came, and Dean doubted he’d ever seen him angrier. The throw-down was imminent, but it wouldn’t come from Dean.

He waited.

And then it was over. The tension melted. John’s eyes flipped between one breath and the next. He shrank back to normal size, and muttered that he was going out, grabbed his coat from the hook by the front door and disappeared, all within the span of seconds.

Dean released a massive breath. He turned slowly to find Sam, still exactly where he’d been, and still just as pissed off.

“What did you and your English teacher need from Dad?” Dean asked, hoping to divert his brother.

“What difference does it make to you?” Sam shot back.

All the weariness seemed to come back at once and pull at Dean’s limbs. “Whatever, Sam. Look, I’m going after him. You’re cleaning this mess up. Don’t go barefoot in the kitchen until we’re sure all the glass is gone. And for fuck’s sake, stop dumping his swill down the sink. It’s not helping.”

Sam’s eyes hardened. For a beta, he had a remarkable amount of power behind those hazel eyes when he wanted it. “You’re siding with him again?”

“I’m not siding with him! Damnit! But he needs me right now more than you do. There’s leftovers in the…”

“You think he’s the one who needs you?”

“I can’t do this right now, Sam. I’m doing the best I can. Look, stay here. Get your homework done. Eat something. I’ll be back late.”

“Mm-hm.” Sam dismissed his brother and slammed his bedroom door. Dean knew that he’d need to remember when he hoisted his dad through the kitchen later that they would have glass shards to contend with.
The bar was dim and smoke-filled. Dean picked his way to the dingy stage in the back. Rog was mostly sober this early in the evening, and his fingers were light on the keyboard. Dean spotted his father already at the bar, sitting as if carved into the scene by a sculptor. Dean didn’t speak to him.

“Hey, pup,” Rog greeted cheerfully. “You been practicing that riff?”

“I don’t have a piano, man. I told you that. Just scoot over. I can slide in without anybody noticing.” Dean dropped his backpack on the floor at the back of the stage. Homework would have to come later. He could sleep tomorrow. He slipped in beside the old codger and took up the rhythm Rog was pulsing without so much as a pause. The edges of Rog’s eyes crinkled, and he nodded in approval. They played on together, blending chords and rhythms seamlessly. The drunks on the floor weren’t listening anyway, and Rog’s tip jar stood empty but for the seed bills he’d put in himself. Wednesday was always a hard sell.

Two hours in, John Winchester had grown roots through his ass as his head nodded lower and lower toward the bar. Dean barely glanced at him. His eyes were drawn to Christopher behind the bar, who shot Dean a piercing glance as he slid another glass in front of John’s elbow.

Break time.

Dean bit his lip. Rog, ever aware, shuffled his butt to the center of the bench, shifting Dean off-balance.

“What the hell, man?” asked Dean, getting to his feet.

“You’re off-beat, pup. Get outta here for a spell. Don’t come back until you killed some of whatever’s eatin’ you.”

“Subtle,” muttered Dean, taking a bracing sip of his club soda. Christopher finished wiping the bar and licked his lip. One look was all he needed to get Dean’s feet moving, and before he knew what was happening, he had Chris’ fist tangled in his hair and his cock down Dean’s throat. Christopher pressed Dean’s back into the brick wall in the filthy alley behind the bar. It smelled of piss and worse. Dean kept his feet beneath him, loathe to let the knees of his jeans soak in whatever he was squatting in, but Chris didn’t care one way or another. He was brutal tonight. The pain at the back of Dean’s head where the man had his grip tangled in the short hair meshed with the force at the back of Dean’s throat to set him alight.

He was hard. He moaned in desperation, but he didn’t reach for his own cock. Instead, Dean braced his hands, fingers splayed, against the bricks and just tried to breathe. Chris didn’t give him many opportunities. Tears tracked down his cheeks in response to the deep plunge of the beta’s length down his throat. Dean gagged and snorfled, trying to catch a breath. His nose ran. His eyes rolled up, hoping to connect in a moment of meaning, hoping to communicate that he was okay with what he was being fed, but the beta had his eyes on the wall before him. He used Dean’s mouth like an Omega fuck-hole, and he paid no mind to the boy it was attached to at all.

Dean whimpered.

Christopher came with a garbled groan, pressing right in against the constriction at the back of the alpha’s throat, making him struggle against the impulse to puke, making swallowing that much harder. But he did. Swallow, that is.

Chris pulled out with a satisfied pat to Dean’s cheek. He nearly caught Dean’s lip in his zipper as he pulled out and tucked in all in one motion. He left Dean huffing for his breath, squatting in filth against the brick wall and went back to work. Break time was over, apparently.
Dean thumped his head against the wall once. The breeze ruffled his hair. A dog barked down the street. Something scattered near the trash can. His hard-on begged for a touch, but Dean refused to acknowledge it.

Something about being used like that centered him in a way that a mutual connection never seemed to, and Dean soaked it in, alone. He closed his eyes, feeling the rough sting at the back of his throat, feeling his head throb, feeling his erection pulse. The ground felt solid beneath his feet, and his cheek where Chris’ benevolent hand patted him in approval felt warm. He touched it in wonder.

At length, he pushed himself to his feet and went back inside. John was right where he’d left him. Christopher was just refilling his tumbler without glancing up. Rog raised a disapproving眉 when Dean slid back into place.

“What?” Dean asked him, not really caring what the answer was.

“You stink,” Rog replied. “And you missed a spot.”

Dean followed Rog’s eyes to the obvious bulge at his crotch. “Mind your own fucking business, man,” Dean snapped. He picked up where he’d left off and bought Rog a few unexpected tips over the next hour. Chris dropped him off a fresh club soda with a flirty wink. (Oh, sure, now he looks me in the eye,) grumbled the sulky wolf in Dean’s head. Dean just smirked and played on. His backpack sat forlorn and forgotten in the corner.

A quick call from the payphone to check on Sam didn’t go well. At least he knew Sam was still breathing. Only his 14-year-old angst-ridden brother could have fit that much feeling into the words, “You’re a dick!” before hanging up on him.

NOW:

Castiel was naked and on her before the door closed with a bang. Her skin was hot and damp. She grabbed for him and wept in pain. The knot needed to be swift and hard. There was no room for play. There would be no caressing, no soft words, no scening. She needed medical attention more than she needed devotion right now. She needed an injection.

The head of his swollen penis found its mark on the first shove and disappeared into her vagina in a brutal push. He crushed her beneath him and grunted into his work with gritted teeth and a hand tangled in her hair. Castiel relinquished the leash holding his wolf back. He let it go completely. He surrendered to the force of nature that drove him to breed. April’s tiny body took a pounding as the wolf assumed ownership. She was little more than a Rut-stick for him to bury himself inside, but the scent coming off her body was better than any Rut-stick Castiel had ever smelled. Nothing in the world had ever smelled this good to him.

The wolf took over, leaving Castiel to ride the wave helplessly. He would breed her, fill her small belly, create life and Pack within her body. So many puppies. Castiel could already feel them plumping her from within as he groaned into his movements. The pull in his gut flared to a burn so intense, he knew she could feel it spilling over. All his life was a matter of waiting for this moment – for a chance to breed, and Castiel went for it with abandon.

His shout of ecstasy broke free on its own. His hands tightened their grip. His teeth took tender flesh and tore into it. Castiel’s knot surged, and his life flowed from his body into hers, into the sacred
place inside this sacred woman where his young could find safe harbor.

God, that scent!

She mewled beneath him, snuggling her arms in closer to her sides so that his body covered hers entirely. He didn’t think she was breathing, and that seemed unfair as he was panting uncontrollably.

There was blood on the pillow. A crimson streak of it dribbled back down her shoulder and smeared across her upper back. Castiel licked his lower lip and tasted blood there too. Her blood, not his.

“Can you breathe, Kitten?”

“I want you above me, Sir,” she managed. Barely.

He chuckled. That was a ‘no’. Her voice sounded miles away, but it might’ve been the ringing in his ears.

Cas pushed up on his hands, surveying her shoulder, giving her air. He felt dizzy for a moment and braced his arms until the feeling passed.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Better,” she admitted. “Alpha, I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I didn’t see that coming at all.”

“I didn’t either.” He spent a few breaths simply looking at her golden eyes. They would retain at least a ring of gold until her Heat passed. “What happened?”

She shook her head in dismay. “It hit me so fast. I nearly fainted. One minute, Michael and I were looking for toys for Gabriel, and the next I was on the floor. Did Gabe get the toys? They were over by the stock cabinet.”

Cas huffed at her single-minded worry about his brother. He pushed his torso a little higher and looked where she was pointing to see several sex toys scattered on the floor. “I’ll walk them over after we untie,” he told her. “That was generous of you to think of Gabriel, April. He’s lucky to have you for a mate-in-law.”

“It was Michael who picked everything out, Sir, the toys and the paddle. I had no idea what might work, but Michael knew what to do.”

“Let’s roll, Kitten. My arms won’t hold out for four days if I don’t pace myself.” He guided her into straightening her leg and rolling to the side.

“Alpha, you’re not Tripping yet, are you? What happens if you don’t?”

He shrugged. “I guess we’ll just go through it all again in a couple of weeks.”

“But you have so much to do! Please, Sir, I’m so sorry!”

“April Renée.” Aaand, there was that voice. She bit her lip.

“Don’t apologize for things I have no control over?” she guessed.

He lowered his chin, and his eyes sparkled with amusement. “Bingo,” he said softly, leaning in to kiss her nose. “With any luck, I’ll catch up to you, and we’ll both cycle together. At worst, I’ll get pulled off track by your hormones and Trip next week. That would be inconvenient because it would
mean we need to reschedule the meeting with Keller. But, April, my beautiful horny love, if that happens, we’ll deal with it. I don’t want to hear another apology from you.”

She nodded. “I have a confession to make though, Sir.” She paused long enough for him to sigh and nod. “I didn’t just Trip into Heat with no prompting. Something…set me off, I think.”

Cas frowned in surprise. He’d not been expecting that. “Something about Gabriel?” he asked, trying to work it out for himself.

“Indirectly, maybe. But not really.” April’s cheeks were a rosy pink, and her eyes were fevered bright. She looked alive. God knows she smelled alive. Castiel was finding it hard to concentrate. His hips wanted to take up a rhythm again, but he had the leash in place again, and he waited.

“Sir, it was after Michael selected some toys to take across the hall. He handed them to me, and I began to wonder how he knew with so much confidence what Gabriel might like best. Michael seemed so certain. My mind…Alpha, I didn’t plan it…I imagined that Michael knew from experience what another man might prefer. I imagined Michael using those toys.” April’s eyes grew dark and hooded. Her breathing became shallow as she told the story. Her hips picked up the rhythm that the Alpha was fighting to resist.

“I imagined Michael using those toys on himself while he was in Heat, and before I went two more steps, the Heat hit me hard. He ran for it, Sir. Michael ran. I think he could smell me. I think I startled him.”

“He left you here?”

“He came right back” she corrected. “He was only gone for a minute or two, and then he was back. He helped me to the bed. He called Dean. Sir, he took care of me, but I think I scared him.”

Castiel barely noticed the movement of their bodies in concert, so distracted was he in the puzzle his Omega laid at his feet. Why would a sexual fantasy between Omegas Trigger a Heat a full fortnight early? He didn’t know how, but he knew it had to be Michael. It had to be another of his baffling idiosyncrasies. There was something about the ratios of his hormones and the way they carried out into the air that turned everything near him on its head.

Castiel’s orgasm took him completely by surprise. He startled a growl into April’s collarbone as he curled up beside her. She clung to his back and rode the waves of hot semen with a leg thrown over his firm hip and a heel pressing into his ass. His distraction made him miss the sorrow that poured off her at first. She sniffled into his hair and attempted to hide her emotions. Slowly, he uncurled and reached for his mate.

“What is it?” he asked kindly.

“That burning in your belly,” she sniffed. “You want puppies. Your wolf thinks he’s breeding me. He’s going to be so disappointed when I don’t catch. I wish we had prepared sooner.”

Castiel laughed easily and sweetly. “Got the plan in place too late for this round, didn’t we Kitten? Don’t worry about me. I can make it another three months.”

“But your wolf!”

“Ah, yes. The wolf. Be a good girl, and tell him for me, would you?” Castiel’s face shone with the light of simple happiness. He didn’t look like a man deprived of everything he wanted, but she knew what he’d been feeling, and that was no light matter.
“You want me to talk to him?”

“I do. I expect he’ll listen to you more readily than he will to me.”

“He won’t listen to me, Alpha.” But Cas’ wolf slid gracefully into place behind those blue eyes. The red circle around the outside didn’t dim even with the wolf’s presence. Castiel had him on a leash. April felt the usual thrill at looking into eternity within her angelically beautiful mate. She smirked. If her mate wanted to play lighthearted, then so would April.

“Hello, you,” she said playfully, abandoning her despair for the liveliness in its eyes, and he licked a long stripe up her throat. It felt like having a lovable Tasmanian Devil on a string. Somehow, she felt easier just knowing Castiel trusted her to do this, and her heart lightened in truth. “I hate to tell you this, dear one,” she told him sternly, mustering all the firmness she could and trying not to giggle.

“But we’re all going to have to wait until my next Heat before we can expect any pups.” His blue eyes narrowed in disapproval. Hands closed around her narrow waist, and she squealed in delighted surprise as he pulled and rolled until he was on top of her again and gnawing hungrily on her throat. She laughed outright, and the sound spurred his teeth to nibble harder making her thrash at the combined tickle and sting.

“Ahhhh! Cas!!!” she cried, laughing harder and kicking her legs. The tie of his knot meant neither of them could move very far without pulling painfully, but he knew all the best places to drive his tongue, teeth, and lips over her throat to make her squeal in desperation. Leaving a trail of red and purple marks, he moved down to cover her chest and collarbone with marks too. She laughed without reservation, threw her head back, and opened her chest to his ministrations.

All too soon, the wolf had his hands clamped around April’s hips and was driving his knot deeper into her body, ignoring the tightness and the pull. He panted hard, and she mimicked him breath for breath. Rarely enough did she get the chance to feel the sensation of his wolf driving into her unrestrained – as he’d set the leash down once more – but even more rare was the chance to feel it from her front brain. Fully satisfied as she was at the moment, even her Heat wasn’t powerful enough right now to sink her into her wolf. She marveled at the sensation. If the Alpha had wanted to, he could have sent her under with just a look, but he smiled at her wonder from behind the eyes of the wolf. And then he winked.

April bit her lip again and rolled her own hips to meet his. The wolf snarled in glee. He picked up the pace, and she matched him. Nerves sang. Sparks flew. A great white buzzing filled the room, and she Released with a loud cry, but refused to relinquish her hold. She wanted to come on his knot – on the wolf’s knot – without letting her bitch take over. She wanted to ride the beast to completion, and it was that image that drove the buzzing to a deafening climax that whitened her vision and rocked her to curl around his hands and his center. She tucked her head tightly against his chest and spasmed hard in endless waves of sensation.

He must have come too. They were both still when the buzzing and whitewash cleared.

“Did you like that?” he teased, nibbling her earlobe. He was Castiel again. She couldn’t have said how she knew the difference, and they never talked about how neither of them considered the great black beast a true aspect of Castiel, the person. His wolf was a separate entity entirely. It was an untamable creature. It lived within the Alpha, but it wasn’t of him.

“Do you ever worry he’ll lose control and hurt us?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “I would never allow that to happen, and neither would he.”

She smiled, then giggled. “Tickling is not fair.”
Castiel raised one brow. “You have a safeword, Kitten. Don’t talk to me about unfair.”

She smiled gently at him. God, he was gorgeous when he looked at her like that. “Spoilsport,” she muttered without meaning it in the slightest and lifted her head for a kiss.

“Get some sleep, my little one,” he said in a voice she suspected was reserved just for her. “We’ve got a long way to go.”

“You’ll be here when I wake up?” What she had planned to say was that she wasn’t remotely sleepy, but the jaw-cracking yawn that escaped just as she started to speak changed her mind for her.

“I plan to step out to check on the Pack, Kitten. I’ll take Gabe his toys. But I’ll be checking on you through the bond, and I’ll be here as soon as you start to stir if not before.” He wasn’t going anywhere for a while. Their play had left them both swollen and puffy to the point that it felt like their parts had fused down south. Cas rolled them carefully onto their sides once more, watching that April’s thigh didn’t take his weight. He adjusted her until she leaned heavily against him – as heavily as her weight could manage. She was cushioned against his body, and she settled immediately with her head on his chest.

“I love you so much, Castiel James,” said April.

“Castiel James, is it?” he asked, craning his head and scrunching his chin to look into her face. “How did I earn such an honor?”

“Shut up,” she grumbled, snuggling in and closing her eyes. His happy laugh jiggled her head.

“I love you, too, April Renée, my Kitten.”

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Michael lay still and pensive. He caressed the sore wound on Dean’s right shoulder idly, his thoughts far away. Dean took care with choosing his words. The last thing he wanted to do was drive Michael underground over what he’d just experienced. Dean’s bulbous knot nestled tight and firm within Michael’s swollen channel. Face-to-face in their least favorite post-coital position, they both suffered the discomfort without comment. Neither had wanted to turn his face from the other while they pounded out the panic in their own heads. It had been an anxious thrum that beat between them both, Michael certain that Dean would stomp him into submission on the next breath, and Dean terrified that Michael would lie to him about what he felt for April. The idea of having to hear him do that after everything was a knife in Dean’s liver – a red-hot twisting dagger of uncertainty. He couldn’t bring himself to blink much less take Michael from behind just to make the after-moments more comfortable.

“Better?” asked Dean. Michael’s cock was spent and shrunken, loose and ignored, their bellies both smeared with globules of hardening come. Now that the dire need was slaked, the Omega had nothing to focus on but his admission to his mate and the shame in his gut.

“No,” he whispered.

Dean let Michael retreat into himself. He poked around in the Omega’s head a little, but he knew what he’d find there. How much hope could any Omega entertain when opposing an Alpha of Castiel’s stature? How much hope was there that it would ever even make it to a direct
confrontation? And it wasn’t as if Cas had ever allowed any doubt about his thoughts on the matter. He’d never made pretenses that any part of his mate was up for grabs – any part that he didn’t share openly, generously. Noblesse oblige.

“Where’d your middle name come from?” asked Dean changing the subject. “Is it a family name?”

Michael’s tight smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Quentin was my grandmother,” he said dully. “On my mother’s side. He was a gentle soul, and a genuinely kind man. I only knew him when I was young, but he always carried sweets in his pockets for the pups at church. He died young; too young.”

“They named you for him.” Dean felt the press of fingertips dig into the bruise on his shoulder. He didn’t flinch.

“My Pop didn’t like it. Naming a pup after an Omega is bad luck according to him, but Mommy planted her heels on that one apparently. I got ‘Michael’ from Pop’s grandfather, I think. I don’t know for sure. Never asked him.”

“It’s not bad luck to name a pup after a gentle man, Michael Quentin.” Dean shifted to pull away from the probing touch that was bordering on hard enough to break the scabs open and set him bleeding again. “There’s no bad luck in being an Omega.”

Michael chuckled humorlessly. Dean clung to his hip and breathed through the massage Michael’s ironic laugh delivered to his knot. He didn’t want to succumb to the sensation for the moment. His mate was hurting, and that needed to come first.

“You know nothing, Jon Snow,” said Michael, giving up on Dean’s bite-wound and laying down fully on his side.

“Maybe,” Dean countered. “I got a good dousing of it from Kali today. I know I have a lot to think about, but the only reason you have me and I have you is because one of us is Omega.”

“I’ll trade you,” said Michael snippily.

“Can’t help you there, my love.”

Michael clenched around Dean’s knot and rutted his hips up and back a little bit. His eyes were closed. The side of his head rested on his bicep where his arm stretched out above him. “Get a good feel, alpha,” he said colorlessly. “This is all I’m really good for.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Dean, trying very hard to ignore the sensation. It wasn’t easy. It turned out not to be possible. A stilling hand on Michael’s hip did nothing. Dean gritted his teeth as his balls pulled up tight, and he emptied satisfyingly into Michael’s channel all over again.

“All I’m saying,” said Dean once he had himself centered again, and a tighter hand on Michael’s hip to hold him still. “Is that it’s not as bad as you seem to think.” Dean’s body was singing joyfully at the sensations the Omega elicited. He tried to ignore them and focus.

Michael sighed heavily. “I don’t care if he’s the most progressive Alpha alive today, Dean. He’s not going to be able to give us this.”

“Us?” asked Dean. “Is it an ‘us’?”

Michael’s eyes were still closed. He dumped confusion and uncertainty into Dean’s head. As hard as it was to feel out of control in his own heart, not knowing for sure that April felt the same way tore at him even worse. He couldn’t ask her. He couldn’t put her at risk like that. He needed to pull back,
tell Castiel that a full foursome was a bad idea, threaten Dean with masculine dismemberment if he breathed a word of what he felt of Michael’s emotions.

Dean picked up on the threat of castration. Or, well, he could tell that there was a dire threat roaming around in Michael’s head, and he was familiar enough with Michael’s thought patterns to be able to connect the dots.

“Babe,” Dean tried again. “After everything you’ve seen us iron out, what makes you think we can’t handle this, too?”

“What do you think is going to happen?” Michael said into the space above Dean’s head. “I’m a fool, and I let myself get too comfortable here. I know better. I’m never going to win against an Alpha, Dean. He’s never going to let me get any closer to her than fucking distance. He’s going to dangle the pretty, pretty morsels in front of me and then whack me with a stick if I reach for them.”

Dean sent Michael a fierce but wordless reply. He didn’t know how it would all play out, but Michael’s vision was balderdash. There wasn’t a trace of Castiel in that image. Michael’s face flattened to a closed and angry pinch. He huffed and pulled firmly at the tie that held him close to his mate.

“OUCH! Cut it out, you little…” Dean moved uncomfortably with him, straining his back to keep from hurting his dick. The knot wasn’t ready to release Michael yet. “Damnit, Michael, stop pulling! You’re not going anywhere until we’re done talking!”

“I need to get out of here, Dean! I need to go put some miles in on the treadmill. I can’t stand this!”

“Stop pulling, Omega!” The alpha tone caught Michael by surprise, and he whined in frustration even as his body obeyed. “Goddamnit, I know you’re scared, but you’re jumping to conclusions!” Dean leaned his face in close and took hold of Michael’s face by his jaw and gripped him tightly. “He’s not like that! Don’t you get that by now?”

“I’m in love with her, Dean. How do you think this resolves? No alpha bends that far.” Michael’s tortured green eyes fluttered back and forth in the short space between Dean’s eyes.

“You’re forgetting someone in your rush to condemn alphas, baby.”

“Yes, well, she’s not your mate.”

“No, but you are.”

“It’s not the same thing,” protested Michael, pulling his face out of Dean’s grasp.

“It’s exactly the same thing. You think it doesn’t freak me out to know that my mate’s heart is slipping out of my hands?”

“I’m not leaving you, Dean. It’s not like that at all!”

“I know. Baby, I know. And we’ve got to trust that April and Castiel know too.”

Michael shook his head. “You’re living in a dream world, alpha. A relationship like this might work for two alphas who can’t keep their hands off each other, but the best I can hope for is to be allowed Omega fucking rights with her. Aren’t the horny little Omegas cute together? It’s not ever going to be enough. It’s not about sex, Dean. Christ, I don’t even want to scene with her. I want…” Michael clamped his mouth shut, aware suddenly that he was saying too much. Dean was Castiel’s – lock, stock, and barrel – and whatever the Omega told his mate would get back to Castiel.
“He already knows all about it, Michael. I’m sure he does.” Dean knew why he cut off so abruptly.

“No, he doesn’t. He thinks it’s just lust. Omega lust. He thinks we’re prisoners of our hormones and can’t help ourselves. That may be true for April. But…” Michael couldn’t resist the temptation to spill his heart. He had to trust somebody. “Dean, I’ve never wanted to just hold someone before in my life – just hold her and not try to take anything. I’ve never wanted to hoist someone up onto my shoulders, so they could get a leg up to somewhere I can’t ever follow. I’ve never wanted to tuck someone into bed and watch them dream without needing to be a part of those dreams. All I really want is to be close to her and to try to mean something to her while she gets to wherever she’s going, and then I want to bask in the glow of her light. I don’t even care if anyone else knows I’m there.”

“Yes, you do,” Dean told his mate.

“Yes. I do,” Michael admitted. “I’m so sorry.”

“Shh. It’s not anyone’s fault. I’m the last person who’s going to judge you for falling for someone you’re not supposed to have.” Dean stroked Michael’s hair.

“Fucking rights are supposed to run downhill, Dean. If he doesn’t give the green light, I won’t ever get to touch her. Would you…? Will you talk to him? Will you tell him that a foursome is a bad idea? Get him to nix that plan? It’s the only way. If I ever get the chance to know what she tastes like, I’ll be lost.”

Dean gazed deeply into his eyes. There was nothing in Michael’s emotions that backed up that request. “It won’t work for long, Omega. If this thing you’re feeling is more than just a passing infatuation, it’s not going to be denied.”

“How long did you live in denial?” Michael asked sharply.

“Too fucking long,” Dean shot back. “But in the end, it wormed through anyway. It was bigger than me, Michael. It was even bigger than Cas.”

“Why aren’t you angry with me?”

“Wouldn’t do any good,” said Dean reasonably.

“Since when does that have anything to do with love and anger?”

“Baby, we’ll figure it out. I promise you. In a few years, however this all shakes out, it’s going to be right as rain. It’s you and me and him and her, and it always will be. I don’t know how all the lines are going to connect, but I need you to have faith that the Universe wouldn’t have activated our Triggers if it was going to mean endless heartache.”

“Dean Michael,” Michael propped himself up on an elbow. “Tell me the truth. Can you share me with another wolf? Can you see yourself being okay…really okay…with something real and lasting happening between me and April?”

“It’s a little early to start ringing the wedding bells…”

“Just answer the question!”

“I don’t know! All right? Look, you said yourself you don’t even know if she’s in the same pickle or not. But what kind of asshole hypocrite would I be to tell you what’s good for me is off-limits for you? I’m not blind, man! I know you didn’t go looking to fall for the boss’ girl. God, Michael, I watched you fight it as hard as you could. I fucking watched you! And if Cas hasn’t caught on yet,
it’s deliberate.”

Michael grimaced and pulled again at the knot. “I need to go for a walk, Dean. Help me. Pull yourself…”

“Fuck it, Omega!” said Dean, Deep alpha. “If you do that again without permission, so help me, I will thrash you right across those stripes on your ass until they fucking bleed! You’re going to hurt both of us!” Dean rolled up onto the Omega’s body and pinned him. Michael let out an anguished sound and collapsed flat on his back.

“I don’t want to do this anymore, alpha!” he whimpered in defeat.

“Stop. Michael, get a grip. Stop it! Nothing terrible has happened. Nothing terrible is going to happen. Listen to me! Trust me! I’m not going to let anything …”

“It’s not in your power to promise me that, Dean! You’re no more the decision maker in this house than I am! You gave it all away! You gave away every chance I had to hold anything of my own!”

Dean’s eyes blazed red. “Don’t you dare presume to judge me! You have no idea what I’ve had to face to come to that decision.”

“What you’ve faced?!” Michael’s eyes shone gold and reflected the light. “Dean, I’m only going to say this once, because I love you more than you’ll ever understand. But you are an idiot. You need to give yourself wholly to him? Fine. You go do that. Cut your balls off and hand those over too. Go big or go home and whatever other alpha bullshit you can think to throw in the kitchen sink when you toss it into the cab of his truck. But don’t you ever try to tell me it’s none of my business! I. AM. OMEGA!” Michael was breathing hard enough that Dean braced against the shift of his belly. “I’m learning to live with being a slave. I’m making the best of it because the alternative is I go insane and die screaming, and that scares the shit out of me! But don’t think for one minute that you and I are the same. You HAD all the self-possession a man could ever need, and you gave it away! What the hell does that do for me?”

Dean’s knot must have sensed the tension, for it released its grip. Dean’s wet length slid out without ceremony. Michael wormed his way out from beneath his mate in defiance of Dean’s protests, dodged his alpha’s clutch, and slammed the door on his way out, still very naked and dripping with spent fluids.

Dean buried his face in his pillow and kept his focus tightly on Michael’s mind, tracking him until it was clear the Omega was somewhere deep in the bowels of the house and no longer travelling. He seemed to be in the gym. He seemed to be running. He seemed not to mind Dean’s intrusive pushing, for he hadn’t shut the bonds. He wasn’t answering any of Dean’s probes though.

Dean Winchester couldn’t remember ever feeling shame like this before, and Dean Winchester was no stranger to shame. He tried to make sure Michael was aware. That seemed monumentally important. It wasn’t often that an alpha got such a clear look in the mirror. It wasn’t often that an alpha could humble himself enough to admit what he had seen.

He lay nude on his soiled bed and tried to come to grips. It was an emotion so radically unlike the vague malaise that his own sense of insecurity flung at him nightly because this emotion came backed up by real events. The difference was palpable. His audacity at believing his marriage to Castiel was a personal privilege, and was his choice alone, that it touched only him, that his decision to play an Omega role for the Alpha – it all seemed like such pretentious folly in light of Michael’s objective declaration.
Dean wasn’t an Omega. Pretending to be one to stroke his husband’s ego and grant himself a vent of grace to pretend he didn’t have any responsibilities of his own, it was a slap in Michael’s face. Michael, who deserved only roses and satin, who gave so much more than he took, who had taken beating after beating from the Universe and every alpha he’d ever met, and bravely shook it all off to try once more to have faith…in Dean…deserved better than this. Dean thought back through the last couple of months, at his whining, at his conceit, at his blatant abdication, and his mindless entitlement. How did Michael find anything about him to love? Was it purely hormonal? If they didn’t share a set of bonds that wrapped around their psyches so tightly as to be irrevocably braided together, would Michael still love him?

Dean lay still for a very long time. Michael didn’t return. Dean needed desperately to talk to someone he could trust, but everyone he thought of was currently locked inside one of two rooms downstairs near where Michael was pounding the synthetic pavement and muttering under his breath. Dean didn’t know how he could tell the Omega was muttering, but he could. And the picture made him smile vaguely.

Slowly and after exhausting every alternative he could think of, Dean fumbled for the cellphone on his bedside table. He scrolled through the contact list and pulled up Tessa’s number. He had another appointment in a couple of days, but he felt a shame spiral coming on. It was either give in and call the shrink or dig out his hairbrush and try to get enough reach around his own hips to leave a dent that would make a lasting impression. Considering what he wanted the thrashing for, doing it himself seemed like a bad idea.

She answered on the second ring.

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Dean had said Gabe was a mere five minutes behind her, but he was taking forever. Where were they? Had they crashed on the way home? It was unthinkable, but Kali couldn’t erase the vision her imagination supplied her in humorless irony of fire and twisted metal. She paced the room in a tight U-shaped formation around the huge bed again and again. And then, just as she gave up and gripped the door handle to go in search, she heard two galumphing masses come crashing down the stairs.

Kali got the door pulled open just as Gabriel smacked into the frame and collapsed around it to fall into her arms with a pitiful whine. He smelled distressed more than anything else. He was in dreadful pain. All of his clothes came off with no preamble as he crumpled to the floor. Once down, he awaited his fate with trembling form. His eyes stayed glued to the floor in front of him. The door snicked closed on its spring.

“Gabriel? Omega, can you hear me?” Kali drew close to him but didn’t touch him yet. She didn’t want him spooked, and he looked all too close to it. “Gabe, I’m right here, sweetheart. Can you look at me? It’s Kali.”

He whined and scowled. He didn’t look up. “Darling boy, you’ve got to tell me what you need me to do. Do you have to have an alpha? I can have one here in a flash. They’ve got someone standing by. Just say the word.”

“No,” he grunted. “No alpha. You promised, Kali. Promised me you would do it yourself.”

“I will, if that’s what you want. You have to tell me what to do though. What do you need, Gabe?”
She squatted down on the floor beside him and began to assist when his fingers tried awkwardly to remove her loose blouse.

“Need you to fuck me hard, Kali,” mumbled Gabriel, seeming completely out of it.

“All right,” she comforted him, touching his shoulder. He flinched but then settled. His skin was clammy. “Will my fingers do?”

“Fingers? I dunno. Try. Okay? Please, Kali. It hurts.” Even as he spoke in broken pained huffs, he toppled forward and rested his forehead against the floor. He took hold of her hand with her shirt still only half off and pulled it to rest on his lower back. He raised his hips and pressed back, any vestige of modesty forgotten in the pain and the Heat.

Kali nodded firmly and shrugged her blouse all the way off. His overpowering scent wasn’t lost on the beta, but even as it engulfed her, she fought to maintain herself. “Be easy, Gabe. I’ll take care of you.” She moved to his side until she had a good comfortable reach, and she swiped a thumb through the slick that issued in a thick flow down both thighs. She pressed it against his rim to check the give, and he wailed and pressed back so violently that her thumb sank in to the tight webbing of flesh at the base of her hand.

“Be careful, Gabriel!” she chastised pointlessly.

“I said FUCK ME, KALI! Not play with me.” He rocked into her hand. She spanked him hard across his right ass cheek and growled harshly.

“Don’t do that again, Omega! If you tear yourself needlessly, I will paddle you until your brother can’t sit down!” She pulled her thumb free and coated her fingers with the silky fineness of his slick. Great goddess, he smelled delicious. She wanted him to take hold of her and slam home inside her willing body, but he wasn’t ready for that yet. She knew he wouldn’t get to the point of playing a Top role willingly for a couple of days.

Kali’s new diamond sparkled at his shoulder as she used her grip to steady him against the firm press of two fingers. He trembled hard but refrained from pushing back.

“More,” he whispered gruffly, shaking badly on his knees. “Please, more…”

He was loose and ripe, a virtual paragon of perfect willing ripeness, ready to splatter open and drench her in fertile liquid that promised what he couldn’t deliver. Kali tightened her grip on his shoulder and shoved four fingers deep into him.

“Yeah! Yeah, like that. Oh, please!” She thrust her hand deep inside and then pulled back. He began to rock subtly. At first, he only rocked, but as she gained a steady rhythm, she let him direct the speed, force, and depth of the thrusts until she was only holding stiff and steady, and he was doing all the work. Gabriel held nothing back. He moaned and grunted as he shoved his ass back onto her stiffened fingers. She tucked her thumb in tightly and didn’t respond other than to pant slightly when his channel engulfed the broad knuckles of her hand on every other pass.

“Come on, Gabe,” she encouraged. “You’ve got this. Come on, baby!”

“Hit me, Kali!” he shouted on a down-thrust. “Hit me hard!”

“Are you sure?” It didn’t feel right to take her usual hard swing at a man so outside himself.

“HIT ME, DAMN YOU! I CAN’T COME WITHOUT IT!”
The shouting knocked her past her reticence. Kali hated to be shouted at, and she slapped his ass hard in response. She felt the tremor all the way up her arm as his channel responded. She did it again, then she worked her way up onto her knees, frowned in concentration and let him have it, reddening his ass and driving his moans up two octaves. He was a mess of swearing, rocking and driving his hips up to meet her hard hand. Her pupils blew wide, and her mouth fell open at the unmitigated eroticism. He didn’t really seem human anymore, but that was as it should be, she thought with a hard slap to his thigh. He wasn’t human right now, he was Omega.

She felt his channel clench first, then he Released with a wail, and that set off his climax. He shot come into the carpet without a single touch to his cock. Slick gushed forth around her hand in spurts that splattered to her elbow and dribbled in waves down his thighs.

Gabe dropped to his elbows, panting hard, and pulled off her fingers, now pruny from the moisture. His skin still felt clammy to her touch. His eyes were still gold-rimmed and blown. His face was still a fever-red.

“Baby, it’s not going to be enough. Let me call you an alpha. Please, Gabriel. Don’t suffer like this.” Kali stroked his back in long firm sweeps of her red-hot hand, the one that had struck him again and again.

“Mm-mm,” he said in refusal. “I can do it without an alpha. We need toys though. Did Cas send anything over?”

“I didn’t see anything. I looked through the drawers. Give me a minute, Gabe, I’ll call Fred.”

“Tell him to look in my room,” offered Gabriel rolling onto his side and massaging his own channel with a single finger.

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Dean found Michael sweating on the treadmill, completely naked except for a pair of running shoes. The alpha braced his hands above him on the doorframe watching the muscles play across Michael’s back. He knew Michael could feel him there, but his Omega didn’t slow or turn. The night was wearing on, and Dean had work in the morning that he couldn’t skip, but Michael needed him more than Dean needed sleep.

It was time, and Dean was finally ready.

He felt grounded and centered in a way he hadn’t for some time, and it showed in the stillness of his eyes and his face. So often he picked up on subtle clues cast by wolves who didn’t even know they were conveying messages. But then too, sometimes it took a sledgehammer upside his head before he woke up and looked around him at the real world. This was clearly one of those times, and Dean was out of excuses. He stood in the doorway in nothing but a pair of loose sleep pants and bare feet.

“Would it help if I told you how sorry I am for being a dick?”

“Not if you keep being a dick,” said Michael without turning or slowing.

“Are you really that unhappy here with me?” Dean already knew the answer to that one, but he needed to jump past Michael’s ire…or right through it.
Michael hopped his feet to the sides of the treadmill and let the belt continue without him. He mopped at his face with a small towel. He still didn’t look around. “Still being a dick, Dean. Don’t ask stupid questions.”

“What should I ask, then?”

Michael cut the power, and the treadmill slowed to a stop. He turned around. His whole face registered frustration and pain. “You convinced me to try to give the Omega a voice, then you fucking disappeared on me. You want me to trust you, but how can I do that? Now I’m fucked through both holes and sideways. I can’t turn the new guy off, alpha. The damned thing’s found a foothold, and it’s not letting go. And you ask me if I’m unhappy? Nah, I’m fucking ecstatic! Where do I sign up for more? I think there’s a spot on my left nut you haven’t kicked yet.” He stepped down off the treadmill, and Dean blocked his next step.

“I’m done being a dick to you Michael. Seriously. Look, I know you don’t trust me. Hell, I wouldn’t either, but…I was stupid. I was trying to turn you into Castiel. I don’t know why, but I get how unfair that was.”

“You don’t know why?” Michael jeered, then slipped past his mate and picked up his water bottle. “It’s not rocket science, alpha. You wanted to Mate him, but you got me instead.” Michael turned around and caught the stricken look on Dean’s face. “I’m not gonna be HIM, Dean. If that’s what you need, then maybe you and I should pull back. I’ll be here for your Ruts, and I’ll bear your pups, and maybe we leave it at that.”

“Are you insane? What the fuck kinda answer is that? Damnit, Michael, I love YOU! I love YOU! And you love me back. I fucked up. Big time. I swore I wouldn’t let you hit the ground, and then I did. I went off into fantasies thinking I could play at being an Omega ‘cause it looked so carefree and all that bullshit, and I left you hanging. Well, I’m back now. I’m standing right here, and I’m not going to let it happen again.”

The man standing in front of Michael wasn’t the man he’d spent the last couple of months getting to know, and the Omega seemed to be realizing it slowly. There was a staunch severity to Dean that spoke of deeply engrained solidity. This was a man who could still the hurricane in Michael’s head, who could hold him up when every muscle turned to jelly. This was an immovable rock in the maelstrom. Where the hell had he been all this time?

Michael stared at him. Dean could feel his mate rifling around in his head, deeper than he’d been invited, but Dean didn’t protest. He felt his eyes redden as his alpha aspect deepened under Michael’s touch.

Finally, “You’re still going to hand everything off to Castiel?” There was a faint glimmer of hope behind Michael’s eyes, but he seemed reticent to fan the spark.

“What we do within the confines of our marriage is between us,” Dean told him without blinking. “I know it affects you, too. I get that. What I had screwed up is how I need to be a different person for each of you without sacrificing who I am for myself. Michael, I can do this. It’s taking me longer to untangle it all than I anticipated. That’s all.”

“If you give him everything you are, what does that mean for me?”

“It doesn’t change anything for you. You’re still his exactly as you are now. You’re still mine exactly as you are now. You’re affected only in the moment before he cleans off what I’ve given him of myself, and he hands it back to me. For that short time, you’ll outrank me. April will outrank me. Once the ceremony is over, we step out refreshed in our places. Everyone will be the same except for
me. The statement I’m making in that ceremony changes everything about who I am in relation to
him, but it doesn’t change you, Michael. It doesn’t change us.”

“If he gives it all back to you, how is that a change?”

Dean rested a hand on Michael’s damp shoulder. “It’s still his to own, but he’ll be granting me
guardianship…custody. Nothing about that makes your place as Primary Omega any different than
what it is now.”

Michael shook his head. “If you don’t own anything, how can you be the alpha I need, Dean?”

Dean chuckled. “Because he’ll blister my ass if I’m not. Taking care of you is a big part of behaving
myself for him.” Dean rubbed the back of his neck in a self-effacing way. The gesture was iconic
Dean, and yet didn’t weaken his stand within his alpha designation one bit. It was a dizzying
spectacle to witness.

Michael squinted and cocked his head. “You’re going to be an alpha as an aspect of being a Sub?”

“You’re overthinking it, sweetheart.”

“Forgive me for being suspicious, Dean,” said Michael acerbically. “I’ve been burned a few times
already by trusting you when you say, ‘Trust me’.”

Dean’s gaze focused vaguely into the distance. “Meet me every single day at breakfast as my
Dominant, Michael. You can have everything. I swear it. And two or three times a week, under the
schedule you negotiated with Castiel, whatever you say goes. Rip me up one side and down the
other and don’t you dare walk away hungry. You hear me? Outside of that – brand new leaf,
Omega. I had it in my head that you’re not really Omega. I was so fucking blind. Everyone tried to
tell me, but I thought I had you pegged. I was wrong, Michael. You ARE Omega, and from now on,
you’ve got an alpha who knows it.” When Dean’s eyes slid back into focus and caught Michael’s,
the strength behind them soothed the Omega’s doubt.

“You’re a brat, Dean. Is it my job to figure out how to deal with that? What about when you pull that
bullshit fake-alpha on me?”

Dean swallowed hard, but he didn’t look away. “Look, Michael, I have more control over that than I
let on. I can’t swear I won’t ever lose my grip, but if we lean on Cas to keep that side of me
balanced, and we feed the brat in our scenes, I can promise you won’t see more than a flash of the
bastard outside of our play. You will have an alpha where you need your alpha.”

“That’s not enough, Dean.”

Dean nodded and stepped even closer, intent. “I did. But, man, that’s not something that happens all
the time. And there was no pretense about what was happening to me during any of that. These last
couple of months threw me sideways. Give me a chance. I can do this. I can.”

Michael rested his hands on Dean’s bare waist above the elastic of his sleep pants. “I’m running on
empty, Dean.”

“You’re carrying my puppy, Michael,” Dean whispered back. “There’s nothing empty about you.”
He pressed his flat hand against Michael’s belly.

“I want more than that, man. Can I have more?”
Dean chuckled and leaned in to kiss the side of Michael’s wet head. “Give me another chance. You’re pissed off right now cause your alpha fucked up. Think back a bit though. You and me in between the cornstalks...before I let you down; before that mess in the car.”

“Which you haven’t wiped up yet,” Michael reminded him.

“Which I’ll wipe up before breakfast tomorrow,” Dean agreed. “That wasn’t half bad, was it? Aren’t you mostly satisfied with what we’ve got? Aren’t you mostly mad at the way I’ve been skipping out on taking my alpha role seriously? If I get my head on straight, aren’t we good? Michael?”

Michael’s eyes darkened, and his posture straightened enough to be a clear effort at intimidation. Dean knew right where he was going, but he let his mate play it out. “You want another chance? All right. You got it. But pull that shit again, Dean, and you’ll be sitting on a sore ass for a month. I’m not gonna put up with it.”

Dean couldn’t fight the smirk, and he lowered his head a minute to let his amusement fade. If he knew how that expression and the way his lashes touched his cheeks put Michael off balance, well, you use what you have don’t you? He looked up again and smoothed his features. It was time to put the rubber to the road.

“Look at me, Michael. Look me in the eye. Listen to me, Omega.” Michael couldn’t help responding. Every trace of an uncertain or unwilling alpha was gone from his mate’s voice. It wasn’t a commanding tone exactly, but it pulled him right in. He locked eyes with his mate. They were eyeball to eyeball, and the Omega had nowhere to hide. Dean put one hand on his shoulder and the other on his chest.

“I’ve got you. All right? Look at me...get way down deep inside there and see for yourself. You see it? We both forgot that guy in there, but I’m on it now, and I’ve got you. Nod for me, so I know you’re with me.”

Michael nodded slowly.

Dean smiled with his eyes, but then they hardened. “If you ever...ever... threaten me again with an inappropriate punishment from a designation you don’t have the authority to occupy at the time, you’ll be feeling the rough side of my hand, and I don’t care WHO sees it, or WHERE we are, or WHAT the hell is going on at the time. I’m not going to put up with it. We clear? You wanna try to call my bluff, baby? Are we on the same page?”

Michael’s nostrils flared, and the gold swamped his eyes. His mouth fell open slightly. Dean could feel him digging rabidly through the layers of his alpha’s psyche, looking for a chink, but not finding one. “Um,” he croaked. “Y...yes, alpha. I mean, no. No bluff. Same page.”

Dean remained solid while Michael fumbled. He kept his hands on his mate. It felt a little like waking up from a dream for both of them. There was a touch of déjà vu to the interchange, but in reverse. This connection is what they would have found together from the beginning if their Mating hadn’t formed backwards. And it wasn’t that they’d never touched this place. They had. But Dean had often done so apologetically, reluctantly, and it left Michael believing it was a space the alpha occupied only in discomfort.

The guy in front of him with a rock-solid expression didn’t look uncomfortable.

Michael lowered his eyes. Dean lifted his face again with a touch beneath his chin. “What is it?”

“What about the safeword thing, alpha? What are we going to do about that?”
Dean chuckled and planted a chaste kiss on Michael’s brow. He maintained Michael’s eyes as he backed up a little. He pushed all of his earnest sincerity through their bonds as he released a long breath. “I have absolute control of the use of my safeword. Don’t you buy that brat’s bullshit for one second. Do you have any idea how many novices I’ve fucked in my lifetime? You think I could do that safely if I couldn’t call it when I needed to. I’ve stopped hundreds of scenes, Michael. Sometimes just to let some douche know the ropes were too tight. Sometimes to stop something that was really messed up. People have some fucked up ideas about what it means to Dominate a guy.”

“Then why put me through all that? You did that on purpose? My ass is striped because you knew better, and you decided to play weak? What the fuck, Dean?!?”

“HEY! Don’t make me put you on your knees to get respect from you, Omega. Ask that question again. Nicely.” Dean’s eyes blazed, and Michael swallowed hard.

“Can you…explain…” Michael was wording his question very carefully and inspecting each word for nuance before he spoke it. “…why, if safewording isn’t…a problem…for you…”

Dean put him out of his misery. “I was screwed up, Michael. I let my wolf in where it doesn’t belong because he’s sometimes my comfort zone, and I wanted to pretend I could care for you like a beta instead of the Omega you are. It worked until you really got brave enough to jump into the deep end. I wasn’t prepared for that, Michael. I wasn’t prepared to have you turn out to be Omega for real.”

Michael looked bewildered. “But, Dean, you told me where we were headed. How can it have taken you by surprise?”

Dean shook his head in bafflement. “I don’t know, myself. I don’t know yet. But this feels different. Right? It feels different to me. How about you?”

“Oh, yes. This feels different, alpha.”

“And hey,” said Dean with a deep breath, “I’m not expecting perfection. Let’s take it as it comes. All right? You, me, both of us out in plain sight now. No more bullshit.”

The Omega nodded. “All right, Dean. It’s just you and me in this huge house for the next few days. I want to try out some of the exercises Hannah wrote up for me; the ones I’ve been avoiding. Will you help me with them?”

“I will,” Dean told him seriously.

“And if it’s all right with you, I’ll stay home tomorrow to keep an eye on things down here,” said Michael quietly. “Can you have Joshua meet me here.”

Dean nodded. “I’ll let him know. I need to go in to work. I can’t leave Sarah just to Sammy yet, and the first week of a session is usually chaos.”

Michael stood solemnly. “What’s going to happen next?”

Dean stepped back a little, but he held onto the redness in his eyes. “You and I need to talk to Castiel. We have to put it all on the table. Keeping your reaction to April a secret isn’t going to help us.”

“You want me to tell him that I’ve got a crush on his mate?”

Dean lowered his chin and raised his eyebrows in a look that was painfully reminiscent of Castiel. “Is it a crush, Michael?”
“What if I refuse to talk about it?”

“Keeping it a secret is not an option. Although if you like, I’ll do the talking.”

Michael’s jaw worked as he gritted his teeth. “What makes you think you get to call this for me?”

Dean couldn’t stifle the quick laugh that broke free, but he pulled it under quickly and went right back to stern. “I’m your alpha, kiddo. You don’t get to tell me ‘no’. It’s kind of a ‘be careful what you wish for’ situation.”

“I’m not ready, Dean. I don’t know what I’m feeling. I don’t know what April’s feeling. Please don’t make me do this yet.”

“Keeping secrets from our Alpha is a bad idea, Michael. I thought you learned that one the hard way. I know I did.”

Michael frowned in consternation. Sweat was drying on his face and chest, and his thoughts swirled wildly. He was beginning to spin through his designations in a dizzying whirl, beginning to spiral out of control. “Hey, hey…” Dean took hold of his upper arms and looked into his eyes, connecting red with gold, and halting the freefall. “You don’t have to do that anymore, Omega. I’ve got you. God, fuck, I’m so sorry I left you to try to alpha yourself. But I’m here now. Slow it down. Breathe for me.”

“I’m spinning, Dean.”

“I know. Tell you what. Let’s fix this. I’m going to count to five and then I’m going to take you down whether you’re ready for me or not, and I’m gonna knot you so hard you’ll be spitting my come through your teeth.”

Michael’s eyes dilated, and he gasped slightly. “Why…why the count? What do you expect me to do?”

“You?” asked Dean with a wicked smirk. “You run.”

Michael stared at his mate with wide, golden eyes, frozen and confused, until…

“One.”

Michael bolted. He disappeared through the door, still nude and wearing a pair of expensive running shoes. Dean grinned. “Two.”

The back door slammed. Dean didn’t move. “Three.”

The alpha could feel his mate lengthening the distance between them. He was heading for the trees at the back of the property.

Perfect.

“Four.”

Dean rubbed his hands down his thighs, wiping his sweaty palms into the fabric of his sleep pants. Then he dropped them and stepped out. His bare feet were up to the challenge, and the night would keep his nakedness its own secret. He already knew this yard well enough to know his feet could take it, but he was glad to know his Omega had sturdy shoes.

“Five.”
Dean stole silently after Michael, avoiding open spaces where the moonlight would highlight his movements and dimming his bonds enough to make him harder to see. For Dean’s part, he didn’t need the bonds to track his mate. Michael’s arousal gave his trail away like a phosphorescent trace in deep water, and Dean let his alpha do the hunting. Michael had broken from the path, but there were only so many navigable ways through the dense brush.

Alpha words weren’t going to mean dick to Michael anymore. He’d wasted that advantage until it was meaningless. But alpha action, backed up with a consistency that Michael could learn to lean against spoke louder anyway. Tonight would be a turning point for them both. Tessa’s patient words echoed in Dean’s head. “We are each slaves to our natures, Dean. If you ask a hummingbird to behave like a rhinoceros, you’re going to be horribly disappointed in the outcome. Are you expecting Michael to provide you something that isn’t in his nature to give?” It was exactly what Fred had told him weeks ago.

Dean’s feet whished lightly through the long grass, allowed to grow wild as the summer crossed into August. Dean knew where he wanted to bring Michael down. There was a spot, beneath the trees, protected on all sides from wind, a small hollow that was cushioned with soft grasses. Deer used it in the spring to shelter their fawns. He would need to be fleet if he hoped to get there first, but Dean was good at this. And he was fast.

He achieved the space and hunkered low, listening, scenting, letting the wind bring his prey to him. Michael stumbled as he hit the hollow unexpectedly in the dark, his gaze over his shoulder, thinking Dean was still behind him. Dean took the Omega’s momentum for his own benefit and rolled Michael another full turn before settling on top of him and huffing wetly in his ear.

“What took you so long, Omega?”

“How…?”

“Shhh.” Michael’s back heaved against Dean’s chest. The alpha wormed his knees between his mate’s and pressed them outward, spreading the Omega’s slick backside. Michael didn’t fight him as he’d done weeks ago when Dean’s alpha first attempted a coup to Claim his mate for the first time. His alpha had already proven his worth, and the Omega was desperate to hand the reins back to him. The alpha’s Claim asserted itself over the Omega’s will, and the young man went soft and compliant. He whined desperately into the grass in front of his face and shifted his ass a little in presentation.

“Good boy,” Dean whispered to him. He pressed in slowly. “I’m here, Omega,” Dean promised as he moved tenderly into his mate’s body. Michael’s bruised backside, his swollen channel, his sore nipples, his expanding waistline, Dean worshipped every inch. He beat back the voices in his own head decrying how he could ever have taken this gift for granted, and he stood proudly on the pinnacle of Deep alpha assertion and drove the point home again and again; the point that he belonged in that place up there.

Their love-making lasted much longer this time, owing to the slow, ponderous confidence of Dean once he’d assumed his rightful place over his Omega. Michael didn’t fight at all. He huffed into the ground and let Dean own his body. And there it was. Right there. There behind all the bullshit Dean had been throwing at him. Inside both of their heads, in the movement of their hips, in the mingling of sweat, in the kisses Dean sprinkled over Michael’s broad back, they connected alpha to Omega.

And when Dean’s knot locked in the niche that was meant to hold it, Michael cried silently in relief.

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Bela was beyond frustrated. She didn’t have all the time in the world, and no one was picking up on the other end. It wasn’t even clicking over to voicemail. It just rang. She ended the call with a huff, trusting that the phone on the other end would log her call. Her burner phone might be gone before he tried to return it though, and time was running out.

She drove her heel into the soft-packed dirt of the running trail and grimaced. She’d been instructed to avoid direct contact until she had something definitive, but now that the moment had arrived, he wasn’t answering. Bela punched in a number she knew well, praying she wasn’t about to get her head bitten off.

“Singer,” came the crisp answer.

“Bobby, it’s me.”

“What the…? Wrong number!”

“Alpha, wait! I’m not being followed. No one’s listening. Jesus, we’re not the CIA! It’s just a fucking merger. Just listen to me!”

“I told you how to contact us, Talbot, and it wasn’t through my personal cellphone!”

“No one’s picking up, and I’ve got your answer for you. Do you want it or not?!” Her eyes darted to either side. Standing alone out in the park, she wasn’t hidden exactly, but she’d have seen anyone close enough to eavesdrop. “I knew your line would be secure, Bobby.”

“For your information, beta, it’s not.” He was testy. “It’s a bad idea to draw attention to myself by piling overdone security protocol onto my personal phone. You’ve got a lotta nerve.”

“Sue me,” she spit back.

“I’ll arrange a meeting,” he told her, sorely uncomfortable about speaking to her right here in his office.

“No!” she protested. “That would raise Crowley’s suspicions faster than anything we could do. Look, it’s really simple. Bobby, all he’s sticking on is the belief that you and Cas are out for world domination. He thinks you two are driven by aspirations of grandeur and acclaim, and you’re conspiring to take over the Lupin side of things and then carry on to own the whole world. All you have to do is cut the legs out from under that horse and his whole argument falls apart.”

She was met by silence from the other end, and she drew her phone from her ear to check that it was still connected. “Hello?”

“I hear ya, beta. I just don’t believe ya. Crowley’s a snake. What does he care about protecting the world from wolf domination?”

“He doesn’t, alpha. But if he’s not the driver of the bus, he’s going to throw jacks beneath the wheels of whoever IS driving. All he really wants is a brawl of old-fashioned proportions. He’s a Traditionalist, and the civilized manner that Jonathon Miles is taking this merger bid is pissing him off. He was counting on Castiel to flame up and go Alpha like a normal ambitious jackass Alpha-Dominant would do. He doesn’t believe any Alpha deserves to win if there’s not actual blood spilt in the contest. Truth is, if Alpha takes him on and wins, Crowley would love to back his claim for world domination. Crowley thinks through his wolf. He’s really that simple.”
“You’re sure? We could give him an old-fashioned showdown if that’s what he wants.”

“No. There’s too much at stake to risk losing.” Bela glanced around again, trying to look as if she wasn’t.

“Risk losing? You’ve met Castiel, haven’t you?”

“You do or say something that proves your intent is motivated by nothing but a desire to build a strong research institution and not subjugate everyone around you, and Crowley’s got nothing. The boards’ votes will all flip. Right now, they haven’t heard anything but his propaganda, and most of them are realists who understand where wolves fit in the grand scheme of humanity. They don’t want a zealot starting a war between the species that’s gonna set us back to cave-dwelling days. If Castiel fights for the top spot, some of them will think that proves Crowley’s point.”

Bobby took a long moment to ponder. Cas wasn’t going to be reachable for several more days, but he could send a message. Benny and Dean could meet with him. Together, they could put a simple plan together. How had a bid for operating cash turned into a fight for their very survival as an institution? Fergus Crowley needed a firm hand and a swift kick up the ass.

“Good work, beta. Thanks. But don’t ever call me on this line again.”

He hung up before she could answer, and Bela stalked back to her office in a tiff. What kind of gratitude was that? Did he not realize what kind of position she’d put herself in just by agreeing to play this game? It had better be worth it, Singer, she thought gruffly at him.

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Dean arrived home from work to Tony humming in the kitchen. He grabbed a beer on his way in, then leaned over the pot and sipped a taste from the stirring spoon before Tony shooed him out. He chuckled good-naturedly. So far, so good on the Sarah Blake front, although she hadn’t witnessed anything hardcore yet.

Dean headed for the stairs to get a change of clothes, but his nose detected a rare scent sneaking in from the back porch, and he followed that instead.

He found Castiel in a loose bathrobe leaning against the house wall, a lit cigarette between his fingers, staring out at the sunset.

“I think you’ve just ticked off every stereotype on the checklist for a well-satisfied Alpha, C.J.” Dean took the cigarette out of Cas’ hand, took one deep puff, and smashed it out beneath his boot heel. Castiel wasn’t a smoker, never had been, but his wolf liked an occasional puff. Cas only ever lit up during his Ruts, and only when he was pleased with the wolf’s performance.

Cas laughed. He was relaxed and loose. His hair was a mess. His eyes were bright but deep-set with lack of sleep. He looked well-fucked.

Robbed of his oral fixation, he reached for Dean instead. He mouthed at Dean’s lips hungrily and ran a warm hand through his hair. Then he stole Dean’s beer, turned his head and downed half of it.

“Hey! Fucking brat! Give me that!” Dean jumped for it as Cas lifted the bottle high and outside to dodge him. Castiel used Dean’s launch to pull him in closer, and his eyes darkened as he carefully
poured the drink down his fiancé’s throat.

“I want you, Dean,” Cas said in a deep gravelly voice, and Dean sighed.

“You’re Tripping, Alpha. I can smell it. You’re early, too.”

“Mm-hm. It’s not here yet, but it’s coming. Maybe another day.” Cas let Dean drain the bottle then took it and set it on the table behind them. He massaged Dean’s torso and shoulders with strong hands, turned him, and pressed him against the stones and went to work on his throat.

“You get Bobby’s messages?” Dean asked with his face toward the ceiling.

“Mm-hm.” Cas didn’t pause. “I just got off the phone with him.” His lips moved down over Dean’s shoulder to touch the healing bite as his thumb edged Dean’s shirt collar out of the way. Dean closed his eyes.

“What about April?”

“Sleeping,” mumbled Castiel. “She should be out for a few hours.”

“I see,” Dean breathed. “Rules of a cycle, Cas. You should be sleeping too.”

“Mm. Can’t.” Cas’ clever fingers had Dean’s buckle open. “Need you first.”

Dean untied the bathrobe and wasn’t surprised to find there was nothing beneath it but Alpha. It was time to start the tune and begin their dance. Every nerve in Dean’s body was onboard. Castiel’s scent was deep, earthy, and rich, and growing darker by the moment.

“You want me to join you in there, babe?” Castiel pulled back with a pained look in his eyes. “I would love to bring you in with us, Dean. But we got started too late on developing our foursome. We need to take slow careful steps, and that would be anything but.”

“Please, Alpha. I’ll be good. I can do it. I swear I’ll have that damn safeword on the tip of my tongue the whole time. Please let me show you. I want…”

Castiel took two quick steps backward. His eyes were huge, his face forbidding. Dean’s eyes mirrored his, but his breath heaved, and his expression looked hopeful rather than fearsome. Dean’s slacks caught at his knees.

“Dean. I can’t. You’re… We’re… God, I want to… I can’t!”

“Do you trust me?” Dean relaxed against the wall.

Cas’ face grew sad. “Not with this. Not yet. Dean, I’m falling into Rut. My judgment is suspect. You’ve got a terrible track record for minding your own boundaries.”

“Yeah, yeah. I get that.” Dean stepped off the wall, reaching for his pants to keep himself from looking completely ridiculous, but also reaching out to Cas. “Get Michael onboard. Oh, please, Cas. Let me do this. Michael will tell you if I’m hitting a wall I shouldn’t cross, even if I can’t.”

Castiel leveled that look at him. It was that look, and Dean knew it would be a wonder if he walked away from this porch without a blazed butt. “Can’t, Dean? Didn’t we just talk about this?” Of course, walking away unscathed wasn’t the goal.
“Yes, Alpha. I meant that having all four of us in there for your cycle, just for a portion of it, would be the best way to test out our comfort zones. I’ll be good. Pinky swear. I’ll sit out all the girl stuff. Please, Sir? I want in. I missed your last cycle.”

Cas chuckled and tied his robe closed again. He did love the way the brat worked him up. He always knew the right buttons to push. Right now, this close to Rut, any button at all would do the trick.

“No.”

“Come on, C.J. Please?”

“The subject is closed, Dean. We’ll pick up where we left off after this cycle is over. Right now, I mean to bend you over this table and fuck you hard. Any protests to lodge?”

“Cas, look, I can do this. I want to try!”

Castiel nodded firmly, took Dean by the back of his neck, and moved him using only a fraction of his substantial strength until he lay with his chest to the table. “That wasn’t the question I asked you. What does it mean to you when I say a subject is closed?”

Dean shuffled his feet. Cas was re-divesting him of his slacks. “Sir! Those words just slipped out! That’s not what I meant to say! I meant I want you to fuck me hard!”

“That’s a lie, and it’s earned you twenty extra. Answer truthfully.”

Dean huffed hard through his nose and gave a miniscule struggle just to feel Castiel tighten his grip. “Means…means I need to drop the subject, Sir.”

“Correct. But you didn’t, did you?”

“No, Sir.”

“Which rule does that break, Dean?”

“Rule number one, Sir. I was disobedient.”

“I do love hearing you say that word, Pet. Say it again for me.”

Castiel slapped Dean’s bare ass harder than a first strike usually fell.”

“DISOBEDIENT!” shouted Dean as the pain flushed through him.

“Set your feet, Pet. I’m going to light you up, and then I’m going to fuck you.”

“YESSIR!”

Tony set the table for two with a happy hum. A strange muffled shouting sound drifted to him, and he cocked his head to listen. Fred tapped the place setting he’d paused on with a firm knuckle, and Tony startled.
“What IS that?” he asked the veteran butler.

“Discipline,” Fred answered serenely. “Please continue. Michael and Dean will be ready to eat in about 45 minutes. I will take trays back to the others as soon as their meals are prepared.”

“Discipline,” repeated Tony with a glazed eye toward the back of the house. Fred watched him carefully with an arched brow.

Tony startled again when he found himself scrutinized. He finished setting out the silver. “It’s just the Lupins who…you know? I mean, the staff doesn’t get…disciplined…like that?”

Fred chuckled. “No, not in this house. However, my friend, I think you might be surprised at how wide-ranging this type of lifestyle really is. I think you might be surprised at how satisfying it can be, whether for Lupins or for Simians like you and me.”

Tony followed Fred back into the kitchen. “You’re married, right?”

“I am. We’re celebrating 41 years this October.”

“So…do you do this kind of…discipline…with your wife?”

“My husband,” Fred corrected. “And yes. It’s been a very powerful tool in our marriage from the very beginning. It isn’t for everyone, Anthony, but it was right for us.”

“He spanks you?”

Fred coughed subtly. “No, he doesn’t.” Their eyes met for a moment, Tony’s going wide, and then Fred bowed slightly, politely, and excused himself.

Anthony Del Vecchio stood still and listened. It was faint, but every now and then, a particularly high yelp made it all the way to the kitchen.

“Dinner ready?” asked Michael, sweeping in from the garage with grocery bags on his arm.

“Um, yes sir. I just need to serve it.”

“Good. I’m starving. Lemme go get Dean…”

“Sir…”

“Tony, seriously, stop with the ‘Sirs’.”

“Your mate is occupied at the moment,” Tony bleated swiftly.

“What?” Michael looked around from his place in front of the refrigerator where he was unburdening himself.

“I believe there is ‘discipline’ underway. I believe alpha Dean is involved. Some of the shouting sounds like him.”

“Great,” sighed Michael. “Keep it warm for us, wouldja? If he’s taking a spanking, they’ll fuck after that. It’s going to be another forty or forty-five minutes at least.”

“Yes, Michael. Would you like a canapé to tide you over?” He held the platter out as Michael dove for it.
“God, yes!”

Just then, a faint but distinct shout echoed back to them both. “Oh fuck, yeah!!!!”

Michael closed his eyes and popped the hors d’oeuvre into his mouth. “Make that twenty minutes,” he said around the food as he chewed.

Tony smirked and stirred the stew. He let Michael disappear with the tray, and he silently trekked across the kitchen to kick the door to the patio open. It didn’t matter that the two wolves were out on a porch on the opposite side of the house, they were both loud enough to be heard clearly. Tony stood still and listened.

He jumped when Fred’s assertive throat clearing popped him back to his duties. Fred’s expression told him that if spankings were a thing that staff might expect in this house, he’d be getting one right now. “Sorry, sir,” Tony mumbled as Fred pulled the door closed. Fred had no intention of correcting Tony’s impulse to call him ‘sir’.

Chapter End Notes

There's plot coming soon. I swear.

And apologies for the short-sheeting of both Heats. I tried to get more of both of them, but this is Dean's moment, and - stubborn as he is - he wouldn't be denied.

****more happy grinning****
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

Unexpected permission that doesn’t clarify anything. Gabe finds himself surrounded by alphas. Sarah and Sam have an interesting lunch. Dean finally capitulates to sit down with Pam. And Michael has his first post-conception appointment with the obstetrician.

Whew, I think that’s enough for one chapter. **cheeky grin emoji insert**

Chapter Notes

Quick qualifier: I am in no way connected to mental health or physical health services. I made all this shit up. If you have real expertise and would like to gently nudge me where corrections might need to be inserted, I’m pretty coachable. I ask for leeway where we can just play up Lupin anatomy or psychology as a difference, but if it’s wrong, and it’s glaring, let me know. Gently. I’m not fragile, but I prefer polite. :o)

Also, this chapter went super fast. I didn't expect to have it ready to post until after hell week (which is this coming Monday - Thursday). But Ta-Dah! Chapter! WTF, Nudge?!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Missouri Spencer Mosely
beta-Dominant [A/D/I: 0], [D/N/s: 16], [Z-Scale: -10], no Pack affiliation
cis-Female, Bisexual, b. 1957
Mated to: Felicity/Felix
Wolf Avatar: Half-breed Red Wolf/Coyote mix

Chapter 81 – Wednesday, August 2, 2017

NOW:
Castiel collected the fluid carefully from the condom he’d just removed, emptying it into a capped blunt syringe, and laying it beside two others on the countertop before tossing the condom and returning to the swing to help April dismount. He carried her to the wide couch at the back of the Play room instead of the platform mattress. Bedding would need changing again, and he was too tired to worry about it. April needed cuddling. So did Castiel for that matter.

“Sir,” she said sleepily. “You rest. I’ll walk it over to Gabe and come right back. He shouldn’t have to wait when it’s already collected and ready to go.”

“Shh, it’ll keep for a bit, Kitten.”

“Please, Castiel. I hate to think of him right next door, hurting, when we can do something about it. I’ll only be a minute.” She risked his disapproval by slipping off the couch and padding silently to the counter. Cas lifted his head, but he was too tired to make an Alpha decision anyway. He let her go. She was right. It had already been two nights and a day since his brother Tripped into Heat, and without an infusion of alpha semen, he was in agony. Some Heats hit worse than others. There was no knowing which way it might go, and everyone was different. But Gabe hadn’t tried to cycle without an alpha in years. His body was no longer accustomed to a beta mate.

April picked up the three capped syringes and slipped out the heavy door. Cas closed his eyes and turned onto his side with the couch supporting his back. He should have insisted she put on a robe, he realized, and he should have gone with her. She was in Heat, for fuck’s sake. Cas’ thoughts slipped away from him as he began to doze. His mate was in no real danger this deep in the house.

Stupid, stubborn fucker, Cas thought, of his obstinate brother on the last waves of his consciousness. Why hadn’t he taken the offered alpha contractor in the first place? Gabe was begging for a strap… And Cas had been oblivious until he checked his messages on a lucid moment to find a cryptic note from Dean that Gabe’s temperature seemed unreasonably high for this point in his Heat, and that maybe the lack of an alpha was causing him problems. Lack of an alpha should never have been necessary. Gabe knew better than that. Sure, it was possible to struggle through a Heat without alpha intervention sometimes, but the Omega knew well the danger signs of a hard Heat. He knew better than to try to push past if his fever flared. Too, he knew Cas would be right across the hall with a cycling Omega of his own and damned certain to be producing more ejaculate than she needed. He’d never been stingy about providing for his brother.

Castiel’s doze broke like a soap bubble at a stab of shock from April. He was on his feet, grabbing a robe, and hurrying out the door in a single breath. She stood in the open doorway down the hall, frozen with her mouth hanging open and the syringes still in her hand. Cas couldn’t see them yet, but he could hear his brother’s ecstatic moans filling the hallway and a very familiar grunting in a voice Cas knew well. Michael squatted against the wall on the balls of his feet, looking determinedly at the floor with a blank expression.

Cas shrugged into the robe and touched Michael’s shoulder in passing. The Omega’s tension was evident in every line of his body. He obviously didn’t want to be here but couldn’t seem to make himself leave.

“Michael, would you please escort April back to the Play room? I’ll be along in a while.”

Michael looked up at him in surprise. Cas was divesting his mate of the syringes and touching her cheek gently. “Would you like a round with Michael, Kitten? If you’re both up for it, you have my permission. An Omega can give you a few things that I can’t.”

April’s shock transferred to her mate’s face. “You mean Michael…and me? Right now? Just the two of us?”
“Don’t let him fuck you bare, please. He’s fertile, and I don’t want to take any chances while you’re in Heat. I’m too tired at the moment…” Cas cast his eye into the room before him. Kali lay propped against the headboard, naked with Gabriel’s head buried in her crotch and both of her legs spread obscenely wide. Dean knelt behind Gabe, sweating and grunting into his work. He seemed not to have noticed his audience, lost to the feel of Omega. “…but I can feel that you’re ready to go again.” Cas looked back down at his mate. “Only if you want to of course, Kitten. You don’t have to. We can try the vibrator again.”

April looked rapidly between her mate’s weary eyes and Michael’s, wide and frozen where he still squatted on the floor. “I…I would like a chance to spend a round with Michael. If…Michael, do you…? Do you want to?” Her words were careful, but the spark of arousal the Alpha felt from her body cinched it. She needed a turn with the Omega, and by the look on Michael’s face, he did too. Michael could smell her Heat scent as easily as an alpha would do.

“Sir…?”

Cas cut him off. “I’ll talk to Dean about it when he’s finished with what he’s doing. Go. Go play.”

“Sir, I’m not allowed. He put me under restriction.” Michael pushed himself to standing. He seemed on the verge of grabbing the girl and fleeing to whereabouts unknown; every muscle just as tense as when Cas first saw him but poised now for action rather than merely stressed. All the Heat and Rut scent in the air was getting to all of them.

Kali erupted in a thrilled squeal. She clutched at the back of Gabriel’s head and ground viciously against him with her head thrown back. Gabe’s muffled voice laughed into her. Cas waited for her to relax back against the headboard. Dean picked his pace up, still showing no sign he knew the door was open.

“Dean!” Cas called to him.

“What?!” Dean groaned back without looking around. So he DID know.

“I’m sending Michael in to take a round with April. He needs you to lift your restriction.”

Dean shoved in deep and held there, rotating his hips to force his knot past Gabe’s rim and gritting his teeth. “Yeah,” he grunted. “Sure. Tell him to have at it! I’m a little busy right now.”

Cas nodded at the two Omegas in the hallway, and they wasted no time in disappearing across the hall with a slam of the door. Cas stepped in and closed the door behind him. He set the syringes down on the table in the corner and leaned back to watch Dean work. He was beautiful like this, and tired as Castiel was, he couldn’t help but appreciate Dean’s sweat-slicked body, his clean lines, the evident care he put into paying his Packmate the attention he needed.

Dean had Gabe by both shoulders, pulling him back into the alpha’s thrusts to deepen his immersion. Getting a really deep injection would help everything that was hurting Gabe. Cas felt the slightest tug of discomfort at feeling turned on watching Dean work his brother over. But it wasn’t Gabe pulling Castiel’s eye, and he knew there didn’t need to be a rush of shame in what he was feeling. Old habits die hard though. Dean’s face was alight with sensation. It made little difference at this point that his purpose was noble. At the height of arousal, all that mattered was the physical experience, and Dean was not ashamed in the least.

He wasn’t as oblivious of Castiel’s state of mind as he seemed though. “I gotta knot him, babe. I’m sorry, man, but he needs it. You good with that?” Dean still didn’t look at Cas. He kept his eyes between Gabe’s shoulder blades.
“It’s fine, Dean. I appreciate you taking care of him. It looks like we both had the same impulse. Your way will be more effective than mine. You don’t mind if I stay, do you?”

“JESUS FUCK! You two! Shut up!” Gabe shouted with his head pillowed on Kali’s thigh, shifting heavily with the force being applied behind him. Kali laughed and patted him sloppily on the cheek. Her Mating bite stood out stark against her collarbone, much lower than most people carried scars. That had probably hurt like hell to receive.

Dean locked up all at once, shifted his hands to Gabe’s hips and pulled roughly back. His head flung back, he groaned a loud, long sound to the ceiling before pulsing his hips minutely again, filling Gabe’s channel with soothing fluid.

“Ho, shit, God…that feels…Christ, Dean!” Gabe moaned, pressing his ass back into the sensation of everything his body had been craving. Kali’s face grew soft as she watched Gabe’s eyes squeeze tightly closed. She ran fingers through his hair, sweeping sweat-drenched strands off his wrinkled forehead. Cas watched her silently. Her response to having her Omega taken in Heat by another…her response told him everything he hadn’t realized he still wondered.

“Roll onto your sides,” he instructed, stepping up after giving them a chance to catch their breath. He dropped his robe and took up the small space behind Dean once they were all situated. Gabe curled into Kali, who wrapped herself around him as tightly as she could. Dean dropped his head back to scent Castiel’s Rut as Cas cuddled in close with a series of adoring kisses to Dean’s throat.

“You’re such a good man, Dean Winchester,” Cas whispered to him. “Thank you for taking care of my brother.”

“Dork,” Dean answered affectionately. “He’s my brother, too.”

“Shhh!” Gabe protested. “It’s naptime. Go to sleep, alphas. Sap at each other later.”

Cas reached over Dean’s hip to slap Gabriel’s hard enough to leave a pink print behind. Gabe snickered.

Sleep came quickly, and apparently, so did April. Cas fell asleep with the sensation of his mate’s climax tingling in his own genitals. He smiled against Dean’s neck even as he lost the thread of April’s experience. Omegas within a pack often needed each other. Some packs set them up like a harem, allowing full contact between them, barring nothing as long as they avoided impregnating one another. Cas felt good about what he sensed from his mate. She seemed completely relaxed in Michael’s capable hands. Somehow, nothing about Michael’s dominant nature was triggering Cas’ possessive side this time, but he didn’t try to investigate the feeling. He let go and slept, tucked up tightly against Dean’s back.

***************

The door slammed behind them on its springs. Michael made a beeline to the wide bed, pulling April along behind him by her hand. The mattress was soiled beyond redemption, but the overwhelming scent of Alpha caught in the bedding made Michael feel even more stimulated if that was possible. It felt like sneaking into Castiel’s space clandestinely to steal what he wasn’t supposed to touch, and he reveled in the sensation. Holy fuck, she was beautiful.

Michael climbed up on the bed from the end and crawled across the damp crusty sheets, running his
nose through the bedding that reeked of Omega in Heat and Alpha in Rut, and he couldn’t get his
clothes off fast enough. April stood at the end of the bed watching him with amusement. She was far
enough along in her cycle that her mind was mostly coherent, and she could maintain a bit of control.

“You don’t actually need me for this, do you Michael?” She quirked an eyebrow at his one-man
revel in the sheets. He’d begun writhing in the bedclothes, trying to coat himself in scent, rolling
around naked and unashamed. He turned onto his back and gestured to her. His eyes were dark. His
mouth fell slightly open. His body was ready. He most certainly DID need her for this, but a little
pregame scent-marking wouldn’t hurt either.

She grinned. “We need a condom. Hold on a second.” She kept the burning sensation that coursed
through her blood and was rapidly picking up intensity to herself, and she schooled her face
carefully.

Michael watched her dig through one of the cabinets she’d seen Cas take them from earlier in his
effort to collect fluid for Gabriel.

She came back slowly, holding the small foil packet in her hand. “Are you sure we should do this?
It’s not too late. You would tell me if you didn’t want to, right?”

“Didn’t want to?” Michael asked in confusion. “Pete, you’re killing me here! Please, for the love of
God!”

She frowned and stopped, still several feet from the bed. “I mean…what exactly is it we’re doing?
Aren’t we going to try a scene? Don’t you want to play with me?”

Michael licked his lip and rolled onto his side. He felt the weight of a heady moment tug all the
playful revelry out of him. Michael knew exactly what he really wanted, but what did she? Michael
was aware that this opportunity had been thrown at him in ignorance. Cas felt it would be a healthy
addition to April’s sexual repertoire to mix with another Omega. In the best version of himself,
Michael knew he shouldn’t take the offer under false pretenses, but Michael had never been that
strong, and an Omega who didn’t take what was freely offered by an Alpha was insane. What he
could do though, was be straight with April.

Michael let the moment lengthen. He could feel his mate approaching completion across the hall. His
own body sang with it, and he wasn’t above a bit of vicarious appreciation.

“I don’t want to play with you, Pete,” he said at length. “There’s really nothing I want less than that.”

Her face fell, and he was quick to sit up and raise a calming hand.

“I don’t mean it like that. Shit. No. God, April, I want you so bad. You know that. I want everything
you’ll share with me…everything our mates will allow. Please.”

She frowned and looked down. Michael couldn’t read her. He couldn’t touch her until he knew. He
had to ask.

“Pete, do YOU want to do this?”

She kept her eyes on the floor, but she blushed, and she nodded.

“Even if it’s not a scene?”

Bless her. Her entire body blushed, and her shyness touched the very tips of her ears with color. She
was the very picture of innocence blooming into awakening. She was a rosebud opening to the sun.
Michael’s heart stopped beating for a moment just watching her.

“If it’s not a scene…then what is it?” she asked quietly, risking a look into his face.

“Come here. Please. I want to touch you. Just that. I just want to touch you.”

“Without letting our wolves out?” She took a few steps closer.

“Without letting our wolves out,” he agreed softly. “I don’t want that from you, Pete. God, please. All I want is a chance to be myself…with you. Can we do that? Can we try being just you and me? No scenes, no whips or blindfolds, no ordering each other around, none of it. Just us. I want to touch you. I want to feel you touch me.”

“Like making love?” She put a knee up on the bed and let him reach for her.

The words stuck in his throat, so he merely nodded. Yes, like making love. Only not. Because they shouldn’t. Michael had permission to take her body, but he didn’t have permission to touch her heart. He would have to take what he could get and hope the consequences didn’t destroy him later.

April stretched out beside him. Her Alpha’s scent was everywhere, and it felt like a benediction to the Ozzie. She held Michael’s eye as she slowly reached out to touch his bare, hairless chest. She heard his breath catch and saw his pupils dilate rapidly. She couldn’t feel him in her body though, and after having her mate’s physical reactions so close at hand for so long, the moment felt strangely disconnected. She frowned again.

Michael smoothed a thumb across her forehead, rubbing out the frown lines and shushing her softly. He leaned in slowly and kissed her lips. It was the simplest and softest of touches. It demanded nothing, asked nothing, forced nothing. It was simply a touch, and it felt amazing.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “Don’t do anything you don’t want to do. Pete, even in Heat, you get to make your own choices.” His eyes were full of concern and desire. He was holding himself back. For her. He was waiting to hear her say she wanted him. God, did she want him.

She forced herself to take a deep breath and calm her racing heart. She licked her lips again and tried to order the words she needed to say into a sequence that would make sense.

“I want you however you’ll let me have you, Michael. If you want to turn your wolf loose on me, I’ll say yes to that. If you want to kennel them both, we can do that too. You can have me, Michael, as long as you let me have you too.”

He gasped and panted in surprise. Was she saying what it sounded like she was saying? He surged forward and kissed her hard. He pressed into her soft, tired body and felt her surge up against him right back.

She kissed back. Holy fuck, she kissed back. Michael rolled up on top of her, careful not to crush her, but so not careful of anything else. They clutched at each other and took everything their bodies demanded. He grasped her leg behind her knee and pulled it up to wrap around his hip. She clutched at the meaty muscles across his shoulders, and they kissed as if the press of their mouths was the only way to stave off starvation. He plundered her tiny mouth with his tongue, with his teeth, and she reached right back into his with her own. She mewled desperately, and Michael pulled back and stared wide-eyed at her.

“Did you just…? Is that why he calls you, ‘Kitten’?”

She laughed, nodded sheepishly, and reached for him again.
“Shit, Pete!” he dove back in under the weight of her pull and let himself go, hoping he could elicit that sound again.

He did.

He did many times. Soon she was mewling like a feline, and he was desperate to sink into her. Where had that damned condom wandered off to? Michael pulled up onto his knees and searched the bed frantically. April sat up too and applied her lips and teeth to his left nipple.

“Ahh! Fuck! Yes!” he cried, tightening his hand in her hair and forgetting about the condom for a moment. Without letting go, she handed him the foil square, and he took it, ripping it open in his teeth. She switched to play with his right nipple, while he rolled the rubber onto himself.

“They’re falling asleep, Michael. Let’s wake them up.” She was looking up at him with a mix of pure innocence and outright devilment, and the combination stoked something fierce in Michael. He leaned over her, laying her out below him.

“Let’s do that. You ready, Pete?”

“Mm-hm.” She opened herself to him, and every cell in Michael’s body rejoiced. Michael kissed her brow, her nose, her lips. He rocked back on his knees, doubling up, and crouched between her legs, breathing in her scent. She was potent in her Heat, the delicacy of her feminine scent overpowered by her body’s desperation to attract an alpha who would fulfill its need to be bred. It smelled damned good to the Omega too, and it was nearly enough to overcome his distaste of the idea of fathering pups. She smelled amazing. Michael touched his tongue lightly along the edge of her swollen vulva and traced downward to taste the slick that coated everything. She was sweet in his mouth.

“Michael!” she gasped.

He pressed her thighs further apart, distracted from his plan to get right to his own fulfillment at the taste and smell of her. He licked along her folds again, and she stiffened. A thick spurt of slick issued from her channel, and he grinned, pleased to think that she was responding to him and not the Alpha for once. He tasted the thick fluid. Her Heat turned it rich and musky to match the sweetness. Michael dragged his tongue upward through the flow, over her rim, straight across her opening and up to her clitoris, where he settled in to play. She was so soft, so pink, so swollen. How many times had she come in the last few days? Was she too sore? Michael chuckled as her legs locked around his shoulders and her hands took hold of his head to hold him in place. Supposing that answered the soreness question, Michael lapped at the little fold of flesh with a delicate touch of his tongue. He held onto the backs of her thighs and went to diligent work on her tender body. It didn’t take long at all.

April came with a surprisingly soft groan. Her hands kept him right where he was as she rode the waves of happy bliss, and then she went lax. Michael pulled back upright, wiping his mouth with the side of his arm and smiling happily in victory. She rolled her eyes at him and pulled him down for another kiss, plunging in to taste herself in his mouth.

Michael’s breathing was shaky as he maneuvered into place above her. He pulled out of their kiss and locked eyes with hers. The moment turned from playful to serious at some cue neither of them could have named. His arms trembled as they held him aloft, and he felt her body do the same. She nodded, unblinking. He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing with his nerves.

Get ahold of yourself, Michael, he thought.

He nodded back, then he pulled his body up a little and grasped himself with one hand to help guide
himself in. April shifted her hips, rotating a little and opening herself to him even more.

“Where?” he whispered, his eyes downward at the closeness of their bodies.

“Channel,” she whispered back curving her spine to offer herself fully. Michael took his lower lip between his teeth and pressed his cock into the tight, slick embrace of her channel.

It didn’t feel like fucking Dean. It didn’t feel like that at all. April let him pull her legs to lay over his shoulders. It rounded her back that much further, and it let him sink slowly all the way in. He felt Dean’s awareness touch his mind, and he sent his mate the closest approximation of a wink he could manage, then he closed the bonds between them.

She saw him smirk, and she answered him back in kind. They were still shaking slightly with nerves, but they were determined.

“Is he watching you?” Michael asked her, holding still.

She shook her head. “He’s asleep.”

“Good.”

Michael pulled out and then pressed slowly back in. He sort of forgot how to breathe for a few pulses, and then his breath tore out of him in a gasp as April’s channel tightened around him. He panted into her ear. An alpha couldn’t do that. Not like that. It had been a very long time since Michael had allowed himself the joy of taking an Omega’s channel, and he’d forgotten. It felt like she had wrapped her fist around his dick and squeezed. It felt amazing. Her muscles contracted down the entire length of her channel and massaged every inch on him.

“Again,” he begged, pushing deeper and loving her immediate response as she kissed the side of his throat beneath his ear, tightening her channel muscles again. “CRAP! Pete!”

She huffed a laugh. “Language, Michael,” she whispered, tickling the hairs in his ear. He shuddered violently, and he fucked her hard.

“Say my name again.” Michael squared his knees and let his pace take its own path. The bedding was toast already anyway, and he didn’t see any reason not to turn himself loose.

“Michael,” she said right in his ear. The bed rocked with the furious pace of his movement. “Fuck me, Michael,” she panted, loving the hard fast rhythm.

And that did it. If he hadn’t been so turned on he might have been ashamed at how quickly it was over, but Michael wasn’t one to feel shame over much in the first place. He fucked her through the tightening of his balls, through his emptying into the condom, through the aftershocks, and all the way until his cock began to soften and resist his thrusts. He slowed to a stop regretfully, and the tip slipped free with another gush of her slick. He lay heavy on top of her, sweaty and sticky and stinky. She didn’t protest being folded nearly in half. She kissed the side of his sluggish head and reached down around the side of her hip to slip the condom off and toss it carelessly onto the floor.

He chuckled. “You’re going to feel stupid if you slip on that and break your head open later.”

She smiled softly. “You’ll take care of me if that happens.”

He looked at her somberly. “Yes, I will.”

There was an unspoken unfinished thought in the air between them. Michael shrugged his shoulders.
one by one to let her legs fall back to the bed. He rolled to his side. April followed, rolling all the way to her belly and tucking right up against him. He leaned in and kissed her shoulder then her cheek.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked her very quietly, like a secret.

She closed her eyes and leaned into him closer, rolling a little more to take a little spoon position. He wrapped an arm over her to pull her in and curled around her.

“Tell me what to do, Pete.”

She shook her head slowly, her eyes still closed.

“Alpha thinks it’s just sex between us,” he persisted. “Is it just sex?”

She grabbed onto his wrist and held it tightly but didn’t answer.

“Pete, why did he give us this today? Is there something I need to know?”

“Michael, don’t,” she whispered in a voice so Ozzie it was almost a glimmer instead of a sound.

“All right. I won’t push. I get it.” He kissed her shoulder again and pretended not to hear her sniffle softly. “Go to sleep, Omega. Get some rest. You’ve still got a little way to go before your Heat ends.”

Michael sighed and settled behind her. She fell asleep in no time, but Michael lay blinking at the back of her silky head, unsettled and more fucked than ever. The world just wasn’t ever going to be fair to an Omega-Sub. She had to know that, and he had no choice but to blindly trust her caution. He couldn’t risk her well-being, her safety, her stability. He couldn’t. Michael didn’t know where to funnel this sense that her need was superior to his. He’d never felt anything like it before, and he didn’t have a compartment in his mind to file it under except “Pack-care,” and that wasn’t right. She wasn’t a puppy.

Michael waited for some time and then let his bonds back open to find that Dean was pensively waiting for him, quiet and thoughtful, but not angry, not fearful. Michael reached through for his mate’s touch, and Dean’s warmth surrounded him like an embrace.

***************

Sam ate lunch in the dining hall with Sarah. They both worked slowly through their lunches, one-handed and awkwardly, a pup nestled into the crook of each of their left arms. Sam had tried to insist he didn’t need help. He could feed the twins in their stroller or one-at-a-time, but Sarah’s eyes lit up when Jess stopped by to drop them off while she snuck out for a meeting at work that she shouldn’t skip.

“Oh, Sam! They’re adorable! They’re so TINY! Please, may I hold them? I haven’t seen my niece in ages, and I miss her so much. Please?”

He chuckled and handed J.T. off to her before digging in the diaper bag for supplies. “Jess just
changed them, but they’re probably hungry. Give me a minute, and I’ll get them set up.”

But Sarah refused point-blank to give the pup back. She cooed at him and caressed his tiny cheek. “They’re twins? They look so different.”

Sam smiled, taking Hank in-hand and passing Sarah a cloth and a bottle. “Genetically, they’re standard siblings but they’re Lupin twins because they gestated at the same time. Lupins have a lot of versions of ‘twins’. Their mom was an Omega female. She carried John there in her primary womb, that’s the same uterus that primates have.”

Sarah shot him a flat expression to show that she didn’t need a remedial anatomy lesson, and he smiled.

“Henry was…” he started.

“Henry was her backdoor baby?” she finished for him, and he nodded, focusing down on his son’s face. Hank squirmed in his father’s arms.

“They aren’t twins in the classical sense because they didn’t share a womb, but they were born together during the same labor cycle.”

She nodded her understanding. “They seem so tiny. Were they full-term?”

He nodded again. “Lupin newborns are about half the weight of primate babies. They grow quickly after they’re born though, don’t they, Hank? You’re catching right up, aren’t you?” They baby reached out to touch Sam’s nose and his dad let him grasp it, leaning in to kiss the little fist. He turned back to Sarah, catching the starry look on her face which she wiped swiftly away. “Lupin gestation is only seven months. Once they’re born, they gain weight at about the same rate that your children would. By two months old, at the same point when primate babies are born, they usually reach about eight pounds. Essentially, they just do those same last two months of development out of the womb instead of in it. It makes childbirth substantially easier for wolf mothers than for primate ones – smaller heads going through the same sized birth canal.”

“Youre mate is a beta,” Sarah said carefully. “Are John and Henry adopted?”

“Theyir mother died in childbirth, and as it happens, Jess and I can’t have children of our own. It was a…mutually beneficial situation.”

“Sam, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. That was rude of me.”

He blew her off, setting the half-emptied bottle on the table and lifting his son to his shoulder to burp him. “It wasn’t. I don’t mind talking about it. We’re lucky as hell to be able to take them. Everything just worked out.”

“How old are they?”

“They’re only six weeks old. We’re still getting used to trying to wrap our schedules around them. Jess is staying with them for a few months. Then she’ll go back to work, and I’ll take time off. It’s not going to be easy, but it’s so worth it. Only…”

Sarah followed Sam’s lead and put J.T. up to work the gas out of his little belly. “Only what?”

Sam chuckled softly. He stroked Hank’s soft downy hair. “Four months ago, I was a bachelor, working all the fucking time, sharing a house with my bachelor brother…not a domestic responsibility on the horizon. Well, nothing like this. Now look at me. I’m solidly domestic. Got a
brilliant, work-aholic mate, two kids. I’ve got Pack responsibilities. I mean, I never even considered joining a formal pack before Dean hooked up with Cas. Now I’m expected to step up and be an active part of the Pack. And, my brother up and moved out, so now the house, the upkeep and the lawn and stuff are on me in a way they never were before. I’m telling you, Sarah, my head is still spinning.”

“You don’t regret a minute of it, Sam Winchester,” she said sagely, watching him stroke his puppy’s back.

“No, I don’t. Not a minute. But it was a lot of change too fast, you know? It’s hard to keep up. I worry all the time that I’m going to forget something important, like feeding them, or…or…leaving them somewhere. I’m not used to having so much to think about. It’s, uh, a little scary – a lot scary. That doesn’t seem exclusively like a wolf thing, does it?”

Sarah tucked John back into place and let him have the bottle again. He seemed very grateful. “It seems completely normal to me,” she said. “Anyone would be reeling with that much change happening so quickly. The only thing I can imagine that might be different is that your hormones get all scrambled when you mate, right? What did that feel like?”

He settled Henry back down and resumed feeding him, taking a bite of his own sandwich carefully so as not to dribble lettuce on the pup. Sam chewed on his mouthful and the question at the same time.

“I can hardly remember what it felt like not to be Mated, to be honest. It was a crazy whirlwind few weeks right at first. Having someone else’s emotions in your head can fuck you up. You sort of overblow everything at first. Like, you feel your mate get irritated at something you say, and you don’t like it, so you flare up over it, and before you know it, you’ve made things way worse. And of course, like you said, the hormones are going bonkers, and that makes both of you even less rational. It’s a miracle that Matings ever gel the way they do. I mean, the sex makes up for a lot of the downsides, but still.”

“What do you do? About those little irritations and stuff?”

“You get to know your partner. You come to understand what they’re feeling. Not every kneejerk emotion requires a response. Sometimes you or your mate are just crabby. You learn to give each other a little space, and you learn what you might be doing that they find annoying. Sometimes it’s not something you can eliminate, but sometimes it is. You sort of smooth your rough edges for your mate and let them have a few emotions without making a big deal out of everything. They do the same for you.”

“You and Jess make a lovely couple, Sam. I’m happy for you both. I understand that most Traditional Lupins wait for a True-Mate. You and Jess are True-Mates?”

“Yep.” Sam took the empty bottle away from his sleepy son. “Okay, well, full disclosure, Castiel thinks we aren’t, and he’s right more often than he’s wrong, but he wasn’t there. I know what I felt.”

Sarah smiled kindly at Sam. “You have a beautiful family, Sam. I can tell they mean everything to you.”

“They do,” Sam agreed. He lay Hank in the stroller and put a small blanket over his tiny body. The beta drifted in thought for a minute as he watched the pup fall asleep.

“Does having them here change our observation this afternoon?” Sarah asked. “There’s still so much I haven’t seen. If we need to change things up, that’s fine with me.”
He shook his head. “No, it’s actually a wonder I’ve still got them. Give it five more minutes and watch what happens. You want me to take J.T.?”

Sarah drew the pup closer to her chest in a show of possession that dared him to try it. He chuckled good-naturedly.

“No, it’s actually a wonder I’ve still got them. Give it five more minutes and watch what happens. You want me to take J.T.?"

“Exactly. There’s another likeness you can add to your observations,” he told her. “Something about babies. I barely get to touch them when I’ve got them here at work. I guess it makes no difference if you’re wolf or ape…everyone loves babies.”

Right on cue, Meg arrived with a look of entitlement, collected the diaper bag from the seat beside Sam, checked its contents, checked the sleeping pup, cocked an eye at Sarah, and took custody. She wheeled the stroller around the table and stood tapping her foot until Sarah got the message and settled John beside his brother. Meg nodded her head firmly, capped the bottle in front of Sarah, tucked it into the bag, shot Sam a weighted look, and left with the stroller. She didn’t look back.

“Um.”

“See what I mean?” said Sam.

“Don’t you worry about who’s taking your twins?” asked Sarah, baffled.

“Well, it’s Meg. I guess I should. There’s a history between us that went to a sad place through no one’s fault. But, no. Even Meg will protect them with her life. Everyone who works here is Pack. We take care of each other. At worst, I’ll have to track them down at the end of my shift. Meg may have to hand them off to do clinic hours or something. But whoever I find them with, they’ll be fine. If anyone needs help, they’ll page me.”

Sam looked around as a palpable tension and a firm, clear, resolute voice rose a few tables over. Sarah put her sandwich down.

“You're instructions were very clear, Omega! You told me you understood them. You have either lied to me or blatantly disobeyed.” The beta standing over the small young man in a red tunic was clearly put-out, and the Omega stared up at her in dread.

Sarah whispered, “Sam. What’s happening?”

“Just watch,” he whispered back. “I’ll talk it through with you, but let’s just watch for now.”

“Well? Which is it?” asked the resolute woman.

The boy slipped gracefully from his seat and knelt before the woman, his trainer, Sarah supposed.

“Ma’am, I understood the instruction.” His face was to the floor. People shuffled around the room ignoring the confrontation, some of them slipped past the pair without paying them any mind.

The beta tangled her fingers into his hair and forced his head up. “You disobeyed me.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Again.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“It’s not going to happen again.”
He looked on the verge of answering her again, but she didn’t give him an opportunity. She used the painful grip in his hair to haul him to his feet. She forced him to double over the side of the nearest table, scattering Omegas and their trays in her wake. His tunic found its way over his head revealing a perfectly shaped but hideously bruised backside. The beta looked at it for a moment, then glanced around the room until her eyes landed on Sam.

“Stay here,” Sam told Sarah. He left her there, pulling the paddle out of his pocket as he wended around the tables between them. Somehow, Sarah had let herself believe that paddle was ceremonial rather than functional. Evidently not.

“Need some help, Jody?”

Jody just gestured at the damaged backside attached to its hyperventilating owner. “I can’t take this one, Sam. I don’t even know where to start. He was supposed to report to medical three hours ago for his medication. He knows that. He told me he was going straight there, and I just checked up on him. They haven’t seen him all day. In fact,” and she directed the next statement to the boy, “They said he hasn’t come by voluntarily for the last week! They’ve had to hunt him down every day this week!”

“All right. I’ll do the paddling. I have a few tricks that I can use that won’t be dangerous given the state he’s in. Who’s in charge of him?”

“He’s, um, Lisa’s. You know the new teacher?”

“I’ll talk with her. We need to get to the bottom of this. Until it’s straightened out, she needs to take tighter custody. For whatever reason, he may not be capable of that level of responsibility. We need to do it for him for a while longer, it seems.”

“Thanks, Sam. He’s in red. We all thought he was ready. He’s nearly finished with his training.”

“Some Ozzies never get there, Jody. Everyone’s different. Some never reach a level of self-care where they can be trusted with it themselves. We don’t know yet if he’s struggling with something training-related or not. I need to talk to Dean and Benny.”

“Should we even punish him then?” asked Jody. “If it’s not his fault?”

Sam put a hand on her shoulder and spoke in a voice that he knew would carry to Sarah. “We have to follow through regardless. The Omega brain falters far worse when it loses predictability than it does if we administer a punishment for something he couldn’t avoid. It’s an ugly truth, but it’s been borne out again and again. He needs the consequences.”

“I understand. But if we follow up and determine that putting this on him is more than he can handle, Sam, we’re not going to keep punishing him for something he can’t control.” Jody was adamant and for a minute, she placed herself between the frightened boy and the enormous beta with the paddle in his hand.

Sam lowered his head and met her eye. “No, we’re not. But we’re following through on this one.” Sam waited for Jody’s somber nod. She stepped out of the way.

“All right, Kyle,” said Sam firmly. “You don’t need me to go through it all again. You know what we’re doing here, right?” Sam’s voice was strong but nearly emotionless. He touched Kyle’s back with his fingertips.

“Yessir,” the boy mumbled.
“I want your feet as wide apart as you can get them. Wider.” Sam waited a moment. “Wider, Kyle.” He nudged at Kyle’s left foot. “Okay, right there. Now get your ass angled out for me, like you do when you Present in class. Good, boy. All right. Lay your chest flat and pull your cheeks apart.”

“What?!”

Sam popped the paddle onto the outside of Kyle’s hip. It stung fiercely. The Ozzie yelped and reached back to do as he was bid.

“Good, boy. I’m giving you ten. Count them. Don’t sink into Subspace. I want you paying attention. I’m aiming for the soft spots right at the middle. Don’t move your hands.”

“Yes, Sa…Sir.”

Sam checked his distance. He fixed his feet. He focused his breath. He released his wolf. The paddle landed with a loud snap. It echoed against the high ceiling, and Kyle shouted. His fingers went white against his bruised cheeks, but he held.

“One!”

The Omega’s hole clenched. With his butt cheeks pulled apart as they were, his asshole took a direct hit. It was sensitive, and the paddle was a misery completely unlike a standard spanking. Sam popped him again.

“Two!”

A small dribble of slick leaked out and tumbled down toward his balls. Sam thought it notable. He would add it to his report. He swung again, not as hard as he would if leveling his paddle against the muscle and flesh of Kyle’s round gluteous maximus alone. It hurt anyway.

“Three!”

Sam popped him twice then in quick succession, and Kyle skipped up to his tiptoes with a shrill, “Five!”

“What about four?” Sam asked him.

“Four, sir.” He was bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet. His channel delivered a little more slick, and his penis was beginning to thicken. Sam didn’t remember masochist tendencies in Kyle’s profile. He didn’t have them all down by heart though.

He swatted the boy again. “Five!”

“Kyle, we passed five already. Pay attention. That was number six.”

“You’re confusing me!” he wailed.

“That was number six. Say, six.” Sam’s voice was devoid of judgment or correction. It was almost conversational, but flatter. It had taken him years to perfect the tone that a harried Omega needed to hear.

“SIX!”

“Good. What will the next one be?”

Sam smacked the paddle down just before he answered, so his “Seven!” came out at the right
His hole and the flesh to each side were turning bright red. The lunch room was still ignoring the punishment. Sam knew he was in pain, but the slick was now a solid line and had begun to drip to the floor. Some of it dropped from his testicles, and another line tracked the length of his cock in a ticklish flow. Kyle’s hands shook.

Sam slapped the paddle again.

“Eight!”

“Good boy. Nearly done. Kyle, your health is important. Taking your medicine is not optional, understood?” He punctuated his question with a harder swat.

“YESSIR! NINE!”

“What was that?” This time Sam waited for his answer.

“Yes, Sir!”

“Good.” Sam popped him one last time, quite hard. He went up on his toes again and cried out, high and long.

Sam stood and waited. “Kyle, say the number, or I’ll have to repeat it.”

“TEN!”

“Good boy. All right. Let go. Let’s get you up. You’re fine. I love you, kiddo. Come on.” Sam put the tunic back down over Kyle’s butt and hauled him up. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sarah furiously taking notes. Sam pulled the sobbing boy into his chest and rocked him a little from side to side, his paddle back mostly out of sight in his outer pocket.

“Shh. You’re all right. Breathe for me, Kyle.”

“I’m sorry, Sam! I didn’t mean to skip it. I got lost!”

Sam couldn’t resist the little laugh. Got lost? The kid had been to and from the medical wing every day for ten weeks. Something else was going on with the boy, and Sam wasn’t about to burden him with worrying about it. It wasn’t Kyle’s job to fix this. He took Kyle’s face in his hands and looked into his eyes. “We’ll figure it out, all right? I want you to trust me. You’re a good boy, and I’m proud of you.”

“Okay, Sam.”

“Okay. Go with Jody now. She’ll get you cleaned up and back to class.”

Jody held her hand out for Kyle to slip his into. Sam heard him complain to her as they walked toward the exit. “My butt stings, Jody. I can’t sit through class like this.”

“Yes. That’s gonna suck. Plus, I think Lisa’s got Presenting and knotting as today’s practical. With the glow your butt’s putting out, you’re going to be the first one the alphas all go for. I’ll have the cream waiting for you upstairs after class. Can you remember to come straight up? I’m not making it an order this time.”

“I don’t understand the session schedule,” Sarah said, coming alongside Sam with no preamble. He jumped a little. “If the session just started, how is that Ozzie in red already? The list you gave me
“Ozzie training is the most critical thing we do here. There’s a new class starting every four weeks. All of the other courses are important, but they aren’t quite as life-changing.”

“Omega training is equally important.” Sarah asked. “However, if an alpha isn’t trained to care for a Ozzie correctly, they could cause real damage through negligence.”

“You’re not wrong,” Sam agreed. “But the demand isn’t there yet for fuller classes for alphas. As a rule, society still puts the burden for training on the Omegas, as if a well-trained Omega can govern herself.”

“Or himself,” she said vaguely.

“Or himself,” he agreed. “Or various alternative pronouns. Lupins don’t vary in gender identity as frequently as primates do, but we do see some non-binary primaries, and we see a few trans individuals as well. Everyone has a home in the Lupin Pack.”

“Sam, that was awful. That poor boy! I need you to explain it to me. Can you do that? He didn’t do anything wrong.”

Sarah and Sam headed toward the door. He hailed Sam.

“If Jody promised him consequences before she sent him to medical, and we didn’t follow through with that promise, no matter his reason for failing to comply, his brain will perceive it as a break in trust. For an Ozzie, a sense of predictability in the way the world works is essential. Even if the kid had been kidnapped between the dorm and the medical wing, once we got him back, we would still have to paddle him, or his trust takes a hit. Too many hits like that starts a downward cycle that an Omega, especially an Ozzie can’t climb out of. Of course, the intensity of the punishment can be dialed way back for something an Ozzie really has no control over. In Kyle’s case, I’m not convinced he’s got no control. There’s something going on with him, but he’s totally capable of getting his pills for himself every morning. Whatever this is, at its core, may be outside his control though.”

“Well then, wouldn’t it make sense not to promise him a consequence for something he might screw up? Shouldn’t Jody be held responsible too?” Sarah and Sam headed toward the door. Dean was coming in now. He hailed Sam.
Sam nodded. “Maybe. If it’s something she might reasonably have been aware was more a weakness of his than it seems she knew. Kyle’s case is bugging me.”

Dean heard the last sentence. “Yeah, me too,” he agreed, nodding politely at Sarah. “We had this figured, man. Kid’s third week here we had him solid on the routine. He followed it like clockwork, completely reliable.”

“The paddling aroused him, Dean,” Sam told him. Dean sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah. I was afraid of that.”

“So, it’s an eliciting behavior?”

“Mm-hm,” Dean agreed. “We missed something. He’s not getting something from us, and his wolf’s acting up to force it. Only thing is, I don’t know what we missed. He’s not a brat. He’s not a masochist. Dude’s ass is bright-fuckin-purple though. He’s craving something that you just gave him, something he’s not getting anywhere else.”

“Sam was very sweet to him after the paddling,” Sarah put in. “Maybe he’s not getting enough affection. Maybe it’s the post-punishment feeling he craves.”

“We almost drown these pups in affection,” Dean told her in frustration. “I mean, maybe yeah. Maybe he needs more than that. But it’s the arousal response that makes no fucking sense. Hell, I don’t know. We only have a couple of weeks to figure it out. I’m not sending him home like this. In the meantime, we put his meds on delivery. He can’t keep skipping doses.”

“Get some lunch, Dean. I’ll schedule a quick counselling meeting. You want Pam there?”

“Yes, please. Pam, Benny, Jody… who else? Lisa. Maybe I shouldn’t have cycled Lisa in in the middle of the session. I’ll bet switching trainers on them is what’s got him stirred back up. But I didn’t have a choice. I needed Sonny out with the alphas.”

“I’ll take care of it. I’ll have Sonny there too. He knows the kid better than anyone but Jody. And Dean, man, don’t beat yourself up over this. You’re doing the best you can. You’re doing better than that, better than anyone could under the circumstances.” Sam shot Sarah a look and then went on quietly, leaning in intimately and holding Dean’s arm firmly. “If you feel yourself slipping, give me a call, all right? We won’t forget to ask Michael this time.”

Dean didn’t flinch or deflect. “I will. Thanks, man. That helps.”

Sam watched him make his way toward the line with a squaring of his broad shoulders.

“Is he limping?” asked Sarah.

Sam gathered Sarah up and turned her to the hall. “Castiel is out on Cycle leave,” he explained.

She looked at him blankly, and he laughed, shaking his head. “Please don’t make me explain this to you. He’s my brother.”

She stopped walking and buried her face in her hands. Sam found the crisp redness of her ears nothing short of adorable.

“All right,” he sighed. “Restroom. Do you want me to find you a woman escort?”

She didn’t directly protest the requirement for an escort this time. Alpha Castiel had left no wiggle-
room in that. But she studied Sam for a minute.

“What’s the alternative?”

He raised his brow. “Uh, well, I guess you can come with me into the alpha restroom. No one’s going to care. Or we can both use the multi-sex single-holer on the second floor. That’s assuming it won’t freak you out to have me in there with you.”

“What if I leave all of my belongings in the hall with you?”

“Escorted everywhere, even into the restroom,” Sam quoted again.

“Fine. I assume there are stalls in the alpha restroom?”

“There are, but you won’t be allowed to lock yours. The door stays open.”

“You people have some serious trust issues, Sam.”

“We have a lot at stake, Sarah.”

“What if I need to take a dump, or if I’m on my period? Don’t I get any privacy at all?”

“Not while you’re onsite,” he repeated. “And there’s really not a lot I haven’t seen. You’re not all that interesting.”

“What’s to keep me from spilling all your secrets the second I leave here every day? It’s just toileting for pity’s sake.”

Sam scratched his head and looked both ways. “Look, we can hash this out every single day after lunch if you want, but if we’re going to do that, we need to eat earlier. I’ve been holding it for the last fifteen minutes, and I’ve really gotta go. You can come with me, or I can hand you off to Charlie. Which do you prefer?”

“Fine. Lead the way.”

Sam smirked at her, and she rolled her eyes. She chose a stall at the end of the row. If the door had to stay open, at least she could work with the angles of vision. Sam honored her choice and selected a urinal near the front. No one else was in the restroom, which helped a lot.

He spoke loudly over the sound of his stream hitting the back porcelain. “So, did you have any other specific questions about what happened in there with Kyle?”

“Not really. It all played out in a way that answered the questions I came up with.” Sarah emerged from the stall and blushed again to realize Sam wasn’t finished yet. She ducked her head and hustled to the sinks only to notice that his back was still flagrantly obvious in the mirror. Sam cheekily turned his head and winked at her as he zipped up.

“That’s a powerful bitchface you have there, ape. You should keep that handy for Dean. He loves them. He’s going to eat that right up.” He stood close to her and shared her sink.

“You’re brazenly stepping across the bounds of propriety, Winchester,” she said snippily, ripping a towel from the dispenser.

“The bounds of propriety are different here, Blake,” he told her back. “You perceive threat and
intimidation where none exist. I am not an ape. My means are not theirs. If I meant to intimidate you, you would be intimidated. That’s not male posturing, I assure you. I want you to let go of your biases. I want you to learn to feel the intent behind my actions.”

“We are alone in a restroom, Sam,” she told him bravely. “Sexual assault happens to women in restrooms all the time. You want me to forget twenty-five years of conditioning and my own sense of danger and just trust that I’m safe because you, who have the strength to overpower me at will, say so? That would be stupid of me, Sam. I may be naïve, but I’m not stupid.”

“I’m asking you to layer your senses with something new. I am no threat to you whatsoever. Lupins don’t sexually assault primates, although the reverse is decidedly not true. Primates have a history of raping anything they can catch and fit a dick into. I can quote you a few statistics if you like. Maybe it’s a pipedream to think you and I can ever have the kind of trust that wolves establish instinctively. You cannot smell my intention, and I misread your facial expressions again and again. Maybe we can’t do this. But I would very much like to.”

Sarah had no response ready for him this time. His hazel eyes shone with fervor. She cocked her head and frowned fiercely. What exactly was he asking of her? Sarah rubbed a hand across her mouth and nodded mutely. Sam seemed content with that for an answer. He nodded back resolutely and held the door for her.

Something had just shifted between them, but Sarah had no idea what it was.

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Dean sat cross-legged on Pam’s leather couch. She side-eyed his boots but said nothing. He had his head bowed against his open palms, working his fingers through his hair in frustration.

He wasn’t alone in feeling frustrated.

He dropped one hand and turned his head to regard her again, propping it up with his palm over his chin and mouth. His green eyes blinked twice slowly.

“Is that code?” she asked rudely.

“What more do you want me to say?” he asked.

“That is entirely up to you, kiddo. We can sit here for an hour if you want. I have to say, I’m annoyed as fuck at how little you trust me, after everything.” She tilted her head and refused to look away first.

He sighed. “Don’t call me kiddo.”

“Right, because you’re the pinnacle of maturity right now.”

Dean bristled. “Psychiatrists are supposed to have patience, damnit.”

“Fuck you, Dean. You’re toying with me. I don’t have a lick of patience for being played.”

“Well, what about the sarcasm? Are you supposed to be sarcastic in a counseling session?”
“I wasn’t aware of any counseling being sought or delivered,” she sniped back.

He grumbled under his breath.

“Save it, Dean. You want to be an asshole and waste our time, knock yourself out, but you’re not leaving until you’ve met the requirement you were assigned.”

“It was a fucking recommendation, goddamnit, not an assignment!”

“Fine. There’s the door.”

Yeah, that wasn’t happening. Dean knew Pam couldn’t reveal what he’d talked about in session, or if he talked at all, but she could report how long he’d spent in her office. He sulked and turned away. She pursed her lips and tapped her pen on her notepad.

“Are you this cooperative at your appointments with Tessa?”

“Mind your own fucking business.”

“Why are you pissed off at me?! What the hell did I do to you?”

“Not a damn thing,” he snapped.

“Why take it out on a friend who hasn’t done you any damage? Are we not friends anymore?”

“I resent the hell out of being forced to get help fixing something I can fix on my own. I don’t need this counseling session.”

“You can fix it on your own,” she repeated flatly. “Mm-hm.”

“Screw you, Judgy McJudgerton.”

“Creative, Dean. Not your best work, but cute.”

“Why doesn’t anyone trust me, man? I’m an alpha! Everyone else who’s alpha gets the benefit of the doubt. But not me. Just because I’m a Sub, people treat me like that erases the alpha.”

“Okay. Or we’re responding to your actual behavior that shows a glaring deficiency in…shall we call it your self-protective instincts?”

“Call it whatever you want. It’s bullshit. I don’t have a deficiency in my self-protective instincts.”

“Then why does it look like you do?”

“How should I know? Maybe you all really suck at your jobs.”

“Dean, I pulled your contract scene logs. I checked your stats. You want me to read them to you?”

“No.”

“Do you have any idea how many times you called an appropriate halt to unsafe action on contract?”

“A few.”

“More than a few. According to the logs, you called a safeword 241 times, and every single one of those times was vetted by the monitors on duty as well-called. You got it right every single time. And there is not one instance of anyone taking unplanned damage in one of your scenes, not you or your
client. That scores you as the single safest participant of the program we have ever had. You have a perfect record, Winchester.”

“Great! Then that proves my point. I don’t have a fucking deficiency.”

“You let Castiel beat the shit out of you, and you never raised a finger to check him.”

“No! I didn’t. I did no such fucking thing! Stop saying that!”

“The explain it to me.”

“How much I take, and how much he delivers…that is between him and me! Everyone else can butt right out of it, all right?! I knew exactly where he was headed, and I knew where he needed to go. And I made the conscious decision to let him get there. I GET TO DO THAT, PAM!” Dean jumped to his feet in fury. “GODDAMNIT, IF HE GETS TO MAKE CALLS LIKE HE DOES FOR ME, THEN I CAN DO THE SAME FOR HIM! I’m an alpha! I’m not a fragile twig that’s gonna snap in a hefty breeze! I knew it was gonna hurt, but he would NEVER break me! Never! Don’t you sit there and look me in the eye and tell me my safety was in danger! BULLSHIT! AND FUCK YOU!”

Pam thought about it. “The idea that Castiel could be capable of doing you real bodily harm is terrifying to you.”

“No, it’s not, because he’s not capable of that.”

“Oh, I assure you he is, Dean. He is extremely powerful and much stronger than you are, both in metaphysical psychological power and in raw physical strength. He could break you like the twig you claim not to be.” Pam sat back and released a long breath. It would be pointless to pretend that the scent of his anger hadn’t affected her, so she let him see her tremble in the wake of his shouting.

“No, Pam. You’re not listening to me. He can’t harm me. I’m in no danger from Cas at all. None.”

“And Michael?” she asked, looking for a way in from another angle.

Dean huffed at her, turned, and flounced back onto the couch, rubbing at the scuff marks his boots made. “Michael’s a puppy. He’s still wild. Give him a couple of years. Cas’ll get him whipped into shape.”

“Why is that Castiel’s job?” asked Pam, genuinely interested.

“He’s Alpha. Training Doms is what he was born to do, Pam.”

“Do you expect to have the same relationship with Michael that you have with Cas?”

Dean went boneless against the back of the couch. His head faced the ceiling. “I’m done, Pamela. Write me whatever note you gotta to send me back out there with a clean slate. I’m done talking.”

She laughed softly, and he raised his head. “What?”

“You are a piece of work, Winchester.” She smiled affectionately. “Just when I think I’ve got your brat figured out, he runs me around and has me chasing my own tail again.”

“I love you, too, doc.”

“I don’t want to leave it like this, Dean. Can’t you give me anything? Anything at all? Can I talk to the alpha for a little bit?”
He chuckled and sat somberly for a little bit, staring at nothing. “It hurts too bad to talk about, Pam,” he said at last, all trace of humor and brat gone from his tense body.

“What hurts?”

Dean studied his lap. He found it decidedly uninteresting. “What kind of asshole gets handed the perfect mate and rejects him for a dude he can’t have? Why do I do that? How do I stop?”

“First, we’re not going to fix this here. This one goes to Tessa, you get me? Don’t make me send her a note about this. I want you bringing it up.”

“You can’t tell her what I say in here!”

“You signed the form, Dean-o. You gave us both the right to coordinate and collaborate. I asked you point blank if you understood what the form meant. It’s your right to rescind your permission, but as of right now, Tessa and I can discuss you as much as we like.”

“Fine. Whatever.”

“All right, then. Second, you haven’t rejected Michael. You’re still finding your balance points perhaps, but your Mating with him is strong and viable. It’s not that easy to reject a TM anyway.”

“Look, all I know is I made him feel like he’s never gonna measure up. He doesn’t deserve that. He’s incredible. He’s perfect!”

“Dean, it’s all right to admit that he’s not the mate you dreamed he’d be. Facing up to that isn’t going to tear you away from him. Cut yourself some fucking slack for once! You don’t control who you love!”

“I don’t have the right to hurt him like this! And Cas! He has to live with me knowing what I’m doing to Michael and trying to work around it and be better than all of us to make up for my… deficiency!”

“You let Castiel worry about Castiel, damnit. God, Dean! You frustrate the fuck out of me!”

“There you go losing your professional demeanor again.”

“You carry every burden for everyone and act like you deserve it. You don’t, okay. You don’t deserve to take all of their pain and heartache onto yourself just because you couldn’t protect them from hurting.”

“I do if I’m the one causing the pain!”

“No, Dean,” she said with compassion. “It really doesn’t work like that. You’re not hurting anyone on purpose, and everyone is responsible for their own emotions.”

“But I did hurt Michael on purpose. Don’t I have to take responsibility for that?”

“What did you do to Michael?” she asked carefully.

“I tried to shove him into a Cas-shaped box. I acted like an idiot, pretended I had my shit together while letting my brat run him in circles the whole time. I got him so turned around we wound up getting a P.C.A. from Dale the Mall Cop.”

Pam gaped at him. “Dale White? With the county?”
“Yup. My ass is still striped. Wanna see?”

“Hell yeah.”

Dean stood up, turned his back to her and dropped trou. She whistled in sympathy. He was healing, but the marks were still there.

“When did that happen?”

“Same day he laid into you for barging in with doctor doucheface without calling him first.”

“That was Saturday.”

“Yeah. Saturday.” He buttoned everything back in place and dropped back onto the couch.

She stared at him a little longer. He blinked back.

“Cas strapped you twice in the same day?”

“Huh! Look again, sweetheart. Those are caning stripes.”

“Dean, this is serious.”

“No, it’s not. You’re trying to make it into something it isn’t. You were there for the first round. Did he do anything inappropriate? I mouthed off at him to try to pull him off of you, and he humored me. You can get the full skinny on the second round straight from Dale. He stood witness. Cas did what he was supposed to do and no more. We were talking about me, not him.”

“Fine. What did you do to deserve that and what does it have to do with Michael?”

“Michael’s a pup, like I said. He gets hot and horny, and he thinks with his wolf’s dick. He does stupid shit sometimes. He’ll grow out of it, but I played dumb and let him go riskier than I should’ve. It was a moronic thing to do considering he’s carrying our first pup in his belly. We got busted going, um, going ninety-something down a county road, and Dale hauled us in to see Alpha.”

“Who was driving?”

“Michael. I was in the passenger seat beating off.”

“Michael was driving,” she repeated. “Michael broke the speed limit. Why is that your fault?”

“Because he’s a hot-head AND an Omega, Pam! We don’t know how much control he really has yet. He may not have the carriage he seems to with all his Dominance, and I haven’t been supporting him right because I’ve been playing broken, like I said!”

Pam nodded as the pieces fell into place. “Trying to make him over to be just like the mate you wanted instead of the one you have; trying to force him to be your rock when you needed to be his.”

Dean touched the tip of his nose then dodged her eyes as the blush of shame reached his face.

“All right, Dean. I think I get it. You’ve got some work to do, but it’s not insurmountable. And you’re not the only one who needs to make some changes.”

“What are you going to tell the committee?”

“That you’re a stubborn jackass with a heart of gold, a hero-complex, and a wicked codependent
relationship with your fiancé.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“And that you have committed to me that you will take self-protective measures as needed to keep yourself and your partners safe.” She said the sentence with a beady eye trained on him and a take-no-prisoners scent filtering across the room.

Dean took a deep breath in loudly through his nose. He let it out. “Pamela Barnes, I swear I will take self-protective measures as needed to blah, blah, whatever, so help me God.”

“That’s all I ask, love. You’re a fucking brat, and I hate your guts. Get out.”

He smiled gamely and stood slowly, his hands rubbing down his thighs a time or two.

“Pam…”

“Any time, Winchester. Any time.”

“No, I need you to stay after work for a special round table about Kyle Miller. I mean, thanks and all, but we’re gear-shifting here.”

“I got word from Sam earlier. I’ll be there.”

***************

“Stop fidgeting, Michael!” Dean slapped his hand down gently, and Michael snapped at him – literally snapped his teeth in an attempt to bite his mate. Dean’s eyes hardened fast. “That’s one, man. If we get to three, you’re kissin’ tile. Keep your temper.”

“I’m nervous.”

“I know, but don’t take it out on me. There’s nothing to be nervous about.”

Dr. Mosely scuttled into the room without thinking to knock, and they both jumped. “Good afternoon, boys! This is so exciting! I’ve got all the baselines and the preliminary results. Congratulations, fellas, it’s a go! I’m proud of you.”

“You’re proud of us for knowing how to fuck?” asked Michael.

“That’s two, Omega,” Dean told him. Missouri didn’t even blink, accustomed as she was to out-of-sorts pregnant Omegas.

“Based on your D.H.O., your projected due date is February 7,” she told Michael.

“D.H.O.?” he asked.

“It stands for ‘Date of Heat Onset’,” she explained. “We calculate the pup’s due date based on when your Heat started. Everything in the tests looks normal. I’ve got a copy of the results for you to take with you. You boys be sure to ask me anything you want to understand better. But your chemistry
just looks like a medical textbook, Michael. You need to be aware that men face a harder time than women do in carrying babes, but there’s nothing at all that indicates you should expect any issues. I want you to go about your life as you normally would, Omega. Don’t act delicate, and you won’t BE delicate.”

“Delicate! Are you serious?”

Dean cleared his throat. Michael cut his eyes over, but he didn’t apologize. He pulled back a little though, and that was enough for Dean.

“You don’t need to worry about me laying in bed demanding peeled grapes, Dr. Mosely.”

She nodded firmly. “Good. You’re not getting any.”

Michael grumbled softly under his breath, and then caught himself and desisted. “I’m starting to get irritable at nothing and nauseated when I lie down. Is there anything I can do about those?”

“I can’t help you with the irritation. Mood swings come with the territory. You can try yoga, meditation, and some Omegas say added spankings help.”

“I’ll try meditation, thanks,” Michael said sourly.

“I can give you a prescription for an anti-nausea syrup that works fast if it gets unbearable, if it gets to the point you can’t keep anything down. You need to eat solidly and regularly, Michael. Don’t skip meals, even if you’re queasy. If it’s mild, try ginger tea or ginger pills.” Missouri shifted her attention to Dean. “You may need to make him eat sometimes, alpha. Omegas get pretty stubborn when they’re uncomfortable, but the pup needs a constant source of calories. Make him eat right, too. Not all calories are built the same. Your report has a menu guide. Nothing in that guide will hurt you either, Dean. Going into this as a team might make it easier for him to swallow if it’s a big change.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Dean told her.

“No alcohol. Michael. Don’t drink. I mean it.”

“No, doctor. I won’t. I live in Castiel’s house anyway. He cut me off the second I went into Heat.”

She laughed merrily. “I bet he did, the old fox.”

“Dr. Mosely,” Michael said hesitantly. “Is the baby going to make it? Really?” His hand rested unconsciously on his lower belly. Dean took his other hand and squeezed it.

“Michael, your pup is healthy and thriving. You smell great. Your blood and urine chemistry are perfect. Your internal anatomy is strongly constructed. You were built for this, young man. But you know better than to think any of us can predict the future. Male Omegas give birth to healthy pups every day. You’re doing something riskier than what you were doing this time last year, am I right?”

Michael huffed an unexpected laugh. “I was doing Quaaludes this time last year.”

“Alrighty then, I take that back. The point is, we all know there’s some risk, but you knew that before you and Dean sparked that little bug in the first place. The best you can do is take care of yourself and each other, and everything will turn out as the Universe intends. You’re going to make phenomenal parents, guys. I don’t say that to everyone.”

“Thanks, Missouri,” Michael said. Dean smiled at him.
"Is he likely to have to do bed-rest near the end?" Dean asked. "Most men do, don’t they?"

"Many do," she nodded. "There’s no way to know yet, fellas. The posterior uterus is a weird organ, and it messes with a lot of other body functions when it starts pressing against things that need room to shift. Don’t worry about it too much. If we make that call later, it’ll be because it’s the right call to make. And Michael, going horizontal for a few weeks isn’t the worst thing that can happen."

"Yes, Ma’am."

"Last thing," Missouri told him. "You know what a Kegel is, and how to do one. Omega, you need to stick to that exercise schedule like it’s your religion. Say ‘Yes, Ma’am’."

"Um, yes, Ma’am."

"Dean?"

"I’ll make sure he does them, Missouri."

"No, I want you doing them too."

"What? Why?"

"Because if he has to do them, it won’t kill you to share a little of the inconvenience, and because it will make you a better Bottom for your Alpha."

"Jesus Christ, Missouri!"

"Say ‘Yes Ma’am’."

Dean could feel Michael fighting to maintain restraint, but a look at his face caught the twitch of his lip. Dean pointed at him. "Not a fucking word to Castiel! This is covered under medical confidentiality."

"Whatever you say, alpha. But the doctor’s waiting."

Dean squeezed his hand again, then turned cheekily back to his mate’s gynecologist with his best scamp grin and said, "Yes, Ma’am. You’re the boss."

"All right, you two. Get out of here. I need to go home. It’s been a long-ass day!"

Dean stood and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek and whisper a thanks into her ear. She squeezed his shoulder and smiled with just her eyes.

They made their way slowly down the hall, hand-in-hand. "Gabe and Kali will be done tomorrow," said Dean vaguely.

"Mm-hm," Michael responded.

"Cas and April have another full day ahead of them, maybe two."

"What’s your point, Dean?"

"Gabe and Kali might slink out of the H/R room, but they’re not going to be hanging around the living room with us any time soon. Sam’s busy with the twins. We still have the house basically to
ourselves. Do you want to celebrate the good news with me a bit? I’m itching for a really intense scene."

“You want me to scene with you?”

“Is that a surprise? I love scening with you.” Dean stopped and faced his mate.

“I’m not feeling particularly dominant, Dean. I feel a little…delicate, I guess. I mean, yeah, I can get there if you want me to.”

“Nope. Don’t force it. If you’re not feeling it, we won’t do it. It’s that simple. I can cuddle my delicate Omega in a bath instead.” Dean squeezed his hand and took up his pace again.

“We’re not supposed to play without Castiel’s go-ahead anyway. Not yet. Why don’t you go crash Alpha’s Rut?” Michael suggested. “We both know he wants you there. April’s tailing off first. She can go upstairs on recovery, and you spell her with Castiel.”

Dean thought about it. He checked Michael’s words and emotions for signs of double-speak and didn’t find any. “We’re doing a hot bath first though,” he said by way of agreement.

“Not too hot,” Michael reminded him. “There’s a temperature cap. I don’t remember what it is, but we have to be careful.”

Dean tugged him into a loose headlock and kissed his cheek sloppily. “We’ll be careful. We can google it before we get in. See? I can take care of you.”

Michael pulled free and walked on alone, his scent heavy with churlish discomfort. “Michael? Was it something I said?”

“Do you even care that I fucked her, man? Does it bother you at all? I feel like I’m in the Twilight Zone episode where the guy had two totally separate lives going at once and he was the only one who could see it.”

“I didn’t see that one,” said Dean.

“I just made it up.”

“Sounds plausible though.”

“Stop deflecting.”

“Hey, you’re the one who put the killer idea for an episode in my head.”

“I still have no idea how she feels about me, Dean,” Michael admitted ruefully. “At best she’s holding it close to the vest to hide it from Castiel. At worst, I’m just her Omega fuck-toy.”

Dean frowned. “Babe, you shouldn’t be sleeping together with this much potential fuck-all between you. I should never have okayed it. Damn Alpha caught me off guard.”

Michael’s laugh held no humor. “I’ll remember that next time I want something I know you’ll say no to. Catch you just pre-orgasm, and I can get you to agree to anything.”

“And another thing,” Dean picked up, clearly having continued the discussion in his head instead of out loud. “Of course, I care. Just because I haven’t put a cock-cage on you or locked you in the basement doesn’t mean it’s not affecting me. But I don’t really get a say in this, man; I really, really don’t – not unless I’m going to walk away from Cas, and I’m not gonna do that. You want to know
what I feel about it? Here, feel this.” Dean swept it all up and shifted it through the bond to his mate, whose eyes grew wide. All the anxiety, the ripe fear, all the jealousy and ugly possessiveness, the alpha urge to put his foot down, the hurt…so much hurt, and mixed with it all, coating it, was a thick layer of trust.

Michael laid his head on Dean’s shoulder. He was afraid to ask if it was him that Dean trusted so fiercely, or if it was the Universe itself. Maybe it was Cas. Somehow it always seemed to come back to Cas. Whatever the source, Dean’s faith was a balm to Michael.

“Thank you, Dean.”

“We’re in this together, man, come hell or high water. We’re gonna see each other through no matter what happens. I love you, you big cranky doofus.”

“There you are! I thought I’d missed you!” Balthazar rounded a corner and jogged to catch them.

“I have a late meeting I need to get to. What’s up, Bal?”

“Not you, you adorably conceited twerp. I was looking for your blazing hot mate. We have plans to discuss! Come along, Michael. Let the alpha go to his boring meeting, and let’s plan his demise. I’m dying to get started on this scene of yours. I know just the guys.”

Dean paled.

“Michael?” he asked weakly.

“Go on, Dean. I’ll be fine. Balthazar and I can look after each other.”

Dean watched his Omega friend collect his Omega mate in a way-too-comfortable side hug and lead him away. They had their heads together in open conspiracy. He goggled well after they turned the corner, then he checked the time, cursed, and took off at a run down the hall, late to his own meeting.

Chapter End Notes

I'm starting a seed comment below to measure the interest in creating a forum elsewhere to open discussions. It's not a done deal, but I'm warming to the idea. Many thanks to Cake_Blindness for poking at the options and nudging me toward agreeing to some stuff.

Reply to the comment with any input you have.

Thanks as always. I love this pack.
Chapter 82

Chapter Summary

Cas finishes his cycle with help from his favorite alpha, and they fill the next day with Saturday errands. Really, fellas?

Chapter Notes

Nnnnot a lot of plot progress. No apologies. We're adding one itty bitty tag for use of wax candles. We've alluded to it before, but never actually lit up. It's a Rut, so we're getting dirty again. Brace yourselves. I hope it measures up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 82 – Friday, August 4, 2017

THEN:

Michael picked idly at his cuticle, looking up toward the entrance with only his eyes every now and again. She was late. She’d never stood him up before, and he could feel the weight of impending disappointment that always carried him over the edge into someone he didn’t enjoy being at all.

It wasn’t his fault.
Hadin’t he been sweet to her? Hadn’t she been the one to seek him out, not the other way around? Hadn’t she said he made her feel things she’d never felt before? Fucking girls, man. They’re all the same.

Fucking alphas, too.

Michael wasn’t stupid. He’d seen the two of them, heads close together, whispering, fucking giggling for fuck’s sake, thinking they were alone in the library, of all places. He was stuck in a Romance novel and fuck her sideways for that.

Least she could have done was be straight with him, not reply coolly that ‘of course she was still coming, silly!’ with an intimate touch to his throat.

Michael took another slug from his bottle. He would need a new one soon. Rachel passed him on her way to the booth she was sharing with that beta with the intense brown eyes. She caught Michael’s eye with a predatory gleam in hers and a downright evil grin. Her shirt tail was askew in a way it shouldn’t be just from dancing. At least someone was having a good night.

Michael aimed for casual as her look shifted from prowling to filial concern. She knew who he was waiting for, and she could read him at a glance. He winked at her and gestured with his head, sending her after Dreamy-brown-eyes with a nod.

Fuck.

Michael could have had that guy for himself if he’d wanted. Instead he funneled the pretty boy to his sister like a good big brother does and kept himself straight-and-narrowed for fucking Suzanne.

Suzanne, who sauntered around the hallways like she owned everything, like nothing could touch her, like an emotionless ice queen, who somehow never seemed to notice him in public, but who turned into a pool of softening dough when he lowered his chin and his octave and cast his eyes in just the right light in a private space.

Suzanne, who screamed like a panther when he struck her just right, and then panted into the bedding and begged him to do it again.

Suzanne, who Presented alpha in front of the whole school at a Friday night football game her Freshman year and fielded anonymous friend requests with snapshots of her own knot linked to the account, and who wept into Michael’s chest as he swore to keep her safe.

Hadin’t he beat the living crud out of the ass-wipe who aired a recording of her agonized moans over the intercom before announcements? It was bad enough that they’d all heard it first-hand and left her rolling on the ground in misery while her body shifted her publicly and painfully into something decidedly less feminine. To have had them all zoom in with their smart phones and hit record from every angle, so they could enjoy again and again the moment when her penis unsheathed for the first time in a sticky mess of viscous fluid and wrenching pain, was bad enough. To have to face those sounds and images over and over again in cowardly, faceless assault was too much.

Hadin’t he taken a nasty beating for turning ass-wipe’s face into strawberry jam? Hadn’t she showered him with thankful kisses, grateful beyond words? No one else, she swore, had ever done so much. For her.

The door opened, letting February’s worst sneak past the warm bar. Michael didn’t look up, but he left his cuticle and went back to his beer. He could scent her without looking. He could scent them both.
His heart rate kicked into overdrive, and his cheeks felt hot.

“Michael!! You waited!! Thank God! Look who I ran into. You remember Grayson, from Biology, sophomore year. Mr. Tidwell. We did that project together.” She looked like July, and she smelled like a summer evening just as the sun is setting when the cool breeze kicks up and all the daytime stress has settled. Michael wished he could wring her neck.

“Hello, Grayson,” Michael told the alpha flatly, taking Suzanne’s hand although she hadn’t offered it. He tugged her in to stand close, and she stumbled into him. “Goodbye, Grayson.”

Grayson’s face was unamused. He stood with his arms crossed at his chest and his feet planted as if bulldozers might be needed to roust him out again. Suzanne laughed uncomfortably and righted herself. Beneath her freshly showered and scent-sprinkled aroma, Michael detected sex. It wasn’t particularly fresh, but it was Grayson she carried in her pores.

Ew. They had some kind of alpha-alpha thing going on, and Michael’s lip pulled back from his teeth slightly.

“I thought Grayson could join us tonight, Michael,” she said, trying for nonchalant. Michael scoffed.

“I’m not interested in a three-way with this douche-cadet, sweetheart. You’re late, and I’m going to make sure it doesn’t happen again. Don’t get comfortable. We’re leaving as soon as I finish my drink.”

Michael caught sight of Rachel out of the corner of his eye again when he heard her squeal in delight and saw her thrash wildly in her booth seat. Mister-brown-eyes had obviously found the ticklish spot and latched on. From his place at the bar, Michael could see that her pencil-skirt was pushed up above her hips, and the tight line at her knees could only be panties. Her face was flushed in pleasure. Seeing his sister in capable hands, Michael checked one standard worry off his list and went back to the matter before him.

Suzanne was just straightening up and posturing to protest his commandment, but Michael didn’t listen as her volume increased and douche-cadet’s chest puffed out comically. Michael slammed the remainder of his beer, threw a wad of uncounted cash on the bar, took a firm hold of Suzanne’s bicep and dismounted from his stool.

Showtime.

In hindsight, he shouldn’t have thrown the fourth punch. Or the next two. Grayson was already down. Blood trickled from Michael’s nose and mouth, but Grayson’s face was splintered far worse.

Michael grimaced in pain as the strap landed again. Pop’s voice barraged him with ultimatums, but Michael wasn’t listening.

Fucking alphas. That dick of a half-man had no clue how to draw the sounds out of a girl like Suzanne the way Michael could, and she had to know that.

But she still chose him over the Omega whose opinion of himself was the talk of the school. He was a laughing stock everywhere but in a cool dark bedroom, where they all learned to their astonishment that he was a god.

The strap burned across his ass, rounding his hip with a bite that cut a hard, red line. Michael grunted.
It didn’t matter. None of it mattered. They all chose alphas in the end.

He’d let himself believe – hope – just this once… She was an alpha herself, for pity’s sake, and she knew first-hand how it felt to bear the sting of public ridicule over something she couldn’t control. He thought they understood each other. Those vulnerable wide eyes, baring her soul in the middle of the night, wracked by sobs, comforted in his careful arms, soothed by his kisses.

Michael took the punishment.

He deserved it for being stupid.

How many times would it take for him to get it through his rock of a head?

Omegas never win.

Rachel was waiting in his room with a Tylenol, a warm compress, and an icepack.

She touched the compress to the swelling beside his eye, and he winced but didn’t dodge. He took it and lay on his stomach on the bed. She tucked in beside him on her belly, craning to tug his boxer-briefs below the curve of his butt and arrange the icepack to drape across both cheeks. He almost smiled at the familiarity of it. They’d both played nursemaid for each other many times.

“Tell me about your new best boy,” he prompted. He didn’t want to talk about himself. He didn’t want to talk about Suzanne. He never fucking wanted to see the bitch again.

She smiled an innocent smile, full of daisies and butterflies.

“He’s huge, Mike. He’s hung like a bison. You should have snapped him up when you had the chance.”

NOW:

Benny followed the alpha-Sub out, pressing his hand along the door to catch it and hold it open. Dean looked tired, but Benny thought he seemed more solid than he’d been in months.

“You did good in there, alpha,” Benny told him, coming alongside, and walking at Dean’s pace.

“I hate to see them suffer, man. We have to put a stop to it.”

“We will,” Benny assured him. “But it’s not going to happen overnight. I think we’ve figured out this one though. That’s something.”

“Thanks for staying late with us, Ben,” said Dean. “You have a lot on your plate at home.”

Benny laughed. “Yeah, you do, too. No, actually, Andrea’s at her mother’s for the week. It’s just Rudy and me living the bachelor life until Sunday.”

“Oh,” said Dean, pulling to a stop near his office door. “Wanna come over and eat with us? Tony always makes more than we need, and the table’s pretty sparse what with everybody locked away in the basement. It’s not much of a Friday Night Pack Dinner, but you’re welcome to join in.”
Benny lit up. “Absolutely. Give me twenty minutes to feed the dog and get him squared. You want me to bring a bottle?”

“No, man. Michael doesn’t need the tease. Just bring yourself. I’ll see you in a bit…just gotta track down my mate. He took off with Balthazar to plan a fuck-fest that I’m sure I’ll live to regret.” Dean took out his phone and began tapping into it.

Benny stepped closer, scenting him shamelessly and laying a weighty hand on his neck. “You’re not going to do anything you don’t want to do, Dean. You promised.”

Dean blushed and shrugged from beneath the alpha’s hand. “Sheesh, Benny. Chill out. Of course I’m not. Think I want to sit in front of Missouri again and explain why I let something happen to me that I didn’t like? It was a figure of speech.” Dean’s phone pinged with Michael’s reply. He tapped Benny’s arm in a friendly way and slipped into his office to grab his keys. “See you in twenty, Ben. We’re having some kind of Stroganoff thing. Don’t be late, or Michael will finish it off.”

“I’m already there,” said Benny, jogging backwards to get his own personals.

Michael served himself another portion just as an exhausted but freshly showered Castiel wandered into the kitchen. Dean shot to his feet and met him by the doorway with a pleased and affectionate embrace.

“You smell ripe, babe,” he told Cas. “You shouldn’t be out yet. You want me to bring you something?”

“I want you, Dean,” Cas told him blandly, wrapping strong arms around him and burying his nose in Dean’s throat. “April’s done, and she’s sleeping. I can’t eat. Can’t sleep. I’m so tired, and all I can think about is turning your ass red. Come play with me. Please?”

Michael had his palms flat to the table and his eyes downcast. The scent of Rutting Pack Alpha nearly tore his self-control right out of his grip. Benny sniffled a couple of times and then sneezed violently. Castiel looked up. His hands had minds of their own. One pushed deep into the back of Dean’s trousers and pulled him in by the meat of his ass. The other was working swiftly to unclasp his buckle. Dean let him.

“Benny. Good.” Castiel’s breath came short and fast, and his voice was a painful grate in his throat. “Come spot us. You wanted a chance. Come help me now.”

“Whoa, Alpha!” Benny protested, shoving his plate back. “I didn’t expect to be doing it while you were in Cycle. You reek. No offense.”

“No time better,” Cas told him logically as if Dean’s pants weren’t at his knees and his underwear sitting at an odd angle on his hips. Dean had hold of Cas’ shoulders, and his eyes were closed.

“Alpha, I need an hour,” he wheezed to Cas. “Lemme get Michael bathed and in bed. I promised him some time. I’ll meet you in an hour.”

“Right now, Pet. I can’t wait any longer.” Cas growled at him and kneaded his ass firmly while his teeth threatened Dean’s shoulder.
“One hour, Alpha.” Dean kissed the side of his throat and then wormed his way from the man’s embrace. He kept his eyes down, but he didn’t back down when Cas’ red eyes flashed, and his body flared aggressively. Michael was on his feet, his eyes golden, his nerves ready to fire him in any direction in flight or in supplication, whichever seemed safest. Benny shifted to put himself between the Omega and the Rutting Alpha whose control seemed to be on its way out. Dean moved backward slowly, away from Castiel, with his trousers gripped in one hand.

“Benny?” questioned Dean without looking away from Castiel’s feet. “You got him? You need any help? I can call Sam.”

“Go on, brother,” said Benny softly. “I’ll stay here. Thanks for dinner. Tell your guy it was really good.” His voice was gentle, but his stance was defensive. Cas would have to physically disable him to get to Dean or Michael. Dean hustled his mate out through the dining room and straight up to the room they shared. He stripped the trembling Omega and ran him a bath, careful to keep the temperature out of the danger zone.

“You’re not really going to make him wait.” Michael let Dean ease him in and then sat forward so the alpha could squeeze in behind him.

Dean leaned Michael further forward and began to work the tense muscles of his shoulders. “Our scene will work better if he’s a little bit pissed off. He gets the most out of tanning my ass when he can pretend there’s a valid reason for it. Plus, I get to be alone with you for an hour, and that’s always a good thing. Close your eyes and lean way forward.” Dean dumped a cup of water over Michael’s head to wet his hair. Michael let himself accept the care from his mate. He felt sleepy and satisfied as Dean pulled him up.

“I had no idea how badly I needed to hear Missouri tell us the pup’s healthy, Dean. It didn’t feel real until now. It’s like a weight’s been lifted, and I can breathe again.”

“He said, Michael?” agreed Dean. He scratched his nails through Michael’s scalp as he spread shampoo into his hair. “When we go for the first ultrasound, it’ll feel even more real. I want Cas and April there for that one. Would that be all right with you?”

“Mm-hm. They should be there.” Michael agreed blearily. Dean worked a soapy cloth over his neck, down his back, across his shoulders. Michael didn’t participate. He let Dean do as he wanted. “You wanna hear what we have planned for you up at the Contract room?” he asked into the echoing room.

“Who, you and Balthazar?” asked Dean with a nudge to Michael’s knee to push his legs wide. He leaned around Michael and began to work down each leg.

“It’s gonna be epic,” Michael told him.

“We’ll talk about it when you’re not falling asleep in the tub. Just relax. You’re done for today.”

“Kay,” murmured Michael. “I need to do my running in the morning though. Don’t let me oversleep.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Omega,” Dean chided warmly. “If I think you need sleep, you’ll sleep as long as I say.” He nibbled Michael’s ear, and Michael shivered.

It didn’t take the full hour before Michael was fast asleep, warm and dry, clean and tucked inside a cocoon of layers in the too-soft bed. Dean lay placidly beside him, stroking his damp hair and watching his dreams change color from blurry yellows to deep indigo and swirling midnight blue. He
could feel the pull behind his navel where Castiel’s patience had worn to an end, and he smirked. Dean kissed Michael’s brow and slipped off the bed, still nude from the bath.

Benny waited in the hallway outside the Playroom. “I told him the H/R room was empty, but he wants you in with his mate. Can you play there, Dean?”

“Yeah,” Dean told him breathlessly. “I’m good.”

Benny stopped him from slipping in with a braced hand on his chest. “Look. Once we go in there, his pheromones are going to sweep us both out of our heads. I need you to tell me right now, do you want me here?”

Dean bit his lip, and his eyes twitched to the broad flat door. “Is it going to freak you out?”

“You know me better than that, alpha,” Benny answered him.

“Are you thinking he wants you in the middle of it? You gonna lose your head?”

“Dean. I can smell him; I’m not a robot. I’m not stupid though. I’ll tuck in on the sideline and stay out of the way.”

“Then, yeah. He’s nervous, man. Even in Rut, he’s scared of himself. He wants to know you’re here. This isn’t like when I fuck up and he applies a strap to straighten me out.”

“I need to know how far to let it go,” said Benny, dead serious, his blue eyes rimmed with crimson.

“Don’t interfere unless he doesn’t stop when I call red. Excepting that, anything he does is fair game.” Dean’s eyes matched Benny’s, and his face bore the same grim planes.

“Dean…”

“I mean it, Benny. If you’ve ever trusted me in your whole damned life, I need you to trust me now. You’re here for him, not me. Once he gets his confidence back, we won’t need a spotter. This is just to get him over the hump. Don’t you dare step in unless I’m unconscious and still taking swats or if I call it, and the swats don’t stop. We clear?”

Benny growled, and his face hardened further. “I’m not going to stand there and watch you two break each other because you’re both too stubborn to say Uncle.”

Dean gritted his teeth. Surely, they’d passed this point years ago. He shook his head. Stubbornly.

“You know what he’s like if he doesn’t get a chance to feed it, man. He needs this!”

“He can’t get it at your expense, you moron! You don’t have to bleed for him!”

Dean chuckled ironically. “Right. My expense. Benny, get out of the way. I’m going in there, and I’m going to kneel in front of my Dom, and he’s going to open me up – however he wants to. We’re both going to take everything we need. You hear me? BOTH of us. You got a problem with it, there’s the door.”

“I don’t like knowing you’re still as dead-set against protecting yourself as you’ve ever been, even after he admitted to losing control.”

“Then go home.”
Benny frowned and worked his jaw, huffing through his nose in consternation.

“Look,” said Dean pacifically. “I’m not going to let it go too far. I swear you can trust me. What you need to remember is that I can take more than I should be able to. I can take more than an Omega. You just gotta trust me, Ben. Unless you see bone sticking out, I’m fine. It’ll heal. God, man I want this. It’s been ages since we played, and he’s Rutting! I’m so hard right now, I could beat this door in with just my dick. Either step in with me, bear witness and stay outta the way, or go home and beat off to get the smell out of your nose. Either way, we’re doing this. Cas wants you there. It’ll make him feel better.”

Benny sighed heavily. “All right, Dean. You two deserve each other. You know that, right?”

Dean winked and shoved the door open.

Castiel was pacing furiously at the far end of the room. He whipped around, ready to tear into Dean, but the Sub slipped onto his knees in his usual place and met his eye with calm assurance, with deference. The Dominant wolf purred at his perfection.

April was awake, sitting against the iron headboard with both knees tucked beneath her chin, stress poring out of her skin in response to her mate’s state of mind. Benny skirted the edge of the room to stand as close to her as he could get without being obvious about it.

Cas had his fingers twined painfully in Dean’s hair. He wrenched his Sub’s face upward and to the side to stretch out his healing bite-mark, Castiel’s mark. The rabid Rutting wolf didn’t care about the other one. He didn’t much care whether an alpha could form a Mating-scar through repetition. He wanted to see his own mark. Dean kept his eyes on the wolf’s. All sign of red was gone from the bottomless depths of blue.

The wolf was unleashed. Dean’s heartrate skipped into overdrive.

“You kept me waiting, Pet. I don’t appreciate it, and I’m going to take it out of your ass.” Cas stared right into his wide eyes long enough to read him to the depths of his toes, and then he released Dean’s hair.

“Yes, Sir,” he breathed. Dean could feel April’s eyes on his bare form. He could feel Benny trying to figure out how to get close enough to April to look her over without unsettling the Alpha. Castiel’s hair was a mess. It needed cutting. His eyes looked both intense and deeply worn out. Dean shook his awareness out and zeroed back into focus. What difference did anyone’s hair make right now?

“I want you kneeling on your scene square, knees out of bounds, Pet,” Castiel instructed bluntly. Dean stood up, bidding a reluctant farewell to his beloved blue starting position where he was safest. He lowered himself onto an orange square only a couple of meters further in and shifted his knees until they rested outside the boundary described by orange paint on the bare floor. It opened him up. One of Castiel’s hands found its way back into his hair and forced the Sub’s head painfully backward, as he sank to one knee in front of his Sub. Cas ran his other along Dean’s taint to tap at the plug nestled tightly in his ass. He gripped it and rotated it, pushing tightly against Dean’s rim, forcing it fiercely against his prostate. Dean fought to keep his eyes steady, to keep his breathing even. “Are you ready for my attention, my Pet?” the Dom asked him softly with a voice full of promise.

“No, Sir,” Dean whispered back, knowing damn well that wasn’t the answer he was supposed to give. April gasped quietly and tightened her grip around her knees. Benny crept to the bed and put one knee up. Cas scowled and tightened the grip in Dean’s hair. It hurt. God, it hurt! Dean’s eyes watered, and his mouth fell open.
“I don’t advise playing games with me right now, Dean Winchester. I will ask you again. Are you prepped for me?”

“Oh. Prepped. Yes, Sir. I thought you meant was I ready to go. Sir, I need a few swats before I’m ready for you to fuck me.” Dean’s tone carried no emotion. He didn’t tease. He stayed still. Castiel swallowed, boring into his eyes and bringing their faces very close together.

“Be very careful what you ask for, Pet. You don’t make the rules in this room. I do.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Benny edged further onto the bed keeping his eyes on Castiel. He gestured firmly to April, and she only waited a moment before shifting toward him so that he could sweep her off in a bridal carry. He took her to the back of the room and laid her carefully on the sofa with a soft blanket, checking her for damage and scenting her for signs of unfulfilled Heat. She smelled soft and spent. She smelled miserably unbred, and Benny’s alpha mourned the missed opportunity despite it not being his in the first place. An unbred Omega was a loss to the whole Pack, and Benny’s alpha felt the loss despite it not being his Pack. He stroked her hair as he knelt beside her. She ignored his attempts to care for her. She never looked away from the unfolding scene behind Benny.

“Supplicant’s position, Pet,” said Castiel coldly. Dean leaned down until his face and chest were on the ground and his arms stretched out in front of him. He was forced to break eye contact. He couldn’t see anything but firmly padded surface. He controlled his breathing with great effort and struggled not to cry out when a sharp sting shot across both of his feet. Cas knew he hated having his feet caned. The cane popped again, and Dean yiped, rocking back in a miniscule and aborted motion to protect his naked feet. He grimaced and then held. Cas popped him one more time, and Dean whined.

“Get your ass up,” said Cas. Dean pressed his hips into the air without moving anything else. Cas knelt near his left hip and scraped a hard nail along his left calf and up toward the back of his knee. It didn’t hurt. Dean was ticklish back there though, and the uncertainty of what might be coming next always heightened his sensations through his flesh. His whole body erupted in chill bumps. He moaned. Cas pinched the soft flesh behind his knee tightly. He took hold of Dean’s balls with the other and gripped them hard. Dean closed his eyes. He wasn’t supposed to, but he needed all his concentration engaged. He swallowed. He stillled himself. The chill bumps remained.

Then Cas was gone. Dean panted into the floor. Uncertainty was a killer at times like this, and Cas moved silently when he wanted to. Was April still watching him? Was she turned on? Was Benny? Remaining still in this position with his forehead taking the weight of his head took extreme effort. Right here was where trust kicked in.

Castiel.

Pamela told Dean that Cas could break Dean like a twig, and right now every sense in Dean’s body was telling him it was true. Only a madman would allow someone like Castiel to unleash a beast like
what he carried inside him without even looking round, without once raising a hand in his own protection. The wolf wasn’t tame. He was wild. And he rejoiced in causing Dean excruciating pain. Those facts alone scared the daylights out of everyone. Everyone but Dean. Even Castiel felt discomfited in the knowledge that someday things could go too far. Dean had an angle that none of the rest of them had though. He, and only he, had looked that eternity right in the eye and read its bare soul. Maybe April had experienced that by now. Dean didn’t know yet.

He was anxious at the uncertainty because he didn’t know what was coming, but he could never be afraid of Castiel.

He smelled it before he felt the burn of wax that dribbled swiftly over his shoulder and dripped to the floor. It burned. Cas had the candle very close to his flesh. It wasn’t just sensation play. It was real pain, and Dean rocked as he worked to accept it. Then the other shoulder. Castiel was silent, but Dean could smell the ferocious intent; it was nearly gleeful. He wanted Dean hurting. He wanted him unhinged. Thank fucking God. Dean took six or seven rapid breaths, swallowed again, steeled his body, and rolled himself over to flash his metaphorical belly. It was blatant capitulation of power, and it wasn’t a roleplay. Up until now he had been obeying, but with the shift, he was no one. He was owned body and spirit.

Castiel’s nostrils flared as he sensed the change. He dribbled the wax up the curve of Dean’s spine toward his sensitive backside, but though the flesh flinched and reddened in its wake, the Sub held still. Cas lengthened the distance between skin and candle as he let the wax dribble down the crack of his Sub’s ass. Some of it dripped over the base of the plug, and some of it flowed around his sensitive rim. Dean keened in pain but held. He rubbed his forehead in a rolling motion against the floor, fighting the need to tighten his muscles. He somehow kept them loose against the onslaught.

A crust of green wax coated the back of Dean’s sack as he whined in agony. Cas let the flame burn, let the flow continue. He could smell his mate where Benny had her stashed; he could sense her intrigue as she watched him with sleepy eyes, curled up on her side. All of her tension had melted away once Castiel’s fiancé was in place beneath her mate’s large paw.

Castiel stood upright and snuffed the candle between thumb and forefinger. He watched Dean in silence. The man’s skin reddened along the wax lines, but the chills still ran the length of his back which moved with a steady up-down motion with the regularity of controlled breath. His skill at breath control was mesmerizing, and Castiel panted in anticipation of making him lose it.

He walked silently away again and collected a new plaything and a small tub of greasy lubricant, setting the candle on the counter. He made eye contact on his slow pace back, first with April, a somber and haughty gaze that lasted just a breath, and then with Benny, whose presence tempered the wolf even though it should’ve riled him. Benny rested on his butt on the floor in front of April’s curled form, not touching her, ever watchful.

Cas turned his attention back to Dean, set the toy on the floor where Dean couldn’t see it, scowled sourly and flamed his stiff hand down sharply against Dean’s ass as hard as he could with a single swing. Dean jolted forward and fell flat with a shout that cut off sharply. He scuttled back into position, jaw clamped, clearly angry with himself.

“Do you have any confessions to make to me, Pet?” asked Castiel, circling him slowly.

“I closed my eyes a minute ago,” Dean admitted in a pained voice. Cas straddled him, facing backward and spanked him bare-handed very hard. Dean ground his teeth but refrained from moving or crying out. Usually, as long as he could see it coming, he could control his response. Control wasn’t what Cas wanted from him. He didn’t want him to fake losing it though. He wanted Dean to hold on until his fingertips popped free one by one and he fell apart for real.
“Anything else?” asked Cas, breathless, bracing himself in a wide squat around Dean’s hips with a hand on his reddening backside.

“I fucked up with the Ozzies, Sir. I screwed up, and one of them had to take swats that weren’t his to take. I need to pay for that. Please.”

Cas gripped Dean’s red cheek and pushed himself up. That wasn’t part of their play. It was honest-to-God need, and it straddled the boundary of what they usually covered in a scene like this, but Cas was in Rut. His boundary lines weakened when he cycled.

“I’ll take care of you in a bit, Pet. I need to get you ready first. You’re not there yet, are you?”

Dean felt the back of a thumbnail trace up the length of his back, following the sensitive line of cooled and hardened wax from the cleft of his ass to the back of his neck, and the chill bumps absolutely erupted all over his body. Holding still took all of his concentration.

“No, Sir!”

“Dean, tell me what happens to an alpha’s body if he’s knotted without sufficient preparation.” Cas was strolling slowly around his Sub again, looking down on him in admiration. Such patience. Such control. So much trust.

“Sir. He experiences anal tearing, fissures, muscle strain, incontinence. He’s vulnerable to hemorrhoids and chronic infection. He can suffer permanent damage. Under severe cases, he could die from the effects of traumatic shock and fecal poisoning.”

“None of that is acceptable to me, Pet.”

“No, Sir,” Dean replied into the floor.

“Have you worn your plug all day?” Cas knelt and ran delicate fingertips over the tender stripes on the bottoms of Dean’s feet. It tickled beyond his ability to control himself, and his toes flinched.

“Sir, I removed it mid-day for a bathroom break, and I cleaned myself thoroughly.”

“Good boy. Let’s make sure you’re prepared for me, shall we?”

Dean’s rapid panting took him by surprise, and he approached hyperventilation before his Dominant’s sure hand on his back supplied the steadiness he needed to bring himself back under control.

“Color, Pet?”

“Green, Sir.”

Cas grasped the plug and wasted no time removing it. Dean pressed backward at the loss, and Cas paid him for the motion with another round of vicious strikes to the center of his ass. Dean blew several breaths out loudly through his lips. Castiel struck his beloved with the same force he would apply to an Ozzie, and it made Benny’s eyes water in sympathy. He knew he would be out the door in flash if anyone tried to do that to him, and it was hard to watch. He couldn’t see Dean’s face. He could see the tension across the line of his shoulders. Dean had tried to explain it many times before – how the pain was just as intense as it looked, but that it traveled a pathway that by all accounts other alphas lacked. Benny was fighting his impulses as hard as Dean was – against his own impulse to put a stop to what he was watching. Behind him, April sank into the cushions in a drowsy haze.
Castiel worked globules of lumpy slick unceremoniously into Dean’s slightly gaping hole with four fingers, spreading them wide inside his Sub and pressing the lube right into the dark void. He tested the give with his hand. He pulsed his fingers in and out several times as Dean went back to rubbing his forehead in a back-and-forth across the floor, little swipes in each direction. He moaned loudly as Cas attacked his prostate ruthlessly. And then his fingers disappeared.

“Upright now, Pet. Up on your knees.”

Dean got there on strong arms that had not begun to shake yet. He knelt. His eyes sought their target. His toes supported the weight of an ass already smarting soundly. Castiel was behind him where Dean couldn’t see him. Instead, his eyes locked with April’s and held there. She licked her lips. Dean’s mouth fell open, and his brain skittered sideways.

“Good boy,” praised Cas, and Dean felt dizzy at the relief in those words. One more solid push, and he would be floating in the beautiful blue sky where every sensation sent him soaring higher and higher. He was so ready. And April’s soft blue eyes promised him company. He couldn’t look away.

Dean felt Castiel’s hands peeling wax away from his rim, a firm thumb chipping flakes out of his crack and brushing them away. The sting of burn was sweet.

“All the way up, now, Pet. Up high on your knees. I have a new toy for you to play with.” Cas supported Dean as he straightened his thighs, until he knelt upright. Castiel reclaimed his Sub’s eyes by unspoken command, and then he showed Dean the toy. It was longer than his others, shaped in sequential bulbs of thickening size from the end to the base, and Dean spotted a button on the butt-end beyond the wide flare. His mouth watered, and he swallowed hard. At the base, it was even wider than Castiel’s knot. It was impossibly huge, a gimmick, a novelty. It probably came with a disclaimer statement that it wasn’t intended for actual use and that sexual penetration with the monstrosity was not encouraged, all liabilities waived – all that legal jargon.

The wide base was flat. Dean watched as Cas set it on the ground between Dean’s knees and then nodded at it with a clear, ‘Go ahead’ command.

Dean’s eyes fluttered. He floated. At that simple nod, he was there, and everything changed color in his mind. He stopped trying to control of his breath. He confirmed that all control of his muscles sat with his Dominant who smirked easily and guided his body down with just his eyes – like a remote control. Dean didn’t need to aim his body to know where his own center was in relation to the toy. He watched Castiel’s eyes with unblinking focus, and he lowered himself slowly until he felt the blunt round tip of the first bulb touch his slick entrance.

Melting lubricant dribbled out of him to run down the already slicked bulbs.

Dean’s teeth took hold of his lower lip. He didn’t notice. All his attention was on the ocean blue of Castiel’s eyes. He pressed down, and the first bulb slipped in easily, innocently. Cas squatted in front of him, naked and beautiful. Neither of them blinked. They didn’t touch. Nothing hurt for the moment as Dean floated and Cas’ eyes pressed his body inevitably lower. The second bulb slipped in. It wasn’t much larger, and it sent Dean nothing but gentle pleasure.

The next one would reach his prostate. Dean’s pupils were huge. His face and chest were flushed. Castiel smelled like sin and ripe perfection, like catnip, and Dean wished he could roll in the smell and coat his whole body. Cas’ chin lowered, and his eyes narrowed incrementally. Dean felt the third bulb slide home. His breath caught as he felt the length press against his sweet spot and send a jolt of fire through his body.

Cas’ eyes showed he knew what Dean was feeling. Still, neither of them blinked. Still there was no
pain, just glacially slow movement and laser focus. A line of sweat tracked down Dean’s brow. The fourth bulb popped past his rim. The toy was widening rapidly now, and Dean felt the first pang of burn before his body sucked it in and held it fast. It felt like being knotted by an adolescent, a sensation Dean was familiar with from Keller testing panels. His breathing was coming fast and shallow now.

Dean felt the first real pain, but it wasn’t from his ass. His teeth bloodied his lip, and Cas’ face grew stern with disapproval as he reached out and pulled it free. He touched the growing spot of blood and pressed his thumb into Dean’s mouth. Dean whimpered softly as the fifth bulb snapped into place. This one hurt a little bit. He was beginning to feel full. His prostate ached with the increasing pressure. The bulbs were spaced just right so that each one pressed the pinnacle of its girth against the tiny bundle of nerves as the next one entered his body. He sucked rapidly on Castiel’s thumb in response, and the Dom allowed it. Their eyes communicated everything.

Trust.

Dean felt a new line of sweat trace down his opposite temple as another dribbled through his hair to break free at the back of his neck. His nostrils flared in mirror image of Castiel’s. The man was in Rut. He was supposed to be out of his mind with lust, zeroed in on fucking things, not carefully, painstakingly taking a Sub apart with just his eyes.

Dean felt his thighs begin to feel the first warm touch of strain just as the sixth bulb slipped in. It was slower to take residence inside him than the last one, and it hurt. It burned for a moment, and Dean panted, a flash of panic entering his gaze that Castiel snuffed with a slight shake of his head and a renewal of his focus. He slipped his thumb from Dean’s mouth and took painful hold of his hair. Dean used the pain to pull himself along. His floating had entered a bank of darkening clouds, but he wasn’t perturbed. Castiel had seen him through dark places many times, and the blue eyes weren’t flinching.

Dean pressed down, his thighs feeling it, his toes beginning to strain. The next bulb didn’t want to go, or his body didn’t want to take it. Neither mattered. The Dom wanted it, and what the Dom willed…happened. The seventh bulb popped in suddenly. Dean cried out at the sudden feeling of fullness, at the burn at his rim, at the cramping, involuntary clench of his muscles. He didn’t break his eyes away through it. He huffed shallowly to ease the pain and relax his body.

“Color, Pet?”

“Nnngh!”

“Dean. Talk to me.”

“I’m good. Keep going.” He didn’t sound good.

Cas searched his face and reached through their weak double bond. “Can you do this? Don’t harm yourself.”

Dean panted and paused to take stock. He’d probably had something this size inside him at some point before in his life, but he couldn’t think of when. His eyes danced from Cas’ right eye to his left. The Dom could feel his trepidation, could feel him struggle to decide.

“On your hands and knees, Dean. Slow and easy. Just take it with you.”

“Sir!” Dean obeyed, but he lost the blue eyes that were holding him together. The toy tipped up and stood outward in obscenity, sticking grossly out behind him. Cas put a hand on his back as he
rounded behind Dean and touched his stretched rim.

“You’re beautiful, Pet. This is incredible. You’re stretched so wide. You did this all on your own.”

Castiel touched the base of the toy, and the vibrations sent Dean onto his elbows, unable to hold himself up. Those strong arms of his were shaking now. His body absolutely sang with the vibrations. Every nerve ending in his lower self sparked at once. Dean had no idea what sounds were coming out of his mouth as he burst out of the storm clouds into bright white sunshine again. It wasn’t a float anymore. It was a soar. He picked up speed rapidly, only distantly aware that the bulbs, the stiff, soft toy was pulsing in and out, each bulb popping through the ring of tight muscle at his entrance. Nothing hurt. There was only pleasure. He couldn’t have described anything in words if he had to. It slipped out to the barest few bulbs and then it pressed back in again to fill his core and stretch his limits.

Castiel was fucking him with the biggest toy Dean had ever had inside him.

There was a hot tightness. Pressure. Sweetness. Electricity. Rapture. There was a burn that told him he was alive and real. There was a clench that reminded him he owned a physical body. Maybe it wasn’t his to own, but he occupied it. He felt moisture, but he didn’t know what wetness meant, just that it was everywhere. He felt a powerful vibrating pressure followed by a rush of sweet completion, and he heard a breath behind him suck in.

“God, Dean.”

“Mmm?”

“It’s in, baby. It’s all in.” A final dribble of come dripped in a ropey break from the tip of Dean’s cock.

A hand touched his belly and pressed against the soft flesh. “I can feel it.”

Dean knew that voice. That was his safety. Whoever owned that voice was his protector. When it said, “Dean,” it meant good things.

Good things.

He floated.

“Look at April. Pet. I want you to hold her eyes. I’m going to move on. Can you speak?”

Dean frowned in confusion, working hard to understand the concept of words. Part of him got it. Not the part that had control of his thoughts, but maybe a part that had control of his eyes. He found wide baby blue with his own eyes, and it felt right.

He flinched from a sudden spark of pain at his lip and tasted blood. The voice sounded right beside him.

“Don’t do that again, Dean. You won’t get another warning.” A firm touch tugged his lip free of his teeth.

Dean whined. The baby blue held him. There was peace in those eyes. There was solace and companionship. Those eyes knew the way through the clouds, too. They’d been where Dean was, and they peered at him from a place on the ground. They could tether him. He only needed to remember where they were. He needed to hold onto them.
They blinked. That’s what it’s called when the baby blue fades for a moment, and then returns again. Dean remembered that much. He was so full. So full. So much pressure. There was a constant throb and a buzzing that sent sparks of sensation through his body so that he shimmered in his flight.

Baby blue. Like the sky.

“I’m going to leave it inside you, Pet. It’s time to light you up, and you’re going to hold this inside you the entire time. Do you have anything you need to say?”

“Mmmmgh! Nnnnngh!”

“Very well. We’ll talk later.” Someone touched Dean. The touch felt cool and safe. He hummed into it. The safe voice sounded softly right beside his ear. “You are in charge of what happens to you, my love. If you need to stop, and you cannot find words, simply flatten your body to the floor, and everything will stop. Do you understand how to do that?”

The words and the touch cut through his flight without grounding him. There was a tone that Cas knew how to access that could cut straight through everything. Dean nodded once, cutting his eyes from April’s to Castiel’s with a flash of human comprehension that the Dom smiled into before ruffling Dean’s hair and standing back up again.

“Eyes where I put them, Submissive.”

Dean’s face turned front again.

“Breathe out.” The voice directed him from behind, and the Playroom disappeared again save for the baby blue that rarely blinked. “Breathe in.”

“And out.”

And then the baby blue widened a fraction in alarm, fire erupted across Dean’s flank, and he screamed.

Dean floated through his cool-down, through his bath. Words reemerged in his head, but his tongue was thick and uncooperative when he tried to use them. April’s slippery body tangled with his as they both lounged in the bathtub and let Cas’ hands clean them and massage out the soreness.

Castiel didn’t much smell like Rut anymore. He had a lingering trace that would fade before morning, especially if he could squeeze in one more round with his mate. The last round would need to be with his Kitten. Dean’s body was wrecked.

He moaned in relaxed pleasure in the hot water, holding his sister close to his chest for comfort while Cas massaged firm fingers into the muscles around his entrance. The cramping was intense, but he’d experienced worse. There had been no tearing, despite the absurd stretch. He was so loose, even Cas’ knot didn’t really lock.

April whispered soothing words into his ear. She ran a warm cloth across his chest while he cleaned languorously behind her ears.
“I believe that settles the question of how you’ll react to sexual touching in the presence of my mate,” said Cas smugly. He was too sleepy to couch his thoughts as carefully as usual.

“Mm-hm,” murmured Dean settling his lips against her warm shoulder. She giggled at the sensation. He was inadvertently close to her Mating-scar with all its exaggerated sensitivity.

Benny was gone. Just a swift check-in after the knot slipped free, a promise to discuss the matter further in the next few days, and Benny slipped out the door. Cas opened the drain and hauled first April, then Dean, out of the cooling water. The two were a pair now, bonded by experience. They nestled into each other, warm and dripping while Cas struggled to work a towel between them to dry them both.

April trailed light fingers over Dean’s hip. “Does it hurt much?” she asked softly.

“Hurts like hell, kid,” he answered honestly with a drunk-sounding slur. “You?”

She shrugged. He’d gone easy on her, in truth. His first two days of Rut took him to a place where the only thing that mattered was physical connection and sexual release. All he cared about was fucking, and she possessed a number of qualified and willing portals for him to dock at. She was tired and a little sore, but her body was nearly unscathed.

She and Dean both had new wounds on their shoulders, and she had a deep bite in the center of her right thigh, right in the front. Benny had cleaned it, but he knew better than to cover it with a bandage.

“Come on, big brother. Lean on me. I’ll help you get to bed.”

He chuckled at the idea of putting his weight onto the tiny girl, but his laughter stopped at his first step, and he clung both to her and to Cas, who took his other side. Limping badly, Dean followed Castiel’s lead in crossing the bathroom and stepping gingerly across the H/R room to the bed. Dean didn’t remember changing rooms.

Castiel, the doctor, looked him over again, touching gently as he’d done before placing him effortlessly into the tub. He gave Dean a couple of pills and made him finish the whole glass of water. Then he padded out to shower, leaving his Subs tucked warm and lazy in the bed.

Everything below Dean’s waist ached. It hadn’t been the massive ‘toy’ alone, it had been the switch, the paddle with nasty holes drilled in, and the cane. Cas removed the toy with its increasingly immense bulbs before applying the second two implements as if trying to beat Dean’s backside out of existence. Then he knelt behind him, pointed his fingers into a missile, rolled his hand in up to his forearm and curled his fingers into a tight fist inside Dean’s guts, pumping joyously against the soft wet places inside Dean until it felt like he was trying to knock Dean’s teeth out from behind. Dean had come untouched again at that. Something about knowing how open his body was, about the impossible gaping looseness of a body that, by rights, shouldn’t be capable of doing that without damage, about knowing that his Dom’s fist commanded space in a place it didn’t belong anatomically, all that, plus the sheer sensory overstimulation sent Dean shooting off onto the floor even while he soared through the clouds.

It was bliss like he’d only ever known at this man’s touch. Only with Cas. What Michael drew from him touched the very core of who Dean was and what he needed, but Cas had a way of dragging him completely outside himself, into places he shouldn’t be able to go.

And then, Cas made love to him. April’s eyes never faltered despite growing narrower by the minute. They never closed. Benny seemed both soothed and uncomfortable as their scening took on
a decidedly romantic flavor. Cas had Dean sprawled on his side with his fiancé at his back, slowly, sensuously moving in him against very little resistance. Dean came back to himself a bit for that, but he was loopy on endorphins, and he didn’t help Cas’ progress much. Castiel didn’t mind.

Puffy, swollen, a bit inverted, and extremely loose, Dean’s entrance was channel-like in its softness, in its welcome. It wept a continuous flow of slick from the deeply penetrating push of Castiel’s lube-coated fist previously. All three of them felt the guilty desperation in the Alpha’s dark psyche to convert the man he loved into the mate he couldn’t become. All three of them wept silently as the Alpha claimed his newly christened Omega with his body and his heart.

Nobody talked about it.

What was there to say?

April was sleeping deeply when Castiel rejoined them, fresh from his shower. He fumbled in deciding where to sleep. He wasn’t going to find space between them, that was clear. They were wound inextricably together. Finally, he decided Dean needed him more. In truth, Castiel needed Dean, too.

He slipped in behind the man, and Dean let go of the girl enough to roll onto his back.

“How do you feel?” asked Castiel quietly.

“Like I was run down by a steam-roller,” Dean whispered back, stretching to leave a kiss on Cas’ lips.

“I’ll want to look you over again in the morning.” Cas snuggled in close to his beloved.

“Yeah, I know. I gotta go to work tomorrow. Don’t let me oversleep.”

“Tomorrow’s Saturday. You’ll sleep as long as I believe you need to sleep, Submissive.” Cas’ voice held a trace of firmness, but he was losing his grip on consciousness rapidly. Dean laughed at the congruity in wording, and then he moaned and drew his legs up in pain.

“Hey, Cas?” he asked after a moment, watching the Alpha fade.

“Mm?” Cas didn’t open his eyes, but his thumb traced a line across Dean’s ribs where his hand rested.

“Would you still be in love with me, do you think, if I wasn’t masochistic, like I am?”

Castiel’s eyes blinked open softly. “I love everything about you, Winchester, and that’s an important part of you. It doesn’t define who you are though. Truthfully, it was your eyes I noticed first, then your swagger, then your incredible mind. I fell for you one aspect at a time, and each realization sank me deeper into your hands. By the time I was aware of your propensity to hurt and how well it aligned with my desire to cause…” Cas blinked sleepily. Dean’s green eyes ate up every word. The Sub had a death-grip on Cas’ forearm. “I was already lost on you, Dean. I love your kindness, and your integrity. I love your brilliance. I love that family means everything to you. I love your adamant defense of your mate. I love your playfulness and your joy for life. God, Dean… you’re so beautiful. I will love you forever, no matter what.”

“Love you, too, Alpha,” said Dean sleepily, comforted. Satisfied.
He tucked his head and curled it below Cas’ chin, rolling more into him. April shifted at his back until she curled into his warmth. All three of them slept soundly.

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Dean leaned on Castiel to get up the stairs to his room before the sun was up. The last dregs of Cas’ Rut were fading rapidly. He and April moving together sleepily next to the sleeping alpha, woke him from a delicious dream where nothing hurt.

Dean found that having Cas grunting quietly atop his mate in the dark hours of the early morning didn’t feel like he’d anticipated it feeling. It felt gentle and safe, soft. It felt Pack, and it felt…a little annoying since the dream had been a good one, but Dean rolled from his side to his belly and watched them finish their cycle from a place inside their circle. He felt loved and welcome. He smiled softly when April came with a cry. Dean felt a vicarious twitch in his groin. He could relate.

Dean and Cas rounded the open doorway into Michael’s room, and they both blinked in surprise. The dim lamp was on, and Michael sat in his favorite chair with a mug in his hand and a rumpled pair of pajamas. Across from him on the loveseat, a robe-clad Naomi looked up from her mug with a startled face.

“I’m sorry, alpha,” she said quickly, setting the mug on the low table between them. “I shouldn’t be here.”

“Relax, Naomi,” Michael told her in a voice that held authority. “I invited you, remember?”

Dean blinked back and forth between them. He felt Cas sigh at his back.

“Neither of us were sleeping, Dean,” Michael explained. “I decided a cup of tea and a little talk might help. What time is it?”

“It’s about four,” Dean told him.

“I need to get going.” He turned to the woman across from him who hadn’t moved since setting her cup down. Her eyes were on the floor, and her hands were clenched in her lap. “I’ll see you after breakfast?”

She shot a look at Dean but avoided Castiel’s face.

“Naomi?” Michael asked again.

“Whatever you say, Michael,” she mumbled, standing up and walking stiffly toward the door without looking at the alphas in her way.

Cas put his hand on her shoulder as she drew near. “Mother, you are not restricted to your room unless your behavior warrants it. You’ve done nothing wrong. Please be at ease.”
She clenched her jaw and mumbled something before fleeing to the safety of her own space.

Dean watched her go and then turned back to his mate with a questioning look.

“She had a nightmare,” Michael explained. “She was freaked out enough to come poking her head in here. I was already awake, so I offered her a cup of tea. It’s not a big deal.”

“Wow,” Dean said flatly. He limped into the room. Cas followed him, supporting his steps until he could ease himself to sit gingerly on the bed with a tight grimace. Michael drained his mug and joined the couple, squatting lightly in front of Dean.

“Are you all right?”

Dean set a heavy hand on Michael’s head, then let it shift to the back of his neck. “I’ll heal. It was worth it.”

“And you, Sir? You’re finished?” Michael looked over his shoulder at Cas, standing imperiously behind him.

“It appears that way, Omega. I won’t be joining you on your run though, and of course, that means you’re confined to the treadmill downstairs.”

Michael rolled his eyes impudently, but nodded, patted Dean’s knee a couple of times and stood up to dig out his shorts.

“I expect you’ll spend the day resting up with your mate, Alpha?” Dean asked him as he worked through a series of muscle clenches to assess where he was most taxed.

“Actually, Dean, I need to stop off and visit Maureen this afternoon. Would you care to join me? It’s been too long since I checked up on Jeremy Lister.”

“Jeremy…? The kid who stumbled in out of his head and got every alpha on staff jazzed to stand in line to knot him? The one who made me wait four hours for you to show up that day? The one who screwed my Valentine’s Day?”

“Don’t be petty, Dean. He was in Heat. If you hadn’t been rebounding yourself at the time, Ellen would have put you at the front of that line, and you would have Claimed him yourself.”

“You don’t have to do that today, man. You need to rest.”

“You need to rest,” Cas told him bluntly. “I need to catch up on four days of missed work. I wasn’t prepared to cycle this week, Dean. I wasn’t expecting it until we returned from Dayton. I expected to have impending Rut to use during that presentation. I have work to do to get ready. We leave on Wednesday. I don’t have time to rest.”

“You can take a day, Alpha.”

“After I stop in to see Maureen and Jeremy, I plan to go by the Douglas County Animal Shelter to see the setup there. I want to scope it before I take April to select a pet. You may come along if you like, but you’re entitled to stay here and recuperate.”

Dean looked at Michael. The Omega raised his palms and his brows and backed away, stepping into the bathroom.

“And then you’ll rest?”
“Then I need to go over the list of facilities Pam and Meg have assembled for taking care of Mother. We need to get her settled soon.”

Dean struggled to his feet and limped up to Cas who looked like he knew what was coming. Dean whispered right into his face, “If you collapse from exhaustion because you push yourself when you need to be recovering, April’s going to go down with you. She won’t rest if you’re stirred up, Alpha. You two are too closely linked right now.”

Cas blinked and pulled his face back in surprise. It hadn’t been what he was expecting at all.

“I’m all right, love,” he told Dean with a kiss to his nose and a warm palm on his hip, slipping inside his bathrobe. “I’ll sleep until noon, and then I’ll only do as much as I can without pushing myself too hard. I would prefer you to stay in bed for the day, but I’m inviting you to accompany me because I want your good sense watching over me while I’m out. It’s entirely your choice.”

“And April?”

“I’d like to ask Michael to keep an eye on her while we’re out. She’ll probably sleep most of the day. I pushed her pretty hard.” Cas caught Michael’s eye as the Omega emerged from the bathroom, shirtless, dressed for his run. Michael’s adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed.

“I…Yes, Alpha. I can do that.”

Dean stepped away from Cas and limped painfully to his chest of drawers. “Cas. You can’t put her well-being in his hands. It’s not…it’s not a good idea.”

“Michael doesn’t mind, do you, Michael?”

Michael shook his head adamantly, wide eyed, praying Dean would keep his fat mouth shut just a while longer. Dean shot him an exasperated look but didn’t qualify his objection. Instead, he turned to Castiel. “I’ll go with you today, babe, if you promise to sleep until noon. Thanks for getting me up the stairs. I just need to move around a little, and I’ll be good to go.”

“All your good advice to me goes for you too, Dean. You should rest. There’s nothing you need to be up for this early on a Saturday.” Cas held his eye meaningfully.

“Got a breakfast date with my mate, Sir,” Dean responded.

“That’s not for a few hours yet,” Cas reminded him. “I want you to go back to bed.”

“No. It’s not. It’s a request from someone who cares about your health.”

Michael chuckled, stopped by Dean to kiss him sweetly and touch him lightly through their bonds to let him know he had eyes on his alpha even when they were separated, nodded politely at Castiel, and slipped out of the room with a towel over his shoulder.

Cas watched him go. Dean gave up trying to find anything appropriate to wear. He turned back to his Alpha. “Truth is, C.J., I need to get you back to yourself kinda in a hurry because you and me got interrupted when April went into Heat. We need to talk. I wanna get the wedding plans solid. And you need to hear some things about Michael and his…um…progress. If you pretend you don’t need to recuperate from this week, you’re going to crash hard later. That’s not good for anyone – not me and you, not April, not Michael…hell, it might carry over into your stand against Crowley next week. Please don’t ‘Alpha’ your way to a major fall. Please, Castiel.”
Cas nodded. “Scout’s honor, Dean. I’m headed back to bed right now. I assume you’re staying here. Would you like me to carry April upstairs and tuck us all back into the big bed? The staff is pacing the hall downstairs with cans of spray-cleaner waiting for us to clear out.”

Dean chuckled at Cas’ lightness. Cycling always left Castiel exhausted but lighthearted. It was a comfort to know that carried through even as his methods and his partner changed.

“Get her settled in the Master, yeah. I’ll join you after breakfast. I can get Monica to bring you trays if you want. You need a big breakfast, too.”

Castiel smiled at him. There was a palpable warmth between them. Dean was in near-excruciating pain, and Castiel was the cause of his misery, but neither of them felt weighted down by that fact.

“Thank you for last night, Dean,” Cas said simply.

“We both needed it, C.J.”

“Go on back to bed for a while,” the Dom told him. “I’ll have Michael wake you for breakfast, and I’ll let him know what your limits are this morning.” Cas’ visage changed to stern, and Dean’s body responded. “You are to make use of your good sense this morning, Dean. If he pushes you further than you should go, you are to respond like a mature and fully-trained Submissive. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Alpha.” Dean soaked in every feeling he could get to from those cerulean eyes. The pain in his body was a pale and powerless thing next to the surety and warmth in Castiel’s eyes.

“Back to bed, then. We’ll be down the hall.” Cas sat him on the edge and then fetched him a couple of Ibuprofen and a tall glass of water.

Dean drank and then settled into the mattress. “Pick a place that’s close-by,” he mumbled sleepily.

“What’s that?” Cas tucked him in.

“For Naomi. You and Gabriel need to be able to visit easily…and Michael, apparently. You need to stash her close to the house.”

“I’m not stashing my mother, Dean.”

“Whatever. If you send her to live in Rhode Island, it’ll make everyone miserable.”

“Everyone but you,” Cas pointed out, and Dean smiled.

“And don’t get a Springer Spaniel.” Dean was becoming loopy again as he fell into the comfort of Egyptian cotton.

“I’m going to leave it up to April. It’ll be her dog.”

Dean downright giggled into his pillow without opening his eyes.

“Laugh it up, fuzzball,” said Cas affectionately, and Dean popped up in delighted surprise at the reference.

“That was perfect, C.J.! You’re growing up so fast!” he sniffed in mock sadness.

“Watch it, Pet. You’re not too sore for me to go one more round on your feet.”
Dean pulled his feet up close, tucking in fetal-position and biting his lip, mumbling a quick apology.

Cas laughed. “And stop biting your lip. Go to sleep.” He leaned over Dean, kissing his temple, scenting his throat, nuzzling against him one more time. Dean marveled. Cas smelled stable, solidly Alpha, tired but not beat. Castiel had just put in four days of non-stop action, and he was in better shape than Dean who’d only done a couple of hours, really.

“Is Benny good with what he saw?” asked Dean sleepily.

“We’ll talk later, Dean. Sleep now.’

“Kay.”

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The pace of the afternoon was suited to the condition of both wolves. Cas still had dark circles under his eyes. Dean’s most difficult challenge was riding upright in Castiel’s car. The suspension of the Lexus was top of the line, but he felt every bump like a princess perched 20 mattresses above a single pea. He grimaced and grunted at each bump.

Dean’s mind was a bit muzzy from his long naps and a relaxed breakfast that Michael orchestrated to fulfill the remainder of Dean’s aftercare needs. Michael petted and cared for his mate, coddling him through the ache and feeding him with extreme tenderness. He asked nothing of Dean but that he open his bonds wide and let his Dom view the full extent of his condition and that he accept without protest all the care that was offered. The alpha-Submissive had no argument with being handled like a newborn princeling.

Jeremy was already at Maureen’s house when they arrived. He was bare-assed in the corner with his hands linked behind his head, standing in full view of the front door when alpha Maureen admitted her guests. She made no acknowledgment of her Omega ward as she handed out welcoming hugs. Jeremy’s ears reddened.

She filled the alphas in on his progress. He was in good shape, having weathered a Heat without incident. He had reconciled with his parents once they learned to trust Maureen’s process, and had himself lined out to return to school in a few weeks. Mostly.

“He’s nearly through with summer school,” Maureen explained to Dean when he flicked his eyes meaningfully toward the boy in the corner whose backside was red and shiny. “He missed enough of last year to need a catch-up plan. Most of it has gone well, but he failed his Biology test, and I learned afterward that he spent his study hours out with his friends. It was a test he couldn’t afford to fail.”

“Spending summer in school when you’re sixteen is no picnic,” Dean sighed in sympathy.

“What were you doing the summer you were sixteen, alpha?” Maureen asked shrewdly, and Dean shrugged and took another cookie. He kept a weather eye on Castiel as Dean stood beside the table, waiting for the order to have a seat. It didn’t come.

They didn’t stay long. Maureen allowed Cas to retrieve Jeremy from his place of penance and speak to him privately for a few minutes in a back bedroom while Dean sneezed at the ambient cat hair and showed his marked bottom off to Maureen. She was unimpressed. Dean decided that Cas had some
odd friends. Who could look at a masterpiece like that and not swoon in envy?

Dean made Cas stop at the barber on the way out to the shelter. It was time for Dean’s bi-weekly trim, and Cas’ hair was a disaster. C.J. laughed openly when Dean requested to be allowed to kneel on the barber’s chair. The ape with the clippers was baffled but shook it off and reached higher to get to Dean’s head.

And then twenty-five minutes of delight and bittersweet sorrow at the shelter. So many dogs. So many cats and kittens. Gangly full-sized cats and grizzled older mutts with defeat in their faces watched the men saunter past. Sometimes all they got was a half-hearted thump of a tail or a dismissive swipe at whiskers with street-worn paws.

The volunteer gave them a full tour. He explained the adoption process and encouraged the men to evaluate their lifestyle, so they didn’t make an unwise selection. Castiel was tight-lipped and withdrawn as he scribbled out a donation check and handed it over. Dean sensed his need to protect something, to ‘save’ something, and he insinuated himself at Cas’ side, leaning inelegantly against him, requesting aid in limping back to the car. Cas turned him to lean against the car and kissed him fiercely, his eyes pained. It didn’t matter that the animals weren’t human, Canid eyes in mute suffering were always going to hit the Alpha directly at his core. There was virtually no difference in the look in the eyes of those dogs compared to the deep anguish of Omegas pulled from bondage.

“Why isn’t there a sentient, bipedal cat species, Cas?” Dean asked as Castiel helped him ease into his seat again.

Cas chuckled and leaned in to kiss his nose, thankful for the distraction.

“Because cats are perfect as they are, Dean. They didn’t need to adapt further to a hostile habitat the way our forebears did.”

“Or bears, for that matter,” Dean suggested when Cas slid into the driver’s seat.

“Same answer.”

“No way,” Dean argued. “There’s nothing well-adapted about Pandas. It’s astonishing they haven’t gone extinct already. Or Koalas.”

Cas side-eyed him and started the car. “Koalas aren’t bears. Tell me about what went wrong with the Ozzie you mentioned yesterday. What have you done that made you feel so guilty you brought it up during playtime?”

Dean fidgeted before answering. “You asked me to confess stuff. It slipped out.”

“I get that. I’m not upset with what you said, Dean. I’m curious about what’s going on.”

Dean sighed. “You know Kyle Miller? He’s in red this week; part of the Ozzie class that Sonny was running. I gave it to Lisa to finish out.”

“I don’t remember Kyle Miller,” Cas admitted. It took Dean a moment to digest that. Time was, both of them knew every Ozzie in the joint intimately. Cas had pulled back dramatically, and it showed already. Dean stifled a moment of sadness as the premonition that he would one day face the same ignorance washed over him. He didn’t want that to happen.

“Well, he’s had a big backslide, and nobody saw it coming.”

“What happened?” Cas pulled into a gas station to refill his tank and check his destination again. He
typed the address into his phone’s navigational app while Dean put his thoughts together. They both got out of the car. Dean activated the pump and set the auto-cutoff trigger.

“We’re not 100% sure yet. Have to test some stuff, but we had him taking a few bits of his care on himself within three weeks. Sonny had a special connection with the boy, it seems. He’s one of those who shows indications of needing real supervision long-term. Give him too much to keep track of, and he loses his grip on everything. That’s the bit we missed. By week eleven, we’d been adding things bit by bit, and it tumbled apart. He was overwhelmed with more responsibility than he could handle, and he pulled into his shell like a turtle. Lisa didn’t know him well enough to catch it early. Now she feels like shit, and it’s not on her, man. It’s on me. I never should have pulled Sonny in the middle of a session.” He leaned against the top of the car on his elbows.

“You’re not to carry this in your bank, Dean. Look at me. Things happen. You’re not omniscient and neither is Sonny. It’s an honest...I’m not even going to call it a mistake. I read your plan. It made the most sense given the resources you had available. Ozzies are tricky, and sometimes it’s not possible to see everything they need before it rears its head in painful ways. He’s not hurt, is he?”

“Well, his ass is every shade of purple and brown known to man, but he’s not damaged long-term.”

“Well, his ass is every shade of purple and brown known to man, but he’s not damaged long-term.”

“Let it go, Dean.”

Dean put the fuel dispenser back in its cradle and tore off his receipt. “He’s got a wicked crush on Sam, too. We were all scratching our heads over why he’d plump up with a stiffy over getting his ass blazed by Sam in the lunchroom, when Sonny started laughing his butt off.”

Cas supported Dean’s elbow on his way back down into his seat. He gave Dean a quizzical look, so Dean elaborated. “Yeah, apparently, Sam Topped him at his intake, and Kyle’s been hot for my baby brother ever since. Sonny said he’s used it a buncha times in class to keep him behaving himself.”

Cas shook his head as he headed back around the car. “Lisa didn’t know?”

“She didn’t realize it was relevant. It wouldn’t have been except that Sam didn’t know either, and he convinced Benny we missed a pain-kink. Had us chasing geese for almost an hour before Sonny figured out what had us turned around. Once we got all the details on the table, things looked obvious. Kyle’s gonna need solid custodial care, C.J. I hate that.”

“I know you do,” Cas told him, looking across briefly.

“Healthy people should not need someone to run their lives for them!” Dean protested in frustration.

“Everyone’s different, Dean. Everyone has weaknesses. The Pack’s purpose is to flow over one another’s weaknesses in a way that makes everyone as stable as they can be. You know that April’s got much the same issue, don’t you? She would falter in a minute without someone scheduling her day for her. And yet, she is an amazing musician, a master mind-reader, and a hell of a Submissive. Her deficiencies are no worse than mine are, or yours. They’re just different.”

“Well, we’re changing his assignments. He’s not responsible for his schedule anymore. Jody will be setting his hours for him and escorting him until we’re sure what he can handle. Sam’s agreed to tutor him an hour in the morning three times a week. It’s a little cave to his crush, but Sam says it’s something he can handle. The kid needs a break, you know? Where are we going?” Dean finally looked around and noticed they weren’t on their way home.

“I want to stop in at the local care facility unannounced for a tour. Are you up to that much
“walking?”

“No, I’m really not. Can we make it short?”

“Of course, Dean. I’ll know most of what I need just from the scent anyway. There’s no hiding the smell of discomfort and anxiety. If it doesn’t smell right, we have no reason to come back for a more thorough examination.”

“Lead on, MacDuff.”

“What did you want to talk over about the wedding plans?” Cas prompted again, clearly working through Dean’s to-discuss list.

Dean worked a hand beneath himself and massaged a cramp with his fingers. “It’s about the ceremony after the ceremony.”

“Mm-hm?”

“I need to understand why you are so gung-ho about it.”

Cas looked across the seat at Dean in surprise. “I thought we’d already covered that.”

“You made it sound like you’re doing it because it’s what I want and what your wolf wants. What about you, Castiel?” Dean didn’t return his glance. He looked out his window as the car left the city of Lawrence behind and headed west.

“I’ll be honest, Dean. If you hadn’t asked for it, I would never have suggested the idea. But… I really see it as the best hope we have to make a stable union without fighting our instincts every day. Forget the fact that taking ownership of you soothes every fiber of my being, forget that putting on a Claiming show in front of everyone we care about is going to make me feel like a god, most of all, Dean, I want you to be happy. I know it’s going to make me happy to have you between my feet where you’ve always belonged. And by the sound of it, you expect it to make you happy as well. That’s the best we can ask of life, don’t you think?”

“So, all that egalitarian talk was bullshit? That was just to win me over?” Dean was still watching cattle.

“Are we having a fight, Dean? Are you angry with me again?”

Dean laughed, then closed his eyes to funnel the pain. “Nah, man. I’m not mad. I get it. You thought you knew what I would go for, and you aimed for that target. Guess I surprised the hell outta you by turning the opposite way?”

“Yes, you did,” Cas laughed, too.

Dean paused to think. “Kali said I’m trying to be your Omega. She said we need to be very careful.”

“Kali is a wise woman.” Cas kept his thoughts and feelings close. Dean couldn’t read him.

“She’s worried that alphas playing dress-up like this makes a mockery of what Omegas go through. She’s concerned that we only go through with it if we mean it for real. Cas, I…shit. I mean. Man, you need to understand this – I mean it for real. You know that, right?”

“I know, Dean.”

“I’m not playing a game. If there was a way to make it legally binding, I would sign that paper. You
get what I’m saying? I need you to own me the way an alpha owns an Omega. I can’t say it any clearer than that. Don’t do this if that makes you uncomfortable.”

Cas looked over again. “You’re the one who’s not meeting my eyes,” he pointed out. “Who’s uncomfortable?”

“Well, my asshole is melting out of my body, and I’m bruised inside all the way to my diaphragm, so forgive me if I’m uncomfortable.”

“Dean, we both agree that a standard, equitable marriage is unlikely to work for us, correct?” Cas checked his map and signaled a right turn.

“Mm-hm.” Dean sighed carefully.

“We both expected to install a Pack Discipline structure between us.” It was a statement, but Dean agreed again. That was a no-brainer.

“What we’re planning takes that about fifty degrees deeper. What you need to understand about me…I don’t show it often, but my Alpha and my wolf both locked onto you from day one and insisted I make a claim. I’m programmed somehow to need to own you. I have fought that urge every day since I fell for you out on the quad, watching you flirt with coeds you had no business playing with. Nothing on earth will settle me faster than taking your safety and care under my wing for good. It’s always felt like you should be mine, but that you were just one step out of reach. Even after we decided to marry, I didn’t feel right…not until you showed me that robe and told me your plan.”

“We’re True-Mates, aren’t we, Cas?” Dean’s voice was uncertain and soft. He had his head lowered. He looked as if he feared breaking something between them by saying the words out loud.

Cas glanced at him again. He looked back through the windshield.

He answered just as softly.

“Sometimes the Universe sets plans in place that get their wires crossed in the implementation.”

Dean looked at him.

“I can’t be an Omega.”

“That’s not what I need from you, Dean. I want you as you are. We don’t need a True-Mate bond to be right for each other. We have everything we need.”

Dean pressed his lips together and chewed them both into his mouth.

“Don’t we?” Cas asked, reaching across for his hand.

“Sometimes it feels like I mean more to Michael than I do to you.”

“That’s unacceptable,” Cas declared. “I need to fix that. You should never feel second-place in my life. You aren’t second-place.”

“I know.” Dean became pensive. He had a lot to think about. “You’re not second-place to me either, C.J. Me and my sister-wife can share you, but you’re going to be my husband; mine and no one else’s.”

Castiel smiled and pulled slowly into a parking lot beside a long, flat building. Behind it, surrounded
by fencing, were numerous small, pretty cottages.

“Sister-wife?”

“Mm-hm,” said Dean. “I really liked having her there last night. It was unexpected, but we totally passed that test. That’s another roadblock cleared on our way to a foursome. ‘Course, I need to hit you up with another one before we can take another step forward. Nothing’s ever easy for us, is it?”

“Another roadblock?” asked Castiel, putting the car in park.

“Yup.”

“And?”

Dean sighed. He couldn’t do this without his mate there. “Tell you at home. Let’s do this first.”

The facility smelled like a Pack home. Castiel’s eyes were everywhere, he checked the clarity in the gazes of the clients as he nodded politely at them. He asked questions of the staff at every turn. No one seemed surprised by his impromptu visit or put out in the least. They were pleasant and relaxed. Cas declined a tour of the staged bungalow and insisted on being shown an occupied cabin instead.

They accommodated him. Being famous had its uses. The elderly man in the little house they showed him to was thrilled to host Alpha Castiel Novak and alpha Dean Winchester in his tiny home. He shyly asked for a picture, so his granddaughter would believe him, given as he admitted, to flights of fancy in his dotage. Dean wanted to bundle him home and trade him for Naomi. Cas cuffed him hard without a word of reprimand. Dean just grinned at the adorable old fellow, who grinned right back and pressed a beer into Dean’s hand.

Michael’s big confession would have to wait. Dean sipped his beer and watched Cas poke his head into all the nooks and crannies of the little house. It needed to be suitable for an ex-Congresswoman in-absentia. It didn’t have to be large, but it needed to carry a certain degree of dignity. Naomi wasn’t going to slide into instability overnight, but there was no way of knowing how her beta and her front brain would take the next few months.

Dean distracted Homer with clever stories from the road that made the old guy laugh. He heard Cas ask about a waiting list, and he heard the awkward answer that allowances could probably be made considering she was a U.S. Congresswoman. Famous always works, apparently. Famous and wealthy.

Dean had pretended some time ago that he didn’t even hear Cas suggest hiring caregivers for her and moving her into the Guest house. Cas never brought it up again.

On the drive home, they were both businesslike. Dean said he needed to spend the rest of the day and most of the evening in the Pool house, working on his book. Cas promised to go right back to bed and try to sleep straight through.

Dean filled Cas in on a lot of what he’d missed at work – what he knew, anyway. The media circus around their names continued. It was an odd feeling to know they had that much of a presence in the mainstream of popular culture when so little of it touched them in their little Kansas bastion.

Billie wanted to brief Cas herself about the plans for addressing Crowley and the assembly. Cas confirmed that he had no intention of leaving Dean out of the discussion. Dean let Cas know that Billie found out Bela was double-agenting her ass off, and Billie was livid to have been left out of
the plan. Cas made a mental note to schedule time alone with Billie first thing Monday morning to
give her a chance to blow off steam without burdening anyone else. He’d known it was coming.

Dean also let Cas know that Benny was putting together a research study on the phenomenon of
merged psychological aspects, of designations taking a conjoined presentation, of their ability to
share control of the front face of behavior. Dean struggled to put it into words. He and Benny needed
to get the wording right. A well-worded hypothesis was the key to a useful research study with
actionable results.

“You miss a lot if you take four days off, man. Next time, try to schedule Rut over a weekend,”
Dean suggested. Castiel chuckled.

Cas asked Dean if he saw any chance that Michael might attend the convention in Charlotte, and
Dean answered firmly in the negative. Cas didn’t press.

They pulled in at home as Dean brought Kali up again. Cas confessed that Gabe asked him to set an
early wedding date. Gabriel wanted her, and he wanted her now. Castiel had Ellen working Kali
through her prelims to Keller testing, but he didn’t really need the test to know where she fell in rank
in the Pack. His reticence to give them a final okay was more about Gabriel than it was about Kali.
Dean stood by the car and sucked his teeth judgmentally.

Cas shook his head, but he wasn’t sure what Dean would think of his excuse. “My instinct says he’s
got at least one more bout of panic to get through before he’s ready, Dean. I feel like he’s in a hurry
because he can feel it coming, and he wants to be locked in before it hits. I don’t think it’s a good
idea to humor this impulse. I want them to marry because they want to, because they need to, not
because Gabe’s afraid he’ll run for the hills if he doesn’t marry her right now.”

“It’s all right to trust your instinct, Alpha,” Dean assured him. “You’re probably right.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. My brother doesn’t deserve the mess his mind puts him through, Dean,
but I can’t stop it from happening. All I can do is hold him together while he goes through it.”

“You’re not alone this time, Ceej. You’ve got Kali and me.”

“No, Dean.”

“No, what?”

Cas opened the door into the house and ushered Dean through.

“I draw the line at ‘Ceej’.”

Dean grinned as he limped in to find his mate. “Whatever you say, Alpha. You’re the twenty-five.”

Chapter End Notes

All righty. Quick note: On April 21, this little monstrosity right here turns one year old.
I’m headed out to spend a week with family and stuff, so this posting will be the closest
chapter to that anniversary. Happy birthday, babycakes! I love you! You fucking saved
me.

And you! All of you! You have no idea! Some of you have been with me from the
beginning, and some of you just joined WIP Hell recently. I adore this pack. It's unlike anything I have ever seen develop spontaneously, and I'm changed forever. I'm constantly honored and humbled at your generosity of heart and mind. You've meant so, so much to me, and you've helped me mold this story into something richer than it would have been without you.

And don't worry. Why stop before we've passed 1M words? Why stop? Why?
Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

Aren't Sundays just the best? It's a great time to get everyone together for a little bonding and some R&R, maybe reconnect, maybe clear the air, maybe trigger your mate with an unexpected dinner visitor that leads him to consider murder. Sundays are great! Oh, and April's finally busted. Sort of.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the happy anniversary wishes. I was doing nothing whatsoever related to my puppies on that date, but it was a lovely day anyway. I continue to be blown away by this pack we've become, and I was thrilled to get to meet mljmorris in person. Thanks for driving out for lunch and for sharing your beautiful family. That was a delight.

My travels took me kind of close, but I've still never actually been to Kansas. I'm not sure how that's possible. Missouri is beautiful. Oklahoma is...Oklahoma. What can I say?

Enough rambling. Go read the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 83 – Sunday, August 6, 2017

NOW:

As it turned out, sleeping much of Saturday proved to be essential to their recovery. Sunday was nonstop. Castiel spent more than two hours locked up in conference with Michael early in the morning before breakfast, teaching him calming meditation and picking apart the scene Michael and Balthazar envisioned line by line until they had a viable and mutually agreeable plan in place. Michael emerged pale and wan but determined. He found taking his place at the breakfast table harder than usual, but as Dean wasn’t up to snuff yet either, they both let the event pass without any extra measures, and they both appreciated a stress-free meal.

April joined them at church, fitting in as seamlessly as the other two. She folded onto her knees between Dean and Michael through the service, evidently comforted by the routine, although she didn’t participate in the rituals. Michael glanced around and realized most of the Omegas in attendance were equally uninvolved. They speckled the attendees throughout the congregation, nearly all of them on their knees, heads lowered.

“Should I be doing that?” he whispered to Dean with a meaningful glance at the pair in front of
“Not if you don’t want to, man,” Dean whispered back. “There’s no rule here. Most Omegas I know in this congregation find it comforting to kneel. But you’re not most Omegas.”

Cas paged swiftly through Dean’s scene report before they settled in for lunch with a put-upon expression. “Did you have to write it like a porn fic?” he asked without looking up. “I don’t need every grunt and gasp documented. I just need to know where your head went.”

Dean twinkled at him from his place in Cas’ office doorway. “You said to put in everything.”

“Yes. Thank you for your diligence, Dean. This will do,” Cas deadpanned, less amused than Dean had expected. “Come in and close the door. Let’s talk it through. I’m not showing this to Benny, and he’s asked for a follow-up.”

“Oh,” Dean shut the door and sat gingerly on the sofa. “I thought it was just for you.”

Cas nodded, still reading. His pupils dilated as he got into the really good stuff, and he blushed.

“Well, despite the exaggerated presentation,” Cas looked over the top of the pages with an annoyed expression, “you’ve given me everything I asked for.” He set the report down. “Do you have anything to add?”

“It was perfect, Sir. Everything you did was perfect.”

“Not too much? Not over the line? You took quite a beating. Can you honestly tell me that you enjoyed every stroke?”

“Every stroke, Cas.”

“And having an audience wasn’t off-putting?”

“I’ve played in front of April before,” Dean pointed out.

Cas was quick to nod. Then he added, “But never in front of my best friend; not like that.”

It was Dean’s turn to blush, and he focused his eyes on the floor between his feet. “I was always embarrassed before, man. Didn’t think I could let anyone see what a pansy I am in private. I only ever trusted you with that.”

“Change that word, Dean. Change it now.”

Dean frowned, but he didn’t look up. “You know what I mean.”

Silence stretched between them.

“You’re walking a fine line, Winchester. You know I don’t accept negative verbiage from you about yourself. You are in no way a “pansy.” I don’t even know what the word means.”

Dean sighed. “Fine. I, uh, I feel sometimes like the extent of my need to show submission while we play means I’m not a full adult, not a full man, the way you and Benny are. It’s embarrassing.”

“You don’t write anything in this report about feeling embarrassed,” Cas noted, picking the pages back up and scanning them again.
“No, I didn’t. Not this time. This time felt different. I wasn’t embarrassed. Maybe it’s Michael watching out for me from the inside.” Dean looked up bravely and met Castiel’s eye. “Maybe it’s having finally come all the way out of the closet to the whole world. I guess it’s all out there now, and there’s nothing left to hide. I gotta say, Cas, having Michael see right through me the way he does gave me a boost I didn’t expect. He doesn’t judge me the way I thought he would – the way I thought everyone but you would. He’s cool with me as I am. That helps a lot.”

Cas smiled slightly, showing warmth more in the crow’s feet around his eyes than in his mouth. “Tell me how it felt to have witnesses.”

Dean scrubbed a hand across the back of his neck and resisted biting his lip for the umpteenth time. “The truth is, it turned me on.” He blushed furiously and looked away again.

“Don’t be shy, Dean. There’s nothing to feel embarrassed about. I’m glad you enjoyed performing for an audience. You are beautiful, and it makes me proud to show you off.”

Dean scoffed. “You’ve been wanting to put me on display since way back, haven’t you?”

“I was never going to do anything you didn’t want, my love.” Cas stood up and rounded the desk to sit on the sofa beside Dean. He took Dean’s hand and held it between both of his. “One experience with an audience doesn’t have to change anything, if it isn’t what you’re interested in doing. I would enjoy showing you off, yes, but I don’t need it. You’re enough for me without that.”

“Michael needs it, Castiel.” Dean let Cas’ proximity wash over him, grounding him in Pack scent.

Cas smiled again. “Give him that if it’s something you can do without sacrificing yourself. If it pushes you into something that isn’t right for you, I’m not going to allow it. I need you to be straight with me. We’ll find another way to feed Michael if we need to.”

Dean put a thumbnail in his mouth and glanced up at Cas coyly through his lashes. He looked like he had a response but couldn’t force the words out.

“I see,” said Cas. “I went over Michael’s Ringmaster scene with him this morning. It’s a full gang experience, Dean. Are you certain?”

Dean looked away, losing the war against taking his lower lip between teeth and grinding down hard. Castiel’s grip on his chin brought him back round, and the Alpha’s thumb rescued the poor beleaguered lip.

“I want it bad, Cas,” Dean whispered.

“Why is that so upsetting? So, you never realized you have an exhibitionist side…why is it such a problem to accept this?” Cas searched his eyes.

“It’s not just an exhibitionist kink,” Dean protested. “They aren’t just there to watch! Hell, I always knew I liked performing. I love that shit. You’ve seen me turn it on for an audience before. This is different. Cas, I want to be a fucking slut for my mate! I wanna go completely docile and let them have their way with me. God, look at me, man! I’m getting hard just thinking about it. How did we never know about this before?”

“Dean, calm down. You’re getting worked up for nothing.”

“It’s not nothing!” Dean insisted. “What’s coming next for me? Huh? What am I gonna want next, to star in a porn film and air it in the seven o’clock timeslot ahead of Grey’s Anatomy?”
Cas squeezed his hand and looked intently into his eyes. “Aside from performing for general audiences, whatever you want, we’ll find away to give you. We can do it safely, baby. There’s nothing wrong with you. It’s not even an uncommon kink in Submissives. It’s okay, Dean. I promise it is. It’s okay to want to play like this. I want it too. So does Michael. So does April. You don’t see any of us beating ourselves up about it, do you?”

“And you’re an extreme Sub. Dean, you are who you are. It’s probably always been there, buried deep inside you, and it’s only coming to light now because Michael sensed it and called it forward. You remember how surprised he was to learn that you didn’t like him bringing Sam into your scene way back at the beginning? He knew, Dean. He knew from the very start that you have this need. It’s just taking you a little longer to come to terms with it too.”

“April’s Ozzie, Cas. It comes with the territory.”

“I’m Deep alpha,” Dean insisted stubbornly. “I’m not supposed to want to be the slut Bottom in a gangbang scene.”

Cas raised his brows and challenged Dean’s assertion silently.

Dean didn’t respond.

“Michael’s Omega,” Cas said firmly. “By that logic, he’s not supposed to want to take you apart and share the pieces with a pack of other men. But he does. Do you judge him for not staying in his lane?”

Dean shook his head slowly and closed his eyes.

“Dean Michael, if you crave this, then do it. Feed your wolf what he desires. Feed yourself and your mate. God, please let me watch,” he added as an aside, then he shook that thought off. “Don’t schedule it until you come to terms with it in your own mind though. Your psyche has had more of a struggle than it needs lately. There’s nothing about this scene that emasculates you. There’s nothing wrong with any of this if it’s what you both want. It’s just like any other type of sexual play that we do. I’m concerned about why you’re finding it so disturbing. You’ve done gangbang scenes before from the Top side. You know it doesn’t dehumanize the Bottom participants. It’s play. It’s fantasy. It doesn’t change who you are.”

Dean licked his lips and centered himself. He thought about it. “It’s not my wolf who’s begging for it, C.J. It’s not the usual capitulation he does to please the Top. This is me; pure front-brain me. What does that say about me as a person? Why would I get off on being humiliated and hurt? On being passed around like a piece of meat? I mean, it’s not just something I’m willing to do. Fuck, Cas, I’m drooling over the very idea. It feels like a ravenous beast just woke up inside me, and he’s starving for it, but it’s not my tertiary. Bring on the masses with their cocks out, Michael! Bend me over and use me hard, then wipe my ass off and throw me up on the shelf until you need me for a party favor again! And I’ll take every hit and every degrading word, and I’ll soak it up and feed off it.”

“And?” asked Castiel wisely.

“I’m an alpha, for fuck’s sake!”

“And?” he asked again.

“There’s a council on alphas somewhere in the Universe, man, and it’s keeping score like mad. I get dinged every time I roll unless it’s for you. I’m being judged for this, and I’m coming up short. I can feel it.”
“Is that so?”

Dean looked at him miserably. “You can’t know what this feels like.”

“The council leader’s voice wouldn’t happen to sound like John Winchester, would it?” Castiel asked.

Dean didn’t answer for a long time. “My butt hurts,” he said at last, rolling up to his feet and rubbing warm sensation back into his backside.

“Dean, you were too ashamed for years to think about bringing an audience into our scenes, but once we tried it, you found it fed your performance and heightened the experience. Is that right?” Castiel stood up too and faced him.

Dean nodded mutely.

“Then you may find you respond the same way to Michael’s scene. He’s planned it well. He’s got no one scheduled to participate that you don’t already know and trust. April and I both plan to be there, witnessing from the outside. There won’t be anyone watching that you don’t have a chance to approve prior to the start of the scene. We’re even calling off the alpha monitors outside. This isn’t a standard contract scene, and I can serve as your protection better than they would do anyway. Michael’s going to be homed in on your emotional state the whole time, and he’ll call it off if you become distressed. Plus, I know your tells very well. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. You can have this, Dean. It’s all right to want it.”

Dean gripped Castiel’s arm and leaned against him.

“You secondary and your tertiary know how to watch out for themselves, sweetheart,” Cas said softly. “I don’t doubt they could both put a stop to something that wasn’t working. What I don’t know is if you have that same strength of judgment when you play from the front.”

Dean glanced up at him and then pulled away and straightened. He nodded. “Yeah, man. It’s a weird feeling to play from up front, but I’m still in there. I can do it.”

“Good. This is not a time to trust the freefall, Dean. Not yet, anyway. I’d like you to try this with Michael. It sounds to me like the only obstruction holding you back is a sense of alpha expectation that’s left you fighting shame unnecessarily. There’s really no reason you have to feel shame. If that’s your only objection, then please be aware that it’s a false one. Think about it. Talk it over some more with your mate and let me know what you two decide.”

Dean nodded and then leaned into the Alpha. “Thanks, Cas.”

“Enough emotional turmoil for now, baby,” Castiel told him as he rocked into their embrace. “You’re both doing very well. I’m pleased with your commitment and your effort. I know it’s not easy.”

Dean sighed.

“On to simpler matters,” Cas said, changing tone. “The board has finally reinstated Donna. It took too long, and the books have suffered without her. She can get back to it starting tomorrow. I expect she’s well-rested after her leave-of-absence.”

“Don’t count on it,” scoffed Dean, taking the cue from his Alpha and switching mindsets. “She may have got off easy from the Board, with just a long vacation, but her mate wasn’t so forgiving. Jody made sure she got the message and won’t ever try to hide anything like that again. Donna put our
whole initiative at risk by keeping quiet about her screw up. I heard Jody promised a spanking every single day she was suspended. That’s a lot of trips over her mate’s knee, Cas, even for an Omega.”

Cas’ eyes widened. “Oh. Then I imagine she’ll be extra relieved to be reinstated. I’ll drop by tomorrow and offer her a cushy chair or a pillow. It was an honest mistake, Dean. That seems a rather harsh consequence.”

“You’re one to talk,” Dean said under his breath.

“You’re a much stronger brat than Donna is, my love,” Cas reminded him with a meaningful look.

“And you’re a stronger Top than Jody,” Dean shot back. Cas grinned at him like he’d just been paid the ultimate compliment. Dean rolled his eyes, rubbed his ass again, grimaced, and then sighed the remainder of his tension out.

“When do we go over the plan for Dayton?” he asked, changing the subject again.

“We have a conference call at two. We’re using the secure line in my office, but at this point, that’s really just a formality. I believe it’s all mostly in place. Dean, all I really need is a chance to address the assembled Boards. We can ease their concerns in a matter of minutes.”

“Maybe,” said Dean. “People are strange though Cas. They can turn in directions you don’t expect for irrational reasons. Some of those guys already have their minds made up against us.”

“Some of them do, no doubt. But all I need is a two-thirds majority. Do you believe anyone from the ACRI Board will vote for an alternative?”

“Of course not, but that still leaves a lot of wiggle-room for that slime ball to slither through.”

“I believe what we discuss this afternoon may soothe your discomfort somewhat,” Cas told him sincerely.

“Why does that make me even more uncomfortable? Shouldn’t it make me feel better?”

“Come on, Dean. I want to see what April’s up to. Matt will be here in the morning to get started on her work plan.”

“What about the other guy?” Dean asked, following Cas out into the foyer.

“Mark’s given notice to his employer. He’ll join us when his commitment to them is over.”

“Matt and Mark,” Dean mused. They strolled slowly toward the conservatory where a light piano tune sounded effortless to their ears. “Cute. And they’re engaged?” He didn’t wait for Cas to answer. “How do we make a ‘Ship’ name out of Mark and Matt? It’s just…Ma..rk, or Matt. Matark? Cas, they’re unshippable. It’s a doomed relationship.”

Castiel laughed. “You’re adorable, Winchester.” Then he stopped in the middle of the hall, thinking. “Wait. Do we have a ‘Ship’ name?” His head cocked in thought.

“What do you think?” Dean responded, stopping, and turning to face him.

“What is it?” Cas looked wary, like he didn’t really want to know.

“How are you this out of touch? They named us years ago. It comes up in magazine articles and crap. Dude, they tweet it at us all the fucking time.”
“Dean…” Cas whined.

“You and me, we’re ‘Destiel’. You and April are ‘Caspril’.”

“That’s not so bad,” Cas said in relief. He started walking again slowly. He took Dean’s hand as he came up flush with his fiancé. “What about you and Michael?”

Dean chuckled. “The leading option seems to be ‘Mean’, but I dunno, I’m leaning toward ‘Deachael’.”

“The whole exercise is extravagantly ridiculous. You know that, right?” Cas led Dean into the room and lowered his voice to keep from disturbing his mate.

“Well, and lately they’re working up a ship name between the two Omegas,” Dean tossed in. He watched Cas’ face, but the man barely responded. “I’ve heard, ‘Mipril’ more than once on Twitter.”

Cas just rolled his eyes and dismissed the topic as ludicrous before leaning over his mate and leaving a warm kiss on her temple. She smiled but continued the tune. Cas stood over her with his eyes closed for a moment and listened.

“Yours?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” she said without pausing her fingers. “Instrumental. I’m just letting it flow. Sometimes I find melodies like this…just opening myself up to whatever happens and listening to what my fingers do.”

“That’s remarkable, Kitten,” he told her sincerely. “Can you take a break for a few minutes?”

She stopped at once and rotated to face him. “Of course.” She grinned. She smelled stable and relaxed. She smelled…(all right, Alpha, you’ve eaten your fill over the last few days. Get your mind out of the gutter.)

“Have you talked to Matt yet about where you should start?” he asked as if he hadn’t just been struggling against his own libido.

“Not yet,” she said cheerfully. “Nick’s coming back tomorrow, and we’ll pick it up from there.”

Cas startled in surprise and looked from Dean to April and back again. “I thought Nick went home.”

April’s face was alight with life and pleasure. “He said he already had a month blocked off just in case. He and the others have been travelling around Kansas and Missouri over the last week, just seeing the sights and looking for the best pubs to play extemporaneous jam-sessions in. They’re out having fun, waiting for our cycles to end. He texted me this morning. They’re on their way back now.”

Dean smacked his lips. “And you’re the only one he told this plan to?”

April glanced at him. “I guess.”

Dean shook his head and met Castiel’s eye with a significant look. “You have some strange friends, man.”

“I’ll call him,” Castiel said firmly.

“You going to let him back in?” Dean asked.
Cas started to answer off-the-cuff, then he caught himself and slowed down. “Do you have reservations, Dean?”

Cas caught the subtle look of satisfaction flicker across Dean’s face before it disappeared. It seemed he might be getting the hang of bringing his spouse-to-be into the decision process the way they both wanted. It would take practice, but he’d evidently gotten this one right.

“Not really,” Dean told him. “Except half the team will be in Dayton from Wednesday until who knows when. We can’t leave them all here alone. I don’t know what your plan was, but Michael’s coming with. I promised he could be there.”

Cas looked back at April. “You cannot stay here without a pack alpha, Kitten, not if there are guests on premises.”

“Everyone’s going to Ohio?” she asked, looking disappointed.

“Everyone I trust to serve as your chaperone,” he admitted.

“What about Nick’s alpha?” she asked hopefully. “Can we bring her here?”

“Jenn is a busy woman, April,” Dean told her seriously. “It wouldn’t be reasonable to ask her to drop everything and fly west to sit here and watch over all of you. She’s not a babysitter.”

April’s exasperation at the idea that she needed babysitting flashed at Dean instantly, and it was a furious thing. Castiel cleared his throat, and she schooled her face with an apologetic look toward her mate. Dean watched the two of them carefully. Had Cas really seen it? Did he know that April had a deep emotional side that she kept mostly buried from view? Surely, he knew. It’s not something she could hide from her own mate, was it? Was that even possible? But Cas didn’t seem to have been responding to April’s little flare of stubborn backbone. He wasn’t even looking at her. He was deep in thought. Maybe that sound he made was nothing but a need to clear his throat.

And didn’t that just open a world of possibilities? Dean caught April’s eye again, and he narrowed his own. They would be talking privately. And soon.

She swallowed and blushed.

Hmm.

“No, I’m afraid Dean’s right, Kitten. Nicholas may have wasted his time hanging around for five days on the chance he could slide right back in and pick up where he left off. I cannot leave you here.”

“Ohio is halfway between here and New York, isn’t it? Maybe they can come too. We might be able to find some space with a piano. Surely you can spare someone to babysit if I’m in the same town as the rest of the contingent. Please, Castiel. I need to get going on this. Nick needs my help. He came all this way to work through the sheets with me and his musicians. It’s not the same over the phone.”

Cas frowned. He was clearly giving it deep thought.

She pressed, standing up and moving closer to him, beseeching. “It’s always going to be like this, my Alpha. Your work and my work will move us in different directions sometimes. Please don’t make me give mine up for yours…not every time, anyway. Please? You promised.”

“That’s a low blow,” he told her softly, wrapping a gentle hand around to hold the back of her neck with no correction, just connection.
“It’s the truth, Castiel.” Her baby blue eyes, still tired from her cycle, shone with fervor. “Is your work more important?”

Dean fought not to interfere. Of course Castiel’s work was more important. What was she saying? His gaze was locked on Cas’ face. A war was being waged in the Alpha’s brain, and Dean watched helplessly. The mates went inside themselves, blocking Dean from seeing where the argument shifted. Castiel wrapped fingers around her hip and dug them in, gripping tightly. His lip twitched. His eyes burned with possessive fever. The Omega showed no emotion whatsoever. She seemed immune to the tension in the room. She didn’t blink or look away. By all evidence, she was utterly passive in presentation, as if waiting for a delayed train and resigned to the inconvenience.

At long last, Castiel sucked in a frustrated breath and let it out slowly again. “I’ll arrange something,” he told her sternly. “I’m not happy about it.” As if that weren’t patently obvious.

“I can stay here?” she asked, clearly not daring to hope.

“You will follow every single rule I’ve set you, and I want to hear from you every four hours during your waking day. Consider this a test, April Renée. If it doesn’t go well – and I mean perfectly – we’re not doing it again until I have a permanent bodyguard established for your protection and your supervision.”

“Cas…” Dean started. Then he faltered and had to try again. “It’s too soon.”

“Thank you for your input, Dean,” Castiel told him. “This is between April and me. I have commitments to her that I mean to uphold.” He looked at her with the full force of his substantial Alpha supremacy. She met his eye, and Dean had to acknowledge she had guts. “She has commitments to me as well, and she will meet those obligations, or she will answer to me for her failure to do so.”

“Thank you, Sir,” she responded gravely. “I won’t let you down.”

Castiel called Maureen and arranged to have the alpha sleep over while the household alphas were away. April accommodated every request and every demand with aplomb. She was on her best behavior, barely willing to believe she’d succeeded in winning him around to her request.

She avoided Dean as long as she could, but he cornered her in her bedroom before dinner, his face a grim mask. He closed the door behind him and pointed her to the floor. She sank down onto her knees without complaint. Unexpectedly, he settled on the floor in front of her, sitting cross-legged on his butt.

“We need to talk,” he said by way of introduction.

“Yes, alpha.”

“Stop that,” he chided.

“Sir, I’m on my knees.”

And by training, she was right. An alpha didn’t put an Omega on their knees to chat informally. But
Dean and April worked differently, and he knew she could read him.

“What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?” she asked innocently. Oh, yeah. This girl was hiding something.

“Look at me, kid,” he more than suggested, and she struggled to comply. When she got there, he assessed what he could see, sense, and smell. He wondered if he even knew her at all. Her eyes were bottomless, it seemed, but the more he looked, the more he wondered if she wasn’t an illusion of smoke and mirrors. “How much does he know?” he asked vaguely, and he saw her react for just a flash before wiping the slate clean again.

“Dean…”

“Yes?” He didn’t lend her any comfort. She carried too much of the weight of their pack to let her control it too, and that’s what he suspected she’d been doing. He didn’t know how, but he wasn’t letting her out of this conversation until he understood.

“May I sit down?”

“Are you gonna level with me?”

“I want to.”

“Have a seat. Let’s talk.”

She shifted until she matched his pose. He recognized the submission in copying his posture. It was a tool he used himself often enough when he wanted to ease a Top’s mind without letting them know how it was achieved. He didn’t comment though. He leaned in close with his brows up, and he held her still with his eyes.

“Michael told me some time ago that you’d been playing with his emotions, but he couldn’t put his finger on what your game was. He asked me to stay out of it. Now it looks to me like you’ve got a scheme going with your mate too, and I want to know what you’re up to. Don’t bullshit me, April. You’re much more than you seem to be. Now tell me: how much does Cas know?”

“About what?” she asked, wide eyed.

“About you and what drives you to do what you do.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what you mean.”

Dean lowered his gaze and put his hands together in folded fists over his lips, his thumbs resting against his chin. He thought desperately. “Kid, I get it. You’re Ozzie, and the only power you really have is what’s between your legs and inside your head. I’m not going to take anything away from you. You can trust me. You sent him to get me out of hell. You moved over and made room for me when you didn’t have to do that. I owe you everything. I love you like my own blood. I’m asking you to trust me. We both want the same thing here, don’t we?”

“Do we?” Her eyes were searching just as fiercely as his were.

Dean knew she wasn’t going to give up anything she didn’t have to. His fingertips went numb. He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “I think we do,” he said. “You and me? I think we want exactly the same thing.”
“You want to be a world-renowned composer?” she deflected. He shook his head without giving in.

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“You’re confusing me, Dean.”

He thought about it for another moment. “April, you know what Cas and I are planning at our wedding.”

“I think it’s romantic,” she said with an adolescent sigh.

“Cut the shit, kid. You may have everyone else snowed, but I see right through you. The point is, I’m planning to turn myself over to him exactly as if we’d been mates from the start. That puts you and me in the same pool, and I want you to be straight with me. It’s not gonna work if you’re hiding shit from all of us.”

She shook her head and met his eye stubbornly. “You’re alpha, Dean. You can bend over every day from now until you die, but that’s never going to change. We aren’t in the same pool. We never will be.”

Ah, good. Now he was beneath that rock-solid defensive wall she had up. She was getting angry, and he could use that. He pressed in fast.

“How are you hiding your emotions from Castiel?”

“What? Why would I do that?”

“Are you in love with Michael?”

She shot to her feet in alarm and backed up until her legs hit the bed and she sat down hard. “What? No! Where did you…? Of course not!”

Dean stood up slowly and edged closer to her. “Why did Cas put you and Michael together in your Heat? Where did he get an idea like that?”

“Because I asked him to!” she said desperately. “It’s just an Omega thing! He said it was normal for Omegas in a pack to be drawn to each other. That’s all it is!”

“Is it? And if there was more to it, would you tell me? Would you tell Castiel?”

She gasped. “Dean, I’m not! Please, you can’t say something like that to him! He’ll tear Michael to pieces!”

“So, you’re protecting Michael.”

“No! I’m not…I’m not in…It’s not true!”

Dean took a knee before her and rested his hands on her hips. “April,” he whispered, “you’re hiding something big. It might not be this. Maybe I’m completely missing the mark, but there’s no mistaking what I saw. You go way deeper than you let him see. That shouldn’t be possible. Whatever you’re not showing him, it could tear everything apart. I understand why you do it, but I don’t understand how. It’s not good for you to carry it by yourself. It’s not safe. You need us to carry some of it for you. Is it just about your music? Is it?”

She’d begun to cry softly. “I can’t…”
“Yeah, kid. You can. Talk to me. Please. April, what’s wrong?”

She fought with herself. “Dean. There’s not a way for all of us to get everything. Keeping him stable has to come first.”

Dean nodded, but then he shook his head. “And then what? You just sacrifice yourself again and again? Don’t you matter too? Don’t I? Where does Michael fit? Do you know how he feels about you?” It was a risky question, but Dean didn’t plan to reveal anything she didn’t know already.

She flicked her eyes to his and then looked away swiftly and nodded. “I know.”

“Did you lead him there on purpose? Did you know where his pressure points were?”

She frowned again and shook her head. “It just happened.”

“You weren’t teasing him? Maybe trying to get a rise out of Cas?”

“No. It’s not like that. Michael, he…” she took a deep breath. “He sees me as a person before an Ozzie. No one’s ever looked at me or talked to me like that before. I didn’t mean to draw him in, but I’m so comfortable around him. I forget all the rules and all the restrictions and just let go of everything. I don’t know what to do now. Do you hate me?”

“Oh, Christ, kid! Of course I don’t hate you.”

“I would understand if you did.”

“April, you and me, we’re closer than any squabbling over mates, aren’t we? God, you’re like the sister I never wanted, but always needed. I mean, Samantha makes a fair baby sister, but you’re miles better than he is.”

“I don’t know what to do, Dean.”

“Do you love him?”

“I don’t know. I’m afraid to look closely. That’s how I keep it from Castiel. He can only sense emotions I look at directly. If I never acknowledge what’s roiling around in the pits, neither of us can see it. I can’t hurt him like that. Don’t you understand? He’s not like you. If I…if we…Dean, it would destroy him.”

“What else aren’t you looking at?”

She huffed a humorless laugh. “You saw that, didn’t you? He wraps me in kid gloves and treats me like a pup. It was a comfort at first, but it’s starting to get old. I’m growing up, maybe. I don’t know. But it’s starting to feel too tight. The thing is, I don’t think he wants to know a grown-up version of me. He likes having me as his own pet project, as his little ward. Don’t I have a responsibility to be what he needs me to be?”

“Forever?” asked Dean suspiciously. Surely, she wasn’t planning to shadow herself for her whole life. She just shrugged. “No.” Dean shook his head firmly. “Cas has never been a pup a day in his life. He was forty years old when he was born. And one thing I know about that man, he can handle anything.”

“That’s not true. You didn’t see him from the inside when we thought you and Michael were going to leave us.”
Us.

That gave Dean a new line to think about and made him frown.

“He barely held it together. He was terrified.”

“He knew about that from the start, didn’t he?”

She looked sheepish. “Yes, I think so.”

He thought about it. “But he kept it together, put a plan in place – a stupid plan, but whatever – and he got us all through it. Kid, he’ll do the same with whatever you’re going through. You need to trust him. Nothing you do could destroy him, not unless you walk away from him.”

She got that stubborn look on her face again. “I can’t show him the deep stuff, Dean. I’m going to regret the hell out of letting you see it. It’s all I have. If he gets his hands on that, I have nothing of my own. I am nothing. I can’t do that.”

“April.” Dean shifted closer until they were breathing the same air and their eyes couldn’t focus without going cross-eyed. “He’s not here to take anything away from you. God, I know it’s terrifying. I know. But he’s not going to do that. He won’t always give you what you want, but he’ll let you be whoever you really are. I know he will.”

She huffed again and gave him a sad pitying look. “How can you begin to understand?”

“That’s what Michael said,” Dean admitted sadly.

“I have enough, Dean,” she told him. “I get to keep my music. We can have a family. I have him, and you. I have Michael...for now.” She suppressed a shuddering breath and turned it into a firm statement of strength. “I have it worlds better than most Ozzies. He takes me seriously enough to bring in trainers and all kinds of resources to help me develop. What other Alpha do you know who would do that, even if they could afford to? I never dreamed I could have a Pack like this, or an Alpha like him.”

Dean didn’t share her enthusiasm. “You’re not a child, April, even if I still call you ‘Kid’, and you’re nobody’s burden. If you set yourself up like this now, when does it end? Is he going to be the only person who matters for the rest of your lives?”

“I’m auxiliary, Dean,” she said as if the statement were common fact. “Anything he grants me is a gift. I admit, sometimes I can sway or shift things one way or the other without anyone knowing it’s my work, but that’s as much as any Ozzie can hope for.”

He stared at her. Fresh from a fulfilling cycle, she was as free from the bindings of her designations as she could ever hope to be.

“What would it hurt to tell him all of this?” wondered Dean out loud.

She smiled. “He’s a very smart man, Dean. I don’t know if you’ve noticed. Plus, he’s extremely determined. Once he discovers that I’ve got a pirate’s chest locked away from him, he’s going to pry at the padlock day and night until he cracks it open, and then I lose the only power I have. Then he can take it all. I love him dearly, but I can’t let him take it all.”

Dean wrapped his arms around her. “I’m sorry, kid. I forced you into fessing up.”

“You’re going to tell him, aren’t you?”
“Don’t be afraid, April. I’m not gonna go running to tattle everything you tell me. I’m a brat, remember? I’m pretty good at keeping secrets. But here’s the thing: you should talk to him yourself. You’ve talked yourself into something that’s not true. He’s not like that.”

“He’s still Alpha, Dean. Just because he’s a good guy doesn’t mean he can stop being what he is.”

Dean backed up a little, so he could look at her again. “Start with telling him he doesn’t need to keep you in diapers. I suspect he’ll be relieved as hell.” Dean chuckled. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but you’re not really his type from a classic point of view. He usually goes for older, more experienced partners. I can’t tell you how surprised I was the first time I saw you or when I heard you were still a virgin when you walked through that door. I think the Universe knew you and he would grow into each other, but I don’t think it ever meant to freeze you in place at seventeen years old.”

“Older? Dean you were seventeen when he fell for you.”

“Oh. Well, yeah, but I wasn’t anything close to a virgin.” Dean blushed, remembering. “And he was a lot younger then too. You two are twenty years apart. It doesn’t make any sense unless you’re a whole lot more than you seem on the surface. That guy doesn’t need a pushover mate sitting at home waiting on his knot. He needs a challenge, and a partner. He needs an equal.”

“That’s right, Dean. That’s you.”

“No. There’s no version of him that is ever gonna be satisfied with a spineless waif for a mate. You two are True-Mates. That means you’re right for him, and he’s right for you. And yeah, I’m not going to pretend he doesn’t need me too. We know that already. What he needs from you is everything you can throw at him. God, April, you’re gonna be glorious once you stop being afraid, and he’s gonna be the one peeking out of the shadow you cast, not the other way round. Get in there and be everything you want to be and make him scramble to deal with it. Make him nervous. Piss him off with how much you demand he give you. Take it all. God, April, you’re gonna be glorious once you stop being afraid, and he’s gonna be the one peeking out of the shadow you cast, not you seem on the surface. That guy doesn’t need a pushover mate sitting at home waiting on his knot. He needs a challenge, and a partner. He needs an equal.”

She stared at him. “You’re joking.”

“I’ll tell you what I saw you try to hide in there earlier, kid. I saw a dragon peek its head out and then scurry back under. A dragon, not a fucking kitten. You know his rating numbers. You’ve felt his lash across your back. You know who he is. Show him who you are and make him watch you take flight and soar and make him green with envy. He has no one to look up to, April. He puts me on a pedestal because he needs someone to be in awe of, but I’m not that guy, and eventually, I’ll fall. But you. You really are that magnificent, aren’t you? You are everything he needs, if you’ll just let go of your fear over being an Ozzie and reach for it.”

“I can’t.” She sobbed again, and he took hold of her, kneeling high in his knees and pulling her in close.

“Shh. You don’t have to do anything today. Let it grow however it needs to. You’ll know when the time is ripe. You have a whole pack at your back, kid. We’re you’re biggest fans. Trust me on this. He may not need you to be a brat. You were right about that, and I had my head up my ass. But he doesn’t need you to live in his shadow either. You aren’t his pet, April. I am. You’re his True-Mate. You are Castiel Winchester’s True-Mate. Think about that for a minute. He hasn’t done a single thing in his entire life just halfway. He goes all out in everything. He can handle whatever you grow to be. And when he comes at you with a diaper pin, don’t stifle that stuff you let me see. Flare up at him and make him deal with it. Make him think about why he thinks you need to be babied like that
“You make it sound so easy. I’m not you though, Dean. My wolf rolls just from that eyebrow going up. I can’t stand against him.”

“Right.” Dean wrapped all his skepticism around the word. “You had it right there, kid, and you shoved it back under intentionally. You’re not standing against him, you’re standing up for yourself.”

“He’ll spank me for insolence.”

“Probably,” Dean conceded, “but you’re taking swats, what, two or three times a week anyway? Wouldn’t it be a nice change if they bought you something besides a clear head?”

“How do you know it would buy me anything?”

“Because I know him. You and he are set up for a lifetime of injustice right now. I don’t know everything, but I know he can’t abide injustice for long. He’ll put up with it for years if he thinks it’s the best thing for you, but it’s not, is it? He gets to go out there and be everything he wants or needs to be. You deserve the same. Once you stop hiding yourself and let him see that’s what you want too, he’s going to light up like the fourth of July, and it’ll make everything you two do together that much richer.”

“That, or tear us apart completely. I don’t know, Dean. It’s risky. There’s no putting it back in the box if it goes wrong. There’s a reason Ozzies learn to maneuver from the shadows.”

They stared at each other for a while, each weighing the other’s words, each poking at their new understandings from a new place.

“Dean, I never meant to toy with Michael.”

“Yes, you did. Haven’t we come too far to lie to each other?”

She didn’t answer for a minute. She didn’t deny either though. “Are you angry with us?”

He pursed his lips and weighed her. He cocked his head. “Are you done playing with him?”

She looked down sheepishly. “I never meant to hurt him. I genuinely thought he despised me, and I was trying on different masks to see which ones fit me best. I didn’t expect him to see through the game and fall for the person underneath. You know, he’s pretty sneaky himself, and it was catching me out that first got his attention, I think. He started looking at me differently after that, but it took me a long time to notice the change. Once I realized where his mind and his… Once I caught on, it was too late.”

“So, you knew he was a goner when you asked your mate for a side-serving of Omega during your Heat?”

“I was in Heat, Dean,” she defended. “I’ve never hidden that I’m attracted to Michael. I don’t know if you know what it’s like to be in Heat, but it’s hard to remember anything but finding a way to satisfy the burn. I wanted him really bad. I justified it in my head because I knew he wanted me too.”

She sighed and crumpled a little. “I’m so sorry. I think I broke him. He didn’t want a scene. I never dreamed he would just want to…Dean, your mate made love to me like I matter to him, and it was the sweetest anyone’s ever been to me in my life. I have no idea what to do with that. Maybe I love him, and maybe I just feel like he’s my savior. Maybe I’m just responding to the rush of feeling like a whole person for the first time, like a woman. It scares me.”
“It’s all right,” Dean assured her. “It’s fucked up, just like always…but it’s going to be all right.”

“Don’t tell him. Please, Dean. I may have a chance with Castiel, if what you say is true, and he can give me room to grow. But this thing with Michael…I don’t know which way I’m going. It would be a catastrophe if he found out I’m so turned around. He would come for me, and I don’t know if I can say no. I can’t do that to Castiel. I can’t do that to Michael if it turns out to be nothing more than a phase. I can’t do that to him, and I’m so sorry I ever played with him like that. It would’ve been you if you weren’t…you know.”

“You would do that to me?” Dean gave her a hard look, and she looked sorry, but not cowed.

“I’m not always a good person, Dean,” she admitted.

“Uh-huh. Spin me something truthful.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Try again, Omega. I’m not biting that lure.”

“You know why,” she said softly.

He nodded. “You thought manipulating us was the only way to get anything you want, and you believed that testing the fences for weaknesses would be the key to learning how to play us. You went for Michael first because he seemed like the weakest link.”

“I’m not proud of myself.”

“April, I’m not mad at you…exactly. I’m not really thrilled either, but I’ve seen Ozzies who’ve been put through the wringer. I’ve seen stuff that would make your hair fall out. I know how the world works. I know why it drives Omegas to go underground and turn Machiavellian in their scheming. I’m disappointed you would turn it on another Omega. You know what he’s facing, and it’s harder even than what you’ve got to deal with. He’s going to have the whole world clamoring for his destruction. The world hates an anomaly even more than it hates an Omega, and Michael is both. You know, when he first told me what he thought you were up to, he also begged me to stay out of it because he didn’t want to see you punished. He wasn’t even under your spell then – at least I don’t think he was. Now that I know you have a lockbox where you can hide your emotions, I have to consider that Michael might have one too.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

“No, not right now. Not like this.”

“Are you going to punish me?”

“If I spank you, I have to explain to Cas what it was for. I’m better at lies by omission than straight up falsehoods. What do you think? Are you ready to clear the air with him?”

“No! Please, Dean.”

Dean scrubbed his face fiercely with his hands. “Remind me not to demand answers when I don’t have a way to deal with them. Why do I keep doing this to myself? He’s going to be so pissed when it all comes out.”

“Michael or Castiel?”
Dean laughed. “Good point. Both of them, I guess.”

“I’m not ready, alpha.”

“Nuh-uh. Don’t try the pouty lip and the big blue eyes thing, ‘I’m not ready, alpha!’, Save that for someone who hasn’t been working with Ozzies for the last decade.” He pointed a finger in her face. “I’m on to you now, kid. Don’t try to play the kitten with me. I’ve seen the dragon, remember?”

She pulled her lip back in, chastened, and blinked seriously.

“Come on. Dinner’s probably on the table, and my ass is too sore to take a strap for being late.”

“Dean?” she asked as he pulled her to her feet.

He resisted an irritated response.

“Thank you,” she said.

He blew out a breath and wrapped an arm over her shoulders. “It’s what I’m here for, I guess.”

They made their way slowly toward the dining room. “You’re done with testing the fences though, April Renée. I know what to watch for now, and if I catch you at it again, I’m taking it out of your ass. You get me?”

“Yes, Dean.”

“Atta girl. I promised I’d always give you what you need even if I hate it, right? Well, I don’t believe you need to be punished for trying to survive and keep your head above water. But that doesn’t give you free rein to keep doing it like that. If you need answers, you can always come to me. Don’t play with your packmates’ emotions. We’re not your toys.”

“I understand.”

Cas rounded the corner from the kitchen into the dining room with a tray of chicken breasts that smelled strongly of curry. “Where have you two been?”

“Upstairs,” answered Dean with a wink at April and a gentle shove to send her to her spot. “Did you need us? You could’ve called for us over the intercom.”

“Never mind. You’re here now. Did you bring Michael with you?”

“He’s not with you? Cas, did you make dinner by yourself?” Dean asked in wonder, poking at the chicken on the tray in the middle of the table with a fork suspiciously.

“I had help from Kali on the curry, but I did the rest all by lonesome, and watch your tone. April, would you please fetch the potatoes? Dean, we need drinks for everyone. Christ, now where has Gabriel gone off to?”

Kali sauntered in with a bowl of steamed vegetables and calmly told Cas she’d sent Gabe out to wash up. “He’s coming right back, Alpha. Everything’s under control. Why don’t you have a seat? We’ll take care of the rest.”

Castiel’s face relaxed, and he dropped into his chair. Dean followed Kali back into the kitchen. “What was that all about?” he asked her.

“Our shepherd dog doesn’t like it when his flock wanders away,” she told him seriously.
“He was looking for us?”

“He was trying very hard not to go looking for you when every impulse told him to go/hunt/seek/find/protect. I taught him to make chicken curry. Pretend you like it tonight, would you please? He seems delicate for some reason.”

“Wow,” said Dean, wondering how Cas’ impulses knew he’d been in secret conference. Well, he was Mated to Dean’s conference partner. She was clearly quite stirred up, and that probably pushed Cas into paranoia himself. Now who was echoing?

“Are you sure you want into this pack, Kali?” asked Dean, working to fill a tray with glasses, a water pitcher, and a bottle of chilled white wine. “We’re nuts, I’m telling you.”

“I’d hate to get bored, Dean,” she replied calmly. “I’ll take ‘never a dull moment’ over a life of boredom every day of the week.” She pointed April to the potatoes, while grabbing a basket of rolls, and they walked back through together.

“Oh, no! Did I miss all the work?” mourned Gabriel with a searching look around the kitchen.

“Here, hero.” Kali handed him her basket and kissed his cheek. The sentimental expression that crossed Gabe’s face made April sigh with a soft, “aww,” and Dean giggle.


“You’re always starving,” April teased.

Dean set the tray of drinks on the sideboard with a frown. Where was Michael? It wasn’t like him to be late for dinner. Dean focused on his bonds and found his mate close and moving closer. He began filling Cas’ glass without another thought, but he nearly spilled it into Cas’ lap when Michael came in slowly with one hand supporting Naomi’s arm, and another at her lower back.

“Mother!” said Castiel, standing up and nearly knocking the wineglass out of Dean’s hand himself. He steadied Dean’s arm, glanced at Dean’s face, and then moved to intercept her. “I wish you’d told me you were planning to come down to dinner.”

“It was Michael’s idea, Castiel. I do hope I’m not…” She too glanced at Dean. “…unwelcome.”

“You’re welcome to join us. You know the rules. I’ll not tolerate intemperate speech. Neither will Dean. April, will you please collect a place-setting for my mother? Michael, please escort her to sit next to you. Dean, do you have enough glasses? Mother will be drinking water while she’s on her current regimen of medication.”

Dean didn’t move. He held Castiel’s wine as if it was a grenade with the pin pulled.

“Dean?”

Dean met his eye slowly. He set the glass on the table in front of Castiel’s plate. “Yes, Alpha?”

“I asked you a question.”

Dean kept his eyes on Castiel, but his entire focus was on the pair making their way to the chairs near his own at the other end. “Glasses?” he asked vaguely.

“Yes, Dean. Glasses. Are there enough, or shall I send April back for another?”

What was Michael thinking, befriending Naomi Novak? He had a strong caretaker vibe, and a
growing maternal instinct, but there was a limit to that kind of stretch. Michael knew what she’d always been. He could feel what her presence did to Dean. What was he playing at bringing her to Sunday dinner?

“Dean.” Castiel’s voice broke through his reverie. “A word in private, if you please?”

“yessir,” Dean mumbled, frowning at his hands. Hadn’t he just been holding a glass of wine? He followed Castiel out into the parlor, through it and across the foyer to the Alpha’s office in a daze. The door clicking shut snapped his focus back.

“Dean, are you all right? You’re scaring me.”

“Kinda a shock was all, I guess. Is she really staying for supper?”

“What do you need me to do, baby? I can take her back upstairs.”

“S’not my call, Alpha.”

“Dean! Snap out of it! You’re falling. Here, sit down. Sit right here. Jesus Christ, what the hell? I had no idea it was this bad.”

“Not…falling. Just…a little dazed. Kinda spinning…or something.”

“That’s it. We’re not doing this.” Cas sat down next to Dean and dialed Michael’s cell phone. It rang, and then went to voicemail. Cas tried Gabe instead.

“What’s the verdict, Cas? Everyone in here is wigging out. Is Dean still breathing this time?” Gabe’s attempt at levity didn’t reach a friendly ear.

“Can it, Gabriel. That’s not funny. Get her back to her room and tell her kindly to stay there. Send Michael to my office.”

“Um, ten-four, good buddy. Over and out.”

Cas hung up, pocketed his phone, and pulled Dean in to lean against him. “Follow my breathing, Pet. You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

“I’M your pet, Alpha,” he mumbled. “Not her. She’s a dragon, and you can’t keep a dragon for a pet. They’re not tame.”

“All right, Dean. We won’t get a dragon. Just breathe easy. Michael’s coming.”

“Michael! Fuck! Cas, Michael brought Naomi to dinner! Did you see? Calm as fuck, he just waltzed in with her, like they’re besties. Are they besties?”

“Shh. We’ll get to the bottom of it. No, Dean. I believe he meant to be kind. He’s not taking up with my mother. He didn’t intend to hurt you.”

Michael knocked on the door and poked his head in. He wasn’t escorting anyone, thank God, and he wasted no time in sinking to his knees in front of his mate. Dean gripped his head and sobbed over it.

“Did she hurt you, Michael? Are you hurt?”

Michael managed to turn his head enough to look up at Cas with frightened eyes. “What’s happening?”

“I was hoping you could tell me, Michael,” Castiel replied. “What does it feel like?”
“It feels like he’s in Subspace, Sir, like when he’s flying so high he loses verbal capacity.”

“But he’s not in a healthy place at all. This is very different.”

Dean was groping along Michael’s arms and back, searching for a physical injury. “Dean, stop it! I’m not hurt. For pity’s sake. Snap out of it! I’m okay!” Michael pulled free and gripped Dean’s face, looking desperately into his eyes. “Are you in there? Can you hear me?”

“Michael.”

“Yes. It’s Michael. Can you hear me?”

“Can hear you. You’re shouting at me. Course I c’n hear you.”

“What do we do?” Michael asked Cas. Castiel rubbed Dean’s back with an occasional squeeze to his neck.

“He had a full panic attack the last time the two of them were in that room together. It’s possible this reaction was his wolf’s attempt to protect him from that. He seems to have fallen into a deep tertiary mindset.”

“But what do we do?” Michael asked again.

“We don’t panic, first of all. Pull yourself together, Omega. Our Submissive is in distress. He needs us to keep a grip on ourselves.”

“Right. Oh, God. What the fuck was I thinking?”

“We’ll discuss that later. Right now, focus on Dean. Tell me what you sense from him. Speak calmly and with a soothing voice.”

“Yeah. He’s… floating. He’s confused and scared. He thinks he’s in danger, I think. Shhh, Dean. You’re all right. Can you look at me? Look at me Dean.”

Dean blinked a few times and frowned, trying to pull his face away, but Michael held him.

“Give it to your wolf, Michael,” Cas whispered to him.

Michael huffed a few rapid breaths through his nose. His eyes dilated, and his face changed its facets as if he’d slipped on a mask.

“Enough of this, Dean Winchester,” he said coldly. “Come with me.” Michael rose to his feet, offended that he’d been kneeling in the first place. “Right now!”

Dean startled and stood up, following in the Omega’s wake. Castiel slipped out behind them. Michael made a beeline for the stairs and took them two at a time. Dean stumbled after him. Cas shrugged at Gabriel who was on his way back down. Michael ignored Gabe, but he turned on the landing, took Dean by the upper arm, and marched him up the remaining stairs, down to the end of the hall, and faced him to the left at Naomi’s closed door.

Michael gestured sternly at the door with his chin. Clearly, it was an order, not a request. Dean shot him a pleading look, but Michael narrowed his eyes, and Dean somehow received a singularity through his bonds that was as effective a version of, “One,” as if Michael had said the word out loud. The passing notion crossed Dean’s skittering thoughts and left as fast as it came: could Michael send him a “Two” the same way? He didn’t wait to find out.
Dean put a shaking hand on the doorknob and turned it. He didn’t see April and Kali make the top stair and slowly edge down the hall in anxiety. He pushed on the door, and then the flying, soaring, bafflement screeched to a stop. An old woman sat crumpled on a fancy divan with her face in her hands. She was weeping. Dean stared at her. She looked up slowly at him.

Nobody said anything. Michael nudged Dean’s back gently, and he stumbled across the threshold. Naomi’s mascara, carefully applied for the first time in ages, had run all over her face, and it destroyed her attempts to look human. She didn’t look human. She looked pathetic. Dean approached cautiously, his head pulled a little to the side as if concerned she might jump at him with a switchblade.

Michael sighed in frustration. “I believe you had something to say to my mate,” he prompted, and Dean frowned. That was a corrective tone of voice, but he didn’t have anything he needed to say, and Naomi wasn’t Michael’s mate. He started to turn and face Michael, but an arm across his shoulders stopped him. The air around him filled with the scents of home and pack. His Alpha stood next to him on his left, and he slipped an arm around Dean’s back to hold his right hip. Alpha stood close enough to hold Dean up if he should weaken and fall. His scent was strong, bracing. Dean’s mate, on his right, was the one with his arm across Dean’s shoulders. He clutched Dean’s left arm and pulled him in tight. He stood tall. Much taller than most Omegas, and he smelled like nothing in the world could phase him. Dean was so tightly encased, he felt like nothing could ever hurt him, not least of which, the sad strange old woman on the divan. Dean smelled Gabriel and April. Kali was here. They must be behind him. They were close.

“Well?” said Michael’s wolf. “Go on.”

Naomi took a very shaky breath, wiped her eyes and collected much of the smeared mascara in her tissue as if she’d cleaned tear-stained eyes many times before. She nodded at Michael. Dean frowned deeper. She wasn’t a monster at all. This pathetic slip of a crone couldn’t have harmed his mate. What on earth had he been thinking?

“What…?” He turned to Michael.

“Shh. Let her talk, Dean. She has something to say.” Michael’s voice was a command as always when it came from the scraggly black wolf.

“Dean…may I call you Dean?”

“Call him alpha, mother,” said Castiel coldly.

“My apologies, Alpha. You’re correct, of course. I’ll try again.” She looked at her lap and wiped her eyes again. She had found a way to stop the tears. She looked up. She didn’t look Dean in the eye. She was clearly speaking to him though.

“I owe you deepest apologies, alpha,” she said. Dean couldn’t stop his eyebrows from trying to mate with his hairline. Possibly, the world had ended, and everything was on its head. Before he knew it, he’d laughed a loud guffaw. She startled back but braced herself again and started once more to speak. Castiel’s grip tightened on Dean’s hip. “I cannot atone for the damage I’ve caused you, but please know that it was never truly aimed at you. I have been unmercifully cruel over the years. I don’t ask your forgiveness. It won’t happen again.”

“Thank you, Naomi,” said Michael. “Your dinner will be brought up to you. I’ll see to it. Are you ready to eat, Dean?”

Heat flashed through Dean’s limbs, and his eyes went red. He tore free of Michael’s grasp, sending
Cas staggering a little as well and eliciting a soft, “Oh, shit” from Gabriel.

Dean rounded on Michael. “Thank you, Naomi?! Are you fucking kidding me?! That was some kind of fucking twelve-step bullshit?! Who do you think you are?! Do you have any idea what that did to me?”

Michael held his ground, his jaw working with restrained tension, holding in all the things he wanted to say but shouldn’t. “It’s good to have you back, alpha. Shall we eat?” he tried vainly. Dean closed his eyes and attempted a slow ten-count in his head. Murdering one’s own mate didn’t usually bode well for one’s longevity and mental health. Castiel’s arms wended across Dean’s chest from behind, crisscrossing over his sternum. It wasn’t binding, but it felt solid.

Cas huffed into Dean’s ear. “Let’s go, Dean. Don’t try to deal with him right now. I’d like to keep my Pack Manager out of the morgue.”

Dean turned his face in to Cas’. “I’m going to kill him, Alpha.”

“No, you’re not. He meant well. Come on. Let’s go back downstairs.”

“Gabriel,” Naomi called suddenly.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, stepping up quickly and taking her hand.

“I have to apologize to you too. My son! I’ve been a horrible mother!” And she was weeping again, clutching at Gabe with talon-like fingers.

“All right, Mom. I hear ya. It’s okay, now.” Gabe worked himself free and patted her gently on the shoulder. “Let’s get you some supper and then I think maybe an early night for all of us. Eh, Alpha? What d’ya say? Straight on to bed, right?” Gabe shot Cas a desperate look.

“I’m not going to drug her, Gabriel. But, yes, I believe that was enough drama for one evening. Good night, Mother. I need you to stay here in your room for the time being. I regret having to rescind your prior freedoms, but Dean’s stability is my priority. I’m sure you understand.”

“Maybe she could wear a bell,” Kali suggested, leading an unsteady April from the room. “That way we could hear her coming and scuttle Dean out of the room.”

Even Gabe’s eyes showed shock at her lack of sympathy, but Kali just shrugged. Dean began to laugh. They made an odd assemblage shuffling down the hall. Dean was flanked by his two Dominants. April had Gabe and Kali on either side. Dean giggled intermittently, repeating quietly every now and then, “Get her a bell, Cas.”

“I’m not putting a bell on my mother,” Cas finally said to soothe him. Maybe to shut him up. The manic giggles were becoming an annoyance. “What designation is he in, Michael?”

“He’s tertiary, Alpha,” said Michael dully, helping Dean through the door and back into the dining room.

“Indeed? Was that not his alpha back there? He looked alpha to me.” Cas presided over the pack retaking their seats. Naomi’s abandoned place-setting looked horribly lonely beside Michael.

“He was alpha for a moment, Sir, but he couldn’t hold it once you took hold of him. Sir, I believe that was enough to knock him back into his wolf.”

“I see,” said Cas conversationally. He sat down. “Interesting. Kali, would you please start the
chicken around? Eat, everyone. It’s getting cold.”

Dean fumed quietly at the end of the table, incensed at being denied his request for a bell and grumbling under his breath. Michael ate silently. He kept his head down. Cas, Gabe, and Kali chatted amiably, pretending they could salvage the evening. April shot looks down the table at Dean but couldn’t connect. Eventually, she slid off her chair and took to her knees beneath the table at Castiel’s knee. His armor crumbled a little, and weary grief crept into his eyes. He pressed a warm hand against her cheek, and she turned into it, seeking comfort.

The chatter stopped. Gabriel leaned back and looked at the ceiling with a hopeless expression. Kali leaned in to rest her head against his chest. Castiel bowed his head over his plate and attempted to gather himself.

“I mean,” said Dean into the somber stillness. “If she had a bell, we would always know where she is.”

Michael bolted from his chair with a green cast to his face, and a hand pressed tightly over his mouth. He dashed from the room, heading into the kitchen. They heard him vomiting violently. Dean stumbled after him.

The four people left at the table sat in silence, listening to the mates try to form some kind of coherence. Each of them seemed to be trying to care for and comfort the other, and each of them tried equally valiantly to slough off the care as unnecessary.

“I don’t suppose he’ll be trying to administer family therapy again any time soon,” Gabriel observed as Michael heaved noisily into the sink again.

“Thanks, Gabe,” said Castiel. “That’s helpful.”

“So…strappings all around, no? Who’s getting it first?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Cas, mystified.

“Oh, well. I mean, Michael’s a no-brainer. That one’s easy. Dean’s stuck as a Sub again, and we all know how that works. Kali, here with the smart mouth and the inappropriate jokes. I think she deserves a belt or two.”

“And you?” posed the Alpha. “You’re including yourself? What for?”

Gabe wiped a hand over his mouth, squeezing the flesh between his fingers as he drew his hand down. “Oh, well, I mean…I probly did something in there. I dunno. April? Come on, help me out here.” He tuck low to look under the table, but April just stared at him miserably.

“See, Alpha? Even your mate’s off-kilter. Come on, bro, let’s get this party started. No time like the present.”

“Are you trying to tell me something, Gabriel?”

“Who me? What? Nooo. What would I…?”

“If you need it, all you have to do is ask.” Cas set his napkin beside his plate.

“Oh. Right. Well. The thing is…”

Kali still had her head down on his chest. His fingers had been flowing through her hair, but now
they clenched tightly and tangled up a bit. She grimaced and flinched. She’d been scenting him and listening carefully to his words as well as his body.

“Gabe, let go!” she demanded. To Castiel’s astonishment, the Omega obeyed. “Sir,” she said calmly, sitting up straight, but leaving a hand wound with his in his lap. “Would you please excuse us?”

“Of course, beta. Do you require any assistance?”

“No, I believe I can handle your brother on my own. Come on, Omega. Dinner’s over.”

“Thank God,” he said as she pulled him to his feet.

Cas pushed his chair back as they departed and looked sadly down at his mate. “Are you all right?”

She nodded. “I hate seeing him like that. It scares me.”

“He’ll be fine in a bit, Kitten. Come on up here with me. I could use a little comforting myself. That was an unsettling experience.” He helped her rise and settle across his lap.

“I think Gabriel’s right,” she whispered into his neck.

“You too?” he asked, although he knew the answer already.

“Yes, please.”

“All right. Let’s go check on the boys, shall we?”

She nodded mutely.

He carried her for a few steps, but she wiggled free, and he set her placidly on her feet. The kitchen was empty. They found Dean and Michael showering together in the Master bath, barely even pretending to wash. They were so wound around each other that it wasn’t possible to tell through the fogged glass where one body started and another ended. Dean had either forgiven his pregnant mate or he had suppressed his anger for the interim until Michael felt better.

Cas settled April on the bed, but she dropped off the end and back onto her knees like a silk robe flows from the edge of a bureau. He set a benevolent hand atop her head and sat down on the bed to wait.

They didn’t have to wait long. Michael and Dean emerged, leaning on each other, still damp and still rubbing towels over one another awkwardly. They moved together as if drunk, but they stopped short when they saw Castiel. Dean licked his lips and jolted awkwardly when Michael dropped to his knees without warning.

“Oh. Right.” Dean dropped as well.

Cas closed his eyes for only a moment, then he firmed his breath and opened them up again.

“Michael Quentin,” he announced. “My pack is unsettled this evening.”

“Yes, Sir,” said Michael with his head down.

“Look at me when I’m speaking to you, Omega,” snapped the Alpha, and Michael’s head popped up.

“What do you suggest I do about that?”
“Sir, you should punish me. That was a stupid thing to do. I should have asked. I should have run it by you first. I’m so sorry. I worked on her for days getting her ready for that, but I never thought about how it would make Dean feel!”

“Be easy, Omega. I will take care of you shortly. I need you to understand though; none of us saw that coming. I am guiltier than you are for taking her in and allowing her free range about the house. It didn’t occur to me either that Dean might respond like he did. You are not responsible for his drop, Michael, at least not directly, no more than I am. Your error was in taking her in quite a cavalier manner without consulting me or Gabriel for input. You understand now that that was foolhardy?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

Cas nodded. He turned his attention to April. “As for you, my dear. You found the experience quite distressing and would benefit from a powerful experience that serves to take you out of your head, correct?”

April nodded solemnly, but Michael flared loudly. “No, Sir! She hasn’t done anything! You can’t!”

“Silence, Omega! You forget yourself!”

Michael whimpered.

“Dean, my pet? What can I do for you?”

Dean shot a worried look sideways at Michael, but he couldn’t pretend he didn’t know where this was going. “Sir, I need to cry it out.”

“I see. Are you certain, Dean? You have committed no offense.”

“Yes, Alpha. Please.”

“You are in poor shape to take a punishment, pet,” Cas reminded him. “That leaves me few options.”

“Yes, Sir,” said Dean. “I trust you, Alpha.”

Michael sniffled. “It’s not fair, Sir,” he said quietly.

“No, Michael. It’s not.”

Cas took April first. He didn’t go long, but he meant business. He couldn’t feign anger enough to help her Release chemically, but he got her present enough in her own flesh, and out of her head, to get to a finish line of sorts emotionally. Afterward, he petted and soothed her. He helped her to climb under the covers where she watched the proceedings with her head pillowed on her arms.

Cas put Dean up on the bed on his belly next. He applied a stinging switch to the soles of his feet and his calves. Dean flinched with each strike, but he stubbornly refused to cry until Cas approached the tender flesh at the backs of his knees, leaving welts behind, and driving Dean past his dogged endurance. He gasped all at once, and then sobbed into his arms. He never asked his Alpha to stop, and he lay supremely still until the blows stopped and he hiccupped his way to join April beneath the covers.

“Michael, please lay yourself out over the back of my settee. I need your feet twice the width of your shoulders, and I need you to stand very still.”

Michael took his position with care. He couldn’t see Dean well from this position, but he could feel
him. Dean had been so angry, but the man who cradled Michael’s head as he heaved up the small bites of dinner over the sink hadn’t been anything but loving and concerned. Michael was confused and remorseful. He couldn’t imagine what it was about Naomi that drove Dean into the darkness like that, no matter how bitterly hateful she’d once been. The strap landed across Michael’s backside, and he flinched. The next one made him grunt. The Alpha at his side said nothing, but he vocalized his effort as he applied the wide strap with a deep resonant grunt of his own at every swing. Michael’s tears sprang free in no time. He needed to hear words. He needed to be told everything that had gone wrong hadn’t ruined everything, but Castiel said nothing.

Michael broke.

“I’m sorry, Sir! I’m so sorry!” he cried as he sobbed. “Please forgive me! I didn’t mean to hurt him again!”

The strap stopped falling. “You didn’t hurt him, Michael. I did that. This is entirely my fault. You’re only in this position because you need to experience your regret physically to let it go. Have you finished, or do you need more?”

“More?” he asked in dismay.

“It’s up to you, my sweet boy. How much do you need to let it go?”

“It hurts so bad,” moaned Michael, rolling sideways a little so he could look at his mate. He saw his alpha watching him stoically from beneath the bed covers. He touched Dean’s mind. Where Dean had been floundering helplessly minutes ago, he was now calm and at ease. He blinked at Michael but offered him no guidance. Their eyes locked.

“Three more, Sir,” he said at last. “Make them count, please.”

Castiel didn’t correct his position. He let Michael stay canted to one side, so he could keep Dean’s eyes. He landed three hard swats while Michael forced his eyes to stay wide. The humiliation of having his bare ass strapped in front of Dean and April while they both looked on took Michael the rest of the way. He felt miniscule next to the Alpha, and he felt honored at the same time. He didn’t try to examine the feeling. He just breathed and allowed tears to track sideways down his face to drip from the tip of his ear.

“Up you go, Michael.” Cas helped him stand. “Go slowly. You may feel dizzy for a moment.”

Cas put Michael in bed on Dean’s far side before sliding in beside April. She sighed and shifted into him. He scented her. Her Heat was well and truly gone, and with it any chance of filling her belly with life.

Next time, he thought possessively. Next time.

“You’re wrong, Cas,” said Dean from his place between the Omegas.

“Wrong about what, Dean?”

“It’s not all your fault. It’s nobody’s fault but hers…and mine, I think. She went at me for years before I let you know what was going on. You didn’t know what it was doing to me any more than Michael did.”

“She’s my mother, Dean. She’s my responsibility. And I’m Alpha. Of course it’s my fault. I should have been more cognizant. I’m no good to you if I can’t keep you safe. She moves out tomorrow.”
“You don’t have to do that,” said Dean. “She’s not the same to me now. Michael had the right of it, even if he did it in a poorly timed way.”

“Poorly executed too,” put in Michael with his head turned away from the others.

“But it worked, guys,” said Dean more strongly than before. “Don’t you see? She doesn’t have the same power over me that she did.”

“We don’t know that for sure, Dean. I’m not going to risk it. And besides, as much as it bolstered you to have the pack stand with you, it was just as powerful a message to Mother that this pack won’t stand with her. She is more alone than ever now. I need to get her out of this house. It’s toxic to her. No matter what she’s done, I won’t make her stay here and attempt to cope with that on her own.”

“Alpha,” moaned Michael.

“Michael, don’t,” said Dean. “You didn’t do anything hurtful on purpose. Roll onto your back and press into the pain. Trust me. It helps. Let it go, man. God, I’m sorry I scared you like that. I was trying to claw my way back up, but my wolf had me by the scruff, and he wouldn’t let me surface.”

Michael whimpered as he felt the intense burn flare. He pressed down into the bedding until the waves of heat died out into a nearly numb throb. “It’s not helping Dean.”

“Oh. It always helps me.”

April giggled unexpectedly at Dean’s effort to guide his mate through processing a strapping.

“Something funny?” asked Michael.

“Little bit,” she admitted. He humphed and rolled up onto his side so he could press back into his mate.

Cas stayed with them until two were sleeping. Michael wouldn’t fall asleep for some time yet. “Stay here and try to sleep,” he advised. “I’m going to go clean up downstairs.”

“Please, Alpha. May I come too?” Michael sat up with a pained tightness to his face.

Cas nodded, and they slipped out together. The Alpha didn’t mention that Michael hadn’t bothered to grab his robe. Nudity and Omegas went together seamlessly much of the time. It felt like an important milestone to see Michael forget to think about it. It was an inherently Omega thing to do, not to eschew clothing to make a statement of some sort or to attempt to manipulate someone else’s state of mind, but solely because he’d forgotten to consider whether he was clothed or not. Cas smiled subtly as they entered the dining room again and began to clear away the ill-fated curry and its accoutrements.

Castiel sent Michael back up to bed once the kitchen was in order. He slipped down the hall to check on his brother. He found Gabriel and Kali fast asleep. Cas pulled the door closed silently. He leaned against the wall outside Gabriel’s suite and listened to the house settle. He had so much work to do before Wednesday, but he felt woozy with exhaustion. What he wouldn’t give to climb back in his bed between Dean and April and let sleep take him. He pushed off the wall and plodded wearily up the stairs and down the broad hallway, counting off rooms as he passed them. Sam’s and Jess’ on the left, April’s on the right. The big Master in the middle on the right with two unoccupied guest rooms across from it. A couple of rarely used sitting rooms on each side and branching hallways that led off to the TV room, the living room, all the comfortable places his home had to offer. And then, at the very end, Michael’s room stood on the right, and Naomi’s on the left.
Perhaps it had been their proximity that brought them together. Naomi wept frequently these days, and Michael was nesting—nurturing a maternal instinct that grew deeper by the hour. Perhaps he heard her crying alone in her isolation, and he couldn’t bear to leave her in such a state. Whatever the case, Michael’s instinct to repair and protect had harmed not just one person, but two quite badly, and Cas hadn’t seen it coming.

He paused outside her door, reaching inside himself for strength. Then he opened it and slipped in without knocking. She looked up at him, bereft. She didn’t have anything to say, but she curled into him when he sat beside her and enfolded her in his arms.

It was going to be a difficult conversation and a very long night.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, I'm still trying to sprinkle literary or pop-culture references here and there through the narrative, and I was mildly disappointed that no one challenged my assertion that Dean would quote Shakespeare in the last chapter. He's a bright guy, PhD and all that. He's no slouch, but Shakespeare? You're not supposed to let me get away with bullshit like that.

Carry on. I love all y'all.
Chapter 84

Chapter Summary

Busy, busy chapter. The four of them break their own rules, or plans, or whatever, but that's par for this course. Really, they should give up trying to make plans at all.

Another whipper-snapper attorney falls prey to the Alpha. Sarah learns to feel her way through, we catch up with Meg...

Um, and April tries a straight-on presentation for maybe the first time in her life.

Busy chapter.

Chapter Notes

It's full-steam ahead - at my usual turtle's pace.

This chapter introduces a plot conflict established some time ago that I need to go backwards to fix. The upshot is that there truly are more than one potential TM for each person. There was a note a long time ago that no one was really sure. Oops. Uh, yeah they are sure. I'mma fix it shortly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
NOW:

Cas woke to warm moisture at his knot – right on the bulge of his knot – surrounding his knot. He groaned and spread his feet wide, noting the tone shift in his head indicating that his mate appreciated the improved access. Small fingers, chilled from a long night’s stay above the blankets, grasped his testicles and kneaded them gently. Jesus, what a thing to wake up to. Cas ran both hands through her hair and encouraged what she was doing as his blood sped swiftly to parts previously unattended.

April turned her attention to the head of his cock, wrapping that warm moisture around just the tip and tonguing him to a full erection. One or two easy pulses of his hips later, Cas brought her out from beneath the comforter.

“How do you breathe under there?” he asked rhetorically just before kissing into her mouth. She tasted minty. She’d already been up and about if her morning breath was gone. He sent her regrets that he couldn’t say the same, but she dove back in for another deep kiss and let him pull her into the movement of his hips.

He’d barely slept at all. Maybe two hours. Probably not, but the daily grind waited for no man, and Castiel had things to do today. Important things. His mate knew that, but she also knew that a deep and satisfying round that moved the blood from one extreme in his body to another would always be more effective than caffeine at waking him up, and it was early yet.

It was an easy thing to find his place in her body and to let his hips take him where he wanted to be. Everything about her fit him, and she settled her forehead into the soft space at his throat as she handed control over to her mate. Her rounded back, the space between her shoulder blades where he could almost see angel wings attaching, gave him a place to spread his thick fingers and dig in.

Cas was aware that their movements had woken Michael on the far side beyond where Dean lay curled, but he didn’t look across the pillows at the young Omega. Michael, for his part, wasn’t looking at their coupling either, but his nostrils flared and he had one hand in smooth motion on himself while another gripped his own mate’s messy brown hair. Michael lay high on the pillows with his head resting up on the curving iron of the bedstead. He had to know there would be consequences for breaking his mate’s ‘No touching’ rule, but he’d obviously calculated it worth the trouble. Dean’s head lay still in the middle of Michael’s belly. Dean could sleep through anything at this hour.

Everyone seemed determined to keep blinders on for the moment and pretend they weren’t diving wholeheartedly across the boundary line they’d all drawn together. April had her eyes closed in the warm scent of her mate. Cas stared blankly at the ceiling while he broke his own rules, waiting to find out where Dean’s mind would carry him once he awakened. Michael huffed a controlled breath through his lips. His eyes darted swiftly sideways and then snapped back to the back of Dean’s head.

“Come on, guys…” whined Dean, turning so that his chin pressed into Michael’s soft belly and sleepy eyes blinked unhappily up at the Omega. “It’s not even morning yet.”

“Dean,” whispered Michael, touching his mate’s cheek.

Dean’s eyes slipped closed, but he wasn’t sleeping. He was gathering himself. His mate was in dire need, and early or not, he knew he couldn’t ignore it. “Fine,” he grumbled. “Take your hand off though. I’ll do it.”

Dean repositioned awkwardly. He curled his knees beneath him and turned to face his target.
Michael was wet and slick already with arousal. Dean, fetal position and folded tightly with his bottom faced directly toward Castiel’s bright eyes, covered his Omega’s entire cock with his sleepy mouth and began to work him over. His mate’s pleasure wove into his own as he moved, and he began to enjoy himself. Dean’s sleepiness was slow to evaporate. It was a soft and sluggish alpha who bobbed languorously on Michael’s ready cock.

Castiel was not looking at the ceiling any longer. Dean’s backside showed marks across its full span. They were predominantly Castiel’s marks, weren’t they? Were any of them Michael’s? He couldn’t remember for sure. Cas felt hot blood coursing along wide open passages, setting his limbs on fire. He felt alive and powerful. He clutched at his mate and he turned his attention back to her. She was watching his face hungrily. Cas looked across at Michael. Dean’s mate met his eye with wide-eyed dismay. He appeared to be holding on to his control by his fingernails. Michael’s mouth was slack, and his tongue lolled in his mouth as he panted.

Cas tried to hold back, but the heat reached his face and made his eyelids flutter. His mouth fell open to match Michael’s and with a mighty push, he forced his knot up and past and in and locked, and he came hard with a shout. He pulled his mate’s body into his and he pressed teeth covered loosely by his lips into April’s mate-scar even in its tender unhealed redness, and she bucked and pulsed above him.

Nobody moved for a moment aside from the breaths they couldn’t subdue. Cas stared at April, reaching through to reassure and hold her. She looked back at him, trusting, still.

Dean released Michael and turned his head to the side. He didn’t move otherwise.


Cas reached a hand out and touched his curved lower back. “Dean, we’re…we’re tied. Stretch out and let Michael…”

“NO! Please! I want you. I want you both.”

Cas licked his lips and looked back at April. “Can you roll with me? It might pull a little.”

“Yes, Alpha. I’m with you. Go take care of him.”

“Shit,” they heard Dean mutter. He pushed himself off of Michael and moved upward to kneel by his head between his mate and his fiancé, on his knees facing Michael. He took hold of Michael’s jaw in a sharp grip and looked fiercely into his eyes. A quick glance down at his hungry cock and back at Michael served as all the instruction Michael needed. Dean looked angry, but he wasn’t. He was in the grasp of a wave of powerful emotion, tucked beneath the surf of pack pheromones and pressing desire. He wanted them both, and he wanted them right now.

Michael moaned a mourning loss that his own need would have to wait, but he rolled onto his side, and wrapped his lips around Dean’s length, pressing in slowly until he felt his lips stretch wide and his throat catch.
“Michael, I need you to talk to me,” said Cas with his hands on Dean’s cheeks and his face close enough to bite if he’d wished to. He lay out on his side, and April found her balance beside him, folded awkwardly between the three men. She had few options but to press her weight into Michael’s hip. Her eyes stuck with her Alpha even as her silky hair spread across Michael’s groin and fouled in the sticky slick he and Dean had spread along himself.

Michael pulled off and looked up at Dean. His mind quested Dean’s for certainty, for signs of wrong, for hints that he was pushing into something for false reasons. Dean closed his eyes and let Michael dig. He could feel his sister at his right thigh. She rested a hand on him near his knee. He carefully, gently moved her hand and placed it on Michael’s belly. She gasped softly and shifted until she was clear of Dean, even incidentally.

“Are you sure?” Michael asked him. “Dean we don’t have to do this this way. You and me, we can go next door. I’ll take care of you, alpha. Let me take care of you.”

“No. I want you both. I want…he knows what I want. I’m good. Just do it. God, fuck, Michael, please!”

“Say it, pet,” Cas touched his ass with a flat tongue, just tracing lightly. Chill bumps. They burst out everywhere.

“Lick…use your tongue. Sir, please? I wanna feel you fuck me with your tongue, and I wanna come down Michael’s throat. Can we…? Please? I’ll be good. So fucking good for you.” Dean’s left hand white knuckled the iron bedstead.

“Hm,” Cas responded. He touched April’s mind. She was watchful and careful. She seemed guarded, but her body wasn’t uncomfortable folded between the others and tied fast. He turned back to Dean.

“Is he all right, Michael?”

“He’s horny, Castiel. He wants it for real, and he doesn’t seem bothered by April. I think we’re good, Sir.”

“Sit up, Michael. I want the three of you looking at me.”

Dean rolled his eyes impertinently, but he settled back on his heels and made room for Michael to push up beside him. April clung to Michael’s hip as he shifted, and her hand went right back to rest against his belly. Michael’s hand covered April’s and pressed into the softening padding where his body was preparing to cocoon the pup’s growth. He winked at her, and she smiled back.

Castiel noted the exchange with approval. Now that they had their taste buds whetted with one another’s distinctive flavors, all the tension was gone, and they smelled and behaved like Pack Omegas should. “We’ve talked about trying this, but all of our plans thus far have been bowled over by heated moments and a ‘Try anything’ mentality.” Castiel met each of their eyes in turn as if he were seated at the head of a conference table and not naked and still hard, his knot buried within the musculature of his mate’s body.

“Alpha…!” Dean moaned piteously, wrapping his arms over his head. Cas looked at him and continued anyway.

“I very much want to carry on what we’ve started,” he assured Dean. “I want that badly. But we haven’t discussed this, and we’re not taking one more step forward until we do. For myself, waking up wrapped in the scent of all of us sharing a nest together feels righteous in a way I could never
have predicted. Taking that a step further and joining bodies in the same way feels just as right to me.” He paused and looked at each of them again. No one responded. “But that’s just me.”

“Good talk,” asserted Dean, shuffling around to resume his position. “Let’s hit it. Michael?”

Cas’ fist in Dean’s newly shorn hair pulled him up short. “It’s not all about you, Dean.”

“What? Yes, it is! We were all holding out to make sure I wouldn’t feel wiggly having girl parts leaking all over the bed. But I’m not! I’m good! Cas, I’m good! Michael’s good. April already got her some, so she’s good. You’re killing me! You assholes woke me up with your bed-rocking at ass-thirty in the morning. The least you can do is put me outta my misery!”

“Would you care to rephrase that, Winchester?” Cas asked, close to provoked.

“Nope. This? This is not a scene. I’m keyed up. I’m ready. I want it. You two want it. Let’s do this.”

“Not a scene? Dean, you ‘Sir’d’ me,” Cas pointed out. He did release Dean’s hair though, and he signaled Michael to lay out again.

“And you called me ‘Pet’. But I never agreed to Sub for you this morning. I’m not taking anything that wasn’t offered.”

“Dean,” said April softly. “Let’s try not to make him angry just yet. I think we should make it very clear. If you’re okay with this, I’m okay too. Michael?”

“Whatever. I’ve about lost what I started with what with all the yammering. Y’all just tell me what we’re doing. Is it a go, or not?”

Castiel sighed, but he pressed a hand to Dean’s shoulder and kicked his head to get him back onto his knees. Once Dean was there, Cas pressed his back until he lay across Michael’s face. One hard smack to Dean’s ass earned him a satisfying yelp, and then he was helping Dean back up and into position.

“Why must you always provoke him?” asked Michael, orienting himself to Dean’s substantial cock with one hand and a questing tongue.

“He loves it, babe. Yeah. More of that. Ya feel what that does to me, right?” Dean grabbed the iron bedstead again and settled, leaning forward to grant them both access from opposite sides. He could feel the Alpha’s hot breath and pointed tongue along the hot curve of his ass where a brand-new handprint had formed. Cas didn’t bother to deny that Dean’s style of taking the lot of them through to the next stage made his blood sing. In truth, Dean was absolutely right. He loved the perky brat with all his heart, and he wanted to give him everything he had.

“You know…” said Michael, popping free of Dean’s dick with a loud smack. “I’m not getting much out of this, and there just so happens to be an available orifice right there at my midsection. If she wants to, of course. If you two don’t mind, of course…” Michael trailed off and dove right back in to work Dean over as if it didn’t much matter to him one way or the other. But he canted his hips to make himself quite available to the Ozzie.

The Ozzie, for her part, licked her lips and pulled her head clear of Michael’s groin with a hopeful look towards her mate. With the angles they were all forced into to get Dean situated, she had nowhere to go but right back across Michael’s hips. It really did seem a plausible form of kismet and an unnecessary torture if they denied the Omegas their chance.

Dean didn’t answer out loud. Michael felt him send caution, but not outright refusal, and that was
permission enough for Michael.

Castiel closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the divot of Dean’s ass as he worked it through his mind. They were seeking approval for April to touch Michael, not for Michael to take April. They weren’t in Heat, either of them, but if a foursome was what they all wanted, then didn’t that by default mean he’d already said yes to this in theory? Plus, he was right here. He was tied to her, for fuck’s sake. How much tighter claim did he need? Cas felt Dean reach back and scrub blunt nails through the hair at the nape of his neck to soothe him. April hadn’t moved. She opened her bond-link wide and let Cas see that her loyalty wasn’t wavering.

It’s just sex, he told himself. He breathed in the scent of his tightly-woven pack, and he grasped Dean’s hips in bruising fingers. The bruises wouldn’t likely even show up amid the mess he’d left before. Dean pressed back into his head and pulled him in with a cupped hand at the back of his head. Cas chuckled at his impatience.

“Go ahead, April. If you want to, only if you want to,” Cas told her. “If you don’t, Dean can take care of his mate.” He delved back in with lips, teeth, and tongue, plundering Dean’s sweet puckered target and devoting his attention there. He dismissed April and Michael but for a corner of his mind that locked onto her and her sensations. He knew she’d taken the offer, and he knew she was proceeding with gusto, but he had work of his own to focus on, and Dean was already lost to the grinding pulses from back and front at once.

“I’m not writing a report for this, Alpha!” Dean hollered at him from inside the shower not fifteen minutes later. “It wasn’t a scene!”

“It was both a new experience and one that challenges your assumptions about your sexuality, Dean. You most certainly ARE writing it up for me. And make it a report this time, not a smut rag.” Cas tapped his razor on the side of his sink and turned his face to begin shaving his left cheek.

“Spoilsport,” Dean groused as Michael tipped his head back to shampoo his hair. “Takes all the fun out of spontaneous sex.”

“No one forced you to participate, oh sweet brat of mine,” Cas sang at him with a smirk. Then he turned to address his other Sub, soaking in the bathtub at the far end of the long bathroom. “Five minutes, Kitten. You owe me for taking liberties without permission. Meet me in the bedroom.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, a bit surprised. “I’m sorry, Sir.”

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“You owe me one hell of an apology, Alpha,” Billie stated around the rim of her cup.

“I regret that it became necessary to exclude you from planning activities, beta,” he responded just as coolly.

“That isn’t what I’m looking for here, and you know it.”
“It’s all you’re going to get. Don’t press. You know well that there are times and circumstances that require me to skirt the standard pathways.”

It was too early in the day for popcorn, but Dean, his feet crossed casually on the broad black conference table, adjusted his own cup of coffee to the purpose and watched them bicker. Billie shot him a death glare, and he winked cheerfully at her.

She turned her attention back to Cas. “How am I supposed to protect you and your interests if you don’t tell me what’s going on? Fuck it all, Castiel, we’ve been through this again and again. You and I are a team. This is a pack endeavor. When you blindside me, all kinds of fucked up shit could go wrong – and usually does. I was ten minutes away from having Bela’s kneecaps sliced to shut her up.”

“You wouldn’t have done without running it by me first,” he reminded her. “Not if you plan to maintain your position.”

She rolled her eyes and huffed in exasperation. “You know what would be a nice change? If you and I could pull the same rope in the same direction for one fucking day. Tugging at odds like this is a catastrophe waiting to happen. You can’t keep me in the dark and expect things to magically work out.”

Cas didn’t give. “Billie, your experience, your integrity, your presence, and your initiative… I need all of these to help us get where we’re going. I don’t take you for granted; quite the opposite in fact. What we did in placing Bela where we did had the potential to go disastrously wrong. It was critical that the number of people involved be minimized, and it was critical that you be on the outside. You are my public face to the world. You couldn’t know until she’d achieved her goal. It was too dangerous – too dangerous to Bela. I never expected that you would appreciate my position on this, but there was no way I was going to tell you. That’s the end of it. Be as angry as you like, but despite the two of us sometimes leaning into different lines, we are still guiding this ship in the same direction. Not every hand can pull from the same place in the rigging.”

“Fuck your marine metaphors, Alpha,” she bitched. “Did Dean know?” She adamantly refused to look at him again.

“From the beginning,” Cas answered. “It was Dean’s idea.”

“But Sam didn’t,” she said. “I caught Sam fuming about Bela jumping teams. You both lied to him, too.”

“As I said,” Cas sighed. “The circumstances…”

“Your circumstances are going to tie a noose around your stiff neck one day, and be the death of you, Castiel.” Oh, yeah. Billie was angry, and she wasn’t buying the company line.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked patiently.

She sat forward aggressively. “What I want you to say is that your sorry and you’ll never pull a hood over my eyes like that again, but that’s not coming out of your mouth, is it? I guess that leaves me with mopping up again. ‘Cause, boy, do I love being your janitor!”

“Damn, Billie,” Dean muttered.

“Shut up, alpha,” she snapped.

Cas didn’t call either of them down. He looked between them for a moment, but he thought she
deserved a chance to vent her spleen, and he and Dean could take it. For several minutes, she fumed quietly. The alphas let her think. Finally, she seemed to come to a decision. She pointed a finger at Castiel.

“You’re going to make it up to me.”

“Oh? How am I going to do that?” Castiel never disciplined Billie for her sharp tongue and brash demands. He’d only spanked her once, and that had been years ago. It was for keeping her opinions to herself when he needed honesty and bluntness. She never made that mistake again.

“You’re taking NPR’s interview request this morning. You’re doing ”Meet the Press” on Sunday. Live. In studio. And you’re going to instruct Dean to pick two appearances on my list as well. I don’t give a flaming rat’s behind which two.”

“Aw, man! Please don’t make me…”

Cas silenced Dean with a look. Dean desisted but took to quiet grumbles under his breath as soon as the Alpha looked away.

“…And you’re going to speak with ”The Wall Street Journal” about the merger as soon as we can go public with the final decision,” she finished up.

“Done,” said Cas, laying his palms on the table and pushing his chair backward.

Billie startled at his abrupt and complete acquiescence. Her eyes narrowed. “You were going to do them all anyway, weren’t you?”

Cas’ smile was subtle and kind. “I need you, Billie. Please don’t lose faith in me. You’ll understand when it’s your time to take the mantle. Some choices are more difficult than others. Many of them have no good answer. I couldn’t risk Bela’s safety. You speak to too many people to have us take the chance that someone might see through something you’d not said.” He stood near her and touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “I’ll do whichever interviews you recommend.”

“And Dean?”

“Dean will do what I tell him to do.” A trace of humor made it back into his voice.

“HEY!”

“Good,” she said firmly. “Then I DO have a preference. I want him in ”Classic Car” with his sweaty shoulders on display and his knuckles grimy. I want them to get a shot of that ass for the cover.” She stood and turned her attention back to Dean, whose face had frozen in a beet-red look of shock. “It’s the least you can do for setting me up to look like a fool in front of the whole leadership team, and don’t give me that look. You love it.”

Cas studied Dean from behind the beta, and saw him struggling to find a way to say yes without looking like he was giving in. Showing off his Baby as well as himself was never a hard sell, but he was caught in a brat’s dilemma. He couldn’t agree without appearing to be caving to the pressure, but he’d be roasting in hell before he could bring himself to say no. Cas took it out of his hands.

“He’ll do it, Billie.” He shot Dean an assertive look. “He’ll do it, and he’ll make it good. Won’t you, Dean?”

“I…uh, Yes, Sir. I’ll do my best.” Dean’s blush deepened, and he locked onto Cas’ confidence.
“That’s what I thought.”

“God, the pair of you. Excuse me. I need to go throw up.” Billie scooped her papers into a pile and left without a backward glance.

Cas broke out into a hearty laugh. Dean chuckled. “She’s pissed at you, man. Why do you let her wind herself up like that? Why don’t you brake her like you do everyone else?”

“What would you prefer, Dean? That I should ask her to temper herself for my comfort? I need someone who isn’t intimidated by me, someone who will always give it to me straight whether I want to hear it or not. Plus, Billie has no need for outside assistance in regulating her emotional swings. She can do that well enough herself.”

“Ouch,” mumbled Dean, sliding to his feet.

“That’s not a dig at you, my love. As I said recently, we are all different. Billie has her weaknesses too. She tends to be too rigid when situations call for flexibility and creativity. She’s an idealist who cannot make allowances for alternative views that may have validity but clash with her world view. She will struggle with that her whole life, I expect, because the world is an untidy place.”

“And,” said Dean, brightening at his own epiphany. “She doesn’t get to fuck you.”

“No,” Cas allowed, holding the door for Dean. “She doesn’t.”

 Cas used his office phone for the radio interview. It was high time he made a statement anyway. His mother wasn’t going to return to her office in D.C., and the public deserved to be made aware.

“Rumors have surfaced in recent days that Congresswoman Novak is in mental distress. Can you confirm her condition? Do you know where she is?”

“She is currently at my pack residence under a doctor’s care. I have no comment on the details of my mother’s condition,” Cas said firmly into the headset. “But I can confirm that her health has taken a grim turn and that she will not be capable of seeing her term through to the end, nor of standing for another election. She is withdrawing from her seat in Congress.”

“That’s a surprising turn of events, Alpha,” the interviewer remarked. “What are your expectations? Will there be a special election or an appointment to fill the gap? Any chance that you, yourself, might be named as a successor until the election in November? There are precedents, Alpha, for a next-of-kin to step in and complete a term in cases like this.”

“There is little time between now and the general election in November to try to piece together a special election. It would be a waste of taxpayer funds. But in any case, I’m not a suitable replacement, Greg. Congresswoman Novak’s staff is in consultation with her to name a stand-in. It will be someone who shares her mission and her views; most likely someone who has worked closely with her for some time. The electorate of Kansas made its will known at the last election, and they deserve to have that decision honored. It’s no secret that I oppose most of my mother’s initiatives in Congress.”

“Have you mended any of the very public rifts between you and the Congresswoman since her
unfortunate illness?"

“She is and will always be my mother,” Cas said in rote. “She is my Pack. I am her Alpha. For any of your listeners who don’t know what that means to a wolf, all I can say by way of explanation is that personal rifts between us don’t extend below the surface. We are family, and we always will be.”

Greg didn’t pursue that line of questioning. Cas was a closed book where his relationship with his mother ran into public statements. “We’ve been hearing disturbing rumors for months now, Alpha Winchester; rumors about Mrs. Novak’s alleged involvement in the bombing of the Lupin hospital in Oklahoma. Her office has categorically denied any involvement, even so much as bombastic egging of her decidedly passionate base. Would you like an opportunity to speak to the rumors, sir?”

Cas resisted sighing audibly. “Not especially, but I will do so anyway. There is no truth to those rumors. Naomi Novak had no part in that egregious act of senseless violence. She is unequivocally innocent of any involvement. The investigation into what happened is still underway. I have confidence that the investigators will get to the bottom of what happened, and the guilty party or parties will be held accountable for their actions. It’s time to stop casting random spotlights about and hurting innocent people. We must allow the FBI to do its job. They have far better resources than we to get to the bottom of the matter without relying on rumor and speculation.”

“Then,” the interviewer pressed. “Her abrupt and unexpected disappearance from her own staff had nothing to do with a rumored mental breakdown brought on by pressure from an impending indictment by the FBI?”

Castiel actually laughed, then he scrubbed his face with his free hand. “Not that I’m aware, Gregory,” he chuckled. “I’m not aware of an impending indictment. Are you?”

“Um, no Alpha. It’s as yet only a rumor.”

“Ah. A rumor.” Cas didn’t complete the thought. He skipped past the logical fallacy. “I’d come to expect better from NPR than rumor-mongering. Let me be very clear. My mother is very ill. She is not going to improve sufficient to retake her seat or stand for election again. From this point, she is withdrawing from public life, and the details of her condition are private. She is not, however, quaking under the expectation that she’s about to be taken into custody by the FBI for conspiracy in plans to explode a Lupin care facility. Those rumors are patently false. Congresswoman Naomi Novak dedicated more than ten years of her life to public service for this country. She did so to her best ability, with integrity and conscience. She is a paragon example of right action. No disagreement about direction of moral compass between her and me changes that. She has conducted herself to the highest ideals of government service, and she has earned her country’s gratitude and respect. She has earned the right to retire with grace.”

“Alpha Winchester, we’ve not heard you come out strongly in your mother’s defense like this in some time…”

“She is ill, Gregory. Kicking an infirm woman when she’s down is surely beneath even rumor-mongerers. Besides, it’s the simple truth. No matter our philosophical differences, she has always been above reproach ethically. Dragging her name through the mud at this point for the sake of ratings is beneath you.”

“Alpha Winchester, there are more than a few supporters in Kansas and around the nation who have begun to raise their voices to encourage you to throw your hat into the ring for public office. Have you considered running for your mother’s seat in the next election cycle? Or perhaps for the Senate seat that opens next?”
“I despise politics, Greg.”

“That’s…not a ‘no’, sir.”

“I have no plans to run for public office. All of my energies are consumed in directing my life’s true passions, namely, my personal Pack and the Lupin Facility that grants respite to thousands of individuals every year and that makes relentless headway into the dark chasm of ignorance we still face about our own species. Any attempt to split my attention further would harm the two to which I’ve dedicated my life.”

“Your company is in merger talks with the Keller Foundation. Can we expect a statement soon?”

“You will know anything there is to know shortly after we do. We’re hopeful that talks are nearing their completion and that the final outcome will prove beneficial to all involved.” Cas beckoned Bobby inside when the alpha poked his head in.

“That’s all we have time for, Alpha. Thank you for your time. I know you’re a busy man these days.”

“Not at all, Gregory. It was a pleasure.” Cas waited the requisite polite pause while the correspondent signed himself off by name, then hung up with a deliberate slam.

Bobby laughed at him. “We each have our roles to play, Alpha. I don’t envy you yours.”

“Thanks.”

“Relax, Cas. They aren’t going for spin. They’ll play it back just as you recorded it.”

“How many times can the listenership hear those rumors, even in an effort to debunk them, before something sticks?” Cas was upset. “She’s been tried and convicted without ever stating her defense. Damnit, she’s innocent! History is apparently going to tie her to that explosion no matter what the truth is.”

Bobby jumped right in as devil’s advocate. “She’s not a bad fall-guy, Alpha. She takes the heat off everyone else. She’s not competent to understand the ramifications of the rumors, so they’ll bounce right off from a practical standpoint. She’s innocent, so she never has to face an actual trial. Maybe it’s karma coming to roost. Maybe it’s the Universist perfect balance bullshit playing out. She’s kind of reaping what she sowed through all those years of perfect right service. It’s not an eye for an eye. It’s more like an eye for a hand, but it’s not exactly unjust. She hurt a lot of people, Alpha.”

Castiel’s face frosted over as he beheld the man petitioning him to condemn his mother to a legacy of murder she didn’t commit. He didn’t need to speak. Bobby raised his palms outward in surrender. “Just running the idea up the flagpole. It don’t have to stay there.”

“What do you need, Bobby?” Cas asked him.

“Need you, son. Lawyers have a final review meeting pulling together. Come on. We’ll make it quick. They only have a couple of questions left. Besides, you can shout at them if you want. That’s what lawyers are for. It’ll make you feel better.”

“I feel fine, Singer.”

“Sure you do. Did you get any sleep last night at all?”

Cas checked his desk for anything he might need to take with him. He met Bobby at the door.
“Three hours or so, I think,” he admitted. “Maybe two.”

“You need a babysitter to tuck you in, Alpha? Does it bear repeating that your stability and wellness effect everyone here?”

Cas smiled indulgently, good enough evidence that he wasn’t as on edge as Bobby seemed to believe. “I have all the babysitters I can take at the moment. Maureen moved in this morning to keep watch over April while we’re gone. Jesus, Bobby, we don’t leave for two more nights, and she’s already unpacked. It’s only Nicholas.”

“You whine just like Dean these days, Castiel,” Bobby observed.

Cas laughed again, and it was a light carefree sound. “I’ll take that as a compliment. A little brat rubbing off can’t be all bad considering how much good it does him.” He dodged around a blue door as it swung outward. Adam emerged, still buckling his belt with a quick apology for nearly hitting the Alpha square in the face, but Cas relieved him with a touch and a word. “We should’ve designed the doors to open inward. That was a mistake. Our next facility will incorporate all the lessons we’ve learned here.”

“Yes, Alpha,” sighed Adam, taking off at a jog in the opposite direction.

“Walk, Omega!” Castiel admonished with a roll of his eyes as he met Bobby’s. They shared a bemused chuckle.

“We’re close, Alpha,” Bobby confided. “We’re standing on the edge of everything we wanted.” He began strolling calmly down the corridor again. Cas paced him.

“Don’t tie yourself too tightly to one path, Singer,” he answered quietly. “We need to keep the option open to walk away from this merger, or we lose our strong bargaining position. If it falls apart, there are other avenues to get us there. We already got out of it what we really needed. We have the stopgap funds which can be paid back as a loan over time if we have to. It wouldn’t be the end of the world. The path was never expected to be a straight line. Only the destination is important. We’re going to reach the summit of this mountain no matter how the paths break and reform and swerve. All we have to do is keep the end in sight.”

“Talk like that scares the shit out of the people in that room, Alpha. They aren’t planning on switching paths. You might wanna keep the ‘failure is fine’ talk to yourself unless it happens.” Bobby’s eyes were dark and serious. He appeared to be among those unnerved by the idea that walking away was looking viable to their North Star.

“Bobby, I’m leveling with you. You know I’ve not ever been married to any one approach. So far, this has worked. We’re building momentum, and it’s a good thing. We’re helping. If that ever stops being the case, you need to understand that I will drop whatever doesn’t work like a worm-infested apple, and I’m not going to mourn the loss. Our goal is bigger than any institution. Only people matter.”

They stood near the door to the meeting room facing one another. People glided past. It was a humbling moment for Robert Singer. Castiel was a breed apart, and in day-to-day matters, it was easy to forget that. The moment stretched. Benny found them in the hallway and joined them wordlessly, trying to suss out the depth of the interaction between his colleagues. Something was being decided.

“Are you with me?” Cas asked Bobby after what seemed an eternity. He scented Dean at his back and could tell Dean was mouthing his confusion at Benny, who shrugged. Bobby’s face softened.
“I’m not ever gonna say anything but yes to that question, Alpha. If you need to turn the rudder, we all turn with you. Just be sure you’re not turning us in to the rocks.” Bobby’s forehead touched Cas’ in a rare pack touch. The chemical response felt good to all of them.

“Good grief!” sighed Benny, letting out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Stop with the nautical metaphors! He’s got you doing it now, Singer. Twenty years of that shit! It’s enough already! We get it. Your great-great-great grand-Alpha made a kajillion bucks as a pirate! Let it go, guys. We live in fucking Kansas!”

Cas and Bobby held their position just a little longer, but they laughed. Cas protested the defamation to his ancestor as he pulled away. “Merchant sailor, Benedict. Not pirate. He ran a highly successful merchant vessel, using his prowess to avoid blockades and true pirates…”

“We KNOW! Jesus, Alpha! You gotta get some new stories, brother.” Benny shoved through the door still mumbling, and Cas turned his radiant smile on Dean. Dean shook his head at the man’s playfulness.

“If he really wants new stories, Cas, we can have him sit in on more of our play-scenes. He barely scratched the surface this time. There was hardly any blood at all, and I’m already up and walking.” Dean put an arm around Castiel’s waist. The words were all for Bobby’s benefit, and the old alpha probably knew it. He broke away from the couple at the door and resumed his usual dour mask as he found his seat. Cas made a show of escorting Dean to his seat and planting him there with an inappropriate kiss and a steamy look which Dean returned with interest. Quick meeting or not, Cas made sure every attorney in the room knew who was in charge here, and he did it without saying a word to any of them.

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“All right then, let’s pare it down. What’s your name again?”

“Clay, Alpha.” The beta lawyer, barely past his Bar certification, barely licensed, barely more than a pup, and way over his head, said with a small voice.

“Clay, my notes show that you and I had a one-on-one meeting more than three weeks ago. Do you remember that meeting?” Castiel leaned into his crossed arms, and the pup swallowed hard.

“Yes, Alpha.”

“I offered you an assignment, if my notes are correct.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“But you’re telling me now that you’ve neither completed nor even started the assignment. Is that what I’m hearing?”

“Alpha, your assignment is futile. We aren’t at liberty to alter the bylaws of the Keller Foundation. It’s an interesting exercise, but I had more pressing assignments to complete. I had deadlines.”

“Don’t toy with the boy, Alpha. If you’re going to fire him, do it, and let’s move on,” Bobby told him.

Clay squawked in dismay. “Sir?!”

Cas hadn’t even flicked his eyes to Benny or Bobby at the other end of the table. “I’m waiting for an answer to my question, beta.”

Clay was suddenly keen on the precarious position he was in. Everyone stared – at the sweating beta, not at Castiel. “Sir, I haven’t completed the assignment yet.”

“Son, have you begun to write it?”

Castiel never used the paternal assumptive. He didn’t need it, and it was an understood thing anyway. Putting it in now was nothing but cruel.

Clay looked down, no longer capable of meeting the Alpha’s eyes. The pieces were falling into place. He had thought it was a practice exercise to facilitate his growth. They hadn’t filled him in on anything about where the merger plan was headed. He hadn’t known he was working on a live document. He received an invitation to attend this meeting, and he’d assumed once again that it was merely to provide him exposure to some of the big moves the company was making.

“I haven’t, Alpha. I have read the existing bylaws cover-to-cover and made extensive notes, but I haven’t started editing anything.” His ass was on the line, and he’d wisely chosen full disclosure without bullshit.

Silence lengthened again.

Finally, “I see.”

“Alpha, please let me explain…!”

“That won’t be necessary, Clay. You are unmated, correct?”

“Yes, Sir,” muttered Clay with a sense of foreboding. Maybe the Alpha wanted to be sure he didn’t have dependents left destitute when he lost his job.

“No pups?”

“No, Sir. Not yet.”

“Good. Then, as you are young, healthy, and have limited alternate requirements on your time, you have the next two days to devote entirely to this enterprise. It isn’t officially due yet, is it? You have the legal library and our various other resources at your disposal.” Cas stared into his eyes with a fierce Alpha glare. His meaning was clear: get it done, or don’t bother coming to Dayton, or anywhere else ACRI-related. Most of all, Cas was determinedly NOT looking at Dean. Or Billie. Keeping a straight face might prove impossible if he broke away, and that would spoil the effect. But God, this was fun.

Cas despised most lawyers. They faced every action with a glut of “What-ifs” that seemed determined to derail everything. Billie reminded him again and again that allowing for what-ifs ahead of time was what the lawyers got paid to do, and that it protected the Facility. Cas disagreed. Most of what they came up with was preposterous in the extreme, and it made achieving anything new a massive pain in the ass. They were pompous and needlessly interventionist, the lot of them.
This pup. He’d been just about all the arrogant trust-fund-baby cockiness that Cas could stand in their meeting a few weeks prior, and Cas was no stranger to wealth-privilege. Cas selected him for his obscurity. Fresh out of law school, he ought to be raring to prove himself, but he’d practically laughed in Cas’ face at what he felt was a pointless exercise in futility, a first-grade assignment way below his capacity, all long nights and tedious plodding through dull pages. He wanted in on the good stuff, and he told the Alpha that to his face. Cas stuck with the assignment anyway, and here they stood today, ready to move, the chessboard all set up and prepared, and Castiel’s queen not just missing, but nonexistent.

“My Pack Alpha, Sir…she has certain expectations for me at home. I can’t devote 48 hours straight to this assignment.” Clay was miserable, but he had it coming, and no one moved to defend him.

“I will speak to her after this meeting,” said Castiel as if the matter were closed and stuffing three weeks of work into two days was a matter of will.

The meeting ended soon after, and Dean followed Cas down the hall with his eyes alight and his lips pressed tightly together. “Damn, Papa!” he finally said once the office door closed behind Billie. “I forget what a hard-ass you are. You’re going to fire him anyway. Why drag it out? Just to torture him? Cas, that kid’s not gonna cut it.”

“Yes, he is,” Cas told him calmly, his eyes on Billie. She picked up his meaning in no time.

“Oh, no you don’t!” she protested, backing up swiftly. “You’ve already got me playing janitor. I’m not your babysitter, too!”

“Not a babysitter, Billie. A mentor. You will shepherd the pup through this first key assignment, and you will continue to mentor him until he is my top corporate attorney. I expect nothing less than complete success from this assignment. Go get in touch with his Alpha and let her know she won’t be seeing Clay until he returns from Dayton, whenever that happens to be. Until we’re through, you and he are to be glued to each other as if you were born conjoined. Hop to it, please. There’s no time to lose.”

She didn’t move. Her face scrunched up in annoyance. Annoyance was a gentler word than what she was feeling. “I know what this is. This is payback. God, you’re a dick sometimes! FINE! I’ll babysit your cub, Papa! And you know what else? He’s going to be the best fucking lawyer we ever employed! Fuck you, Alpha!”

“Thank you, Billie. I knew you would come to see it my way. You’re dismissed. Please close the door on your way out.”

She flipped him off as she left, and he couldn’t keep the laughter inside anymore. Dean shook his head in wonder as the door slammed and his Alpha laughed until his eyes teared up.

“What, the fuck?” asked Dean.

“She loves me,” Cas said wiping his eyes. “She just doesn’t remember that right now.”

“Payback for what?”

“She found me difficult to work with back before your Rut, when you were in lock-out, and I was a bit unbalanced myself waiting on you. She threatened to take off until you and I had a chance to
knock each other’s heads back on straight, and we argued about whether her timing was acceptable to take vacation. This morning I reminded her that your stripes are back in place and asked her if she’s enjoying the difference. She called me an unflattering name. Now I ask you, is that very professional?”

“Crikey, you’re both nuts! Why do you let her talk to you like that, man? And don’t give me that shit about needing someone who’s not scared of you.” Dean settled into Cas’ chair behind his desk, and Cas slid up onto the desk itself, so he could look down into Dean’s face.

He thought about it. “I don’t really know, Dean. It works for us, and it feels right. She turns serious the second I need her to, but she’s real in a way most of our colleagues aren’t, and playful swipes have always been one of the ways…I guess it’s just part of who she is.”

“You’re not worried someone else might try it, watching her as an example?”

“I’m really not. Having people play with me has never been one of my worries. More the opposite, rather. I frighten most people, and it takes some of them years to be comfortable around me.” There was a loneliness about the words, and Dean understood suddenly. It was lonely at the top. Everyone in the pack was playful. Even Rafael had a quick and brutal tongue once you got him liquored up enough, but no one played with Cas except Dean and Benny – well, the girls did sometimes. And Billie apparently. Dean had missed it. He’d seen them snipe at each other, but he never noticed the deep abiding respect beneath the sharp words. Castiel’s faith in Billie was becoming more and more understandable. Billie, for all her years of service moved in different circles than Dean did, and he had never worked closely with her.

“That was punishment, then?” asked Dean, looking up at Cas. “You’re training her to take your mood swings without complaining about it?”

Cas nodded and put a hand along Dean’s jaw. Repressing his constant need to reach for Dean used to be second nature. These days, he didn’t even try.

“It’s pretty cold, man. I’ve never seen you that callous before.”

Cas laughed again and got up. “Yes you have, Winchester. I’ve used the same method on you many, many times.” With that he disappeared into his suite and let the door close behind him.

Dean stared at the door. “You have? When? Hey, Cas! Alpha! WHEN?!” But Cas didn’t come back, and Dean needed to meet Sarah and Sam for the hand-off that would allow Sam to put in a few hours of training with his new recruits.

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April stormed back into the conservatory with her tablet in her hand. “I knew it! Look,” she demanded. “It’s supposed to be in a minor key! You can’t claim a style that’s meant to be minor, turn it major, and pretend it’s the same style!”

Nicholas rolled his eyes. “Forget the style, kid! Just play the damned thing. Did you really run outta here just to find evidence to prove me wrong?”

“It sounds like shit, Nick! I’m not playing it until you change the key.”
Keira set her violin back in its case and kicked her head toward the kitchen. It was looking very like they weren’t going to be playing any time soon. Jackson followed her. Maureen watched them go, but she didn’t follow. An alpha loose in the house made no difference if the Omegas were both here. They squabbled on, oblivious to the desertions from their pit.

Damon looked uncomfortable as his cohorts abandoned ship. He fiddled absently with his drum, watching the progress over at the piano. There didn’t appear to be much progress. April was digging in her heels adamantly, and Nick was no better. Damon looked at Maureen, then he gave up and trotted out to see if there was anything to eat.

“Because you’re being a brat, and I’m sick of explaining everything twelve times! Do you want my help or not?” she demanded.

“I’m a brat? You’re being a stubborn bitch! Of course I want your help, but you know there’s no reason to follow pointless outdated convention when it fucks up the sound you’re going for. Quit being pedantic!”

“Maybe I would know that if I had all the training you say I don’t need, and I have no idea what ‘pedantic’ means,” she shot back.

“We’re wasting time. Come on, guys, one more ti… Guys? Where the fuck did they go?” Nick turned baffled eyes on Maureen who continued knitting calmly.

Nick turned back to April, but saw only her back as she left again, angrier than ever. “What the hell is wrong with everyone?!” he moaned in bitter resentment.

“Don’t look at me,” muttered Maureen, collecting her paraphernalia to follow after April and see if she could assist. “Maybe don’t call people a bitch if you want them to help you.”

“Oh, come on! She knows I don’t mean it. She kno… Seriously? You’re leaving too? Okay. Fine. I can do this by myself. I needed a little alone time anyway. That’s exactly what I need. Go on, all of you. Get lost. Give me some peace and quiet for a second, so I can think.”

“Who are you talking to?” Monica asked rudely, sweeping in to collect glassware and give the furniture a quick dusting.

“Myself, obviously,” he muttered.

Maureen found April showing Jackson where to find the good bottles. They’d already consumed the ones Fred set out for them, and now they were hunting for something more potent. It wasn’t Maureen’s job to protect Castiel’s liquor cabinet, but she watched April to make sure she wasn’t partaking without a phone call out. Mostly, she watched the Omega for signs of distress. April looked fine. She laughed at Damon’s impression of Nick and Jackson’s impersonation of Fred that Maureen had to admit was pretty damn funny.

April chopped raw vegetables into chunks and set out cubes of cheese. No one was really hungry, but they needed a break, and the Ozzie hosted naturally. Maureen found her sweet and easygoing, as long as she wasn’t near Nick. She was looking forward to meeting the primate music teachers, hoping they would bring a calmer tone to the space so they could all survive in one piece. One of them was due tomorrow, she thought.

“Is he always like that?” April asked Jackson as she settled beside him at the kitchen table. She nodded at the door to indicate she wasn’t talking about anyone in the kitchen. Jackson shrugged.

“When he’s composing, he’s a prick. It eats at him until he feels like he’s got it right. Never shuts up.
Works night and day. Plays it over and over again and shouts at everyone within hearing distance.”

“This is going to be a fun week,” sighed Maureen sitting across from April.

“You can go on home, alpha,” April told her. “I’m not doing this. I don’t need it, and he can go fuck himself if he thinks he’s staying.”

“Is that a fact?” Maureen asked tonelessly.

“Yup,” she said in the same manner Dean did, popping the P.

“Perhaps give it a night’s sleep and a talk through with your mate before you jump into a decision. Castiel has a way of talking to Nicholas. Or, so I’ve heard anyway.”

April regarded her shrewdly before selecting a grape. “You know Nick, don’t you, alpha? You know them both from way back?”

Maureen couldn’t stop the smile that crept across her face. “Oh, yes, my dear. I know them both from way back. Nicholas Maraby is my brother.”

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“And then he left the meeting like he hadn’t just scared the daylights out of that pup. The poor kid. I mean, yeah, kid’s a blowhard and a fuck up, but Jesus.” Dean walked with Sam and Sarah to their next classroom.

“Wow, all of Castiel’s focus right on him in front of everyone? I’m surprised Cas didn’t put him down,” Sam commented.

“Oh, he did worse than a D.F., Sammy. He sic’d Billie on the guy.”

“Oh, shit! Still, better Billie than Cas.”

Sarah interrupted. “I don’t know, Sam. I’m with Dean on this one. Billie scares me far worse than Alpha Winchester.”

“Ah, but you call her Billie, and even out of hearing range, you can’t call him Cas,” Sam pointed out. “I think you sense more than you know. You’re picking up on it subconsciously. You need to practice listening to the signals from your body. I think we might be able to train you to pick up on power signatures when they’re really strong like that. Like, okay, between Dean and me, who do you feel a stronger sense of power from?”

Sarah looked between them and shrugged. “I already know your ratings. Whatever I say is bound to be slanted by what I know.”

“We cancel each other out if you go by our ratings,” Sam countered. “I want to know what you feel, not what you’ve researched.”

He stopped in the hallway outside of the gym door and arranged himself beside Dean as if for inspection. Sarah thought the exercise fruitless but chose to play along with a wry amusement.

“Here, Dean,” she directed. “Stand on this side. Move apart from each other, so I can get a feel for
each of you separately.” Dean shot Sam an irritated look and raised his brows at the idea of taking instruction from an ape with no status, but he let Sarah shift him. He had things to be doing and people waiting for him, and Sarah wasn’t the only one who felt the game had no point. Sam didn’t notice, or rather, didn’t bother to acknowledge his brother. Sam shook his arms out a little, shook his head like a soggy pup, and then settled into a neutral stance, staring ahead of him. Dean shrugged his shoulders and glared at Sam before doing roughly the same. Sarah stood between them and studied them both.

She closed her eyes and stood very close to each of them in turn, breathing deeply through her nose and working to perceive any difference. “What am I looking for?” she asked at length.

Sam’s voice was quiet and intimate to avoid spoiling her internal perceptions as if speaking to one heavily sunk into hypnosis. “Don’t think about what you’re sensing. Just react. Imagine who you would want more distance from if Dean and I began to fight savagely right here? Feel what your body wants. Listen to your feet. Where would they take you first? You don’t have time to think, only to move. Where are you moving? Better yet, between the two of us, which one would you seek protection from if a gunman blasted down the hallway right now? Imagine that you are threatened right now by someone else advancing on you. Where are you moving? Who’s got the best chance of protecting you?”

Sarah breathed in a few more cycles. Her chin was tucked close to her chest, and her eyes were still closed. She stood equidistant from each of them, faced toward the wall. Sam took advantage of her blindness and the passing noise of a group of employees walking by. He moved silently to his left and tugged Dean’s sleeve to shift the alpha as well. Sarah didn’t move. Her brows were furrowed in concentration. The test subjects each now stood near where the other had been. Dean had his arms folded across his chest and his foot almost began tapping with impatience. Sam frowned at him and held up a single finger.

Wait.

Give it just a minute, asshole.

Sarah reached one hand out without opening her eyes. If the men had not moved, she would have touched nothing. They were in new positions, not quite in one another’s original starting places. As it was, her fingers caught Dean right in the middle of his chest. Her eyes popped open when she felt contact, and they widened in surprise.

“Oh! You moved.”

“Yeah. You thought I was Sam.”

“No,” she disagreed. “I can’t explain it. I didn’t think anyone was there, but I couldn’t get the sensation out of my head that the strongest force was right here instead of where I was looking for it.” She seemed perplexed, skeptical of her own perceptions.

“We done playing hide-and-seek?” Dean asked Sam around Sarah.

Sam was grinning ear to ear. “That was amazing! You did it. I knew you could. It’s just a matter of concentration.”

“You mean that was right? I expected Dean’s negative eighteen rating would detract from his base power. I thought the answer was probably you, Sam.” Sarah looked rapidly between the brothers. “You tell him what to do more often than he does you, and he always obeys you. I don’t get it.”
“Look,” Dean interrupted, turning to Sarah. “This is fun and all, but your boyfriend has work to do in the gym, and folks are waiting on us too. Can we play magical fairyland some other time and move this along?”

Sam ignored him. “Base power isn’t diminished by any of the other designations, Sarah. A Deep alpha trumps a beta every time. All of the other psychological aspects determine how that power shows itself in the world, but nothing can reduce the strength it bears and can wield at need. You were absolutely right. In a pinch, Dean’s the one with all the raw power. Mine’s about half what his is. Being Dominant doesn’t give me base strength, just an assertive presentation to direct the power I do have.”

“Sam, this Deep alpha is about to wield power all over your ass if you don’t get a move on. We don’t have time for this.”

“I’m going.” He turned to Sarah and left a farewell kiss on her cheek as he would do a Lupin underling who had done particularly good work. He looked her in the eye meaningfully with a hand on her arm. “Ignore him, Sarah. He’s a dick. You did great.”

Sam whapped Dean upside his head without any real force and slipped into the gym.

Sarah quickly caught up to Dean’s fast pace in the opposite direction.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she announced.

Dean snorted.

“Are you ready to go?” Cas asked Meg who was already waiting for him in his suite. He was still half-chuckling over Dean’s outrage and surprise, hot enough to sense through the closed door. Dean could protest all he wanted, but Cas’ tendency to throw training techniques into any interaction he deemed helpful was so ingrained, it was astounding that his fiancé hadn’t caught on before now. It was also completely likely, a little voice piped up, that Dean’s response was all an act. Actually – Cas’ chuckle died in his throat – it was most certainly an act. Damn that brat. Staying a step ahead of him was apparently no easier as his Alpha than it had ever been as his Dom.

Cas needed to think it through a little before he made a next move. He couldn’t shake the feeling that HE was the one in training, not the Sub, and that would not do.

“Her room is prepared, Alpha. All that’s missing is someone to occupy it,” the beta nurse told him. “Are you sure we should do this without some more muscle? What if she refuses to go along?”

“My mother has been through enough, Margaret. I’m not going to strong-arm her out of her home. Let me handle her if she protests. Besides, Michael is joining us, and she seems to do whatever he asks.”

“Yes, Alpha,” said Meg submissively.

Castiel swept his keys and sunglasses off of the entry table, but he stopped and turned at a touch to his arm. Meg looked uncomfortable. He paused a moment and then dropped his keys and led her to the sofa and sat beside her. A Deep Alpha’s full attention focused squarely on one individual could
be a weighty burden, as Clay had recently discovered, but to Meg it was a comfort.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, touching her cheek with his fingertips. She leaned slightly into the contact before answering.

“Alpha, I’m tired of feeling like shit over Sam Winchester. I want to move on, but I haven’t been able to. He’s all I think about. It just hurts so bad, and there’s nothing I can do. Do you think maybe I should transfer? Vegas has the strongest medical wing. Is there a place for me with Christian? I don’t want to leave, but I can’t keep on like this.” The words rushed out as if they’d been dammed up, trying to force their way into audibility for too long – or as if she feared they wouldn’t come out at all if she didn’t say it all in one fast release.

Cas’ face softened in sympathy. He pulled her into an embrace and affected not to know that she was crying silently. “You would be an asset to Christian or any clinic you devoted yourself to, Meg. Even if he doesn’t have a position open, if he knew it was you, he would make one. You are a gift to the Universe. However, I can’t imagine losing you. I need you, Meg. I need you here.”

“I can’t stay here and see him every day, Sir. It’s killing me.”

He stroked her hair and then left a gentle kiss on the top of her head before easing her up again. “I expect you don’t want to hear this, my dear, but you are prime age to Trigger with a True-Mate.”

She scoffed rudely and turned away from him to dab at her eyes. “Waiting for a True-Mate is torture, Alpha. It’s the worst kind of tease. And besides, you’re living proof that falling under that spell doesn’t wipe the slate clean of everyone else you love. How is that going to help, and when does it get to be my turn anyway?”

“Meg, if Triggering doesn’t clear your nostrils of Sam, moving to Nevada won’t either. You have to find a way let him go.”

“Easier said than done,” she retorted.

“I know,” he told her gently.

“So, you’re not going to let me transfer?”

“Is that really what you want to do?”

Hopeless eyes turned back to him, desperately seeking an alternative. “No, I don’t. I don’t want to leave my life here, my friends here. I have Pack here. You guys mean everything to me. But I can’t live like this. God, look at me. I’m falling apart!”

“Shh. Meg, have you considered registering in the Mate-Match program? We encounter a great many possible matches in our daily lives just by doing the work we do, but the program can increase your chances tenfold. As you say, there’s no guarantee that a True-Mate will wipe Sam out of your head altogether, but it’s bound to help. The truth is, and forgive me, I’m the last person who should have the right to say this to you, but the truth is, Sam does not share your feelings. No matter what you choose to do or where you choose to go, he is not an option for you. He isn’t going to change his mind, and all that can happen if you cannot let him go is that your attachment becomes a burden to him, his mate, and to yourself.”

“You want me to look elsewhere for a True-Mate? What are the chances I find one anywhere near here? Or Vegas? I need to stay with the ACRI, Castiel. I’m a beta and a Sub. Whoever I tie to is going to take me to live with their Pack. I could wind up in Delaware or Colombia, for that matter!”
“Perhaps it’s time we open a branch in Colombia,” Cas told her, eyes twinkling and a hold on her chin.

“I can’t leave you, Sir!”

“No. No, Margaret, you are mine. You are my Pack, and I need you as badly as you need us. Give me some time. Let me work on this for you. Go see Ellen and have your scent sampled. Get yourself registered and let me work on it. We’re not sending you to Delaware.”

“If I spend time in the scenting rooms, I could Trigger with anyone, Sir.” She stood and fetched herself a glass of water from the kitchen, thirsty and off-kilter. Diluted scents, piped in one on top of the other while registered participants sat within the small space taking them in were not potent enough to Trigger a full reaction, but electrodes picked up every viable response. They could read a Trigger response and let the participants know whom they had a high chance of fully Triggering with if allowed to meet. It gave them a lot more choice in the matter of how and where they Triggered, and it let them have some say in the individuals they preferred, especially when multiple options were unearthed.

“Let’s forgo the scenting room for now. The program works both ways, and a beta like you is likely to have more than one match in the system. We can search the immediate area first.”

“Please don’t go to all that trouble, Sir. I’m just being pathetic. It’s a grade school crush, and I need to get a grip on myself, not turn the place upside-down. You need to focus on Dayton, on your own Pack.”

“Margaret, you are my Pack, and there’s nothing pathetic about you. You are in pain, and it’s my responsibility to do for you what I can. Don’t minimize what you’re experiencing, and don’t think for a moment that I’m going to accept you telling me where my focus belongs.” He leveled one of his patented Alpha glares at her, and she swallowed uncomfortably and put her glass down with a thud. Her face broke into anguish, both heartbreak and relief, and he smiled kindly at her as he joined her in the kitchenette and embraced her again while she sobbed.

“You’re going to be all right, Submissive,” he whispered. “We’ll take care of you.”

He held her for a few minutes until her crying subsided, and then he moved her out to arms’ length. “Let’s go get my mother and bring her over. I’m sure you have her room set up just the way she’ll want it, and she’s going to be very comfortable here. You’re a wonderful nurse, Meg, and a good person. We’re lucky to have you.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” she sniffled.

“Meg, have you spoken to Jo about any of this?” he asked tangentially as he opened the passenger door for her in the parking lot.”

“We’re friends, Sir. We talk about everything.” She was confused enough about his question that she didn’t say more as he directed the car out of the lot.

“Forgive me if I’m being presumptuous,” he qualified. “But she seems out of sorts lately, too. I read it as discomfort that so many of us Mated so suddenly, and she’s a bit bewildered by the new status
Perhaps she’s envious? Jo is anxious to start a family, and yet she’s neither Mated nor seriously courting anyone. In your view, would she welcome a suggestion from me that you and she enter the Mate-Match program together?”

Meg’s eyes went wide. “I don’t know, Sir. Jo’s still pretty young to expect a True-Mate Trigger; for an alpha, anyway. Mostly, she just misses Dean. He spends almost no time with her anymore, and it’s like she lost her best friend.”

“That’s unfortunate,” said Cas with a frown.

“Shit, he’s not gonna get in trouble over that, is he? I didn’t mean to stir anything up.”

Cas laughed. “No, Margaret. Dean’s time is as limited as mine is. I’m sure he’s doing his best, but the truth is, Michael has needed him close these last few months. They’re leveling out now, so I’ll nudge him to spend some time with Jo. His friendships are important too, and they need nurturing.”

Cas drove in silence for a bit, thinking hard. “She’s not all that young though,” he interjected into the silence. “Alphas Trigger anywhere from 25 to 40. She’s on the early side of that range, but it’s not uncommon at all.”

Meg didn’t respond for a moment, but then she caved. “She’s terrified of having to wait until her mid-thirties like you did, Alpha. It happens a lot to alphas, and it’s like they lose the best years of their youth just waiting. No offense, Sir.”

“None taken, Meg. It wasn’t an easy wait.”

“Worth it though?” she prompted.

“Worth it,” he confirmed with a firm nod.

“That’s what I keep telling her. Of course, I’m not in any better shape. It’s the unknown that makes waiting so hard. We could Trigger anywhere, with anybody. It might be today, tomorrow, or ten years from now. It’s the waiting. I know that True-Mates make the best matches. I know that it’s best to wait on the Universe to balance everything out, but sometimes I feel like it would be better to go find someone who’s close enough that I don’t feel like wringing their neck or braining them with a frying pan, and just get it over with. It’s not like I would ever know what I missed.”

“That is entirely your choice, beta, but please be careful. If you choose to Mate without the Trigger, you’re stuck with someone you may grow to despise, and there’s no divorce from a Mate.”

“Yeah,” she said glumly. “Damned if you do, damned if you wait. I’m going to be gray before someone wants me, and by then it will only be out of desperation.”

Castiel pulled the car onto the shoulder smoothly and stopped. He turned his full body to face her, and her wolf froze, eyes lowered, hands in her lap, cheeks pink with mortification.

“Margaret, I don’t accept self-pity from anyone in my Pack. You get one warning. Am I clear?”

“Yessir,” she told her lap.

“Eyes on me, beta. Am I clear?”

She looked up into his sapphire eyes and said it again more clearly. “Yes, Sir.”

“Whether you Mate decisionally, you wait for a Trigger naturally, or you register and send your
scent out into the system to seek a match, good things are coming for you, Margaret Masters. You are out of balance with the Universe right now, and the tide will turn. Do you hear me?”

“Thought you weren’t religious, Alpha,” she cheeked, a brat’s response to correction.

He tongued his upper lip, repressing a laugh, but his eyes showed it anyway. “I’m not, but sometimes, I can just feel a rebalance coming. Call it whatever you want. Good things are coming for you, Meg. Chin up and knock off that negative self-talk, or I’ll have to take action to remind you what’s expected of a Head nurse in my employ.”

“Yes, Alpha,” she said with a touch of humor. Then she shifted the conversation back to the Mate-Match program. “Can you really find a way to find me a Mate and allow me to stay here? If I had to choose…Sir, I don’t want to leave. I just want to stop pining over a man who doesn’t love me, and I want to stop feeling the urge to kick Sarah Blake’s teeth in every time I see her throw herself at him.”

Cas laughed outright. He turned into his driveway and saluted casually at the guard by the gate. “We can try, Meg. And in any case, Sam is not going to be tempted by a Primate, no matter how pretty she is.”

Meg scoffed again, her eyes on her lap. “Pretty, and smart. Interesting, nerdy just like he is, sassy as hell, confident, witty, earnest…”

“Meg, stop. Sam’s not a fool. He’s not going to do anything that puts his family at risk. She’s a guest at our Facility, nothing more.”

“She’s a perfect match for him, Sir,” the beta said darkly as they entered the cool shade of his garage. “Better than his mate.”

“It matters little how well-suited they are, Meg. Sam’s Mated, and that means everything to him. He loves Jess. They have as strong a chance as any mates to build a life together. They have pups to raise. His eyes aren’t going to go wandering off into a whole different species just because she’s interesting.”

“No, probably not. He’s a good man. I get that. Doesn’t change the fact that I want to beat her into a bloody pulp.”

Castiel chuckled again. Spending time with Meg was always refreshing. Her issues weren’t light ones, but her spirit was unquenchable, and he loved the little beta.

“Do not assault research fellows in our Facility, Margaret. And don’t forget,” Cas cracked his door open. “Primates and Canids don’t flirt in the same way. You are likely misreading her intentions anyway. I’m not convinced she’s interested in Sam. It’s more likely you’re overprotective of what you’ve been considering your territory, and you’ve become hypersensitive to perceived threats to it.” He showed her no mercy as he held her in her seat with his eyes. “It’s time to let go of that.”

“Geez, I’m trying! Isn’t that what I just said? And don’t tell me I’m misreading. We may be different species, but we’re both women, and I know what I know. Territorial or not, what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t warn him?”

Cas assumed a stern face. “Don’t say a word to Sam about Sarah, Margaret. He’s perfectly capable of protecting himself all by himself. All you stand to accomplish is to make yourself appear petty.”

Meg rolled backwards and out of the car in one motion without answering.

“Margaret?” he called, following her out of the car. She was already headed into the house.
“Yes, Alpha!” she shouted back impudently. “You’re wrong about this though. He’s gonna get blindsided, and then it’s gonna be a big fucking mess. Mark my words.”

“Not a word to Jess, either…” he tried, but she was inside. Cas ground his teeth. She wasn’t refreshing, she was infuriating. He hoped Meg assigned herself direct care of his mother while she was on campus. The two of them deserved each other.

Cas trudged reluctantly after her, hoping Michael had every item of luggage in the foyer and Naomi dressed and ready to go. He wasn’t in any mood to turn this transfer into a dramatic farewell scene. It needed to be a clean cut. He hadn’t been exaggerating his mother’s need to find respite. Unintentional or not, Michael’s effort to address her culpability and soothe his mate had likely accelerated her descent. All of the coping mechanisms that Lupins use to heal from psychological blows were now defunct in Naomi. What her beta felt would always be there under the surface, but she had no way to address it effectively any longer. The best Cas could do was get her somewhere that didn’t hurt. He couldn’t give her a Pack, but he could keep her from being torn apart on a daily basis.

The last time Cas had felt this thoroughly a failure, it was when he’d stepped into Gabriel’s bathroom to find his brother unconscious and hemorrhaging badly, a wire clothes hanger discarded beside him.

April excused herself from the table when he emerged into the kitchen. She smiled at him. Her smile made a world of difference. He smiled back and took her proffered hand.

“Michael’s been with her all day, Alpha. She’s in good spirits, considering. They’re in the parlor.”

April led him through, ignoring the musicians drinking his expensive Scotch. Maureen stood up, but he shook his head subtly at her, and she sat back down again.

“Where’s Nicholas?” asked Cas quietly.

“Sulking in the conservatory,” April answered in a huff.

“Sulking? Are you two at odds?”

Cas pulled her to a stop a couple of feet into the parlor.

“I told him to go home,” she stated firmly with no trace of Ozzie in her tone. “I’m not interested in being his punching bag while he figures out what he wants.”

Cas went on alert. “He’s been abusive?”

“He’s being a child, Alpha. I get that his creative process is a tumultuous one, but he lashes out at whoever’s close at hand. I didn’t sign up for that.”

Cas winced at her revelation that she’d uncovered Maureen’s connection to his college roommate. That had been an oversight on his part, but now that he thought about it, it had been stupid not to alert April that they were siblings. Maureen and Nicholas were both close and trusted friends, but
Cas’ relationships with each was as different as theirs was with each other. It was a complicated and jagged triangle. And there was history that it wasn’t his right to reveal.

“April, I apologize for withholding that information from you. It wasn’t done maliciously.”

“I’m not angry with you, Cas. But I’m not changing my mind on her say-so. There are some people who can irrationally shout at me. He’s not one of them.” Cas blinked at her determination and self-confidence.

“And I wouldn’t ask you to,” he assured her. “Here’s what I know about Nicholas. Yes, he’s irrational when he’s working. He becomes passionate, and he doesn’t care who gets hurt until he’s finished a piece, and then he morphs into a different person altogether. Forgive me, but I thought you already knew that about him.”

“It’s different having him here in the same room. Over the phone, I could just hang up on him. He would calm down and call me back later apologizing, and we’d move on. Here in the same space, he never lets up. It’s a barrage of whining and lashing out and stubborn insistence when he knows damn well he’s wrong, and it’s not working.”

Cas couldn’t suppress the smile that cracked across his face.

“What?” she asked, in no mood to be made fun of.

“You’re beautiful when you’re self-righteous,” he told her earnestly with a touch to her hair. “Don’t get flustered. I’m not patronizing you.” He waited for her to calm herself before continuing. “The way I see it, this is an incredible opportunity to put your personal stamp on something that has the potential to be timeless. No matter if the show is a success or a failure, your name will forever be tied to his in a professional light. I authorize you to flare right back up at him when he gets nasty. If you can stick it out and learn to work with him, you earn your stripes in the real world, April. You get a first step toward the credibility you said you wanted. The industry knows him. He has a reputation for being a bear to work with. If you can do it as a young unknown composer, you earn instant standing.”

“He’s an asshole.”

“Yes, he is. And if he becomes truly abusive, we’ll put a stop to it and kick him to the curb. Look at it this way, have his tantrums so far been about you personally, or about the music?”

“About the music, mostly,” she conceded reluctantly. Meg finished with her checklist and pointed Michael and Naomi both to gather luggage. They obeyed without protest.

“Then as long as it remains music-related, can you continue?”

“You didn’t want him here in the first place, Alpha.”

“That’s irrelevant. He’s here now, and you have a chance to compose with one of the best-known Broadway writers ever. It’s not a chance you can turn away if you’re serious about what you want. He’s on course to be the next Lloyd-Webber. You have a chance to get a leg-up from one of the rising stars. April, for God’s sake, rise WITH him.”

“He called me a bitch.”

Cas’ brows rose, but his mouth smirked. “You’ve said worse to Michael, yourself.”

“Yes, well,” she scuffed the carpet with her bare toes, chagrined. “Michael IS a bitch.”
“Would you like me to speak with Nicholas on your behalf?” he ignored her petty grumbling.

“No, Sir,” she admitted, still shuffling her foot and looking at the floor.

“April?” Cas lifted her chin. She pulled away from his grasp, a defiant act that she rarely felt compelled to try. He allowed it without comment when her eyes met his despite the petulance.

“I’m not going to let him be an ass, Castiel,” she asserted.

“That sounds reasonable,” he agreed. “But it may be beyond his capacity.” Cas let that sink in. Each of us have our weaknesses, he seemed to be saying into the pause.

“He can stay, I guess.”

“That’s my girl,” he said proudly, and she melted a bit under the praise. “I wish I didn’t have to leave you. You know that alpha Maureen is the best replacement we could have brought in. She knows when to tighten his leash, and she’ll listen to you sympathetically if you need to unload your frustration. She’s here for you, not him. Use her. All right?”

“All right.”

He kissed her softly on the lips. “I’ll leave you fully balanced, Kitten,” he whispered. “But you will need more than one Release before I return. Don’t hold that against alpha Maureen. She’s only doing what she must to keep you balanced.”

“Yes, Sir. I know.”

“On the other hand, Nicholas may expect to find himself standing upright for other reasons. She has little patience with her brother once he goes off the deep end. If she hasn’t spanked him yet, then he’s barely begun to tantrum.”

“It gets worse?!”

Cas laughed and pulled her close. “I’m afraid so.”

Michael brushed past them with a suitcase in his hand. “Dickwad’s looking for you, Pete. You might want to see what he wants before he starts gnawing the plaster molding.”

“Thank you, Michael,” said Castiel. “That will do.”

Michael smirked over his shoulder at the couple and passed through into the kitchen with his burden. Naomi followed him with a small carry-all, looking like a lamb whose shepherd had disappeared around a rise.

Meg stopped beside Castiel, watching Naomi round the archway into the kitchen. “Those two are explosive together, Alpha. I think you dodged a bullet here. She’s leaving in the nick of time.”

Cas sighed and cinched his mate in a bit tighter. There wasn’t much to say to that, was there?

Castiel barely noticed what had just taken place, but April did. She wondered if Dean might be on to something. Not once had her mate indicated her designations needed to be taken into account. Not once had he told her how to respond. He had spoken to her exactly as he did to Dean, to Michael, even to Sam. He’d treated her as a person, and not as an Ozzie. He’d offered help, not forced it upon her, and he accepted her decisions without question. All right, not without question, but once she defended her stance, he backed off and let her choices stand.
His scent surrounded her like a soft blanket, and had she chosen to, she could have let herself fall into his hands, handing all the decisions to him. He would carry them for her. He’d already told her that. If she needed him to, he would be her shelter in any capacity she needed him to be. But ‘needed’ was operative here. He offered to hold her kite string while she soared, and he offered to feed it out to whatever height she was brave enough to reach for. He would keep her secured to the earth no matter how high she flew, and he would marvel at her from the ground. She hadn’t truly believed it until now.

Castiel believed in her.

She told him through their bond that these choices were hard, and she was scared, and he answered her back with trust, confidence, and a nudge into the fray. He believed in her.

“I’d better go see what he wants,” she said into Castiel’s throat.

“If you keep on like this,” he said with a squeeze before releasing her. “I’m going to have to promote you from Kitten to Tiger. Go get him, Tiger.” He winked, and it was as devastating as ever. April suppressed the impending swoon, got her feet beneath her, and turned to face the battle with her game face sliding into place.

(Tiger,) said her wolf. (Kinda like the sound of that. Course, it’s not Dragon. What would it take to make him see a Dragon?)

(One step at a time,) she responded into the darkness where her wolf lurked. (Not yet.)

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone, as usual. Thanks for everything.
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

Trauma in the ER sets them all back - all except Dean. Dean's totally stable for once. Cas and Michael both get a kick in the teeth, and April doesn't know which way is up.

Chapter Notes

This is the kind of chapter that I usually post, and then run and hide from the fallout. We're going dark again. Buckle up.

See the End Notes for warnings. It's not a happy chapter. Plus, as dark as this one gets, it's really just the spark for the angst to come.

I broke my self-imposed 15K per chapter limit, but only by a little.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 85 – Monday, August 7, 2017

THEN:

“A-ha! There you are. This is maybe the worst hiding place in the whole stadium,” said Nate sliding into the press box and closing the door behind him.

“I’m not hiding,” she countered. “I was waiting for you. I knew you’d find me here. You always find me.”

“That’s because I can smell you.” He tapped his nose. “True-mates have a stronger scent tie to each other.”

She giggled. “We’re not True-mates, Nate. We would’ve Triggered by now. Maybe you have an abnormally sensitive sense of smell. Maybe you’re a mutant.” She nudged him with her elbow as he sat down beside her. They sat in front of the announcers’ microphones, but the power was off. The room was dark and cold overlooking the 50-yard-line. “What’s your X-Men name going to be?”

“Carnivore,” he told her with a snarl.

She laughed. With him. At him. Both. He was adorable, but he was such a nerd, and she just couldn’t picture him as anything but a high school nerd, as if she might return twenty years from now and find him still sitting right here, looking just like this. Nate rolled his chair closer and used the collar of her jacket to rotate her to face him. He licked his lips.
“Nate, we need to talk.”

He froze. “Well, shit. There went my boner. And I was going to see if I could talk you into some ‘Illegal Contact’ while we’re up here.”

“Is that a football reference?”

“When in Rome,” he whispered as he closed the gap between their lips.

“You hate football,” she said, but the kissing was nice, and she didn’t feel like a little making out would hurt anything at this point. He’d always been a good kisser.

“What are we talking about?” he reminded her without pulling away from her lips. His tongue swiped across the seam of her mouth. “I told you, just set the date, and I’m there, baby.”

“Nate,” she whined and pushed him away. “I don’t want to talk about Mating. I’m only sixteen. I’m not ready. You’re not ready either. We have years to think about it, to figure ourselves out.”

“What’s to figure out?” he asked. “I’ll go to school, get a degree in Mechanical Engineering, get a job, get a house. It doesn’t matter when we Mate, April. You can live with my folks or yours, and I’ll come home on weekends. Better yet, you can come to school with me, and we’ll get an apartment. We can make it work. People do it every day.”

“I don’t want to talk about Mating, Nathaniel!”

“Whoa, pulling out the full name. Yes, ma’am.”

“You have a one-track mind.” She shoved her chair back away from him on its rollers. She felt crowded again. That seemed to happen a lot these days, and she had to fight the urge to bolt. Nate wouldn’t hurt her. It wasn’t that, exactly.

“Well, yeah. I’m a teenage alpha. It’s a cliché. Maybe you haven’t read that book yet.”

She sighed.

“Look,” he said, scooting closer again. “What do you think is gonna happen when we graduate in May? I’ll have to move away. Are you staying here? Are you coming with me? April, I can’t watch out for you if I can’t be where you are, and I can’t study engineering here.”

“I’m not coming with you to university just to sit in your dorm room and wait for you to come back every day.”

Nate scoffed and scratched his chin. “Okay. Okay. I get it. You think I just want you around for sex, right? Like my Mother and my Mom? Don’t look to them, April. I know they’re fucked up. But I’m not like that. I would never try to tell you not to find work, not to study what you’re passionate about. Sweetheart, you can enroll, too. You can study music!”

“And then what?!” she shouted.

“Wha…I don’t know! Whatever music students do! Teach music classes. Join an orchestra. Take private students. Play for the church.”

“Play for the church,” she parroted dully.

“Once I’m done with school, we’ll move somewhere nice and you can get involved in whatever work you want. You can pick where we live. I don’t care. Pick anywhere. I’ll go wherever you
want. All I’m asking is that you stick with me while I’m earning my degree. Is that too much to ask? After that, the world is yours, sweetheart.”

“I’m not sure I want a mate at all, Nate.” Her voice barely carried even though he was quite close.

“You’re scared. April, I know. God, I know. I wish I didn’t have to put pressure on you like this, but we’re running out of time. Once I’m gone, I don’t want to think what might happen to you. I love you.”

“I know you do.” She frowned. She wanted to reach out to him and comfort him, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. Her instincts demanded she not close the gap that was her only remaining escape route if he pounced. He wasn’t going to pounce. “I love you, too, but I don’t want to Mate you. Not right now, Nate. Not until we’ve grown up some. I want to go to that school in Kansas where they do the testing. I want to learn what the polished Omegas know.”

“Pssh! They teach Omegas how to give head, April. You don’t need some strange alpha to teach you that. I can teach you right here!”

She slapped his arm. “Don’t be crude. It’s more than that, and I don’t remember you thinking I needed lessons last Saturday.”

“Never hurts to practice,” he said with a provocative snigger.

“You’re a dork. How did a dork like you pop a knot in the first place?”

He sobered and set a hand on her shoulder. “Promise me you’ll think about it. I know you love your Dad, and you don’t want to leave Lawton, but do you really want to be his little girl forever? He’s never going to let you grow up. I may not be perfect, but I love you, and I’ll let you decide everything. How many other alphas do you know who’ll offer you the same freedom?”

“What if we’ve both got a True-mate out there somewhere?” she asked wistfully, gazing past the far bleachers where the sun was disappearing.

He watched her as she watched the sunset. He reached out and wrapped a hand around hers on the desk in front of them. “Is that what you’re looking for in Kansas?”

“I need to find out who I am before I have any idea if I’m the right person for you,” she answered. “I need to find out who I am.”

“That’s easy,” he said softly. “You’re the love of my life.”

NOW:

Getting Naomi squared away turned out to be simpler than Cas expected. She protested nothing, even moving into a room half the size of her space in the manor and giving up nearly all her privacy. The door into her room had been designed for a hospital care space, and as such, came mounted with a window that wasn’t blinded. Meg had installed a rolling screen just inside the door. That helped, and she thanked Meg for her thoughtfulness.
She thanked Meg. Without prompting. Castiel noticed Michael nodding calmly in approval. He noticed his mother’s quick eyes watch for that approval.

Well, shit.

Cas put it on a back burner. Having Michael step in to fill a void that had been vacant since his father abandoned her was less than ideal, but it was helpful today. Watching her accept him made Castiel’s skin crawl though. It was an unnatural connection, and it couldn’t help anyway. It made them both feel solid for the moment, but the damage beneath the surface had no hope of riding that sleigh. Once that truth became evident, she would struggle to deal with it. Michael couldn’t soothe her for long. No one could.

Meg and Michael stayed to help her unpack. Naomi held her chin high, determined to face the world as a queen in humble abode. She was who she was, and her means of coping seemed as effective as any she might’ve tried. Castiel kissed her temple and excused himself with an explanation that he was scheduled for clinic coverage and a promise to stop by before leaving for the day.

Cas thumbed through his schedule on his way to the clinic. Dean was offsite. He had moved his weekly appointment with Tessa to Monday, so he wouldn’t need to cancel it altogether. Dean’s commitment to see to his own emotional growth cemented another block into place in the firmament Castiel felt rising around him. A very large block.

This morning’s impromptu tangle had been a rousing success. Dean had enjoyed himself immensely. Michael was beside himself with the gloating. April came away satisfied far beyond what vanilla sex usually gave her. And while they’d increased the complexity by bringing all parties into the same bed, nothing about what they’d done except body count could be called kinky. April usually liked a twist or two even when they weren’t really scening exactly. She stepped down to breakfast with a bright pink behind and all parts north absolutely glowing as well.

Cas had fed her quickly and hustled her upstairs to dress before Nicholas turned up. Maureen took her over with a simple nod. Matt had called in because of a sick fiancé who needed his care for the day. Cas and April agreed she could survive the day without him, even if that left her alone with Nick. Stiff upper lip, and all that.

The Alpha donned his white coat, signed in at the clinic desk, and buried himself in minor Lupin health issues for the remainder of the day, pointedly ignoring the murmur of increased activity as the last pins were placed before they headed east to make their case.

Dean stopped by after his appointment, slipped Cas into an empty exam room, and sucked fiercely on his face for a few minutes. Then he straightened his clothes, tidied his hair, nodded confidently, and disappeared as fast as he arrived, leaving Castiel wide-eyed and rumpled. The Alpha got a text shortly after, asking if he would mind driving Michael home and letting Cas know that Dean was calling it a day. Cas sent him a thumb’s-up emoji in response.

And then the shouting started. Clinic staff rushed past him at a quick jog, calling to one another urgently. Cas fell in with them, his ears picking out what he needed, and his fingers digging into his pocket to stow his phone. He grabbed a pair of gloves from the wall dispenser on his way out the door. The car sat at a diagonal, half on the sidewalk, and covering the walkway. The rear door was open, and blood was everywhere. Castiel went into emergency mode. A panicked beta had the Omega in a clumsy carry that he wouldn’t be capable of maintaining very far. Cas called for a gurney, and two medics peeled off immediately. He wrapped the young man in his own arms, letting blood flow over his hands and a forearm, and he took him bodily from his mate. Crap, they were Mated. Cas could smell it. The beta only resisted for a moment, but then he released his Omega with a wail of despair. Cas settled the boy on the gurney, tucking his limbs carefully inside the railing,
laying his blood-covered hand atop his own stomach, and then placing two fingers at his throat.

“What happened?” he asked the beta as the whole assembly jogged quickly through the wide sliding doors and into the stark white hallway.

“He was attacked on his way home from work! Some fucking alpha asshole ambushed him. I think he’s been raped, but he won’t say a word. I don’t know if he’s been stabbed or shot. God, you have to help him! Help him, Alpha!”

“We’re going to do that. I need you to stay calm.” Cas moved quickly, but he stripped a glove off and touched the young beta on his throat. “Look at me. I need you to stay calm. What’s your name?”

Cas let the gurney move ahead into the first available space. He arrested the beta’s forward motion with his eyes and his touch.

“Rick. Please. You have to save him!”

“What’s your mate’s name, Rick?” Cas pulled calm assertive on like a cloak. Vitals were being taken in the room beyond. A preliminary assessment would meet him when he stepped through.

“Connor, Alpha. His name’s Connor. He’s only 22 years old. Please, God, don’t let him die! I should’ve walked him. I should never have let him go alone. They were waiting for him, Alpha! They knew he walked that way every day, and they knew what time he’d be there. He barely said a word, but he dragged himself to the corner and called me. What the fuck am I gonna do?! How did I let this happen?!”

Cas signaled a staff nurse to take custody of Rick. “We’re going to take care of him, Rick. You need to stay here with Marie, and let me go take care of him. Can you do that? Stay here for me.”

Rick’s face was agonized. He wanted to force his way into the tiny room where his mate lay pale and bleeding. What if this was the last time he ever saw his mate? He could feel the Omega’s weakness through their pulsing Mating-bond. Connor wasn’t really there. It was as if he was dreaming, but there was no color to his link. It was just a blank canvas. Rick clung to the line as tightly as he could. His eyes glazed over as he turned inward to stay with his mate, his life.

Cas nodded to him, squeezed his arm, and then rushed into chaos.

Alone and pale, Michael stood at the clinic archway in shock. He wanted to slip away and hide in Alpha’s cozy suite until someone strong came to take him home, but his eyes fixated on a puddle of blood that ran almost a foot in length near the wide doors. Michael gulped the nausea down and clutched the archway support. A nurse stooped and wiped up the blood. She deposited the paper into a bright red plastic bag, sprayed the floor from a heavy spray bottle and wiped it again until all trace of red was gone. Michael’s eyes still seemed to see rust red in a curving streak where now there was only speckled tile.

He wanted to turn his eyes to the shivering beta who had been led to a cushioned chair to the side. He wanted to connect with the young man. They were probably of an age. They probably had a lot in common. They might have met at some point, maybe at church, maybe at some town function. Who knows? Michael couldn’t tear his eyes away from the floor, and he couldn’t make himself look at the beta who was sending panic scent in every direction. Looking at him would make it real.

Michael could still hear urgent and assertive voices, but they weren’t shouting now. They were moving as a single entity behind the closed door with the large window. The window didn’t reveal much. It wasn’t curtained, but bodies kept moving across it. There was no line-of-sight to the gurney in the middle. Michael didn’t know when his gaze had shifted. He felt numb. He felt shaky. He
would vomit soon if he stayed here, but he couldn’t move. If he moved, they would spot him. They would come for him as they’d come for that bleeding boy.

Secure arms embraced him from the side and led him backward into the Facility proper. He scented no menace, so he let himself be guided. Someone was speaking to him softly.

“…no place for a pregnant Omega. Let’s get you somewhere you can sit down. Here. Sit here. I’ll fetch you some water.”

“Trash can,” Michael grated through clenched teeth, and her eyes went wide as she understood. She grabbed for the little plastic-lined bin in the corner and slid it between his knees just in time. Throwing up broke his shocked senses free. He began to shake. His eyes teared up and overflowed, and his hands were too tightly attached to the edge of the bin to do anything about it. It was a good thing she’d found him a chair. His legs weren’t going to hold him up like this.

They weren’t very far from the clinic, and the scent of despair and horror made its way down the hall. Michael heaved again, doubling over with the cramps. A cool cloth pressed against his forehead, then his throat, then around to the nape of his neck. It didn’t help. He felt cold everywhere, and he couldn’t stop shaking.

And then Dean was there. Dean’s grim face, frightened but steady appeared in his eyeline. The alpha was on his knees before the Omega, looking up into his face in concern. He was talking, but Michael couldn’t hear him. Michael closed his eyes and leaned forward until his weight fell against Dean’s body, forcing the alpha to catch him and settle back onto the cold hard tile.

Too many words. Michael’s head began to ache with the words, and he moaned into Dean’s throat.

“…going into shock. Get Castiel.”

“Alpha, I can’t. We’ve got a major trauma next door. He can’t be called away right now.”

“Then fucking get Missouri! He’s shutting down!”

Michael would have liked to slip into a dazed unconsciousness and awaken in a comfortable white-sheeted bed. But he stayed strangely alert. His faculties never left him entirely, although his sense of time and distance were fucked up. Every moment lasted a lifetime, and yet time seemed to jump forward randomly at the same time. His sense of space likewise went squirrely. He knew where he was, and he didn’t. His head throbbed. His feet and hands were freezing. He threw up twice more before Dean deposited him in a narrow white bed with Missouri unwrapping her stethoscope behind him and shoving him rudely out of the way.

“Is he okay, Dean?” Michael asked in a shaky gravelly voice some time after Missouri left.

“Who, baby?” Dean pressed back. He was still rubbing Michael’s hands and feet in series to bring blood back into them.

Michael swallowed. His throat was raw. His head throbbed. Dean had pulled the heavy curtains across the blinds at the window and turned off the lights, but the room was still too bright. “The Omega they brought in,” he explained. “He was bleeding everywhere. Is he going to be okay?
Alpha was looking after him. He’s gonna be fine, right? Alpha’s got him?”

“I don’t know, Michael,” Dean told him honestly. “I’ll check.” He laid Michael’s right hand down, tucked it beneath the blanket and reached across to begin massaging his left. Dean’s face was pale and grim. Still.

Missouri said he was fine. She said the pup was fine. He’d had a shock, but he would be all right. She’d said so. Had she lied? Dean shouldn’t look like that if he was fine.

Michael pulled his hand out of Dean’s grasp and took his mate’s wrist. Dean bit his upper lip, and his eyes welled up. A tear fell free, and he scrubbed it away fiercely.

“We’re all right, alpha,” Michael gruffed. He wished he could say it in a normal voice, but his voice had fled. “The pup and me, we’re all right. Don’t cry.”

Dean huffed a broken laugh. He leaned down and touched his forehead to Michael’s. “That scared me so bad, baby. I felt you freeze up. I was halfway out of the parking lot, and you went so blank I could barely feel you. I’ve never been so terrified in my life. Please don’t ever leave me.”

“I’m here, alpha. Just had a shock, that’s all. That’s what Dr. Mosely said, right?”

Dean nodded without lifting his head. He squeezed Michael’s hand and pressed his other hand into Michael’s belly. “You need to lie still for a while.”

“Dean, that Omega. I think he died. There was so much blood, and Alpha didn’t say he was going to live, only that he would take care of him. If he was going to save him, he would’ve said. The beta – his mate – would’ve needed to hear that, but Castiel didn’t say it. He died, didn’t he?” Michael began to tremble slightly again, and Dean stood up and leaned across him, pressing his arms into the bed, grounding him.

“Relax, Michael. You need to stay calm for the pup. Getting upset isn’t good for the pup. I’ll find out, but you need to concentrate on staying calm, all right?” Dean released him and stroked his hair and his face. The alpha traced down the thin line that connected his mind to Castiel’s, but all he sensed was weariness. That could mean anything.

“I want to go home, Dean.”

“I know, baby. Let me talk to Cas, and I’ll take you home. Can you close your eyes for a minute? It will help you calm down and maybe make your head hurt a little less. I’ll be right back.”

Michael let his eyes close and nodded. He squeezed Dean’s hand again and then released it. Dean slipped into the hallway, but he stayed where he could see Michael through the window while he flagged down a nurse. Michael had no idea how much time had passed, but the filtered light that made it through the curtain had begun to fade to orange by the time he opened his eyes. It had probably been no more than 10 minutes since Dean stepped out, but it felt longer.

Michael’s eyes fastened on the couple embracing outside his room. They were framed by the square window. Dean had Cas’ head pulled into his shoulder, and his fingers scratched lightly through the hair at the back of Castiel’s head. Cas, for his part, barely showed any life at all. He lay still against Dean’s body. His hands were clasped loosely at the small of Dean’s back, and he stood statue-still.

Michael knew without delving into his bonds with Dean, and he let the blank feeling of spent numbness cover him like a blanket as he watched the two alphas embrace. He didn’t tremble, and his fingers retained the warmth that Dean had rubbed back into him, but he couldn’t feel much to make him desire to move or to think. He lay on his side and blinked stoically. Castiel would have tried his
best. He was a great doctor. The best. Wasn’t he? If he couldn’t keep that young man’s heart beating, no one could.

Michael watched Dean nudge Cas’ head up with a touch to his chin. He watched them kiss softly. He watched them shoulder the burden of grief together. He felt numb through it all. Michael didn’t try to read Dean’s lips. Words of comfort and solace. Bracing words, strengthening words. It didn’t really matter which words Dean selected. His face said everything.

So did Castiel’s. Self-recrimination. Anger. Rage. Despair. Dean’s touch stilled him under Michael’s slowly blinking watch, but the pain in Castiel’s face wasn’t something that could be wiped away with a touch to his brow or any combination of words.

“They think they can get away with it, Dean! We’re fighting a pointless battle here, if after all these years, they still strike in broad daylight with witnesses everywhere and think they can get off Scot-free. That kid was barely old enough to VOTE! And he’s DEAD! I can’t fix this! I promised you I would fix this.”

His face morphed from grief to rage in an instant, and Dean knew exactly where his mind was taking him. He wanted vengeance. He wanted justice. He wanted blood, and the Alpha had the resources to take everything he wanted. He’d done it before. Dean could feel Michael’s eyes on him. God, that Omega could’ve been his Michael. Dean had caught the tail end of Castiel’s heartbreaking report to the beta in the waiting room. Alpha kept it simple but personal. He offered the man a place to sit and process. He brought over a counselor to take him somewhere private and help him contact family. Cas gave him his cell phone number and urged him to call if he needed anything.

He wouldn’t call. What could Castiel do for him now?

The truth was, Castiel could wield the sword of justice in swift and permanent judgment. Cas could do what every wronged and bitter individual ever longed to do when the cowl of helplessness settled over their limbs. Castiel Winchester was NOT helpless, but Dean knew that the Alpha would hate himself once his feet came back to earth if he let his power and his desire rush his body into actions he couldn’t take back.

“Fix it for me the way we talked about, Alpha,” Dean whispered. “Stay home tonight, babe. Stay home with your pack and grieve with us.”

“I need to file a report for the police.”

“Good. Do that. You’re going to hand this to the police, and then you’re going to get back to work. We’re not going to save everyone, C.J. But we keep plugging away until the world is a different place, and they don’t feel they have the right or the freedom to hurt people anymore. You can’t bring him back by turning into a vigilante. You’re not doing that ever again. Remember Gordon, Cas. You said that’s not who you wanna be. Listen to me. Look at me. You’re not doing that anymore. We told Bobby he can’t, and you can’t either.”

“I don’t answer to you, Dean Michael!” Castiel growled.

“Who do you answer to, then,” he snapped back, not giving an inch. The busy hallway was no place to hold a conversation like this, but Dean prayed it would work in his favor – snap the Alpha back
out of his wolf faster.

“No one!”

“No one? Bullshit! You fucking answer to me, you prick! I toppled you, remember? I’ll do it again if I have to. You answer to that mate of yours who trusts you to live upright for her. You answer to the Omega in that room right there who’s carrying your pup! You answer to your brother who’s holding himself to a higher standard because YOU told him to. Stand down, and let Cas back in. I won’t tell you again.” Dean was panting by the end, and his eyes had shifted to full crimson. He’d never tried to speak to the great wolf that way before, and Claim or no, he doubted it would get him anything but backhanded. Castiel’s eyes showed the barest ring of red. He was fighting for the surface, but the beast was so angry, and that always strengthened it.

Michael frowned and sat up. He needed to hear what they were saying. Those weren’t words of solace any longer. He stumbled off the bed and made his way to the door. Opening it, he stopped in the doorway and stared accusingly at his mate.

“He tried his best, Dean! How can you be angry with him?! It’s not his fault! He tried his best! Go turn your rage on the assholes who DID this, not the guy who tried to clean up the mess! What’s wrong with you?!”

“Michael,” Cas said, and he reached out to catch the man whose legs wanted to give way again.

Castiel was somber all evening. Dean wanted to stay near him, but the Alpha needed space, and Dean reluctantly took Michael into the Pool house and let him rest on the couch while he worked on his outline and arranged his notes. It was mindless work at this stage, and that’s what he needed. He hated being apart from Cas, and he hated that Cas didn’t seek his comfort. But Castiel James was a breed apart. He had a trek to make within his own mind, and he couldn’t do it while Dean stood over him fussing. He promised Dean to leave the Omega’s death in the hands of the proper authorities, and Dean believed him. But Cas needed to subdue the wolf now, and that was going to take muscle and determination, and it wasn’t going to be pretty to watch.

Dean tagged Gabriel with a nearly wordless request that he stand vigil, and Gabe stepped in with a nod. April spent the evening shivering with Kali in Gabriel’s suite. Dean wanted to stay with her too, but he was alpha, and there were delicacies to consider.

“What’s going on, alpha?” asked Tony as he wheeled in a cart bearing two meals. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say it feels like someone died.”

“Comes with the territory when you work with Omega outreach, Tony,” Dean told him. “Alpha had a rough day at the clinic. We lost one today, and he’s taking it hard. Stay clear of him for the night. Let Gabe take his tray, if he even wants one.”

“Oh, shit. I had no idea. Can I do anything?”

“There’s nothing we can do but wait until he gets a leash on his wolf. He’s got to do that on his own, I’m afraid.
By bedtime, Castiel seemed more or less himself again. He was tired and sad, but he wasn’t murderous any longer. He spoke softly to Michael and looked him over to make sure Missouri hadn’t missed anything. He let April feed him a late meal of hot soup with a tall glass of water. He sought Dean in the room Dean shared with Michael. Dean was sitting up in the bed, checking through some pages from his revisions that altered the Facility’s Keller rating reports to the new format. Dean glanced up at him when he stepped in.

“It’s all right, Alpha. It’s par for the course,” Dean told him. “He’s a big fucker, and he’s gonna slip the leash sometimes when shit goes sideways. You’re equal to this, you know. You can handle it. Don’t freak out on me.”

Cas sighed expansively and shook his head. “You saved me, Dean. I don’t know how you did it but thank you. I would’ve been out the door, wreaking havoc, slashing shit into pieces left and right and laying waste…”

“Cas, stop. There’s no need for that. All I did was remind you who you are. You did the rest. You wanna have a Pack bed tonight? It’s your call. We’re here if you want us, but if you still need some space…”

Cas came the rest of the way into the room and sat on the bed beside Dean. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, Winchester.”

“It’s Universist Balance, Alpha. Like karma, only better.” Dean slipped his glasses off and set them on his side table.

Cas chuckled. “If you say so. Where’s Michael?”

“Talking to Gabe. Your brother thought he could use a little Omega-to-Omega mono-a-mono.”

Cas ran a hand through his hair. “Dean, I’m so sorry.”

Dean regarded him cautiously. “Sorry for what, exactly?”

“If you marry me, that’s not going to be the last time you’re the only line of defense between my wolf and utter destruction. It’s not fair to burden you with that responsibility.”

Dean laughed. “Right. And it’s fair that you got stuck doing it every other minute of every other day. We’re a Pack, man. We look out for each other. Truth is, I wanted to sic you on the bastards, not hold your leash while you muzzled the wolf. You know how I feel about this stuff. That’s not likely to change. But I know how you would’ve felt later if I let you stalk out there without at least trying to stop you. The fact that it wasn’t hard to stop you speaks for itself. I don’t mind watching out for you every now and then, C.J.”

“Why do I feel like I failed you, then?” Cas pulled himself up onto the bed, and Dean moved his papers so that Castiel could lay down beside him.

“Because I’m safe. All this hubbub is just a deflection, so you don’t have to look at what really hurts, and that’s the boy that you tried your damnedest to save, but couldn’t, and the mate who’s at home alone tonight when he should be with his Omega. That could have been your mate, Cas, or mine. We lost today, and the bastards won, but we’re not going to let it change our course, and we’re not going to let it turn us into animals like them. We keep fighting, Alpha. You didn’t fail. You lost. You
hate losing, so buck up and get back into it.”

Cas clung to Dean and they breathed together for several minutes.

“You didn’t answer the question, Alpha,” Dean reminded him. “You want us all with you tonight? Tell me what you need.” It was little more than a whisper by the end.

Cas nodded, took a bracing breath and sat up. “Yes, I think a Pack bed would be the best thing for me. But no sex. Can you live with a night of no sex? I’m not up to it, and neither is Michael.”

“Speak for yourself, Alpha,” said Michael from the door with false bravado. Cas smiled at him. Dean chuckled. “Give me ten minutes to get us situated, Cas, and we’ll be right in.” He began to stack his papers. Castiel kissed his forehead and left the mates to their space.

The Omegas slept side-by-side in the middle of the great bed with their mates on the outside. They were no safer in the middle than they were on the edge, but it was no use telling that to the alphas. An alpha needs what an alpha needs, and neither Omega was in any position or state of mind to argue.

Castiel jogged alone in the morning. Michael watched him skirt the curve of the driveway in silence from the window with his head resting against the corner post.

Cas also relieved Michael of his duties of the morning. Dean sat at table, fully dressed and free to take a turn caring for his mate instead of the other way around. There was a solemnness about the house that settled over everyone. It was a home, not in mourning exactly, for it wasn’t theirs to mourn; it was a house buried by shame, and it would feel broken until the Alpha dug his way to the surface. He’d leashed his wolf. He’d heard his fiancé’s words. He knew he had no blame to bear, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d unbalanced everything when he failed that boy.

“We can’t take him to Dayton,” said Castiel. “He’s had too big a shock, and he needs time to recuperate.”

Dean stared at his plate. “You can do it without me, Cas. I don’t have a vote anyway. The best I was going to do was glad-hand and look pretty, standing four-abreast. I’ll stay here and look after him. They’ll understand. Pack emergencies happen sometimes. I want someone to Facetime me for your speech though. I don’t wanna miss that.”

Cas set his jaw and then grimaced. “I need you with me, Dean. You don’t have a vote on the leadership decision, but you’re an owner. You have to be present if a decision is to be finalized on the merger. We can’t do it by proxy or by phone with the way we’ve set it up. If you’re not there, you forfeit. We need every voice.”

“Sir, I’m shaken, but I’ll be fine here on my own for a few days. We’ve got a whole house full of people to keep an eye on me.” Michael sat up as straight as he could and summoned strength he didn’t trust to appear stronger than he felt. “We may be Omegas, but Gabe, and Pete, and I can hold down the fort. Please don’t put your plans at risk because you think I need a nurse to sit by my bedside.”
“That’s not your decision,” Cas said coolly.

“No, Sir,” Michael responded. “But it’s the best option.”

Castiel slammed his palm onto the table and glared at Michael.

“Leave him alone, Alpha,” said Gabriel before Dean could get his own defense raised. “He’s not the one you’re upset with. Go chop down a tree or something. You need to let the rage out somewhere. Don’t take it to Dayton with you. You can’t let the Boards see you like this.”

Cas stood up and transferred his glare to his brother but found Kali rising to stand against him, her shoulders thrown back, her arm slung out to cover Gabriel’s chest. Her eyes blazed.

“Stop it! All of you!” shouted Dean into the tension. “Sit down and eat your fucking breakfast! Jesus!” Dean didn’t stand, but he too had an arm out in protection of his mate. Only April sat alone and undefended, but April was the safest of them all. “Castiel James! Knock it off! You’re being an ass! Michael isn’t challenging you! Gabe isn’t challenging you! You’re pissed off at yourself and the world, and we don’t deserve you to turn that against us! SIT DOWN!” His face was red with frustration.

Fred stepped in and refilled Castiel’s coffee cup, then he topped off Dean’s.

“Thanks, Fred,” Dean muttered.

Cas sank slowly back into his seat and draped a weary hand over April’s shoulder. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he told them. “I’m sorry. I can’t seem to keep myself…”

“You’ve never stood down before, little brother,” Gabe told him, tugging gently on Kali’s arm to bring her back to the table. She sat slowly as well, her eyes still on the Alpha. “You always had a chance to vent your rage in glorious destruction that soothed your big dog. You didn’t do that this time, and he’s still rabid in there. I’m serious about chopping down a few trees. You need to turn that rage loose on something, or it’s going to burst out of you at the wrong time. Alphas aren’t built to suppress rage.”

Dean was back to staring at his plate. “Cas…”

“No, Dean.”

“I know, but…”

“I said, NO! I’m not turning him loose on anyone while he’s like this, least of all you!”

“What do you suggest, then?” Dean asked, with a piece of bacon in his hand. Michael’s hand on his knee was beginning to hurt.

“I could swing by the legal library and see how my friend Clay is coming along,” said Cas dully.

“Beating up betas is better?”

“I learned to funnel my rage effectively long before I met you, Dean Winchester. I expect you to trust me to take care of it. I am NOT going to turn it on you – not you, not April, not unsuspecting dill-hole beta attorney pups in the legal library. Michael, you will remain here for the week. Your lessons are canceled. Your Pack Manager duties are suspended. You are to devote yourself to rest and recuperation, and you are to report the status of your condition and any lingering or new symptoms to me and to Dean regularly while we are gone.”
“Dean, you’re coming to Dayton as planned. We can have a charter plane on standby if that will make you feel less uneasy about leaving him. I sympathize, but what Michael really needs is rest, and as much as I know you would prefer to watch over him, April and the rest of the Pack can do that. He won’t be alone. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Alpha,” they both answered unhappily.

“Please finish your breakfasts, everyone. April, if you’re still hungry, you may take your seat and join the table. Dean, we leave for work in twenty minutes. I’d like you to drive this morning.”

“Yes, Cas,” he said, glancing at Michael who had deep circles under his eyes.

Cas excused himself and spent the next twenty minutes alone in his office. April couldn’t have said what he did in there as he’d closed his bond with her, and Dean stubbornly refused to check. When he emerged, he looked put together, fresh and relaxed, ready to face another storied day in Nirvana.

He told April, “Maureen will be up in an hour, and Nicholas knows better than to poke his head in before 8:30. Please call me if you find yourself distraught. It’s been a rough couple of days, sweet one, and I fear you may bear the brunt of the fallout if we’re not careful. I regret I cannot keep you with me today.”

She smiled thinly and touched the fingers he had against her collarbone. “I’m fine, sir. I’ll play a little Beethoven this morning, and that will help me settle.”

“Good girl,” he whispered affectionately with the first real smile he’d managed that morning. He leaned down for a chaste kiss. “Ready Dean?”

“Coming,” said Dean, but he lingered beside Michael’s plate, hunched down in a squat. “Call me if you need anything. Leave your bond wide open. I’m going to be watching over you. Stay off your feet as much as you can. You get to play hooky today, man. Take advantage of it. Promise me?”

“Promise, alpha,” said Michael with a sad smile. Dean patted his thigh and stood up. He planted a kiss on Michael’s temple.

“And don’t think I won’t know if you try to rub one out on the sly, baby boy. I’m watching you. You’re supposed to be resting, not jerking off. If you didn’t like the whooping you got yesterday, remember I promised to double it on the next offense. I keep my promises, Omega, even if you’re convalescing.”

“Yes, alpha,” said Michael with a roll of his eyes and his mouth settling into a thin line.

“Was that necessary, Dean?” asked Cas as he held the door for Dean and handed him his keys.

“You don’t know him like I do. A whole day with nothing to do but lay in bed and stare at the ceiling?”

The door closed behind them, but a trace of tension remained. Michael carried it with him into the parlor where he selected a soft couch to stretch out on with the remainder of his coffee and his phone. He maintained his façade when Gabriel sauntered through to check that he was comfortable, and he held it in place when Eunice refilled his cup. He even graced her with a smile and a word of thanks.

April came in last, and the mask slipped a little when she knelt beside his couch and put a hand on
his arm without saying anything.

“I’ll be fine, Pete. Go on and play your Beethoven. I can hear you from here if you leave the door open.”

“Come in the back with me, Michael. What do you have in here by yourself that you won’t get there?”

“Solitude,” he told her with haunted eyes.

“You shouldn’t be alone today, my friend,” she said simply.

“You friend?” He frowned and touched a strand of her hair, just to touch it.

“I’ll play you anything you want,” she tried again. “Come and sit with me.”

“I need to be alone for a bit, Pete. I’ve got Rachel texting me nonstop anyway. I need to chill her out. Let me have some time, would you?”

Her eyes caught the morning light, and the blue sparkled in rays filtered by the sheer panels in the windows. She nodded, patted his arm as if he were gravely ill, and stood gracefully, retreating through the far door.

He hadn’t been lying about his sister. She demanded an answer, and she seemed on the verge of calling Castiel herself. He tapped out a terse response and then set the phone face down on the coffee table. Michael closed his eyes and kicked his shoes onto the floor with a couple of loud clomps. The image that his brain provided was the same that had tortured his dreams all night. Castiel, with blood dripping from his elbow, laying a body out on a white sheet and catching the right hand in his own, laying the hand atop its owner’s belly and securing the unresponsive arm inside the rail. The Alpha’s eyes had never stopped moving over the body until he waylaid the mate with a gloveless left hand, his right still so fouled with blood that the Alpha had tucked it obscurely behind himself so as not to alarm the beta.

He moved with smooth grace and confidence. He’d clearly done this, or something much like it, many times before, but this one hit them both harder. Michael opened his eyes and stared up at the crown molding, memorizing the intricately repeating pattern. He saw that hand again even though his eyes were open. He saw the hand rest across a belly distended. He saw Castiel’s eyes pass over that belly and deliberately leave the man’s hand covering what he couldn’t protect any longer. Michael had watched the scene in shock, all of his senses telling him to freeze, to get low, to stay and hunker and wait for protection. But he couldn’t close his eyes. There was blood everywhere, and it issued from a gaping wound in the Omega’s belly. His pregnant belly. Even if Cas had managed to save the Omega, the pup was clearly gone. No one had even mentioned the pup. Michael hadn’t thought to ask Dean to check on the pup while he still lay in the tiny room under Dean’s terrified care. The pup was gone before its mother ever made it into the clinic, and Michael’s brain erased it from existence until his dreams reminded him last night.

He felt sick. His coffee smelled vile. His breakfast churned. Michael sat up abruptly and clutched the back of the couch, but he had nowhere to go, and he was alone. The Grandfather clock in the hall ticked. He couldn’t hear anything from the conservatory. Michael sat for some time with his head bowed over his knees, resting on his elbows, praying the nausea would abate before it forced him to vomit again. His mouth filled with saliva that felt rancid to swallow.

He picked up his phone, but he didn’t know whom to call. A string of texts from Rachel were nearly shrill in tone, and he set the phone back down. Its ringer was off. Eventually, he stretched back out, and at length, he slipped into a sweaty, clammy sleep.
Michael awoke to Maureen’s hand on his forehead, and her concerned eyes looking over the pallor of his face. “How do you feel?” she asked him.

“Peachy,” he croaked, sitting up again.

“You don’t look good.”

“I’m not sick, alpha. I’m just badly shaken. I witnessed something, and it kicked me sideways.” Michael found that his coffee had been replaced by a tray with a cold pitcher of water and a glass. He reached for it, but Maureen got there first. She poured for him and helped him steady the glass while he drank. His hands were shaking again.

Great.

“I just need to get those images out of my head. If I can figure out how to do that, I’ll be right as rain.” His voice was a croak from all the vomiting, and it wasn’t helping him convince the alpha he wasn’t ill.

“I heard about it from Dean last night, Michael. Sleep may help, but you shouldn’t be in here alone. Grab your shoes. We’re going in where there are people.” She stood over him imperiously until he rocked forward with a grumble and swept his boots off the floor.

“I don’t want to listen to Sir Nicholas berate people all day if it’s all the same to you, alpha,” he groused. She offered him an arm to lean on, but he chose to walk shakily on his own.

“Neither do I, as it happens,” Maureen informed him. “I sent him away today. April’s not in much better shape than you are. No one’s going to get any work done around here today, not like this. He and that adorable ape tutor of hers are down at the guest house in the woods out there. They’re going to spend the day putting together a long term curriculum with career goals and what-all. God help the child if Nicholas Maraby is planning her future, but it got them out of the house.”

April was at the piano, but she wasn’t playing at the moment. She was scribbling on a sheet of music, then erasing furiously, then scribbling again. Jackson sat alone on the couch beneath the window, staring at his phone.

“Weird that they left us here today,” Michael observed to no one in particular. “They’re both usually so protective.”

“They didn’t have a choice,” said April over her shoulder. “Everything comes together today and tomorrow. They wouldn’t have left if they didn’t have to.”

“There’s my sweet Peter Pan,” he offered with no hint of sarcasm or barbs, just a sense of comfort in her predictability. Michael sank down into the cushion of the sofa nearest the piano. He dropped his boots on the floor and let his body unfold down the length until his feet rested on the far armrest. “… always putting the Alpha first, still no closer to growing up…”

“Michael, you look terrible,” she told him. She left the piano and was seated on the cushion by his hip faster than he knew she could move.

“Touch of morning sickness,” he explained. “Give me a couple of hours and a good nap. It’ll pass.”

“Should we call Dean?” April asked Maureen.

“I called him about twenty minutes ago. He asked me to have Michael call when he woke up.”
Michael grunted. “Could’ve told me that when we were still in the parlor. Wouldn’t kill you people to give me a little privacy.” He took his phone from Maureen. He unlocked it and called his mate, noting that it was already 11:00 in the morning. Holy… What had happened to the morning?

“No, Dean. I’m all right,” said Michael into the phone. Jackson rose casually and wandered aimlessly out of the room, still glued to his phone. Michael watched him go. “You can feel it for yourself. I feel like shit, but it’s just the usual nausea and the after-effects of yesterday’s overload. I’m not dying, for Christ’s sakes.” Michael raked his fingers through his hair, listening. “No, stay there and do what you need to do. I’m going to lay down and try to sleep.”

Michael cast his eyes heavenward as he hung up. He shared a look with April, and he shrugged at her smugness. So, she wasn’t the only one who sometimes put the alphas’ needs first. He didn’t think to look to the alpha who had busied herself with something to do with couch pillows at the far end of the room. April went back to the piano and began to play something soft and lyrical. Michael didn’t try to sleep. He lay still and tried his best to stop existing for a while. The music helped him get there. He heard Maureen excuse herself to see about lunch, but with an upset this profound in the Pack, Michael knew Fred was here, and Fred would take care of everything. Woe be to alpha Maureen if she tried to interfere with that.

Michael felt his lip pull up in a slight smile as he imagined a confrontation between Maureen and Fred. The alpha wasn’t going to see it coming, and the Primate’s hands would never even be dirtied. A warm hand touched Michael’s cheek, and he realized the music had stopped. He didn’t open his eyes.

“I wish you would smile more often,” she said softly. “You have the most amazing smile.” She traced a thumb across his lips. He didn’t answer, but he turned his head into her touch. “Can you tell me about it? Castiel won’t say a word. I know someone died in the clinic yesterday, but I don’t know why it’s got both of you so torn up. If you can’t talk about it, I understand, but it might help. I want to help you, Michael.”

He rolled onto his side to face her, but he still didn’t open his eyes. Some things were best left relegated to his imagination, and he feared that the expression he imagined on her face might not be real. “Young Omega man,” he told her very quietly. “Newly Mated. Younger than me, maybe. I think I heard he was twenty-two. He had a pup still some way short of due. His belly was round, but not big. Someone jumped him. Alpha or two. Raped him. Stabbed him in the belly. Killed the pup first. Killed the pup, Pete. There was blood…everywhere. I saw it in Alpha’s eyes before he even tried to save the Omega… I saw him realize there was no point. The boy was a goner as soon as they took his pup.”

Michael unburdened himself upon a soul he knew could help him carry the load. Omegas didn’t live in a dream world of perfect safety, and they lived by a code deeper than any research could touch. They were stronger than alphas. They had borne torment unimaginable and stepped out of it whole, resilient. They had secret tricks that they didn’t willingly share with betas who lived a life muted from the full palette of colorful reality, or alphas, who broke under strains that barely tickled an Omega. One of those secrets was the sharing of burdens. There was no point pretending one Omega’s burden didn’t belong to the others. All Omegas suffered eventually. Handing a portion of that burden to be carried by another set of strong shoulders meant that two could walk bowed but not broken.

Michael knew that Gabriel would willingly take a share when he emerged from wherever he disappeared to every day. Gabe hadn’t let him talk about it last night. Last night had been about getting his feet beneath him and staving off the desire to crouch and hide. Gabe would be by soon, and Michael would tell him what he’d seen, and Gabriel would understand. Gabe had strong
shoulders and a kind heart. But for now, there was only Pete. She held his hand, and she stroked his hair, and she didn’t talk. Michael shuffled his hips back into the sofa, pressing his back into the support, and April climbed up beside him, spooning close and letting him drape an arm over her. Her hair smelled sweet.

“Stay with me…” he mumbled. His nausea was calming down, and his head didn’t hurt quite so badly.

Michael slept deeply and dreamlessly. April was still curled up with him when he woke several hours later. Someone was plinking an annoyingly redundant note on the piano.

“Gabe, please stop. Let him sleep.” That was Pete’s voice.

“Too late,” snarked Gabriel. “He’s up already. Mornin’ sunshine.” Gabriel stood leaning his backside against the keyboard with one hand behind him drilling the same key again and again. “It’s after two. We need to talk, and the alphas will be getting home early, if I know either of them at all. And I do.”

“I’m up,” Michael told him as he pushed himself to sit on the couch. He tugged April absently to lay across his lap and kept a hand moving through her hair.

“How you feeling, champ?” Gabe asked him with a concerned look on his face. The concerned looks were beginning to rub Michael weary. But Gabriel was different, wasn’t he?

“Better than I did,” Michael admitted. Gabe nodded and filled him a glass from the tray that had followed Michael magically from the parlor. Michael took several sips. He let April take the glass and help herself to a drink before setting it on the floor. “My headache’s gone. I don’t feel like puking my guts up. That’s a nice change.”

“Good. Still shaky?”

“Where’s that alpha?” asked Michael as he raised his hand to check for trembling. He felt weak, but his hand held steady. He tightened his hand into a fist and lowered it back into his lap.

“Had to run back home for an emergency with one of her wards. Glad it’s not me. She looked ready to thump someone’s head through a wall.” Gabe was leaning against the keyboard again, ignoring how irritating April found it. This talk was for Michael, not April.

“It’s just us?” Michael guessed.

“Us and the staff,” Gabe told him.

Michael nodded and lowered his head to scent April’s hair. If his lips passed her ear with a light touch, it was purely incidental.

“You wanna talk about it?” Gabriel asked him. Michael nodded again.

“I need to. I can’t get the images of blood out of my head.”

“Okay. Lay it on me.” Gabe’s eyes were ancient, timeless. He barely blinked through the retelling, and he didn’t interrupt with pointless questions. April’s arms circled Michael’s waist. She rested a cheek against his thigh and stared into the crease where his leg met his hip, and she listened.

When Michael finished recounting, he stopped speaking and stared at the blonde hair in his lap, stroking it again and again. Gabe watched him for several moments.
“You’re safe now, Michael,” he said. “It wasn’t you. It wasn’t your pup. It wasn’t your ‘Pete’.”
Michael’s eyes flicked up to Gabriel’s.

“It could’ve been,” he said dully. “I drive myself places. I walk around alone. I tell myself I’m badass enough that no fucking alpha’s gonna get the drop on me, and I’ve kicked the snot out of so many of them I stopped counting. They can’t get me. … But they can. They can, Gabriel. Take me by surprise. Outnumber me, gang up on me and overwhelm me, and I’m that boy with the blood and the hole in his womb, and I can’t save myself or anyone. It could happen to either of us.” Michael’s fingers tangling in silky blonde hair clearly told Gabriel who “either of us” included.

“You always knew that,” Gabriel reminded him.

“I want you to teach me,” Michael told him with no heat in his voice. “You go into dangerous places, and you come out again. I want to learn how you do that. I need to feel…”
Michael lowered his head again and took solace in April’s warmth. She pulled herself in tighter and turned her head to kiss just below his eye.

“The secret, kiddo, is that you’re never gonna feel safe.” Gabe’s pronouncement made Michael wince. He hadn’t wanted to say that word, but Gabe heard it anyway. “You’re never going to BE safe. That’s lesson number one. And you’re right. The bastards are everywhere, and they can get us anywhere. Doesn’t mean we roll over and make it easy for them. I can help you both with that, and I have no intention of asking for permission to do it.”

Gabe pushed off the piano and approached the pair on the couch. April sat up, but she kept one arm wrapped behind Michael. He complemented her with an arm across her shoulder, and somehow her head wound up tucked under his chin. “Lesson number two is don’t fight the establishment that’s built to protect you. USE it. It’s going to rub you wrong and make you feel like an infant sometimes, but it’s not about you anymore anyway.” Gabe’s eyes shot down to Michael’s belly and back up. “There’s safety in numbers. There’s also power in numbers. Being conspicuous draws eyes to you. Sometimes that’s what you want, and sometimes it’s not. I plan to teach you how to play the game they don’t think we can play.”

“What do we do about Castiel?” asked April in a voice that didn’t shake. “He needs somewhere to vent.”

Gabriel grew immediately stern and pointed a finger toward her face. “You stay away from him until he figures it out, you hear me?”

“How can I do that? I’m his mate!”

“April Fucking Renée, he will tear you in two if he takes you right now. I’m not kidding. This is not a side of my brother you’ve ever seen, and you don’t want any part of him!”

“No! He would never hurt me! You don’t know, Gabe. You don’t know what he’s like.”

“And if you’re wrong?” Gabe challenged with a quirk of his brow. “Look, I know he lets that pup off leash sometimes when you two get jolly together. But this is nothing like that.”

“Then how is he going to get it out? What happened yesterday shook him as badly as it did Michael. He’s not immune to this stuff, it just doesn’t usually hit so close to home.” April sat up. She didn’t seem ready to take Gabriel’s word for it this time. “He needs a release, Gabe! It’s either Dean and me or he goes out there and tears something apart! He doesn’t want to be that guy anymore!”

“What do you know about that guy?” asked Gabriel with a chill to his voice.
“Not much,” April admitted. “But I know enough.”

Gabe shook his head and turned his back on them. “You don’t know anything, kid. You’ve never seen anything like this. He covered for it when he brought me home from Oklahoma because he already knew he was going to handle that the old-fashioned way. If you didn’t know about that,” Gabe turned back around with a truly regretful look. “…I’m sorry to be the one to tell you. But Castiel is in a brand-new frying pan now, and he’s got a whole new fire to jump into, and you two need to get out of his way. He’s never had the rabid wolf calling for blood and not let it go get some. You’re damn right he needs an outlet, but it’s not gonna be Dean, and it’s sure as hell not gonna be you.”

“Then what?” asked Michael in April’s shocked silence.

“He’s got to work it out for himself. If you ask me, a sabbatical in the wilderness with a near-death experience or two might do it. Hell if I know. I’m no alpha. Course, if you ask me, he oughtta skip out late at night and pull those assholes’ balls out through their eye-sockets. That’d do it, too. It’s always worked before.”

“He leaves tomorrow for Ohio,” April said sadly. “He doesn’t have time to work it out. He needs a release now.”

“Stay away from him, Omega!” Gabriel shouted. “I’m not going to say it again!”

April’s nostrils flared and her cheeks pinkened. Her eyes flashed golden. Gabe let his fall closed.

“I don’t wanna talk about my brother. I wanna talk about you.” He looked at Michael. “You need to be done convalescing, or at least appear to be done, by the time the boys get home in a couple of hours. That’s not going to get you out of being grounded for the next week for your own good but trust me on this. What do you need to get back to being your usual pissy self?”

Michael frowned at him for a beat or two. “I don’t understand.”

“Last thing either of them needs is to be worried about you when they’re out of state. You need to pull yourself together and put on a show. You got the two of us here to prop you up. What else do you need?”

“You want me to fake it?”

“Best-case scenario,” Gabe clarified. “You don’t fake anything, and you act 100% because you feel 100%. Is that going to happen?”

“Nobody would believe me anyway,” Michael protested. “I turned total basket case. They’ll know I need a few days.”

“You don’t have a few days.”

“Why are you pressuring him, Gabe? Leave him alone. He’s been through enough.” April was still angry, and she’d just about had all of this bullshit she could take.

“He’s been through precisely ‘Dick’, and you know it. I’ve seen Omegas walk out of the worst dungeons imaginable, shake it off, and ask when’s dinner. I’m not telling you to forget what you saw or pretend it didn’t matter. I’m telling you that we…” Gabe circled his finger to include all of them. “…don’t get the luxury of a long recuperation time. It’s not just for the alphas’ sakes. It’s as much for you as them. If you wallow in it right now, it’ll settle in the pit of your stomach and live there. Once it digs in, there’s no rooting it back out again.”
“So, you want him to bury it? How is that healthy?” April got to her feet and faced him.

Gabe put a hand on her shoulder, and he looked at her like the ancient being he was. “I want him to step around it and walk past it. Trust me, guys. You can spend the next twenty years in therapy if you want, but this is what works. You did good, Michael. You took it in, and you didn’t let it drop you.”

Michael started to protest that he had indeed dropped, but Gabe forestalled him.

“You didn’t drop, Michael. You hunkered down. Your body took you into ultimate survival mode, but your mind was ready to reboot once the chemicals cleared out. That’s not a drop. You did everything right. You shifted some of the weight to us, and you let yourself rest. I’m warning you not to get comfortable and expect to gain strength back slowly over the next few days. This isn’t the flu. If your symptoms have faded, it’s time to move on.”

“What do I do about the images? Every time I close my eyes, I see blood.”

Gabe’s face offered no solace. “You live with them, Omega.”

Michael stared at Gabriel. “They don’t go away?”

“They never go away. Sometimes something new gets added, but the old ones will always be there.”

They all turned at a bustling in the doorway. “Holy Cow! That’s quite a stench you three are putting up,” said Pamela cheerfully as she swept in. “Smells like you’re plotting to overthrow the Kremlin. Hey, handsome!” she said to Michael with a broad smile. “I’ve missed you! Only ever get to see your brat these days, and he fucked up the leather on my new couch.” She hugged Michael tightly as the Omega stood to greet her.

“It’s good to see you, too, Pam. Thanks for coming.” Michael couldn’t remember when he’d started feeling warm toward Pam, but her presence was a deeply welcome thing, and he hugged her for longer than usual. He held her tightly through it. She waited him out.

“And you!” she said once Michael finally let go. She swept April up like a long-lost waif and hugged her tight enough to lift her off the ground. “I have MISSED you! God, the stories Cas is telling about you. I expect free tickets when you play Kennedy Center.”

“I’ll make sure you get them,” said April sweetly.

“All right, boys and girls. Let’s settle. Fred’s bringing a snack. It’s story time. Everybody find a seat.” Pam herded them all toward the sofa, and Michael shared a grin with April. Pam was a force of nature.

“I don’t get a hug?” asked Gabe.

“Last time I hugged you, Gabriel, you licked my ear. Sit.”

“Pam, how is Castiel?” April asked as she sat between the men.

“He’s a mess right now, April. But he’s got a plan, and he’s going to be fine.

“He talked to you?”

“Yep. Like a real grownup for once. And that means you three don’t need to plot to overthrow the Kremlin. You just worry about yourselves. That’s why I’m here. I want to see how you’re doing.”
“That, and Alpha heard that Maureen took off for a while and sent you to babysit,” mused Gabriel.

“She’s coming anyway. I was coming anyway. It’s going to be a hell of a few days. We’ve had the police come by to interview the nurses and doctors who were on yesterday. We’ve had news crews circling, hoping to get a shot of something that’ll make their ratings flash. Everyone in the building is panicking over getting ready for Dayton. I needed a break.”

“Are there news vans outside?” asked Michael with a furtive look toward the eastern wall.

“Stay in the house, Michael,” she told him serenely, as if it didn’t much matter.

Fred carried in a broad tray with several snack foods and several different drinks. The Omegas ignored the food, but Michael nodded a quiet confirmation at the butler, a response to a nonverbal question. Fred lowered his eyes and left. He looked worried. Pam filled a small plate, mostly with black olives. She picked out a soft drink and sat down on the floor in front of the Omegas.

“I know all about what happened. I won’t make you talk through it again. How are you feeling now?”

“I’m much better,” he said strongly. “I expect I’ll need a good night’s sleep tonight, but I’m past the worst of it. I’m fine. Really.”

“Uh-huh,” she mumbled around an olive. “You can save the act for your Pack alphas. I know how that game goes. How about telling me the truth.”

In the end, she pulled the truth out of him, and she seemed satisfied. They talked for some time, but she didn’t make Michael revisit the incident, and she had a way of keeping the mood from getting maudlin. April played for her before she left, and Pam hummed on her way out. She left Michael feeling quite a bit better, and he slipped out to try his hand at Castiel’s meditation technique followed by a short run on the treadmill. By the time Dean and Cas came home, he presented a bright-eyed, pink-cheeked vision of glowing gestational masculinity. Dean pulled him in and clutched him, apologizing repeatedly for driving away in the morning when all he wanted to do was stay.

Michael chuckled and patted the back of Dean’s neck. “I’m good, alpha. I’m all right. Gonna need another couple of easy days maybe, but I’m okay. See? Lookit. See it for yourself.” Michael plunked a pile of emotions on Dean as if jumping into his lap, and Dean’s metaphorical grunt at catching them off guard made Michael smile.

Michael checked in with Tony while Dean sifted through the tangled pile with a frown on his face. Dean came away relieved. It didn’t look great, but it looked worlds better than it had been early this morning, and lightyears better than yesterday afternoon at The Facility. The resilience of Omegas would always be a wonder to Dean.

April attached herself to Castiel. He practically carried her from the doorway into the kitchen before sinking down into a kitchen chair with a tired smile on his face.

“I’m fine, Kitten,” he told her.

“I don’t believe you, Alpha,” she pestered, smoothing his hair. “The bond is still closed. Open it and let me see.”

“All right,” he conceded. April’s body relaxed as she felt him fill her senses again.
“You seem better,” she admitted. “What did you do?” She glanced across the kitchen where Dean stood frowning at the floor. “What did he do?”

Dean shot her a cautionary look, and then tapped Michael to send him elsewhere. Dean didn’t bother explaining, and, but for a lingering look toward the table, Michael didn’t question. He slipped out to find Gabriel and Kali to summon them for dinner.

“I took care of it, April,” Cas told her imperiously.

“How? With Dean? What did you do?”

Castiel let an annoyed look cross his features, then he kissed her lips chastely and leaned his forehead into hers. “I’m not going to share that with you. I need you to let it go. I was upset, but I handled it, and I’m fine now.”

April huffed and pulled back from his grasp, stood up and walked away – stalked away. “I deserve to know, Alpha! I worried about you all day! Gabriel said you would come home too upset to touch me safely! First it was Dean’s reaction to your Mom, and you had to throw her out, and now this! I know you’re not FINE!”

Castiel stood up slowly and rubbed his eyes with the flats of his palms. “Undress, please Submissive, and get on your knees. I see we need a refresher.”

“Wha…? But, Sir!”

He didn’t raise his voice, but he cocked his head and one eyebrow her way, and she caved with a petulant scowl. April didn’t have much to remove. She favored simple dresses that pulled over her head, and she often chose to wear nothing else. Today, a pair of soft pink cotton panties came off to join the dress, folded on the seat of Castiel’s chair. Tony’s ears went bright red, and he stirred his pot vigorously.

April sank to her knees in the middle of the floor and faced her thighs. Castiel didn’t move. He waited for her. At length, when she stubbornly refused to meet his eyes, he cleared his throat. It was not a happy sound. She finally looked up at him, but her eyes were filled with hurt, with betrayal.

“April, you can feel for yourself that I am very tired. I am very sore. It has been a difficult day for all of us. Do not mistake that I wish to avoid telling you what I’ve been doing today out of a misguided attempt to protect you. I have my reasons, and that is enough. I don’t know what my brother has been telling you, but I ask you to trust me when I tell you that I have myself well-contained, and that I am fine. Yesterday’s incident was not the first such tragedy, and it won’t be the last.”

He walked slowly toward her, holding her eyes. “I had planned to ask you to join me this evening in what I’d hoped would be a mutually satisfying experience, but I’m afraid I cannot fulfill that plan. Insubordinate behavior will never be rewarded in this house. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha,” she said. Her face was blank, but her eyes sparkled with fire. Cas squatted in front of her and took her chin lightly in his hand.

“I take your outburst as evidence that we still have work to do before you fully trust me. That’s fine, my kitten. We will work on it together. When I tell you that I’ve handled something and that it isn’t yours to know, I expect you to trust me, and to let the details remain my property to do with what I will, not yours to demand. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha.” Her eyes were fast losing their fire, but a pitiful sadness replaced her fury.
“Good. Now. Since I know it’s eating at you, I will tell you that I had an intense training session with my wolf today. It has left me weary and sore, and I have no interest in going any further into it than that. Does that satisfy your concern?”

April sucked her lower lip between her teeth, but then she let it go and whispered up to him, “Yes, Alpha.”

“Dean, will you please fetch me the Number Four wooden paddle?”

“Uh, sure, Alpha. Where’d you see it last?” Dean slipped off his stool at the breakfast bar and stood indecisive.

“She doesn’t need you to deflect my anger, Dean. You know where it is.”

Dean paled slightly and left without another word.

“Sir, may I ask one more question?” April figured she had little to lose at this point.

“You may. I don’t promise to answer it. I never promised to share everything I do with you.” Castiel seemed ready to keel over.

“Were you alone for your training session?”

Cas ran his fingers through her hair gently, sweeping it back away from her face and tucking it behind her ear. “Dean stayed with me, love. I wasn’t alone.”

She nodded solemnly.

“Forehead on the floor, Submissive. Raise your hips.” April moved fluidly, and Tony found that he needed to check the pantry for a missing item. Dean hurried in and set the paddle in Cas’ hand by the handle and then checked the burners. He adjusted two of them and reached for a tasting spoon.

“Brace yourself,” Cas told his mate. “Count silently to fifty.”

It didn’t matter much that he was tired. Castiel would always be capable of laying wood to flesh like he meant it. April’s backside started out nearly pristine, with only a trace of remaining bruising along the curve from her experiences over the last two days. Omegas heal quickly after all, and he hadn’t left much of a lasting impression on Sunday night or Monday morning. That wasn’t the case this evening. Tony didn’t reemerge. Dean arranged the food. April’s backside didn’t stay pristine.

Cas’ Number four landed squarely right where he meant it with swift regular strokes. He aimed for the junction where ass met thigh and thigh met thigh. “X” marks the spot, as it were. More of a “t” really. A bright pink one. April held still like a champ, but she trembled, and she wept without making a sound. Cas knew she was crying. He could feel it in his head. Crying from wooden paddle licks meant she was in the right headspace to Release, and that was a burden Castiel was relieved to set down. Her silent count would be nearing fifty by now. He stopped swinging and placed a hand on her back at the apex of its curve.

“Tell me truthfully, April. Are you finished, or do you need more?”

“More, Sir!” she said into the tile. “I want to learn to trust…”

“Will this help you?” he asked, genuinely curious. Her mental state was a confusing mix right now.

“Yes, Alpha.”
“All right. Here we go.”

Cas leveled the paddle and popped it down again in exactly the same spot. The Number four was wide and round, not quite circular, but close enough that it covered everything in one swipe – everything Cas wanted stinging. He returned to his metered regularity, and her breathing skipped more than once as her sit spots went from pink to red. April’s toes curled, and that was a tell for Castiel. He picked up his pace and intensity. She Released with a cry, reaching her arms over her head as if shielding herself from an attack above her, but her ass remained motionless.

Castiel stopped swinging. He touched her butt with a finger and then released it, watching the white fingerprint turn back to red. She would bruise nicely from this one.

“What do you expect to learn trust from being paddled, Kitten?” Cas asked her without releasing her position.

She sniffled. “Sir, Gabriel said you would come home broken.” She sniffed again and rubbed her nose along her outstretched arm, leaving a shiny trail. “You said you were fine. He said I shouldn’t let you touch me, but I needed to know.”

“And what have you learned?”

Dean brought dishes to the table one by one, and he pointed Michael to the silverware drawer when he returned with Kali.

“That I should trust you, Alpha,” she told him shakily. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

Cas looked from her head back to her ass and assessed the damage. “This doesn’t hurt?” He rested a hand across her seat.

“Yes, Sir. It hurts. But it’s a good kind of hurt. It makes me feel safe and loved.” April had to take another swipe of her nose along her arm, and Cas couldn’t stand to watch her do it again. He pulled her up to kneeling and used his own handkerchief to clean her arm and her face, holding it for her and instructing her to blow. He squatted in front of her, and April could feel now that it wasn’t a comfortable position for him at the moment.

“You are loved, April. And you are safe. What happened to that man is not going to happen to you. I will protect you even when I’m not with you. I will protect Michael and our pup. I will protect Gabriel and Kali and Jessica and Sam. I will protect J.T. and Hank. I will protect Dean. No matter what trauma I face, or what it does to me; no matter how unbalanced I am, I will always take care of you. April Renée, you can trust me.”

Cas took her hands in his and pulled her to her feet. He held her dress for her to slip on, and he tucked the pink cotton panties into his back pocket.

Kali laid empty plates around the table, strolling slowly around its perimeter. “You told them both no this morning, Castiel,” she said casually. “It doesn’t seem unreasonable to me that she wouldn’t expect magical healing to take place over the course of one work day, especially if you’re not willing to consider relieving your stress level naturally.”

Castiel sat in his chair and shook his napkin out before placing it in his lap and shouting uncharacteristically. “Gabriel! Stop hiding! Come in and eat!” Cas barely looked up as Gabriel slid in guiltily and slipped into his chair.

“Relax, everyone. I am much better this evening.” Cas reached toward the center of the table and picked up the salad bowl. He served some for himself and some for April. She stood behind her chair
pulsing on her toes and working up the strength to sit down. Cas passed the bowl to Gabriel. “Kali, yes, you are probably right, but for the fact that the issue is between my mate and me, and I request that you stay out of it please. Gabriel, likewise. I know that your intentions were honorable and protective, and I take no issue with your intent, only your implementation. Please refrain from coaching my mate to avoid me. That will never be necessary.”

Cas continued serving his plate and then passing each bowl or platter to his right. Tony still hadn’t made an appearance. “Michael, my boy, how are you feeling this evening?” Cas continued. “You look much better.”

“I’m weak, Alpha, but I’m recovering rapidly. I feel much better.” Michael didn’t serve himself very much, but he made sure to add a little of everything. Dean subtly placed two more spoonfuls of vegetables beside his half porkchop. Michael grimaced but didn’t protest.

“Pamela stopped by?”

“Yes, Cas. She did. We had a good talk, and it helped.”

“Good. We’ll be leaving early in the morning, as you know. Alpha Maureen will return before morning. April, I expect you to get back to work tomorrow. I expect you to follow the rules we discussed. I don’t expect you to take any abuse from Nicholas, and you will have both Maureen and Matthew to assist you in keeping things civil.”

“I’ll help, too, Sir,” Michael told him.

Castiel nodded. “You have no assignment, Michael, but to recover. But if you choose to convalesce in the conservatory where your presence might serve as a calming influence, I would welcome that. April, for goodness sake, sit down! It’s just a paddling. You’ve sat on far worse. And stop rubbing. Only puppies get to rub the sting out of an earned red bottom.”

“Yes, Sir.” April sat carefully, and she caught a cool look from Dean. He’d told her that he knew what to look for now, but surely he didn’t expect her to drop everything at once. Did He? She frowned at him and shifted in her chair until Cas put a hand on her knee and stilled her. Dean worked his jaw subtly, but he didn’t comment. He turned back to his plate and Michael’s, spearing a sprout on his fork, and whispering to his mate as he held it out for Michael to bite.

April watched him for a moment. She was thinking hard while rooting about in her mate’s emotional underpinnings. She cut a small bite of pork and ate mechanically. She knew the pack could expect a cold and robotic version of Castiel for the next few days as he rebalanced himself. April had much to consider. Her front-facing direct approach had served her well when she needed to decide how to respond to Nick. Cas had been a guide, not a tyrant, but then, he’d also been well-situated in his core self – a best version of himself.

This evening, when she’d been direct and led with her intense fear for his stability, he’d cut her off at the quick. Clearly, he didn’t consider the two the same at all, but April wasn’t sure why one bought her respect and alliance, and the other left her sit spots throbbing. Was she only allowed to be direct if her emotions were in control? Shouldn’t the opposite be more encouraged? For when, if not when she was truly anxious and losing control of herself, was she more likely to be in need of immediate attention, and why did that attention always seem to turn spanky?

April stirred her sprouts into her rice and made a thick bumpy globule of paste on her plate while she turned it over in her head. If she hadn’t had that discussion with Dean, tonight would have gone very differently. She knew Cas hated ‘insubordination’, and she knew that was where she’d gone wrong. But she also knew he’d now told her more than he would have done if she’d kept her cool and met
him in ‘Robot-land’. April felt confident that she could have wheedled even more out of him if she had stuck to her usual routes. Not only that, but he would also have given her a tasty scene tonight that would have been spans better than what she would be going to bed with now.

She had Gabriel whispering caution in one ear, and Dean demanding she strip off her stage makeup in the other. Now she was so turned around, she didn’t know which way to go, and it had all turned into a mess. Most troubling of all, Castiel was more stressed than he’d been when he walked in. Nothing cemented the fact that she’d failed as clearly as that did. She needed to think it through. Obviously, Gabriel had been entirely wrong in his assessment. That was unexpected, but simple enough. Gabe had been wrong, case closed.

But Dean. Dean wanted her to stop ‘playing’ pack members, but April couldn’t wrap her head around what that meant. There were so many connotations to manipulation. Wasn’t it a manipulation to hide how anxious she really was and try to speak with a rational voice? And yet, that’s obviously what Cas wanted from her. Why was that better than tucking beneath his chin and cooing to him soothingly until the comfort of mate mixed with his natural tendency to parent the vulnerable, and took him to a place that felt more solid? Wasn’t her goal supposed to be to help him feel less off-balance? And yet, Dean’s judgmental glare down the length of the table threatened a dope-slap upside her head if she didn’t stop with the injured urchin routine.

Her orchestration had worked miraculously well on Monday morning when she choreographed them all to hurdle the interminable waiting and just dive into Pack sex. Careful was one thing, but at the pace Cas was taking them, they would be parenting teenagers before they ever got to a foursome.

“Stop playing with it, and eat it,” Cas grumbled sideways at her. She sighed. She was back to being his ward, and he was back to being a robot. Total fucking mission failure. April scooped up a forkful of rice and sprouts and ate it mindlessly.

“Jess, called earlier,” Dean mentioned in the silence of scraping forks. “She’s planning to bring the pups over to stay here while everyone’s gone. We’ll just miss her though, Cas. She’s not coming until tomorrow.”

Castiel nodded, still focused on his plate. What could he possibly have done today that made the muscles in his thighs and stomach so sore? And his cock seemed flayed skinless. April touched his mind, and he looked up at her, but he didn’t relax.

“That’s a good idea,” Cas told Dean without looking away from April. “Having the pups here will help everyone’s mood, and it relieves Jess of having to try to go it alone. I should have suggested it myself.”

Why was he still holding April’s eyes when he was answering Dean? She frowned slightly. There was a message here for her, she was certain of it. He’d left one point out, but it was the most important, and it was for April. Having Jess here meant that much more supervision. Having Jess here put one more wolf between Castiel’s mate and Dean’s. April looked away and went back to her meal.

She had thinking to do. She needed to wend her way forward very, very carefully. And Dean would have to live with her path. The world didn’t work the way he wanted it to just yet.
**Necessary Spoilers** Warnings for medical trauma (not our cast) and mentions of rape and assault (also not our cast). Warning for minor character death (not our cast). Warning for shock reaction that may be disturbing.

I'm going back to work tomorrow night, so that starts up my weird posting schedule again. Sorry to leave you all with the lights out. It's not a cliffhanger, but it's not a happy place they're in either.

Note from the Writer's Studio: I needed emotional trauma to move the plot where it's headed, and originally I planned to dump it on April, but then I fucked up my timeline. That means poor Michael got kicked in the nuts again. Sorry, kiddo.
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

Cas is catching on slowly. The meetings in Dayton get underway, but no one really knows what's happening. Dean gets a chance to talk Cas through a bit of tension that has the potential to lead to bad things if they aren't careful.

And two betas hold the keys to the kingdom and aren't giving away any hints about what they're planning.

Chapter Notes

This chapter's THEN section got a boost from akiichan. Thanks for the request. I've been chewing on that for some time, and your prompt hit me at exactly the right time. I hope you like it.

In other news, I feel like I'm finally gearing up for the long climb to the pinnacle of the story before we get to slide downhill again. Finally. This round really needs about three chapters to cover everything. I nearly waited and posted them all at once, but then I would be dumping, like 40,000 words on you poor people at once. So, here's the first of three. The whole chapter is an incomplete sentence, so you'll have to wait for the resolution.

Sorry bout that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Dad said don’t do anything stupid, Dean! If you don’t get down, I’m telling!”

Dean grinned at his kid brother who was worrying his ass off as usual. The tree was dead, but it was firmly rooted. If it was going to fall, it would have done so already. Dean stood upright two branches above the lowest with his arm wrapped around the trunk and his bare feet braced safely near the joint enjoying a hell of a view. He wasn’t stupid. Climbing trees was a matter of instinct anyway. It was about making yourself one with the wood grain and feeling where the strength of the growth would support you. Bare feet, sturdy denim, and a good sense of balance were the only prerequisites.

Nagging little brothers sold separately.

“I mean it!” Sam shouted, picking his way around the trunk to keep Dean in his sights. “The roots don’t look stable. The whole thing could fall at any minute. You’re being stupid!”

Dean’s 8-year-old brother’s shrillness was beginning to spoil the party, and Dean grimaced down at him. “It’s not going to fall, Sam. Get a grip. I know what I’m doing.”

“If you fall and break your head open, the whole camping trip is gonna be shot! And we just got here!”

And really, that’s all Dean heard, although Sam’s voice never stopped. A brisk gust of wind hit just as Dean stepped his way around to the right to avoid his brother’s judgmental glare, and a wicked snapping sound barely preceded the awful tilt that came next. Who knew that a full-grown tree could tumble that fast?

Sam screamed and launched himself to the side, landing in a thorny holly bush. Dean screamed too, but he didn’t manage to get quite as clear. Luck was with him though. The weathered bare branches had long since shed their smaller offshoots, leaving wide gaps between them, and it was into one of the gaps that Dean hit the ground at the same time as the trunk. He grunted heavily and rolled onto his shoulder to come to a stop, staring at the cloud-spattered sky and panting heavily. It had never looked so blue. Dean could feel the Earth rotate beneath him. Time slowed to a crawl. He turned his senses inward and marveled that aside from a bruised shoulder and what felt like a faint tingle in his left ankle, nothing seemed broken.

And then he remembered Sam.

Shit.

Shit! Shit! SHIT!

SAM!

Dean scrambled to his feet and looked around desperately for his brother, picking his way through ugly skeletal gray branches and upturned brown earth. He turned at the scrabbling sound from the bush to his right. Sam stepped out, wide-eyed, scratched up, but walking upright without a limp and looking relatively whole.

“Holy shit,” breathed Dean.
Sam’s eyes narrowed.

Dean had barely a moment to take in the fury before his brother unleashed it on him full-force.

“TOLD YOU!!! I KNEW IT!!! YOU NEVER LISTEN TO ME, DEAN!! YOU COULD’VE BEEN KILLED!!”

“Jesus, Sammy. Calm down. I’m fine. You’re fine.” Dean picked a holly twig out of his brother’s hair and blatantly ignored the voice in his head that told him they were both damned lucky to be fine. He didn’t want to look into what it would have meant to have had to carry his brother’s broken body back to the campsite. “You were right. Okay, baby brother? I’m listening now. You got my attention. I’m man enough to admit I was wrong about that one, and you were right. What say we go find one that’s still alive to climb?”

“Are you insane?” asked Sam, beginning to wonder if the question shouldn’t be rhetorical. “I’m going back. I’m gonna tell Dad.” Sam began to pick his way by his brother, but Dean pulled him to a stop by his upper arm.

“You can’t tell Dad, man. He’ll skin me alive.”

“And?”

“C’mon, Sam. Please. I won’t do it again.”

“He’s gonna see all the scratches. Look at your shirt.” Sam poked a finger through a new hole in Dean’s t-shirt.

“Sam please. Look, I know you’re pissed. You know what? You can hit me if you want. I won’t even dodge. I won’t hit back. I don’t blame you, man. I was stupid. I should have listened to you in the first place. Please don’t tell Dad!”

“No, forget it!” Sam shot back. His skinny body postured to the best of his ability, and Dean couldn’t deny that his little brother had presence. “You’re just scared of getting licks. You’re not sorry at all! Fuck you, Dean!” Sam yanked himself free and stepped around his brother to seek the path they’d followed when they were told to make themselves scarce for a while.

The swear words sounded dissonant coming from Sam’s mouth, and Dean frowned in dread. “Sam, wait!” He jogged to catch up, limping slightly, and he threw himself in front of his brother and stopped him with one hand on each of Sam’s shoulders. “Man, I’m really sorry. I feel like shit. Goddamnit, I could have killed you.” The full impact was beginning to hit Dean upside the head.

“You could have killed yourself, you dumb prick!” Sam countered, and his voice broke. Dean’s frown turned apologetic, and his brow furrowed in concern.

“I’m really sorry,” he said softly.

“Yeah? How sorry?”

“I told you. You need to hit something, Sammy. I can see it in your eyes. Hit me. I’ll let you.”

Sam’s jaw worked silently as he continued to fume, trying to funnel the desire to lash out but finding nowhere to send it. Sam would never have considered the idea under normal circumstances. Dean had more than three years on him, and their scrapping in the yard proved again and again that Sam didn’t have the juice or the weight yet to pin his older brother. But his fierce hazel eyes glared daggers at Dean’s penitent green, and this time there was something else in Dean’s eyes.
There was a silent plea that Sam had never seen there before. Dean’s sense of guilt was swamping the 11-year-old, threatening to pull him under and make surfacing again so much harder. Sam stared at him for a long time. He didn’t have any idea what he was feeling, what Dean was feeling, but he knew what they both needed to get them out of the quagmire. He didn’t stop to examine the impulse. He ignored the voice of his mother in his mind, warning him to be careful and think it through. Sam knew that if he did that, neither of them would find the absolution their eyes demanded.

He steeled his jaw, and he pointed. Dean turned his head to follow Sam’s finger back to the newly horizontal tree trunk, scraped up along the branch joint where Dean’s feet launched him airborne. Dean’s eyes widened.

“You, um, you…I thought you were gonna take a swing, Sammy. I don’t get it.” Dean looked back at his brother and wished he hadn’t. Sam’s eyes were dark with determination and anger. His cheeks were flushed around the scratches that ran down both sides, one blood-lined scrape starting perilously close to Sam’s eye.

“You want me to hit you? Fine. We do it my way or not at all.”

“I’m not getting it, man. What are you saying?”

“I’m not an idiot, Dean,” Sam told him, sounding much older than his 8 years. “I know what happens to you when Dad spanks you. I know you need it in a way I don’t. When we get back to the campsite, Dad’s gonna figure out that something happened, and we’re probably both gonna get it, but that’s not going to make you feel better. Not like it will if it comes from me.”

Dean’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re gonna spank me? Come on! You’re eight!”

“So? Maybe you won’t feel a thing. What, are you scared?”

“I’m not scared, Sam. It’s just ridiculous, that’s all. Whoever heard of an almost full-grown pup getting his ass busted by his kid brother?”

“You’re not almost full-grown, you asshole. And you’re the one who offered in the first place. The way I see it, you can either put up or shut up. I’m not gonna try to make you. But level with me, Dean. Are you really sorry? Like, for real sorry?”

“Jesus! How can you even ask me that?”

“Then prove it.” Sam crossed his arms and stood firm. His face had morphed into a look that Dean knew very well although he usually saw it on his alpha’s face, or his mom’s, or a multitude of teachers over the years, or the directors of the pups’ programming at church, or…hell, every adult Dean had ever had the misfortune of pissing off. One eyebrow on Sam’s face seemed to mock the squirmy feeling low in Dean’s gut, and he frowned again and turned to look at the tree trunk and lick his lips.

There was no one around but the two of them. How bad could it be? Sam was a pup. He couldn’t possibly wield a swing hard enough to really hurt. It would make the kid feel better, and after all, Dean really had just put his brother in danger for no good reason. He owed it to the kid.

Dean took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “All right. You’re on.” He strode up to the freshly disturbed soil around a newly embedded branch and found a smooth space on the trunk. Dean scratched his nose and looked back at Sam. “Here?”

“That’s fine,” his brother answered coldly. “You know the drill.”
“Yeah, about that…I’m not taking my pants down.”

“Drop ‘em, Dean! I’m not fucking around! We’re doing this right, or we’re not doing it!”

“Holy shit, listen to the mouth on you,” Dean grumbled, but he turned to face the log and unbuckled his belt with shaking hands. Something had clicked into place in his head, and he began to float in his own mind. It felt like someone else had control of his movements. Someone else shoved his clothes toward his knees. Someone else draped his body over the prickly bark of the dead tree. Sam was still five feet away, and there was no one but the two of them for acres in any direction. Dean refused steadfastly to examine the sensation, fearful of pricking the bubble and finding himself humiliated in reality. The floating was better.

“Are you ready, Dean?” Sam’s voice floated through his haze. “Are you sure? Last chance.” His baby brother picked his way forward to stand beside Dean and his skinny bare ass.

Dean scoffed. “I have a choice?” he asked incredulously.

“I told you,” Sam reasoned, still sounding much older than his years. “I think you need this as much as I do. If I hit you, and it pisses you off, you’re gonna knock my head off. You think I’m stupid enough to set myself up for that?”

“Fuck, Sammy. I told you I wouldn’t dodge. I told you, you get a freebie. Just do it already! I feel like a douchebag here, laying naked on a tree!”

Dean wasn’t looking over his shoulder, so the swat caught him by surprise. He sucked in a breath and gripped the branches to either side of his space. “Shit on a stick!”

“Hold still! I’m just getting started.” Sam put his shoulder into it and let all his frustration and fear, both for himself and for his brother, come flinging down the length of his arm and onto the narrow pink curve of his brother’s bare backside. Dean had been right in one aspect – Sam’s strikes couldn’t begin to match their dad’s. But he wasn’t weak either, and he was highly motivated. Sam began to cry in his fury over Dean’s recklessness, and Dean’s tears and muffled sobs answered him back in remorse. Dean’s fists clutched at the branches he was holding. His face crumpled in pain and penitence. Everything washed out of him at once, and he sagged over the tree trunk, boneless.

Sam’s blows came to an abrupt stop. He turned away to face the sun, get his breathing back under control, wipe his face, and find himself again. Time stood still as the two brothers felt shadows of the beasts they didn’t know well yet slink back into darkness. Neither of them was naïve enough to pretend they didn’t know what they’d just experienced, but they also had no desire to discuss it.

Dean pushed himself up slowly, brushed the bark and debris from his shirt and his thighs, surreptitiously rubbed the sting out of a surprisingly red butt, and pulled his clothes back into place, all without turning around.

Sam still had his face turned to the sun, his eyes closed tightly.

Dean stared at the tree in front of him. It was heavy enough to kill. It had wide-reaching branches that spanned a great distance in every direction. The roots showed diseased, damp, and dark in the upturned soil at its base.

“Sam…”

“I know, Dean. You don’t have to say it again.”

“Dad’s gonna know, man. You hit pretty hard for a pup. My butt’s gonna be red for hours.”
“Yeah. Sorry about that. If he gets pissed, I’ll take it too. I shouldn’t have done that. It’s not my place.” Sam kicked at a rock half embedded in the dirt. He wanted to feel sorry, trying to put himself into the mindset his alpha would no doubt demand from him, but he couldn’t. He felt good. He felt really good.

“Fantastic,” Dean snarked. “Now you say it. Fat lotta good it does me now.” Dean rubbed himself again in wonder. Sam really did pack a wallop, 8-year-old pup or not. Dean couldn’t face him. He wanted to be pissy and resentful, but he felt light. He felt a reprieve settle over his shoulders, and he feared Sam would see it if his brother caught sight of his eyes.

He settled for slipping back into big brother mode. “Come on, twerp. Let’s get back before they start looking for us. Maybe we can convince Dad we got scraped up by wandering off path and shoving through some underbrush. That sounds like us, right?”

Sam huffed, half amused and half frustrated. “It sounds like you, yeah. Fine. I’ll back you up. Slow down, man! They aren’t looking for us. They’re probly still knotted! Dean, slow up!”

The cover story bombed spectacularly. John took one look at the boys with their scrapes and bruises, with Dean’s trace of a limp and tender shoulder, and he crossed his arms and stared in silent rebuke until they both caved and spilled everything. Sam’s walloping for telling lies was powerful but short. Dean, on the other hand, winced all evening as he tried to find a way to sit on the tree-stump stools scattered around the camp fire on his wickedly tanned backside. John had said nothing at all about the already pink tone Dean was sporting, but he had to have noticed. Backsides didn’t redden themselves.

No one remarked when Mary served her signature campfire cobbler to everyone but Dean that night either, and he wasn’t surprised when he was sent off to the tent he shared with Sam a full hour before his little brother joined him. Dean didn’t mind. He had some thinking to do.

They had scuffled for years, and Dean had been swatted by Sam playfully more times than he cared to remember, but something had just shifted between them, and he couldn’t ignore how right it felt. Nothing that alpha or Mom could do following what happened in the woods came close.

Dean knew all about the wolf that lurked inside him. It had been peeking out for several years now, and he’d become accustomed to what it felt like when the wolf slipped in. He’d never felt it so stridently before though. And he’d bet his last dollar that Sam was experiencing much the same sensation, but clearly from a very different vantage. Dean tossed onto his side in his sleeping bag, watching the shadows hunker over the fire in the cool evening.

He didn’t want to be Omega, but he could feel it creeping up on him. At eleven, he knew it was only a matter of time before he Presented with a slimy, leaking channel and a permanent need to be someone else’s property. Sam would be alpha, that was just as obvious. Something about that felt comforting. John wouldn’t let Dean just stumble out alone in the world, prey for any hungry alpha to feed on, but what about if something happened to John? If Dean took anything from what the afternoon had brought, it was a sense of comfort. Sam had a seriously impressive wolf growing to full stature within his skinny body, and Dean knew that when push came to shove, he would be glad to have Sam on his side – maybe not right now, maybe not for years, but someday.
NOW:

Michael knew Dean hadn’t managed to sleep at all when the alpha woke him with a demanding nudge from a persistent hard-on along the cleft of his ass. They were alone in their own room, Dean spooned up close behind Michael in the wee hours of the morning. Dean would need to be up and away in an hour or so. There was time for the mates to knot before that. Michael hummed and pressed his ass backward in agreement. One more knotting before his mate flew out for the week sounded like just the thing to Michael.

Sleeping nude had many pros, but spontaneous sleepy sex was Michael’s favorite. It was, in truth, his only.

“Open up wide to me, baby boy,” Dean mumbled into Michael’s neck. He didn’t mean the Omega’s channel. Well, he did. But not only his channel. Michael sighed, pressed his hips back, and let his mate have full access to every space in the attic of his mind. Dean filtered through it all shamelessly as he rolled his hips to reach Michael’s prostate and pleasure him from the inside.

Michael respected Gabriel’s experience, but he rejected the idea of deliberately hiding his tender state from his mate. He wasn’t broken, just bruised, and he felt Dean deserved to see it. They grunted in unison as Dean worked his hips in tighter and circled Michael’s cock with his fist. The alpha enjoyed the slower, more intimate pace of a position that denied him his full force and demanded he take an easy, sultry pace.

“I can stay home, Michael. It won’t kill us. It’s not the end of the world.” Dean mouthed along the shell of Michael’s ear and nibbled the pointed tip when he reached it.

“I don’t need you to cancel your trip, alpha,” Michael assured him in a low voice. “Your puppy and I will be fine.” He groaned deeply as Dean’s reach lengthened inside him, the knot already deeply embedded and ready to lock once it swelled to full capacity. “Shit,” he muttered and tucked his chin into Dean’s arm. “Wish…wish I was going with you.”

“You want me to try again?” Dean asked him, slowing his hips. “I’m not seeing anything in your head that should keep you here. You’d do better if we could spend at least the nights together.”

Michael let Dean see how deeply touched he was by his mate’s faith in his resilience, but he shook his head. “No, a few days at home would be better. I’m not up to facing people, and there would be no way around it. It’s going to be a media circus. Jesus, Dean. Do that again.”

Dean chuckled and pressed his hips forward while he stroked down the length of Michael’s dick with a firm grasp.

“All right. Have it your way. I can be home in a couple of hours if you need me. I mean it.”

“I know, alpha. Shut up and fuck me.”

Castiel lay with an arm folded sharply behind his head and another wrapped around his mate. They were alone in the room everyone called April’s. Cas rarely slept here but sleeping in the Master when Dean wasn’t there had begun to feel blatantly wrong. The Alpha was thinking hard, and he knew the instant his mate emerged from the swirling tumble of her dreams. She nuzzled his arm, and he
tightened his hold in response.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” he said softly into the darkness.

“I’m not,” she responded in a simple voice. “What’s got you stirred up? Worried about Dayton?”

“Mmm,” he hummed. “Yes, and no. It’s going to be an important shift for us, but I just can’t make myself care whether it goes as planned or it all falls apart…not like everyone else seems to. No matter what happens, we’ll keep grinding away, and we’ll keep making slow but steady progress. I don’t see why it matters what our letterhead looks like.”

She smiled. He could feel it even if he couldn’t see her face. “That’s because your ego doesn’t work like everyone else’s.”

He smiled back, staring up at the ceiling. He wondered if she realized how right she was.

“Have you slept at all, Alpha?”

“A little. I’ll sleep on the plane.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not a long flight, Cas, and you’ll be focused on keeping Dean’s breakfast in his stomach the whole time. Don’t lie to me.” She said it warmly, and he took it as intended, kissing her head in apology.

“I can get by with less sleep than most people, angel. I’ll be all right.”

“I know. I’m not worried about you.” She fell back into sleepy silence and watched the ineffable, inscrutable thoughts shift ceaselessly through his head. Ultimately, it was the Omega who broke the silence again. “What kept you up then, if not the merger?”

Castiel sat up and reached for his bedside lamp. April adjusted her weight to lean into his chest as he settled against his pillows in the dim light. “I was wondering about you, Kitten.” He sent her warmth and affection through their bond, but it was tempered with a sense of discomfort.

“Sir?”

“Not in the middle of the night, April. Let’s be informal for this.” They both stared vaguely into the distance and felt each other out carefully. “You said you wanted to be my mate, not my ward. Did you mean that?”

“Of course,” she told him carefully.

“Then why are you hiding yourself from me?”

April sat up to match him, still not looking at him, and no longer touching him. She played with the fine fabric of the soft sheet at her waist.

“Hiding?”

He sighed. He touched his lips and furrowed his brow. His eyes skittered across the room as he attempted to pull his thoughts together. “April, I know that you trust me with your body and your wolf. You are the Omega that I have always yearned for. Sweetheart, we fit, you and me. I trust you in a way I’ve never trusted anyone. I let you see deep into me, and I only block you from the places that I know would harm you to witness. But there’s no denying that I don’t inspire the same trust from you.”
She took a breath in preparation of refuting his assertion, but he was expecting that.

“No, don’t. Please just listen. I’m baring myself to you, and I’d like for you to listen to me for a minute. I have your body and your wolf. I don’t yet have your mind or your heart. I know that takes time, and I’ll wait for you forever if I must. I know that you’re afraid, and I know why. I can’t do any better than to promise you over and over again that I won’t ever take my role as your alpha farther than I must. April, if it takes the rest of our lives to win your faith, I will wait forever. I beg you to give me just a little benefit of the doubt. Try me a little, Kitten. I want to prove myself to you.”

The darkness stole all her armor, and she struggled to find her footing. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

If that wasn’t a bald confession, she didn’t know what was.

“Sweetheart, if you don’t feel safe with me, you’re not going to feel safe anywhere.”

And there was the rub. A side of her wanted to point out the absurdity of his assumption that she might ever feel completely safe, but she couldn’t make herself do it. Not just before his big meeting. And an extremely soft candlelit image of Michael’s face swam for just an instant across her eyes before she swept it ruthlessly away. That one couldn’t ever come to light. Not ever.

“Let me think about it while you’re gone,” she said instead, and her voice held none of its usual cant toward the small and meek. There was just something about this hour of the morning that stole her mask and hid it far away. “We can talk when you get back.”

He nodded. “I love you, Kitten. You know that, right?”

She smiled affectionately. His love had never been in question; only how far his protective arm might reach if he felt she needed it. And how could she be expected to know whether he was right or not? There was more to her masks than manipulation. Some of them played an important role in who she was at heart. She depended on having him always there and strongly rooted. She depended on him reading her needs when the fog covered her ability to see it for herself. She couldn’t clarify in her own mind what role she needed him to play and where the lines should fall. How could she expect to explain it to him?

Her impulses were at war with each other, and no one seemed to have noticed. She was Ozzie. Ozzies were relatively simple when compared with wolves like Dean and Michael. Weren’t they? But what about the demanding voices from her head? She had a master director sitting up front pushing buttons to move the other two designations. She had a chess master controlling everything she did. It wasn’t external. It wasn’t a mate or a teacher or a parent. It was within her own head, and it was cool and calculating enough to frighten her. How would Castiel react when he learned he wasn’t her only… Her only what? April wrestled with it, but she didn’t get anywhere, and he was waiting for an answer.

“I know. I love you, too, Cas.”

He turned at last to face her, and she bravely searched his deep blue eyes in the soft light. “I don’t know what happened last night before dinner,” he told her with no trace of accusation. “But I know that wasn’t the real you. It got me thinking and wondering if I’ve ever seen the real you.”

She cocked her head and opened herself up to his touch within her mind instead. He smiled and touched her chin.

know how you're doing it,” he said with his forehead pressed against hers. “And I swear I’m not angry with you, but you’re hiding something from me, and I worry that it might lead us wrong when it comes to keeping you stable. I can’t manage what you don’t allow me to see, Kitten.”

“I want to, Alpha. I want to so badly. I want to show you everything, but it’s not that simple.”

“I know.” He sat back up and then slipped back down to lay beside her. He clicked his lamp back off. “Go back to sleep, April. We’ll talk more when I get back on Sunday night.”

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Dayton was a media circus, just as Michael had predicted, and Dean, still hungover from the harrowing flight that had been little more than a puddle-jump was very glad his mate was left at home. Only a handful of reporters remained at the Lawrence Facility, and he’d spotted a mere two lone stalwarts outside the gates of their home as the hired van pulled out into the dawn to ferry them to the airport.

A look between the two Winchesters as they left the manor grounds put Castiel to the task of texting firm instructions to the security team about his expectations for their performance in the alphas’ absence. Castiel had reason to trust his security team. They had faced challenges before, and they had never let him down. The stakes were higher now than they’d ever been though. He would have Dean and Sam with him, but nearly everyone else who mattered to him was in that house. Driving away from his mate pulled a tight band across his chest that would only get tighter as the days passed.

“Breathe, Alpha,” Dean reminded him. “We need to get used to this.”

Cas sighed and glanced at him, placing a hand on his thigh. “I don’t guess you expect that line to work on me any better than it’s ever worked on you before a flight.”

“No, but one of us had to say it,” Dean told him, covering Cas’ hand and looking out the window as the van approached Sam’s house.

They skirted through the frenzy of reporters fairly easily. They couldn’t have commented yet if they’d wanted to, so it was a matter of keeping up the pleasantries and reminding a few they knew well that there was no news to share. Dean laughed at Cas’ bafflement that a mere business move garnered attention from the mainstream media.

“It’s a merger, Dean. Why are the celebrity forums here? This is absurd!”

“You’re cute when you’re incensed,” Dean told him with a wave toward a camera and a flirty wink. He clutched Castiel’s hand and let the Alpha steer him into the flagship tower where the Keller Foundation housed its executive board and administrative offices in the middle of downtown Dayton. The affiliated clinic and research site was located just outside of town. It was set up much the same as Cas’ Facility, but it focused on training the professionals rather than the public, and its testing setup was far more sophisticated. The Keller Institute performed nearly ten times as many evaluation tests on the Lupin population than ACRI did. It was their chief source of income.

Dean spotted Jonathon Miles among those rousted to greet the incoming Board members, and he
made a beeline, slipping free of Cas’ hand in the process. He felt more than heard, Castiel’s indignant squawk. “Give me a minute, Alpha,” he called over his shoulder.

Jonathon’s face was set to a pleasant but bland greeting mask. He shook Dean’s hand firmly, made light small talk, committed to nothing, and in all regards, behaved as if he was hiding a trove of carefully layered treasure beneath his simple smile. Dean glued himself beside the man, testing a theory, and was not surprised when Jonathon manufactured a reason to slip away while Board members continued to arrive. Dean saw the beta make quick and furtive eye contact with Fergus Crowley who had just emerged from the elevator.

“What was that all about?” asked Sam, stepping up beside Dean. Dean snickered.

“Have you heard who Keller is naming to run against Cas for the Directorship?” Dean asked back vaguely.

“They’re keeping it a tightly contained secret,” Sam answered, nodding his head toward a colleague he hadn’t seen in some time.

“Not for long,” Dean told him.

The ACRI contingent was escorted to a floor upstairs that was empty except for them. The Executive Board immediately claimed the biggest offices and the best conference room for themselves. Christian found the donuts and coffee and propped his feet up at the receptionist’s empty desk at the entrance with a saucy wink and a grin that Dean returned.

“Is there a formal dinner tonight?” Jim Murphy asked, shoving Christian’s feet back to the floor and laving him with a look that reminded him that class wasn’t optional. All the people that Dean liked and trusted most seemed to be gathering around Christian’s chosen locale.

“The formal do is tomorrow night. Tonight, we’re on our own.” That was Benny. “Anybody got any ideas?”

Dean looked around, searching for Cas and found him behind a sheet of glass with one of the Board members. Cas’ face was all business. They were arguing already. Dean nudged Bobby and indicated with a nod of his head. Bobby’s eyes barely swiveled, but he’d taken it all in. He turned his back on the office window and looked meaningfully at Dean.

“We’ve all got our roles to play, Winchester,” Bobby reminded him. “You let him do his job, and you focus on doing yours.”

“Can do,” Dean told him under his breath. The search for a restaurant big enough for everyone had stalled, so Dean came to the rescue with a smirk, a wink, and a hardy press of his palm on a beta’s shoulder. A quick look behind him told him that Bobby had vanished.

The introductory meetings were dull enough and full of enough bullshit that Dean’s eyes nearly rolled out the back of his head. Hell, neither institution would be in any need to discuss merging if all the fluff said of them was even 10% true. Dean was listening though, difficult as it was, and he slipped carefully worded notes across to Cas or backward to Sam as needed to keep everyone on the same page when corporate-speak showed evidence of being code for something critical. He palmed notes from the others just as often.

Dean’s eyes scoured the operational staff on the other side of the room. Miles betrayed nothing, neither in his facial expressions or by communicating anything with anyone but the handsome waiter from whom he ordered sparkling water. Dean’s instincts brought him back again and again to
Jonathon Miles, but the man was a blank canvas.

Crowley practically held court at the far end of the room. Bela sat beside him with the smug expression of one who knows she’s won, and she joked endlessly with Crowley. The beta looked as happy as a duck on a June bug, in his element, ready to crush the competition. His beady eyes kept sweeping over the four owners sitting abreast at the enormous table with a knowing grin, and more than once, he winked at Dean.

Only at Dean.

What a douchebag.

Next came the formal proposals from the lawyers. Each Board had reviewed the basic offer on the table and put in their own suggestions. That meant there were three separate proposals to wade through. They were all the same except for the minutia, but apparently, the minutia was fascinating enough to burn another four hours before anyone had a break.

At last, with little direct input from anyone but the three separate legal teams, they had the details winnowed down to a mere handful of yes or no decisions that they proclaimed would be put to the Boards for a two-thirds majority vote. The Directorship would be the last of these, and no one expected they’d get to it today.

“Kill me now,” whined Christian in the restroom on the ACRI floor.

“Don’t be a baby,” Victor told him. “Your ass isn’t on the line.”

Christian laughed and followed him out the door. “Yeah, yours wouldn’t be either if you hadn’t been screwing your assistant and letting your place go to shit around you.”

The assumption that having Cas assume the Directorship was the only way Victor would keep his job was so pervasive, it had become a running joke.

“That’s cold, man,” Victor told him with mock injury. His sensitivity to the issue was long gone. He’d owned up to it, and at this point, all he could do was keep his attention riveted where it belonged and take the good-natured ribbing of his colleagues who loved him like family.

“Calling it like I see it,” said Christian. The two of them had found peace, but the confrontation between them had rivalled the pounding Victor had faced from Castiel. Christian’s entire adult life was about rescuing and protecting the vulnerable. He had been personally disgusted at what came to light under the not-so-watchful eye of his good friend in Dallas, and the sparks had flown spectacularly. A quick conference call afterward between the two of them and Castiel settled everyone down, and they all got back to work. It turned out to be a good thing that alphas rarely scar.

They rejoined their cohorts in the largest space available, the big breakroom at the far end. It wasn’t going to be a long break. The Executive Board was in session to come to agreement about the votes on the table. Each member had an individual vote, but they all wished to present a united front as much as possible. All the walls in the space were glass above waist level, so they could see the Board arguing away inside their posh conference room. Lawyers came and went. File folders were everywhere. Three of the four owners occupied seats at one end, but despite their personal and financial investments, it was the Board that had all the decisional rights.
Castiel alone, of the owners, was a Board member. He wasn’t chairman, but his voice carried weight for every reason a rational person could imagine. Jim Murphy slipped up beside Sam and handed him a cup of hot tea. They stood together, watching the company they had both pledged their lives to, have its fate decided beyond their ability to assist.

“It’s terrifying, isn’t it?” Jim asked.

“I don’t know why they wanted all of us here,” said Sam, sipping his tea. “Just for the numbers?”

“There’s power in a strong presentation,” Jim nodded. “Wolves will always be about power and posturing. Pretending otherwise is how you lose something like this.”

“So, we stand around and take up space? Shit, Jim, we’ve left our clients rotting for days with a skeleton crew just to make a big show.”

“Don’t downplay the big show, Sam. And don’t assume that’s your only role here.” Jim nodded toward the glass-walled conference room, and Sam turned his attention back to it to find his brother beckoning him.

“The Board wants to officially nominate you four as step-ups, part of the agreement overall, but it won’t be binding,” Dean explained to Sam quietly. “They think you guys have enough clout in the industry to buy us some credit.”

“I haven’t even started working on my PhD yet,” Sam protested just as quietly, glancing around at the stern faces of the Board.

“They know that. They also know you’re registered for the fall semester, and they’ve got half the papers you’ve already authored right there in those folders in front of them. Sam, this is a good thing. You’re a plus for our side. You help just by being your awesome self.” Dean had his big brother face on, coaching his kid brother through an anxiety attack.

“What do they want me to do?”

“You and the others might be called on to stand before the joint Boards and answer questions.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? I’m not prepared for that!”

“Calm down, Sam,” Castiel instructed, coming up beside Dean’s chair. “You aren’t defending a thesis. We’re asking you if you would be willing to share your vision for the future, your substantial experience, and your views on the progress we’ve made. It’s no different than what you do every time you stand onstage at a conference and take questions from the audience. This is exactly the same. We’re asking you to be yourself. Can you do that?” Cas had an air about him that seemed to be saying that if Sam couldn’t speak professionally in front of the Board members, he had little chance of success in the role he was aiming for in the first place. Cas kind of had a point.

“Yes, Alpha. I’m sorry. It was just a surprise. I won’t let you down.” Sam was still anxious, and he knew Dean could sense it, but they weren’t asking him to be in complete control, only to appear to be in complete control. He could do that. Castiel nodded gamely at him, squeezed his shoulder, and left to speak to someone else.

Sam blew out a ragged breath.
He ran across Jo a while later, and she looked just as shell-shocked.

“I almost didn’t come,” she admitted as her laptop blinked a notification at her. “Meg and Charlie got to skip it, and I almost convinced Alpha he didn’t need me here. Now this.” She looked up at Sam balefully. “I changed my mind, Sam. I don’t want Dean’s job. I can’t do this.”

He laughed and sat down on the edge of the table she sat at. “I doubt we have a choice, Pipsqueak. Castiel is a freight train when he makes his mind up about something, and he wants both of us…and your mom.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“And don’t call me Pipsqueak, beta.”

“Apologies, alpha.”

They sank into silent reverie.

Very little was actually decided, and the councils tabled the good stuff for the following day. Dean and his retinue made an appearance at the restaurant with a wide patio that he’d reserved for them, but he and Cas didn’t stay long. They moved cheerfully among the ACRI contingent, bolstering spirits and promising great things. Dean knew that Cas needed a quiet space this evening though, and a reconnection that he couldn’t get from the pack at large. Dean made sure they gave as much to the pack as they could, and then he slipped the waiter an extra tip to bag their orders to go, and he sneaked Cas out the door and into the Uber he had waiting on the curb.

“Thank you, Dean,” Cas told him, pulling the alpha in to lean against him.

“Oh cool!” exclaimed the driver in possibly the least cool tone possible. “I know who you are! Can I get an autograph?”

Dean chuckled. “Sure thing, man. We’ll set you up when we get there. Nice ride. I drive an Impala myself.”

The driver snorted. “Hardly the same thing. You don’t have to jerk me off, man. Chevy stole all the sexy from the Impala back in the 70’s, and it never recovered. I’ve seen yours. I’d kill for a ride in that girl. They don’t make ‘em like that anymore.”

“No, they don’t,” Dean agreed. He sat back and relaxed. Everything seemed poised to send them rolling off into full stress behavior, but Dean felt solid. Cas felt solid beside him, but he couldn’t tell yet if they were the same kind of solid. Dean knew that Cas had been keeping a close eye on his mate at home, as close as Dean was watching over Michael, and he felt optimistic on all fronts.

Dean took it as a good sign that Castiel offered to pose for a photograph in addition to leaving the driver a signed Post-it. He shuffled Cas up to their hotel room with dinner swinging from a bag around his wrist. They made out in the elevator, both silently hoping there were security cameras capturing the groping. They made it down the hall and into the room with all of their clothes on, but that didn’t last once the door closed behind them.
Dinner grew cold.

“Tell me where your head is, Alpha,” Dean prompted later. Much later. He was naked on his belly on a freshly made bed.

“Where do you want it to be?” Cas taunted.

“You’re incorrigible,” Dean told him.

“I’m encourageable,” Cas countered, leaning in close and letting his naked form drape across Dean’s back.

Dean chuckled, crossed his arms beneath his cheek, and spread his feet apart in case Cas was more than talk. Cas kissed along the line of his shoulder and spent a little extra time tonguing the healing wound of his bite. “Michael’s is definitely scarring, Dean,” he observed, lifting his head to look across Dean’s back—his gorgeously muscled back—to check out the scar on Dean’s right shoulder near his neck. The wound had healed, but a staccato series of white Morse dots and dashes showed where his teeth had overlapped one another in sequential episodes. It appeared that the more Michael reiterated his Claim, the more pronounced the scars would become.

“What about yours?” asked Dean, searching the wound on the left shoulder with his fingertips.

“I can’t tell yet,” Cas told him without a hint that it mattered. Dean knew better, but it would be what it was. Wanting it to scar wouldn’t change anything.

“Well, I’ve got this either way.” Dean held up his left hand to show off the ring he prized.

“Yes, you do. Thank you for wearing my ring, Dean Winchester.”

“Come here, you sap. As if you weren’t wearing mine right back.”

Their kissing died out quickly this time. Both of them already sporting swollen lips and a decidedly sappy disposition.

“I’m sorry my sour mood caused you to miss out on dinner with the pack tonight, Dean,” Cas said into the stillness that followed.

“Oh? Were you sour? I didn’t notice. Truth is, I just needed you to fuck me, and that didn’t look like the kind of place that allows that kind of thing on the tables.”

Cas smiled graciously. “Liar,” he accused.

“Which part?” asked Dean, bracing himself upright on his elbows.

Cas indulged him. “The part where you pretend you didn’t notice I was forty seconds away from going feral and biting someone’s head off.”

“Oh. Good. I thought you’d lost the ability to sense when I’m ripe for a good pounding. Jesus, Cas, never change, man. I need you to stay on your game. You don’t want me to have to go in search for it, do you?”
“I will spank you, Dean, if you push me into it.”

Dean laughed happily. “I’m counting on it.”

Cas didn’t answer, so Dean picked up the dropped thread. “Babe, don’t sweat it. You’re not worse for wear here. You had only just got yourself back on the rails, and then you had to leave your mate and go right into the lion’s den. You’re fine. You aren’t super human. All you needed was a little space and a chance to let your hair down. Now you’re back, and you’re awesome, and if you’re still encourageable once our old-ass dicks get their third wind going, I’m gonna see what a sour old grouch is like when I provoke the shit outta him.”

Cas still didn’t answer. Dean, who had settled his head back into the nest of his arms, cracked an eye open and looked at him. “Or are we done for the night? Big day tomorrow and all that shit?”

“We do have a big day tomorrow, Dean.”

“Which is code for you don’t want to have to discipline your brat. You’d rather talk. All right. Hit me.” Dean turned over and sat up against the flat headboard. (Seriously, what good is a headboard that’s all one flat piece with no tie-off points?) “What do you need to talk about?”

Cas grunted as he got out of bed to clear their meal off the table. He didn’t bother covering up as he bagged the trash and set it on the floor outside their door.

“How do you see our foursome going from here, Dean?” he asked at last, placing a knee back on the bed, but not going further.

“Ah. A light topic, then,” observed Dean. “I thought your head would be all about how to crush Crowley.”

“Dean, I really don’t care much about Crowley. We’ve talked it all through until there’s nothing left to talk about. Whatever is going to happen will happen. The subject bores the hell out of me. Please, can we discuss important matters instead?”

Dean shifted until he was sitting up straight, and he crossed his legs. “You’re a very strange man, Castiel James. Most people think the merger is important.”

“You know what I mean. The merger is a means to an end. But our Pack…Dean that IS the whole point of everything. Nothing matters more. Nothing.”

“All right, Cochise, I hear you. You know I agree with you. It’s just not what the rest of the world expects from us.”

“Fuck the rest of the world, then, Dean.” Cas kneed himself onto the bed and knelt before Dean, earnest in every way. “The ones who have been paying attention wouldn’t be surprised at all.”

Dean ran fingers through Cas’ hair. “No, they wouldn’t.”

“So? The four of us,” Cas reminded him. “Something’s off. Am I missing something?”

“Ho…ly cow, Alpha!” Dean startled. “That was abrupt. What makes you think you’re missing something?”

“April’s hiding things from me. I don’t know how she’s doing it. And she let a crack show in her façade yesterday that I haven’t seen before. You told me there’s something we need to discuss about Michael that will affect the four of us, but then you sat on it like you’re hoping I’ll forget. I want to
know everything you know, Dean. I don’t want you to have to break your confidences, but I’m beginning to feel like we don’t have a choice. They’re Omega. They shouldn’t have secrets from their mates. It’s dangerous.” Cas was on a roll at this point, and Dean let him run through the lot of it.

“I need to be the Alpha mate that April can trust, but how do I do that without breaking her trust if she hides things from me? If I ask you about it, is that any better? I know that Michael has a deepening crush on her that may be getting out of hand, and I confess…” He paused.

“Cas? Confess what?”

Castiel scratched his head and looked guiltily at Dean. “You know he’s still challenging me, don’t you Dean?”

“He’s what?”

“It’s the same challenge that drove him to put you up to throwing your birth control down the sink – parenthetically a terrible idea, by the way. Our water supply doesn’t need any more prescription drugs in it.”

“Whoa! Back the fucking truck up. Forget the water supply,” Dean protested. “What are you accusing my mate of now?”

Cas regarded Dean as if his fiancé had missed the letter “A” in alphabet lessons. He began laying it out as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“It can’t have escaped your notice that Michael detested April until I proclaimed her off-limits. I admit I screwed up in letting my possessive side show that obviously. I know better than to let a rival in on my weaknesses, but the boy is very good at pushing my buttons.”

“Jesus, Cas! Egotistical much?”

“Yes! That’s not the point. From that moment on, Michael opened himself up to the idea of forming a connection with April. He’s got me dead-to-rights, Dean. The idea of having him pursue her makes my skin crawl. He can’t take her away from me any more than I can take you from him, but he can even out the playing board. And there’s nothing I can do, is there?”

“Like what?” Dean asked, feeling very uncomfortable. “You wanna build a steel wall down the middle of the house with a single door that only you have a key to? You can’t fix this, man. You can’t stop it if it’s gonna happen.”

“So you DID know about his feelings,” Cas surmised.

“I know he’s fallen for her pretty bad. I can’t tell you it’s a lifelong love kinda thing. I don’t know that. I wanted him to talk to you about it though. That’s why we were putting it off. There haven’t been two minutes to rub together that all three of us were available to discuss it since you two cycled…and about that! If you knew he was crushing, why the fuck did you put them together during her Heat?”

Cas’ face said it all. “That’s what I needed to confess, Dean.”

“You did it on purpose to hurt him?” Dean accused, disbelieving his own words.

“No!” Cas threw a hand up in defense. “No, but I thought April, especially in Heat, would make it clear that she didn’t return his feelings and that it would never be more than sex between them. I thought it was the gentlest and most gracious way to let him down easy.”
“How very magnanimous of you.”

“How would you rather I confront the boy and scare the fuck out of him?”

“God, what a fucking mess,” groaned Dean.

“Poly relationships are hard, Dean,” Cas said sagely. “It’s a minefield of miscommunication and assumption.”

“We’re not IN a poly relationship, C.J. That’s the whole point!”

“We are,” Cas rebutted, as if going all the way back to the start would allow them to follow the same trajectories for once. “Of course we are.”

“Look,” Dean stated, emphasizing with his palm toward the bed. “Michael didn’t fall for April to get back at you. It just happened. He fought it the whole way, dude. I watched him try like crazy to keep the pins from falling. I watched him. You wanna talk about trust again, start with giving the guy some credit for not being stupid and not being a total ass wipe. I’m not going to try to claim he’s an angel all the time, but he wouldn’t do that to an Ozzie in his own pack. He wouldn’t.”

Cas appeared to consider the point carefully. “I’ll concede that it may have shifted beyond his control. I’ll give you both that, but his timing was impeccably tied to our confrontation, and you cannot dispute that. You can’t tell me that you know nothing of his wolf’s impulse to strike at me. Dean, that’s never gone away, and you know it.”

Dean bit his lip and frowned. Cas had him there. Michael’s full Pack buy-in and subsequent Omega training capitulation had always carried a darkness with it that only peeked out every now and then, most recently when Michael couldn’t resist gloating over having scarred Dean’s shoulder and rubbing it in the Alpha’s face at breakfast. Michael’s wolf still carried a torch for the idea that one day there still might be a reckoning. Dean knew that. But he hadn’t dreamed that Michael might have gone so far as to have deliberately gone after the boss’ girl just to score revenge points.

That wasn’t the Michael that Dean knew.

Was it?

He flipped the script. If they were going there, then they were going there.

“Are you still of the opinion that you’re Mated to the third choirmistress from the right in Heaven’s highest angel choir, then?” asked Dean not as carefully as he should have. Dammit, Cas’ accusation stung like hell.

“What?”

“You are, aren’t you? You have no idea, do you?”

“Tit-for-tat arguments are beneath you, Dean. I’m trying to figure out how to move forward here without causing more destruction than necessary, and you’re playing swipe-for-swipe.”

“No, I’m not. Look, you said yourself you felt like she was hiding something, and you knew she was up to some kind of manipulation bullshit last night, right?”

“What’s your point? Do you know something about April I should know?”

“I’m not telling you more than I can tell you, man. God, I’m sorry, but she trusts me, and this is all
shit you should talk out with her. What I can tell you is that from the looks of it, she was pulling Michael in just as much as he was jumping for it. He came to me ages ago, way before he lost all his good sense and fell for a girl, of all things. He told me he felt like she was trying to rev him up with all her carefully staged nakedness and strutting around in ways he knew better than to respond to. I’m not blaming her any more than I am him. Jesus, Cas this isn’t something we lay blame about anyway! All I’m saying is that things might not be as simple as you want them to be.”

Cas frowned. He turned the words over in his head. He needed them to make sense. But they didn’t.

“You think I’ve got a blind spot around my own mate,” he said at last.

Dean shrugged. “I’d be willing to bet we both do. That Mating-bond makes it feel like we are omniscient, but we’re not. They’re still people, babe, and they have complex layers, and we’re not gonna see everything.”

“The first thing we do when we get home is get to the bottom of this,” stated Castiel’s Alpha.

‘Y…eah. Maybe not like that though.”

“You sound like Gabriel,” Cas pointed out.

“Good,” Dean told him. “You’re brother’s like a mage. I’d love even half his wisdom.”

“Oh, brother,” moaned Castiel.

Cas stood and strode to the window, peeking out into the night. Dean watched him without moving. “This thing between them,” said Cas almost to himself. “It’s one-way. I would have felt something by now if April shared his feelings. There’s no way she could hide something that big.”

Dean chewed the inside of his cheek as he tried to decide what to say.

“She would tell me,” Cas said, turning from the window.

“Yeah, she probably would,” Dean agreed. “But then what?”

“I don’t know,” Castiel admitted.

“Could you entertain the idea of letting them try out a relationship?” Dean was scared witless to hear the answer to that one, but he made sure nothing showed on his face.

Castiel wasn’t looking at him. “I don’t know,” he admitted again. “She’s already afraid of me. Maybe this is what it would take to break us. I don’t think I could take it. Let’s pray we never have to face that. Dean, she’s not going to fall for Michael. She doesn’t think of him like that any more than she does you. He’s like a brother to her.”

“A brother? Cas, she begged you to let him fuck her.”

“You know what I mean.” Cas’ frustration was breaking through. “Omegas are different. Their boundaries don’t fall the same way ours do.”

“Be careful with the ‘Us and thems’,” Dean reminded him. “They’re not as different as all that.”

“Yes, Dean. They are. For all we want Omegas to be just like everyone else, they aren’t. Pretending that they are is what got us all into this mess as a species in the first place.”

“Fine. You’re right. They’re not people. Let’s chain them to their beds and make sure they get all the
chemical balancing they need and keep them spitting out pups, and everybody’s singing under the rainbow!”

Castiel buried his face in his hands. Dean got up and went to him.

“Hey. Alpha. Chill, man. This is me. You can say anything in the world you need to say to me. But don’t you dare let your mate hear you talk like that. We all know Omegas are different. But you said it yourself, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. Buddy, you’ve got a possessive mastiff stuck in your gob the size of Rigel, and you need to worry about that before you start putting shackles on April or Michael. Cas, that man hasn’t done anything to hurt you. He’s Omega, dammit. He can’t hurt you. Taking shots at him from the captain’s chair is asshole behavior. Are you an asshole, C.J.?”

“I don’t want to be,” he admitted. “But, yes. I am. I’ve always been an asshole. You should know that better than anyone.”

“Nah. No, you’re not. Hey,” Dean wrapped his arms around his fiancé and moved in close to let his scent help. “You and me are two flawed individuals, right? We’ve got our own special ways of being fucked up, and don’t you threaten to spank me for saying it. That’s not derogatory self-talk, man, that’s simple truth. Laugh for me, so I know you heard me.”

Cas tried not to chuckle, but Dean just had a way of phrasing things.

“Good, so then, if we’re flawed, it stands to reason that our mates wouldn’t be perfect either, right? Huh? Right, Alpha?”

“That makes sense,” Cas sighed. Dean’s scent had picked up a little of Castiel’s over the years, and that seemed to smell stronger this evening. Another thing they’d never talked about. Cas buried his nose in Dean’s throat.

“Let’s cut the pups some slack before we castrate them. What’dya say? Maybe try talking to them without letting the big guy lead the discussion for once. Maybe try facing the crazy weird Poly issues as people, not as wolves for once.”

“I don’t know, Dean. We are wolves, and that’s a slippery slope.”

“I’m not saying we throw out the baby with the bathwater. We’ve already got a precedent. You started it. You pulled us all together and said, ‘I want all of us to share sexy fun times together, what about the rest of you?’. ”

“I never said, ‘Sexy fun times.’” Cas’ eyes turned vague as he remembered what that conversation felt like. He remembered liking the simplicity. “And my vote came third, not first.”

“You stifled the wolf, and you pulled way back on the Alpha, and we all got the same sized vote. You had everyone’s backs just like you’re supposed to. You set ground rules. You set the boundaries. I’ve never felt so safe to try something that far out of my comfort zone, Cas, but you made it safe for all of us, and it was awesome. I fucking loved it. I wanna do it again! I wanna sleep as a Pack every night and wake up to who knows what.”

“You hate being woken early in the morning.”

“Work with me here, Alpha.”

“I hear you. But you’re trying to talk me into something that hasn’t happened yet on the off chance that it happens someday. We can discuss how the lines of connection have pulled all of us into an
interconnected pack web. We can do that without needing to turn it into a discussion between Secondaries. And, Dean, this is a good thing that’s happening to all of us. This interconnectedness is good. You can’t expect me to stand aside and let Michael, or anyone, turn it into something cheap just to score points. I can’t do that.”

“All right. Fair enough. Dude, if it turns out that my mate is trying to cut your legs off at the knee, I’ll fucking castrate him myself. Don’t think I’m going to stand beside him and let him tear apart everything we’re building. But, Castiel, listen to me. He’s NOT doing that. He’s not. You’ve read it wrong. There’s no shame in that, babe. I see now how it looked like that from where you’re standing. I’m asking for your trust. You hear me, C.J.? I’m asking you to take a leap that feels wrong to you out of trust for me. Can you do that? For me?”

Dean’s green eyes had never been so intent, and Cas had no defense.

“Camelot fell because they were tangled in their own laws, Dean.”

Dean raised his brows. ‘If you say the phrase, ‘hoisted on our own petards’, I’m going to knee you in the nuts. In fact, that’s a standing promise where that phrase is concerned. Here’s the last thing I’m going to say about this tonight before I let you keep me up all night worrying your speech into a fucking shit storm and then back into perfection again.” Dean made sure he had Castiel’s attention, which was absurd. What else in the overly posh hotel room could possibly hold the Alpha’s attention?

“Camelot was a fable, and the laws they were bound to were shit laws. This is not Camelot. We’re building a Pack based on love and trust, and we’re NOT going to go wrong by doing that. If I ask you to trust me, it’s because I have a way of being sure of my own course that I don’t have a way to share with you yet, not because my way is shit and I’m not ready for you to call me on it yet. Your mate’s not perfect, Cas. And if you believe she is, your rose-colored glasses need a new prescription. In that same line of reasoning, my mate isn’t the antichrist. I know you know that, but your wolf and his shoot sparks every time they see each other, and it might be easy to forget that there’s a tortured kid inside that asshole swagger of his. I’m asking you to give me some time before you start swinging axes and beheading folks. I’m also asking that you, for all our sakes, talk to your mate before you draw any conclusions about who’s trying to sabotage what. Can you do that, Castiel? Can you trust a brat Submissive who freaks out at the sight of a seventy-year-old woman?”

“Dean,” protested Cas with a laugh that he felt was wildly inappropriate. “Yes, dear,” he decided on, and Dean’s eyes went comically wide.

Dean blushed heavily and jerked his head to look at the floor, stammering.

“Dean? What did I say?”

“Hmm? Nothing. It’s nothing.” He began to laugh, and Cas couldn’t resist joining him. “It’s just… that phrase. Babe, you couldn’t know. My dad used to say that to Mom when he was pissed at her but too exhausted to keep up with the bickering. He always said it just like that; like, ‘Yes, Dear’,” Dean mimicked his father, and couldn’t tell the difference between John’s version and Castiel’s.

He laughed harder, and Cas smiled in sad amusement, shaking his head. “You have the strangest sense of humor, Winchester.”

“I love you, too, man. Come to bed. Please?”
Benny sipped his sherry slowly. Billie was drinking still water as usual. Bobby was on his third Scotch. It was Bobby who finally broke the silence. “All Crowley has to do is show Cas in the light of a megalomaniac who thinks he’s everyone’s savior, play up the patronizing patriarchy and then spotlight the Boy Scout beta as an alternative. Miles has no blemishes on his record. He’s a master administrator. He’s an organizational mastermind. He’d run a hell of an institution. He’s got no enemies, and he’s already paid his dues.”

Benny nodded thoughtfully. “Even some of the Board members we had solid might play it safe and swing over to Miles. And the shitty part is none of us have been able to get a read on the man himself. Crowley has had his ear for weeks now. He may have bought into the idea hook, line, and sinker. He may think he’s saving everyone’s bacon by sacrificing himself – taking one for the team.”

Billie scoffed. “Taking one for the team? Look, I don’t know the man well. He plays it close to his chest. He may have no enemies, but he doesn’t have any really close friends either. I don’t think anyone but Miles knows what he’s really after. The Boy Scout thing might be a total fake out. Who says it’s Crowley playing Miles? It could be the other way round.”

“So, we’re at the mercy of a beta bureaucrat?” asked Bobby, downing his drink.

“Cas better make a hell of a speech tomorrow,” Billie mourned.

Benny chimed in sadly. “We need to be prepared to pull out if the vote gets hairy. I know Dean’s got his heart set on this merger. He thinks he’s serving Castiel’s dream up to his fiancé as a wedding present, and he’ll dig in and fight like hell to make it happen. But this vision of ours, this track we’re following, it won’t keep gaining momentum with a bureaucrat at the helm. We’re not at that stage yet. It’s gotta be Cas. We have to win this vote, or we have to be ready to take our little red ball and go home.”

“I wish we could get just five minutes with Jonathon to find out where his head is.” Bobby eyed the decanter of Scotch as his hand rolled the empty tumbler in a circle. “Dean’s not the only one who feels ready to step up to the big leagues. This is it for us, folks. If we’re serious about changing the course of both cultures, we need to make tomorrow work. Walking away sets us back at least five years, and we might never recover our momentum.”

“We’ll know tomorrow,” Billie said with a touch to Bobby’s shoulder as she stood up. “We’ve done everything we can do tonight. I’m going to bed.”

“***************

“And here’s the finalized agenda for tomorrow,” Bela told Jonathon. They were standing in his foyer. He hadn’t invited her into his home proper. He hadn’t offered her a drink. Bela made sure her awareness of those points didn’t appear to ruffle her cheerful efficiency. “The nominations come first, of course, and then you’ll both be invited to present your cases to the joint Boards. Crowley is adamant that you stick to the speech he wrote. I suggest you go over it a few times tonight and once or twice in the morning. He’s concerned that you strike the right tone. This isn’t going to be an easy sell. Novak has a tight leash on one third of the voters. He has a leg up on us before you ever open
your mouth.”

“Thank you, beta,” he said simply, accepting the folder she handed him. “I will see you in the morning. If you’ll excuse me…” Jonathon Miles gestured toward the front door, and Bela pursed her lips before allowing him to show her out. Damn, that man was a brick wall. She was usually very good at seeing beneath a person’s surface, but he was as inscrutable as Littlefinger, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that she may have read him wrong.

Climbing into the back seat of Crowley’s chauffeured Bentley, Bela nodded grimly at Crowley. He was taking the earpiece out of his ear. “Sounds good, beta,” he gloated. “He’s perfect. He’s like a green screen that I can paint with whatever background I want. You’re a genius. Who needs a grand title when I can put a puppet in place to do the dreary daily work while I phone instructions to him from a beach on St. Thomas?”

“Don’t count your chickens, Crowley. We haven’t won yet.”

“No, but we will. I don’t know why I didn’t listen to you in the first place. This is going to be the LIFE! I never even thought of running a puppet regime before you and your sneaky-ass slithered into my life. I’m going to retire and live in the Virgin Islands with a Piña Colada in my hand and a control board at my fingertips. Life has never looked this easy, and it’s all thanks to you, sweetheart.”

“Crowley, I think we should move Novak’s speech up. Introduce him to the Boards, and then have him do his presentation before you nominate Jonathon. I have a bad feeling about giving him a chance to work in a defense against your boy. He’s quick on his feet, sir. I wouldn’t put it past him to get a solid argument delivered even if it’s on the fly.”

“You worry too much, Talbot.” Crowley touched the button at his arm rest and spoke into the intercom. “Stop by that street taco place. I need sustenance.”

“Yes, sir,” came the reply.

“Worrying is what you pay me for, Crowley,” she reminded him. “If we get caught flatfooted, you’ll blame it on me. I intend to not let that happen. It only works if you listen to my warnings.”

“Ah,” observed Fergus Crowley. “But then the puppet-strings are in your hands, not mine. Aren’t they?”

Bela sighed heavily and turned her attention out the window. She had nothing left to do. It would all be decided on the morrow. Tomorrow she’d know if her careful domino placement was enough to topple unsuspecting towers or not. A tiny smirk reflected in the darkened window when she mused that no matter which way the dominoes fell, she could ride them to a bright future in any direction. Right now, she had all of their trust. That would change tomorrow, but the disillusioned party wouldn’t retain the power to hurt her, and the victorious party would reward her with his protection. She knew how she preferred it to go down, but that was in Jonathon Miles’ hands alone at this point. She prayed she had enough credit points stored up in the Universe to entice the winds to favor her. That was a useless prayer. Bela Talbot didn’t have any credits to her name. Maybe Jonathon did.

Maybe.

Chapter End Notes
The next two chapters are going to be tough to write. I need to think them both through and get them right. I've been both chomping at the bit to get to this point and dreading the hell out of it. You should see my notes. O_o

Anyway.

I hope you enjoy dangling in the uncertain with me. I never stop wishing I could do this full time and just let it all come out at once. But...bills, groceries, obligations, etc. Ya know, real life.

Love to the pack. Thanks for everything.
Chapter 87

Chapter Summary

While the alphas are away...Michael's having a rough day, April's masks are all falling off, and Gabe's...gotta do a thing.

Chapter Notes

Holy Hell. Even my read through seemed to bog down. I told you this was gonna be a rough write. Hugely Michael-centric chapter. Also, I realized at some point that except for Michael and a little Gabe-Kali, this chapter is almost all O.C.'s Maybe that's why it feels draggy to me.

Couple of notes:

Don't press me about reproductive genetics RE sex of the offspring when 2 men conceive. I picked a scenario, and I'm sticking with it. It don't make sense. I know that.

Don't get too pissed at Rachel. It's not really her fault.

All of you who said you weren't a big fan of seeing a Michael/April tag come to fruition; well, we're not there yet, but this is a heavy "we're moving that way" chapter. It is what it is. No apologies. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 87 – Thursday, August 10, 2017

NOW:

“Mike, quit deflecting, and tell me what happened. You’re doing that armadillo thing you do when you’re upset. Uncurl yourself and talk to me.”

“Rache…”

“Yeah?”

Michael paced, his phone to his ear, the unmade bed taunting him in its emptiness. “I’m pregnant.”

“Uh, yeah. I know. That’s yesterday’s news. Congratulations, you’re going to be a spectacular mother, and I get to spoil the shit out of the little guy.”

“No, it’s not that. I mean, it is. It really is. It’s ALL about that, but…”
“Michael, damnit. Talk to me.” Rachel’s worry practically trailed down the connection and took hold of his collar.

“It’s…I’m Omega, Rachel. I’m really, actually, honestly, truly Omega.”

“Sweetheart…” she murmured, her voice full of compassion. “You were Omega from the moment you were conceived. It’s not something you ever had a choice about. It’s a part of you. I know you think it’s a character flaw, but it’s not. And you are so lovable. I love you, you big doof. If you weren’t Omega, you wouldn’t be you, you wouldn’t be carrying that puppy right now, and you’d miss out on so much color in the world. It’s okay, Mike. It really is.”

“It means I’m weak, Rachel. Everyone around me is stronger than I am. I’m a sitting duck, and now I’ve got a baby to protect, and I can’t do it. I can’t protect myself, let alone a pup.” Michael’s pacing picked up.

“You’re not weak, Michael! Stop that right now! You witnessed something horrifying, and it’s hit close to home, but that wasn’t you, and it’s never going to BE you!”

“God, I miss you,” he lamented.

She sighed tiredly. “I miss you, too. It’s not the same around here without you.”

“How’s Pop?” he said by way of a subject change. He heard her breath huff but couldn’t read if it was frustration or amusement. “Rachel?”

“He’s still finding his feet. Sometimes I think he’s got it, and then he’ll spout something completely absurd, and it feels like he hasn’t made any progress at all. I’m a little worried about Mommy. I’m not sure Pop’s big revelations are the best thing for her. He’s taken up Omega empowerment so much, he’s trying to make her set her own Release pattern. It’s not really working, and she’s a little weirded out by the whole thing. She can’t bring herself to ask him for anything, so they’re just waiting each other out most of the time, until she loses her shit and breaks something. Then he goes off on her, then he feels like shit and apologizes, and then they start all over again. Mike, I’m trying, but he’s like a toddler with this. I mean, whatever they were doing before was working. Why change it?”

“It’s complicated stuff,” Michael admitted. “I had no idea how complicated until I joined a four-man union and tried to figure out how to balance everybody at once.”

“Four?” she asked. “I thought you guys were keeping the boundary lines up.”

“They got fuzzy,” he confessed.

“So…you and Castiel?”

“No, not really. I’m O, and he’s Alpha, so he gets to call for whatever he wants. And, I mean, he hasn’t demanded anything I didn’t want to give. It’s not like that. But, I’m not…He’s not. We’re…not together. And he doesn’t really know the whole story yet.”

“I see. But…four.” The phone line crackled, and Michael sighed at the overt suggestion.

“Yeah. You know me. Never really knew what was good for me, did I?”

“Mike, she’s taken,” Rachel said carefully.

“So is Dean, but that didn’t stop either of them.” It came out with a ton more petulance than he
expected, but he didn’t rescind his statement. “Rachel, she’s not like those others. She’s not helpless. She doesn’t need to be saved. She already has an alpha, so there’s nothing to lose. It’s just me and her.”

“And whatever the Alpha feels like taking out of your ass,” Rachel clarified.

“Nah, he’ll come around. He doesn’t have a leg to stand on. Bottom line is that if it’s okay for him, it has to be okay for me.” He hoped she couldn’t hear that he didn’t believe a word of what he was saying.

“And what about April?” asked Rachel. “Does she want you the same way? Does she get a say, or is that irrelevant?”

“Of course she’s relevant!” protested the Omega, pulling up short in disgust.

“So…you asked her opinion? She told you she wants you even if Castiel tells her no? Does she even know what your plan is? Do you? Do you have a plan? Does anyone else know about this?”

“Jesus, Rachel!”

“Michael, it’s the same thing that’s gotten you hurt over and over again since you were fourteen. You pick the damsels in distress so you can feel like a hero, but it never works, because you’re not that guy. It’s not because you’re Omega, and they all choose an alpha over you. It’s because…”

“Because why?” he asked angrily.

“It’s because you’re self-centered, and people get tired of being expected to meet your needs when you don’t actually care about theirs.”

The line went quiet. Michael didn’t know what to say for a moment, and Rachel feared she’d said too much.

Finally…

“I’m not him anymore, Rache. This is different. I’m different. I’ve changed.”

“Good,” she said firmly. “Then put those new skills to work and think about what might be best for April. If you put her in a position where she’s forced to choose between you and her mate, she’s going to pick him, and she’s going to resent you for making her pick in the first place. If you really love her – and shit, Michael, if you do, then that’s the most hopeful thing I’ve ever heard from you – if you really love her, then don’t force yourself between them. You have to think about what’s best for her, too. She doesn’t have as many choices as you do.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I think your need to win, especially against an Alpha, might override your good sense. And, kiddo, you never had a lot of good sense in the first place.”

“Thanks, Rachel. I appreciate the vote of confidence.” Michael sat heavily on the bed. The household would be stirring soon. The alphas left early, and everything felt too muted, too still.

“Michael, I’ve never blown sunshine up your skirt, and I’m not about to start now. You’ve always called me on my bullshit, and it’s kept me out of some shitty situations that I was headed straight into. You want me to lie to you?”
“No,” he said with a pout. “But you’re not always right about this stuff.”

“Yes, I am. When it comes to you and your alpha confrontations, I’m always right.”

“What does a Neutral know about this stuff, anyway?” he grumbled. Her Keller had come back a supreme disappointment, and she was still processing the midline readings.

“Oh, gonna play the Dom card on me? Okay. I get it. I’m a boring bland beta-Neutral. Got no way to relate to the impulses of the wild boys and the call of the full moon. Whatever. But I know this. I know YOU. You go somewhere quiet, and you ask yourself…if you ask April, and she’s game for a confrontation, and then you confront the Alpha, and he says, ‘Hey, no problem. You two make a cute couple. I think you should ask her out. Buy her some flowers,’ will that satisfy you? Or are you desperate for a showdown, so you can TAKE something from him? Is this a chance for you to prove to all those shitty alphas who walked away with YOUR prize that they were fucking with the wrong Omega?”

“I’m tired of being powerless, Rachel,” he cried. “I’m tired of feeling like all I can do is sit around and wait for someone else to decide my fate!”

“Sweetie, you’re not powerless. Omegas have power over everyone. You wanna talk powerless, think about what it was like for me to finally get my assessment and find out I’m not a wolf at all. Zip. Zero. None of the good stuff. I can sense it all around me, but I may as well be a fucking monkey for all I can participate. Omegas have a well of prowess to pull from. Sometimes I think Omegas run everything.”

“Rachel…”

“No, shut up a second. You bitch and moan and whine nonstop, and damn, Michael, I get it. Omegas get a shit deal in a lot of places. But, you’re not in A LOT OF PLACES! You still get the high-end endorphins, all the deep wolf shit, the really intense connections. You get Heats!”

“You want Heats?” he asked, baffled.

“Fuck YES! Are you kidding me? I wanna fucking FEEL something!”

“It’s not like the pornos, Rachel. It’s really uncomfortable…”

“Right. I get that. Except that you have a mate now. Tell me just how uncomfortable your last Heat was. Go on. Was it miserable?”

Michael blinked. “Not exactly.”

“It was incredible, wasn’t it? No, wait. Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

“It wasn’t worth what I went through to get here. Rachel, it’s years of agony before they’ll let you take an alpha.”

“Oh, please. You didn’t wait for them the let you. And for the record, dude, I know. All right? I know it’s no picnic being Omega. But seriously? Is it really that bad?”

“Tell you what,” he said flatly. “I’ll grant you the sex is awesome, and the connection is incredible. You got me there. But do you really think a hypersensitive nerve ending or two is worth having no personal rights? Having no legal standing? Having to watch a fog fall over your brain so slowly you can’t even tell it’s happening until you’re staggering around like a drunk sailor, and then finding that the only way out of that fog is to bare your ass to some jumped up muscle-laden prick and have it
beaten out of you? You’re upset that your life is black-and-white and you don’t go into Heat? I’d fucking trade you in a second!”

“Shit, Mike…” She sniffled and caught her breath.

“You have no fucking clue what it’s like, Rachel, so don’t judge me! And of all the assholes in the world who think they get to tell me how great my life is because I lucked into a good house…” Michael broke on an angry sob. “I never thought you’d be one of them!”

If it had been anyone else, he would have hung up. He might delete the contact number. He was certainly angry enough. But it was Rachel.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured at last. “You called me for comfort, and I … Michael, I’m sorry.”

“Forget it. You couldn’t know. That’s what I’m figuring out. No one knows – no one who’s not Omega. It’s not your fault. Did you know that April has to ask permission to get a snack when she’s hungry? What’d you do last time you were hungry?”

Rachel didn’t answer. What was there to say?

“And the shittiest part is that she NEEDS that rule. Well, maybe not that one specifically, but all the rules that tell her when and where and why and how and who…she can’t do it on her own. All the things she can do brilliantly, and she can’t set her own bedtime without falling apart. And Rache, I’m Omega too. You get that? I’m closer to being like her than I am to being like you. We don’t know where my limits of autonomy are yet, but we know I was over that line in San Antonio. Dean says if we’re careful and he pays close enough attention to my state of mind, we may never have to find out where the line is. I could live my whole life in a state of Omega balance and never seem to anyone outside the pack like an Omega at all. But one screw-up, and I’m flat on my ass again and acting like a psychopath. I can never live on my own. I can never be fully independent. I can’t travel by myself. I can’t apply for a job or a loan or admittance into KU by myself. Not ever. And here, while I’m balanced, all that regulation feels so ridiculous, but Rache…It’s not. I need the restrictions just as much as April does, or I’ll come unglued at the seams again. You have no idea what that feels like.”

“No,” she said sadly. “But I know your pack needs you around to keep them balanced too.”

“Maybe,” he told her. “But it’s not the same. That man who died. He was attacked in broad daylight just for having the gall to think he could walk alone. There were people around. No one helped him. No one even called an ambulance. They left him on the pavement to bleed out while his mate had to drive to get him, fumble his nearly lifeless body into the backseat by himself, knowing their puppy was already gone, and get him to the clinic alone. Our clinic isn’t the closest to where he was, but he went there because he knew they would actually try to save an Omega. He couldn’t be sure of that at the hospital. And you know why no one lifted a finger? Because they all knew those alphas, and no one wanted to be on their list.”

“Jesus.”

“That’s where I rank in the world, Rachel. And I’ve got to figure out how to raise children in a world like this.”

“And Castiel did nothing?”

“It’s complicated,” Michael admitted. “He didn’t go raging beast, if that’s what you mean. He’s working with the investigators, and he’s going to put some not-so-subtle pressure on the witnesses to talk to the cops. But in the end, it still happened. It happens every day. And here I am in this big
Michael’s conversation with his sister left him in a morose mood again. Tony arrived earlier than usual to serve breakfast, although they were completely capable of cooking for themselves. Fred hovered. Maureen sat in Cas’ chair, but she allowed April to dress and to sit in her chair, not on the floor. Jess bundled in just as breakfast ended with both pups already tucked into their sling at her waist. She looked harried. Michael carefully extracted Hank, handing the pup to April, and then he took J.T. Jess sighed in relief.

“Thanks, guys. I need to grab the stuff from my car. I had no idea how hard it is to travel two miles down the road with twins. Who knew they would need this much crap?” Jess was beside herself. Her hair flew wild. She was wiped out after another nearly sleepless night which followed a week of near isolation from adult contact with people who could hold a conversation in real time, and she was feeling decidedly abandoned by her mate who wasn’t expected to return before Saturday, and…

And Michael took her in hand. In short order she was fed, stripped of her pups, stripped of her maternal trappings, stripped of most of her clothes, and tucked into bed. Michael pulled the heavy drapes to darken the room and turned the lights out.

“Get some sleep, Jess. We’ve got this for a while.”

“Michael, wait. Hank’s got a runny nose, and J.T.,’s been spitting up everything he eats. They need me.”

“We’ve got this,” he repeated sternly. “They need you rested more than they need it to be your hand wiping their snot. Go to sleep.”

The expression on her face told him everything. She wanted so badly to push back, and if he’d been Sam, she would’ve. But Michael wasn’t as emotionally involved, and he didn’t have any buttons she could push. He waited patiently by the door for her to finish the calculations in her head and conclude that arguing was pointless. She nodded glumly and stretched out on the pillow as he smugly pulled the door closed.

J.T. rested along the soft line of Michael’s waist, draped belly-down on the Omega’s forearm with his legs straddling his arm in their soft footie pajamas. That cushioned bulge at Michael’s midriff was new, the one supporting the pup, but he steadfastly refused to acknowledge it.

He headed back downstairs where a bizarre mix of musical styles was emanating from the hallway to his left. At least they weren’t arguing yet. Michael heard the violin and cello add their voices to April’s piano, sensed that the room was chock full of people he wasn’t prepared to interact with, and he turned the opposite way, carting the puppy with him. He considered stopping in his office to check on his spreadsheets and download the newest transactions, but he was under strict instructions not to perform any managerial work, and he wouldn’t put it past Castiel to check up on his login times. He skipped the office and returned to the kitchen where he found Tony with a squalling pup, trying to entice him to take the nipple of a bottle.

“He can’t drink if he can’t breathe,” Michael told him. “Here, trade me. You got a bottle ready for
Michael slipped Hank away from the cook smoothly and transferred J.T. into his arms just as easily. “Try feeding him in a sitting position and burp him every few minutes. He’s been playing the spit-up game.” Tony went along gamely, gathering up the alternate bottle and settling into a chair at the table. Then he watched Michael wipe Hank’s nose and fit his own mouth over the baby’s nose. Michael took a quick breath and then gave a powerful suck.

“Oh, bloody hell! That’s disgusting!” Tony looked quickly away when Michael spit into the sink and turned on the faucet. “Use the bulb-thing, man!”

Michael laughed at his revulsion and fixed his mouth around the pup’s nose again, suctioning his sinuses clear with a quick, powerful breath. Hank startled and coughed, but he began breathing easily through his nose, and Michael wasn’t disgusted. It was a trick his aunt had taught him years ago, and it worked much better than the rubber suction bulbs on tiny people who couldn’t blow for themselves yet. Michael rinsed his mouth out with a glass of water and spit into the sink again. He wiped Hank’s face and dropped a kiss on his hairline, which had begun to recede a bit as his birth fur fell out.

“He can eat now,” he told the cook who was determined not to look at him. Michael dropped a cloth off beside Tony and then settled beside him. They fed the twins peacefully.

“I hear you’re getting a puppy,” Tony commented.

“Pete’s getting a puppy,” Michael responded, sitting Hank up higher to try to keep him breathing easily.

“Why do you call her that?”

“What?”

“You call April, Pete. Where did that come from?”

“Oh.” Michael shifted again, frowning slightly at the pup as if worried about him. “Inside joke kinda thing. It’s just a nickname.”

“Can I ask you something?” said Tony, pulling the pup up to his shoulder where he’d draped the cloth.

“Um. Sure. I guess.” Michael was on alert, aware that the wrong question might lead to things he mustn’t disclose, aware that his body language could give him away despite carefully chosen words.

“Do you like this Domestic Discipline stuff? I mean, what’s it really like? I figure you might be the best person to ask since you’re sort of on both sides of the equation and all.”

Michael relaxed. He almost laughed outright but turned it into a patient chuckle. Primates curious about the Lupin Pack Dynamic was something he could handle. “Are you asking because it seems crazy, like the way I cleaned Hank’s nose? Or are you asking because it seems like something you can see yourself wanting to try for yourself?” J.T. burped spectacularly and dribbled a gooey mess down Tony’s back.

Tony reacted swiftly, caught most of the mess in the cloth, cleaned the pup, and went back to feeding him. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Okay, so if I did kind of want to look into it, which side do you see me in?”

Michael regarded him. “I can’t read apes the way I do wolves, man. Your body language is all wrong to me, and your scents never change with your moods unless you swing way into something
big. If I had to guess, I’d say you were a Bottom, but I have to tell you that nearly all apes seem like that to me.”

“Except Fred,” Tony mumbled.

“Yeah,” Michael agreed. “Except Fred. I wonder if it’s because he’s been around Pack his whole life. Like he picked up some of the tells through osmosis.”

“But, and tell me if I’m overstepping here, doesn’t it hurt to get your ass paddled? Why would you let someone do that to you?”

Michael huffed and shifted Hank to burp him. “Man, you need to talk to your own people about this. I have no idea why an ape might wanna get into pack discipline. For us, it’s basically chemical. Yes, it hurts. Of course it hurts, but that’s not the point. It’s how our bodies connect chemically with each other, and how the hormones react to the stimulation, and all kinds of science crap that I don’t know. And you people don’t have any of that, so I have no idea what you might get out of it. Talk to Fred. Or talk to Sam. He’ll probably be willing to take a swing or two at you, show you what it’s like.”

“Whoa, I never said I wanted to be paddled. I’m just curious about what it supposedly does for you wolves.”

“It’s atonement and rebalance,” Michael said simply. “Rebalance personally, and pack rebalance too. It sets all the pieces back at start. Unless it’s done badly, then it throws the balance off even worse.”

Michael was thinking as he spoke, so the statements came out a little off-kilter, fragmented. “Even wolves, with our sense of smell and our instincts, fuck it up sometimes. I can’t imagine how you guys would ever know what you’re doing. It seems like the hierarchy would be arbitrary for you. I guess you could still get the atonement shit taken care of. I guess you people still feel remorse when you fuck something up, right? Maybe having somebody to answer to helps apes the same way it does us. I just can’t figure out how you know who should answer to who with only one gender designation.”

“We Primates are not quite as simple as you seem to believe, Omega,” Fred said calmly as he strode in with a clipboard in his hand. Michael and Tony both turned. “What we lack in concrete designations, we make up for in ingrained personality traits. Some people are simply born more dominant in personality, and some less so. By the way, you Omega, are under strict instruction not to take on any unnecessary responsibility this week. Eunice, Monica, and I will be here all week in shifts, and we will take on the task of caring for the pups. I’ve spoken to your mate, and he’s asked me to relieve you of any undue work I find you performing.”

“Fred, this isn’t work,” Michael protested.

“You are responsible neither for Jessica’s wellbeing, nor those two little ones. Not today.”

“Hank has a cold,” Michael protested again. “He can’t breathe.”

“We are perfectly capable of dealing with a child who has the sniffles, Omega. Hand him over.”

Fred was rarely resolute like that with the wolves in his pack, but a slight shiver ran up the length of Michael’s spine at his tone, and he had no argument prepared that would work. It didn’t stop him from trying.

“Fred, if you leave me with nothing to do, I’ll go crazy. Watching over the pups is good for me right now. Please.” Michael smoothly jumped over the implicit acknowledgment he’d just made that Fred’s word held weight. He didn’t want to think about it.
Fred shot a look at Tony as if wishing he weren’t present, but he turned back to Michael and squatted down before him as Castiel often did. “Listen to me, pup,” he said with a grandfatherly wisdom and a tone of concern. “Caring for pups right now is a distraction. You don’t need a distraction. You need to let yourself experience what you’re trying hard to repress. I can’t make you do it, but I can make sure you have nothing else to turn to for the next day or two.”

Fred’s grey eyes held nothing but care, and Michael had no idea how to fight him. “Everyone’s telling me something different, Fred,” he said in a small voice. “Gabe says to ignore it. Maureen says to drown it out with other people’s voices. April wants me to talk about it until it holds no power. Dean wants me to lounge around in my bathrobe and mope. I don’t know what to do. At least here with Hank, I know what to do.”

Fred put a grounding hand on his shoulder. “They aren’t wrong, Michael. All of that advice is relevant, but each in its own time. If you do them in the wrong order, it won’t help. You aren’t ready to walk past it yet, pup. You aren’t ready to find distractions to drown it out. You need to face it first. Take all the distractions away, and let your mind take you where you need to go.”

“But Gabriel said…”

“Apologies, Michael, but it will not have escaped your notice that Omega Gabriel is not the healthiest example of emotional stability. I implore you to take his advice with a grain of salt. What he survived was monstrous, and the case may be made that not all of him survived it. Please consider that there may be another way.”

“You want me to go lie in bed and think about it over and over again?”

“If that’s what you need to do. I expect your mind may be ready to divert its attention from the gore and the horror at this point. I expect you may find yourself ruminating on its relevance to your situation in particular. You don’t have to be alone, Michael, but please understand, avoiding thinking about what’s happened isn’t going to help you heal. Can you give it the morning at least?”

Michael sighed. “You’re going to report to the alphas if I don’t.”

“I am,” Fred responded.

“He has a cold,” Michael repeated, handing the snuffy pup over. “He’ll need suctioning again soon. Face-to-face works best. And Jess didn’t sleep last night at all. She needs to sleep all morning if you can keep her in bed.”

“Michael…” Fred warned.

“I’m going.” He stood up. “Oh, and J.T. just puked.”

“We’ve got this.”

“I’ll be in the parlor.” Michael didn’t want to be too far away. He wanted to hear it all, even if they weren’t going to let him help.
Michael drifted aimlessly in his mind. He took the sofa beneath the window where the morning light cast dust motes sparkling across his vision and turned the room hazy. He spent a fair amount of time watching Dean’s presence stretch out into the distance, his terror at flying replaced ultimately by relief. Michael had to practically squint to feel him at all, but he was there. Tracking a single dust particle with his eye, Michael squeezed the bonds very slowly closed until only the barest crack remained open. Somehow, having Dean in his mind was an imposition. He didn’t really want to know why.

He lay staring into the sunbeam, deliberately thinking about nothing. Sounds from the kitchen wafted through. Dishes were being collected and washed. Babies fussed. Calm voices spoke of mundane things. Dust motes moved randomly. The piano began and stopped abruptly, only to pick up again. The same phrase drifted in several times in a row before giving way to something else. The sun shifted slowly. Michael fixed his eye on the leading edge, hoping to perceive it moving. His argument with Rachel was fresh in his mind, and his chest clenched involuntarily. He loved her with all of his being. He’d trusted her his whole life. She knew him more intimately than anyone else on the planet, and yet, once he Presented, an uncrossable chasm had opened between them. She could never really know what it was like to have all of his self-assurance, his personal judgment locked forever inside a cabinet that he was forced to wait on someone else to open for him, a cabinet that someone else held the key to. He had fought it for so long, and he’d made a grand show of being immune to the effects, but in the end, he wasn’t immune at all.

And he was angry. So very angry. And he had no one to turn that fury on. No one who deserved it. Rachel didn’t deserve it. Dean didn’t deserve it. It wasn’t their fault. It wasn’t even Castiel’s fault. It was no one’s fault that in spite of everything, Michael was beginning to find solace and security in letting others hold his keys. He let a hand trace across his belly beneath his navel. His pup was in there somewhere – behind all the squishy organs that processed his waste and gurgled incessantly. He couldn’t feel the pup at all. He had sore nipples, and nausea, a widening waist, and the beginnings of some odd cravings, but all that seemed so disconnected from the idea that there was a tiny heart already beating next to his lower spine. And his emotions felt beyond his control. Euphoric one minute, and miserable the next, Michael wanted to be able to attach his feelings to an event, not to the whims of fluctuating hormones. How was he even supposed to process the trauma he’d experienced and its devastating backlash when he couldn’t be sure his emotions were a result of the actual event and not just a wash of heavy-handed hormone release as his body worked to construct another person?

The sunbeam shortened slightly as the sun climbed to a steeper angle, and the morning mistiness faded a little. The kitchen went quiet. Michael imagined what the beta who lost his mate to rapist murderers might be doing right now. Was he surrounded by pack? Was he, too, lying supine on a couch in the morning sunshine, trying like hell to make sense of a world that claimed to cherish Omegas but in fact considered them expendable? Was he arranging his mate’s funeral? Talking over details with the police? Sleeping it off under heavy sedation? Was he coping or falling apart? How alone did he feel? What was it like to have a Mating-bond that connected to nothing on the other end? What was it like to have someone you loved share a space in your head and then have nothing but a vacuum? Did the vacuum ever close back in on itself, or was it doomed to gape in emptiness forever?

Michael clutched at the flesh of his belly. A tear tracked down the side of his face. He wanted so badly to matter. His wolf strutted around like a king, snarling at anyone who dared to hint that he didn’t matter. But most people couldn’t see his wolf. Michael had a practiced technique of letting the wolf’s cool superiority show through the lenses of his eyes. He funneled it through his cold judgment, through his showman’s imagination, through his intricate construct of layered masks. Was any of it real? Was all of it just a front? Was he Dean in reverse? And who was this Omega who felt so foreign and so familiar at the same time? He was the enemy, wasn’t he? He’d always been the
enemy. Was it betrayal of the wolf who had muscled him through the terrifying journey into adulthood to cast it aside and climb up on the Omega’s back now that his life had settled?

Michael was tired. He was tired of the mask, tired of fighting, tired of having to read every face for signs of threat. He was tired of trying to prove that he didn’t need an overlord, trying to prove it to his pack and the world at large, trying to prove it to himself.

Michael was still caressing his belly, his head turned into the sunlight. He hadn’t noticed that the music had ceased.

“Have you thought about names yet?” April asked him.

“Pete,” he said, startled. He swiftly wiped his eyes and the traces of tears where they disappeared into his hair. He sat up. “I thought you were working.”

“We’re taking five. It’s going well today. Having Matt here keeps Nick from being a jerk to everyone.” She came all the way in and sat on the floor beside the couch and leaned her shoulder into it. “So? Names for the little guy?” She reached out and mimicked the touch across his skin that he’d been repeating. It felt nice.

“Not yet. I figure we should focus on boy names mostly. It’s a longshot to get a girl from male-to-male conceptions.”

“Like 25% chance?” she asked. Michael figured she already knew. The basics of Lupin reproduction were covered in high school biology, and this was one of the easier statistics to remember.

“Yeah. Something like that.”

She took a deep breath through her nose and let it out like a long release of tension. “A little boy. Guess it’s on me to throw some girls, then.”

Michael let her hand continue its gentle sweeps. He reached out and touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “I’d like that,” he said.

She smiled softly, and the moment felt trapped in a delicate bubble. Her blue eyes seemed bottomless. Her face was smooth with youth and innocence. Her lips were full, soft. Michael found himself transfixed by them as her tongue darted out to moisten the lower one. “What about Kevin?” she asked, and it took him a moment to remember she’d been asking about names.

“Not a big fan of Kevin,” he told her.

“Byron?”

“Not really ready for this conversation, Pete.”

She tilted her head and spoke to another side of him entirely. How did she do that? “Michael, you’re okay. Really. You know I would tell you if you weren’t.”

Her abrupt shift into everything he wished he could climb out of startled him.

“You would? How would you know?” The surreal bubble-like spell lingered, and Michael was afraid to move lest he pop it.

She sighed and adjusted her position, taking her tender touches with her, but the delicate bubble stayed. “I can see inside you. I can see nearly everything. I can tell where you’re bruised, and I know
it hurts, but you aren’t broken, not like Gabe is.”

He broke his gaze away, frowning. “I would hope not.” There was shame in his voice. “I haven’t been through anything close to what he’s faced. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time with a bloodstream full of pregnancy hormones. That’s all.”

She licked her lips again, and her frown matched his. “No, it’s more than that. You’re at war with yourself, and you feel like the weak side is beginning to show a strength you didn’t know it had. It’s scary, isn’t it? It’s not the side you want to win, but none of your old attack patterns work at stuffing it back in its box anymore. You’re afraid the Omega might drown the rest of you and turn you into something you don’t want to be.”

“What do you know?” he asked rudely, but there was more desperation in his voice than offense.

She smiled all of her compassion into the sunbeam. She chuckled softly. “I told you. I see you, Michael. I don’t know if it’s a curse or a gift, but I can see your struggles like colors in a painting. My Omega sees things most people can’t, and then my mind figures out what it means, I guess. I don’t know how to explain it. I used to think everyone could do it, but they can’t. It’s an Omega thing, and it’s not all Omegas even, just a few.”

“Yeah,” he breathed. “Just a few.”

“Gabriel,” she said softly.

“Mm-hm,” he agreed.

“And you and me, both. All three of us here. And that’s amazing, don’t you think? For such a rare talent?”

Michael’s green eyes flicked back up to meet hers. “You can see me the way I see inside people?”

Her smile deepened. “You’re very good at hiding when you want to. I guess it takes one to know one.”

He smiled sadly back at her, that smile of hers contagious beyond his capacity to fight it. “All right then, soothsayer,” he posed, his voice strengthening. “What’s my fortune? You say I’m just bruised. What happens now?”

She straightened her back and leaned back on her hands to regard him. “You’re going to come to terms with the Omega side of you, stop fighting it, and figure out how to use it to your advantage. And stop worrying that giving over to your Omega means you’ll lose your wolf or your access to being the asshole you are at heart. You don’t stop being yourself when you embrace the Omega, Michael.”

“I’m not an asshole!”

“You kind of are. But don’t worry about it. It’s an endearing kind of assholery.”

“You think I’m endearing?” he asked hopefully, foolishly, and he immediately kicked himself internally.

“You’re too adorable for words. Now come on. Come sing with us. We’re going to do some random jams to break Nick out of his writer’s block. You’ve moped enough.”

“Fred told me to stay put and think about stuff.”
“Come on, Michael,” she coaxed. “You did that. I’m telling you, it’s time to move now. Shake that maudlin shit off again and let some light in. Come play. Play is healing too.”

He let her pull him up, but he dug his heels in once on his feet and pulled her back by her hand. “I’ll come with you under one condition,” he said, watching her eyes. Her eyes would tell him. “Can you explain to me why you sound so much older when your mate isn’t in the room?”

She let her hand drop, and her expression turned serious. “We all wear masks, Michael. You and me, we can read people in a way most people can’t. My masks have a purpose just like yours do.”

“Don’t wear a mask when it’s just you and me, Pete. Please? I want to see the real you.” He touched her cheek again and then tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, turning it into a caress.

“Please stop,” she whispered, looking to the floor, closing herself off as clearly as if she’d closed a door between them. And then she blew out a breath, took a step back and looked up again, her hopeful light relit and glowing. “Come sing for us.” She tugged on his hand, pulling him along into the foyer.

Michael went along obediently. None of his senses worked where April was concerned. And that seemed monumentally unfair, because clearly, she could read him like an open book. If she could see how much she mattered to him, see it in his soul, shouldn’t he have the chance to know where he fell in hers? But he couldn’t tell. She had never hinted clearly either way, and she’d never come right out and said anything either, and he was growing frustrated with the gameplaying. Ozzie or not, she had a right to her own feelings, and she had a right to express them. He couldn’t tell though. Was she deflecting to protect herself or him? Maybe she really didn’t feel anything, and she was trying to figure out how to let him down easily. But Michael’s instincts said differently. And he was ready to poke her into the daylight.

Michael’s bonds were nearly closed. Their mates were going to be gone for days. No one perceptive enough to catch their subtle interplay was around. Now was as good a time as any, and if she wasn’t going to answer the question in private, maybe he could stoke her to giving something away while they worked through the tunes together. Music was her Achilles’ heel. Michael texted a check-in to his mate, and then dropped his phone back into his pocket.

Maureen was at the far end of the conservatory with a wad of crochet work in her lap and an open laptop on the side table next to her. Michael had already tested her give enough to know that her authoritative scope stopped at keeping the alphas clothed from the waist down and keeping April from drowning in Omexol. She didn’t care what happened in the house outside that.

Keira smiled enticingly at Michael as she turned and bent over to retrieve her fiddle from its case on the floor. Oh, well, now, that was interesting. The woman’s pants stretched over a nicely rounded backside, and the look she gave Michael once she righted herself, caught him staring, and tucked the fiddle under her chin was not subtle. He winked playfully at her before he realized what he was doing, and then he smiled in chagrin. She played a flirty phrase on her fiddle, holding his gaze the whole time. She cut off and adjusted herself obscenely, ostentatiously in her pants and turned to speak to Damon.

Jesus.

Subtle.

Michael shook his head and focused back on Nick and April at the piano. Had April caught that? The stiffness of her spine said yes, but she didn’t say anything about it. Michael let her talk him through the plan. Nick patted him on the shoulder with a word of welcome before retreating to take a spot on the couch with his keyboard in front of him. Matt sat at the round table with papers strewn all
around him, ignoring the musicians.

Michael looked through the playlist the team had thrown together and marked the ones he felt confident he could sing. He sat on the edge of April’s piano bench, watching Keira out of the corner of his eye. She moved like a Sub. She had that aura about her, and he found himself drawn to discover if she was a brat or not.

“Careful there, Omega,” April whispered. “The other two are possessive as hell.”

“Could be fun,” Michael responded before he thought about who he was talking to. It’s what he would’ve said to Rachel. Then he realized where he was and who was watching, and he cleared his throat.

April giggled. “You ready?” she asked him. “Everyone ready?” she asked the room. And then she was someone else entirely. April took control of the room with a few keystrokes and a simple nod of her head, and it was electric. Everyone obeyed her, even Nicholas. Even Michael. They went through the songs at her direction, simple catchy pop songs, melodic country songs, brash raucous shouts of defiance into the void and lilt laments. Michael did his part. Singing was a simple thing for Michael. He knew his voice was passable – probably more than passable – and he enjoyed using it to dig into people.

Michael did his part.

Singing was a simple thing for Michael. He knew his voice was passable – probably more than passable – and he enjoyed using it to dig into people. He played with Keira a little, but he soon found her depths too shallow to interest him. She wasn’t interested in him anyway. She was trying to pull a response from Jackson, and Michael didn’t like being used if there wasn’t a payoff for him.

And of course, his mate might take exception.

And his current plight kind of precluded delving into the possibility of female alpha entanglement potential.

And it wasn’t Keira he wanted anyway.

Michael wondered what Dean would think of the idea of letting Michael play with people here and there on the side. They’d touched on the idea a little. Dean was obviously okay with being on the receiving end if he’d greenlighted Michael’s gangbang scene, but what about a simple side piece here and there? Kiera’s hips had this little twitch thing they did when her bow arm accented a note heavily, and it drew Michael’s eye. He took a deep breath and pulled his eyes back to the lyric in front of him. It wasn’t Keira he wanted. Damnit!

“You missed your cue, genius.” April’s elbow caught him in his new padding, and he grunted.

“Sorry,” he muttered, listening as she took the group around to circle back to the phrase where he needed to enter again. Michael focused back in, and he realized that the tune in his throat was all about questing for an answer from a prospective lover. He canted himself carefully, shoved Keira from his mind, and delivered the lines to April. It wasn’t understated, but he hadn’t been the one to choose the songs anyway. And Michael was one to take the opportunities that presented themselves. His eyes, possibly his best feature, took on an intense light, and he leveled them through his lashes perfectly. She had to know what he was doing, but she played on as if oblivious.

No one was that oblivious.

The next song, different in style and tone, let Michael assail her with an even more direct proposition. It was gritty and provocative. If April hadn’t caught on before, she did now. Her cheeks pinked in hot little circles high up near where her eyes had begun to blaze. And then that song ended, and the playlist called for another that was all seduction. Michael slipped off the piano bench and approached Jackson where he was trapped behind his cello. Michael locked eyes with the man, went down on
one knee and crooned to him. Jackson was lost in the music, and he responded to the tune, not the lyrics, bowing across his strings like a man possessed and meeting Michael in intensity. Keira huffed angrily and popped herself up an octave into a shrill cry that shrieked above the cello and the piano both. Damon’s eyes went wide, and he shuffled backward several steps to get out of the line of fire. He found quite accurately, that standing between Keira and Michael was no place he wanted to be. The piano thundered. Michael seduced. Two women put all of their ‘woman scorned’ fury into driving music from seductive to assault, and Nicholas stopped breathing.

“That was it!” he cried into the deafening silence as they shuddered to a stop. “That’s what I need! Holy Fuck! That was it! April! Kiddo! I need you to do that again!”

April’s blue eyes blazed. She panted for a moment, her face flushed, her chest heaving, and then she stood up and stalked out of the room.

Michael dropped the tablet he carried with all the lyrics loaded on it. He ignored everyone else, and he ran after her with a quiet, “Pete,” on his lips. He caught her near the hallway opening into the foyer and took hold of her upper arm to stop her. “Pete, I’m sorry. That was cruel of me. I didn’t mean it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said coolly, pulling her arm out of his grasp, but not turning to leave. “You put yourself into the music. It was good, Michael. You did very good.”

“Please.”

“Please, what?” she challenged. “What do you want from me?”

Michael ducked through the closest doorway. the living room which was cool and shaded even as reflections from the pool danced across the ceiling. April followed him slowly. She left the door open.

“I really am an asshole,” he confessed. “I’m sorry. I’m not interested in those jerks – any of them. You have to know that.”

“I know,” she said noncommittally. She crossed her arms across her chest.

“You’re not going to make this easy on me, are you?” he asked, ducking his head. He threw a furtive glance at the doorway, praying no one had followed them.

“Get to the point, Michael. I have work to do, and it sounds like Nick finally got the sound he wanted. I should get back.”

“Hey, you’re the one who stormed out, not me.” His irritation and the unfairness of everything and everybody turned him punchy, and he grimaced at his own inability to stop himself from lashing out.

“Your point?” she asked again.

“The fucking point, Pete, is that I’m in love with you. That’s the point. And forget Cas. Forget Dean. They aren’t really a part of this. What’s going on between you and me...that’s just you and me. Just, please, fucking tell me...is it all my imagination? Is it just me? If I’m off my rocker, and I’m floating out here by myself, you gotta tell me. I swear I won’t make you choose between us. We can figure something out. I’ll play it however you want, but it’s just us here right now. Just you and me. I won’t tell a soul. I swear. You’re safe.”

“Safe? Really, Michael?”
“April, please!”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” she shot. “I can’t think of anything you could do that would make me LESS safe than conning me into falling for you.”

“Conning?! Are you listening to me?! I just said I’m in love with you!”

“Shut up, you idiot! God, I hope you’ve got your bonds closed! You’re going to break everything!” The color in her cheeks spread down the length of her throat and made her Mating-scar stand out stark white against flushed skin.

“What?! No! No, no, no! It’s not a con. Listen to me.” He advanced in her in earnest desperation and took hold of both of her arms. “If you don’t feel anything for me, God, April, just say so. I swear I’ll leave you alone. I’ll never say another word about it. But I need you to look me in the eye and tell me so.”

April met his eyes, and hers were furious. "YOU need! Why is it always about what YOU need? Who the fuck do you think you are? Like this whole playground isn’t hard enough to manage without you playing ‘Horse’ with Castiel and using me as the ball. I don’t need this, Michael. I sure as hell don’t need you!”

“What are you talking about?” He didn’t release her, and he didn’t let her eyes drop. He held them with his own, with every ounce of determination he had. “It’s not a game. Did you not hear me? I love you!”

“I heard you.”

“And? It’s not a complicated question.”

“Yes, it is.” April sighed heavily and her tension went with her exhalation, but the fire in her eyes remained. “I’m not stupid, Michael. You don’t love me. You just want to hurt Castiel. It’s probably the most obvious play you could have made. You and your superiority whatever it is. You don’t even like me.”

“What are you talking about. Jesus!” Michael stepped back as if she’d struck him. “Is that what you think of me?”

“Look me right in the eye and tell me the thought never crossed your mind,” she challenged, and Michael whimpered pathetically. His mouth dropped open, but no words came out. She advanced. “You tested and probed at him until he flinched at something, and then you grabbed hold of it with both hands, and you’ve been trying to wrestle it out of his hands ever since. And the fact that that something happens to be a living, breathing person means jack-shit to you, Michael, because it’s all about winning, isn’t it? It’s about striking him where it hurts because he hurt you. I don’t want to be part of your game. You asshole, I care about you, even though I know what you’re doing, and that makes it hurt so much worse!”

“It’s not like that. God, April, I swear!”

“Really?” she asked again. “You didn’t set your eyes to figuring out where his pressure points were?”

And Michael was trapped, because he’d done exactly that. He was guilty as shit, and her blazing eyes called him out. But it wasn’t true anymore, and it hadn’t been for a long, long time, long enough that he barely remembered the man he’d been then. Michael’s fingertips went numb, and all of the injustice swatted him squarely between the eyes, and he got mad.
His voice shook. “Me? Yeah. Yeah, that’s exactly what I did. You got me. I got sick of getting the shitty end of the stick every fucking time. Did I want to hurt him? Fuck, yes, I wanted to hurt him. I’m totally guilty here, but don’t stand there and act like you don’t know that it’s changed, like you didn’t know exactly what was happening as it changed. You didn’t just know, Pete, you were totally onboard the whole time. You wanna call me down for finding his weaknesses and using them against him? You really wanna go there? You knew all about everything, didn’t you? I wasn’t the only one poking and testing, but at least I pulled up when I realized there was a person caught in the middle. Did you? Or did you slide in tighter and choke up that much harder? You’ve been playing with me ever since you noticed me looking at you. You play everyone. Who’s really the asshole here?”

Her full-armed slap sent Michael reeling, and he staggered back several steps. She advanced on him, rage in her eyes, and as soon as he straightened, she struck him again. Michael snarled as his head whipped to the side, her handprint emblazoned on his cheek. The third time she raised her hand, he caught her wrist. His nostrils flared, and hers did as well. They glared at each other.

“Release her, Michael!”

Maureen stood in the open doorway, one brow arched high, alpha command on her lips. Michael opened his hand, splaying his fingers. April dropped to her knees where she stood. She tuckered her head under and went still. He looked down at her wondering if the alpha could see his reddened cheek, wondering if she knew April had struck him. Michael breathed out slowly, deflating his chest. He turned away from the doorway and lowered his hand. The world spun a little, but he had his legs under him. His face felt hot.

“Go to your room, please, Michael.”

“Yes, alpha,” he muttered. He kept his hot cheek averted and skirted past her with his eyes down. Michael didn’t wait around to find out how Maureen intended to deal with April. His tears started falling before he reached the stairs, and he made a dash for it. There was no one around. Jess’ door was closed. The hall was empty. Michael slammed his door and sank dejectedly onto the floor beside the bed. Everything was fucked up beyond belief, and it was all his own fault. Blind, fuming rage from his scrawny asshole of a wolf had led him to try something that a moral human would never think to try, but he’d been so angry, so powerless to right the wrongs, so crushed by the weight of his own shackles, it had seemed justifiable from his position beneath Castiel’s boot heel. But from this side. Was there any hope he could ever convince her that his feelings were genuine? She’d said she could see him from the inside, but then she didn’t believe he was genuine. They were all enmeshed in their own machinations and extricating themselves seemed like a hopeless endeavor. Michael, for one, knew he was never going to be capable of playing on only one level. He suspected April couldn’t either. He suspected Dean and Cas were both just as tangled in games of their own. He suspected they felt justified in whatever they were up to out of alpha authority or some such nonsense.

Michael sat in his room and let the clock tick the afternoon away. His butt went numb. His stomach grumbled. Monica tapped on his door and delivered a tray to him with her usual maternal gravity. He was to eat every bite, she said unsympathetically, and then set the tray back out in the hall. Apparently, he was actually grounded. Good to know. Michael expected Maureen to swing by eventually, and he wasn’t surprised when she finally did.

He was up on his bed, stretched out on his back, staring at the ceiling when she poked her head in.

“Would you like to talk about it?” she asked, coming all the way in and closing the door.

He turned just his head and regarded her. “Not especially. Do I have a choice?”
“I’m not your alpha, Michael.”

“You’re in charge right now. Am I due for a trip over your knee?”

Maureen smiled. Somehow, alphas like her always found him adorably frustrating. She shook her head a little. “Only if you ask me for it. You don’t smell out of balance to me, Omega, and by the look of that cheek you tried not to let me see, you’d already had all the swats you might need. I’m just here to make sure you’re all right. You’ve had quite a week. I’m not surprised you and April overflowed a bit. She’s been worried about you.”

Michael scoffed. “Right. Tell that to my left cheek.”

Maureen chuckled. She sat down on the side of the bed, facing Michael. “It’s none of my business, sweetheart. If you want me to stay out of it, I will. But even though I’ve only been in this house for a couple of days, I can tell that you and April care about each other. Don’t think you have to throw that away just because.”

Michael crossed his feet in front of him and leaned in toward her. “Just because? Just because what? Because she’s Mated to the Hell beast from Perdition? Because he’ll rip my head off my shoulders AFTER he stuffs my balls down my throat? Are you telling me to send her a singing candygram and just see what happens?”

“Good grief, Michael! Slow down a little bit! Do you even know the man?”

Michael’s hands were in his hair as he threw himself against the headboard. “Jesus Christ! Are all of you fucking blind! He’s. NOT. The. Sweet. Gentle. Compassionate. Pushover. All of you keep trying to convince me he is. GOD! You’re going to get me killed!”

“All right,” she conceded. “Maybe not. This may hit him upside the head and set him snarling left and right. But I’ve known him so much longer than you have. I knew him in high school, Michael. I watched him struggle with it, and I watched him defeat his own demons. Castiel didn’t have many friends in those days, and I was one of the few he confided in, and it was a close thing. I’ll admit it. But you don’t know the level of control he’s capable of. You don’t know how important his moral compass is to him. It’s WHO HE IS. It’s everything. I can’t swear he won’t lose it for a time, and scare the shit out of everyone around him, but I’m certain he’ll come to grips and rein it in. He can do this, Omega.”

“And what’s the body count going to be when he comes around? What are the chances I escape unscathed?”

“And yet you still made a move on his mate in his own house while he was gone.”

“It’s MY fucking house too, damnit! I live here just as much as he does.”

“Michael, don’t pretend you don’t know the world doesn’t work that way. She’s his Mate.”

“I’m not falling into that trap again,” he spat. “I can’t change what happened. I can’t change that my True-Mate fucking ditched me before he even met me. I can’t change that I have zero power to even the field, or that I wanted to with all my heart. I can’t change anything. I can’t change that I fucking love it here in spite of everything and that as much as I hate his guts, I love the guy like a frikken Messiah at the same time. And I’m in love with Dean like a goddamned puppy, but even that doesn’t touch what it feels like when she touches my face. I’m fucking lost. And I’m pregnant. And I’m losing my grip on everything I thought I knew about myself, and I’m so fucking alone in this huge house full of people I don’t know!”
“Come here, pup,” Maureen coaxed, leaning into him and adjusting so she could hold him.

“I can’t catch a fucking break!” he sobbed. “I’ve tried so hard to turn over a leaf and jump where they said to jump, and it’s all smoke and mirrors! I’ve spent my whole fucking life in freefall, and I’m STILL falling!”

“Shh, shh. You’re okay. You’re not falling. Everything’s fine, Michael.”

“Everyone’s gone, and I’m falling apart.”

“You’re all right. I’ve got you. Let me get my phone, and I’ll get Dean on his way home.”

“NO! God! Fuck, no! Don’t tell him anything. Please, alpha.” Michael pulled away and scrubbed furiously at his eyes.

“Michael, hiding things from your mate is a bad idea. You need him here.” She turned his chin until she could see his eyes. He allowed the touch. He could tell she was checking for a rational presence behind his eyes, and he needed to trust that she could see it if he couldn’t tell anymore. Frankly, he couldn’t tell.

“Not yet. I need to think. He already knows all this. It’s not Dean I need to talk to, and Castiel can’t leave right now. Please don’t tell them Pete and I were fighting. You didn’t already, did you?”

She huffed another small laugh. “I told them a little. It’s to be expected that Omegas act out some when there’s a change in custody. Neither of them even batted an eye.”

“Christ, we’re six year olds to them.”

“Don’t mistake Omega care for childcare. There’s a difference. You know there’s a difference.”

Michael shifted to sit on the edge of the bed with his back to her. “Am I grounded in my room?” he said over his shoulder.

She laughed softly. “No. I don’t think it’s necessary to ground you. I appreciate you staying clear this afternoon. April needed the space. That doesn’t mean you have to stay here though.”

“Did you spank her?”

“She slapped you. Three times.”

“The hell she did! Is that what she said?”

Maureen’s silence pulled Michael around to glare at her. “Your cheek is still red,” she observed. “It may bruise.”

“Fine. She slapped me. But it wasn’t three times,” he muttered.

“So, yes,” the alpha finished, standing up again. “April earned a round with the paddle. She’s fine. She and Nick are close to having another piece polished. She didn’t even flinch at sitting back on the piano bench.”

Michael scoffed. “Lady, you don’t have the arm to make that girl sore enough to have to stand up. She’s sat on whip-marks before. Your paddle isn’t even gonna leave a mark that she notices.”

“My, my, you’ve got it bad. And you think you’re going to be able to walk away from her?” Maureen asked at the door.
“I don’t really have a choice, do I? Even if Castiel could stomach the challenge to his great all-encompassing Alpha-ness, April doesn’t want me. She thinks I’m a dick who used her.”

“You have a point there,” she nodded. “Sometimes people change their minds though. You never know.”

“Mark sent you these instructions.” Matt passed the pages across the table, and April stifled her nerves as she took what looked to be a mountain of tightly-spaced hand-written pages. Flipping the top page, she found they were covered on both sides.

“I can’t…”

“None of that. We’re stripping can’t from your vocabulary,” he said starkly, and she frowned. “April, you can do this. I watched you run the whole session this morning. You weren’t playing stock covers. You were turning old tunes into music. They weren’t your songs, but they may as well have been.”

“Playing someone else’s piece isn’t anything like writing one of my own. I don’t have any control over what comes to me. It just happens. All this stuff…” She held up the pages. “…This is trying to force something. I don’t work that way.”

“Here, let’s talk it through. When do songs come to you? Just out of the blue?” Matt put a hand on top of hers that clutched Mark’s detailed words. He stilled her.

“They hit me when I’m feeling something particular, I guess. Mostly heartbreak. I got a shit-ton of songs from breaking up with Nate.”

He laughed. “You and Taylor Swift. Okay, that’s the key. Don’t you see? You just need to get into the emotional state of the character, and let it come to you.”

“Then what do I do with this?” She waved the pages.

“Don’t tell him I said this, but feel free to stuff that crap in your mattress. I never said I’d make you read them, just that I’d give them to you.”

She gaped at him. He shook her surprise off and tapped the table with his knuckle. “What kind of song do we need?”

“Um,” she brought her hands up and rubbed her face. “It’s a declaration of purpose. This is the signature statement of self. It’s a young woman, and she’s apprenticed to the witch in the village, and she wants to learn everything and then take it further than anyone’s ever done before. But there’s all these rules and limits and expectations. She’s supposed to mate, supposed to take it slowly. She’s supposed to do only what she’s told. We need a song that expresses her frustration at the limits.”

“April.”

“What?”

“Kiddo, that’s Belle from ”Beauty and the Beast.” That song has been written already.”
“No. It’s got to be new. It’s not just longing, it’s defiance.”

“Oookay, so, it’s Ariel. ‘I wanna be where the people are?’ They’ve done that before too.”

“Damnit! It’s missing something! I’m not writing the same fucking song all over again!”

“I mean,” he said fatalistically. “It’s a universal theme.”

“NO! It’s got to be unique, or it’s not worth writing!”

“Agreed. But you know the story Nick’s telling. I don’t. What’s unique about this girl?”

April thought about it, running through the plot lines, working her way up to the point where the character’s emotion blasted out in a way that could be translated by music.

“Rage,” she said. “She’s not just angry. She’s furious.”

Matt rested his chin and mouth in his hand, leaning into his elbow on the table. He stared at her.

“What?” she asked.

“You just turned it into Defying Gravity,” he told her carefully.

“FUCK!!”

He laughed. The others were all in the kitchen eating. “So, hold on. This story, it’s a young untested protégé finding her way into brilliance against all conceivable expectations and limits, and breaking the mold of society in her wake? Is that right?”

“It’s set in dark ages Scotland when the old crones had a lot more respect than they do now,” she told him. “Being a witch wasn’t what we think of it now. It was acknowledged that some people were born with a power from within that they could wield to help their clansmen in all kinds of ways.”

“Mm-hm, and the heroine?”

“She’s got more internal power than they’ve seen before. They’re all afraid of what she’ll become if they teach her everything.”

“April, does this story sound familiar to you?”

She glanced down, thinking, working out how to say it without seeming too presumptuous. At last, she decided Matt wasn’t likely to catch all the ramifications anyway. “It’s Castiel,” she said quietly.

He laughed again. “Huh. Didn’t think of that. Yeah, maybe. You know what I see?”

She looked up, puzzled.

“It’s you,” he said. “You’re writing your own declaration of self. You’ve made a good start, but you’re right, it’s missing something.”

She stared at him, shocked. Surely, he was kidding.

Matt’s smile softened into something intense and kind at the same time. “You’re right, about the determination and the rage. Fight like hell, April. But there’s more to your struggle than that. You know what else? Those limits they try to put on you? They have no fucking right to do that, do they?”
They have no idea what your limits are, how can they imagine they have the right to define you, to shackle you? You’re bigger than all of them, and only you can define that. They’re pedestrian boors. They don’t have the standing to lick your sandal straps. Take everything that Belle and Ariel and Elphaba needed to say and add yourself to it. Break out, April. Stand the fuck up! You know what’s missing? You’re greater than they are, and that can’t be contained, not by any force in the world. It’s not just rage at the prison, it’s OUTRAGE that anyone even tried to put bars around you. And it’s the purity of self that’s going to make you unique. You’re not going to change to fit anyone. You’re going to take everything that you are, and you’re going to drive forward with it and make THEM change. Twenty years from now you’re going to be exactly who you want to be. There’s your declaration.”

“NO!!” she clapped hands over her ears. “That’s not me!”

“Yes, it is.” Nick’s voice drifted across the piano and the wide space. “I can’t believe it took a monkey to explain it to you. That’s exactly what it is. This is your story, kiddo. And you’re going to write the title song. We’re going to record it as a single, release it as your debut composition, and it’s going to be a hit. You’re gonna want to find a place in here for your Grammy.”

“No!” She turned on Nick in fury. Tears of anger welled in her eyes. “You can’t! You can’t make me do this! I won’t do it! If he finds out…!”

“What did you think all the imagery was about?” Nick asked her as he approached slowly. “Our heroine flies apart four times through the storyline – physically crumbles into pieces. Does that sound like Cas to you? Each time she disintegrates, she comes back stronger, larger, less breakable, and all the more whole. Does that sound like an alpha to you?”

“Nick, I have too much to protect! You can’t make me do this. He’ll figure it out!”

“I’m counting on it,” Nick told her. “April, muffin, lovebug, light of my life and my retirement, all you have to do is write everything that’s in your soul that you’ve been hiding from your mate. Talk to him with your music. Just to him. Write him a song. Tell him everything. Tell him everything you’re afraid to say. Put it to music, and I can retire.”

“You’re crazy,” she whispered.

“You remember what I told you back in New York? How Cas and I are fighting the same battle? Why I had to kill the Omega in that story? I asked you which ending felt real? You know why the Omega’s death still feels more real? Because even Cas is part of the problem. April, we’re changing the ending. You and me. And we’re gonna drag the Alpha into it too. This is real-world stuff. I’ve got the technical crew trying to figure out how to make the disintegrations work without turning cheesy. They’re trying a floor-to-ceiling silkscreen with overlapping layers. The actress has to time it perfectly, but all she has to do is jump at the slit, dive through, and then the lights pick up the image, crumble it on the screen like a shadow play. We’re going full alternate media. It’s a light play, dancers on wires in the air behind the screen who interact with dancers in front of the screen onstage, a whole fantastical display that comes back down to reality when the heroine pulls herself back together piece-by-piece. You can’t imagine what we can do with computers these days. It’s going to be incredible. Or it’s going to be complete shit. It depends. I told them they’ve got to make it work, or they’re all fired.” He giggled manically. “April, it all hinges on your song. If you fail me, the show never happens.”

“Write it yourself!” she protested. “It’s YOUR show!”

“Nope,” he said. “It’s OUR show. This is my telling of your life. The signature song can’t come from anyone but you. No one knows what you’re carrying around inside you, but you.”
“What makes you think I can do this?”

“I dunno,” he admitted like it didn’t matter. He pointed a thumb over his shoulder at Matt. “This guy seems to believe in you. Plus, the one at home with the flu thinks enough of you to spend hours trying to walk you through the process line-by-line even though he’s too sick to stand up.”

“What if I try, and I fail?”

Nick scoffed and Matt made a ‘humph’ sound. Nick took her by the shoulders. “Everyone fails, April. If you manage to get through life without failing catastrophically a few times, then you really are the creature in this story, and I should bow to you right now.”

“Go get some lunch, April,” Matt told her. “We’ll try some phrasing after lunch. Don’t push it. The words will come. Eat first.”

***********************

“Can you at least tell me where you’re going?”

“Kali, I can’t. I’m sorry, love. I can’t tell you.” Gabriel tucked a couple of folded shirts into his bag.

“Are you coming back?”

“Of course, I’m coming back! I wouldn’t leave you here with these dick-nozzles! Besides, my brother’s getting married in a few weeks. You think he’d let me miss that?”

Kali followed him pathetically from his dresser to his bag on the bed and back again. “And the plan to sneak out and marry ME this weekend? Did you forget about that? Am I not supposed to notice the timing here? Are you running, Gabe?”

Gabriel stopped with a small pile of folded underwear in his hands. He dropped the pile to the floor and grabbed her in both hands. “Now listen here, beta. You’re not getting rid of me! Look at me. I HAVE to go do a thing. People’s lives depend on it. I won’t be gone more than a few days. When I get back, I’m going to marry you, elope with you, stand under streamers in the front lawn. I don’t care, whatever you want. Then I’m gonna fuck you until you pass out, and I won’t leave this room until you tell me I can. Keep me here for months if you want. Kali, I HAVE to do this right now. I told you it would be like this, and I told you you would hate me for it. But this is me. I’m not leaving you. You get to make the same decision if you want, or you can make a different one. When I get back, if you’re gone, I’ll understand.”

“Bastard!” she quipped. “I’ll fucking show you! I’m going to be standing right here when you get back, and I’ll spoil your plans to get rid of me. I don’t scare that easily.”

“Good,” he whispered with a soft kiss to her lips.

“Gabe, please come home to me. I’ll kill you if you leave me.”

“Be right back, baby. Just gotta go do a thing.”

Chapter End Notes
Bye Gabe. Godspeed. Oh, and if this was a movie, those would obviously be famous last words. (I'm not that awful. They aren't famous last words. That's a spoiler, but c'mon. It's Gabe, not Hedwig.)

Also, Chapter 88 is written too. I'll post in a few hours once I'm sure I've got myself turned round right. I wrote them other-way-round, and now I need to go check continuity.

Stick with me folks. I swear we're getting there.

Love all y'all so fucking much.
Chapter 88

Chapter Summary

It's the big day in Dayton. The Boards' eyes are on Castiel. Cas' eyes are on Jonathon. Jonathon is watching Crowley.

Chapter Notes

I hope you enjoy the jumble of words, and I hope to hell it makes sense. Please note: the author is aware that corporate mergers don't work like this. At all. Whatever. The author isn't a business woman. She's a lab rat using her imagination.

Also, in case you missed it, this is the second of two chapters posted close together. If you skipped 87 by mistake, slide back and catch it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 88 – Friday, August 11, 2017

NOW:

Sam’s face had turned bright red in the morning sunshine as he paced furiously beside the hotel pool with his phone to his ear. Bobby ate his breakfast slowly and watched the man’s control slowly slip through his fingers. Plate glass windows and a polished sliding door separated the bright, festive hotel breakfast room from the lounge area outside, but it wasn’t thick enough to keep Sam’s rising
“Lemme guess,” the alpha prompted as Sam collapsed into his seat, his face still pink with frustration. “While the cat’s away…?”

“It’s only been 24 hours, Bobby. She’s doing this on purpose. I know it’s only to test me, but seriously? She said the Pack and the staff took such good care of the pups that she slept most of yesterday and all night last night. It’s not sleep deprivation. She’s a competent professional adult. Surely she can get through a few days without turning into a basket case.”

Bobby laughed. “I used to hear the exact same complaint from your dad, Sam. It’s refreshing to see the apple hit the ground so close and put down roots. Feels like a full circle.” Bobby took a long slug of his coffee, and Sam gaped at him.

“Same complaint? You mean my mom?” Sam stared, confused.

“Son, your mother was a wildcat in desperate need of a leash and a whip. Leave her alone for a couple of days, and she’d go feral every time.”

“Wait.” Sam adjusted his posture and focused in on Bobby. “Are you saying my mate is just like my mom?”

Bobby laughed again. “Sweetness and obedience in public but spiky as a hedgehog at home?”

“I thought it was something I was doing wrong,” Sam muttered. “It’s like she lies in wait for me to be exhausted and then springs the most ridiculous behavior – like a four-year-old, like she’s totally out of her mind.”

Bobby’s mirth erupted across the table. “You’re not doing anything wrong, beta, not if she’s still a poster child for responsible adult behavior in public. That’s your litmus test. God, I miss your mother. She used to wind John around both pinky fingers until he couldn’t tell up from down, and then she’d wink at me like a scamp and set him spinning. Your Jess is a spitting image, kid.”

Sam watched Bobby laugh at his plight with an unappreciative face, but he felt a weight lift from his shoulders. “What do I do about her?”

“Do? You choke up on her leash, boy. Don’t give her any slack or she’ll use it to put a tourniquet around your testicles and pinch them right off. Stay ahead of her if you can, and God help you if you can’t. Don’t leave her to concoct plans to hit you with when you’re wiped out. Keep her too busy to scheme. Wear her out, Sam. If she’s got any juice left at the end of the day, you’re not running her hard enough.”

“Sounds like what Dean told me,” Sam grumbled.

Bobby sombered. “Dean was old enough when you lost your mom to have caught on to some of it. He was alpha enough to have sensed the give and take between your parents. And, Sam? Your folks were a perfectly matched set. They were True-Mates, or I don’t know what a True-Mate is. If things had been different for your family, John would have sat you down when he first sniffed that girl of yours, and he would have coached you through what she’s needing. As it is, I ain’t your dad, and it’s about ten years late, but if you need to ask me anything about how that dynamic looked from the adult side of the prism, I was there, and I can try to describe it to you.” Bobby ate a few bites. Sam didn’t. Eventually, Bobby looked up and softened. “Your mate is just like your mom, kid, and you… you’re John all over again. I can’t spell it out any better. All those things she does that get under your
skin? You’ve got it in you to flip it and make it work for you both. You’ve got a chance to carry what your folks had into a whole new generation, where the world is building up around you to support what you’re doin’ instead of trying to tear it down. And you got two little boys who need to see it work, just like your mom and dad did. Don’t be afraid of it, Sam. You’re beta, and sometimes we act like betas get a raw deal, all things considered. Don’t you believe it. Mary was a beta too, and that woman was as wolf as they come. The trick is to remember, always remember, Subs like that ain’t tame. Respect ‘em like the wild animals they are, and they’ll eat out of your hand. Forget for a second that they’re wolves, and they’ll snap you in two.”

Sam was speechless. He’d been ready to allow that Jess obviously missed him and was acting out as a cry for his attention, but Bobby’s take on it took the view to a much higher altitude. From up there, Sam could see it so differently. He searched his memory. His father had always seemed like a tyrant over his mom, at least to Sam. And yet, she had never acted like a woman subjugated. She was lighthearted. She was loving and sweet. She had never flinched or seemed fearful. Appearances could be deceiving, especially to a child, but Sam’s house had always been a safe place to be. Sam tried to superimpose what he and Jess might seem like to a child with how he perceived his parents, and the vision was an epiphany. John’s callously hard hand was never far from Mary’s backside, and all the times he mounted her with fury and aggression, right in front of their sons…Sam could envision exactly the same thing happening with Jess. She torqued him up until his blood boiled, and she left him no recourse but the basest version of subjugation. And then she wiped the tears from her eyes, straightened her skirt, and smiled at him. The only thing she truly despised was when she wanted a response, and he failed to deliver a strong one.

Bobby watched the pieces fall into place in Sam’s memory with a vaguely nostalgic gleam in his eye. “I think you were likely about a year away from the big talk with your old man when it all went haywire, Sam,” the alpha told him gruffly, speaking around the lump in his throat. “And afterwards, he didn’t have it in him anymore. Truth is, I dropped the ball too. I was more focused on your brother than on you, son, and for that, I’m sorry. He was headed off a cliff if he didn’t stop playing around with girls, and I needed to get him on a safer track. You just never seemed to need anyone but your brother. I shoulda put more thought into you than I did.”

“Bobby,” Sam started, and then had to clear his throat. “Look, it wasn’t your job to raise us. I’m grateful that you did everything you did, but it was never your job in the first place. There’s no reason to regret anything. I know how much you’ve had on your plate. I know how many of us you saved. We were a whole lost generation, and you saved as many as you could. I can never thank you enough for what you’ve done for Dean. And you were right about me. As long as someone was looking out for him, he looked out for me, and I was fine. Yeah, I missed having a mom and a dad to help me through adolescence, but Dean was always there for me, and you were there for him.”

Bobby huffed. “You’re resilient and forgetful, Sam, but both those things probably go together. Eat your breakfast. We need to get moving.”

Sam smirked as he shoveled cold oatmeal into his mouth. He wasn’t as forgetful as all that. Sam wasn’t ever going to forget those years, coming to terms with being the least important member of the pack, or the least in danger of falling apart at any given moment anyway, making peace with the negligence born of the foxhole lifestyle they’d all been thrust into by Mary’s death, and finding a way to be his own mother and father when the empty house closed in silently around him. Sam had needed so much more, but he had come to the very pragmatic, survivalist conclusion that he wasn’t going to get it from his father. Dean was barely keeping his own head above water. Every day had become a triage where only the most dire crisis merited attention, and Sam was just never dire enough. And now, years later, Sam was finally recognizing the full scope of what he’d missed out on. He’d needed his father’s council to understand Jess, and he’d been robbed of that. It was a broken circle, and the ramifications could have meant a lifetime of anguish between the mates. Sam’s
instincts were never going to take him there. He needed guidance, but John was gone. Mary was gone.

And yet, all was not lost because Sam had a direct bridge to what he’d missed in Bobby, and he had all the research into personality templates through The Facility, and he had a Pack Alpha who put a premium on ferreting out each individual’s particular needs regardless of societal assumptions. And Sam still had Dean.

Speaking of… Dean limped awkwardly toward the table Sam shared with Bobby, a pained grimace on his face. Castiel followed slowly, his head cocked close in conference with Billie.

“Are you all right?” asked Sam as Dean braced his arms on the table. He didn’t sit down. Sam checked the clarity of his brother’s eyes.

“Peachy,” grunted Dean.

“Punishment or play?” Sam asked him with an eyebrow quirked.

“Letting off some steam before he has to make the most important presentation of his life. I’m a goddamned saint, Sam. I deserve a fucking medal for taking one for the team. But look at him…” Dean looked over his shoulder. Cas was holding court in the middle of the foyer. Wolves had gathered around him for a quick word, for a touch, for instruction. Castiel glowed with assertive energy. He did indeed look well balanced this morning.

Bobby grunted, and Sam chuckled, saying. “I don’t feel sorry for you one bit, you masochist. Tell me you didn’t love every minute of it.”

“Wow,” protested Dean. “Rude.”

“Have you eaten?” Sam asked.

Dean bowed his back with his hands braced on the small of the arch and then he rubbed his face as he came back upright. “Yeah. We ate in the room. We’re all set. You ready? You’re up today, too.”

Sam paled. “Oh. Right. I almost forgot about that.”

“You’ll be fine, man,” Dean told him as they moved slowly to join the growing crowd in the foyer that had the Alpha at its nucleus. “You’ve done this a thousand times.”

***************

If Dean had hoped for a chance to linger at the back on his feet while the swelling dissipated a bit, he was disabused of that idea swiftly. His chair between Bobby and the Chairman of the ACRI Board was padded, but it was still a chair. He suffered through a monotonous morning of redundant drivel, all while stifling the desire to shift his ass in search of a less tender position. He received a single note from Castiel, a long strip of paper, folded once with all-capital block letters reading, “STOP FIDGETING!!!” Bobby snickered quietly as he read over Dean’s arm. Dean counted it a victory that there was only one note.

The morning waned interminably, a complete repeat of the day prior, or so it seemed to Dean, until at last the request came to allow the nominated step-ups of the ACRI Headquarters to address the joint
Boards. Jo was called first. Her nerves were evident only to those who knew her well. Jo’s vivacious passion shone beautifully, and her depth of knowledge was immediately apparent. A few of the Keller Foundational Board members threw out obscure research questions that someone in Jo’s position would have no responsibility to be versed in, but she caught the lobs and calmly tossed them back, showing herself to be both well-informed, and an agile sparring partner. Dean grinned at her with pride as she retook her seat. He could tell she was shaking, but she’d done well, and he couldn’t stop smiling. Hesitantly, her eyes shot toward the long Board table opposite and then back to Dean with a careful half-smile before dropping her eyes again and biting her lip. Dean scribbled furiously on his notepad, ripped the page off, folded it, and handed it behind him to Sam. Sam took it with a smile, passing it down the row to Jo.

Jo read the note, laughed softly, winked at Dean, then showed it to Sam. It read, “FUCK!!! That was incredible!!! Your boss must be a fuckin’ genius!!!”

Ellen was called next. And seriously, there was really no better way to gain the ACRI credibility than to have Dr. Ellen Harvelle take the podium. She already knew everyone in attendance. She wasn’t nervous in the least. She was clearly more of an expert than most of the Keller initiates themselves, and her Ozzie presentation style made her seem nonthreatening even to those on the panels who had their heels dug in against letting the ACRI take a single toehold more than was strictly necessary. Dr. Harvelle’s stature, her reputation, her presence and bearing, her institutional knowledge, and her clout all worked in Castiel’s favor, but the Alpha remained impassive while she spoke, and he didn’t address her. His only acknowledgment was a slight nod of his head as she thanked the assembled councils for the opportunity to speak to them even as his attention turned to accept a folded note from behind him. Cas nodded at the Omega, scribbled a response on the note, and handed it back without looking.

Sam was up next. If Dean didn’t know better, he would think Sam lived for moments like this. His brother was a breathtaking vision of enthusiasm and commitment. Dean couldn’t help thinking about what they’d all surmised about the crazy affectations that took over Dean when he became a public personality, and he couldn’t help comparing himself to Sam. Sam showed none of the mask-wearing tendencies Dean used to protect his more private aspects. Sam needed no masks. He was all one person with a single face. He had different moods, and he had a bestial wolf who added muscle here and there, but for Sam, they were all of a single pattern. His beta meshed with his forebrain, and his wolf fit with his beta. Sam was just Sam, and Dean found him astounding to watch, envy quickly suppressed as always.

Sam spoke of working with Sarah, and the potential that connection implied for the future. He brought up outreach possibilities that their behavior models indicated might be logical next steps in bringing the two disparate species together – outreach like offering training programs to apes who worked in public venues such as schools, clinics, and government agencies, like supplying rigorous training to primates who saw value in the Lupin style of adult discipline and had minds open enough to envision applying it to apes who were floundering without structure. Sam spoke like a visionary. He had their eyes looking into the future as if the scaffolds were already built, and the whole team was already halfway up the long climb to the top. He turned every question into a chance to think about where the answer could lead them, not where it bogged down in the moment. Sam was every bit Dean’s brilliant baby brother, and Dean forgot all about his sore backside as he found himself riveted to the beta’s imagery.

As Sam took his seat again, Dean turned and beamed at him. But before the alpha said a word, Sam whispered, “I learned it all from my big brother,” with a tight hand to Dean’s shoulder and a dismissive nod to the front where the Council chair had beckoned Billie.

Billie’s presence was a definite shift in tone over the previous three. Where Jo had been youthful
passion and enthusiasm, Ellen had been steadfast expertise, Sam had painted them all a picture of his vision and convinced everyone he knew how to get there, Billie was cold judgment. Her eyes were unyielding, and she made it clear that it was the Boards that were under examination here, not she, and that if she found them lacking, they would find themselves ruind that they’d had the gall to present themselves this morning at all. And she hadn’t said a word yet. And she was beta. And she had no reputation to speak of, or, well, no reputation that any of them could talk about publicly. They all knew her, and most of them owed her a favor or two, but no one wanted to admit just how they knew her or what the favors were for.

Dean turned slightly sideways and whispered back to Sam, “Fuck, man, are you sure you wanna work with her? I’ll bet she brings her own Gestapo.”

Sam chuckled and leaned forward to answer. “Dean, I would follow Billie anywhere. It’s a damn good thing she and Cas are headed in the same direction, because I’d probably tear myself in two trying to follow them both.”

“Huh,” Dean grunted. He frowned and focused back in to listen to the beta who drew eyes the same way Castiel did, merely through presence and charisma. Billie didn’t have a speech prepared. She answered questions succinctly. She assured the panels that her commitment to building the institutions that supported Lupins was unflagging, and that closing loopholes and cracks was her first agenda item. Mostly, Billie proved she had the presence to lead. It didn’t make much difference what she said, it was about how she said it. Putting a beta in charge of an exclusively Lupin institution was going to be a groundbreaking decision, and it didn’t take a genius to realize that doing so this morning set a precedent for the vote that would occur later in the afternoon. If the ACRI team wanted it acknowledged that a beta could be trusted to lead one half of the joint venture, then they had no footing to claim that only an alpha could head the whole shebang. There was a touch of Crowley in the demand to make the four of them stand and deliver as they had done, and for all intents and purposes, Billie had just played right into Crowley’s trap. But it had never been ACRI’s intention to suggest that Cas was the only viable option to head the whole rigamarole simply because he was Alpha. In fact, Cas planned to turn Billie’s presentation into the beginnings of a steam locomotive that couldn’t be stopped no matter what sandbags Crowley had to throw in the way.

Castiel had thought long and hard about Lupin hierarchy, about institutional stability, about Alistair and Gordon, and Victor Henrickson’s blind spots, about Jim Murphy’s assertion that building an institution that couldn’t protect itself from within made the vulnerable populations even more vulnerable. Castiel had enlisted Billie, Benny, Bobby, all of his satellite Directors, all of his Team Leads, all of his most trusted advisors, his mate, his brother, and especially Dean, in devising a new template. The points Crowley just scored off showing how suited a beta could be in running a venture as large as the ACRI would be short lived once Cas presented young Clay’s provisional bylaws. He schooled his features and barely resisted a glance down the table at Dean. Benny touched the Alpha’s thigh with his knuckles and sighed heavily, and Cas nodded very slightly. So far, so good. But they still didn’t know where Jonathon Miles fit. Castiel had forbidden any contact with him whatsoever outside of public small talk, and that meant that even Bobby had no new intel from the man. Bela hadn’t contacted anyone in days. It was a gamble, but Cas felt confident he had the measure of Jonathon, and that however he landed, they could deal. Bela, on the other hand. She was their real weakness. If Bela flipped, they had no recourse.

Billie thanked the Boards and took her seat again. More speeches followed, but Castiel’s mind was whirling ahead, and he didn’t listen to them. They would call a break soon, and then they would reconvene and vote on all the standing details save one. And then lunch. And then…

Castiel studiously avoided spending too much time with his eyes on Crowley, Bela, or Jonathon. Avoiding them entirely would send as flagrant a message as staring right at them, so he worked a
carefully random and abstract pattern as he watched everywhere at once. Benny was reading body language, and Bobby had his spies collecting overheard snippets that would be collected at the break. Cas hated that it had to go this way. What he really wanted was a chance to talk. Just talk. He wanted to present his vision, see if it aligned with theirs, try to build an alliance from people who cared about what he cared about and who would empower him to take the lead out of trust, not from being played. But his naïve days were long over. Castiel itched to touch Dean again. He reached hopelessly through his Mating-bond, but she wasn’t reachable, and it wasn’t April he needed anyway. Not right now. Cas needed someone who knew what he was feeling. He needed an alpha, a comrade, a brother-in-arms.

The break was called at last, and Castiel rose from his chair. Dean was there, and Cas’ arm wrapped around his waist intimately. The touch was informal, but the whole world knew they were a pair, and neither of them moved to make it more than a light embrace as they made the requisite small talk before they could make their escape. Dean’s primary job was to charm the uncharmable and to notice that which was meant to be unnoticeable. He steered Cas through the crowd to chat up the sourest faces in the bunch and to squirrel information from the ones who had secret agendas. And while Castiel himself had a knack for reading people in ways they weren’t aware they had broadcast, what Dean picked up was always different. The two of them operated on different frequencies where reading people was concerned. Cas could tell who people really were deep inside, and Dean could tell what they wanted. That’s as close to an explanation as they’d ever managed between them. Adding in Benny’s studied expertise on nonverbal communication and Bobby’s inexplicable knack for cherry-picking all of the above, they made a formidable spy network.

Eventually, they made their way back into the elevator and into the office suite they’d turned into a satellite ACRI Headquarters. Most of the team was already there, ravaging the snacks and kicking their feet up onto desks to let their hair down for a bit. Dean followed Castiel into the central conference room only to find himself crushed against the glass wall with his Alpha’s hand inside his slacks and kneading the bruised meat of his ass. Castiel’s breath was moist on the side of his face. “I want to fuck you right here against the glass, Pet. I want to claim your ass in front of everyone.”

Cas didn’t ask him for consent. His declaration of intent was his request for permission, and they knew one another well enough to know there would be no protest. Years and years of building trust between them, a body of work that spanned every facet of their lives together, a simply stated need, and that particular nickname invoked in that tone of voice, and they were on the same page instantly. Dean lowered his chin and canted his head to present his pulse point to the Alpha. He whimpered softly. Cas’ hands came around his waist to divest him of his slacks, and Dean let the pressure from behind him, pressing him into the glass, hold him up.

“Alpha,” he sighed.

Dean had been Claimed publicly before, but it had never happened without a clear hierarchical provocation. This was new. This was Michael. It was April. It was the next phase opening up between them that was only accessible because of their mates. Without the excuse of a provocation, this was what Dean had always needed to keep private. It was entirely Lupin in its societal entanglements, but there was nothing going on between them that could be explained away by Pack need. It was alpha-alpha kinky-as-hell public exhibition. It was an Alpha needing to display his well-trained Submissive, and a submissive needing to be seen behaving perfectly for his Dominant. One was wolf, and the other was human, both were alpha, and there was nothing in any of their research references that would fully account for why it was so fucking hot. Dean’s slacks found their way to his ankles, and the blunt head of Castiel’s spit-slick cock pressed against the swollen rim of his abused hole. Two rounds last night left him relaxed and open. Castiel pressed in with his weight holding Dean’s chest flat against the glass and his own hard cock squashed into the pane.
“Keep your eyes open, Pet. I want you to see them watch me take you. I want them to see how hard you are with an Alpha cock up your ass. It’s about time, don’t you think?” Castiel pressed in, and the burn against his rim was perfect. The press of hips and scratchy hair against the sore flesh of his ass where the lap cane left stripes this morning had Dean panting shallowly. “Answer me, Pet.”

“Yessir! It’s time!” Dean untangled his arms which had crossed in instinctive protection when he felt himself assaulted from behind and then had become trapped there. He wormed them each out to press flat palms against the glass and give himself something to push back with, not in resistance, but in order to provide stability for them both. Dean’s eyes were open, but they were cast low. Figures moved around on the other side of the glass. Nearly everyone he cared about was here with only a few notable exceptions, and he was certain he and Castiel had all their rapt attention. Cas pulled back enough to fuck back into him, and he groaned at the friction. He glanced up for a moment and caught Jo’s eye. She winked. Dean huffed and looked down again. Cas retreated and took a moment to lay another long string of saliva across his straining cock.

“Eyes up, Pet. Don’t pretend you don’t want them watching you. I built you a Pack where you would be safe to show off everything glorious that you are…” Cas thrust back in, and Dean’s eyes snapped up to take in the spectators all around him. He felt his dick slide in the smeared precum on the window. He felt every eye in the room as if it was a touch on his body, and he whined as his eyes skittered across the space, catching here and there and then moving on. “…And it’s time for you to claim your prize. Take it, Pet!” Cas fucked into him hard, punctuating his words with a fierce grunt. “Take it, beautiful! Take it all!”

Dean couldn’t breathe. The stripes on his ass would be obvious to anyone not standing directly in front of him, and the expression on his face was beyond his control. He was ramping up so fast, he was in danger of humiliating himself, but Castiel linked the fingers of his left hand into Dean’s so that their rings pressed together, and he took hold of Dean’s hair in a tight and painful grip with his right hand, forcing Dean’s head straight ahead, and Dean forgot all about the concept of humiliation. Eyes were everywhere, and he was naked before them. And Castiel, his Alpha, his Dominant, his God, told him to be good, and Dean became what he was built for. He was a conduit, and his body sang with pleasure. His eyes wild with need, Dean let go of all his reticence, all his fear, and he followed instructions, and he took what he was given. He took it all as Castiel built himself up with speed and power. What he was given was enough to make the alphas in the space cringe and the Omegas avert their eyes lest they lose control themselves. Anyone who didn’t know Castiel well learned something, and everyone but Sam got a new perspective on Dean. They were lucky the glass didn’t crack.

“Come for me, Pet.”

White streaks shot upward and fanned out across the glass to dribble in clumps back downward. Dean’s eyes never closed. He locked onto Jo as he came with a desperate whine, with a begging in his eyes, praying that she would understand, that she could still find him worth loving, that she wouldn’t be disgusted. All his fears crashed back onto him when he felt the telltale hot pulsing from within that spoke of Castiel’s release. Dean’s breathing picked up in pace, went shallow, and threatened to turn into something he couldn’t get hold of. Jo held his eye, and she took a couple of steps forward on the other side of the glass. She met Dean’s silently pleading stare with a soft smile. She shifted her eyes downward to acknowledge the copious streaks he’d left all over the glass and she assessed him with a raised brow. “Not bad,” she mouthed through the glass, and then she grinned, blew him a kiss, and winked. Slowly, as if to make a point of it, she brought her hands together in a deliberate slow-clap that was soon taken up across the vast space. Her grin went wide on her face, and she turned to bring Dean’s attention to the crowd in general. He looked around again, still pressed up against the pane and on full display. Everyone he knew, some he didn’t, even the attorneys and the lackeys were applauding and laughing happily. There wasn’t a disgusted face
in the bunch. There were more than a few couplings spread across various desks that had been swept clear of files and laptops. Dean’s ears were ringing. Castiel’s cock slipped out of his ass, and the hand released and smoothed his hair.

“I built this whole community for you, Dean. You deserve to be safe and honored for who you are. Everyone in this room is a part of our Pack, and they care about you. Where we go from here isn’t really the point, is it? Do you like it?” Castiel kissed his jaw, and Dean strained to get his lips around. “Do you like your gift? Took me a long time to get it right for you.”

“Cas.” Dean turned, smearing the mess at his waist, but needing to get his lips on Castiel right the fuck now. “It’s perfect. I love it. Love you. Thank you.”

“I would do anything for you, Dean Winchester.”

Cas found a box of tissues on the table and got Dean cleaned up and dressed even as their lips rarely separated from each other. Dean’s floating was brief but satisfying. Castiel began to wipe the window, but Billie stopped him. It turned out, apparently, that her new protégé beta attorney, who was exhausted and pushing the limits of his stamina, responded well to a firm Domme’s hand, and was more than willing to clean up after the alphas. Billie set Clay to the cleanup work, after which she set him on his knees at her feet. Cas chuckled at how well his Pack fit together and meshed as one entity, and Billie rolled her eyes and called him a sap. Her fingers moved easily through Clay’s hair though, and she couldn’t deny feeling balanced herself.

The Board members took their seats now that the conference room was open for business again. Someone brought plates of finger foods and drinks for Dean and Cas. Cas leaned over with a snow pea at his lips and whispered to Dean, “It’s good to be the king,” and then he winked. Had Dean been collecting winks today, he’d be well ahead of his quota.

“Did you know that about the lawyer?” Dean asked drowsily with an eye on the young man kneeling at Billie’s feet.

Cas spared the boy no more than a glance and then turned his attention back to business. “Of course. Although I couldn’t have predicted how well-suited he would be with Billie. That was luck.”

“Huh,” opined Dean, fighting the pull to take a quick nap.

Cas shuffled his papers, sipped his tea, and then noticed Dean and laughed. “Go on and get a nap in the breakroom. There’s a sofa in there. The Board doesn’t need you for this.”

“I’m good,” said Dean. “Wide awake and ready to plot world domination.” He blinked hard to clear his eyes from the haze that wanted to settle over them.

Cas ignored the first stirrings of the meeting starting around them, and he turned in his chair to face Dean. He leaned in close and whispered. “That was a lot to go through with no notice and virtually no aftercare. I’m still new at reading this side of you in public. My instinct is to pull rank and make you go sleep for an hour, but I want you to have full say this time because we are essentially at work, and you have a right to make the call. Dean, you are not needed for this meeting. You already know what we’re going to discuss, and what will be decided. You know I will speak for you. If you need to rest, please don’t fight it just because you think you should. I’m trusting you to make a wise decision.”

Dean’s eyes blinked sleepily and were slow to open. It really wasn’t fair. “Why aren’t you sleepy?” he asked in a whisper with a touch of petulance.
“Sex invigorates me, Dean, especially claiming public sex. This should not come as a surprise to you, as it is nothing new. What’s also not new is that the experience usually drains you. We have a long day still ahead of us. You were magnificent, and no one is going to resent you taking an hour to let yourself sleep it off.”

It was the idea of trust that decided it for Dean. If Cas sent him off, he’d have gone, but he’d grumble the whole way about being treated like a pup. His eyes just wouldn’t stay open though, and what was likely if he stayed was that he’d be snoring in his chair in a matter of minutes, and then he’d look even more foolish.

“Fine. Don’t let them do anything stupid, and wake me up before we need to go back. I want the low-down on what everyone saw in the room this morning.” Dean got up without excusing himself. Cas caught his shoulder, kissed his lips again and whispered that he was proud of him, and Dean left with a blush on his face, but a determined pride in his step.

When Dean woke up, his head was somehow already in Castiel’s lap. The Alpha had his fingernails running lightly through Dean’s hair, and his eyes were fixed in concentration on the screen of his laptop. He’d pulled one of the round breakroom tables up beside the couch.

“Hey, handsome,” said Dean sleepily.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Cas said with a private smile just for Dean.

“How’d the meeting go?” Dean sat up carefully. Sitting would be a challenge for a while, but every twinge reminded him of Cas, and that could be nothing but good.

“Exactly as expected. We’re all set for the vote. Everyone’s onboard.”

Dean smiled and shook his head slightly in chagrin. “Your little display notwithstanding, I’m sure.”

Cas chuckled and typed a little into his memo. “A little posturing goes a long way with this crowd, Dean. As I said, sometimes it’s good to be the king.”

“Yeah well, you’re welcome, your majesty.”

Cas chuckled smugly again. “How are you feeling?”

“Physically? Well-used and sore. Emotionally? Surreal as hell. Did that really happen?”

“You were magnificent, Dean. You’re a Dominant’s wet dream, and every Dom in the room is jealous of me. I need to watch my back from here on out.”

“Bullshit,” scoffed Dean. “No one’s gonna challenge you.”

“That’s true,” said the smug bastard with a quick clench of his fist in Dean’s hair that had the alpha wincing.

“Where is everyone?” Dean asked, looking around. “Oh. You kicked them out of the breakroom?” Behind him, in the common space on the wide floor, the team appeared all to be present and accounted for, going about their business.
“Everyone found somewhere else to be once you fell asleep,” Cas explained. “No one wanted to disturb you.”

Dean scoffed again and rubbed his eyes. “It’s good to be the queen, I guess.”

“Queens are women, my love,” Cas explained patiently. “You’re no woman.”

“Dork.”

“I checked in with home. Things appear to be calm. I spoke to Maureen. She said they’re napping. I don’t know about yours, but my link feels duller than I expected it to be from here. Maybe it’s because April’s working on her music, and that pulls her into her front brain. She’s been texting regularly though, just like I asked her to.”

Dean checked his phone and found three nondescript texts from Michael. He appeared to be bored. Seeking down the length of the bonds told him little. If Michael was sleeping, he might not get much from this distance. “We’ll call them later. Let’s let them chill for now. We need to focus on the next few hours. I don’t care how much you claim it doesn’t matter how it goes, I know you, Alpha. You’re itching to get your hands on the whole package.”

“Yes, and no,” Cas admitted. “If I was confident that someone who shares our vision and was competent to guide the venture in that direction was at the wheel, I wouldn’t much care that it wasn’t me.”

“So, now that it looks to be between you and Miles?”

“We win either way,” Cas confirmed. “He’s no puppet, and his only weakness is inexperience. We could work with that without any real issue. At the end of the day, only people matter, Dean.”

“So then,” Dean studied his hands. “Did you mean what you said to me back there?”

Cas reached over and pulled Dean’s chin gently until he gained Dean’s eyes. “You mean just after I had my penis buried up your ass, and I commanded you to come all over the window in front of everyone?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s when I’m talking about. God, you’re a conceited dork. Did you mean it?”

“If you can still doubt that, then I’ve not made myself clear.” Cas had that look in his eyes, the one that saw straight through to Dean’s splintered soul. “I fell in love with you before you ever knew my name, Winchester, and I started building all this from that day to make the world safe for you, to kill all the demons that make you afraid, all the ones inside you and outside as well. EVERYTHING is for you. My only regret is being too cowardly to claim you before I Mated. In the end, it’s absurd to imagine that a mere Mating-bond could stand between us.”

“Jesus, the things that come out of your mouth.”

“It’s simple truth, Dean,” said Cas, as if it were of no moment. Cas hit enter on his memo and closed his laptop. “Come on. Let’s get everyone together and get our game plan laid down. We’re nearly through, and then we can get to work bringing it all together.”

Dean stumbled groggily to his feet with plans that included heavily overcaffeinated coffee. “Yeah, well, Gabe’s in there somewhere in your ‘simple truth’ too, babe. You don’t have to sell me the bridge. I’m already halfway across the fucker.”

“You really don’t get it, do you, Dean?” Cas had his head cocked in adorable consternation. “Before
I watched you floundering as a young student, I believed the world was perfectly crafted for everyone but Omegas. You and your struggles opened my eyes to how rampant, how pervasive, the problems we face really are. It was then that I realized I lost my father to the same issues that take our Omegas. You widened my scope. I went into research to try to understand how to help Gabriel. That’s true. But I built The Facility for you. I wanted to give you an oasis. That’s why our hiring practices are so rigorous. No one signs on who isn’t right for our Pack. No one who might make the place feel unsafe for you gets a badge.”

Cas stepped forward and touched Dean’s shoulder, directly over his healing bite wound. His eyes were beacon bright. His voice was quiet but intense. “It’s all for you, Dean Winchester. Everyone else, including me, gets to take advantage of the fact that it’s there and that it can provide sanctuary for thousands of others who are floundering. But at its heart, in its soul, it’s all for you.”

“You did all that without knowing I’m in love with you, too,” Dean said to those blue eyes.

Cas nodded. Crinkles of soft affection touched the skin of his eyes. “It wasn’t a bribe.”

“And taking over the KF?” Dean continued the line of reasoning. “More of the same?”

“Look at it like this…You’re a perfect representation of the complexity of the Lupine condition. We’re all different, but an institution that is predicated on serving your needs is going to be suitable for just about everyone else as well. Think of it as injecting the spirit of the Righteous Man into everything we touch. We can’t go wrong by doing that.”

“ ’M not righteous, C.J. I’m just human, like everyone else.”

“We’re going to have to agree to disagree about that, alpha. I’m not claiming you’re perfect. I’m saying that you are the heart and soul of our enterprise and following your guidance will lead us out of the fog every time.”

“I’m a dilithium crystal.” Dean pulled himself into a hug and held there. Cas smelled so Alpha, Dean could get lost if he had more time.

“I don’t understand that reference.”


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And suddenly there was nothing left to conquer but the big one. Crowley oozed around smug as anything, certain in his victory, while Castiel circulated with an understated demeanor. The ACRI Board conceded to a few points they had hoped to win, but they gave away nothing they couldn’t live without. Lunch was a massive joint affair, and the schmoozing was cranked up to eleven. Dean was in his element. Even Benny socialized. All the votes for finalizing the agenda had been accounted for, and the three swings would mean everything. Consequently, those three Board members barely got a chance to eat with all the visitors they hosted at their tables. Cas sipped hot tea and watched from a distance, as did Jonathon. And when Jonathon caught Cas’ eye across the dining room and nodded in polite deference, Cas nodded back. Politeness meant nothing in terms of alliance. Cas wasn’t naïve enough to believe it was anything but professional courtesy. He longed to cut through all the bullshit and stride across and just talk to the man.
They assembled back in the huge meeting space after lunch with nothing remaining on the agenda except to agree upon an Operational Director. For this to be the sticking point might seem absurd to an outsider, but it was the O.D. who selected the direction and steered the ship. The O.D. was everything.

“Welcome back,” greeted Crowley, taking the podium and opening the afternoon session in his position as Chairman of the Foundational Board. “We are, as you all know, down to one item on the agenda before we all agree and sign on the dotted line. It’s been voted and agreed by each party that the two institutions may each nominate one candidate for the Operational Director position, and each institution has indicated that they are prepared to do so. As this is a crucial role in the function of this joint establishment from its very inception, it will be incumbent upon each candidate to stand before this combined body and make their cases as well as they are able. With that as your introduction to the proceedings, I now call on the American Caniforme Research Institute to render their nominee and to ask said nominee to come forward and address the joint Boards.”

There was a stir among the ACRI contingent. Crowley was making Cas stand and speak before learning for sure who his opponent was. That was unheard of. It was scandalous. Cas raised a palm to calm his group, and he nodded serenely to Ellen. She nodded back and approached the podium.

“Thank you, beta Crowley. We are prepared to do so.” Crowley stepped back and gave her the microphone, smirking. “As has been stated and should be understood at this point,” said Ellen confidently. “The choice of Director is no inconsequential matter. We at the ACRI, as a cooperative enterprise, have agreed that should this assembled body find itself incapable of coming to consensus on the naming of the Director, that we feel no qualms about shelving the endeavor of merging our two institutions for the time being. Neither of our great houses are in such condition that a weak selection should be allowed to stand. In that light, we have selected carefully a candidate whom we are confident can, not simply succeed in the venture before us, but who has the wherewithal to emblazon a new order for the likes of people like me. My name is Dr. Ellen Harvelle. I am Omega-Submissive. I am by nature, by societal rank, and by the assumption of millions, no more than a birthing vessel. And yet, I stand before you a verified, valued member of the leadership team of the ACRI, a Board-Certified physician, and a Research Fellow with the NLS. One man, and one man alone, paved the way for me to meet the potential that few but he thought me capable of attaining. That man is our nominee for Operational Director of the merged joint institution of both the Keller Foundation and the ACRI, and that man is Alpha Dr. Castiel Winchester.”

Ellen stepped back and gestured toward him, and most of the room erupted in applause. Cas smiled at her, slowly stood, buttoning his suit jacket, and paced his way solemnly to the front. He was every step an Alpha, and no one was immune to the pull. That fact alone was a vulnerability, and Cas would be the first to admit it. Selecting leaders based upon charisma alone could be disastrous to an organization. Dean’s heart picked up to a mile a minute, but Castiel looked calm. He looked to be at home, and Dean was thrown back to years ago, to the first time he realized how at home Cas seemed no matter where he was. That was all Alpha. That was the part of Cas that wielded power enough to hold a monster’s leash and never worry that his strength might flag.

He was beautiful.

“Thank you, Ellen. You did most of the paving work yourself, and we’re lucky you selected to apply your considerable skills on our behalf.” She scoffed quietly and gave him a quick hug before sliding out of his way. Castiel stood quietly for a few moments, looking about the room and getting his bearings. He was in no hurry. What was it April had said? Talented candidates are worth waiting for. That little nugget had stuck with him, and he used it. At last, he squared himself and greeted the assembly. His voice wasn’t quite what they were expecting. It wasn’t booming or commanding. It was simple. Straightforward. Finally, after all the play, he had a chance simply to talk to them.
“My father, Zachariah, was a powerful and wealthy man. He rated extremely high on the Keller scale. Many of you will remember him as the highest-ranking Alpha of his day. Many of you knew him, studied what he allowed to be shared of his readings, wondered years ago how a man like that might fare as he aged. Many of you know that he did not fare well. But that was long ago, wasn’t it? What Zachariah Novak faced was an insurmountable wall of societal expectation that clashed with his insatiable need. He was born into a life of civility, religious dogma, and proper conduct. He was tied hand and foot into the prison of Primate society, all the while housing an inconsolable beast in his breast. He had no outlet, and the beast consumed him. Had my father been one iota less the Alpha that he was, he would have exploded rather than imploded, and he would have taken vast tracts and potentially hundreds of innocents with him. As it was, he left only three of us behind to mourn him. He destroyed only himself. In that day, so long ago and only yesterday, the choice he made was the only viable option. My father died an honorable man, one might say a hero, were one to look closely into the matter.

“The day my father died was the day I was born in many ways. Certainly, that day as the news spread across Lawrence and the surrounding states, that day marked the single fiercest battle I’ve ever faced with the beast within my own breast. There is not an individual in this room who is unfamiliar with the degree of power the monster I carry inside me is capable of wielding. And I say this as clearly as I can, so that all must hear me: we CANNOT return to the society of Primate assimilation that destroyed Zachariah. We cannot turn our backs on the progress we’ve made. People like me depend wholesale on stepping forward every day as a unified Pack into the wilderness we still know so little about. We have so much yet to learn, and it will take the combined efforts of all of us to carve a space in that wilderness to reclaim a homeland for our Pack.

“You wonder, I imagine, why does this man, this Alpha, seek such a position, and where does he plan to go from here? You’ve heard, perhaps, that my intentions are self-serving. You won’t be surprised to hear that they most assuredly ARE self-serving. I am not a meek man, nor am I skittish or shallow. I want a great deal from this enterprise, and I plan to see it all through. My vision is, as it has always been, far greater in scope than I can begin to traverse by myself. However, together, all of us rowing in a single direction, with a firm hand on the rudder, we will chart a way through, and we will map the course for others to follow. What’s my vision? World domination?” Cas laughed a little at that and people laughed with him. “My vision is so much simpler than that. It is to have a chance to raise a family from my home without fearing that my Omega packmates will not be safe on the street. My vision is that should my progeny or yours include an alpha-Dominant of such power and scope that the charts must be redrawn again, that she or he has the support to find a way through the terrifying adolescence that comes with such a ranking without self-destructing. My vision is that we may learn to identify and protect the possibly thousands or tens of thousands of Omega-Dominants who die at Presentation without ever being marked or noted.

“Come with me, I beg you. I ask because I will not compel. I am not the Alpha of the aboriginal tribes who fall gracefully into their birthright with no thought to the humanity of others. I am not the Alpha of our previous generation who endeavored to stuff a larger presence into a too-small box. But make no mistake, I am Alpha, and I mean to use MY birthright in this single moment in time, in a way that we must never allow again. Where we stand at this singular moment defines us all. From this moment, from this decision, our future path is chosen. Behind us, slavery to hierarchy, to the instincts of our guts. Behind us, anarchy and denial, the refusal to be the noble creatures we were born to be. Ahead of us? More of the same? No! Picture with me if you will: in the home, a strong and stable Pack that soothes our instinctive need for hierarchy. We are who we are, and to deny it is folly. We must abandon the farce of nuclear families and lone wolves. Down that road is nothing but disaster. Only sizable, stable Packs can give us the support we need to flourish. All of us, living as we were meant to live, as we MUST live! Each of us true to our natures, each of us smoothing the rough edges of our packmates in their weakness as they smooth ours. And outside of the home,
when we have been cared for, grounded and supported, held and coddled, spanked and fucked, and loved and nurtured, outside the home we must be capable of releasing it all. My vision imagines an Ozzie named CEO of Goldman Sachs, a beta winning the Oscar for Best Film, an alpha teaching Primate Kindergarten – everyone free of the trappings of instinctive mandate, free to pursue their life’s work independent of Lupin shackles. We are halfway there. Imagine this with me! Imagine the world our great grandparents hoped for, where all people are judged by their capacities and their abilities, not by their genitals or their predispositions.”

Castiel’s eyes glowed red, but it was the fervor in his voice that captivated the audience. “They were so very wrong, our great grandparents, and yet they were so hopeful. We can still achieve what they wanted for us. It will take years and years of research, of legislation, of outreach, and retraining. We have forgotten who we are in our rush to be apes, and we cannot go back to what we were. Let’s, then, go forward. Forward is a single direction, and the only way to achieve momentum in a single direction is to have a common goal. If you believe in the vision I seek, then I ask for your trust that I have the means to take us there.”

Cas motioned to Clay, and the beta slipped out of his chair on the end of the long table and carried a thick pile of glossy binders with him. He began to hand them out to the Board members. Cas continued. “Pompous words without specifics are useless. My fiancé taught me that. It’s in the details, he told me. He also told me I speak like an elf from Middle-earth. For that, I apologize. Before you, I submit my navigational chart. I’ve described where we must go from where we are. This is how we’re going to get there. I’ve laid out intricate schedules for legislation, for new university coursework, for assistance in new pack establishment, for embedding Lupin matters with full support into every public works administration. In addition, you’ll see we’ve proposed substantial amendments to the Keller Foundational bylaws. These provisions are already underway at ACRI, but of course, we have no authority to alter the bylaws of the KF unless the merger is approved. I won’t read it all to you, but here are the highlights.”

Cas gave them all a moment to flip through the binders. “I ask for your vote, and I ask for the bylaws to be adopted as submitted. Once named as O.D., a term limit of five years will be in effect. At the end of five years, with a provision for a ‘Vote of No Confidence’ at any two-thirds Board initiative, the Operational Director is prohibited from running again, and that provision includes the forfeiture of the outgoing O.D.’s Operational Board seat. At that point, two important provisions become immediately active. The first is that the O.D. may stand for election to the Foundational Board of Directors to a term limit of an additional five years. The second is that, in replacing the O.D., only individuals of an alternate Secondary Designation may stand for election. These provisions provide two safeguards that are currently lacking. One is to see to full turnover of institutional power at a maximum of every ten years. For those of you who fear that my goal is both institutional and world domination, you’ll find the bylaws are ironclad. Even if you don’t trust me, I have ten years, and then I’m forced out whether I want to go or not. The second is to ensure that alpha dominance is not allowed to infest the very fiber of this great institution. We WILL be stronger as an institution, if we enforce diversity of leadership. This is not negotiable, and as I said, we’re only halfway there. I expect to need to pull Alpha rank to enforce a change of culture over the next few years but, change it will.”

Cas paused to let that sink in, then he highlighted it for anyone who was thinking slowly. “Ironic, I know, but we are in transition as a people, and change is difficult.”

He paused again and watched them frown and scratch their beards. This wasn’t what Crowley led them to expect from him. Crowley was whispering furiously into Bela’s ear, and she was scribbling notes. Jonathon sat calmly with his hands folded before him on the table, the very picture of invested fascination.
“Next, the proposed bylaws call for the creation of an oversight body made up entirely of Omega professionals. We propose a committee of thirteen Omega individuals to investigate internal matters, significant client complaints, and indeed, even oversight into the decisions of the Chairmen of the Boards and the sitting Directors as well, and we propose this body be granted full termination authority. Seats on this committee will be tenured and irrevocable for life, although confirmation of these nominees can be expected to be a thorough process. I don’t advise naming anyone to this committee who isn’t qualified by academic, industrial, and personal stability standards. It’s time we gave Omegas the voice they deserve.”

Castiel paused again, and he glanced at Dean whose face was so proud he looked like he might pop a button or two.

“I have only a couple of personal conditions,” Cas said into the studious flipping of pages and muttering. Nearly every head popped up. “I will not unsettle my family. If that means frequent trips to Dayton, so be it. I would happily entertain the notion of a remote headquarters that floats among the various installations, but I will remain personally headquartered in Lawrence. The final caveat is that I require a strong and opinionated hand directing the Foundational Board. If I may direct your attention to the penultimate page, you will find a proposed inaugural staff including all Board members, both for the Operational and Foundational Boards, all Leadership positions at each installation and satellite, and initial nominees for the various committees.” Pages flipped and murmuring increased. Cas raised his volume and spoke over the noise. “Every name on that list is negotiable except the original owners of the ACRI, who maintain their ownership rights despite the outcome here today, the Director of Operations, whom I hope after the vote will be me, and the Chairman of the Foundational Board, who I demand remain seated by Fergus Crowley. As I said, this is not negotiable. If Crowley goes, I go. If I stay, he stays, for the full five-year term. It is imperative that you understand that prior to voting.”

The Boards went into immediate noisy chaos. Crowley stood motionless by his chair, his jaw on his chest staring at Castiel as if he’d never seen him before. Bela was tapping frantically into her phone and muttering to herself. Cas watched Jonathon peel a single page off his notepad, fold it, and slide it to Crowley without ever looking at the man. Jonathon’s eyes never left Cas.

“Now wait just a goddamned…!” managed Crowley before Cas calmly interrupted him.

“And with that, I thank you for your attention and your consideration, and I leave the decision in your hands. Good day, ladies and gentlemen.”

Cas sauntered back to his seat where his side of the room sat considerably calmer than the opposite side which was in an uproar. Crowley had collected himself, pocketed whatever Jonathon slid under his fingertips without opening it, and was shushing his team. Benny leaned in. “It’s in their hands now, boss. I hope you and Dean know what you’re doing.”

“They all know me, Benny. They’ll remember.”

“I’m just not feeling the Crowley thing. It’s like taking a snake by the tail.”

“Crowley’s good at what he does. He just needs some rules and a strong hand to enforce them,” Cas whispered back.

“Yeah, well, it’s not gonna be MY hand, I can promise you that. I’ll cash out and quit before I spank his naked bum.” Benny sat back up as Crowley retook the podium. The room quieted for him, many of them wondering if he’d been playing both sides all along.

“Thank you, Alpha. It’s always a surprise, isn’t it? I’m speechless. Frankly, I don’t have an answer
for you right now, and that may complicate the vote a bit. In my world, I’ve found everything’s negotiable, but we can discuss that later. For now, let’s move on. I’m honored, truly, to introduce the nominee for Operational Director from the Keller Foundation. This is a man who has no equal among his colleagues. He is uniquely untarnished by scandal or innuendo. His work and his reputation speak for themselves, but I’ll let his words speak as well. Please welcome, beta Keller initiate, Operational Board member, and Operational Director of the Dayton Facility of this great and storied institution, Jonathon Miles.”

Crowley applauded his own words enthusiastically, and the response from the gallery was more than polite. Jonathon was popular and trusted. It wouldn’t have gone unnoticed that Cas’ inaugural plan left him in all of his current roles and also named him to the Omega Confirmation Board. Jonathon himself looked distracted, still seated and speaking to someone behind him. He turned around, straightened his jacket, then stood slowly and spoke loudly. “With all appropriate respect and gravity, I decline the Keller Foundation’s nomination. Thank you for your consideration.” Jonathon sat back down and turned immediately back into his conversation as if being nominated was a mere interruption in something more important. Dean’s eyes were on Bela. She had set her phone down, but at Jonathon’s words, she punched a few keys and then focused on Crowley, who was slack-jawed once again, staring at Miles, clearly hoping his head would explode. Most of that side of the room was in complete disarray. Cries of tampering and interference came across, but Dean ignored them. There’d been no tampering. He was sure of that. Well, sure, Bela was a plant, but she had clear instructions to do her utmost to make Crowley successful, such as she was able. It wasn’t Bela’s fault, nor Dean’s, if they could read him well enough to know he wouldn’t want to win her way.

No, Dean watched Bela text Crowley, and then he watched Crowley surreptitiously check his phone, frown, and then seem to remember the note he’d stuck in his pocket. Crowley cast a quick look around the room, stepped away from the microphone as if gathering his thoughts, and pulled out the note. Dean watched him pale visibly and look in horrified disbelief at Jonathon. Dean followed his gaze. Jonathon raised his water glass in salute, nodded his head at Crowley, and left the table. He disappeared out the double doors alone, and Crowley still looked flummoxed, but he’d turned his disbelief on Bela. Dean watched Bela shrug at her new boss.

“D’ju catch all that?” Bobby asked Dean quietly.

“What the fuck did I just see?” Dean asked, baffled.

“That, son, was checkmate by our good friend Jonathon Miles.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Well, we’ll know for sure soon, but I have a good guess if you wanna hear it.” Bobby looked at Dean, and Dean gave Bobby an exasperated look. “Keep your shirt on, pup. The next thing that’s gonna happen, if Crowley hasn’t swallowed his tongue, is they’ll call for a recess so each of the three Boards can meet privately to discuss the options. Keller will get a chance to name an alternate nominee, but they don’t have one, and everyone knows it. They’ll confront Crowley and make him decide on the proposal. If he says no, his deal falls apart, he walks away a loser, and he won’t get his big bonus or another gig with anyone else. If he says yes, he’s tied, kit and caboodle, to Cas for the next five years, and Cas has more power in this deal than Crowley does. Alpha just made that beta his bitch. Crowley’s also going to say yes, because if he doesn’t, he’s going to prison.”

“What!?? When did prison come up?” Dean tried to modulate his volume, but the first word was pretty fucking loud.

Bobby laughed and shot a careful look around the room. The discussions had broken up into little
groups. Bela was getting an earful from Crowley, but she didn’t look worried. “That note Crowley had in his pocket. Did you see where he got it?”

“Miles gave it to him.”

“That’s right. Good eyes, pup. I’ll make a spy out of you yet. Miles gave it to him only as Cas was wrapping up his speech. Crowley has no way of knowing when Jonathon came to the decision he did, but he knows that Miles was willing to let him show his whole hand before making a move. I sent Bela up to Dayton with Crowley’s exact total for taxes in arrears, something the IRS doesn’t even know yet, seeing as how the IRS doesn’t yet know about the hidden offshore accounts. He owes a right chunk of change for income he never disclosed to the government. It’s a very specific amount, and it’s not a number anyone’s likely to come up with randomly. I told Bela that if Crowley wants to work with Cas, he has to come clean and pay his tax bill in full, and I told her what the total bill, with fines and fees, was going to come to.”

“What the fuck was on that paper?” asked Dean leaning even closer.

Bobby chuckled again. “My guess is that Jonathon Miles offered Crowley a signing bonus to say yes to Castiel’s proposal – a bonus in the exact amount that he owes the IRS.”

Dean whistled as the implications came clear. Jonathon had been a player from the start, and he’d probably gotten everything he wanted.

Bobby continued. “I don’t know if Miles has the juice to come through with cash like that, but at this point, nothing that man does would surprise me.”

“How did he know? Bela told him,” Dean concluded. “They were working together.”

“Looks like it, although that didn’t come from us. She did that on her own.” Bobby watched the pair squabble on the far side of the room. Bela looked as if she’d about had enough of Crowley, whereas he looked to be just ramping up. His voice was beginning to carry.

“What happens to Bela now?” asked Dean.

“What do you mean?” Bobby shot back. “It was your idea in the first place!”

“I didn’t hear what you promised her. I wasn’t there, remember?”

“She’s got her pick of Facilities from the whole gamut, ACRI or Keller, assuming it still goes through.”

“And Jonathon?”

“We wait and see what he asks for,” Bobby said fatalistically. “Cas will want him taken care of, but you need to talk him out of any grand gestures that smack of collusion. It’s not going to matter that he played this straight if it LOOKS like he took a payout to yield in the end. Truth is, I expect Jonathon’s just going to be happy to get back to work. He’ll have had enough of this nonsense, if I know that beta, and I do.”

Dean nodded and sat back in his seat, then flinched and shifted forward onto his thighs again. He wasn’t as surprised by the revelations as he seemed. He had most of the puzzle figured already, with just a couple of missing pieces. He’d known about the tax evasion, and he’d known Bobby would find a way to use it, but this was a method he hadn’t considered. Dean looked down the row. Cas was gone. The podium stood abandoned. People were up and moving, some leaving, some just milling about. Sam leaned over Dean’s chair, and Benny was right behind him.
“Tell me we don’t work for Crowley,” Sam demanded, looking stunned.

Dean smiled at him. “We don’t work for Crowley, Sam. The rewrite on the bylaws strips the Foundational Board of nearly all its power except fundraising and some oversight. For the oversight, they have to go through the Omegas. Crowley will be doing some reporting on our activities, but the most he can do if he sees something he doesn’t like is tattle on us to the Omega Committee. He’ll be spending the next five years as head of the Booster Club.”

“That’s assuming no one proposes any changes to the bylaws,” said Sam.

Benny stepped up and answered. “True, but Cas already has his lines drawn in the sand. He’s shown we’ll walk away if we don’t like what they propose. They’re convening their Boards right now, and I suspect they’re not going to be happy with Crowley. Virtually everything he told them about Cas was a lie, and this bylaw proposal proves it. Plus, it’s now in his best interest to throw all his weight behind Cas. If Cas loses the vote, Crowley loses everything. They have no loyalty to Crowley, and a lot of them know Cas personally.”

“What about the new members who only have their seats on the Board because Crowley put them there?” Sam contended.

“Sam,” said Bobby patiently. “Crowley is VERY good at his job. He wanted a win here. He wanted to piece together a strong, stable Keller that he could show off on his resume. He never intended to get mired down in it for years, but he couldn’t move on to a new project if he didn’t succeed at his last one. That’s how it works in his line of work. One real failure would ruin him. He spent the first few months of all this rooting out the corrupt players. He fired everyone who had a hand in the till or showed signs of ladder-climbing at the expense of the clientele, and those who are left are the passionate lifers like Jonathon. They may value their new Board seats, but they don’t feel undue loyalty to the man who put them there. Those folks earned their seats fair and square, and they’ll expect Crowley to do his part or get out.”

“So…this is a win? A total win?” Sam asked hesitantly.

“We haven’t voted yet,” Benny reminded him. “But it will be. And next time we do something big like this, you’ll be on the inside. Sorry bout cutting you out, Sam.” Benny looked around. The room was emptying quickly. Their own Board members were gone. “Let’s go see what the old farts have to say.”

The vote was anticlimactic in the end. No one had any alterations to suggest nor any questions, despite the limited time they had to peruse the proposal. Castiel pulled Clay aside and thanked him for the diligent attention to detail that let the proposal stand as written. Attorneys on the Keller side scoured it rapidly but couldn’t find anything wrong with it. They pointed out the new rights and powers granted to the Foundational Board, but no one protested the new limitations. Crowley accepted the terms. He could run the numbers himself, and there was an unstated extortion in making it known that his IRS troubles were no longer his own private affair. Explaining why the amount of his signing bonus was significant would mean disclosing why the amount was significant. It was such a Bobby solution, but the alpha swore up and down it had been all Bela.

In the end, considering Cas’ chief naysayer had joined his team, and his only rival had refused to run
against him, Cas won the vote unanimously. And then the final merger vote was a no brainer. And then it was over. Before they knew it, Dean was tying Castiel’s bowtie, and Cas was clipping Dean into his cummerbund. Their phones never stopped buzzing. Cas had four meetings arranged before lunch in the morning, and they had an interview later tonight. Cas was still on the hook to fly to Washington D.C. for “Meet the Press,” as Billie had demanded, and their heads were spinning.

“We did it,” Cas told his fiancé before they left for the formal dinner. “Is this really what you wanted?”

“It’s a little late to be asking that now, man,” Dean pointed out with a soft kiss.

“We’re not moving to Ohio, Dean. I mean it.”

“Relax, Alpha. There’s these cool gadgets called computers. You will have to come here sometimes, but you can do a whole lot remotely. Oh, and I talked to Jeannie, the head of the retraining council for the new Keller charts. She’s going to come to US for the teach-back seminar. She said she can bring everything we need, update all of our modules, and retrain the whole staff. She even said she and her group can mine through ALL of our documents and change everything that needs changing. We need to do that anyway to get all the policies and procedures aligned. You hear me, Alpha? I’m off the hook! I have a staff now that can do all the documentation FOR me! Holy shit, this is great!”

“I’m happy for you, Dean,” chuckled Cas. “But you know this change is going to make everything harder for us, not easier. We have a bigger staff because we have a much wider scope.”

“You’ve got everything you need now, baby,” Dean told him seductively. “Get out there and change the world for me.”

“I’ll do that,” said Cas, moving in for a kiss that messed up Dean’s carefully gelled hair. “And when we get home, we’re getting a dog.”

“Not a Springer Spaniel, Alpha.”

“I don’t care what we get, Dean. It’s April’s dog. She’s the one you need to convince.”

The formal was really quite a lot of fun now that the unknowns were all known. The Winchesters shared a table with Miles after dinner, and he turned out to be much less stodgy with a few drinks in him. Also, he was free to talk, and that lightened him right up.

“I expected you folks to call me at some point, but after I talked to Donna that one time…nothing. I was beginning to take it personally,” Jonathon said cheerily into his drink.

“You know we couldn’t do that,” Cas reminded him. “Still, you would have made a fine Director.”

Jonathon scoffed rudely. “Nah! Maybe someday…someday way in the distant future. I got pups to raise. I’m in no hurry, guys. Thanks for taking that off my hands. I almost thought I might get roped into it by default with some of the spin Crowley was turning out.”

“So, uh, it’s killing me, man,” Dean said leaning in close. “What did you give Crowley that turned him green?”

Jonathon laughed. “You know, it’s funny. He told me when he came to town not to trust anyone and
to make sure I get some dirt on anyone I might want anything from. I think he saw himself as my mentor. He said everyone’s hiding something. It’s just a matter of finding out what it is. Said he was going to take me under his wing and teach me the ropes.”

“Did he now?” asked Castiel.

“Yep. I guess I’m a good student.”

“And you dug something up on your own?” prompted Dean.

“Oh, heaven’s no! I wouldn’t know where to start. It’s that beta woman who trails after him with the high spiked heels. Turns out, she knows a few things she was happy to share with me.”

“How much is Fergus Crowley’s signing bonus going to set us back, beta?” Cas asked in his Alpha voice.

Jonathon looked at him and sat up a little straighter. “It’s not my call, Sir, but if you could find $172,342 in the budget somewhere, it might smooth his transition a bit.”

“Holy fuck!!” shouted Dean.

Jonathon smiled and rested his head in his hands on the table. “It seems like a small price to pay to bring an end to the witch hunts and the constant bullshit. I’d pay it myself if I had the cash.”

Cas shook his head sadly. “I will speak to Crowley myself. We cannot condone fraud from our Chairman of the Board. And no, the budget doesn’t have room for a signing bonus of that size. I feel sure an alternate solution can be reached, one that puts the onus of paying his debts on the man himself, and not on the institution which has decided not to fire him outright.”

“Another project, Alpha? Like Clay?”

“Some people just need a mentor, Dean.”

“Oh, I’m going to like you two,” stated Jonathon suddenly, holding his glass out for a toast. “Thank the Wise and Infinite Universe, at last we’re delivered.”

“Was it really that bad,” asked Dean.

Jonathon pressed his lips together. He took a drink. He looked around and nodded at a colleague. “Um, well. It’s been quite a ride. We have big hopes, alpha. You folks are stepping into a great pool of hard working professionals who are all about three days away from throwing in the towel. Everyone’s been holding their breath. Today needed to happen the way it happened. And don’t get me wrong, we never lost our stripes out there in the trenches, but it’s been the grunts holding things together for so long now, they aren’t going to know how to let go. Everyone’s exhausted and burned out. They need to be seen and acknowledged and honored. They need to be supported with real resources, and they need to be reassured they aren’t about to be replaced.”

Jonathon’s eyes went flinty, and Dean paid close attention. He leaned in. “What do you need first?”

“First? First, we need more staff, so these guys can have more than one day off a week.”

“That’s what I thought!” said Jo, slipping into the chair beside Castiel. “You dorks are talking shop, aren’t you? This is a party, boys! Go play, eat, drink, dance, fuck! Shut up about work for one fucking night and enjoy yourselves.” She stole Castiel’s drink and drained it.
“Joanna Beth,” said Cas sternly, swiping his tumbler back from her. “Come with me.” He stood up and strode away in a huff, and Jo’s eyes went wide.

“What? Oh, shit. Wait! Alpha, I’m sorry.” She got up and skipped after him, trying to catch up without pissing him off further.

Dean laughed in outright glee. “God, I’d love to see him strap that chick!”

“What’s going on?” asked Jonathon.

Dean snickered. “Nothing. He’s just scaring her. He’s headed for the bar for a new drink.”

“Who was that?” Jonathon’s eyes were still wide.

“Oh, brother, you’re in for a whole new lifestyle. You’re gonna have to lighten up. That Alpha doesn’t do well with a really straight-laced team. That woman was my assistant, Jo Harvelle. She was there today, you remember, right? You asked her a question, man.”

“Oh, yeah, fuck, right. I remember now.”

“Aha! He DOES swear. Dude, have another drink.”

Jonathon smiled tiredly. “Man, Winchester, you have no idea. Just tell me truthfully. Is he for real? Crowley convinced half the Board that he’s a creep lying in wait to unleash devastation on us all, and that given half a chance his whole team is ready to crawl across to spill all his darkest secrets. I’ve never seen any sign of that in all the times I worked near him, but…”

Dean laughed. “You know I’m engaged to the guy. I mean, what’s the chance I’m gonna tell you he’s an asshole? But, seriously, see for yourself.” Dean pointed out onto the dancefloor where Cas was surrounded by women all pressing into him as he danced outrageously with his fresh drink raised high above his head. He was laughing and clutching Jo to his chest quite inappropriately. But she was laughing hard enough that her breathing had become little more than a gasp. “He’s got a dark side, man. I’m not gonna lie, and you’ve been in the business long enough to know a man like him isn’t all sunshine and roses, but it’s not anything like Crowley’s been telling folks. His passion is just as real as yours is, Jonathon. I think if you folks have been holding your breath, what you’re waiting for has just arrived, and you should get out there and celebrate. Come on, buddy. Come dance.”

Jonathon chuckled, but he demurred politely. “Go on, Dean. I’ll watch. I wanted to say thanks though. Thanks for taking us seriously. This is going to be a good thing for all of us.”

Dean stood and walked backward pointing at Jonathon. “You missed a great spot for a Casablanca reference just then, but you’ll learn, man.” Turning, Dean increased his volume. “Castiel James! Why the fuck are you letting all those women rub their asses on you?! You belong to ME, you asshole!”

Chapter End Notes

For those of you hoping for a big Crowley crushing...I'm a bit of a sadist myself sometimes. He's gonna suffer so much in this organization. Hehehe.

It may be a while before I get more posted, but these two chapters have some meat you
can chew in the meantime.
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

Dean struggles to get to sleep. April and Michael drop their facades. Maureen is more astute than she looks.

Chapter Notes

Way longer wait than usual. It's been nearly a month, but this one really fought me. Plus, I had a rough few weeks. It took a lot out of me. Some weeks do that.

The interwebs tell me that today is International Kissing Day. That's good. Happy IKD! Go kiss someone, even if they walk on four legs.

This is an April-centric chapter. She's my toughest character to write. I played with this until it about drove me crazy, but eventually, I have to cut it loose and throw it out there. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NOW:

“Tessa wants to try hypnosis on me,” Dean said softly into the darkness in front of his pillow. They
weren’t sleeping. Neither of them were having any luck falling asleep after the whirlwind day of meeting the new associates and trying to figure out where to start in bringing two such different cultures together. Legally, they still had several weeks before the two institutions became one, but they didn’t have a moment to lose, and there was so much to accomplish. Castiel worried that Dean might crash soon if he didn’t get some rest, but there wasn’t a lot they could do that they hadn’t tried already.

Still, Dean’s voice was silly and raspy with exhaustion. Given a few more minutes, he would likely be snoring. And that made it that much more concerning to hear him initiate a new conversation now, when he was so close to dropping off.

“Oh?” Cas responded, praying the response could be kept short.

Dean swallowed and rolled over to face the Alpha. “She thinks that Mom’s death happened close enough to my Presentation as alpha that the two got tangled in my psyche. Like, I maybe blamed Mom’s death on Presenting wrong – in my subconscious or something.”

Cas listened, suppressing the urge to remind Dean that he hadn’t ‘Presented wrong.’

“I have these recurring nightmares,” Dean continued quietly. “I told you ‘bout those, right?”

“Mm-hm. The fire?”

“Yeah. The fire. It always traps me, just like it did Mom, but there’s…in the dream I always get these really bad belly cramps too, like Presentation cramps. God, Cas, you remember what those felt like? That was the worst pain I’ve ever felt. In the dream, they feel so real, and it’s like that’s what clenches that I’m really trapped in the fire. Like, I feel like I have a chance to get out until my stomach spasms, and after that, I’m a goner for sure. Tessa thinks it might mean my mind connected the two things – like deep down, I believe one caused the other. I dunno, man. Hypnosis? Really? Do people still do that?”

“I know very little about it, Dean. We’ll look into it together when we get home.”

“Something else she said.” Dean’s voice was still scratchy and was starting to slur. “Sh’ said maybe I resent bein’ alpha ‘cause it might’ve meant I couldn’t take Mom’s place after I got her killed. Like, if I was Omega, I’d’ve had enough fem’nine character…istics to make up th’ diff’rence. Could’a been Sammy’s Mom, and Dad’s Sub. Ya know, Dad never had a chance ta Claim anyone after she died. Tha’s not good for someone like him. If I’d been Omega, he’da had ta Claim me, and that…that might’a helped him deal.”

“Dean. Love. Go on to sleep. We’re going to talk about this. But we’re not doing it right now.” Cas stroked fingers lightly through Dean’s hair and watched his face go slack.

“love you,” Dean whispered.

“I love you, too. Go to sleep. No more talking, now.”

If Castiel had entertained any hope of sleeping, those hopes were dashed now. The morning would bring nonstop media engagements, and his image was likely to take a hit, but puffy eyes would be a small price to pay. Cas set his mind to work, casting lines in search of a way to hold Dean up while he explored what needed dredging. A niggling tickle at the back of his head insisted that every scar Dean carried had a mirror of one kind or another within the Alpha’s psyche too. They were both damaged by the same kind of trauma, but Cas had a better grip on the edges of his own wounds than Dean did on his. He did, didn’t he? Of course, he did. And a sleepless night or two never seemed to
haul Cas backward the same way it did Dean.

“Where are you taking me for our honeymoon?” The question was barely intelligible.

“It’s a surprise. I’ve already told you that.” Cas was careful to keep his irritation tamped down. Dean humphed and turned his head to face the far side. His shoulders stretched the thin fabric of his white t-shirt. His arms stayed tucked beneath his pillow. He breathed smoothly for several minutes.

“Did Gabe say where he was goin’?”

“Go to sleep, Winchester. I dislike having to say things more than once. You’re trying my patience.”

“I’m worried, Cas. Just wanna know real quick.”

“Dean open your eyes and look at me.”

“Hmm?” Dean rolled his head and cracked his eyes open enough to see the expression on his Alpha’s face. He could see well enough, even in the dark. Castiel was very much the Alpha in this moment.

“This is neither a scene nor a roleplay,” Cas stated simply. “I’m not your boss, and we’re not at work. What I’m about to ask you goes beyond the authority even of a standard Pack Alpha because you are alpha as well, and you could have expected the freedom to facilitate your own personal care as long as you’re not unbalanced, which you currently are not. Do you follow me so far?”

“Yes, Alpha.” Dean bit his lip slightly. He felt the metaphorical hand closing around the back of his neck.

“Had you not specifically requested a change to the Pack Discipline dynamic, you could expect me to express my worry for your wellbeing, grumble moodily at you, swat your backside for emphasis, and let you decide whether to heed the request to disengage and go to sleep. I would not have pressed the issue further.” Cas paused. Dean didn’t have anything to say. “As it stands, my love, you DID ask for a change to that dynamic. You asked me to take you in hand as I would an Omega in my care. Have I misunderstood the request? Am I overreaching?”

“nosir.”

“You still maintain that you need me to take a firm line with you? We haven’t made those vows to one another. Officially, you’re not mine yet. I know you’re exhausted but think about it. Do I catalogue this as disobedience? Do I let it go, or do I respond?”

Dean groaned. “I’m trying to get to sleep. My brain won’t shut off. I thought maybe if I could get a few of the swirls settled, I would be still enough to sleep.”

“I understand,” Cas replied, but he left a pregnant pause. He was still waiting for an answer to the question.

Dean groaned again and buried his face into his pillow, speaking into it in a muffled garble. Castiel took the pillow away from him. “In case I didn’t make it clear, Dean, I’m not playing right now. Failure to answer definitively is a default to no action because you and I are not yet bonded as we plan to be in September.”

“I’m yours, sir,” he said sheepishly. “I’m yours to do with how you see fit. We don’t have to wait for the wedding. I submit to you. I disobeyed you. Is that definitive enough?”
“It is. Thank you. Get on your knees on the floor at the foot of the bed. I want your back to the bed. Knees apart. I don’t need you to disrobe. This won’t take long.”

Dean’s eyes widened marginally, and he scrambled into place. Cas followed from the other side, pulling at the elastic of his sleep pants to bare himself. Castiel wordlessly took hold of Dean’s short hair and thrust his cock deep into Dean’s mouth, pressing in until he felt the soft palate convulse.

“Montreal, Dean. Gabriel has a rescue endeavor underway outside of Montreal. Where we’re going on our honeymoon is a surprise. How you and Tessa address your therapy is not something best discussed while you’re groggy with sleep. If you have anything else to bring up before morning, unless it is life-altering…don’t. You are to go straight to bed and resist any further impulses to say anything.”

Cas was a miracle of designation control. What they might’ve done for fun not two hours prior, was now not fun at all for the alpha, and it was all down to Castiel’s internal government. Dean’s eyes watered, and his throat shuddered. Somehow, by mere fact of intent, Dean took the ruthless pounding into his mouth and his throat as punishment. It WAS a punishment, and the alpha felt it acutely. His fingertips clutched at the flesh on his own thighs. He fought not to struggle, but Castiel’s thrusts hit mercilessly. And he’d been right. It didn’t take long. The Alpha worked him over, used him, communicated his disappointment efficiently, and it ended in only a matter of minutes. Castiel moaned, pressing in deeply and holding there, pulling Dean’s face in with both hands twisted into his hair. He closed his eyes and came, pulsing down Dean’s throat against the gurgling spasms of Dean’s muscles. And then he released Dean to fall gasping against the bed.

Cas let him gather his breath and wipe the drool and sticky fluids off his mouth, then he squatted down to collect the man in his arms. “There’s my very good boy,” he crooned as Dean snuffled. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you to bed. That’s enough, now.”

“Will you rub my back a little?” Dean asked in a gruff voice.

“Of course. Whatever will help you sleep.”

They settled back in, Dean draped into the ‘V’ of Castiel’s legs and situated to drool across his belly as he slept, but Cas didn’t mind a little slobber. It took no time at all for the alpha to fall asleep. They’d already tried scening to get him there, but a penitent sleepy Submissive was a different flavor than the satisfied sleepy Submissive they’d begun the night with. Cas ran tender fingers through Dean’s hair in awe at the man’s endless complexities.

Cas didn’t sleep until the sun had already begun to turn the sky gray. He had far too much to think about. April and Michael both seemed level enough on video chat, but they were obviously ready for their mates to return. They both had a somberness to them that spoke of Mating-bonds strained by distance and time. And there was something more. He wasn’t oblivious enough not to catch that there was something churning beneath the surface. It would have to wait though. Maureen was both a comfort and a tease. While he believed her when she said the Omegas would be none the worse for wear when he returned home, and that a little time away wasn’t going to break anything, she too had a tell within her eyes, and Cas wanted to dig it out.

Only, he couldn’t yet. Two more days.

Yesterday’s meetings had been grueling. He had a new respect for the progress Crowley had managed at the behemoth institution with a Board that was set in its dysfunctional ways, but Castiel’s passionate confrontation with the Foundational Board took everyone by surprise. Cas wasn’t playing around, and he wasn’t wasting time. He’d asked Bobby to talk through the healthcare initiatives they had planned, reading out terrifying statistics that had only begun to improve in the last thirty years.
Benny explained the expansion to the research programs he envisioned and how he expected to apply the results in quick time. Dean stood up and assailed them with a training plan so revolutionary, they gaped at him, and then he showed them projections of what was likely to happen if they didn’t go along. It was a sobering picture.

And still Crowley played posturing games. The other Board members bumbled and burbled in such pathetic immobilization that Dean began to mock them rudely with loud “Harumphs!” of his own. And when Cas swatted his shoulder and told him to cut it out, he pointed at a quiet fellow in the middle and decried, “I didn’t get a ‘Harumph’ outta that guy!” at which Benny, Bobby, and several of the Board members themselves couldn’t not laugh. Cas wasn’t amused. It was no laughing matter. It truly wasn’t.

Crowley glared down the table at Dean, leaned forward and pointed his finger stiffly. “You’ve got a lot to learn, Winchester. You may have the boss’s willy on a string back home, but round here, the grown-ups do the talking.”

Castiel rose abruptly from his chair at the end. He stood behind his chair, and he didn’t say anything as he removed his jacket and folded it over the back of his chair. The wolves in the room hit the kind of still that turns wild animals invisible in deep woods. None of them moved down the table on either side.

“Cas, man. Hold up. We don’t have to…” Dean started, but he shut up when blue eyes flicked across to him.

Castiel began walking the length of the room at a measured pace, his eyes fixed on Fergus Crowley, and his hands rolling up his sleeves one at a time. Crowley paled and pulled back, rolling himself back several inches and sinking into his chair. He would have had an apology on his lips if the Alpha’s expression didn’t freeze the muscles in his face. Cas reached him and stood silently regarding him with his head cocked a bit to the side. His face was all angles and planes, like granite chiseled from living stone. Slowly, he leaned down over the trembling beta, keeping his eyes on Crowley’s. He placed one hand on Crowley’s arm rest, and with the other he reached slowly outward and picked up the remote that sat on the table beyond Crowley’s open notes.

Standing back up, Cas activated the remote and lowered the whiteboard down the length of the wall. He turned to face the lowering span and waited calmly for it to descend into place.

Fergus Crowley began breathing again as Cas picked up a bright blue dry erase marker from the tray.

“This… is our mandate,” he said, as if there’d been no interruption to the flow of the meeting. And Cas drew them a map. He kept it simple, lining out in just a few succinct words what the purpose, the new purpose that their joint rowing efforts, should target. “Your job on this Board is to make sure every action you see any of us take moves us all closer to THESE goals.” He tapped the board firmly with his knuckles. “Every fundraising endeavor feeds these goals. Every initiative we explore has, at its core, these goals. Period. That’s what you’re here for, and that’s what I expect from you. Is that clear?”

“Alpha, we’re not a research facility,” protested a middle-aged woman in the center.

“Why not?” he challenged. “The funds, the resources, the facilities, the expertise, and heaven knows the need, is all here. You were founded as a research facility. It’s in your very DNA. What are you waiting for?”

“We’ve…” she stumbled. “We’ve just never done that – not since the thirties. It’s not who we are.”
He moved like lightning and was leaning over her, intimidating in his presence. “Tell me one more time that you cannot fulfill my instructions simply because you’ve ‘never done it before’, and I’ll excuse you from this body and replace you with someone who has the welfare of the pack in mind. Test me, alpha.”

“Sir,” she said quietly in submission.

He stood back up. “We don’t have time for this. It’s a new day, and I intend to hit the ground running. By the time the contracts are signed and the letterhead is issued, we MUST be ready to move. Your statisticians estimate that of the 8% of Omegas who still die before sexual maturity, as many as half of them may be Dominants. You’ve got the numbers in your database, but you never facilitated any follow-up. No outreach, no research, no goddamned autopsies for Christ’s sakes. These are REAL PEOPLE, folks! And they are DYING! We don’t have time to squabble amongst ourselves to see who gets to hold my willy on a string! WAKE UP!”

Cas had set so many wheels in motion, he was having trouble keep them all straight. He’d had Clay at his elbow, taking notes and making suggestions from a legal perspective. He’d had Billie at his back, issuing follow-up detailed instructions to grease those wheels until they would turn on their own. He had Benny, Bobby, and Dean in similar action, each on different wings, each flanked by a small team. He had Jonathon stamping out the rampant resistance from the home base, and he had such an enormous mountain to climb. Sleep seemed a very long way off, but the softness of Dean’s hair in the dark room cooled his fires better than sleep would anyway. There was a chill to Cas’ right side where his mate’s warmth belonged. He missed her like a severed arm that tingles with phantom sensations, but he let the lines of Dean’s shoulders, highlighted by the streetlights outside, soothe him. Those wheels were in motion. All of them would stay in motion or heads would roll. This was not the moment to bring designation equality into the forefront. That day would come, but they weren’t ready yet. Right now, Cas was Alpha, and he’d made no bones about planning to use that to its fullest advantage to turn the ship.

Someone had naïvely asked him why all his focus seemed to be riveted to Omegas, and he’d snapped brutally that it was the Omegas who were still dying. This wasn’t the institution he’d known years ago. They’d stalled. The stagnation at the top hadn’t infected those on the ground quite yet, but the seeds were there. Bitterness and resentment touched the tones of almost everyone he talked to. They were tired of doing too much with too little. They were tired of juggling everything and not having enough support to keep all the balls in the air. They were tired of knowing that every individual they couldn’t manage to get a hand on was doomed to near certain suffering. They were tired.

And in the morning, when he longed to head west to the refuge where his pack was waiting, he’d need to spruce back up again and present the outcome of the merger to the press. Dean would be beside him for that. Cas found that fact comforting. Dean’s cheek stuck to the Alpha’s bare stomach as he squirmed in his sleep. Muscled arms tightened around Cas’ torso, and then Dean mumbled incoherently and fell still again.

It was both the big things and the little ones. It was the microcosm that allowed two alphas to find solace in each other when so many in the world said they shouldn’t. It was the macrocosm that continued to maintain that a wolf born to produce Omesol should be considered less valuable by the great edifices of society. Was he taking on too much at once? Cas had been told time and again that his vision was too grand in scope. One man could never hope to bring about that much change, not
in one lifetime. But Cas wasn’t alone. He’d never been just one man. Leaning carefully, he brushed lips through Dean’s hair. None of them knew. No one else knew. Not even Benny.

Not even Benny.

Cas wasn’t alone.

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Michael stayed well clear of people on the third day after making such a fool of himself. The pool house, where Dean’s sharp penmanship doctored the notes scattered everywhere, labeling various piles, folders, unfathomable odds and ends, felt as close to home as he could get for the time being. He came to the unhappy conclusion that home now was a pile of people, and not a place. If his Pack was separated, his home was not home. It made him feel like a collie, disturbed that the flock was in disarray. Something Kali had said poked at his memory. Mostly, home was wherever Dean was, and Dean wasn’t here. How bizarre was it that Michael longed to take his broken heart to Dean for mending? How bizarre that Dean would want to try?

They’d spoken several times by phone, and last night by video chat. Dean seemed tired but thrilled at the outcome. Michael couldn’t help but be happy for him. Dean sparkled like a boy whose first kite just took flight, and his enthusiasm was infectious. He didn’t open the bonds up again though. By mutual unspoken agreement, he and April both had their bonds on the barest trickle. Widening them now would reveal that they’d been pinched since the alphas left, and as badly as Michael wanted to feel Dean, he couldn’t disclose that yet. Michael turned on the television and stood before it soaking in the image of his mate in all his beauty. Dean was doing that public thing, and it made Michael smile. He was gorgeous in the sunlight.

“Your Daddy is a showoff,” he told the beating heart at his spine. “And your Papa is a powerful man, little guy. You don’t have to worry about a thing.” Michael had tried to take a turn with the twins, both of them together, and each of them separately, but he wasn’t allowed more than brief visits. Jessica had them now, and after her meltdown yesterday morning on the phone with her mate, she’d taken her pups and retreated into the nursery in embarrassment. She didn’t want company, and Michael wasn’t in the mood for whatever Sub care she needed. Call him a jerk, but if he and April had to suffer through the absence of their mates, then Jess should too.

Passing through the house, Michael heard a new tune belting out of the piano. An anthem maybe? The musical entourage had spent the entire day yesterday hard at work, and they appeared to have the same plan today. The tune had a rising intensity that swept the listener up in its rapture. It had a forceful quality about it. Michael didn’t investigate. They were obviously busy. He tried some simple distractions, cooked a little with Tony, fumbled around in the garage working out where each hose went in the engine of his car, perusing books in the library, but he returned over and over again to the pool house. It didn’t smell like Dean, but it felt like him.

A flash of movement beside the pool caught his eye, and he turned from the TV screen. April had a tray in her hands with a pitcher of lemonade and two glasses. She rounded the pool and stood outside the sliding glass door looking at him. He sighed and slid it open.

“Thanks,” she said. “I couldn’t get it with this in my hands.” She strolled in and set the tray on the table in the kitchen. Michael didn’t know what to say. The look she’d given him last time they saw each other wasn’t one that suggested an offer of lemonade would be her next move.
He turned back to the television. “They look good,” he mused, just for something to say.

She looked up and followed his eyes. They stood and watched together. “They’re going to need a stable home when they get back,” she said softly. It was a peek past the masks she always wore, and Michael found it pissed him off.

“Everyone needs a stable home, April. It’s not on you to sacrifice yourself. I know that’s what you’re doing, and it’s not sustainable.”

“No. I’m not. That’s not what I meant.” She turned back to the tray and poured a glass for him. He didn’t take it.

“You’re asking me to keep you and me under my hat. You’re telling me not to talk about it.” He was still watching the screen, but the story had ended, and a laundry detergent commercial came on.

“There isn’t a ‘you and me’,” she reminded him.

“Right,” he said, turning to face her. “How strange that I forgot. Although,” and he collapsed into one of the wide squishy chairs that were squeezed into the narrow space. “It’s not going to be a very good comeuppance on your mate if I don’t walk away victorious and rub it in his face.”

“I’m sorry I hit you,” she said suddenly, and he frowned up at her.

“Are you? Why? I said some shitty things to you. I had it coming what with all the shitty ways I treated you since I got here.”

She set his glass back on the tray and faced the countertop. It was easier than looking into his hurt green eyes. “You were right though. About me. And I shouldn’t have hit you.”

“Right about what?” he asked.

“I’m a scheming bitch, Michael. You’re right. I see how people work, and I can cajole them into doing what I want. You’re right about how I am around Castiel. You’re right that I knew you…weren’t really still…trying to score on him.” She had her head down. Every word sounded pulled from her core, like an agony or a betrayal. “But I was right that you once were.”

“What is it you’re trying to get everyone to do for you, Pete? You want a dog that badly?” He couldn’t see her eyes slip closed at the sound of the pet name, but he could tell he’d hit with something. People have a tell when something hurts just right, even if they don’t move.

She had a sad, weak smile on her face when she turned around. “The dog is a distraction,” she stated. “You know that. I need a prop. Don’t pretend you don’t know how this works.”

He studied her with a frown. “I think you and I have different methods. I’m not sure what your end game is. But, yeah. I know how it works.” Michael rubbed his brow with a firm hand, wrinkling the skin of his forehead. “Tell me this…just this, and I’ll back off. Wherever you’re going with the schemes and shit, is it about feeling safe, or is it about something else? Pete, you’re already as safe as any Ozzie in the history of forever. Don’t let your aftershocks from before you Mated lead you to fucking up the good thing you’ve got here.”

She blew out a tense breath, and the depth in her eyes shallowed as if she’d closed an aperture within them. “I know what I’ve got, Michael. The last thing I want to do is screw it up. But I’m never going to be satisfied with half of what I deserve, and that’s exactly what I’ll get if I play this badly.”

Michael stared at her, wishing he could drill in and pry those depths open. He wanted to see inside her, and he couldn’t. “I may have an Ozzie mind, but I’ve got a lot more than that, and I’m greedy as
He settled for digging verbally. “You have security and balance here,” he listed. “You have status and wealth. You have a powerful mate who worships the ground you walk on and would break mountains in half to carve a way into the music industry for you, whether you need him to or not. You have a Dominant who lays it on hard enough to satisfy your greedy wolf, and who loves doing it. You have his promise that you never have to feel the growing burn in your belly with an unfilled need for babies that I had to suffer through for years. You have friends here who would do anything for you. You have three brand new big brothers who think you’re the greatest creation ever to step foot out of Oklahoma. You have a corps of music-savvy builder ants sculpting a career out for you and lining the path with golden bricks, so you don’t ever have to worry about splinters in your feet. All you have to do is follow their instructions, and with your talent, the career builds itself.” Michael laid her life out as he saw it, line by line, but his tone stayed carefully nonjudgmental. He was doing the calculations in his head as he spoke. He was finally starting to work it out for himself, and April simply watched him, standing several feet in front of him like a petitioner in audience with a king. She didn’t interrupt.

“Maybe your career won’t be that easy,” he back peddled, really thinking hard. “There’s no guarantees where fame and fortune and success are concerned. But that’s not what the scheming is about, is it? So, where the fuck are you driving this bus?” She still didn’t answer. She lowered her head though, and she bit her lip. “He green lighted your career. He green lighted you and me having access to comfort each other as Omegas. He even said yes to the foursome. I gotta tell you, Pete, that one floored me. And the business about sending me in to cool you down in your Heat? That made no sense. I figure he made the same jump you did about where my head was at. He thinks I’m making a move on you to get at him, and he’s roasting me slowly on a spit before he eats me. That’s kinda classic, if you think about it. But that doesn’t explain you. It doesn’t explain why you’re still scheming even though you seem to have everything you want.”

He watched her shift uncomfortably. Was he starting to home in on the core of it all? “You can’t bring yourself to tell me, can you? You can’t say it out loud.” She turned slowly so that her face was fully averted. Michael’s pulse began to quicken. Ozzies weren’t exactly his specialty but watching April over the last few months allowed him insight that helped him work out some of the blocks in her mind. She was always in motion, even when her body sat stock still at Castiel’s feet. So much of that motion occurred beneath the surface where no one could see it, that she easily passed for docile.

“If I guess the truth, can you trust me enough to be honest about it?” he asked. It was a risk, and he knew he might be driving her deeper underground, but he couldn’t bear to see her so frightened, not if there was any way he could help. Rachel had been right. Michael was drawn to vulnerable women, and April had him held fast. All of his instincts clamored for him to hunker over her and block out all her attackers, real and imagined, with his own body. He wanted her safe, even if it meant he took a killing blow in the process. How had that happened? Was it fate, or had she hooked him in with her scheming?

April didn’t look at him, but she seemed poised in anticipation. She was ready to let him try.

Michael went at it from the side. An indirect approach often worked for him, and he went with what he knew. He licked his lips.

“Dean and I have talked a lot about how closely we align with each other. It turns out we’re like mirror images in a lot of ways. I’m going to assume that happens with True-Mates most of the time. If that’s true, then I can make some assumptions about you from what I know of Cas.” He paused to give her a chance to respond, but she didn’t. He went on. “He’s a visionary who sees the end result of what he wants and then works backward to figure out how to get there. He can’t do all the
implementation himself, so he delegates others to do a lot of the hard work for him. He’s not always up front about what he’s really after. Sometimes he keeps shit under his hat, and it’s only after the fact that any of us have the first clue that he knew what he was doing all the way through. That sound like someone else we know, Pete? Are you the same?”

“Yes, Michael,” she whispered submissively without turning her head. Michael noticed that she’d slipped into an altered headspace, but it seemed like the only way she thought she could handle letting him pry her open, and he really, really wanted to get it all unearthed.

“All right,” he said, still thinking fast. “So, if you have a vision you’re aiming for, and you’re still not at your destination, then there’s something you want that you don’t have yet. Hell, Pete, you have everything – everything but a dog. What’s left? I mean, you’re not knocked up yet, but that’s on the horizon. He said yes. God, he says yes to everything. What on earth are you so afraid of? What could you possibly want that he wouldn’t give you just for the asking?”

April crumpled. She sank down to sit on the floor, huddled over her own lap and shaking. Michael dropped beside her and pulled her to rest against his chest. “Shh, shh. You’re okay. I’m here. I’m not going to let anything bad happen.” Michael rocked her slowly. What would Cas think if he found them like this? Would he assume it was the wholesome brand of Omega bonding that the Alpha felt so generous in allowing between them? It would be quite a shock if he could see what Michael’s heart made of the closeness the Ozzie allowed. Michael wanted more than an Omega packmate from the girl he’d dismissed as shallow on first sight. His heart looped up into the sky at the soft feel of her skin beneath his hands, and he lost sight of it for a few minutes as it soared in hopeful ecstasy. Castiel would not take kindly to the difference. Omega packmates were one thing. Falling head over heels for the girl was something else entirely. Alpha wasn’t going to handle that well once he found out.

Once he found out.

He didn’t know.

Michael froze in his rocking. His hand stopped stroking her hair.

“Pete?” he choked out. “It’s me?”

She whimpered and dug in deeper into his chest, clinging on with his shirt in her fists.

Michael let himself exhale very slowly. He began to stroke her hair softly again as a much clearer picture took shape in his head.

She had everything she’d ever imagined she could want, and she had far more than an Ozzie should expect. But there was no clear path to this. What’s more, April had the inside view of Castiel’s inner workings, and she knew firsthand how far she could push him. If she wanted Michael the same way Michael wanted her, and she’d kept it a secret, there was a reason.

“Hey, Omega,” he said softly, non-threateningly. “I’m not going to put you in danger. You’re okay. You can trust me. I shouldn’t have pushed you yesterday. I was thinking selfishly. I was only worried about myself. Shhh. Calm down. We’ll figure something out. I’m not gonna out you. You’re still safe.”

She sniffled and mumbled into his chest. “You share everything with Dean. If Dean knows, Cas will know. Michael, he can’t know. He can’t handle this. I can’t even acknowledge it directly for myself. He’ll see it if I do.”

She folded in on herself until she curled out of his arms.
“Are you on my side, Michael? You said you love me. Does that mean I can trust you?”

“I would never betray you, but I share everything with Dean. He sees all the dark spots in my head. He knew what I was feeling about you before I got there myself. I can’t change that now. I can’t hide what I’m feeling, Pete, but he already knows about this from my side.”

“What if I just need someone to talk to?” she asked, pulling back up out of her curl bravely.

Michael cursed himself silently that he couldn’t keep his hands off her hair. Everything about her was dangerous, but he really didn’t care. “You need a friend,” he said simply.

“I need a friend.”

Michael wilted. He continued to stroke her hair for several minutes. “Is it because you don’t trust anyone, or is it because you aren’t really certain of what you want from me? You’re already Mated, and you don’t see a way to have both of us?” Michael’s wolf dope-slapped the back of his Omega’s skull. He felt the percussion almost physically, but Michael was ready to clear things up. He was no beggar, but neither was he ready to give up after one reddened cheek. “He’s already Mated too, you know.”

April’s touch to his bare ankle felt warm, intimate. “Everyone I’ve ever known has demanded something from me, Michael. I can’t see past that right now. I don’t know what it might feel like to say yes to a request – or to say no – to answer however I want to. All I’ve ever had are commandments. Every time someone seems to be offering me a choice, I find that it’s a mirage.” She spoke to the floor, and Michael froze, barely breathing. “I reach for something that appears to be offered, and I find a new shackle around the wrist that reached out. I have no real clarity about what I feel for you. I can’t look directly at it. I can’t handle another shackle. I don’t need another claimant. Please try to understand. I need a friend. I need someone who demands nothing; someone who knows what it’s like at the bottom of the pile. I need some time, some space, a chance to catch my breath and feel myself out. I need to take stock of Cas and how far he might be capable of letting me explore. Please try to understand. I need to be careful. He’s not built like other men. There’s a limit to how far he can stretch before his control cracks.”

Michael shook his head. “He’s a better man than you’re giving him credit for. It’s worth the risk. The alternative is unthinkable. We can’t just sweep it all under the rug and pretend there’s nothing there. Even if you aren’t sure what you’re feeling, you have the right – the fundamental human right – to explore it. We aren’t apes, Pete. Their rules don’t apply to us. We’re in the eye of the storm that’s struggling to figure out which rules DO apply. There’s no better time and no better people so perfectly situated to test the boundaries of power. We have to trust that Alpha loves us enough to bend for us. If he can’t, everything’s a sham.”

Michael backed up a little, leaning back on his hands to offer her some breathing space. She smiled sadly at him and told him, “I need everything that Castiel gives me. I can’t play your power games with you. It puts everything at risk. You don’t know what he’s really like deep inside.”

Michael frowned. “I’ve seen his wolf. You don’t have anything to fear from the wolf.”

She grimaced. “Not the wolf. You’ve seen what he’s like. You haven’t seen the depth of the Alpha. Michael, the Alpha controls the wolf. Do you understand? Everyone’s fearful of the wolf because he’s wild and untamable, but they overlook the real power.” She sat up straight and distanced herself further. She shifted to lean against the couch, so that she wasn’t tempted to touch Michael. She faced him, and every strain of affectation evaporated. “You think I’m a schemer, with my hand on every
action, directing things the alphas don’t even know I know about, and you’re not wrong. I admit that, and I don’t regret it. Some of the best things about this pack were my doing. I’m not going to apologize, and I’m not going to elaborate. But you need to understand – I don’t hold a candle to the Alpha where scheming is concerned. He’s got a cold eye on everything. He needs to control everything. I’ve managed to hide huge pieces of myself from him so far, but it can’t last. When he gets home, he’s going to demand I open the chest and let him see. You can’t be involved in that. I’m protected by his Mating-claim. His instincts will temper his fury for me, but not for you.”

“Jesus, Pete. It’s all going to come as a shock, but he’ll get over it. Don’t you trust your mate?”

She chuckled sadly. “I didn’t really mean to hide from him at first. It’s how I worked at home with my father, and it just sort of continued when we Mated. I didn’t know what I was doing until it was well-established, and he already thought he knew who I was. Then it became impossible to let it all go. There was never a good time.”

“What else are you hiding?”

She broke her eyes away. Shame suffused her face with a pink flush. “He thinks I’m childlike, that I’m shallow and simple. Sometimes I let him catch me at a clumsy manipulation attempt.” She paused and frowned, unsure how much to say. “The thing is, the only presentation that he responds to every time is the helpless waif. He needs that from me. It’s the tone that his Alpha is looking for. It soothes him to have a ward to care for and direct. Every other presentation is a struggle. That has to mean something, doesn’t it? He may claim he wants to know the real me, but every time I show him that, he goes off-kilter. His human side loves it, but it’s the Alpha who runs the show between me and him, and the Alpha wants a child to care for.”

Michael stretched out forward on his belly and propped his chin up beside her leg. “And to fuck, which is creepy. You play that role very well.”

She smiled and ran fingertips through his thick hair. “I know. It’s not a false mask. That’s my wolf, and it’s a real part of me. I think my wolf is a lot like Dean’s except that it craves positive attention, not reprimand. We’re both pups inside our tertiaries. I’m looking forward to Subbing someday with Dean. I’m dying to play with his childlike persona. It’s not creepy, it’s canine.”

“Whatever. And your Omega? What’s she like?” Michael let his eyes close while her fingers toyed with his hair, and the afternoon siesta time made him drowsy.

“The Omega isn’t a pup,” she answered softly. It was possible, Michael suspected, that she’d never tried to verbalize any of this before. “The Omega is cunning and defensive. She’s always on the lookout for threats to my safety and comfort. She never takes a break; always wide awake, always watching. She gets overwhelmed easily, but she’s a good judge of character, and she can see how people fit together. She reads people, like all their thoughts and feelings are written on their faces. Only, when facing the world in endless patrol becomes too much, she slips the Sub up to take over, and she goes really deep inside me. It’s not that she stops paying attention, but she lets the Sub take the rebalance while she hides out of sight. Sometimes I feel like I can predict the future from reading people, but too many variables all at once make me feel like I’m flying apart. I need Cas to manage that for me, even if he doesn’t know where it’s coming from. He keeps me in one piece. I couldn’t survive without him. I can’t risk what I have with him. The girl you’re attracted to, Michael, she couldn’t exist without the Alpha.”

Michael released a long breath through his nose. “I should’ve let you hit me one more time, Pete. I really shouldn’t have pushed you like I did. I knew you weren’t ready, but I was tired of not knowing. I’m not used to having a blind spot like I do with you. I’m not used to being told no. I’m a selfish prick.”
She chuckled again. “It’s not selfish to reach for something that pulls you. I just can’t do this with you. I have too much at stake, and so does Castiel.”

He nodded sadly and rolled to lay his head on her thigh, facing away from her. Michael’s thoughts raced. She hadn’t given him everything he wanted, but she’d dropped her masks, and that alone was a balm to the tempest in his head. His Omega stood firmly in the forefront, and it felt solid. He felt like he stood on one fixed island in the middle of a maelstrom, in the middle of a wild rushing river, and that April was standing nervously beside him. He liked the feeling of having her trust so deeply. He searched frantically for a way to tether them both to the spot, and he needed her to know he’d been listening. It was time to give something, anything. It was time to cast a line out into space and see if she would catch it or let it fall.

“Here,” he said. “Here’s what we do. Tell me if you can accept this. We live here together, we share the space, and we watch each other’s backs, yeah? I’m not going to pretend I don’t care about you. You know where I stand, and that’s not likely to change.”

“Michael…”

“But I’m not ever going to demand anything from you. Let’s just say I don’t want to be one of hundreds of people who make demands and expect you to comply. You don’t owe me anything. If you need anything from me, even if it’s just camaraderie, I’m right here. If you need more than that, you only have to ask, and it’s yours. Anything. Anything at all. No questions asked.”

“How is that fair?” she asked. “I’m not going to use you.”

“You use everyone, don’t pretend to be naïve,” he said bluntly, very Michael-like suddenly. “The deal goes like this – you get a friend who has your back and offers you an ear when you need one. In return, you don’t ever play me. You drop all the masks with me. I get to see the real Pete.”

“It’s all me, you know.”

“You know what I mean. Don’t do that stupid simper with me. It turns my stomach.”

She continued to stroke his hair with a thoughtful expression. “Do you mean it?”

“Jesus H. Christ, Pete! Is it really that unbelievable that I might not want to force myself on you? Look, do whatever you want. I’ve never asked anything of you in the past except that you don’t use me in your schemes. I’m not about to start now. You don’t owe me your pity.” Michael sat up with a huff and grimaced at his own outburst. Apparently making an idiot of himself was going to be a permanent fixture. April put a hand on his shoulder. She looked deep into his face, trying to figure out his intentions, but he wasn’t hiding anything.

“No one’s ever offered me anything and not demanded something in return.” It was as if she needed to hear every word again in a different order. “What are you telling me, that you’re planning to quietly pine for me while I come cry on your shoulder? I’m not in need of pity either. Why would you want that?”

“April Renée, do I have to pull rank on you to get you to take me seriously?” He smirked his iconic and irresistible smirk, leaving her lip twitching in response.

She smirked back. God, but he was adorable. “If you pull rank, I’ll expect you to follow through.”

He blushed, and his smile deepened, but he couldn’t hold her eyes. “No, I, um, I don’t wanna do that; not with you. I hope that’s all right. I know I’m supposed to, but I can’t. Pete, I can’t.”
She regarded him softly. This Michael was no one she’d really seen before. He’d shown her glimpses, but his personalities had a hierarchy as firm as his pack, and the sweetness of his Omega often took last place. She didn’t think the time was ripe to delve any deeper, fearful that she might spook him back into hiding. How was it possible that the last time they’d occupied the same room, they left one another furious, and now they were both nakedly vulnerable? She’d never been this naked with anyone without her wolf taking the reins, but her wolf was supremely bored, and a check in with Michael’s showed the same. It was an intriguing turn of events.

“I’d like that very much, Omega,” she told him. “It may be short-lived. Once Alpha digs it all out of me, I’ll be living in the dungeon in chains. He’s not going to be able to allow us this.”

“We’ll see about that,” Michael told her with a hand beneath her chin. “I’m not so sure. He deserves the chance to prove he’s more than his secondary. And he’s got Dean to Jiminy Cricket for him. We probably can’t stop the inevitable eruption, Pete. But we can have some faith in the man before he proves otherwise.”

They stayed in the pool house for hours, talking and sipping lemonade. They raided Dean’s stash of snacks and gorged in a way both knew was unhealthy. April shot Michael a nervous look, but he shrugged it off and popped open another bag of Fritos. Maureen checked on them but left them alone once she was sure they weren’t in any danger. They were curled into each other on the floor, and they both turned to look up at her, but the alpha just smiled and closed the door again.

April coaxed Michael into describing what his Presentation had been like. He admitted that Presenting in the middle of the night, at home, over the summer holidays, had been an unexpected relief all things considered. The fallout from his Alpha’s response sent enough shock waves crashing into the years to come that not having to face public ridicule was barely noticeable in its absence. But everything could have been so much worse. April told him about surviving high school as an Omega, about being herded into soft family-centric classes, about being steered away from the harsher crowds of unruly adolescents and into a corridor relegated just for Omegas and the odd beta, and Michael assured her he could relate to that experience. She told him about letting Nate shield her and about wondering if the wider world was as full of peril as everyone seemed to think.

Michael encouraged her to take her music up onto the local club stages – nothing too grand yet perhaps, but it wasn’t too soon, he guessed, to start honing her performance skills and learning the craft itself. She needed to start paying her dues, earning her stripes, buying up some street cred. She nodded seriously at his words and agreed. She’d been thinking along similar lines and was waiting for the right time to bring it up with her tutors. She was scared, but there was no way through except to go through. Cas had encouraged her to focus on composition, but if Nick’s plan for her worked, and she gained acclaim as a composer, she’d lose the mask of obscurity and the chance to learn public performance as an unknown.

She let Michael dig out her persistent burning resentment over her failed audition at the ape music school, and she didn’t try to pretend it hadn’t nearly crushed her spirit. April unloaded her burden on him in the same way he had shared his pain at witnessing a young man’s needless death with her, and he held her while she sobbed. She’d held it in too long, and it hurt miserably on the way back up. She felt lighter afterward, which she found intriguing. Cas had taken such good care of her in the wake of that fiasco, but his ministrations didn’t relieve the pain the way Michael’s did.

April brought up the upcoming Lupin Conference in Charlotte, and Michael admitted he’d been benched after their surprise in Phoenix that had scared Dean down to his bones. There was more to
that line of thought than they pressed upon each other out loud. They let their eyes say the remainder. Both of them wanted in, but neither of them knew how to make that happen. Michael recognized the look of a mind that was six moves deep into a chess game whose winning checkmate move ended with each of them earning a place on the stage. He guessed his own face registered the same. They were plotting.

They talked until the sun disappeared and the pool lights came on.

“What are you going to tell Cas?” Michael asked after exhausting every other topic he could think of. “What’s going to happen when they get home?”

“Gabe just took off again,” she murmured. “That’s a distraction of its own. He told Gabriel to stay put until after the wedding.”

“Pete, you can’t keep relying on distractions. You need to confront him and straighten yourselves out.” Somehow, they’d wound up on the floor again. It felt more intimate, like all the rules of polite conversation were suspended while they occupied the space like pups rather than adults.

She let her gaze go vague, staring out into the night beyond the rooftop of the great house, and she nodded noncommittally. Eventually, she conceded, “It doesn’t matter what I do. He’s going to dig it all out anyway.”

“You’re really that afraid of him?” She chuckled. “There’s only one chance in a thousand that it works out the way I want. He’s got full custody of an Ozzie, and it’s all his Alpha has ever wanted. If it goes badly, and it looks like it will, I lose everything. I’m never going to get another chance, and I’ve played it all wrong. I misread the house here, and I hid when I shouldn’t have, and there’s no way to fix that now. Now, I’ve lied to him, proven I can’t be trusted, and then I have to turn around and beg him to trust me. It’s not going to work. Castiel doesn’t work like that.”

Michael rested his knuckles against his lips, and he frowned in thought. “I don’t understand. What do you mean, ‘lose everything’?”

The air practically crackled with tension. April weighed the dangers of revealing her insight into Castiel, and Michael weighed the necessity of reminding her how dangerous it was for an Omega to attempt to lead the direction on her own. His latest lessons with Hannah were fresh in his mind, and much as he hated the revelations, there was no contesting the truth behind them. Omegas weren’t suited to carry the weight of self-direction, especially not Ozzies.

“Apart? It’s one thing to play your games to build defenses around you. Manipulating alphas is a time-honored tradition. I’ll help you do it. But you’re really scared, and I don’t understand why.”

She took a deep breath and chewed her lip. “You know, when you moved in,” she began. “They ran a battery of tests on you to figure out how your mind works. You scare the shit out of people with all your strange powers. No one has any idea how you do it, and that makes them crazy. It’s like you can tap into the force of energy that flows person-to-person deeper than anyone else. I watched Castiel go dark with worry about what you might turn out to be capable of next. He wants to pull you apart bolt by bolt to figure it out, but he resists. Do you know why?”

“Because Dean told him to stay out of my head.”

“Yes. But also because you’re a Dominant, not an Ozzie, and he respects your right to speak for yourself. Even if Dean allowed him full access, he would still hold off if you asked him to. You get a
say, Michael. You always will.”

“What are you saying?”

“No one wondered about me,” she told him simply. “I’m Ozzie. There’s nothing complex about our psychological makeup. We need to be managed, controlled, corrected, petted, and fed. We’re only going to stab you in your sleep if we don’t get the care we need. Simple, right?”

“Um, I’m guessing not…?”

“You’re a ring master?” she prompted. “You see all the possibilities, and you direct how everyone interacts in your scenes. Right?”

“Pete, are you telling me you’re the same?”

She broke her gaze away. “It makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“Not from your Omega or your wolf though.” He eased himself closer. “That leaves…It’s the same aspect that the music flows through. It’s the part of you that orchestrates music?”

“It’s the same function, Michael. Orchestrating music works the same as orchestrating people.”

“You’re afraid that once Alpha catches on, he’s going to put a stop to it. Is that it?”

She pressed her lips together. “I don’t want to hurt him, and this is going to hurt him badly. He’ll feel that he’s failed to meet my needs if he finds me meddling around in things that aren’t safe for an Ozzie to play with. But, Michael, I can’t help myself. As much as I need to write music, I need to have a hand in the under workings of the pack. I doubt I could stop if I tried. It fills a need, and I can’t imagine how to convince him of that. It goes against everything he believes about Ozzies. I’m not supposed to be built this way. And I’m still Ozzie! I need him to take care of me. Every day there’s something I can’t handle on my own, and every day he steps in when I’m flying apart and pulls me back together. All it’s going to take is one chance occurrence, one misstep, and he’ll put a stop to the little bit of self-regulation I have, and I’ll be an Ozzie and nothing more. I’m so tangled. I never meant for this to happen, but my brain sends words through my mouth that I don’t even know have a greater purpose until days, sometimes weeks, later. We all have three distinct personality aspects, right? Well, everyone keeps an eye on my second and third, and no one has even thought twice about the first. It’s bigger than I am. It’s a ring master just like you, I’m sure of it, but it’s beyond my control unless I’m carefully managed to stay balanced. I never even knew it was there until I Mated and began to live in a balanced state regularly. If I didn’t know, and Alpha hasn’t asked for a psychological evaluation, how could he know? What’s he going to do when he figures it out? Do I get to keep that side of me, or is he going to tell me it’s too dangerous for an Ozzie to wield that much control? What if it is too dangerous? Am I playing with fire? If he decides I need to shut it down for my own safety… What would that do to me? It would be like getting a lobotomy. It would destroy me. But what if I’m doomed to go crazy if I keep doing it?”

“I don’t know,” Michael admitted with wide eyes. “I know hiding things from your mate is a sure way to dangerous waters.”

She chuckled abruptly. “Dangerous waters…You sound like him.”

“You have to tell him, April, not least because he deserves to know the real you. You aren’t a shallow teenaged imp waiting for a round with the slipper.”

“Yes, I am.”
“Good grief! Come on, you know what I mean. Fine, you’re kinky and insatiable. I get that. Don’t be obtuse.”

She sighed. “You slip from one designation to another so easily. You and Dean can play all three of them at once. I get stuck in my wolf when I’m scared, which is most of the time. What’s more, I think that the orchestrator in my head wants me stuck. That way it can move around in secret, and I don’t get in its way. It’s always been there, and, I mean, your front brain is supposed to be the rational conscious side, right? How can I be this without knowing it’s there? This is the side of me that refused to let Nate close when I cycled. This is the side that demanded I leave Lawton! It’s been manipulating me all along, and I didn’t know! And then, once I followed Jo’s instructions and began to trace the lines backward from behavior to impulse – you know the drills they have us do – what I found was that those lines don’t go to my wolf OR my Omega. They go into this space that I hardly recognize. It’s like I’ve got a little alien with a joystick in my head directing everything, but I spend all my time in my wolf and never realized it was there. All the training does is to teach us when to jump from second gear to third and back again. They never talked about when it’s appropriate to explore your front brain. I didn’t even really know I had one. The music, it just flows straight through. The…whatever you want to call it…the people management…it flows the same way. It’s me, but it’s not a conscious side of me…except, it IS. Once I started to figure it out, I went digging. All that stuff I keep from Cas, from everyone, it’s in that part of my head. And once I started to understand it, I realized I’m GOOD at this.”

“Pete, listen to me. You shouldn’t be trying to manage this on your own. That’s what Castiel is there for. He’s there to help you. He’s not going to sideline one third of everything you are. You have to open it all up and let him work with you to get it all untangled. Don’t you see? It’s only frightening because it’s a position you’re not built to be in on your own in the first place.” Michael moved right up into her space and put his hands on her shoulders. “Your musical genius deserves to be stoked. If this…ring master…is another aspect of that, then there’s going to be a way to keep it fed too. You’re going to have to trust him eventually. You have to trust someone.”

She scoffed into his intensely focused eyes. “Easy for you to say. You trust everybody…except me.” She kept her eyes on his, and the moment lengthened. Finally, she whispered, “If he locks me out of the scheming, he shuts down my muse. It’s one and the same. It’s who I am. I can’t be the musician he admires without being the manipulative scheming bitch he’ll abhor. Maybe that doesn’t make sense to you, but it’s the truth.”

“You’re not a bitch, Pete. I don’t want to hear that again. And the scheming… Tell me what else you scheme about. Is it hurtful? Is it mean-spirited?” Their faces were very close together. Her eyes blinked miserably not four inches from his.

“No,” she whispered. “All I ever wanted was a stable, loving pack that watches over me – watches over each other. I want to be safe.”

“Yeah?” He lowered his head and caught her eyes when she dropped them. “What’s so awful about that?”

“It’s not my place. I could hurt someone by mistake.”

“Shh, hey, don’t go Ozzie on me. Come on back here. Look up at me. Sit up.”

“I’m just a pup myself, Michael.” She flicked her eyes, now moist with unspilled tears, up to his, and she began to shiver again. He shifted in even closer.

“You’ve got the most ancient soul I’ve ever seen, Pete. You’re not a pup, and all of your instincts are noble ones. You and Dean…” He scoffed almost rudely. “You make the rest of us look like rusted
Me? I’ve never done an unselfish thing in my life. I’d wager that Alpha would say the same, no matter what he’s done with his. He’s got that cold eye you’ve seen, and it’s not altruistic. But you two, you and Dean? …all you ever try to do is bring light and love and music into a broken world where Omegas get knifed to death in broad daylight. You want all of us safely tucked into a soft, warm bed with nothing but wider pack around us. I love that about you, Pete.”

She launched herself with no warning at Michael, and her kiss startled him only for an instant, then he gave himself over to it. Her moistened cheeks left tear stains on his as their lips sought comfort in each other, and he forgot to worry about who kissed whom. Her arms wound around him beneath his, and she was in his lap before he could adjust. There was nothing for it but to embrace her right back and return the kiss, and why would he even consider not doing so? It was only a kiss, after all. Omegas seeking comfort from one another within a pack was standard fare. All Omegas worked this way. It was a given. Surely Maureen suspected there was likely to be a deeper physical connection going on than simply one Omega’s head resting in the other’s lap, as she’d found them without remarking on it. Of course, Maureen didn’t know that their bonds had been virtually closed since their mates flew east.

Michael responded when she tilted her head and deepened the kiss. She made an odd, desperate, agonized sound, and he cinched her in and took over. He pressed into her mouth with his tongue and searched her warm, soft mouth as he’d been wanting to do for weeks now. His hand found its way up to hold her head, and she mewled softly. Michael broke away, panting. They stared at each other, wide eyed.

She looked terrified and determined. She looked as open and as raw as he’d ever seen anyone. Her eyes were bottomless again, and she didn’t blink.

“April…”

“Yeah?” she panted, making no move to crawl out of his lap.

“Tell me you’re not playing me. Don’t lie to me.” He couldn’t seem to catch his breath. The only thing remaining in the world was this slight girl braced across his thighs with her legs wrapped around his hips and her hair cascading over his fingers.

Her chest heaved and she looked him straight in the eye. “I wouldn’t.” There was a trace of hurt in her blue eyes, but Michael had been played many times before.

“Yes, you would,” he countered gruffly, but he didn’t let her go. “You did. You have done. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t.”

“Michael,” she started, then stopped with a frown. “I have…nothing to gain from that.” She pressed her hands against his chest and worked herself backward off his lap. “I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry. I’m not trying to confuse you, and I still can’t… I can’t. But…please, I need you to believe in me. If I’ve lost your friendship…I don’t know…please, Michael. It’s not like that. I wouldn’t do that…not like that. I’m not like that.”

Michael buried his face in his hands, thinking fast. He huffed an ironic laugh. “It doesn’t matter. I’m fucked either way. We’re fucked. Everything depends on Cas. He might learn to trust you, but he still believes I’m an upstart rebel bent on hurting him through you. I’m fucked.” Michael stood abruptly, all of his faith in the Alpha fading as the reality of what they were asking of him hit home. His lips still tingled. “We need to go eat. Everyone’s probably shitting themselves with worry about us. Probably got their noses pressed against the glass in the dining room watching for us to come out. I’m surprised no one’s called.”
April let him pull her up. “I’m not playing, Michael. I swear it.”

“Yeah, well. That’s probably true, but it doesn’t matter either way, does it? You’re not going to change your mind and come for me after one kiss, and I’m not going back on my word. I meant it, Pete. If you ever decide you want me, I’m right here. Until that happens, IF it happens, we’re just allies. I’m not about to push in where I’m not wanted. So, you tell me how a play right now makes any difference at all? Everything’s in your hands anyway.”

“It’s all so tangled. I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she said with a hand reaching for his face. He stepped back before it made contact.

“That doesn’t matter much either.”

Michael opened the door to the flagstone-surrounded pool, glittering in the tinted lights. April paused in the doorway, clearly wanting to say something, but either she couldn’t determine what to say, or she accepted that there weren’t any words that would help at this point, and she settled for touching his arm as she passed.

Kali was the first person they encountered on their way in, and she said everything she needed to with just a firm set to her eyes. And Michael was right, everyone seemed staged between the door to the patio and the brightly lit kitchen. Jess occupied one chair in the parlor with Hank, while Fred had the couch and an angry J.T. Both of them looked up when Michael and April emerged. Both of them looked more relieved than made sense. Michael shot a look at April, but she avoided his annoyance and passed on through to the kitchen. Maureen had two places set with steaming bowls of soup and crusty bread. Her presence alone in the kitchen spoke volumes, and both Omegas came to the rapid conclusion that Maureen was solely responsible for their hours of solitude, and that the rest of the pack was not pleased with the alpha.

Michael mumbled a quiet but heartfelt thanks, and April asked after Nicholas as they each took their seats. Maureen instructed them to eat first, only following up on April’s question after she’d supervised them finishing their meals.

“I sent Nick and the others back down to the guest house, Omega,” Maureen picked up once they’d both cleared their bowls. “They expected you back after lunch. Did you break a promise, or has my brother misrepresented what the expectation this afternoon was? Someone has obviously erred, but I’m not jumping to any conclusions.”

“Oh!” April startled. “I’m so sorry! We got to talking, and I forgot. I told him we would do another three or four hours after lunch. You should’ve let him come get me.”

“I don’t recall that being part of MY job description, April.”

“No, Ma’am,” April said meekly.

“So, you lied to Nicholas?”

“No, Ma’am. I forgot. It’s different.”

“Is it?”

“Lying involves intent, alpha. I intended to return. But I forgot.” April never looked up, and Michael watched silently. Nothing he had to say would help her. They both knew where this was going. He cocked his head. This was no wayward urchin in need of a slipper. April’s Omega was no child, she’d said so herself. She was Omega, but she was not a cringing girl. She would defend herself from an unjust assessment, but she was going to accept the punishment that was coming, and she
would feed off it. “I made poor snack choices this afternoon, too. I glutted on junk food. That’s against the rules. I believe those are the only rules I broke.”

Maureen’s face betrayed no humor, but neither did she seem angry. “Did either of you check in with your mates this afternoon?” She looked from one Omega to the other and back again. Both of them paled as one and reached for their phones.

Nothing.

Michael blinked up at April, who looked quizzically back. They turned as one to Maureen. “I thought not,” she said, stepping away from the table and turning her back on them as she rummaged about in one of the kitchen drawers. “Both of your mates sent me notes asking if the two of you were napping late into the afternoon again. I told them I believed you were.”

“You LIED about us?” blurted Michael, astonished. “WHY?! We weren’t doing anything wrong, but we weren’t sleeping either. We were just talking! Maybe we forgot to check in, but at least we weren’t LYING! Shit, now…now it’s going to look like…”

“Like what, exactly?” asked Maureen.

“Like we’re hiding something!”

“What would you say that? I was asked if you were asleep, and the last time I looked in on you, both of you appeared moments away from dropping off into dreamland. We’ve just established that intent is critical in defining a lie. Are you accusing me of intentionally misleading your mates?” Maureen’s eyes sparkled with a lighthearted humor, and Michael frowned at her.

April sank to her knees. “Alpha, I have failed to follow several of my mate’s rules this afternoon. I’m in need of correction. Would you please take care of me?”

“Hold on!” Michael broke in. He shot a glance at the doorway, but they were alone. “Rules are one thing. What the hell are you talking about? Did you deliberately set us up to be alone all afternoon so we could…what? Talk it out? Were you hoping the two of us worked out a plan of some kind? Crimeny, are you scheming too?!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, and I’ll thank you to lower your voice when you address an alpha, even a substitute alpha.” Maureen produced a stout wooden spoon and approached the table again. “Your decisions are your own, Michael. If April chooses to blow off her commitments for the afternoon in order to buy herself some free time to nap, or talk, or whatever, she is free to do so. The consequences of her decisions are likewise hers to bear. Yours are the same. It is not my job to direct your actions, Omega – not yours, not hers, not Nick’s. You choose the behavior, and then you accept the consequences. If you’ve broken no rules, there are no direct consequences.”

“But what about you? You lied. I don’t understand. Why do you get to do that? Why do you get to make that decision for me? Now I have to lie to Dean and pretend I was asleep all afternoon, or come clean FOR YOU, when I didn’t do anything wrong! How can you make me choose like that? Do you have any idea how much Castiel hates to be lied to?” Michael was livid.

“Interesting supposition,” she said, tapping the spoon lightly against her leg. April was kneeling motionless on the floor. Her eyes focused on a spot on the opposite wall. “You assume that I was aware you were awake. Let me ask you one question though, before you call your mate with whichever response you’re going with. Be aware that I do know how Castiel feels about deceit. Answer me this: why would either of your mates not know if you’re awake or sleeping? A Mating-bond starts to dim to a subdued level at about 400 miles.”
Michael felt his fingertips go numb, but he waited to hear the rest. He knew, suddenly, where this was going, and he knew that April had figured it out before he did. Maureen continued lightly, “At 600 miles, the bond registers overt consciousness and powerful physical sensation, but not surface emotion as it does when mates are in close proximity. At 800 miles, it begins to go dim enough that only the most intense pain goes through. It becomes difficult to tell little more than the direction of one’s mate at 900 miles. Now, I’m not making any accusations. Each and every Mating-bond is unique in several ways. It’s possible that the two of you share the first ever recorded bonds that go completely dark at less than 700 miles. What I DO know is that I’ve delivered three rather painful spankings while I’ve been here to Castiel’s mate, and he’s yet to be aware of any of them before I told him about them. All three came as a surprise. In addition, as both of the alphas should be capable of telling for themselves when you two are awake, I assumed by their questions that you must indeed be sleeping, and that they misread the muddiness of their sensations, thus their confusion. If you tell me that you’ve both been awake all afternoon, then I am perplexed as to how two fully-developed Mated alphas could possibly not sense that. Perhaps you can enlighten me.”

Michael didn’t answer. He was busted. THEY were busted.

“Michael?” she pressed. “You were saying about lies? What was it you wished me to know about them?”

Michael sank slowly to his knees, placed his palms on his denim-clad thighs, and lowered his eyes to the floor. “Ma’am, Alpha despises deception above every other rule transgression.”

“That’s true. And I believe that alpha Dean isn’t much more lenient where lying is concerned.” Maureen paused before the two of them. The house seemed eerily silent suddenly. “Was there something you need to tell me, Michael?”

Michael’s heart was beating rapidly, and he wiped the sweat off his palms. He took a bracing breath. “You could have just told us you knew,” he grumbled, pushing his luck, but irritated enough to push back anyway. Maureen didn’t respond to his churlishness except to tap the spoon against her leg again. He could feel her winding up to into a full alpha call-down, and he spoke up again just before she broke. Alphas usually hated that, and Michael was pissed enough to want her stoked. “We closed the bonds when they left, all right? Both of us did it without planning it. We didn’t discuss it. It just happened. Once the bonds were closed, there was no way to open them without letting on what we’d done.” Michael could sense April’s stillness to his left, but he didn’t try to look at her. He knew she would only speak now if Maureen asked her a direct question. “We were going to edge them back open as they flew home again. We didn’t know about the distances, and it seems like they didn’t either.”

“You both lied to your mates.”

“Yes, alpha,” he admitted ruefully. She didn’t sound angry, not even annoyed.

“April?” she asked.

“Yes, alpha,” said the Ozzie.

“Very well. Open them again. Right now. Michael, open them both. Completely.” Maureen pulled out a chair, turned it away from the table, and sat down. The Omegas both stirred as their bonds slipped open, and awareness of their mates filtered back through. It didn’t take a genius to know that both alphas were immediately aware of the shift, and that they were both puzzled and displeased. Michael risked a peek at April. She had her head cocked to meet his eye. It was not a happy look that
passed between them.

“Your mates evidently don’t have the distance effects memorized,” said Maureen conversationally. “And they’ve rarely been this far from you. It’s a sensation one has to experience for oneself to become accustomed to how distance stretches the bond. I’m a little surprised that they weren’t aware since, as you say, your bonds closed while they were still relatively close to home.”

“Dean’s terrified of flying,” Michael admitted softly. “They were distracted.”

“That was a dirty trick,” Maureen mused. “You waited for a moment of weakness. Is that what you did, or was it accidental?”

Another heavy sigh left Michael’s body. April remained motionless. The question wasn’t for the Ozzie. Her intent didn’t matter to her level of upcoming punishment. Michael was the one under the microscope. “It wasn’t accidental, alpha. I timed it on purpose. I wanted a few days to myself. I was angry at being left behind when I didn’t need a week to recuperate, and I wanted to pout in privacy. I wanted him to miss me. I didn’t find out until later that April had done the same thing.”

“I see,” the alpha stated. “Your mate deserves more respect than that, Michael.” It was the first time she really sounded fully alpha, and Michael hated that his body responded. He began to feel the weight of remorse and to anticipate the relief of correction. Damn Hannah and her fucking conditioning.

“Yes, alpha,” he responded on rote.

“Stand up, both of you. Stand in front of me. April, love, what rules have you broken?” Maureen leaned over, helped April to her feet with a hand on her elbow, and supported her as she arranged herself in front of the alpha, shoulder to shoulder with Michael.

“I ate badly,” she said at once. “I failed to text my mate on time; twice, I think. I forgot about my promise to Nick to work with him this afternoon. I was late to dinner. I closed my bond without permission, and I kissed Michael.”

Maureen stifled the laugh before it made it out. “You have a rule against kissing Michael?”

“Um,” April glanced briefly at the man beside her. “The rule is that only Alpha is allowed to touch me.”

“Pshh! That’s a shitty rule.” she proclaimed, startling both Omegas. “Is that really all he said? Please! What’s that supposed to mean? People touch you all the time.”

“Well, I guess he meant sexually?” April tried. It’s not something she’d ever tried to specify before. It had seemed clear when he said it.

“Did you two fuck?” asked Maureen.

“No, alpha,” April mumbled, blushing. “It was just a kiss. One kiss.”

“More than one, if you really want to count,” Michael corrected quietly. He snapped his mouth closed when Maureen transferred her attention to him. She nodded once.

“Right. Okay. I think I’ve got it straight now. April, you stay right there. You’re going second. Don’t avert your eyes. You need to see this. Michael? Drop ‘em!”

He’d known it was coming, but it still startled him. He stepped back a half step in surprise, but he
recovered quickly, and he set his jaw. Numb fingers worked his belt, button, and fly open. He kept his face emotionless as he shoved his jeans to the floor. His boxer briefs joined them. He could feel April’s eyes slanted sideways toward him, and his ears went red.

“Shuffle on up and get over my knee. I’m a lefty, so you’re headed opposite of where you usually go. Good lad.” She helped him position himself. He felt backward. “Just lay out and relax, Omega. I’m stronger than I look. My lap can hold you.” Michael was acutely aware of April. Having her instructed to keep her eyes glued to him throughout had to have been geared toward ramping up his humiliation. His wolf, which had been bored to tears for the last few days, woke suddenly and began to snarl with an ugly curl to his lip. “Get a muzzle on him, Michael,” Maureen told him with one hand crooked around his ribs and the other resting lightly on his backside. He had no idea how she knew the beast had sparked to opinionated action, but he squashed it ruthlessly with a heavy boot to its throat. One displeased grunt, one sternly planted foot, and the wolf gave up. It seethed with fury, but it didn’t struggle. Michael held the wolf with one designation and slumped across the alpha’s lap with another. The wait seemed interminable. Finally, she began to rain heavy-handed blows against the center of his ass, and he jumped at the first one.

“Easy, Michael. Take it easy. We’re not going to get into a longwinded discussion.” Maureen kept a steady pace, and Michael’s butt heated quickly. She spanked him with a firm hand, with more power than her thin frame looked capable of, and his face pulled into a pained grimace after just a few blows. He was grunting after a couple of minutes. His toes slipped on the tile, and she gave him a moment to get settled again. “Let your weight rest over me, Omega. You don’t need to hold yourself up. I’ve got you. I want you to let go.” She smacked him several more times, and he whined when her pace picked up without notice.

“Michael, you are Omega, not beta. Your Mating-bonds are under your mate’s custody. It is his permission, not your own choice, that determines whether they remain open or not.” She continued to spank him, and the intensity never flagged, but the pace crept incrementally faster. “Were you aware of that fact? I know you haven’t completed training yet.”

“Yes, alpha,” he grunted, ashamed to sound distressed, but damnit, he WAS distressed. She shifted her blows lower to cover the tops of his thighs, and right at the crease where it always hurt more. He prayed silently that she would avoid the tender inner thigh, the spots that Castiel favored. Just thinking about that made his ass burn hotter and his face flush deeper until he felt his eyes tear up and his nose start to run. He was breathing shallowly now, and not all of the grunts sounded as manly as he would’ve liked.

At last, she stopped. Michael panted and collapsed across her in relief. He sniffled. He rubbed his eyeline across his upper arm to clear away the accumulated moisture. He wasn’t crying, exactly. The sudden silence in the kitchen amplified April’s sniffles, and somehow that started his waterworks. Michael sobbed abruptly against his arm and couldn’t stop. His tears fell uncontested into his hairline. His face crumpled into a rictus of remorse and pain.

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“Micha...
wouldn’t stop flowing.

“It won’t surprise you with its intensity then. Get your toes set.” Maureen waited for him to shift his feet and his hips. He kept his knees pressed tightly together. He wanted no part of that spoon reaching anywhere near his inner flesh. Maureen got her hand resettled around his side again too, and he felt her tense her core with her first stroke. It was like being lashed by fire. Well, no. It wasn’t. But his Omega felt each blow and exaggerated its intensity in its head until he was convinced that he was going to die if she didn’t let up soon. He kicked out with his legs and scrabbled his hands, clutching the chair leg, the alpha’s calf, reaching for the table leg that Dean had built extra stout and extra wide. Nothing gave him enough purchase to stabilize himself and let him absorb the heat of the spoon that fell so fast it had to be a blur to April. Michael howled in pain. He felt blistered, and still the spoon fell. He began to miss individual strokes. His ass throbbed and heated in a steady build, as if the alpha had hooked him up to a water wheel that had paddles at each spoke and set the damned thing spinning at dizzying speeds. Pop’s spoon didn’t feel like this. Hell, even Dean’s strap didn’t feel like this. Michael’s butt was numb to the count, but fiery from the flurry. It took everything he had to funnel his response into calling out and not shoving himself away and fleeing. He howled, but he didn’t fight. He stayed put until the very end, and he collapsed into a sweaty, tear stained mass over Maureen’s lap when she finally ceased her ministrations.

A gentle hand caressed the length of Michael’s back. His shirt had worked its way up toward his shoulders, so it took little effort to get her touch all the way up and back down to his hips. “You’re okay, sweetheart,” she murmured. “You’re okay. I’ve got you. That’s a good lad. Breathe easy now. It’s all over. Shh. Let’s get you up nice and slow.” Michael’s knees trembled a little, and he used the hand she extended for him, pushing his way off her lap and wobbling a little. “There you go. You’ll feel much better as soon as the sting settles in. You did so well, sweet boy. You’re all done. There’s my boy.” She stood and steadied him. She embraced him when he leaned into her, and she held him for several minutes as he continued to sob quietly. She whispered adoring words to him and scratched his scalp while he calmed. She took a moment to be sure he could stand after he pulled away from the hug, and she stopped his hand as it crept down to rub out the sting. “Here, now. Don’t do that yet. Let’s be sure it sets first.” Maureen guided him to shuffle into the only bare corner in the kitchen. “Arms at your back, love. Hold your elbows. Forehead in the corner. It’s okay to lean in but don’t move until I come get you. We want the message to have a chance to settle before you talk to your mate. Are you good? You’re not going to fall, are you?”

“I’m okay,” he snuffled blearily. He heard the vibration of his phone against the floor by Maureen’s chair. He didn’t turn for it. He felt spent, loose and sloppy and sleepy. Michael wanted nothing in the world more than a pack bed. He wanted to be sandwiched between Dean and April, or between Dean and Cas. He wanted the scent of pack to surround him and send him into peaceful, forgiving slumber. He realized that Maureen had answered his phone, and he caught enough words to know that Dean now had the whole sordid mess explained to him. A new wave of tears ran silently down his face, and he was powerless to do anything about them. Dean settled in his head with Maureen’s explanation. His sense was barely there, compared to its full intensity when they shared a space, but it was far more present than the tiny trickle he’d felt with only the barest crack open. The difference was obvious. Dean couldn’t send him much emotion directly, but Michael could tell the difference between the stirred-up sensation of moments ago from the calm solemnity he bore now. Tears dripped from Michael’s chin, and he sniffled disconsolately.

And then it was April’s turn. Listening with his back turned hurt worse than watching would have. He couldn’t even offer her the comfort of standing witness. By the time they were both tucked into bed side by side, Michael was ready to concede that he needed his alpha. He needed his alpha, and by the sound of April’s distressed whimpers next to him, she felt the same. No substitute could begin to make up the difference for long. Michael fell asleep on thoughts of interconnected need, the intricacies of love, and how any four such complicated people had a prayer of finding a stable
balance for long. He wrapped his arms around her and drifted off, warm and safe.

Safe for the moment.

Chapter End Notes

So, that means it's all resting on Cas. All the pieces are on the board now, and all of their triplicate designations are defined. We pretty much know everyone's needs, wants, and motives. The only unknown is Castiel's Alpha and whether it can handle a rival or not, whether it can handle an equal in ambition or not.

What do you think? Are there enough redundancies in place to cover for each of their weaknesses? Does everyone have an avenue to have all their needs met?

Happy International Kissing Day. Seemed appropriate.

Also, depression sucks ass. Sometimes it kicks mine. Sometimes I persevere anyway.

Love to the pack!
Chapter 90

Chapter Summary

Still waiting to get the Alpha home. What's that you say? I'm dragging it out? Yeah. Yeah, I am.

Chapter Notes

Classic Nudge posting pattern, nothing for a month, and then BOOM!

I had fun writing this one. It's redundant. We're adding Dean to the stew, and he needs the skinny. I promise not to rehash everything again when Cas arrives.

Thanks KreweofImp for the THEN prompt. You know what you did. This is canonically Castiel's last spanking at home as a child. (It wasn't his last at school, but there wouldn't have been many after his wolf fully emerged at about ten.) After this, Cas governed himself well enough to avoid his father's wrath.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 90 – Sunday, August 13, 2017

THEN:

“GABRIEL ALLEN! CASTIEL JAMES! COME HERE, BOYS! RIGHT NOW!”

Zachariah’s voice pummeled up the staircase and into the room they were sharing as a playroom. Cas looked up from his action figures in alarm, and Gabe turned from his homework at the desk.

“What did you do?” Cas whispered.

“Me?! I didn’t do anything.”

“Well, I didn’t either.”

“NOW!!!”

They jumped and scooted gracelessly from the room. They lined up shoulder to shoulder at the bannister overlooking the grand foyer. Their father stood imperiously at the foot of the stairs red-faced, staring straight ahead. One look down at him had Gabe nudging Cas’ ribs, and they practically tumbled down the stairs to re-set directly in front of him.

“Yes, sir?” Cas said bravely.
“Your winter holiday ended a week ago,” said Zachariah with an imposing frown. Gabriel took the brunt of it, but Castiel took a fair portion himself. “You had three weeks following Christmas to get your Thank-you notes written and mailed.” Gabe bit his lip. Cas didn’t flinch. “Have either of you sent them? Any of them?”

Cas looked at Gabe. “No, sir,” Gabriel said. “I haven’t. Have you?” He turned to his little brother. Cas shook his head at Gabe.

“Don’t answer him!” his father rebuked. “Answer me! And I expect words, Castiel. You are not a mute!”

“No, sir,” he managed. “I forgot to write them. I’ll do it today.”

The weight of Zachariah’s fury was oppressive enough that it felt physical. Gabriel’s shoulders hunched. Castiel fought the sensation. He’d admitted that he screwed up, and he’d already committed to correcting the mess. It was the best he could do now. Beating him down with disappointment was a waste of his father’s effort and emotion. Castiel refused to bend, but his father was Alpha, so he would stand and take it. He respected the position and the man, and he didn’t let his irritation show on his face. The screw-up was his to bear. His Alpha shouldn’t have had to remind him. Cas schooled his face to penitent, but not crushed. Gabriel, standing next to him seemed to shrink in on himself.

“You’re right you will, and you’ll include an apology for being an ungrateful, uncultured Neanderthal who doesn’t care enough to fucking say Thank you when someone sends you a gift!”

“I’m sorry, Father,” said Castiel, and he meant it. Gabe sniffled beside him. Cas frowned in irritation and elbowed him in the ribs.

“Sorry, Father,” Gabe mumbled.

“Both of you put your hands on the wall.”

Gabe sobbed loudly, but he was quick to move into his usual position. He lowered his jeans and leaned into his hands. Castiel moved a little slower but not slow enough to draw his father’s anger. They stood about three feet apart, and they kept their eyes on the plaster. Zachariah let them stand there for a good five minutes before he spoke.

“My sons are not takers. You hear me? We are Novaks. The world expects a degree of culture from all of us, even wayward pups. You embarrass me with your impertinence, with your entitlement. I will NOT house princelings in my home who believe they are above the simplest forms of civil gratitude. Apologize to me!”

“I’m sorry, sir!” they chimed in unison.

“Everything you do under the name Novak reflects upon ME, and I have labored too long and too hard to allow puppies to smear my name. You will complete the full list, have them stamped and addressed, and turned over to Fred for mailing in the morning, or you will both forfeit every single item you received this Christmas. I am certain there are grateful children somewhere who would be overjoyed to have half of what you can’t be bothered to acknowledge. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Sir!” they said in concert.

The flat of Zachariah’s hand struck Gabriel first, as it always did when they were corrected together. He was the oldest. He would take the most swats. Cas leaned in on his elbows and sent up a quick prayer of thanks that he was only using his hand. At eight, Cas was still too young for the belt except
in exceptional circumstances, but Gabe had felt its bite multiple times already. Somehow, Gabe just couldn’t stay out of trouble at home. Somehow, he never seemed to be able to stay on the right side of Zachariah, specifically. Gabriel was a cheeky and adorable teacher’s pet who always got away with murder at school, where Castiel’s impudent refusal to bend his neck landed him over the teacher’s desk more than any other student in his grade. At home it was the other way around. Gabriel’s golden-amber eyes that twinkled with mischief found no sympathy from either of their parents. Castiel’s quiet solemnity seemed to them an appropriate level of gravitas despite the unruliness of the dark mop on his head. They approved of Castiel, and they tried their damnedest to understand Gabe.

Cas’ mind jerked back to the present as his father’s wide hand set his butt stinging. Crap, Father was really mad. One of his business partners must have asked Father if his gift had been received. Cas began his usual internal struggle with the growling from inside his breastbone. He breathed smoothly and worked his mantra up from the depths where it spent most of its time idle. “Rama,” he thought on repeat. “Rama, rama, rama, rama…” It was pure distraction serving the purpose of keeping him in place. His backside burned, and he knew he was supposed to take the punishment like a man and stand still, but his feet wanted him to turn and flee, and the growling in his chest seemed to have the crazy idea that he should turn and raise his own hand against his Alpha. THAT would not end well. Castiel breathed in and out, in and out, rama, rama, rama.

It really didn’t last long. His eyes were dry. His breathing smoothed out immediately. His father’s hand came to rest on his shoulder with a firm and simple squeeze before he let go and did the same to Gabriel. Gabe sniffled again. A look to the side showed Cas that Gabe’s cheeks were wet, and his face was clenched in pain and humiliation.

“Fifteen minutes on the wall, boys, and then scoot up and take care of business. Don’t do it again.”

“Yes, Sir,” said Castiel. Gabe just snuffled. Zachariah strode purposefully out. They could hear their mother accost and berate him in the parlor. Something about how ridiculous it was to expect princelings to behave as anything but princelings, whatever that meant. They didn’t hear any response from Zachariah. There was a scent in the air that lingered after he left, and Cas drew it into his nostrils, wondering about it. It smelled like strength and power, like Alpha, but it was more than that. Sometimes, Cas caught a whiff of this scent from his parents’ bedroom in the morning, and his father often seemed a little more pleasant on those mornings. It wasn’t sex. He knew what that smelled like. It was more directly related to power, but he couldn’t quite say why. Castiel catalogued the scent in his mind. It was a heady smell, and it made the growling in his chest quicken. Whatever it was, it smelled like something he wanted to be. It smelled like a pinnacle.

The boys didn’t speak to each other. They were well-conditioned to silence during a punishment. Gabe went extra quiet. He seemed to be settling fast now that his tears and his runny nose were both drying. Cas had the opposite reaction. He’d managed to stand still for the spanking, but he liked the long minutes on display even less. He could hear the grandfather clock ticking away, and it seemed to mock the fact that his pants were at his ankles, easily reached, and there was nothing he could do about it. He fidgeted, pressing up onto his hands, and then settling back onto his elbows. He shifted his hips a little, trying to adjust to the sting. He stared at the texture of the light blue plaster before him and traced lines with his eyes. Surely fifteen minutes had passed. It felt like it had been an hour. And for what? Being sorry for the mistake had hit him immediately. What was the rest of this for? Why did adults always assume that a punishment was going to teach him anything that a simple explanation didn’t? It seemed so stupid. Cas was never deliberately disobedient or even disrespectful. He made mistakes, sure, but really all he needed to fix the issue was a reminder. What point was there in acting like adding a painful addendum and a long, humiliating sentence with his butt showing to everyone would change anything? He couldn’t go back and fix the mistake. One reminder was enough most of the time for Castiel’s internal government to take up the mantle and
make sure the mistake never happened again. He was always his own harshest critic. The rest of it was just pointless humiliating nonsense.

Maggie better not have swept through while he was piled up down here on this stupid wall and put all his action figures away again. It had taken him an hour to array his armies just how he wanted them. They were ready for the most epic battle ever, and it would keep, by God, until he wrote a bazillion Goddamned thank you notes. Castiel rebuked himself for the blasphemy and sent a sincere prayer of apology heavenward. See? God didn’t send lightning bolts down when he messed up to strip him of his clothing and lay him out in pain. A heartfelt apology was enough for the Lord, why should it be otherwise with the great Zachariah Novak?

Cas wondered about penitence. He’d stood still for his punishment, even if it was pointless, and he stood stillish even now. Anyone passing through the foyer would see him, looking like a toddler in the middle of toilet training, with his shirt that stopped near his waist and nothing covering his nether regions. Punishments were supposed to encourage him to change his behavior so that he wouldn’t find himself in this position again. But, somehow, this one only made him angry. And the clincher was, he really wasn’t grateful to all those assholes anyway. None of the crap that people sent him, ostensibly for Christmas, but really more so that Zachariah would notice their “generosity” and want to do business with them, was ever anything worth having. Cas didn’t know any of them. And he didn’t want their stupid presents. If people wanted to do business with his father, they should just call him up and tell him they wanted to do business with him. He wondered if any of them would be sorry they sent the sons of Zachariah Novak Christmas gifts that indirectly got them walloped, if they knew. Probably not. No one cared much about the fate of pups.

Once in a great while, there was a vastly different sensation when his father’s hand struck home – only once in a very great while. And while the pain was the same, and the power set Cas’ ears ringing, his head would suddenly clear as if emerging from great clouds. His mother told him that the spanking must have knocked his sinuses clear, but Cas didn’t feel it in his sinuses. He couldn’t make heads or tails of anything when that happened, but he knew that he felt much better in the coming days, even if he hadn’t thought he’d been feeling poorly in the first place. Father suggested that perhaps those were the corrections that Castiel had truly taken to heart, and it made him walk lighter. But, no, that didn’t ring true for the boy either.

Quiet nights in Gabriel’s room, when Cas crept in and slipped beneath the covers to sleep in a space that felt a bit less cavernous and a bit less alone, were made for soft confessions. Gabe listened to his little brother in a way no one else did, and he didn’t chastise him for tucking right up into the curve of Gabe’s body.

It was during one of those moonlit nights when everyone else was asleep that Cas tried to describe the sensation to his brother. They were both still smarting after having been called to task for inappropriate behavior at the dinner table and wasn’t THAT massively unfair? It wasn’t Cas or Gabe who’d farted in the first place, but come on, farts are funny. Cas confessed to his brother that while his butt hurt, and he hated it, that his mind somehow felt lighter, clearer. Gabe slapped the back of Cas’ head with the heel of his hand. “Duh, lil bro, where’ve you been all this time? You just now noticing? Wake up. That shit happens all the damn time. Now go to sleep. And no kicking or I’m dragging you back to your own room.”

Gabe was bluffing. It wouldn’t have mattered how much he kicked, the elder Novak liked having his little brother curled up against him. They didn’t talk about it, but they both slept better when they were together than they did separately.

Go figure.
Castiel startled from his reverie when Fred’s calm voice called fifteen minutes and alerted them both that they were released from penance. He squatted down beside Gabriel and helped him clothe himself with no hint that he found anything remarkable about the situation. Fred wasn’t like the other adults. Fred was just…Fred. He smiled at Cas gently and ushered both boys toward the stairs. If his arm found its way around Castiel’s shoulder in an unassuming one-armed hug that Cas leaned into a little bit, then who was to know? And Castiel decided to write the first note just for Fred even though he’d already thanked him effusively for the gold-plated harmonica that Cas used to drive his mother crazy on Sunday mornings. He wasn’t an uncultured Neanderthal. He was simply selectively grateful.

NOW:

Dean watched Cas pace at the end of the hotel bed. None of his soothing tactics were working. The Alpha was beside himself with worry and irritation, and he couldn’t do anything about it. He couldn’t go home yet. He had one more full day to go, and in fact, in the morning would be taking a jet even further away from her, out to D.C., for a final round of appearances with news outlets. Nothing Dean said soothed him. All Dean could do was watch him pace and try once more to get through to him.

“I can be home in two hours, Alpha. We set that plane on standby for a reason, man. Send me home. You don’t need me tomorrow. It’s a different crowd anyway. They really only want you.”

“And how will that help, Dean? She needs her mate. Something’s very wrong.”

“I can triage for you. She trusts me, babe. She’ll talk to me. You’re not going to be able to cut away from all the new responsibilities every time April gets the blues. You need to let the pack help you. C’mon, Cas. Let me help.”

“I’m no good like this, Dean,” Cas admitted. “I feel it like a splinter in my side. It’s incredibly distracting. I need to get home. If I’m not there when she needs me, what good am I to her? Fuck the interviews! I’m going home!” Cas stopped and faced Dean resolutely.

Dean pressed his lips together. It was too soon to be testing the shift between them but providing guidance when the Alpha’s sense of duty overrode his good sense had always been part of the plan. He stood up and approached Castiel. He rested his hands at Cas’ waist and his cheek on Cas’ clavicle. “There’s always going to be one crisis or another at home, Alpha. There’s always going to be a pull to get back to her. It’s the bond talking, man. It’s not a true crisis. She’s okay. Maureen would have summoned you if she was in real peril. You need to finish your work out here. Don’t set this precedent, or you’ll never be able to leave home. You can’t do this work from Lawrence 24/7/365. You have to get used to what it feels like to step away and trust that she’ll survive. Send me home. I’ll check up on both of them and let you know. I can take care of them for one day, Alpha. Please.”

Cas huffed, riffling Dean’s hair with his breath, and lowered his head to press his lips against Dean’s forehead. “And if I tell you that’s not an acceptable solution?” Cas said softly, testing the new parameters for himself.

“You’re the boss. We’ll both go. Everything will turn out to be fine, and no real harm done except you miss out on the interviews,” Dean responded without looking up. “I told you. All I ask is that you listen to my input before you go swinging out of here like you’re on fire. I’m not smelling
smoke, Cas, but she’s your mate. I don’t have that view of her. If you need to drop it all and run home, then do it.”

Cas sighed heavily. “You’re concerned that it sets a bad precedent.”

“She doesn’t need a helicopter hovering over her every sniffle. She’s upset about something,” Dean told him, pulling back to look him in the eye. “But Maureen and Michael are with her. She can hang on for one more day without you.”

Both alphas had been startled when their Mating-bonds sprang suddenly to life while they sat side by side on the hotel loveseat watching their own interview air on late night television. Surprise turned to alarm and then to anger. Dean’s face went pale as he realized his mate was in the hot seat, and Dean was right there, metaphorical paddle in hand, ready to line up for a turn of his own. Michael had the bonds closed. Dean had been straight-up lied to when they spoke and texted over the last couple of days. The look on Cas’ face told the same story. Dean waited for the blazing sensation to cease, and then he dialed Michael with an unnecessarily powerful punch of his finger. Maureen answered.

Since then, Cas had been little more than a basket case. Their mates were fast asleep now, and the difference in how that felt through their bonds made them both ashamed not to have caught on sooner. They both received succinct phone calls from the Omegas that left them with little more than assurances of their mates’ remorse and a promise to discuss it in full when they got home. But where Dean felt reassured after speaking to Michael, Cas only seemed more upset from whatever he felt and heard from April.

“She’s more than upset, Dean. Something has shaken her to the point I would almost call her terrified. Something’s really wrong. She needs me.”

“I get that,” Dean answered. “And you’re going to be there for her. Tomorrow night. Maybe she’s just scared you’re going to hold her feet to the fire for shutting you out like that. Do this interview round first. Send me home to check on things. You trust me, don’t you? I’ll get to the bottom of it and let you know. Besides, you need a good night’s sleep before you try to wrangle this one. You haven’t slept in days. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

Cas chuckled. “I was monitoring your sleep, Pet. I didn’t realize you were clocking mine.”

“You know me better than that, Alpha. I take care of my pack.” Dean tightened his grip on Cas’ hips. His eyes firmed, resolute. “Look, I’m not telling you what to do. That’s not my job here. But we agreed I would always give you my two cents, and this is it. If you start running home every time your bond twitches, you’re never going to be able to see this thing through. And it goes both ways, man. She’s going to be out on the road without you sometimes, and not every moment of every day is going to be unicorns and star beams. You didn’t abandon her with no support. She’s covered. She got a good solid Release. She went to sleep with no problems. She’s probably wrapped around Michael right now, and she’s going to be okay. But only you and she know what’s on the inside. I don’t. If you need to get on that jet with me…dude, you’re the Alpha. It’s your call, and I’ll be with you every step.”

“I’m tired, Dean.”

“I know. And you should’ve been in bed two hours ago.”

Cas took a deep breath, angled Dean’s chin up to meet his lips and then pressed their foreheads together with his eyes closed. “Go. Go check up on our pack. Send me word as soon as you know something, even if I’m in the middle of a live broadcast.”
“Your command is my command, Alpha,” Dean whispered snarkily to him.

“Thank you, my love. I really do trust you. I know you’ll set things right. I’ll be home soon.”

Dean pecked Castiel’s cheek and pulled away to grab his suitcase. “I got this. Give the charter a call. I can be there in thirty. And Cas?” Dean waited for the Alpha to look up from his cell phone. “Thanks for letting me in on your thoughts. If it had gone the other way, I’d still be with you. You know that, right?”

Cas finished dialing and put the phone to his ear. “I know.”

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He sent Cas a text from the garage to let him know he’d arrived home in one piece. Then he cracked open the door.

Dean was shocked by the lustful sensation that hit him as soon as he hit the door to the kitchen and Michael’s scent struck his nostrils. He’d only been away for a few days, and it was as if their entire connection was in peril if he didn’t get his dick inside Michael’s channel right the fuck now. The house was silent and dark. Dean lugged his bags up the long staircase and crept quietly into the master suite. It was empty. Perplexed, Dean dropped his luggage with a thump and padded into the adjoining room where April slept when she had a night to herself.

Empty.

Dean grunted and stepped back into the hall, pulling his bonds up to focus on Michael’s whereabouts. Moonlight through the hall window at the end lit his way. He kicked his shoes off and nudged them back into his room and then hustled to the end, poking his head into Michael’s room. The curtain was open, and the moon highlighted one wide lump beneath the comforter. It was one lump, but it was plenty big enough to be two people. All Dean could see at the head was a suggestion of dark hair. Scent told him far more than his eyes did. He breathed deeply through his nose and closed his eyes. Mate. Omega. Pregnant Omega. Soft, warm, welcoming Omega. Mate.

Dean wasted no time getting naked and sliding in behind his mate. Michael was already nude, and he had his back to Dean. Perfect. Alpha-to-Omega sex was the easiest possible connection. Dean didn’t need anything whatsoever to allow him in. He slipped right into the curve of Michael’s back and fit into him like a jigsaw puzzle piece. Michael moaned quietly as his body came to life. He pressed back into Dean with a spike of instant arousal, reaching back to take hold of Dean’s hip. Dean buried his face in Michael’s neck and moved quietly, sensuously, one arm snaking beneath his shoulder and the other clutching around his belly. He pulled Michael carefully into him, away from April enough that they didn’t paw at her accidentally in their movements. April rolled calmly away onto her left side, pulling a pillow over her head, and tucking into a ball of sleepy indifference.

It didn’t take long, and it wasn’t an earth-shattering moment so much as a gentle docking back at home port. Dean’s knot locked in place with a sigh and a quiet moan. Michael crooked his knee high enough to pull Dean’s body to cover him tightly, high enough to rest against the small of April’s back. Dean dropped easy kisses across Michael’s shoulders. “It’s good to be home, sweetheart,” he whispered. “You want me to take care of you?” Dean rested a hand at the crook of Michael’s hip, edging toward his groin.
“That’s a stupid question, Dean,” Michael huffed. “It’s been days. Help me out here.”

Dean laughed softly and eased his fingers around Michael’s dick with a light touch. “You waited for me to come home?” he asked in disbelief. “I really didn’t expect that.”

“Of course, I waited,” Michael huffed, his hips beginning to thrum into the movement.

“You’re so good for me,” Dean crooned. “Roll back a little. Let’s see if we can keep the sheets dry. I’d hate to wake April up to deal with a wet spot.”

Michael adjusted his angle, rolling back so that Dean lay mostly beneath him. There was no indication that they had a mountain of unfinished business between them. That would wait. It would still be there. Michael tangled his hands in Dean’s hair and came across Dean’s fingers with a whoof of his breath, trying to keep quiet. He let his alpha offer his sticky hand to him to lick clean, and they shared it like a late-night snack. Dean could feel Michael’s sense of relief cover every part of their bonds. He could also feel a wave of sorrow, remorse, guilt, and trepidation follow it.

“Shh, baby,” Dean told him, rolling back onto their sides and wrapping him tightly in his arms. “Leave it for now. Go back to sleep.”

“Everything’s a mess, alpha,” Michael whined.

“I know. It’s going to be okay. That’s why I’m back early.” Dean reached out across his mate and touched April’s shoulder. “Come here, kid. Get back into the puppy pile. We’re going to figure it all out tomorrow.” April shoved herself gracefully back into the curve of Michael’s body to make a three-spoon stack. Dean put a hand across her waist, and Michael tucked his chin over her head. The three of them were out in no time.

In the morning, Dean gave both Omegas a quick full-body look over. Maureen’s imprint made them both cautious of sitting on the side of the tub where Dean placed them. He scented them both carefully, but there was no indication that they had found sexual solace in each other, and that was a massive relief. Dean hadn’t been willing to admit that it had been his greatest fear, and Castiel’s as well no doubt, until he was certain they hadn’t. April smelled nearly fully fertile now that she was no longer on any form of birth control. It hadn’t cleared her system completely yet, but it was fading fast. Dean breathed a sigh of relief. As ugly as he feared things might turn if his suspicions were confirmed about what had happened in the alphas’ absence to stir them both up so badly, at least no one had to face the Alpha and explain that she was pregnant from another man’s seed. That would have been catastrophic.

Dean felt Michael’s fingertips press into the spotty scars on his shoulder when he leaned in to scent Michael’s throat. He smiled to himself. “The scar’s not fading, man,” he told Michael as he sat back on his heels. “You marked me plain as day. No idea how you did that, but I like it.” Dean passed his own fingertips over the marks.

“Does it hurt at all?” asked Michael, weaving his fingers in with Dean’s.

“It’s basically numb, which is unfortunate, I guess. But at least it’s there. I’m going to start wearing my shirts open further, so it shows. I want everyone to see that you marked me permanently.”

April leaned in and looked closely. “Most people will assume it’s a tattoo,” she said cynically.
“Yeah, well, most people can go fuck themselves,” Dean responded. He pushed himself back up out of his squat.

“What’s Castiel’s side doing?” Michael asked, as if he didn’t already know. Cas’ bite was newer than Michael’s most recent effort, but it had healed fully, and the skin ran unblemished across Dean’s shoulder once again, leaving nothing behind.

Dean touched the spot, digging in, looking for a knot of scar tissue deep under the surface. “No, there’s nothing there. It’s not going to scar.” His gaze went distant as he searched fruitlessly for any sign that Castiel’s claim on him might find permanent residence in his flesh. It wasn’t going to happen.

“Dean, I’m sorry,” said Michael sincerely. He reached out and touched Dean’s fingers. Dean looked down at him and took hold of the Omega’s hand with a squeeze.

“It’s fine, Michael. That’s not who we are anyway.” He let the wistfulness fade and assumed a firm alpha mindset. “You two get showered up and dressed. Breakfast is on the patio this morning. Everyone sits in a chair. We need to break some molds while we try to untangle this mess. I’ll meet you down there. I need to speak with alpha Maureen.”

Dean turned to go, but a confused sound from April had him turning back to them. “Um, you mean we should shower…together?” she asked with wide eyes.

Dean rolled his. He turned his alpha up to full blast as he returned slowly to the edge of the tub where they were both still seated. He pressed his lips together as he thought for a moment about how best to respond. Somehow his pointer finger ended up extended right at her. “If this hole that the two of you managed to dig yourselves into when we left you alone for three fucking days turns out to be what I think it is, then I want you to look me right in the eyes and tell me whether that’s a good idea or not. What’s more, kid, if you don’t stop the wide-eyed school girl bullshit right now, your ass is going to regret that decision until the fucking cows get home.”

“Come home,” said Michael softly with his eyes on the floor.

“What?!!? ”

“The expression, Dean. It’s ‘until the cows come home’.”

Dean dropped his finger and straightened. “Michael, stay here and do whatever you need to do before breakfast. April, get your ass to your own bathroom and do likewise. You have twenty-five minutes.” He turned on his heel and stalked out, parking himself beside the stairway bannister until the Ozzie emerged from Michael’s room, still naked. She squeaked when she spotted him waiting for her and dashed down the hall into her room. The door slammed behind her. Dean headed down the wide stairs in an old undershirt and a loose pair of sweatpants, shaking his head in frustration. This was not going to be an easy conversation.

“What more would you have liked me to do about it Dean?” Maureen defended. “They’re Omegas, but they’re still human beings. Whatever they’re feeling isn’t going to respond to any ‘rules’ you and Castiel put on them. It may be no more than a strong pack link. They make a good pair together, whether it gets into the forbidden side of things or not. It’s not my business to keep them from
making mistakes anyway, just to respond appropriately when they do.”

Dean refilled his coffee cup and turned back to face her across the kitchen island. “You knew they’d shut their bonds down. I don’t know when you figured it out, but you knew early, and you didn’t say a word. Don’t stand there and act like that’s not something you thought we should know. I’ve only been away from Michael one time before this, and fucking Castiel had him close the bonds with me so I wouldn’t notice him getting closer as they flew across four states. Michael probably thought he was green lighted to do it whenever he wanted to. I never pressed the issue, and I didn’t really make it clear that I want a chance to know when he’s doing it at that distance. And, I mean, that’s on me. But you knew something about this wasn’t kosher, and you let it ride for days. I’m not mad that they’re trying to figure out whatever they have between them. It’s about fucking time, if you ask me. But to act like there’s nothing weird about a dead signal between Lawrence and Dayton when you know better is just reckless.”

“I wasn’t aware at first, alpha,” she told him calmly. “It took me a while to realize that you and Cas were missing obvious signals from your mates. I had to go back into the data and figure out where the radius of connection fades with distance. It wasn’t until yesterday that I was certain, and by then, the two of them had holed up together in the pool house for a long talk that was sorely needed. I could practically smell the tension evaporating out of there. Dean, they need each other. They need an outlet without a rule structure defining it. Everyone needs that.”

“No, Maureen! Everyone does NOT need that.” Dean readied his points to explain how every single relationship in his life was bound and secured by some scaffolding of rules that held everything together, but Maureen shook her head and interrupted him.

“They aren’t you, Dean. Forgive me. It’s really not my place, but these two individuals aren’t wired like you, not even the Ozzie. Don’t make the mistake of putting your own matrix on them. If you shut down their access to each other, you’re going to have a constant battle on your hands to keep them stable.”

Dean stared at her. “It wasn’t your choice,” he said at last. “You should have told us.”

“Dean, are you upset about being blindsided, or are you worried about how Cas is going to take it once he realizes that his mate has a suitor?” Maureen stepped close and placed her hand on his arm. She looked sincere, but seriously, what the fuck?

Dean took a deep breath and bought himself a moment with a long draft from his cup. He caught movement through the kitchen window overlooking the patio. Michael had pulled April’s chair out for her. He swept her hair out of her face and tucked it easily behind her ear as she sat. It looked like a motion perfected over time. Dean’s chest felt hollow. Michael looked up and met his eye through the window. His face betrayed nothing. His bond shuddered with a nervous sense of taking a stand. Dean looked back at Maureen.

“I don’t know. I can’t see how to get through this. I want to trust him, Maureen, but he’s never had to confront anything like this before, and I’m worried that it’s going to come down to two designations against one. I don’t know if he’s strong enough.”

“Do you want me to stay?” she asked softly.

Dean watched Michael sit beside April and serve her a glass of juice. It was the sweetest scene. Nothing about it seemed out of line. “Does your brother have everything he needs from April?” Dean asked her.

“I doubt it, but I was planning to send him packing today anyway. The last thing this house needs
right now is an outside pack nosing in.” Maureen dumped the remainder of her coffee down the sink and rinsed her cup under the faucet. “You and Cas have your hands full with this, and you’ll need privacy to do it right.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I appreciate that.”

“I’ll collect my stuff and clear out. I’ll take Nick and his pack of baboons with me. That just leaves Kali and Jessica with the twins. Dean, please don’t ignore the two of them – the ladies, not the pups. They need an alpha too. Perhaps check in with them over lunch. I wasn’t able to make any headway with either of them, and they’re both hurting. I’m not pack though. They’ll respond to you.”

Dean nodded vaguely, still watching Michael and April. Michael had a sense of waiting for a shoe to drop. His bonds vibrated with nervous anticipation, but his face was calm as he spoke to his packmate. April’s face was the same. With a firm clap to his shoulder, Maureen excused herself. Dean sent Cas a text of good luck for the interviews to come. He was probably mid-flight. He would get the message after he landed.

He collected the remainder of the breakfast fare on a tray. What the hell was Tony even doing here this early? How creepy that the staff thought they couldn’t feed themselves breakfast just because a couple of the pack had been out of town? When had an effort to allow Dean some extra free time in the evenings to work on his book turned into a full-time need for a cook in Dean’s kitchen? Dean squatted slightly and used his arm to shove the door handle down without upsetting the tray and pushed through to the patio. It was cool in the shade of the morning. Dean prayed silently that his outburst at finding Tony cooking for him wasn’t going to come back to bite him. But, really? It was breakfast, not a seven-course dinner.

Dean set it all down on the table. Michael reached out and unloaded the tray. Dean took his rightful place at the head of the table with Michael to his right and April beside Michael.

“All right,” he said abruptly as the Omegas both filled their plates. “Who wants to start the ball rolling? I wanna know everything.”

Michael looked at April, and April looked at Michael. They both slowed to a gradual stop with only half of their plates filled. Dean watched April plead silently with a searching look into Michael’s eyes, and he watched Michael calm her with a solid look of firm reassurance.

“Gabe took off,” said Michael, turning to look at Dean. “He didn’t say where he was going, but he and Kali were planning to elope tomorrow, and he just bolted on her. She has no idea if he’s coming back or not.”

Dean stared at his mate for a suspended moment. Finally, he said, “That’s what you’re leading with?”

“You said you wanted everything. It’s an important bit of pack news.” Michael’s eyes remained level. The boy had nerve. Dean had to give him that.

Dean nodded and flicked his eyes to April. Hers were lowered, and she seemed on the verge of sliding to her knees. “Eat your breakfast, guys. This isn’t an inquisition. We’re just talking. Chill out a little.” Dean started serving his own plate, and after a moment, Michael followed suit.

“We already knew about Gabe,” Dean told them both. “The elopement was a poorly-kept secret from the beginning, but Cas never expected him to go through with it on the first try. We’re on top of that mess. Gabe’s got some shit to work through before he’s ready to tie the knot, and Kali needs to be ready to juggle all his freak outs if she’s staying.”
“She’s staying,” said April abruptly. “She told me no matter where he goes, he’s got to come back here eventually, so she’s planting her ass right here to wait for him.”

“Good for her,” said Dean. “So, that settles that.” He looked expectantly at April.

“I have my show anthem figured out,” she said enthusiastically. “It’s not finished yet, but the basics are done. It’s really going to be something, Dean. It’s going to be the centerpiece of Nick’s whole show! We’re going to sparkle it up, contract someone big to record it, and release it as a single! This is really it, Dean! This is where it all starts for me.”

“That’s terrific, kid!” he said sincerely. “I’m really proud of you. Can’t wait to hear it on Baby’s radio. I’m gonna turn that shit way up and roll all the windows down, even if it’s Taylor Swift belting it out - especially if it’s Taylor Swift. Cas is gonna flip out. You need a manager and an agent, pronto.” There was a minute or two of beaming at each other before his eyes reluctantly darkened again. Dean hated having to be the bad guy. Hated it. “And what else have I missed?”

“What else, what?” asked April shyly. Dean raised his brows at her and shoved a forkful of eggs in his mouth.

“I dunno. How about starting with whatever has Cas pacing a divot in the floor in the middle of the night. It’s not about Taylor Swift, is it?” His mouth didn’t quite close all the way while he chewed, but April was intently focused on her lap. She didn’t answer. He tried again. “He said you seem to be scared out of your wits. He wanted to drop everything and come home to take care of you.”

April’s head shot up. There was fear in her eyes.

“Uh-huh,” muttered Dean. “You still want to pretend there’s nothing going on? I told you, kid, don’t try to con a conman. I may not know all of it, but I know enough to catch you if you try to dodge.”

“Dean, she’s…” Michael began, but Dean cut him off.

“Let her answer, Michael. She’s not as breakable as she pretends.” Michael seemed on the brink of rebellion, but he stifled the impulse and sat back again. Dean checked his mate’s emotions. Michael was cautiously optimistic. His plate sat untouched.

“April, I convinced your mate I could get a read on the situation and get you centered again without his having to abandon his plans. If you don’t talk to me, he’s gonna drop everything and jet home, and he’s not going to be happy about it. He’s worried about you. He isn’t mad, kid, he’s concerned. What’s happened? Why are you scared of having him here? He’s your mate. You have to know he would never hurt you.” Dean abandoned his breakfast too and leaned across the corner to put a hand on her arm. “Come on, sweetheart. Talk to me.”

April looked up at Michael. “Just talk to him, Pete. He’s on your side, just like I am.”

“You know all about it, Dean,” she said.

“Tell me again and lose the high pitch in your voice. I’m not falling for that the way Cas does. Just talk to me. You’re a dragon, remember?”

She chuckled sadly. “I’m not a dragon.”

“Bullshit. Maybe you don’t know how to get to that part of you. Kick the wolf into the shadows though and talk to me like you talk to Michael. Can you do that?”

“How do you know about that?” she asked warily.
“Don’t ever assume I don’t already know something,” he told her coldly. “Now, drop the act and talk.”

“Fine,” she spat rudely and suddenly. Dean startled back. (Damn, girl), his wolf whistled. “Michael told me he’s in love with me. We fought about it. I slapped him. We both said some things that weren’t very nice, and then we made up again.”

“Wow,” said Dean without feeling. “Okay, so…that cat’s out of the bag. You knew that already. It doesn’t tell me what’s got you jumping at shadows.”

“I told Michael I can’t explore a relationship with him.”

“And…?”

She licked her lips and frowned. “Dean, Cas knows I’ve got a private stash where I keep some of myself hidden away from him. He asked me about it just before you two went to Ohio. I put him off for the moment because it was the middle of the night, and there wasn’t time to get into it.”

“And because showing him what’s in there means he’s going to know he’s really Mated to a totally different person than he thinks he is,” Dean pointed out, sitting back again and breaking his biscuit into bite-sized pieces.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“So, you’re afraid of the shit hitting the fan when he comes home,” Dean finished for her. She nodded silently. He watched her for a minute without speaking. “You know I said I believe he’s going to be thrilled to learn there’s more to you than the surface level high school stuff. He’s going to be pissed that you lied to him. He’s going to go up the wall crazy with worry about what might have happened to you in trying to manage it all yourself, but he’s going to get a handle on it and settle. Kiddo, he’s NOT gonna hurt you.”

Michael hadn’t moved much, but he flicked his eyes up and caught Dean’s. “You don’t know everything she’s hiding. She’s Castiel’s True-Mate for a reason. There’s way more to her than you guys expect. She’s terrified that he’ll think her primary designation is too big for an Ozzie to handle, and he’ll find a way to shut it down. You guys freaked out about me, and I’m not Ozzie. Imagine what he’s going to say when he first looks all the way to the bottom of her. It goes pretty far down, Dean. I don’t think she’s overblowing this. You can’t say he’s not going to put her emotional health or her mental stability first at the expense of a portion of her persona. You don’t know that. All he’s going to see is that she’s in peril, just like all the other Omegas he saves every day, and he’s going to start putting shackles on.”

April nodded vigorously. “And that’s not even considering how he’s going to flip out once he sees what I feel for Michael.”

Michael froze, and after a moment, April froze as well. They weren’t looking at each other. Dean sank back in his chair with a feeling of impending destiny. He watched April’s face drain of color. Michael’s fingers twitched on the table. He had his palms pressed flat as he did when he needed to ground himself and manage his own impulses.

“What’s he going to see, Pete?” Michael asked without looking at her. Dean found the question supremely interesting. Apparently, even after spilling his guts, the poor boy still didn’t have an answer from her. It wasn’t rocket science. She wouldn’t have brought it up if all her thoughts were wholesome.
Poor, sad schmuck.

Michael was a goner.

“April?” Michael tried again, turning fierce eyes on her. “You said you didn’t know. You said it wasn’t clear enough because you couldn’t look at it directly. Damnit, I told you everything, like a lovesick puppy, and you keep putting me off. I understand if it’s scary, but I thought we were done with the games.”

“Michael, stop,” said Dean softly but firmly. “Not like this, man.”

“We’re all fucked,” said Michael. He threw his napkin on the table and stood up abruptly. He paced out onto the lawn several yards and came back.

Dean let him fume and watched April. Slowly, she lifted her eyes to his. “Please don’t make me face him alone.”

“Kid…” Dean began. His heart broke with how certain she was that doom was upon her.

She broke in before he could continue. “I’m going to open up and let him see everything. Michael’s right. He deserves to know who he’s Mated to. I do have faith that he can come around eventually. Dean, I have to. If he can’t, then he’s a monster. You wouldn’t have agreed to marry a monster. And he’s never been like that with me. He’s so careful. He’s tried so hard to win my trust. He hasn’t done anything wrong. I know that he would never hurt me on purpose – never. But what I don’t know for sure is whether he would hurt me for my own good. I feel like he might. He wouldn’t mean to, but his wolf and his Alpha are both going to agree on this. Dean, his Alpha is more powerful than I think even you realize. He will do anything to protect his pack – anything to protect you and me, even from ourselves. It’s a huge risk, but I really don’t have a choice.”

“Sweetheart, I’m lost,” Dean told her. “What’s he going to see that will make him slap shackles on you?”

“Wake up, Dean!” said Michael on his return trip in his pacing cycle. “Don’t you get it? She’s Castiel in reverse! Just like you and me with each other. Think about it, everything he’s got a knack for has an answer in her. You don’t think he’s got a treasure chest in his mind where he hides shit that he thinks is too graphic for her? You going to tell me what he did to relieve all the pressure he was feeling after that Omega got knifed? He left here a drooling mess, and he came back stable, and April didn’t feel a thing. He opened the bond back up, and all she saw was an empty room. How is that possible? You know how! He’s doing the same damn thing she is, but he’s got the authority to do it because he’s Alpha. April’s just an Ozzie. He’s a manipulative bastard who lies his ass off whenever he feels like it. He runs everyone through hoops they don’t see coming. She’s doing the same thing, only she’s got to do it better because she’s got a hell of a lot more at stake if she gets caught. Everyone said Fred Astaire was the most amazing dancer ever, but the whole time Ginger Rogers was matching him step for step, only in high heels and backward!”

“We’re not talking about dancers here,” Dean said forcefully back. “Omegas need management. This is way bigger than either of you realize. You can’t just lay it out like it’s a matter of equality.”

“I knew you’d see it from an alpha viewpoint!” Michael shouted before resuming his pacing. His discourse devolved into meaningless muttering.

Dean turned to April. “What are we talking about here, kid? Give me some perspective. There’s a dragon in there, isn’t there?”
She frowned in thought. “The hyperbole isn’t going to help, Dean. It’s not a dragon. It’s just me.”

“But it’s big enough to scare Cas once he sees it?” Dean asked her, noting the difference in her presentation, her voice.

She nodded seriously.

“How big are we talking?”

Michael strode forward again aggressively. “I TOLD you…”

Dean turned on him. “And I heard you! Shut up a minute and let her talk!”

She frowned again, trying to work out how to express it. “My wolf is immense; not as big as his by a long shot, but it’s got a huge appetite, and it’s ambitious as hell. The wolf never quite seems to get fed enough. It wants all the attention, all the adoration, everything my mate can give me and more. It’s never going to be enough until the whole world is in love with me. It’s insatiable.”

“Oh. That’s not so bad. You’re on track to feed that urge with your performing,” Dean noticed his breakfast was growing stale in the rising morning heat, and he focused back in on it.

“Right, well I lied to him about that too. I told him I was primarily interested in writing music, and I could live without the performing. It wasn’t really a lie at the time. I’m pretty fucking mixed up about all of it. The more I work on composing though, the more certain I am that I don’t want to trust the performances to others. I want people looking at ME, listening to ME! It makes me feel like a greedy bitch, Dean, but I can’t pretend it’s not real.”

Dean continued to eat. Michael had stopped pacing. He stood to the side with his eyes fixed on April, his jaw slack. Yep. Michael was a goner. “Tell me about the other two designations,” Dean prompted with his mouth full again. April sighed and steeled herself. She shot a look at Michael and smiled in spite of herself. Michael clicked his jaw shut. He turned on his heel as if to hide that he’d just been caught fawning. Dean ignored him.

“The Omega watches out for me. It’s very intuitive. I don’t know how it knows half the stuff it knows, but I’ve learned to trust it. Dean, it’s never wrong, and it’s worried about how Castiel is going to react. I know better than to ignore that feeling. It’s like there’s a taproot running in a straight line all the way down to the source of everything canine, and it can drink straight out of that like a fountain.”

“Yes!” said Michael suddenly. “YES! Exactly like that! Like you’re feeding through an umbilical cord that touches everything that all the other secondaries are feeling!”

She turned in shock with her eyes as big as saucers. “That’s right. Like an umbilical cord.”

“O…kay,” said Dean slowly, looking back and forth between them. “Now it’s getting weird. Both of you?”

“I told you I thought all that crazy stuff I can do seemed totally normal to me, Dean,” Michael enthused. “Here’s proof! I’m not a freak after all! She’s doing it too!”

Dean lowered his chin and his energy, hoping Michael would echo him. “Michael, sugar, you were never a freak. One thing at a time though. Come sit down, you’re making me nervous with all the pacing.”

April pushed Michael’s chair out with her foot, and he grinned at her as he sank down into it. She

“No, seriously,” he said. “It may not be that unusual after all, but it might take a Dominant to take it external. The biggest difference between a Sub and a Dom is that one focuses in and the other outward. Turn all of the intuition April’s sensing outward externally, and who knows? Maybe it looks just like what I do! Maybe it always will!”

“I…” Dean spluttered. “I mean, there’s a hell of a lot more to Subs and Doms and how they’re different than that, but I’m not ready to argue with you. It’s as good a theory as any.” Michael’s massive sense of relief sent a wave of sadness through Dean. He hadn’t realized that his mate had been carrying so much weight over the extracurricular skills that he kept unearthing. Dean had assumed that Michael was proud of his uniqueness. He reached out and tousled Michael’s hair, turning it into a gentle tug that brought Michael’s head against his chest. “And you’re not a freak. I don’t care what anyone says about you.”

Michael turned and grinned up at him. Dean kissed his hair and then turned serious again. “Can we focus back on April now, please?” he asked his mate. Michael sobered and sat up with a nod.

“So,” Dean started again. “The secondary and tertiary are bigger and wider than the average bear. That’s not really news, kid. Tell me about the other one.”

“Right,” she braced. “Well, Cas’ most powerful aspect is his Alpha. His wolf gets most of the attention, but only because the Alpha is generally civilized. It usually aligns with his primary cognitive persona. Does that sound right? I haven’t read all the books yet.”

“Yeah, that sounds right,” Dean agreed. “Except when something threatens his pack or anything he really cares about. Then the Alpha joins forces with the wolf, goes off the deep end, and it takes a force of pure will from his…”

Dean froze mid-sentence while his mouth tried to catch up to the whirls in his brain.

“Dean?” asked Michael.

Dean blinked and looked at Michael. “I get it now. How could we have been so blind? He needs a warning before he gets home. We can’t blindside him with this.” Dean turned to April. “He needs a chance to shore himself up before his Alpha catches on. I get it now. All of his power is in his measurable designations. No one thought twice when you tested high, but not unreasonably so. No one thought Cas would have a secondary or tertiary match anyway. There’s never been such a person. It’s not in the Lupin parts of you that you’re exceptional, is it? It’s in the part we can’t measure. There’s no way to get a solid measurement on the force of personality from the primary designation. Christ, April, who are you really?”

“I don’t have an answer for that question, Dean. But I know it’s bigger than I should be carrying alone. I know it’s where my music comes through. It’s where all the crap that you hate about me comes from, but Dean, I swear, I didn’t really know I was doing any of that at first! You have to believe me!”

“Whoa, peanut, back up. Who ever said there’s stuff about you I hate?”

She sniffled and then scrubbed her eyes angrily. It was a very un-April-like thing to do. Normally, she would have leveraged the tears and turn her baby blues up to maximum while letting the tears cascade unimpeded. “I don’t know who the fuck I am, Dean! All I know is I’m not who Castiel thinks I am, and I can’t keep pretending. I need to figure it out, and I need his help. This part of me is so much of what scares me about myself, but it’s also what makes me unique. I want to be equal to
the Mating-bond that connects us, but I may crumble under its weight unless he shackles me for my own good.”

“You keep saying that. What exactly do you think he could do to you? I don’t know of any form of mental handcuffs that would stop you from being you.” Dean shoved his plate away and leaned back onto two legs of his chair.

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t know exactly. Conditioning. Medication. Maybe even surgery if he thought it was necessary to keep me sane.”

“Holy shit, April. You think Cas would lobotomize you? Are we talking about the same man?” Dean’s chair thumped back down onto the flagstones.

“What length would he go to if my sanity was on the line, Dean?” She blinked. Her breakfast remained untouched.

“Is it?” he asked on an exhale.

“I don’t know,” she said back, and there was no waif about her. She was a frightened young woman on the cusp of self-discovery, and she was as terrified of facing it alone as she was of having to face it with her mate.

Michael took the cue and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. She let him cinch her in as close as the chair arm would allow. He looked somberly at Dean over her head.

Dean shook his head decisively. “No,” he said. “Not Cas. He’s not ever going to hurt you, April. No. Cutting out your heart is never going to be ‘what’s good for you’. He’s going to swoon with shock when you open that chest, and he gets a taste of his own fucking medicine for once. But he’s going to get a grip, and he’s going to make a plan. You and he are both going to make a plan. Together. He’s not going to hurt you. I’ll tell you right now that he’d have to go through Michael and me, both, if he wants to try, and he’s not going to try. He loves you, kid. Not only does his Mating-bond drive him to make you happy, he’s a good man, and he loves you. Sure, he’ll stagger back a little. We all did. Right, Michael? Right?”

Michael just stared at Dean stoically.

“Right,” Dean affirmed for himself. “We all knew something was up behind those blue eyes you use so well. I can feel when I’m being played, April, and I knew you were on the game. I just didn’t know what your game was or who was running the table. I don’t suppose you could clue me in on what the game was about, could you? Do you know that much?”

April breathed in Michael’s scent and let her eyes fall shut.

“Ah. Right. It’s always about a boy, isn’t it?” Dean let his gaze climb up to Michael’s face. “You still can’t tell if she’s into you or not?”

“Omega Pack-bonding, Dean…It happens a lot.” Michael’s fingers tightened their grip on her shoulder.

“Right,” he deadpanned. “Omega stuff. It’s not love, it’s just Pack-bonding.”

Michael’s bond shot alarm through to Dean. His face begged Dean to stop talking.

“Tell me something, you two,” Dean continued, ignoring Michael. “So, this Pack-bonding, from an Omega perspective, it includes sexual attraction, right?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “It includes
emotional intimacy, trust, confiding, camaraderie. You might even become each other’s best friends…all in the name of Omega-bonding. You could start to turn to each other for all kinds of emotional support. You might start to depend on each other’s opinions, laugh at each other’s jokes, seek comfort in each other after a long-ass day when the only person you really want to be with is someone who totally understands what it’s like to be you. And you’re Omegas, so…we can expect you both to be comfortable with the full Monty, some kissing, some touching, mutual massage, comforting could easily turn into sympathetic fucking. And, I mean, no judgment. I get it. It’s good to have someone close by who’s there for you and gives you exactly what you need without any questions asked. But what I don’t understand is: what’s the fucking difference between that and being in love? Why is it that when Omegas do it, it’s just instinctive pack huddling, and when I do it with Cas, we have a ceremony and exchange rings?"

April was staring straight ahead, unblinking, unmoving. Michael held her close and cocked his head at Dean. If Dean was going to unzip the bag and dump it all out on the table, Michael had no way to stop him.

“I don’t know, Dean. You tell me.”

Dean didn’t respond to his barb. They’d both made their points.

“All of that running us around in circles was to get hold of Michael by the nads just to tell him you can’t…how did you put it – explore a relationship – with him?” Dean wasn’t buying that she had turned Michael’s proposition down. It didn’t add up. “I’m gonna need you to clarify that.”

She didn’t leave Michael’s space, but her eyes transformed, the Omega sliding in where there’d been someone else a moment ago. “I don’t think it was ever about Michael specifically, Dean.”

“Oh? Then what was it about, and when are you planning to let him in on how it had nothing to do with him?”

Michael glowered at him, but as the only lovesick puppy at the table, Dean discounted Michael’s opinion for the moment. April tried again, and Dean’s spidey senses shored her up. He wanted to believe her.

“It was all about building me something safe, something that could shield me well enough that I could uncurl and start to learn to be what I was born to be. I’m only ever going to get a chance like that if the pack that I belong to has – not just my back, but every side. Maybe Michael was part of the plan all along. I really don’t know. Most of it only makes sense to me in hindsight. I never meant to hurt anyone, but there’s a strength to the pack now that is good for all of us. And maybe it’s not a dangerous thing for me to have this. Maybe if Cas and Michael and you, maybe if you all take care of me on a daily basis, it means I can keep using what I do well to mind the fences and keep us all strong together.”

Dean narrowed his eyes. “I’m not buying that you didn’t know what you were doing. I think that’s a load of crap. And between me, you, and that pillar right there, no one wants to be manipulated, not even if it’s for their own good.”

“I really don’t know how to explain it any clearer, Dean. I live in my Omega almost all the time unless I’m overwhelmed or stressed, and then my wolf takes over. What my front brain is doing isn’t something I’m really aware of unless I focus on it.”

Dean thought fast, and he homed in on one particular moment from the past. He folded his hands on the table in front of him. “So, that frontal lobe is moving shit around for you, working people into little balls of compliant goo, and then sculpting them into whatever the fuck you want them to be,
and you’re living in your Omega, so you have no idea. Is that it? Okay, so tell me something. What happens if, say, one of your little balls of PlayDoh won’t stay sculpted, won’t play ball, won’t do what you want it to do? What happens if, oh, let’s say, you want someone to buy an engagement ring and an airline ticket, and propose to a man he’s never thought to propose to, and you’re skipping stones at him left and right to nudge him into thinking it’s his idea, but the damn fool is too fucking stubborn to take the hint? What happens then? Do you think maybe, just maybe, under circumstances like that you might suddenly find yourself pretty damned uncomfortable in your Omega and discover suddenly that it’s time to take a spot between your own eyes in your front brain just long enough to whap him upside the head and say, ‘Look, dipshit, I’m practically painting you a fucking picture here!’ You think you’d know it was happening then? Or was that someone else? Am I way off base here? April?”

“Leave her alone, Dean! You have no idea what it’s like…”

“To be Omega! I know, Michael. Believe me, I know. But I also know it’s a shit thing to do to pull a fast one on your own mate.” Dean fixed her with a furious eye. “He would never do that to you!”

“He wouldn’t have to,” she said simply. “He’s Alpha.”

Dean rounded on her furiously, but his eyes were still green. “What a crock! Look, I’m not buying it. It’s the perfect copout isn’t it? If it works, and everybody wins, you get to smile and bow and be the big fucking hero; job well done. If it falls flat on its face, you get to pull up in shock and cry, ‘Oh, no! What on earth could have happened? I didn’t know what I was doing! It wasn’t really me!’ You wanna be safe? Well, sister, you carved yourself a sweet little nest here where nothing you ever do to any of us is on you. Nice going! Only, maybe some of us would’ve wanted to have a say before the wheels were all greased and set into motion.”

“Dean, please! It’s not like that!”

“Right. Because you’re just a kid, and you’re Omega. You’re Submissive. Whatever the fuck you do is on someone else to manage. Christ, what a clusterfuck.”

“I know you’re mad,” she told Michael’s lap. “And I admit that I knew some of it even before it happened. I could feel where the plan was taking us. But I didn’t ever know how we were supposed to get there. If I trace it all back, everything that I remember, you’re probably right. I probably drew Castiel right up to the point of deciding for himself to go to Texas to get you. But he’s too honorable a mate, and his primary side refused to be led by the other two. He needed me to speak to his human side and grant him permission before he would act. I didn’t know him then as well as I do now. It’s not an excuse. I guess I’m saying that if I tried to do it today, it would be cleaner. But Dean, he wasn’t going to act on his own, and he needs you. Call me selfish, but that means I need you too. I could have been a good little girl and left it to the Tops, but then where would we be today? What I wanted was what all of you said you wanted too. And now we have that. And now I have a safety net that will hold me securely while I unravel the craziness in my head and try to figure out how to feed it without running people around like rats in a maze.”

Dean glared at her before huffing through his nose in frustration. “You might try talking to us. Did you ever think of that? No one likes getting played, April.” He got up and turned his back on the table, trying desperately to pull up any emotion but anger. What was there to be angry about? It didn’t change anything. Castiel still loved him. He was still getting married to one of two – count them, two – loves of his life. Everything – and as Dean scrambled through in his mind, he realized literally everything – in his life was better than it had been before Cas Mated April. It hadn’t all been her doing. Cas worked his ass off, and he was a visionary for the ages. Dean was no slouch himself, but all his efforts seemed to pale in the revelation of what she’d pulled off, possibly without even
knowing all of it. And so, what, she maybe had been aware enough of parts of what was happening to encourage pieces along here and there? Was that so bad? Dean balked at being a pawn. She’d scooted him around like a checker piece. He could see it plainly now. All those baffling little interactions, some of them so obvious it had embarrassed him on her behalf, but some of them so carefully hidden that it would have taken him years to work backward without her confession – all of them had a purpose. Dean didn’t know which instrument he was, but he was clearly one of her principal pieces, one of the voices in her magnum opus. They’d both been building a pack, but where he had been a clumsy bricklayer, she had been writing a symphony.

Dean turned around. April still leaned heavily against Michael’s chest. Michael’s green eyes blinked up at Dean. However it had happened, whoever was at fault, Michael was hooked for good, and he wasn’t giving her back.

“You’re not angry about this?” Dean asked his mate. Michael rested his chin on top of her head.

“What’s to be angry about, Dean? The worst she did was speed things up and pull us in tighter than we would’ve been on our own. She’s a genius. I keep telling all y’all. She’s a genius. I keep telling all y’all. No one listens to the Omega.”

“It doesn’t bother you that she set you up to be a chump? Look at you, man!”

Michael smiled and shook his head a little. “I kinda like it, Dean. No one’s ever worked that hard for me before. It’s always been me running after them and eating mud in the process. It feels nice to be wanted.”

“Oh, brother! I need to take a walk. You two behave yourselves! Keep your hands and other appendages to yourselves. We’re sticking with this, ‘no exploring the relationship’, rule. You two are not a thing, you hear me?”

“We’re not together, Dean,” April told him with a straight face. Of course, she did. “I have a lot of work to do on myself before I can consider what I’m capable of having with Michael. I need to get myself right with my mate, and work things out with him. He’s the most important person in my life right now, and I’ve been horribly dishonest from the beginning. For better or worse, that ends tomorrow. I really would like you to stay with me while I talk to him though. I know you’re angry, but I’m asking you anyway. Please, Dean?”

Dean stared at her. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world, kid.” He ran a hand over the back of his neck and reversed course to head out into the sunshine toward the woods down past the big tree.

The Omegas sat silently for several minutes.

“You made me fall for you?” Michael asked.

“Of course not.”

“Good. I’d hate to think I loved you against my will.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” she countered.

He thought about it for a few moments. “Do you love me, Pete? Not that it matters, since we’re not together, but I was just, you know, curious. You don’t have to answer.”

She lifted her head and looked at him. “I’m going to show him everything, Michael, and he’s not going to be able to tell who the targets of my affections are. It will all register as love and affection without any indication whether it’s for him specifically. So, the thing is, I have everything to lose and nothing to gain from an Omega perspective if I tell you this, but I’m telling you anyway because I
want you to know. I love you, Michael Quentin, and that’s not ever going to change. Will you wait for me to grow up a little more? I need to learn myself before I can be sure who I am when I come to you. Will you wait?”

“Of course,” he replied, happier than he ever thought he’d be and astonished that it didn’t include Dean directly. “I’ll wait as long as you need me to. I’m not going anywhere.”

***************

Kali stood beside Jess’ open bedroom window with Hank on her shoulder, patting his back absently. She watched Dean stalk away, past the edge of the pool, between the pool house and the wrought iron fence, out onto the lawn that sloped down toward the shady trees in the very back. Dean’s phone came out of his pocket and straight up to his ear. So, it was to be a live phone call, and not a vague text message. Kali glanced across the window at Jess, seated against the wall on the window seat. She kept her voice low to prevent the Omegas from knowing they were being overheard.

“It’s about to hit the fan. Maybe we should make ourselves scarce.”

Jess was braiding her hair. She listened to the soft voices below her. It was a conversation clearly meant to be private, but the sweetness of it wasn’t something she could make herself walk away from. She listened. A slow smile spread across her face that she shared with Kali. She mouthed, “Holy shit,” at the revelation that April and Michael were both deep in the swamp and didn’t seem to want to be rescued. The low flashing of the rooftop hid the two women from view, but that didn’t keep voices from rising to the second story. Indeed, once the three of them had begun shouting, even glass panes wouldn’t have kept their conversation private.

Kali paced to the middle of the room with the puppy, whose wide, unfocused eyes were beginning to draw concern from his pack. Henry’s eyes weren’t developing on schedule, and he seemed not to have much ability to focus on anything – not like John could. “It’s not something we can help with,” Jess told her softly. “But we should stay in case any of them needs a shoulder or a place to tuck away while the storm passes. I’m not leaving just because it’s getting hairy in there.”

Kali nodded slowly. “If you say so. Looks to me like you’re borderline yourself for going over the edge. Having you here could turn out to be more of a burden than a help. No offense.”

Jess huffed softly at her, tied her hair off, and stood to check on J.T., who was sleeping soundly. He would need changing when he woke up. She opened the closet to dig out diapers and wipes to restock the changing table. “I’m really sorry you got pulled into that,” she told Kali. “I don’t know what was wrong with me. I got so angry that he left me here, even though I knew he had to leave and that it made no sense to take me along. I lost it, Kali, went totally irrational, and made a fool of myself. Did you see the look Michael gave me? I wasn’t about to go to him after that. He would have set me to doing manual labor for penance.”

Kali laughed openly. “He’s good with Subs, but only when he’s in the mood for it. Catch him in a bad mood, and you’ll wish you had never met the man. I don’t blame you one bit.”

“Anyway, thanks for your help. I never tried meditation like that before. It really helped. I feel so much better. And Sam will be home tomorrow. I can hold out till then.”

“It’s not a problem,” Kali told her coolly, uncomfortable with too much overt gratitude. “Everyone
needs a hand up sometimes.”

“Don’t you need to get to work?” asked Jess.

“Sunday hours are my own,” said the tailor. “The storefront is closed. It’s all sewing time. It doesn’t matter when I go in. Besides, it’s my store. It’s nice to be the boss and set your own hours. And it looks like no one’s going to church today.” Kali handed Hank off to his mother and gazed out the window again before pulling it closed. “Pity. They could use a couple of hours of peace this morning before the storm hits. It looks like Dean completely forgot he owes them both a lashing for the past few days. If they were really thinking strategically, they’d pull him down to the church and distract him better than this.”

“Maureen took care of it last night,” Jess replied.

Kali scoffed. “Maureen’s a pathetic excuse for an alpha. It’s her fault they’re in this pickle in the first place. She should have nipped this nonsense in the bud. Instead, she let them ramp up until they’re both on the hook for lying their Omega asses off, they locked up in the pool house and did God knows what for hours, and Michael’s got a bruise under his eye where the Ozzie slapped him – three times if I heard right.”

“What?!!?” exclaimed Jess. “April HIT him? Does Dean know?”

“Weren’t you listening? She just told him all about it.”

“No, I missed part of it. I had Hank in the hall while he was fussing, so you could eavesdrop without getting caught.” She rocked the pup from side to side. He got a firm hold on her braid and worked the tip into his mouth. She watched Kali’s face go slack and distant. “Gabe’s going to come back,” said Jess in as soothing a voice as she could.

“I know,” Kali told her without turning. “But I’m not going to force a marriage he doesn’t want. I’ll wait for him here, and then he’ll decide what he wants from me.”

“Are you going through with the Keller test if he’s still gone when your date comes up?”

Kali turned to face her. “I keep my promises, beta. I said I would do it. Gabriel’s got to make his own choices, but I’ve already made mine.”

“What do you know where he is?”

Kali shook her head sadly. “I could ask Dean. I’d bet he knows. But it doesn’t really matter. Gabe’s testing my resolve with a dose of what it will be like as his wife. That or he’s headed for the hills, and it’s over. Either way, stalking him isn’t going to help. It’s all down to trust now. I don’t control anyone but myself, so I can stay worthy of his trust, and I can continue to have faith that he’ll do the same. Nothing else is in my hands.”

“He loves you,” Jess said helplessly.

“Yes,” Kali replied. “It’s too bad that’s not enough for people like us.”
“I can change my flight,” suggested Cas. “The last two today can be scrubbed without any real damage. I’ll send Billie in my place. She’s better at interviews anyway.”

“Nah, babe. Your appointment on Capital Hill isn’t until two. You can’t skip that one. We need a solid game plan, and we need Washington on board. Sit tight. Ride it out. Keep your focus. We are so fucking close to bringing home a total win this time, but only if you see it through. I missed, ”Meet the Press.” Were you awesome, brilliant, and sexy as usual?”

Cas laughed into his phone. Billie looked up from her notes across the bench seat of their chauffeured car. “Yes, Dean. Prepare to be astounded and aroused. I was magnificent.”

“That’s my Alpha.”

Cas took several moments to pause and watch the commuters fill the Beltway with congestion that bespoke public civil productivity. “How bad is it?” he asked Dean.

He could hear the gears grind in Dean’s head as he worked out what to say. “Fly home as planned tonight, C.J. Get home and get a good night’s rest. Don’t go to work tomorrow. The Facility is in chaos, and it’s all in the attorneys’ hands anyway. Let them regroup. Take the day. Babe, I need you to face this head on, and I need you Primary. You’re gonna have to have an open mind.”

“What?! Has there been another attack? Dean, is someone hurt? Forget the appointment. I’m coming home now!”

“Whoa! Hold up! Cas! Castiel James, listen to me! No one’s hurt. It’s not an attack. It’s just us, man. We need to talk. Don’t change your plans. The world isn’t grinding to a halt here. I’m trying to tell you that it would help if you had a head’s up that your second and third are going to have a hard time hearing some of it without you on top of your game. Can you do that for us?”

“What’s going on? Tell me right now, Dean Michael!”

“It’s nothing we can’t handle as a pack. It’ll be better to talk face to face. You already had the lead-in. It’s all about your mate and how she’s growing into the role as your mate. Don’t freak out on me and go jumping to conclusions. And before you start wondering – no, she’s not fucking Michael. Just skip over that one. You aren’t coming home to a pregnant mate.” Dean chuckled into the mouthpiece, but Cas wasn’t laughing. “I checked their scents myself. They’re both clean.”

“You’re not making me feel any better about staying in D.C., Dean.”

“Just believe me, man. We can do this. It’s been a miracle we got this far without it hitting us upside the head before now. It’s all a part of feeling our way through. I need you to trust me, Cas. And I’m trusting you right back. You hear me?”

“It’s a terrible time for a day off, alpha,” Cas told him.

“Yeah, well. We’ll survive. Benny and Sam don’t get back from New York for another day, and Bobby’s trapped in Dayton until next Tuesday. There’s not gonna be anyone there to confer with anyway. Your mate needs you, man. And you need to turn your Alpha way down and listen to her.”

“All right,” the Alpha conceded. “I hear you. I’ll be home late, baby. Don’t wait up for me.”

“Oh, hey!” Dean interjected before Cas hung up. “You owe me brownie points. Michael’s still grounded from driving, and there’s no one but me who can run him out to visit Naomi this afternoon. He roped me in, did the guilt trip thing with the eyes and the brow and the … needless to say, I’m driving. But I’m not happy about it, and you owe me.”
Cas laughed again. “Thank you,” he said simply. “I’ll see you soon. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Alpha. Go kick some D.C. ass.”

Chapter End Notes

I solemnly swear to bring Castiel home next chapter.

Comments are sacred to me. Full agreement is SO not required, but civility is. Love this pack!
Chapter 91

Chapter Summary

Gabriel has his hands full, April's really trying but can't quite make her statement stick when her mate's around. Dean and Michael have hit their stride. The Alpha tho. It really all comes down to him.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for breaking my 15k limit again. I threw in some totally unnecessary extraneous stuff that has zero to do with plot development, but it adds flavor, and I like the softer, less driven interactions anyway, so it stays.

Real quick note about sexual orientation as it works in this AU: It's been super super simplified in terms of how people identify. There's a convo between Dean and Michael about some of the variations (see note above about extraneous shit) that makes Dean seem ignorant about some seemingly straightforward questions. I want to say that instead, he's just not limiting his world view to the vocab that describes it. Lupins have been saddled with the assumptions of sexual variety from the other species, and they still lack a full range of words to unravel the complexities. In essence, each individual has to define their own identity and figure out how to put it into words. Many of them don't even try to use the words apes provided for them. I figure there's a lot of real world applicability where there are currently only so many established societally acceptable words we're supposed to use, and those words don't fit all of us. My own personal choice was to pick one that seems closest and then let it go since it's really not close enough. That's what Dean's attitude about Castiel is - he's like, Whatever.

Excuse the ramble. Carry on.

Oh, and I'm really, really sorry. Fair warning.

(See end for spoiler warning.)
NOW:

“Shhh, shhh, quiet now. Remember, what we said,” Krissy whispered. “Quiet like a mouse.” She cast a nervous glance at Gabe, and he shook his head. They were running out of time, and the boy was still moaning in fear. They couldn’t cross like this. Gabe cocked his gun silently and edged his head around the dark corner. It was only fifty yards, but it might as well be fifty miles if the kid didn’t shut up. The other three stood motionless and barely breathing, awaiting instruction. They’d either given up entirely and handed their fates to the Universe, or they were already so well-trained that they would literally walk through a hail of bullets on an alpha’s instruction. The boy was young. His baby fat still dimpled his cheeks, but the stimulants they gave him highlighted every Omega scent his body could produce. He was probably loopy from the drugs anyway. He wasn’t capable of following instruction.

“Can you carry dead weight?” Gabe asked Krissy, focusing down on his gun before flicking cold eyes up to her. His eyes were nothing anyone wanted to mess with, no matter their designation. Krissy stepped backward involuntarily and put her body in front of the terrified freshly-Presented Omega. Gabe simply raised his eyebrows, and Krissy nodded reluctantly. Swiftly, Gabe uncocked his pistol and set the safety all in one motion before flipping it and stepping forward. He moved so fast that the boy never saw it coming when Gabriel brought the handle down hard against his temple, and he crumpled where he stood. Krissy caught him, wedged a shoulder into his belly, and stood up, adjusting him into a fireman’s carry.

“I’m gonna count fifteen, and then you take them and go. Alex is at the halfway mark. Make straight for her. Don’t stop for anything.” Gabe whispered fast and stern. Krissy turned enough to check that the others were listening. None of them had flinched at the blow or their compatriot’s collapse, but she had their eyes, and they were ready. “Don’t look back, and don’t stop moving. I’m buying the steaks when we get to Montreal.”

Krissy nodded again, and Gabe began a slow count at nearly imperceptible volume. Krissy followed
the pulse more than the words as he muttered under his breath and searched the yard in every direction at once. The safety of his gun slid off again, and the slight click told Krissy he was prepared to cover her dash. The boy weighed nothing, but an unfortunate shift at the wrong time would be disastrous. She hefted him again and checked his stability. She hardened her face until her alpha was all the standing trio could see of her, she snarled at them, and when Gabe hit “One” she snapped, “Go!” in a fierce hiss.

Krissy lead the way, straight out into the darkness of wide open nothing that felt like diving into outer space. There was nothing in front of them but hard packed ground and gravel which crunched loud enough to make the moaning protests of a terrified 12-year-old no more than a kitten’s mewl. They couldn’t go back. Krissy glanced over her shoulder and counted. She still had all of them, and they were running. They were running like they hadn’t signed their fates over to the Universe. Thank fucking God.

The first shot rang out when they were half way to Alex. The second sounded closer, and a shower of upset gravel jumped off the ground six feet to Krissy’s left. Then the shouting started, and from there, silence was pointless.

“GO! GO! GO! C’MON! FOLLOW ME!!” She tried to keep her volume reasonable, but their eyes had gone feral, and she couldn’t risk them panicking. They could scatter at any moment. Krissy dove into the dark hollow at the mid-point, and Alex stepped up to shield them and return fire. “Straight ahead, right?!” asked Krissy desperately, searching the darkness. Everything looked so different after nightfall, but she prayed they could clear out before the searchlights came up.

“Don’t you ever pay attention to plans?” Alex teased her, squeezing off a carefully aimed shot. “Dude! Yes! Straight on till morning. Claire’s not gonna let you get lost. Go!”

Krissy didn’t wait for more information. With another stern, “Come on!” she bolted, and her lemmings followed her. Thank God they were fit and fleet. They were gonna make it. Krissy reached the relative safety of the shipping crate and scuttled up to the sliced fencing with her brood, nodding at the hole and shoving them through one by one.

“What happened to that one?” Claire’s voice came out of nowhere. She was shepherding Omegas, but her eyes were on Krissy.

“He needed a hand in keeping quiet,” explained Krissy, lowering her shoulder, letting him slide off and halfway through the fence, where Claire caught him and pulled him through. Krissy followed without a backward glance. There was still gunfire, but less of it was coming from the compound or the tower. More than one had been silenced out there in the darkness, and they still hadn’t turned on the searchlights. The shouting didn’t stop though, and that meant they were out of time.

“This way!” hissed Claire to the lost puppies. “Oi!! Pay attention!! This way!” It was a good thing they were already blown. Claire really didn’t do quiet. “I’m not carrying driftwood,” she snapped at Krissy, but she helped the alpha load up again, and they got the others moving.

Krissy could tell that Gabe had broken cover and was making his way closer to the fence. With any luck, he’d get to the halfway cover before the lights snapped…On.

“They’ve seen Gabe! Run, Claire! Go!”

“What the fuck does it look like I’m doing!?”

The floodlights turned the impenetrable darkness into instant daylight across the compound, but the field outside only had a flashing slash of desperately searching beams. There were two of them. It
made the going much, much easier, but it made hiding for long impossible. All they had was their feet, and they used them. They could hear Alex and Gabe shouting behind them. More shots rang out, and more shouting followed. Claire dove into the driver’s seat and started the jeep, barely waiting for the others to jump in too before tearing out of the underbrush and back the way they had come.

“What are you doing?!” Krissy screamed. They hadn’t just run four people to safety only to have them taken right back again.

“I’m not leaving them.” Claire was calm but determined. The jeep was made for off-road, but they hadn’t scoped the terrain. They jounced viciously as it hit a shallow ditch and nearly capsized. “Hold on, folks!”

“Are you crazy?! They’re coming!! What happened to sticking to the fucking plan?!?”

“I’m in charge, alpha,” Claire told her in a dead-calm voice. “That means I get to change the plan.”

Claire spotted her two teammates, hunkered behind a groundswell that was no cover at all, but at least they were on the good side of the fence. Bullets rained around them. Gabe looked over his shoulder, spotted them, and signaled her to pull to the right of their position. Gabe and Alex both broke position at once and dashed on an intercept course for the jeep just as a weaving floodlight zeroed in on them and the machine gun fire sounded from the tower.

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The sun wasn’t even graying the sky yet. If Cas had slept at all it was an hour or two, no more. Dean didn’t know. After nearly a week of shortened sleep shifts, he’d crashed hard last night and totally missed the Alpha’s return. He startled awake in an instant when Castiel shook his shoulder and beckoned him out to the hallway and down to the Alpha’s office. Nothing about the Alpha’s scent boded well.

Dean padded quickly in his wake and closed the office door behind him, only to have it slip open again when April pushed through.

Castiel’s face told Dean that he’d rather the Omega hadn’t followed, but his arm settled around her anyway.

“What’s going on?” asked Dean.

“I’m not sure. Urgent signal from Bobby.” Cas shifted around to the front of the desk and sat down. He picked up his desk phone and dialed the alpha, clicking over to speaker and setting the receiver back down. April settled on her knees to his right, near his feet. Out of the way.

“Cas,” crackled Bobby. “We got all four of them, and they’re in good shape.”

“Then why the 911?” asked Castiel.

“We’ve got a man down, Alpha. One of ours. I don’t know who yet, and I don’t know what condition. Claire sent me the code.”

“What DO you know?!” demanded Castiel. “Bobby, is my brother hurt?!”

“I don’t know yet. They made it to the check stop. They’re in Baylon’s village; at least the Omegas
they pulled made it in. I need to wait for Claire or one of the others to get a signal before we learn more.”

“Who’s protecting that village, Bobby?” Dean leaned in and asked.

“It’s fully covered, Dean. Been our stashing ground for a long time. No one’s going to follow them inside, and we’ve got a good medical facility geared to tending Omegas there.”

“Why is there no signal?” Cas asked, louder than he meant to. “You’re telling me a state of the art halfway house that sanctuaries refugees has no means of communication?”

“It’s limited, Castiel. We can’t draw a lot of attention by making an energy-guzzling hotspot in the middle of the Canadian wilderness. They don’t build cell towers out there. Access to the satellite phone follows a plan, or they blow cover. Give me 20 minutes. I’ll get you word. Hang tight, fellas. He’s fine. My Claim is solid, and I can feel him. He’s fine.”

Dean met Cas’ eye. “That just means it’s one of the others,” he pointed out. Not Claire. Possibly not Gabe if Bobby’s bond was working. That left Krissy and Alex. Dean’s heart lodged behind his Adam’s apple, and he swallowed hard to dislodge it. “What’s it feel like to you, C.J.? Can you feel him? I got nothing from this distance.” Dean’s Claim-bond with his brother-in-law had barely weakened at all in the months since he’d placed it. It acted like a filial bond – strong, resilient, and lasting – even though Dean and Gabe were not related by blood. But Dean couldn’t feel anything at all.

“He’s alive,” said Cas, staring into the distance. April sobbed in relief and laid her head on her mate’s knee. “Can’t read if he’s hurt.” He turned his attention back to the phone. “Find out and call us right back, Bobby. Do whatever you have to do to protect all of them.”

“I’m on it, sir.” Bobby hung up, and Cas flopped back in his chair.

“He’s okay.” said Dean from his perch on the loveseat before stumbling to his feet. “I’m going for Kali. Be right back.”

“What’s ‘Baylon’s village’?” April asked with her chin on Cas’ thigh. She had settled onto her hip more than her knees.

Cas pursed his lips and ran fingers through her hair. “It’s, uh, it’s a midway point of sorts for aboriginal wolves who want to leave their packs in the wilderness and join modern society. It’s small enough not to overwhelm them, but it introduces them to the structures of our society. It’s also a place where Lupin refugees from oppression or places of unrest can find sanctuary. We have a good relationship with Baylon Knight, who runs the place. He’s still more aboriginal than he is modern, so he’s a good translator between worlds. He knows what it’s like in modern society. He just doesn’t much like it.”

“The packs don’t try to stop wolves from leaving?” she asked sleepily.

“Individuals who are not bonded are free to make their own choices. Most people who were raised in the wild, choose to stay in the wild, but some people don’t. They aren’t slave owners or cults, April. They’re just people. Sometimes young people feel a pull to leave the place they were born to seek something different. I would guess you can relate to that.”

She smiled sadly. “I suppose so. And that’s where Gabe is? Somewhere in Canada?”

Cas’ hands clenched into fists as he felt tingles in his fingers. He looked down at them. “Somewhere in Canada.”
The door cracked open. Dean ushered Kali in with a hand on her robe-clad shoulder. Her eyes were wide and scared, but she settled into the corner of the loveseat, pulled her knees up under her chin and blinked owlishly without saying a word. Cas nodded somberly to her and refocused down at his fists.

Dean rounded the desk. He lowered himself to the floor at Cas’ knee opposite April, rested his cheek against the Alpha’s thigh, and closed his eyes. He prayed their vigil wouldn’t take long. He felt fingers separating the locks of his hair as they sifted through. He felt April’s head come back to rest close to his on Cas’ right thigh. There was really nothing further to say. April’s fingers found their way beneath the tunnel of Cas’ legs and curled into Dean’s. They sat like that for longer than twenty minutes. Michael found them and shuffled in with a frown, craning his head to check that his Mating-bond had led him right, and Dean was in the room. He didn’t ask any questions either, but his furrowed forehead knit his brow into a ‘V’ as he took Dean’s place on the loveseat. Cas had his head back against his chair with his eyes closed. His hands were both in motion over his Subs’ hair. Kali shifted to lean into Michael. He wrapped an arm around her. They waited.

The phone ringing at last startled no one. It sounded like an inevitability, as if the Universe had created this moment for the singular purpose of sending sound waves through air to connect alpha to Alpha. Cas opened his eyes and press the speaker button.

“Bobby,” he said.

“Cas, it’s Alex. I’m sorry, Alpha, it looks bad. She took two bullets and neither of them are where the surgeon can get to them right now. She seems stable, but they can’t move her. I’m flying help in. She was one of the last rescue dogs from his days of scrounging up wayward alphas like Dean, like Castiel. She was younger though, possibly the very last before he changed focus and committed to building something bigger with Cas. The relief that the Winchesters felt in knowing Gabriel was safe was misplaced and short-lived. It wasn’t Gabe who lay in mortal danger, but it was still Pack. “We can’t lose her fellas.”

“We hear ya, Bobby. She’ll be okay,” Dean said.

“I never much scoped for girls back in the day, guys,” Bobby admitted. “But she found ME. And I gotta tell you, I was damn lucky she did.”

“We were all lucky you two found each other, Singer,” said Cas gently. “Thanks for calling to let us know. If you need anything from me at all, just let me know. Anything, Bobby. Go on up there and sit with her. She needs family right now.”

“I can’t, boss,” Bobby croaked. “Security barely wanted to allow the medical team through. They’ve put the whole place on lockdown until they assess the risk. Claire drives like a maniac, and we think she might’ve drawn some eyes westward. We can’t let on that that village is anything but a pitstop for people headed out of the wild.”

Cas sighed. His fingers gripped Dean’s hair in a clench that had the Sub grinding his jaw at the pain. So, Gabe wasn’t as safe as he first sounded, and Alex was in dire condition. “Take it one step at a time, alpha,” Cas told him. “We’ll be in touch if any of them touches base here. Call us when you know anything.”

“Yup. Will do. And Cas? Son, it’s still worth it. I talked to Krissy. She went inside with Gabe this time. Said it was horrific. Said Alex would choose this outcome every time if they could walk away
with even one kid, and they pulled four. Outta the girls’ own mouths. It’s worth it.”

“We’ll see,” said Castiel tersely. He was looking across the desk at Kali who had broken into sobs of relief, her face buried in Michael’s chest. This was a far cry from an elopement.

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“Hey, Dean,” Michael introduced with an air of opening a philosophical discussion.

“Yup?” Dean replied from his post against the parlor door jamb looking out across the enormous foyer to the bank of short, sharp hallways on the other side where the offices and library defined the business section of the house. Castiel and April had been in there alone for over an hour, and Dean’s weak bond-link with his fiancé was insufficient to tell him enough of what might be going on. Michael was lounging on his favorite of the soft couches nursing his morning mug and hoping no one would notice if he just didn’t mention that he had class in an hour and a half.

“What is it about girls you don’t like?” He sipped casually, watching Dean over the rim.

Dean turned slowly in astonishment. “What? Are you kidding me? Don’t you think we have bigger fish in the pan than digging out the root of my sexuality?”

“We can’t do anything until they come out of there,” Michael pointed out. “Just idle conversation, I guess. Humor me.”

“First of all,” said Dean, turning so that his back pressed into the jamb, and he could see both directions without leaving his post. “Fucking rude. Second, it’s not that I don’t like girls, dude. I just don’t like playing with them.”

Michael ignored Dean’s first point. “But they’re soft, and they move differently than guys do. It’s awesome.”

Dean’s face flattened. His eyes rolled a little, and he turned back to his vigil, muttering, “Awesome. Don’t you need to get dressed for class?”

Michael turned and lurched his feet off the end of the couch, sitting upright with his cup and watching Dean carefully. “What about female alphas?” he asked, pushing his luck. “They’ve got all the boy parts. Does your orientation see them as men or women?”

Dean thumped the back of his head against the side of the door hard enough to throb for a second. He pushed off the doorframe and walked slowly to Michael with his head cocked. “Female alphas are still women, man. I don’t make the rules to this stuff. Female alphas don’t have cheek stubble or firm chests. It’s not the same at all. But that’s me. Other guys see it totally different.”

Michael nodded, but he wasn’t finished exploring. “Except you don’t have a problem fucking girls in a Claim situation. I don’t get how it’s different.” Michael let Dean take his mug from his hands and kneel up close between his knees.

“Why are we talking about this right now?” Dean asked him. He set Michael’s mug on the table behind him and wrapped his fingers gently around the curve of Michael’s hipbones, each thumb settling into the divots of his thighs.
“I’m curious.”

“You’re worried about me, and you think I need a distraction.”

“Yes. And I’m curious. I don’t have the years of background in all this that you do. A lot of it is a mystery to me.” Michael liked having Dean physically close. Dean’s hands on him felt like the most authentic version of home.

“You need me to explain ‘Homosexuality 101’ to you?” Dean’s eyes crinkled with light amusement, and Michael counted the distraction a victory.

“I get being gay, Dean. What I don’t understand is how that doesn’t carry over to Claiming. They’re still girls. Why is it different?”

Dean frowned and disappointed Michael by shifting back onto his heels. From Dean’s perspective it was an odd question coming from a Dominant Lupin. Of course it was different. How could Michael not have felt that for himself at some point? “Because fucking in play is all about hitting the pleasure sensors and the intimacy sensors and forming an interpersonal connection that feels good.” It was the best he could do on the fly, and it sounded stupid in his own ears. “Claiming-sex isn’t really fucking to me at all, you know? It’s…it’s mounting more than it’s sex. Totally different objective that reaches a totally different part of my head. It’s not about pleasure or intimacy at all. It’s about taking a stand on the high ground and claiming your space relative to someone else. It’s all about hierarchy.”

“So, it doesn’t feel good?” Michael challenged. “It’s just drudgery? Like, work, work, work?”

Dean laughed and leaned in to taste Michael’s lips and feel stubble against his cheek. Neither of them had shaved yet this morning what with their abrupt early rise. “There’s still friction, pressure, and nerve endings, dude. Claiming doesn’t turn me into a robot. But seriously, you’ve never noticed a difference?”

Michael scoffed and patted Dean’s cheek harshly. “When would I have ever had the chance? Besides, I’m happy either way. I don’t have to switch off the play sensors just to take a stand.”

“Lucky you,” snarked Dean, rolling to his feet.

“What does it mean that Cas calls himself Pansexual?” Michael asked as Dean made moves to return to his sentry duty.

Dean stopped and turned back to face him. His expression told Michael clearly that he was tiring of the Omega’s efforts to distract him, but he was willing to offer one more strand of patience. “No idea, really,” he confessed. “I’ve never asked him. None of my business, if you think about it. As long as I’m part of his matrix, and we’re cool together, that’s all that matters to me. How he puts it into words isn’t important.”

“He doesn’t have any preferences at all?” Michael pressed again. This time it was genuine curiosity. “Whatever, whoever, whenever? Anyone at all?”

“Oh, he definitely has preferences,” Dean’s gaze grew distant as several moments from Castiel’s past flickered swiftly through his memory. “But I’ve never known him to turn someone down because he didn’t find them appealing sexually. I don’t think he works that way. It’s way more about who’s inside the body than what parts are dangling off the body, and he’s got a wide array of...let’s just say, he’s not a picky eater.” Dean forgot to be annoyed as he followed the rabbit trail down into one of his favorite subjects. “Now his wolf,” he clarified. “Does not like bland food. If he’s feeding the wolf, he wants someone who will push back and make their presence known until they can’t struggle
anymore, and then will take all the fire that he can unleash. You put someone like Sam in that position, and the wolf is either going to tear him apart or walk away in disgust without ever laying a hand on him.”

“Yeah? And what besides the wolf?”

Dean knew Michael was leading him out of fixating on the office door, but he shook his head. “Cas’ Alpha wants just the opposite. He wants compliance to the point that whatever he throws out there gets a ‘Yes, Sir,’ no matter what it is. And Cas’ Primary designation loves sweet and tender; all about the intimacy. Keeping all three of them filled up…you can imagine that how the parts are assembled within the body he’s with doesn’t make a whole lot of difference.”

“Thought you didn’t know how he defined it? None of your business?”

“I don’t care how he defines it, Michael. I need to understand him well enough to take care of him and not press any of his boundary buttons, but the definitions are pointless to me. You could just call him ‘Sexual.’ That about covers it. And I have a theory about him that we’re never likely to get a chance to test: I don’t think he’s ‘Pan’ in terms of being attracted without defined limits. I think he’s attracted to subordinates in designation. If he met someone who ranked higher than him, that would get a firm ‘NOPE’ from my big dog. What do you think? Can you picture him going for it with someone who outranks him? God, can you imagine?”

“That’s a fascinating theory, Dean.” Cas’ voice startled Dean, and he jumped, spinning in place and blushing in embarrassment. “You’re probably right.” Cas and April stood near the parlor entrance, hand in hand. “Michael, please go bathe and dress for the day,” Cas continued, unperturbed. “Joshua is expecting you on time this morning. Dean, would you please drive him? April and I are going upstairs. It’s been a difficult separation for us and a difficult morning. We need to reconnect.”


Cas looked at his mate, and his face was drawn. April met his eye quite differently than her usual mien. Gone was the shallow affectation, and in its place was a look of tenuous hope tempered by fear. She wanted badly to trust him, but that bridge hadn’t been crossed yet. Castiel pulled their joined hands forward and squeezed. “We left a great deal unsaid in our original rule matrix,” he told the room at large. “We’ve been discussing boundaries and preferences in a way we should have done more fully months ago. There is a great deal more we need to get into today, but we also need to come back together as a couple and get ourselves realigned. I can’t ignore the fact that I was lied to about our bond closure. But also, we both need a renewal of our bond connection, and we missed each other desperately.”

Dean clapped Michael on the shoulder to get him moving toward the stairs. “Take the play room, Cas. You hit a better headspace for Claim renewal in there than you do in the bedroom. I swear, for a guy who can unleash the thunder like nobody’s business, you can make kinky sex sound boring as hell.”

“I’m borderline controlling my impulses right now, Dean. Please don’t provoke me unless you’re hoping to drive Michael to school perched up on your thighs.”

“There he is,” cheeked Dean with a kiss to Castiel’s lips on his way past. “Go do your thing, whatever you guys need, but please don’t go heavy into the deep talks before I get back. April wants a spotter for that, and I told her I’d sit in.”

Dean watched Cas’ eyes as the Alpha turned. He nodded. He wasn’t surprised by the request. April
had clearly already warned him she would feel safer with backup, and Cas seemed reconciled to it. “I expect you will have returned before we re-emerge. I plan to take my time. She deserves my full attention, and vice versa.”

Dean jogged up a couple of steps, following Michael. “And then we’re going to go to the shelter to choose a dog?” His tone was light, but everyone knew he was testing the pressure level in the room.

Cas sighed and looked back at April. “No, Dean. Everything is on hold for the moment until I’m sure we’re stable – all of us.”

“Everything?” He stopped and turned halfway up. “Even our foursome? Even my big scene up at The Facility? Michael’s been working on it for weeks now.”

“Everything that might be considered a change to our Pack dynamic or a step into a new realm of expression is on hold,” Cas answered. “So, yes, to all of that. It’s all suspended for the moment.”

“Damn,” grumbled Dean. He trudged up the stairs. He felt the brat poke at him behind his sternum, and he snarled at it and swatted it down. Not now, you prick, he thought at it. This is important, and it’s not about us.

“What was that?” Cas called up to him.

“Yes, sir!” Dean called back without turning around. He didn’t really mean to slam the door behind him, but it slipped.

Michael spent his shower working out an argument that would win him the privilege of staying home today. Dean had his knees propped up in front of him on the bed, his feet flat to the comforter, and a yellow legal pad on his thighs in which he was scribbling out book notes. He glanced up as the Omega emerged from the bathroom, nude and drying his hair vigorously with a towel. He only required that one look to know what Michael was about to say.

“No,” said Dean firmly.

“It’s one fucking day, sir,” Michael said, joining the rebellious spirit that would align with Dean’s brat with his deference to soothe Dean’s sense of authority. “Please? Alpha? She needs both of us. You’re skipping out today, too. It’s my pack as much as it is yours, and I have more at stake. You aren’t the one with your heart wrapped around her pinkie finger. I’m not going to be able to concentrate.”

“No,” he repeated more firmly.

“If he learns what’s bubbling around down in there and what it has to do with me, I need to be here to confront him. We can’t let her take all that alone.”

“She’s not going to be alone, and you’ve already missed too much class time. You’re going. That’s final.”

“Dean, this is bigger than any fucking class. I’m begging you.”
“I said it’s final. That means drop it.” Dean set his notepad on the bed and tucked his legs beneath him. “She’s going to be fine. It’s not all going to blow over that easily anyway. We’ll still be here when you get home, and we’ll still be working our way through it. We have to give the two of them the space they need to talk just to each other without you clogging up the works at first. Most of what they need to figure out has nothing to do with you at all.”

Michael grimaced. “I’m not worried about ME,” he argued. “I want to be there for her. I’m abandoning her when she needs me most.”

“Then let me take that out of your hands by telling you you don’t have a choice. Put your pants on and get ready. We’re leaving in twenty minutes.”

“I hate you,” snapped Michael, turning back toward the bathroom, and that was too far over the line for Dean to let go. He wasn’t under any illusions that he was going to pull remorse from his mate, as he turned Michael’s backside, speckled with spot bruises from Maureen’s spoon, bright red with his pliable belt, but he could feel the full circle of cause and effect close up in Michael’s Omega brain. Dean dropped the belt and pulled Michael off the wall by his shoulder, cradling him in his mate’s arms.

“I know you’re scared. I know you want to stay with her through everything she’s facing. But she needs to stand on her own right now, love. She’s got that whole other side of herself that must learn to fight its way to the surface, even when the biggest baddest is standing right in front of her, angry or protective or whatever. If you’re right about her, Michael, and she’s really a match for Castiel, then she can do this. She doesn’t need a crutch to lean on any more than I did when you and Cas conspired to challenge my alpha into fighting for the surface. That turned out all right, didn’t it?” Dean held him close and rubbed the sting out for him, turning it into a deep muscle massage that Michael dissolved into.

“Didn’t know you knew about that,” Michael snuffled.

“Never assume I don’t already know something,” Dean reminded him with a grounding hold on the back of Michael’s head. “I love you, man, even if you hate my guts for making you go to class. Go get dressed and meet me downstairs.”

AMILA

“I’m sorry, Sir,” she sniffled when her efforts to keep her tears from smearing on his chest proved fruitless. She dabbed at the wet spots.

“Kind of a strange thing to worry about, considering,” he said softly, taking her hand in his and holding it still. “I like having you close enough to cover me in your scent, Kitten. I like everything about you, and you can use me as your tissue any time you want.” His blue eyes sparkled with adoration and tenderness. A hand beneath her chin suggested a desire to pull her in for a light kiss, but he didn’t force it. They were tied face to face for a while, sweat mingling together as they cooled. Her salty tears would have been indistinguishable anyway.

April let herself fall into his eyes and lean in for his lips now that they were plump from use. She preferred them like this, not dry and chapped as they often were before she got a chance to work them over. Their bond lay pulsing between them, pulsing with aftershocks and anticipation.
“Love, we don’t have to do this today if you’re not ready,” he said after pulling back and swiping a thumb across her lower lip. “I told you I would wait for you to build trust in me, and I meant it. There are things I haven’t told you either. I know what you can see and feel within me, and I know it’s intimidating. I can’t shield you from all that.”

She shook her head a little, and he stopped talking and frowned in concentration. Dean had told him to try to stay Primary, and reading between the lines, Castiel inferred that April’s fear had to do with what Cas didn’t know about her. He had hoped she would come to trust him more quickly than she seemed to have done, and that she would open up of her own free will. Something had spooked her badly though, and he could read a steep fall in her immediate future if they didn’t dive straight into it – whatever ‘it’ was. Feeding their wolves to completion before they talked would bench their Tertiaries for a while, not that April’s wolf ever found full completion. The bitch within her was insatiable. But she was satisfied well enough for now. April would be smarting for days, with angry stripes across her shoulders, her ass, and nearly to the backs of her knees. She didn’t need any bandages, but he would be watching her closely, and she had earned some coddling over the next week. She was glorious when she screamed.

Their Secondaries, likewise sated from the heavy breathing, grunting, knotting, and intimate moans preceding a pair of orgasms that aligned beautifully, were sleeping it off in the shadows, tightly connected. She made him feel like a God when he came. She made him feel invincible. All he wanted was to return like for like and find a way to soothe her every fear. The tears that continued to fall from her pretty blue eyes spoke of emotion powerful enough to overwhelm and force an escape through a physical vent. Her hands clung to his shoulders like a lifeline.

“I don’t want a shield, Castiel,” she told him in an odd voice. It was broken and part-strangled as if struggling its way through. “I want all of you, if you’ll share it with me. I can handle it. I’m stronger than I look.”

“I know, you are,” he said seriously. “But some of it is dark enough that I rarely look deeply into it myself. It’s not safe for you to dwell down there. I can’t get rid of the darkness, Kitten. It’s always going to be a part of me, but I can live my life without letting it dictate who I am and what I do. I don’t think there’s any way to let you into that without making it a burden you don’t need to bear. I can wall it off and keep it in a box that makes it manageable for me, but that box is meaningless to you. You don’t have the same access to compartmentalize what you sense. You’re going to receive everything I allow you to see as one unmitigated flow. No one could take that without being crushed by the weight. It’s not an option. Please understand, I don’t think you’re weak, but I have no choice but to run what you feel from me through a filter.”

She frowned and toyed with the hair on his chest. “What would it be like…if your filter wasn’t working?”

Cas shifted up onto his elbow and looked down at her in concern. “It would be devastating,” he told her. “I would seem monstrous to you. It’s not the wolf, April. He’s wild and selfish, no brakes, all about taking what he wants, you know the drill. But I’ve got a firm handle on him. He’s not hard to control because he’s utterly predictable. No, sweetheart, it’s the Alpha. At its core, it’s a tyrant, an overprotective, possessive despot, and if you knew the impulses I struggle to suppress just to keep me human, it would terrify you. It seems unleashed and unleasable. Kitten, I can’t let you watch that. Please tell me you’re not watching that.” Castiel’s face paled as she dropped to the pillow with a sigh.

“That’s why you’re frightened,” he deduced. “April, baby, look at me. Can you see more than I’m sending you?” Cas didn’t want her spooked by his worry. He relaxed the line across his shoulders and dropped down even with her on the pillows, intimately. He couldn’t do anything about the
furrow in his brow though. “I need you to tell me the truth. If you can see into the Alpha without any context, with no way to see how I’ve got it leashed, all you’re going to see is a maniacal unbridled power-mad dictator. Is that what I look like to you? It’s okay to tell me the truth. I promise, it’s okay.”

Her chest heaved in fear, but her eyes held his. She gathered herself, didn’t even attempt to control the tremors from her body, and shifted the tangle of emotional turmoil through their bond and into his lap. She had seen everything there was to see from the beginning. She was tied physically and metaphysically to him, and there was no way to change that right now. The connection between their eyes reminded her that she didn’t want out of the bond around her body, her mind, and her heart. She wanted it desperately. She wanted this. She wanted him. He’d been so good to her, and he was obviously devastated to learn what being bonded to him had left her burdened with. He’d been dealing with it since childhood, and he was built to handle the size and scope of his designations. She was an Omega, unsuited and unprepared for the weight. He had abandoned her to carry it alone and worry about what it meant for her. Terrified didn’t begin to describe what she was feeling.

“Shh,” he soothed with a hand in her hair. “It’s going to be okay. It’s not what it looks like. I can explain. Jesus, Kitten, how did you get access to this in the first place?”

She squeezed her eyes closed tightly and grimaced at the pressure behind her eyes. Dean was meant to be here for this. “That’s what I have to tell you, sir,” she stumbled through. “And I want to. I really do. Can we do it after…?”

He lowered his line of sight, his forehead creased heavily. “After we untie? Of course. April, please don’t be afraid. I’m not going to hurt you. I can explain what you’re sensing. I swear you’re safe, sweetheart. Let’s hold off a bit. I want Dean, too. We need him, don’t we? I need him as much as you do. Come here.” He embraced her and tucked her close under his chin in the divot his body seemed to have formed just for her. It was kitten-shaped. She shuddered, but she clung to him. “I’m going to take care of you, my love. Always.”

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Dean paced in the foyer. The narrow stairs, broken by a series of landings, led down from the rear of the foyer to the lower rooms, the sweat rooms, Dean always thought of them. He knew they were down there, and they would come this way when they untied. It was taking forever. Had they decided to forgo his presence and start digging through the chaos without him? Cas had told him not to hold his breath, but the wait was killing him.

He heard the door unlatch from the top of the stairs, and he hurled himself around the corner to watch them work their way up. April was limping and leaning heavily on her mate’s arm. At least she was ambulatory. Dean had been carried out of that room more than once – not from necessity of course, just out of, uh, preference and deference. Cas liked to carry him. That’s really all it was.

“Are you all right?” Dean asked April, ignoring the Alpha. Cas allowed it without comment. He helped her mount the stairs, but he didn’t hover terribly.

“I’m fine, Dean. I deserved the switching. That was the most disrespectful thing I’ve ever done to my mate, and I feel better now that we’ve settled up about it.” She climbed slowly, one hand clutching the handrail, and the other holding Cas’ forearm.
“I’m not talking about your punishment, and you know it,” he told her. “You’re damn right you deserved whatever he gave you. I’m talking about the rest of it. What have you two been talking about?” Dean reached out to her as the pair approached. She transferred her weight from the handrail to her mate-in-law’s strong grip.

“I could use some water,” she said cryptically.

“There’s a pitcher in the front Omega calling room,” Dean told her. “I thought we could talk in there. It’s small and private. Is that okay?”

Cas wrapped an arm around his mate as they emerged from the tight space and she continued to lean in to Dean. “That’s fine, Dean,” he said. He helped guide her shaky steps. Dean didn’t get an answer to his question.

“Michael’s been dropped off,” the alpha told them. “He’s pissed about being excluded. Expect a call from Joshua with a punishment report later. He’ll probably go full tantrum and provoke the works.”

“It would have been better if you cooled him off before you left him to Joshua, Dean. I don’t appreciate him having to take the brunt of your job just because you’re loathe to do it.” Cas chastised as he helped April stretch out on one of the couches in the intimate room.

“Dude! Some faith would be appreciated, too, here,” Dean protested. “I did my fucking job. I don’t think you have a good feel for what’s going on in this house right now. He wanted to be here, and he probably should’ve been allowed to stay. I sent him away because you made it clear you wanted him in class more than you wanted his input.”

Castiel turned around and frowned in confused irritation. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Seriously? You didn’t even ask me if I addressed his state of mind before jumping to the goddamn conclusion that I didn’t do a damn thing! That shit pisses me off, Alpha, and it’s unfair!”

Castiel blinked at him and then looked down at his mate. “All right,” he conceded. “I can accept that. Watch the tone though. You get one warning, and only because this situation is fraught. I want to try to keep myself Primary as you recommended. Please try to make that easier for me, if you don’t mind.”

“I’m sorry,” mumbled Dean. “But I did lay into him before we left. It didn’t do much good.”

Castiel poured April a glass of water and handed it to her. She took it in two hands and sipped with her eyes lowered. Dean sank miserably onto the couch opposite. He watched April drink. She was fronted by the wolf, and she had a sad, scared look about her.

“This isn’t going to work if she’s in her wolf, Cas,” Dean said by way of introduction. “We gotta find a way to pull her Primary up. The Omega at the very least. The wolf can’t speak for her, not for this.”

Cas grunted and poured a glass for Dean and then one for himself once Dean’s was delivered. “Maybe you can start us off then,” Cas suggested. “Let’s give her a few minutes. It does no good to try to rush the wolf back under if it isn’t ready to go.”

Dean sat back on the couch and spread out. His arm extended the length of the back. His knees ranged across both cushions. The message was clear: his couch. “What did you two cover already?” he asked.

Cas set his glass on the table beside April’s head and wormed carefully until she had her head and...
shoulders in his lap on the sofa facing Dean, and he could claim a spread of his own, Omega included. “I believe we’ve clarified the source of her fears. It’s mostly a great oversight on my part.”

“Is that so?” asked Dean, surprised and checking April’s expression. She wasn’t looking at him. “She’s been terrified, but it’s all clear now, and no harm done? You want to elaborate?”

“Why are you confrontational?” Cas asked him. His left hand rubbed lightly along the stretch of her body, up her arm, across her ribs, down to the softness of her belly.

Dean thought about it. “I don’t know, C.J. Maybe because the two of you exhaust me with your evasions and miscues. Like, every time she looks at you, you’re looking the other way, and every time you look at her, she’s Tertiary. I can’t do this for you, but I don’t know how to get you both to quit dancing around and just talk to each other. I can tell you that if Michael were here, he would’ve figured out how to cut right through the shit in one sentence.”

“I don’t know any other way, Dean. I’m not going to force anything from her. She deserves a mate she can trust, and that’s no way to build trust. I can only think to go at it very, very carefully. Anything else risks my mate, and I’m not going to do that. As it is, she’s already far deeper into my psyche than I ever meant to let her go. Dumping everything on her at once, especially while she’s scared would be reckless in the extreme!”

“Oh. Shit. I get it.” Dean felt his fingertips go numb again. “She’s an empath, C.J. She’s gonna see you for what you are – all of it – whether you mean to show it to her or not. Michael was right. He said he thought you had a secret room in your head where you’re stashing stuff you don’t think she can handle. And April was right. They both said. She’s got this…ability…to get an inside view. Add that to your Mating-bond with her. Your secret room is crap, Cas. It’s not gonna keep her out.”

“I know,” sighed Castiel. “I had no idea, but it’s obvious now. I thought she was only sensing what I was leaving for her on the surface. All the while, she’s been bombarded by the full force of my Alpha, and Dean, it’s not pretty.”

“Fuck,” Dean clarified.

“You said you could explain,” April reminded her mate. She rolled to look up at him, and the look Cas gave her settled a huge weight in Dean’s belly. There was a sweetness to it that was often lacking when Cas’ control needed to come first. It wasn’t patronizing, merely affectionate.

“Kitten, a Mating-bond, it gives you a fairly open view of the Secondary and Tertiary designations. True-Mates especially, they can almost visually SEE their mates’ designations. It’s far more than mere emotion. It’s like a view of the soul. It’s very intimate. It’s difficult to hide any of that, not impossible – as I believe we both discovered – but difficult. That’s why it’s possible for us to enjoy the sensation of your wolf curled up with mine in the sunshine. Unfortunately,” he continued. “It means that the view we share of each other’s designations includes the good AND the bad. For most mates, that’s not a problem. No one’s perfect, but few people house anything truly frightening. As you know, I do. I always will. It’s not something I can mitigate with therapy or medication. It’s a part of who I am.” Cas stroked her hair and ran a thumb softly over her jawline. “What mates can’t see through the Mating-bond, or any bond for that matter, is a direct view into the Primary designation. We can’t read each other’s minds or even know how our brains work. But we can feel emotion and physical sensation in a dissociated way, no matter where it comes from. I always know what you’re feeling, but I don’t know what you think.”

She closed her eyes and leaned subtly into his touch. “Kitten, my front brain is the only part of me you cannot see, but it’s the key to how the Alpha stays in check, even when its impulses override its own government.”
“I don’t understand,” she told him. Dean resisted calling her on it. Based on his conversation the day before, there was no way she wasn’t matching her mate step-for-step. He figured it was all about to tumble out anyway, and a little bit of clarification wouldn’t hurt anything.

“The Alpha is a bit of a brute, as I said,” he tried again. “But unlike my wolf, it’s trainable. I’ve managed to teach my moral code, the one I use to define myself, to my Alpha fairly successfully. My cognitive brain and my Alpha move in lockstep most of the time if I keep it satisfactorily fed and if external circumstances don’t push it past its boundaries. I’ll admit, there are some things the Alpha and I don’t see eye to eye on. When that happens, I must muscle it back to compliance through force of will. April, let me assure you, I have a very strong will. I can handle both the wolf AND the Alpha. I’m NOT going to hurt you. Not ever. Sometimes what I must do to bring them both back under control is something I prefer not to share with others, not even you.”

“So, I’ve had a skewed view all this time?”

“Yes. And I didn’t have any idea that you were inside me that deeply.”

“You didn’t trust me either,” she concluded sadly.

“No, it’s not a question of trust, love. You remember what you told me when my head was up my ass, and you had to practically shove me onto that airplane to Dallas? You said that you and I can never be equals. Our power disparity is too wide. Kitten, it’s my job to keep your Omega and your wolf balanced. As much as I’d love to be your equal and share everything with you, I can’t. We cannot ignore the fact that you are not capable of bearing that burden on your own. I’m concerned that having that view of me as long as you did without me knowing about it may have harmed your psyche. I’m going to enlist Pamela in checking you over for damage. We’ll go from there.”

April sat up slowly and turned to look at him. “Sir, I’m ready to come clean. I want to show you the other side of this mess.”

“I’m honored,” he told her with enough grandeur that Dean groaned quietly. “I promise that you’re safe right now.”

She nodded, but she didn’t seem to believe him. “Before I do this, I want you to know that I love you, and it’s been an honor to have been a part of this pack.”

“You’re pushing it, kid,” Dean muttered across the table. “Just show him and cut the theatrics.” Her jaw flinched with tension, but she didn’t answer him. Slowly, April pulled aside the heavy cap that cut her emotions, her intentions, herself, in two portions, and she lifted the enormous bundle up into the light, feeding it through the bond link to her mate. She kept her eyes on his face. He wouldn’t be able to see the cognitive stuff directly, but everything inside the box was connected, threaded together. What he couldn’t see would be heavily outlined and braided into what he could. Its vastness would be highlighted as an enormous void that could be nothing but what it was as it was surrounded by intricate weavings from her wolf and her Omega.

Cas sighed in relief before frowning in confusion. He began to sift through the bedlam in his head. April’s face grew sheepish. Dean switched couches. He sat next to her and pulled her to lean back into his chest, whispering encouragement.

“I’m proud of you, kid. You’re going to be fine.”

“April, it’s…” Cas breathed. His confusion began to edge into alarm. “All of this was…? All this time? What is this?” He held up a strand of pure raw assertiveness. It had its origin in her mind, but she’d threaded it through her Omega to make it easier to access. She used it when she was
performing and composing. She used it when she coldly assessed all the moving pieces in a group of variables and chose which ones to edge carefully into position. It wasn’t until her mate pulled it loose and showed it to her that she realized how it had been strung. It was a part of her he’d only ever seen in moments of great significance.

“It’s me, Castiel,” she told him simply, as, with a blink of her eyes, everything Tertiary fell away from her face. “It’s all of me. I’ll understand if it isn’t something you can accept from your Ozzie, but I can’t change it, and I wouldn’t if I could.”

“Can’t accept?” he muttered, his gaze still turned inward, but his lips tasting the words as if they made no sense to him. “You’ve had all of this from the very beginning?”

She ignored that it was a stupid question. He was shocked and hurt, as she’d known he would be.

“I’m sorry I lied to you about who I am, but I really don’t know myself. I don’t understand what it means or how it fits together. Everything I’ve shown you is me. I wasn’t lying about needing to kneel for you and to take your lash. It’s just that there’s more. I need you to help me with it, but I’ll understand if you can’t, if you don’t want to.”

Cas’ eyes flashed back from internal focus and found her on the other end of the couch, huddled sideways in Dean’s arms, trying desperately to be smaller than she was. “Why did you hide all this in the first place? How could you think I needed you to do that?” He was baffled. “I don’t understand what I’m looking at. It’s…vast. Where were you stashing all of this?”

April turned her face into Dean’s chest against the barrage of surprise that was beginning to edge into outrage. Dean met Cas’ eyes with a serious expression. “You knew?” Castiel asked Dean, his hurt leaking through.

“I knew there was something buried, Alpha, same as you did. We both figured that much out. I didn’t know what or how big it was until yesterday.”

“You wanted me in my front brain to keep the Alpha from overblowing it all and lashing out,” Cas surmised.

“Keep chewing on it, C.J. Think about the implications. She’s got a lot going on in there, and it’s scaring her to think about how you’re going to perceive it. Frankly, she and Michael both think you’re going to try to stomp it out.”

April huffed angrily at Dean and pushed up to shoot him a heated expression.

“What?” he asked. “It’s true.”

“Ignorance? I have no idea what I’m looking at. It’s…chaos. I could use a hand here, April. Please, talk to me. I’m not stomping anything, but I need to understand.”

April turned in Dean’s arms and faced Castiel with her back to her brother’s chest. Her sigh was a release of everything she’d been holding onto so tightly for so long. “No one wants an Ozzie like me, Castiel,” she began. “They can accept ‘plucky.’ But if it goes outside that and an Ozzie turns out to have a mind and aspirations bigger than they should be capable of carrying, I’ve seen how people react to that, and it’s never good.”

“I believe you’ve judged me harshly and unfairly, Kitten. I’m not ‘people.’ I’m your mate, and I deserve better.”

“Yes, sir. And I’m sorry. But there was no way to know before I knew you how you would receive
there was no way to do it twice or undo it. If my mate cannot accept who I really am, what does that mean for us, for the rest of our life?”

“Explain it to me,” he commanded her again.

And she did. She led him through the assumptions and the fears. She showed him how her mind shifted her own cognizance out of the way of the moving parts so that she blindsided even herself in her own machinations. She talked him through a few of her carefully layered designs to show him where her hand could be seen at work in building the nest high and deep for her own security and his; not just bringing Dean home, but Sam, and Kali, and twins. How she’d conspired with Gabe to present a crafted innocence that made Cas’ Alpha swoon, and nudged Dean in at calculated intervals to feed his wolf. A satisfied, balanced Alpha was a satisfied, balanced Pack. She told him to think of it as an offshoot of her knack for arranging music and pulling emotion from an audience.

Castiel gaped. “I knew…I knew you were…up to something. I never dreamed. April, it has to stop. I’m not going to live like this, wondering about every word you say to everyone and whether there’s a scheme of one kind or other behind it. We’re a Pack, damnit, and we deserve more respect than that. I don’t know what to think about this. Do you have any idea how dangerous this is for a Deep Omega? I worry about leaving you to tie your shoes and brush your teeth on your own. You get befuddled with three unstructured tasks in a row without someone guiding you. And you’ve been doing this?! Are you insane?! WHY?! Why did you hide this from me?! You could have…! I could have LOST you over this!”

“Right,” said Dean softly. “Because it’s all about you.” He had his eyes down, and he was shielding April with both arms wrapped around her torso. The Alpha scent in the air was palpable. Cas’ eyes developed a crimson ring.

“Tell me why!” he demanded again.

“Because you’re Alpha,” she said simply.

“You manipulated everything about our family because I’M Alpha?”

“You move too slowly, Castiel. You always feel that critical point when it comes along, the point when it’s time to act, but you don’t do it. You wait. You always wait, and the time slips by, and then it’s too late. If it had been left to you we would still be living alone in your suite at The Facility. We wouldn’t have a pack at all! I get being careful, but you’re not careful, you’re afraid to jump. You’re a coward, Castiel, and someone had to act.”

April’s eyes widened in terror when she realized what she’d said. She scrambled backward into Dean’s body, and he tightened his hold.

“I see,” said Cas. He didn’t move for several seconds, staring at the ground in front of him, and then he stood up and stalked angrily away. April burst into tears as the door slammed. Dean shushed her sadly, but he didn’t really try to stem the flow. She’d carried a lot for a long time, and she needed to release it.

“There was probably a nicer way to say that,” he said into her ear. She pressed her forehead into his chest and sobbed.

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Cas was in hiding. He wouldn’t have put it that way if pressed, but he never used the first-floor den alone. No one would think to look for him here. He was hiding. Cas’ wolf was mildly bemused by his spunky little Omega-mate. He had a massive soft spot for the girl despite her presumption. It was the Alpha who couldn’t get a grip. An Ozzie who called him a coward right to his face and didn’t pay an immediate price for it wasn’t something he could reconcile, but Cas needed to think. He needed to bounce his thoughts off someone trustworthy, but he was ashamed to face Dean after stalking out like a petulant child whose feelings had been hurt. Gabe was on lockdown in Canada and facing a far worse situation than a kerfuffle with a mate. Benny was making the rounds of big donors and the otherwise influential with Sam in New York. Sam was...in New York. Bobby was in no condition to focus on Cas and his troubles. Perspective, Castiel, he chided himself. Bobby’s would-be daughter was lying in agony with two bullets lodged in her body. Cas hadn’t even asked where she’d been hit. Reading the man’s voice, and knowing Bobby like he did, her prognosis was grim. Michael would have been welcome, despite how his sullenness was bound to rub Cas raw right now. Michael had a unique way of carving right to the heart and showing things as they are when all Cas wanted to do was morph them into what he wished they were. He could use a little of Michael’s perspective.

“It takes two for a solid game of darts, Alpha.”

“Dean.”

“It’s not as hopeless as it seems,” said Dean, grabbing the darts from their bracket, and taking a spot behind the line.

“You aren’t seeing what she sent me.” Cas watched Dean’s first throw hit close to the center with a ‘thunk’. “It’s completely out of bounds for an Ozzie. She can’t keep doing it.”

“She’s managed to keep us on the rails since February, man, and she’s not a drooling, babbling mess yet. Truth is, I think she was at it back in Oklahoma too, and no worse for wear.” Dean eyed the target and snapped his wrist to a perfect bull’s eye. “You know what had her so scared of this confrontation was that you and your tyrant asshole would try to find a way to squash it out of her.”

“Watch it,” Cas chided, but his heart wasn’t in it.

“Calling it like it is, C.J. If she mans up and reveals shit that she’s terrified you’re going to rip right out of her, and then you rip it right out of her, you’re a tyrant asshole.”

“She CAN’T do this, Dean! It’s dangerous!”

“If it was dangerous, she’d be feeling it by now. Instead, she has every single fucking brick in this place spit-shined until it glows and every member of this pack but Gabe feeling like the sun shines just for them. I’d be willing to bet Gabe’s her next project, but he’s not as easy as the rest of us. And you. You are impossible to fool. Believe me, man, I’ve tried. You catch everything. You notice everything. Did you really think she was an adolescent lightweight with a pretty face and a way with music?”

Cas flushed and averted his eyes. “I trusted what I could sense through our bond. Why would I doubt that? Have you ever heard of anyone who could successfully submerge over half of the weight of their entire persona from the Mating-bond? I have no idea how she did it.”

“Thought you were hiding shit too.” Dean threw his last dart, and it wobbled to a standstill with it’s point sharing a hole with the second one, right in the middle of the bull’s eye.
“It’s relative,” Cas told him. “For perspective, think mountain and molehill. I wasn’t locking her out of my entire personality. I was guarding my Omega mate from the worst my awful designations have to offer. I would hope you’re doing the same. Michael’s not Ozzie, but no Omega needs the burden of all your insecurities.”

“Oh. Um.”

“Great,” said Cas, sinking back onto a barstool, and turning to face the countertop.

Dean collected his darts and re-set. “Michael doesn’t need protection, and my designations aren’t awful, thank you very much.” He went through three more rounds before either of them broke the silence. His score would have been braggable had he been playing anyone.

“I have no idea how to respond to this.” Cas sat hunkered over the bar like a drunk, and Dean rolled his eyes.

“Try talking to her.”

“I’m too angry, Dean. She’ll sink back to Tertiary. She’ll clam up. Or worse, she’ll start apologizing and try to take it all back. I can’t believe she lied to me for so long.” Cas had to see the irony, but he made no indication that he knew his statements reflected the core issue.

“You’re hurt. I get it. I have no idea what that feels like. It’s gotta suck ass. But try to see it from an Omega point of view. All that stuff she does with her piano? I know you know it’s exceptional. All this other stuff is part of the same talent. You can’t stifle one without squashing the other. You can’t do that to her.”

“I don’t need to see it from an Omega point of view, Dean! I’m not Omega. That’s the whole point! Her stability comes first, and what she’s doing is dangerous! How can you not see that?!”

“You mean, who she IS is dangerous,” Dean shot back. “And don’t get me wrong. I’m pissed too. She had me running around like an idiot for fucking weeks just to get shit lined up the way she wanted it. You know how many times my butt got busted over something SHE choreographed? I keep thinking I’ve untangled it all, and then I remember something else, and when I trace it back… Yep! She’s standing at the starting line with the pistol in her hand setting us all running to her tune! I’m not any happier about it than you are. But you’re the one with the castration scissors, not me. You need to cool it and think it through.”

“No, I don’t. I’m the coward who’s afraid to jump, remember? I wait too long and overthink everything. Maybe this time I should go with my gut and make the move I’m dying to make!”

“And what’s that?” Dean asked quietly, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

“I have no idea!” Cas shouted.

“She only said that to wind you up tight, so you’ll head straight into the worst option you could think of,” Dean reasoned.

“And why would she do that?”

“So, you’ll examine it, realize there’s a better way, and reject it that much faster,” he supplied. “Gets you back to rational faster. I’ve used that ploy myself.” Dean scrubbed hands over his face and around his throat to interlock his fingers behind his neck. He left his elbows hanging at his chest. “Sometimes it backfires.”
Cas chuckled humorlessly. “I know. I’ve watched you do it. Never thought to see it from April though.”

“Cas, listen to me. You need to go talk to her. You need to get out of your Alpha and listen to your mate. I know you had to be baffled as fuck as to why she’s your Trigger. She’s a slip of a thing who has nothing in common with you. Only, she DOES. She’s. Just. Like. You. It makes so much more sense now. You two can figure this out and make beautiful music together. Or you can go ballistic, scare the shit out of her, try but fail to stifle her, and ruin everything. It’s pretty much your choice.”

Cas sulked against the bar. Dean gathered his darts again and eyed the man as he readied to loose them once more.

“She’s been roleplaying a child to soothe my Alpha, hasn’t she?”

“It’s a little creepy, man. Are you really into little girls?”

“No! I’m not into little girls! It’s no different than the waifish persona you generate when you’re Tertiary, Dean. It’s the neediness of an untethered innocence that I respond to.”

“I’m only teasing you,” Dean told him. “I know. I love you like that. It’s hot and scary and soothing all at the same time. And no, it’s not an act when she does it as far as I can tell. At least not all the time. She just goes into her wolf at the drop of a hat when she feels like you could use a nonconfrontational pacifier to make you all happy and calm. I’m thinking Gabe gave her some lessons in fading into the background and seeming nonthreatening. Seriously though. Quit being a coward and go talk to HER, not me. Hiding in here hoping I’ll feed you everything you need to get from your mate is a copout. You’re better than this, Castiel.”

Cas thumped his palm down on the bar and glared at Dean, but his fiancé didn’t flinch.

“It’s not disrespectful to call a spade a spade when the spade needs to hear it straight,” Dean told him. “You’re never going to get pretty words from me, Alpha, when you need me to be blunt. I love you too much to bullshit you. You do whatever you gotta do with that. You’re NOT a coward, man, so why are you hiding in here?”

“Where is she now?”

“I think she’s at her piano.”

Cas sat still, watched Dean through the mirror behind the bar that was designed to mimic a rustic dive pub, and thrummed his fingertips on the red-gold wood. “She may not like it, but I have to be careful. I can’t fight with her about this. I have all the power. It would be nothing short of abusive for me to go in there and shout at her like I want to. But this goes so far outside of our relationship matrix. I can’t just placate myself with a stiff punishment and consider it done. We need to re-set our whole relationship. I don’t know her at all. I’m hurt, and I’m struggling with a powerful impulse to strike out and hurt her back. I want to go in there and let her feel my tongue lashing her, not my belt. She’s got no defense against that.”

“I’m here for you, Alpha,” Dean reminded him. “I’m always here for you. The Universe gave you two of us for a reason, and I can take it. Unleash on me a bit before you try to go back in and talk to her – and I do mean talk, C.J.”

Cas frowned in frustration. “We should have heard something from Canada by now, Dean. The medical crew has had time to settle in and assess Alex’s condition. The wait is killing me.”

“Yeah. Me, too.” Dean put the darts back in the mounted bracket and then snuggled in close, putting
himself in harm’s way with a long presumptuous lick up Castiel’s throat. “I can take it, sir. I’m itching to be your overflow.” Dean’s hand inched past Cas’ hip and around to take hold of the meat of his ass with a hearty grip. Cas stiffened, snarled, and grabbed the wayward hand of his pushy brat.

“Submissives don’t take, Pet,” the wolf reminded Dean in a low, grating growl. “Go downstairs and wait for me.”

“Yes, Sir,” Dean enthused, and he scuttled away.

Cas regarded his reflection judgmentally. He wanted badly to be better than he was. But he wasn’t.

**************

Dean drove to collect Michael at the end of his class with a careful posture that put most of his weight forward on his thighs. He crossed his arms over the steering wheel and breathed through the wait at a red light, using the time to work through a simple meditation. Turning his head, he smiled gruffly at the elderly Primate woman in the car next to his. She was watching him with a look of bewilderment on her face. A kick of his chin acknowledged the passing connection as he throttled through the intersection with a grimace of pain. He probably looked supremely stupid like this. But whatever.

Tony was filling raviolis when they returned. He had flour all over his apron. His head seemed lower than usual, and he didn’t initiate a greeting as usual. The ape was clearly learning to pick up tension cues from some tell or other. He had no sense of smell to speak of, so Dean didn’t know what he was reading.

“Hey, Tones,” Dean greeted. “Chill out, man. We’re not going to eat you.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see about that. This place is like a tomb today. What’s going on?”

Michael clapped him on the shoulder. “Just the usual,” he told the cook grimly. “Keep throwing food at them, and they might let you live.”

“That’s not funny,” Tony called as Michael and Dean slipped out the far end of the kitchen.

“You and me still need to discuss what you did with our bonds when I left last week,” Dean reminded Michael on their way up the stairs.

“Yeah, I know,” Michael demurred. “I talked about it today with Joshua. It’s not his usual teapot, but he’s got a good view of the big picture. Would you mind if we hold off a little while until we get things settled around here? I’m not in the right headspace, and I want it to mean something when we get it on the table. I want to be your Omega, Dean. I mean it. It’s coming together for me in my head, and it doesn’t feel the way I expected it to. It feels really solid.” He stopped at his bedroom door. Dean was gaping at him, and he chuckled at the astonishment. “What? You thought I’d still be kicking and screaming on my way into my grave? Give me some credit. I told you I was going to give it my best effort. Turns out I’m an Omega, Dean. Who knew? Who the fuck knew?”

“Damn, Michael, you are incredible. I love you so much right now. And I’m proud of how you handled today.”
Michael rolled his eyes as he pressed into his room. “Right. Whatever. Look, it’s your call if we need to do this now. I totally deserve it. All I’m saying is it might be more meaningful if we settle one catastrophe before we open the scabs off another one.”

Dean settled against the wall, leaning into his shoulders by the door watching his mate change clothes. “I never clarified the expectation with you, man,” he admitted. “I let you waltz into Phoenix and never mentioned that the sneaking up on me with a closed bond wasn’t okay. All I said was I didn’t want you endangering yourself in public without giving me the head’s up so I could have the cavalry ready. That leaves us in murky water about this thing. Did you know I had custody of the bonds? You know I’m not going to invade your privacy 24/7 and make you keep it open if you need a hot second sometimes. All I’m saying is it’s not cool to slip it closed if there’s a chance I think it’s gone dim from distance. That’s deceitful, Michael – if that’s what you were doing, I mean.”

Dean let the unasked question hang in the air. Michael finished buttoning his jeans before sighing and looking up.

“That’s what I was doing, alpha. I knew what the rules were, and I knew I was pulling a fast one. Shocked me to get away with it for, like, three days. I thought you’d catch on for sure.”

“Pssh! Yeah, bud, that’s on me. I really should’ve. I know all those distance limits. I guess I never bothered to look at a fucking map. It felt like you were thousands of miles away. Made sense I couldn’t really feel you. I hated it though. I want you in my head, man. I like having you there. It’s comforting to know you’re on my side and watching out for me.”

“I’m really sorry, Dean. I was being a spoiled child throwing his toys around and breaking stuff over not getting my way.”

Dean pushed off the wall. “You were in shock.” He sat on the bed close to his mate and looked up at him. The sitting wasn’t his favorite sensation, but the lower position let him appear less threatening… unless Michael interpreted it as a prelude to a spanking. That would work too. “People react in some strange ways. I’m not mad at you. Maureen blistered you already. You and me, we can wait until you’re ready. I’m not going to forget about it, but I’ll wait for you. Besides, I thought you were campaigning to stay anyway. That’s what you told Cas. Remember?”

Michael scoffed, dropped his head and met Dean’s eyes with a sheepish sidelong glance through his lashes. “Negotiation tactic, Dean. I wanted to go with you. It was a clumsy attempt at reverse psychology. I was trying to appear rational, like, so I wouldn’t need to be wrapped in blankets.”

“Jesus, this Pack! Is everybody gaming everybody?!”

“Pretty much.”

“It’s out of control,” Dean mourned.

“No it’s not,” Michael said firmly. “You two set the precedents, Dean. You and Castiel. You can bitch and complain about it all you want, but you two started it. You’ve both been playing each other like this from day one. I had to step up my game just to keep up with you. Don’t pretend you don’t love it. You wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Dean gaped at him and frowned. “That’s not true.”

“It totally is. Think back, Dean. It’s how you work. It’s how Cas works. April fits right in. I’m the only one who had a steep learning curve to keep my head from getting knocked off my shoulders. And what’s more, it fucking works for us. Whatever is going on downstairs between those two better
not end with her in thumbscrews because this pack would fall apart if we try to put everything out in plain sight.”

Dean opened his mouth and then closed it again. Twice. Finally, he went with, “What happened to penitent Michael. I liked him better.”

Michael laughed and reached for his shirt. “I get that a lot.”

Dean was just lamenting the loss of his view of Michael’s shoulders beneath his t-shirt and then reconciling to having the stretch of cotton over them not being a bad replacement when Castiel’s bellow assaulted them from the foot of the stairs. They’d left the door open, and Cas had a set of lungs.

“MICHAEL QUENTIN!! GET YOUR ASS DOWN HERE!! NOW!!”

“Well, fuck,” breathed Michael. “I hope you’re limping and sore from letting him work off some steam. Looks like the whole story just tumbled out. I don’t need him at full power.” Michael trotted out the door, and Dean followed, catching up and stepping in front of him before they reached the first landing.

Castiel fumed. His eyes blazed blue. Blue was good. Blue meant control. April stood behind him with her head down. Standing was good. Standing meant not Tertiary. Dean stopped six steps up and put his arm across Michael’s chest. “What’s with the bellowing?” he asked calmly.

Cas evidently decided to let Dean stand for his mate. “After everything I’ve done for him! Everything! He’s still… He thinks he can… I’m NOT HAVING IT, DEAN!”

“All right. Maybe cool off a little before we do this, Alpha. He didn’t do anything on purpose. We already talked about this. It’s not a one-way street, Cas. He’s not taking anything from you, and they’re not sneaking around behind your back.”

“No? Did you know he kissed her? Did you know they spent hours alone setting up terms for a relationship? Did you know she had to tell him twice that she’s not on the market in the first place and that he bulldozed over her objections to stake a claim as if she’s a prized trophy?”

“That doesn’t even make sense, Castiel! Calm down!”

“I didn’t!” Michael protested staunchly. “None of that happened! We’re not together! It wasn’t a negotiation at all! We were just talking!”

“You didn’t kiss her?” Cas challenged. “She didn’t slap you in defense?!”

“WHAT’?? NO!! It wasn’t like that at all!” Michael looked past the enraged Alpha’s shoulder. April’s eyes were huge and frightened. “I mean, yeah, I… I kissed her, but it wasn’t like that. It was Omega stuff. It felt like pack-bonding. That’s all! And she slapped me for saying shit I shouldn’t have said – not for coming on to her. I didn’t! Sir, I swear I didn’t!”

“That’s enough!” said Dean in a loud voice. “I don’t know what’s happening right now, but I know for sure that you’re barking up a non-existent tree, Alpha.”
Cas pointed right at Michael, but he spoke to Dean. “You’re protecting your mate before you even hear the story! He’s snowing you, Dean! He’s had an eye on April for ages, and it’s all to swipe at me! I’m not having this kind of insolence in my house!”

“Castiel James…”

“Don’t you ‘Castiel James’ me, Dean Michael! He’s been cruising through with an impudent attitude and an insubordinate swagger since we brought him into this house, and he’s poison!”

“HO! What the actual fuck!? Look, I know you’re off your rails right now with about a billion crappy pressure points all activated at once, but this is way out of line! You’re pissed and you’re scared, and I have no idea what April’s been telling you. I have a pretty good feeling that half of what you think you heard is your own imagination running wild! You need to step out, Castiel! You need to take a breath and figure out what the fuck you’re doing before you break everything! You’re seconds away from doing or saying something you’ll regret forever!”

“Get out of the way, Dean! He needs to be taught who runs this pack!”

“Not a chance in hell!”

“Get out of my way!”

“Get out, Castiel! Now! I don’t care where you go, but you’re leaving this house!”

“No one tells me…!”

“TAKE A WALK, ALPHA!!! NOW!!!”

Dean’s eyes were full crimson, and he set his body on the stairs so that Castiel would have to tear him down to get past him. His Deep Alpha pulled furiously at the Claim-bond that had been so unlikely in the first place, and Castiel staggered back a step in surprise and shock when he felt it clamp down. His eyes fluttered. His nostrils flared. He looked from Dean to Michael and back again, breathing hard. Dean shifted, but he didn’t give. He wasn’t about to back down no matter what it might mean between the two men. No one blinked.

With a snarl, Castiel turned on his heel and stormed out, heading toward the kitchen. They heard Tony squawk in alarm just before the door slammed. And still no one moved.

When he glanced back from the doorway to April, Dean found her in tears on her knees.

“Oookay,” he breathed, trotting down the stairs to help her up. He settled her on the lowest step with an arm around her trembling shoulders. Michael stared down at her, unsure of what might have actually been said between the mates and where he stood with April. Had she really told Castiel that? Had she thrown him under the tank wheels after reeling him in until he would’ve done anything for her? Had he been played again? Again!?! Dean glanced up at him with a bitchface that told him to stop being stupid and get down here. Reluctantly, Michael trudged forward, sinking down on the step beside the girl in the eye of the storm. She curled into him at once, and his arm cradled her. It was always going to do that no matter what, he realized. Michael’s protective wings adopted April’s care long before he ever accepted the role voluntarily, and he didn’t have a choice in the matter. He pulled her in, rested his chin on her head and sighed heavily.

“You have to know she didn’t say any of that, Michael,” Dean told him over April’s head. “She probably told him everything point blank, and he ran off with it and jumped to his own conclusions.
He does that sometimes.”

“And then he thinks it through and comes around eventually, and he’s really fucking sorry for the devastation we all have to live through before he gets his head on right?” Michael asked angrily. “That’s a shitty way to live, Dean. Means we walk on eggshells forever, and we’re all at the mercy of his big head. I didn’t leave home and a shitty tyrannical Alpha just to live under the boot of another one. I don’t care what she said to him. That was bullshit, right there. You’re really going to marry him? You think it gets better over the years?” April sobbed harder, and Michael stroked her shoulder with the hand he had holding her upright. “He thinks you’re the one who needs therapy. What a joke.”

Dean didn’t know what to say. “I’m not making any decisions until I talk to him.” The stones in his ring caught the light and sparkled playfully. “But I’m not going to live like that either. And I wouldn’t ask you to. The thing is, you and me, neither of us would ever leave April. Maybe we feel like that because she’s tied knots to us, and maybe we were going to go that way anyway. It doesn’t matter. We’re not leaving this pack if she’s still in it. What that means for the marriage I want with all my heart? Hell, I don’t know.” Dean’s last word broke on an unexpected sob. “He’s better than this, guys. I know he is. He can do this. I’ve seen him take hold of the beasts he’s wrangling and turn them around when anyone else in the same position would’ve broken.”

“Maybe for strangers, Dean,” Michael guessed. “But that’s not what happened here with people he loves. Looks to me like he’s got more of his mother in him than he knows.”

Dean sniffled. They sat on the bottom step in silence as the clock ticked. The sun began to cast lengthy shadows through the back windows.

“Did you really kiss her?”

“Yes,” said Michael just as April whispered, “No.”

Dean sat back and looked at them both. “Let’s try that again.”

Michael scowled at April to get her to keep her mouth shut, but she laid a hand on his arm and looked at Dean. “I kissed him, Dean. And it wasn’t about Omega-bonding.” Michael looked at his lap, clearly of the opinion that that little sliver of information would have been best left unearthed.

Dean raised his brows and whistled softly. “Yikes,” he muttered, turning to face the front again. “Kid, did you tell Castiel that?”

She nodded morosely. “He wouldn’t listen. He’s convinced Michael seduced me.”

Fred stepped into the foyer. “Dinner is ready, alpha,” he told Dean. “Am I right in concluding that Alpha Castiel will not be joining you tonight?”

“Think it’s just us, Fred,” Dean told him, standing and pulling April to her feet. “Oh, and would you check that the H/R room has clean sheets? That dick’s not sleeping upstairs tonight; if he even comes home at all.”

“Very good, alpha. May I enquire, sir? Is everything all right?”

“It’s pretty damn far from all right, Fred. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but it’s in his hands now.”

Michael shot Dean a flat look, but he helped April in through the parlor. Dean watched them go with a pain in his chest.
“Can we do this, Fred? Was it fucked from the start?”

Fred smiled kindly at him. “I have known Castiel for his entire life, Dean. I firmly believe that if anyone alive can achieve what you and he are attempting, it’s you and he. Right now is the time for faith and a firm stand. If I may offer one piece of advice, do not waver in holding him to his ideals. He has, if I remember correctly, held you to yours when your vision became clouded by emotion. I believe you have been watching for an opportunity to return the favor. Sir, that opportunity has arrived. He needs you. He is close to breaking irreparably, and that would be catastrophic to the entire world. But you are equal to this challenge. Faith, alpha. Faith and a stand.”

“Thanks, Fred. Run and get the betas, would you? Dinner’s getting cold.”

“Very good, sir.”

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Castiel’s phone buzzed while he nursed his fourth club soda at Zeke’s bar. It was Gabriel. He spoke in clipped sentences, and he didn’t linger. Alex was gone. Something about an unexpected pressure drop during surgery that became a full crash they couldn’t recover from.

She was gone.

Cas set the phone back on the bar with trembling white fingers. Gabriel would be heading home as soon as the lockdown was released. The Alpha met Zeke’s eye with raw despair. He was lost and alone, and he was falling, and the world would go with him if the grip of his fingertips on the ledge of the cliff failed.

Chapter End Notes

Warning for death of a minor character.

Sorry y’all.

That's 3 long chapters in a week, close to my old pace. Go, me! But, alas, I'll be going dark for several weeks again. I guess this is a cliff hanger. I didn't mean to do that. I just ran out of time. Stupid clock.

Love all y'all. Tons and tons.
Chapter 92

Chapter Summary

Jo and Meg have a decision to make, and Charlie has a fabulous idea. Michael's not as stable as he pretends to be. And Castiel is not having a good run of it. He's epically out of sorts, and it's going to take a team to get him righted again. And Dean. God bless Dean.

Chapter Notes

It's been WAY too long for me. I hate the long breaks. Since I last posted, we've had a heart wrenching loss in my family, and a painful but successful surgery for someone who sees way more than her fair share of physical pain. I've re-initiated treatment for depression (the jury is totally still out on that), and I survived another three week round at work. Whew! Crazy. And then, just as I snuggled in with my amber ale and my laptop, migraine hit again. Damnit!

So, writing through the headache sometimes results in weird writing. We'll see how this one ages.

Read on. Good luck making sense.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 92 – Monday, August 14, 2017

NOW:

Charlie slid a double across the table toward Meg and smirked. “You want the good news or the bad?” Meg accepted the scotch but didn’t drink it. She wrapped four fingers around the tumbler. Meeting Charlie in her modest apartment was usually a prelude to a night of cheesy rom-coms, too many carbs, and a belly sore from laughing. Also sex, usually. Tonight had a very different feel, and Meg, straight off the high of their win in Dayton and assuming custody of an enormous new staff, was caught totally off guard.

“There’s news?” she asked carefully. Amber liquid sloshed as she toyed with the glass.

“Y…e,” Charlie stumbled, looking anywhere but at Meg. “Came in while the guys were offsite making big, world-altering changes in the paradigm of reality, and you and I were neck-deep in everything they left behind. I didn’t think you’d wanna hear it from Ellen. She’s a bit stiff where mates are concerned.”
“Mates,” Meg repeated. Her fingers went cold, but her skin erupted in a sheen of sweat at the implication. “You got a hit.” It wasn’t a question. “Crap, it’s only been a week since I put my scent into the system.”

“These things go fast. Now stay with me on this. Castiel wanted to move on it, so he had us send the samples out overnight to all of the hubs. Every hit we’re gonna get on this round will be in by the end of the week. So far there’s been two that look totally, uh, viable.” Charlie sank into the chair across from Meg and finally met her eyes with a look of trepidation. “That’s the good news, Meg. Two solid hits. Like, strong enough that if you were anywhere near these jokers, the deal would seal itself.”

Meg frowned and broke her eyes away. She slugged her drink in one bracing gulp and then thumped the glass back down, empty. “And the bad news? Where are they?”

“Tallahassee.”

“And?”

“Uh, Budapest.”

Meg scoffed. “No way. I’m not leaving. I already told Alpha that, and he agreed. I belong here, not in…wherever the hell Budapest is.”

“That’s what we thought you’d say. Look, there’s more. We haven’t heard from all the hubs yet. These were just the first two to get back to us with the initial results. There have been several other hits that are weaker but may be viable if you want to take a whiff yourself. Some of them are not that far from here.”

“This whole thing is stupid, Charlie. Forget it. I’m not huffing strangers. I had my shot at the guy I want, and he never wanted me back. I’m done.”

Meg got up and helped herself to considerably more than a double. Charlie sighed and took the bottle away, leaving the Sub her drink and a firm look that she wasn’t getting any more on a work night.

The door banged open and then slammed again. Jo’s greeting belted into the kitchen. “I’m here, you bitch, what the fuck is the big emergency? I have a shitload to get done tonight.” She bustled in and froze in the doorway. “We’re drinking the good stuff? Who died?”

“No, no, it’s good news,” Charlie protested, reopening the bottle and serving Jo a tumbler of her own.


“Oh,” said Jo. “That.”

“Yes, that. Look, both of you, this is good news. I’m trying to tell you there’s hope here.”

“I’m not moving to Mongolia, Charlie.” Jo took the chair next to Meg and touched her shoulder in solidarity.

“Would you just shut up and listen for a second? We know you’re not interested in any Trigger that takes you away from Lawrence. That was part of the deal all along. That’s why Alpha got involved personally. He wrote a proposal to go with your submissions into the system. We only offer your scents to candidates who are already involved in the movement somehow, either ACRI employees or certified in something we can use here. You can’t, like, advertise this because he’s not going to do it for just anybody, but you two…you two belong here no matter what.”
“What proposal?” demanded Meg, draining the last of her scotch and eyeing Jo’s, forgotten in her hand.

“Whoever hits, he’s willing to offer them a job here, relocation expenses included. It’s a part of the deal. If they Trigger with you, and they want in on that, he expects them to move, not you.”

Meg scoffed loudly again. “Right! Someone’s gonna go for that,” she retorted sarcastically. “Tear up their whole life, leave their pack behind and move to Lawrence. For me. I mean, Jo, she’s got that pull anyway. No one’s gonna uproot their life for me.”

“Darlin’, listen to me. You don’t get it. You’re not someone’s settling. You’re the catch. The full deal doesn’t get promoted unless there’s a reasonable chance of a viable Trigger and you give the nod. Even without knowing there’s a deal to help them move into the center of the movement and land a dream job right in the engine of this train, people are lining up to take a shot at matching with your scents. The number of submissions to the Mate-match program in the last two weeks has quadrupled since someone leaked that you two are putting your scents out there. They want you, Meg. They want you. You hear me? You too, Jo. It wouldn’t be a challenge to convince your mate to move here, what with you being alpha and all, but the deal is the same. Cas wants the pack stable. He wants you both locked here, and if that means bringing in a mate he can lock down too, well…”

Jo blinked noncommittally for a moment then murmured, “He’s a shifty son of a bitch. What if I didn’t want to work with my own mate? What if I don’t want to dig in deeper and devote my whole fucking life to this movement? Why didn’t we know he was going to do that? Jesus, Charlie!”

“Relax, Jo. You still make the final call. No one’s forcing you into anything. If you want to open your scent up to a wider audience, be my guest. But you’re not fooling anyone. You don’t want out any more than I do. You would sooner die than leave your post and your pack, and everybody knows it.”

“Don’t get self-righteous with me, Charlene! Let someone lead you through a rat maze with little nuggets of cheese and see how you like it. This is my LIFE he’s playing with here!”

“Shut up, both of you. This isn’t about Jo anyway!” shouted Meg. She was pale and looked unsteady. “Mate or don’t mate. It makes no difference. You’re still here, and you’re still on track to be our next career Winchester. Let me get this straight…this chick in Turkey…”

“Hungary,” Charlie corrected softly. “And I think it’s a guy.”

“Right. Hungary. He’s a Lupin social worker already? He would move for me?”

Charlie’s face took on an earnest sympathy. She took Meg’s hand. “He doesn’t know about the offer yet, doesn’t know his scent matches yours. The ball starts in your court, Meg. If you want, you can say no without ever smelling his scent. I don’t know if the dude speaks English, but what’s a language barrier when there’s good sex? You get to review every option, take in the scent enough to get a feel for each hit. You say who moves forward and who never even gets a chance to know what they’re missing.”

“Oh, this is fun. I find just the right soul, get my hopes up, and then go to them, hat in hand, with a massive bribe from my boss no less, then get kicked in the teeth and laughed out of the room for being a pushy, entitled Sub. No, thanks. Pass.”

“Meg,” Jo began.

“What?!”
“Charlie’s got a point.”

“Oh, now she’s got a point? Now that it’s me we’re talking about and not you? Fuck you, Harvelle.”

“Hey! Watch it!”

“Or what?!” Meg shot back. She shot to her feet. “Forget this. Forget I ever said anything. I don’t need a mate. I’ve managed on my own this long, and I didn’t do too shabby if I say so myself!”

“I know it’s scary,” Charlie told her gently. The beta-Neutral ignored her alpha friend bristling at the table and took hold of Meg’s shoulders. She searched her eyes. “But think about it. We’re not talking about a shitty match you get shackled to for the rest of your life. It’s not going to be like your folks. This is a True-Mate match, beta. You could find someone who gets you on a molecular and metaphysical level – someone who knocks even Sam out of your head forever. Meg, this program works. I’ve seen it work. Cas is offering you a chance to have your cake and eat it too. Maybe he shouldn’t have done it behind your back, but don’t be so quick to walk away. Please?”

“I don’t speak Turkish,” she grumbled.

“That’s fine. Neither does he. And don’t forget the one in Florida. Pretty sure she speaks some version of English.” Charlie guided her back to the table and sat her down, noting that Meg had slipped into Submissive. “We’re just getting started, ladies. New entries hit the program every week. With the influx going crazy like it’s doing, these first ones aren’t going to be the last. You can have your pick. Take your time and have fun with it. If someone doesn’t want the offer, and they turn you down, move on to someone else. The thing is, I can’t imagine a real TM match saying no to either of you.”

“You can’t imagine that someone might have as much invested in their life in Tallahassee as I do here?” Meg proposed astutely, and Charlie shrugged. “What have you found for Jo?” Meg was desperate to shift the attention from herself.

“One so far. A ton of possibles, but one that’s certified. Dude’s in south Arizona. For now.”

Jo stared into her glass for several beats before looking up with a hopeless, lost look. She seemed resigned to the fact that countering the Alpha’s wishes was a pointless endeavor. “What the hell! My heart got set on the wrong guy too long ago to fix it now. What is it with those two, anyway? They’re like spiders sitting in their stupid webs waiting for hapless saps to get stuck in the sticky, only for the two to look ‘em over and say, ‘Hmm, no thanks’. We oughtta form a lonely-hearts club for Winchester rejects.”

“You’re looking at it,” Meg mourned.

“Speak for yourselves,” protested Charlie. “I love ‘em both, but…yech! It’s like thinking of kissing my own sister!”

“You don’t have a sister,” Jo pointed out.

“Maybe,” said Charlie, “But if I did, she’d be just like Dean Winchester. We’d make a lovely pair too. He’s way prettier than I am.”

“Old argument, ladies! And not helping. How long do I have to think about it?” Meg broke in.

Charlie bit her lip a little and abandoned any thoughts of Dean in a sundress and pumps. “There’s not a time limit, Meg. They can pull their names out of the hat whenever they want, and there’s no guarantee they won’t Trigger with someone else while you’re on the fence. Other than that, the
door’s yours to close or step through whenever you’re ready.”

“And Alpha really said he would offer some schmuck a job, sight unseen, just because they fit with us?” Jo put in.

“His thinking is that if they match you two, they’ll fit with the pack as a whole, and he always needs another pair of hands. Now that funding isn’t the bottleneck it was, it’s just a matter of finding them a role that suits them.” Charlie couldn’t sit still. She strolled restlessly across the kitchen but then mindfully stopped and leaned the small of her back against the countertop. It didn’t really stop the energy from vibrating through her.

“Mom’s going to lose her shit,” said Jo. “She’s always going on about the program and how good it is. I’m outnumbered no matter what. She wants me to settle down in a new house with a mate and start filling the place with puppies.”

“Isn’t that what you want, too?” Charlie asked carefully.

Jo took a deep breath. “I never thought I would. All I ever wanted was for my best friend to realize he’s not really gay and take a chance on someone who’s loved him forever. Like anyone could ever compete for his attention with Castiel fucking Novak. Then he Mated, and it wasn’t to Castiel, and I realized all at once that it wasn’t that he can’t share his affection. It’s that he can’t give it to me. I’m an idiot, and it’s time I get back into the real world for a change. Mom’s not getting any younger. She wants grandpups. I can’t think of any reason not to go for it. I mean, we’re about to be crazy busy all up in this bitch, but when has that ever stopped anyone who catches a TM Trigger naturally? It’s not like it asks the two fools who Trigger whether it’s a convenient time or not.”

“That settles it,” said Charlie firmly. “I’ll get it all set up, pull up the profiles with the strongest potential, and get the two of you into the scent rooms. You can sit together if you want, be there for each other. Sometimes it helps to have a friend there to keep you rational.”

“I don’t suppose you have one more dose of the good stuff on you?” Meg held her empty tumbler out hopefully. “I’ll sleep on your couch. We can ride in together in the morning.”

“You’re sleeping on my couch anyway, you lightweight,” said Charlie in her most dominant voice. “And no more scotch for you. I don’t want to answer for why you show up to work hungover.”

Jo began to make motions toward leaving, but she stopped and leaned over the back of Meg’s chair to swamp the beta in a mess of a hug that caught her in all the wrong ways. Meg leaned her head sideways into Jo’s arm anyway. Jo whispered to her, “We’ll always be sisters even if our fantasy mates never figured out we were supposed to be sisters. I love you, you brat. Go get yourself a slice of peace and happiness.”

“You too,” sighed Meg. “Sorry about the ‘fuck you’. I wasn’t really mad.”

“I know.” Jo left her with a simple squeeze and then hugged Charlie. “Why aren’t you in the program?” she asked Charlie as she released her hug.

“I have zero interest in Mating. You know me. Can you picture me Mated to someone?” It was her standard offhand answer, but then she shocked Jo and start led Meg when her eyes flew wide, and she grabbed Jo’s shoulders tightly with a gasp. “Oh, my God! I’ve got the BEST idea!”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” muttered Meg finding her feet. “You scared me.”

“DUDES! WE should form a Pack! A real Pack. Jo can Alpha for us all. Meg’s mate can join too, even if he only speaks Hungarian!”
“I thought he was Turkish!”

“No, seriously!” said Charlie. “The three of us…and Jo’s mom of course. Hell, maybe a few others from The Facility! Think of it! It would be awesome!”

“I’m not Dominant enough to be Alpha,” said Jo with a frown.

“Says who?”

“Charlie,” Jo explained patiently. “I’d have to be either Deep alpha OR a Profound Dom. I’m neither. I’m rank and file. It wouldn’t work.”

“Okay, fine, then we scope the possible candidates and recruit one. What about Benny? You know he’s dying for a Pack of his own. He’s nesting now. He’s probably as vulnerable as he’s ever gonna be to saying yes.”

Meg simply looked back and forth between them, her mouth agape. Light sparkled from Charlie’s electrified expression, and Jo’s face showed confusion.


“You think though?” asked Jo carefully. “Like, for real? A Pack?”

Charlie grinned at her with her lower lip caught between her teeth. “Name one downside,” she said despite her attempt to stifle her own impetuous idea.

“I…uh…” Jo checked with Meg who merely raised an eyebrow and shrugged. “I earned my own money. I wouldn’t want to turn that over to a Pack pool. I didn’t work this hard to give my property to an Alpha.”

“Just think about it.” Charlie was careful not to press, but the idea seemed to want to settle into her sternum and take up residence there. “I don’t ever want to Mate, but I’m dying for family. And if I could choose a family for myself, you bitches would both have to be part of it.”

“Thanks Charlie,” Meg murmured, still firmly Submissive. Her head was lowered. Charlie ran fingers through her hair and leaned down to kiss her temple.

Jo felt her phone buzz and pulled it out of her pocket. She read the message with her mouth falling open. “Shit, you guys! There’s been a… It’s Alex. Oh, no! Fuck! Oh, no! I gotta get home. Bobby’s going to need me to help with the deflection…” Jo forgot all about her friends in her hurry out the door, leaving them both wide-eyed in her wake.

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“Thought I’d find you here,” said Ellen sidling up to Cas at the bar. “What are we drinking? Looks like vodka.” She lifted his glass and sniffed it.

“It’s club soda,” he told her. “Tonight is not a good night for me to drink vodka. I might forget to stop.”
“That bad, Alpha?”

He hunched over miserably as she slid his drink back and signaled to Zeke that she preferred something a little stronger. “You heard already, or you wouldn’t be here to collect me,” Cas mumbled.

“I heard about what happened in Canada,” she admitted with a wary look around. No one else was close. “So I called your house to check on you and heard that you’d been kicked to the curb for the night. What happened there?”

Cas licked his lips. He didn’t want to talk about it, but it was nice to have a friend next to him. “I’m really not sure,” he said into his glass as he drained it. “Who did you talk to?”

Zeke took his glass and delivered him another before gracing Ellen with her favorite IPA in a bottle. She took the beer, pulled off the barstool, and knocked her head sideways to suggest a booth near the back might work better. Castiel frowned subtly. She was Omega. She was Submissive. It wasn’t her place. He felt off, and he didn’t like the swirl of voices muddying his thinking.

“Suit yourself, Alpha,” she said before sauntering slowly to the back of the room as close to the beaded curtain as the booths allowed. She settled with her back to him and took a slow pull on her beer. Cas growled to himself and followed, sliding in opposite.

“I prefer the bar,” he groused.

“Then why did you move?” she countered.

“Who did you talk to?” he repeated.

Ellen lowered her beer and left it on the table. “Dean told me you’d lost it a bit, and he sent you packing until you cooled off.”

“I guess that’s one way to see it,” the Alpha muttered.

“So? You’re in the doghouse. Won’t be the last time, I’m sure. You wanna talk about it?”

“Ellen, you know I respect you, and I love you, but I hardly think this situation is best suited for me to talk over with you. It’s…please excuse the rudeness…it’s between Dean and me.”

“Alpha stuff. I get it. What would an Omega…an Ozzie, be able to contribute to alpha stuff?” She took another long drink and feigned not seeing his scowl.

“It isn’t about being alpha,” he protested. “But it’s private. We had….are having….a fight. We’ll get it settled eventually, I’m sure.”

“And in the meantime, you’re staying up at your suite?”

“Yes, I think that would be best.”

“Alone?”

Cas glanced up, reading real concern on her face. “April’s fine, Ellen. I’m keeping watch over her. She’s rattled, but she’s not faltering. She can handle a night without me. She has Dean and… Michael.” At the last word, he grimaced and emptied his entire glass as if it really was vodka.

“I see,” she replied, lacing two words with a world of meaning. “But you’d rather she didn’t? Have Michael, that is.”
“I don’t want to talk about Michael, Omega.” He really, really didn’t. The man’s face kept swimming up to the surface in his mind, and every time it did, he felt like pummeling it back into the depths.

Ellen stared at him. He could tell her wheels were spinning madly, but her face remained passive. Just like…

“Doctor, you’re an Ozzie,” he said abruptly. She raised her brows in surprise. “Tell me. What would you think about an Ozzie who’s a master at…let’s just say at chess, at…moving pieces around the board and playing them off one another and winning a complicated strategic game? Do you believe an Ozzie can grow to become an expert at manipulative strategies like that without risking her – their – safety in terms of staying balanced?”

“Sir, I’m quite certain you should be talking to Benny about this, not me.”

“Benny won’t be home for another few days. I’m asking you. You’re probably better qualified anyway, seeing as you ARE Omega-Sub, and he’s just an alpha like me.”

“Are you sure you haven’t been drinking?”

“Ellen, please.” The desperation in his voice made her sit back. He seemed front brain and sadly close to a break, and she worried that the wrong words might tip him over. She had her back to the rest of the bar, but there was no one here but Zeke with any experience talking to Cas in a morose state. There was only Ellen, so she buckled in to try.

“She’s a chess master?” Ellen said carefully.

“What do you remember from last May?” he asked. “Did she talk to you about me…or Dean…or the two of us? Did you help her push me into the decision to propose to him?”

“Um. I didn’t see her all that often, Alpha. Sometimes when I met Jo for lunch, the whole class was there too. Sometimes she asked questions about your past – things a mate would want to know – nothing that seemed inappropriate or invasive. I told her a few stories. I don’t know where she learned about your tie with Dean. That didn’t come from me. Later on, as you were wearing down, Sir, we could all see it. Everyone was worried about you. I’m not the only one who sought her out and pumped her for information on your state of mind. She needed an ear. She was terrified you were going mad. She wasn’t moving chess pieces, Castiel. She was frightened. And for good reason, if you will allow me to say so.”

“Hmm,” he grumped. “No, it doesn’t fit. The girl who sat in a pool of pasta sauce and convinced me she could scoot over and make room for Dean in my life wasn’t terrified. She was angry. Worried, maybe, but not scared. She seemed frustrated as hell. I wrote it off. I convinced myself I didn’t see what I know I saw. That was the chess master forcing the queen to shift when it’s got its feet dug in and doesn’t want to move. But the chess master runs the game, not the queen. She buckled down, braced her shoulders, and shoved me into position. I never stood a chance.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Ellen was baffled and a bit alarmed. Cas rubbed a palm across his mouth. Zeke slid another glass into place at his elbow and cleared the empty.

“The question is,” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “Can…should…an Ozzie so Deep she can’t regulate her own toileting with any reliability safely be trusted to… Ellen, I don’t even understand what it is she’s doing. How can I know whether she’s safe to do it?”

Ellen picked through a bowl of peanuts that had appeared as if by magic and ate a few of the
plumpest. She chewed thoughtfully, frowning. “Has anything bad happened as a result?” she asked.

“I don’t know!” he responded forcefully. “From the look of things, she’s been at the center of everything we’ve built as a pack from the beginning. I thought it was me, but apparently, it was her all along.”

“So, you didn’t want the Pack? She talked you into something you never wanted?”

“You know that’s not true. I’ve always wanted a Pack of my own. You know I did.”

“Then what are you on about?”

“Ellen, she’s Ozzie!”

“So am I, Alpha.”

“It’s not the same thing,” he told her confidently.

“Why not?” she pressed, leaning forward on crossed arms. “Inside, we’re all just people. You taught me that, Sir, and you drilled it into me until I believed it enough to apply to medical school with you. Every time I faltered, you put a hand at my elbow and steadied me and reminded me that all the Ozzie stuff is just a distraction from what I can do if I make sure to keep on top of it. How is that different? Her talents are different from mine, but it seems to me it’s still a matter of letting her be herself and keeping on top of the Ozzie crap that tries to distract you. Who is she after a good thorough scene?”

“But that’s just it, Ellen. After a scene, she’s the same person she is before, only balanced. I don’t even know who this chess master person is. I’ve only seen that person maybe four times, total. Has she been lying to me all this time?”

“Oh,” said Ellen. The pieces had fallen into place for her, and she had no idea how to explain it to an Alpha. She decided a few more peanuts needed to die.

“Oh?” he prompted.

She shook her head. “No way. I’m not breaking the code. You’re a smart man, Alpha. You can handle this. It’s not Calculus.”

“Is that so?” Suddenly he was Alpha, and Ellen abandoned the peanuts. “What code?”

“Sir, please. It’s standard Ozzie stuff. This can’t be new to you.”

“What code?”

“Ozzies manipulate just like breathing, Alpha. It doesn’t have to be taught. It’s a survival skill we pick up pretty much as soon as we Present, when all of our choices get handed to our Alphas. You’re never going to meet an Ozzie who doesn’t know how to wrap a superior around their fingers. If you do, I’d like to meet the sorry sack, so I can teach them how not to get their neck stomped. Some are better at it than others. Omegas who turn out not to be Submissive still do it, but they’re not the true masters. It takes a wide-eyed kind of innocence to really pull it off. And you can bitch and moan all you want about it, but you’re never going to snuff it out. Some people, it’s all they have. You HAVE to have known about all this. C’mon, Castiel. You have to have known.”

He shook off the accusation. “How does that translate to a code?”
“We stick together, I guess. If April had confided in me that she needed to nudge you into a different opinion – she didn’t, but I’m saying, if she did – I would have tried to help her do it. I would have been shit at it. I haven’t tried to game anyone in a big way in years. Still would’ve tried though. You know, she may have tapped into Gabriel. He’s got the juice. He’s not Sub, so he doesn’t need it the way an Ozzie does. He’s got some above the table options. Gabe gets to plant his feet and hold stubbornly on if it’s important to him. April can’t do that without your say-so.”

Castiel was offended. “I’ve done everything I could think to do to be a worthy mate to her. Why couldn’t she just trust me? I’m NOT who she’s accusing me of being. I’m NOT!”

Ellen didn’t answer him point for point. “You believed in me when no one else did, Castiel. But, see, studying medicine, becoming a doctor, helping people to discover who they are, these are things you and I have in common, things you’re proud of within yourself, things you want to encourage in others. You and I are friends, aren’t we? Do you still trust my judgment?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “You’ve been far more open with me over the years than most alphas allow themselves with an Omega. I know you, Cas. I know your insecurities, what you carry inside that you’re ashamed of, just as you know my biggest shame. We know each other.”

“Go on,” he said.

“Sir, it seems to me that you’re struggling so much with accepting that your mate is who she is because instead of mirroring you like I do, in all the ways that make you proud, she mirrors your deepest shame. We’re friends here, Cas, and we’re not going to pretend that you aren’t a world class chess master in your own right. Only, you’re not proud of that fact at all. You do what you feel you must, but you barely acknowledge it even to yourself. This girl who has you so turned around is all your fears made real. But if I’m understanding you right, she’s not ashamed of what she can do at all. As an Ozzie, she’s more likely possessive, protective of it. It matters to her, Cas.”

Cas closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands.

“The elephant in the room sure is making a mess right now, Alpha. Are we going to name it? Are we going to keep pretending you’re only thinking about her best interest? You can demand she stop playing the game, but all that will do is move it deeper underground and make her resent you, because you’re _never_ going to follow that rule yourself. You’re not going to stop doing the same damn thing. The elephant has a name, Alpha. We call it ‘hypocrisy’. If you’ve been doing your job and keeping her balanced and fed… I’ve seen the kid, Cas. She glows. She’s the healthiest Ozzie I’ve ever seen. You’ve done yourself proud with that young woman. But if you’ve got her balanced, then it’s not unsafe for her to play those games. You might not like it, and as Alpha, those limits are yours to set. But it’s not a matter of ‘safe’. It’s a matter of necessity. Once you’ve met all an Ozzie’s needs, and I’m quoting you now, what’s left is the core person.”

“So, if all her Ozzie ‘crap’ as you call it fades out after she’s balanced,” he wrangled almost to himself. “Why does she still feel the need to move around in secret? Why did she hold onto the unbalanced persona and trick me into thinking that’s who she really was?”

“I can’t answer that, Alpha. I can tell you what most Ozzies experience, but I leave it to you to determine if it fits your relationship.” Ellen met his eye bravely. He had a solid red ring all the way around both pupils. He was an intimidating presence like that. His eyes bored into hers. “It’s usually not the Omega who needs to cling to the persona of helplessness, Sir. It’s the alpha mate. There’s an unstated challenge in letting go of the need once it’s met. If your Ozzie is just a person, that might mean she’s your equal in some things. Could you handle that? I hate to be the bearer of uncomfortable news, but most alphas cannot stomach an Ozzie who is in any way an equal. I pray you are not most alphas. I pray for both your sakes. Only you know what your Alpha and your wolf
can allow.”

“But that’s exactly what I want!”

“Is it? Are you certain? If that’s true, then her skills at…chess – skills that may equal yours…” Ellen made an impressed face at the very thought of an Ozzie so talented in the discreet arts. “…wouldn’t frighten or offend you as they do. You’re within your rights to demand she respect you, Sir. But please think it through. You accept the behavior from Dean. You’re proud of it, in fact, when he pulls one over on you. You live for the cat and mouse game. How is this different, if not bias against an Ozzie?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“No one ever said it would be simple,” she reminded him, quoting himself back to himself again. He glowered sulkily at her, but the red faded from his eyes. He looked weary. “When’s the last good night’s sleep you had, Sir?”

“I’ve lost track,” he muttered before he considered his answer. He slumped down onto a palm braced on his elbow.

She nodded, more a medical professional than an Omega. “It might be a good idea to get to bed early. Bobby’s flying in to meet Gabe at the airport. They’re both going to need all of us in the next few days, especially you. Ideally, you would go home and curl up with your mate and your fiancé, but I gather that’s not happening tonight.”

He left his cheek propped on his palm but looked up at her and sighed. “I’m not going to talk about that, Ellen. I told you. It’s private.”

She put her hands up in surrender. “You’ve got options, Sir. It’s all right to lean on someone when your Submissive kicks you out of your own house and for some reason, you go. You should probably talk it out with Benny.”

“Enough, Ellen. I can handle my own spats, thank you.”

“Another?” Zeke asked nodding at Ellen’s empty bottle.

“We’re done, Zeke,” Cas told him firmly. “Hers is on me.”

Zeke smirked and nodded, clearing the table without another word.

Ellen allowed him to shepherd her out the door, but she turned to face him on the sidewalk. “Don’t stew in it too long, Alpha. Whatever’s happened has ripples that hit all of us, mostly your mate. Please don’t leave her alone for long. She may be fine tonight, but she’ll drop fast if you don’t clear the air with Dean and go home soon. She’s been without you for nearly a week already. It’s not something to mess around with who’s the stubbornest alpha.”

Castiel’s Alpha slapped the inside of his breastplate like a posturing Silverback gorilla, but Cas let none of it show on his face. “I have my eye on her, Doctor Harvelle. I won’t let her drop.”

Ellen pursed her lips but nodded. She wasn’t far from home, but she let Cas put her in a cab. He leaned in and scented the car and the driver before he allowed her into it, and he paid the cabby before he closed the door. Ellen thanked him and settled back, comforted at the care. Her cheek tingled where he’d run the backs of his fingers over her face. The adrenalin hit shortly before she made it inside her house. Blatantly challenging an Alpha of Cas’ stature always cost her something, but she was ready for the trembling. Jo arrived shortly after and found her mother hunched into a ball
in a hot bath.

“I’m sorry about Alex,” Jo said carefully. “I liked her a lot.” Her mother nodded without looking round, but the scent coming off her was less shock or mourning and more remorse. Jo stepped forward and changed tacks.

“Who was it this time?” she asked patiently, grabbing a scrub-sponge and getting to work on her Ozzie’s back with soft comforting swipes. “Omega?” Jo deepened her voice and leaned in closer to allow her scent to waft across her mother’s shoulders.

“I spoke out of turn, alpha,” said the woman in the tub, still trembling. Here at home and away from public eyes, she let go of everything she clung so well to while working. She let the mantle of Ozzie take its rightful place. “I backtalked Castiel at Zeke’s. We were talking about his mate, and I took liberties I shouldn’t have.” The confession fell easily into her lap like slipping out of a tight pair of shoes.

Jo didn’t change her tone or the tender touch to her mother’s back. “Did he call you down for it?”

“He called ‘Enough’.”

“That’s one we try not hear, isn’t it, Omega?”

“Yes, alpha.”

“Did he set you a consequence?”

“No, ma’am.”

Jo frowned at her mother’s back. That wasn’t like Cas. If Ellen earned a reprimand, he wouldn’t often see to it himself, but he would schedule it. If he had left without doing so, then there was no reprimand coming. “Were you speaking to him as a doctor, Omega? You know that’s allowed.”

“I’m not sure, alpha. I feel unsettled.”

“Yes, you smell it. Do you want me to call Travis?”

“No, please. Couldn’t you? Just this once?”

“Mom, I’m not going to hit you. We’ve been over this.”

“Well then, maybe just sit with me. That feels nice.”

“Yeah, I can do that.” Jo undressed and stepped into the tub behind her mother. Skin to skin, alpha to Omega, let Ellen settle in a way that her Dominant couldn’t give her anyway, and the trembling eased. Jo washed her carefully, letting the simple task speak to the alpha in her chest that needed her Omega at peace. She dressed her mom in soft pajamas and tucked her into bed. Jo pulled her own night clothes over damp skin and padded back in to cuddle under the light blanket with her mother, just as she’d done when she was little.

“Better?” she asked, although she could smell the difference for herself. Ellen nodded silently and wrapped her maternal arms around her warm daughter. They didn’t need a fancy school to navigate their roles with each other. All they had to do was pay attention, and it all fell into place. It helped to have access to enough care close by that Jo didn’t need to fulfill a role for her mother that neither of them found comfortable. She would have if it became necessary, but it never had been.
“Can I ask you a question?” Jo asked into the darkness.

“Of course,” Ellen replied.

Jo turned onto her back so they could look at each other. “What were you and Castiel talking about? Was it work related?”

“No, it was personal. He’s upset about something he discovered about his mate. I advised him to get a good night’s sleep and to be careful not to neglect her just because he’s upset.”

“Something about April, huh? Yeah, I bet I can guess what that’s about.”

“It seems to encompass April, Dean, AND Michael. I don’t know the details, and I’m not at liberty to discuss it, but we should try to keep an eye on them if we can.”

Jo snorted. “Not you though. You keep your nose clean, right? Just like always. They catch you snooping or meddling and they’re going to call Benny in again. You remember last time Benny took a swing at you? Not pretty, Mom. I don’t want to see you that bruised up again. Promise me.”

“I promise, alpha.” Ellen grinned at the ceiling. Jo knew her too well.

“Hey,” Jo changed the subject. “Have you ever thought it might be a good idea to pull a larger Pack together? Not the Winchester one, naturally. That would be a disaster. But, you know. Maybe eighty-six Travis? I’m thinking you’ve outgrown him anyway. If we had a Pack, we could rely on family to take care of you, not a contractor.”

“That’s up to you, Jo. It’s not my decision.”

“Would it weird you out if I Mated and then pulled some of our friends from work in to form a Pack? We’d need a bigger house. Way bigger.”

Ellen sighed. “It wouldn’t weird me out, Jo. That doesn’t make it any more my choice. I go where you send me. I trust you.”

“You trust me. Whatever,” she scoffed. “If it would make you a grandmother that much sooner, you’d be all for moving to Tibet.”

“I hear Tibet is nice this time of year.”

“Go to sleep, Omega,” Jo instructed in her alpha voice, and her mother complied without protest, snuggling her face into the side of Jo’s throat where the alpha scent was strongest. Jo stayed up late thinking. And missing her best friend.

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“Come on, kid. Up you go. Get up and take your bath. Breakfast is in forty minutes.” Dean stroked her hair. She grumbled moodily and rolled over. She didn’t get up. “April! Ass out of bed and in the bathroom, pronto!”

“Five more minutes…” she murmured.

“Are you kidding me? Did you go defiant for Maureen, or is it just for me? He’s been gone for, like,
twelve hours. Get out of bed or I start counting.”

“Mmmmph!”

“One!”

“Fine! I’m up. Geez!” She sat up, hair mussed, face puffy, a glare in her usually cheerful eyes.

“Didn’t sleep much, I take it,” Dean observed, pulling her to the edge by her calves.

“I slept like shit. I hate this. I hate having him this mad at me. It hurts.”

“I know. But you did good. He’ll come around. You’re coming with us today. He can avoid me all he wants, but he needs to make things right with you. I’m sure he’ll find time to spend with you and then let you nap. For now, bath, enema, get dressed for breakfast. The last thing Michael needs is another Sub to handle.” Dean started the water flowing and then dug through her cabinet for her enema kit.

“Aw, Dean, do I have to?”

“Yes. You do. Do I have to stay and hover?”

She sighed but shook her head and took the kit from him. “Where’s Michael?”

“On the treadmill. Call me if you need anything. If you’re late for breakfast I’ll come check on you. If you don’t want me sticking my nose back in here, keep yourself on track. Got it? DON’T go back to bed.”

“Yes, alpha,” she said. She was clearly in a shitty mood, but Dean didn’t really blame her. Cas stayed at his Facility suite last night and only let his mate know as an afterthought. A late phone call and a promise that all was not lost was the sum total that she got from him before he instructed her to get to bed, before he practically hung up on her. He didn’t speak to Dean at all. He never so much as mentioned Michael.

Dean was livid.

He found his mate cooling down after a sprint. Michael was drenched in sweat, and he smelled delicious. They didn’t have time for the knotting Dean wanted. The bulge in Michael’s belly was growing daily, but this early, it was all padding, not pup. Still, he looked amazing in just a pair of running shorts and sneakers. Michael was uncharacteristically ebullient. Dean blamed it on endorphins from the run and the ever-shifting hormone mix of pregnancy.

“You look hot,” he observed.

“Yeah, I worked up a good sweat,” Michael replied with a grin.

“That too,” Dean teased. “You feeling okay this morning? Do your Kegels? How’s the nausea?”

“I’m fine, alpha. I feel good today.” Michael stepped off the treadmill and doused himself across his chest with a squirt from his water bottle before aiming it at his mouth. “We can do the Kegels together at breakfast. I’m not doing them by myself. You promised.”

“Fine, you big stubborn baby.” Dean tossed him a towel.

Michael caught it and swiped his face. The healthy glow of pregnancy made him seem alight with energy, and Dean lost himself in the play of muscles in his shoulders. Michael began to speak before
the towel cleared his face. “Oh, hey, I’m gonna get with Balthazar today. We’re go for our scene. All he’s gotta do now is book the room and make sure everyone’s schedule is free. We’ve got alternates if anyone has a conflict. How does Thursday sound?”

“Thursday?” asked Dean, confused.

“Yeah, this Thursday, as in a couple of days from now. That good? We’ll schedule it for early evening so it won’t interfere with your workday, and I can carry you to your suite afterward and just pour you into bed. I expect you’ll be out for the count after what I’ve got planned.” Michael stripped his shoes and shorts off and disappeared behind the walled shower stall. The water started up before Dean found his voice.

“I’m confused, man. Are you trying to set up our gangbang scene for this week? Michael, we can’t do that. We’re suspended.”

“Not anymore! That was just until I was sure you could pull up a safeword when you needed to, and boy howdy did you ever!” Michael’s voice dripped with pride over the sound of the shower, and Dean frowned as he rounded the corner. Michael’s head was under the stream as he sloughed off the sweat of a hard run.

“Not getting any less confused, Omega. What are you talking about?”

“Yesterday, Dean. Last night. You safeworded. Shit got out of control, could have been monstrously bad, but you called it, called a halt, stopped the play, sent the Top packing. It was awesome. I’m so fucking proud of you!”

“Michael, are you under the impression that last night’s shouting match was a scene?”

“Nah, Dean. I know the difference, but the outcome is the same. He was full-tilt out of control, and I could feel you wanting to take a knee and give him your best ‘Yessir’, but you didn’t. That told me everything I needed to know. I’m good, alpha. Let’s do it!” Michael rinsed shampoo from his hair and began soaping up his body, shifting to a slow and tender caress as his hands crossed his lower belly. Dean noticed but didn’t say anything.

Dean sighed heavily. “It’s not up to you, Michael. We’re still on suspension – both you and me as a tertiary team and the gangbang scene itself. It’s been put on hold. We can’t do it until Cas gives the go ahead.”

“Oh, please! He doesn’t get to make up rules like that if he can’t manage his own shit at home. Where’s that brat of yours? Are you telling me he’s going to let a little thing like a suspension stand in his way?”

Dean sat on a weight bench and waited for Michael to finish up. “We can’t do it, Michael. I’m not going to participate, not like this. The last thing this Pack needs right now is my brat stirring shit even worse than it is. Have you already contacted Balthazar with a date?”

“Maybe.” Michael turned his back and stretched above the top of the shower for a towel in the overhead locker. The view was magnificent.

“Call it off.”

“Seriously? You’re kidding me, right? Tell me you’re kidding.” Michael did a half assed effort at drying and then wrapped the towel around his waist. He turned back to Dean with a frustrated expression. “It’s never going to happen, is it?”
“You’ve got no patience, man,” Dean told him. He stood and snagged a clean towel from a stack near the shower. He dried Michael’s chest and back, spending longer on both than he needed to.

“Look, I know you’re pissed at him, and you’ve got a right to be. But don’t take it this direction, Michael. We’re sticking to our oaths, and we’re going to keep the ones about obedience and respect even when it feels like he doesn’t deserve that from us. This Pack is stronger than one shitty shouting match. Your girlfriend saw to that. He didn’t mean what he said about you. I’ll bet he’s hiding now because he’s ashamed of what he said, and he’s trying to figure out how to take it back.”

Michael erupted into motion with no warning, and Dean found himself trapped against the wall, his back pressed painfully into a knob or a hinge or something, and his breath left him in a “whuumph!” Michael’s whole body held him in place from chest to thighs, and his arms bracketed Dean’s head.

“Something I said?” Dean gritted out.

“I don’t care if he’s sorry, alpha. I’m through with taking orders from someone who might turn on me any second. He called me ‘poison’! Or did you not hear that?”

“Get off me, you psychopath! Of course I heard it.”

Michael pressed in tighter and buried his nose in Dean’s neck. He was dewy and heated, close enough to naked that Dean’s body reacted to his proximity as if the next few minutes were a forgone conclusion. “Michael, cupcake, you need to get a grip…no, on yourself, moron. Shit, stop it, man. I know, okay!” Dean’s voice hit a desperate register. Michael had begun pulsing the length of his body against Dean’s in a bid to find comfort and solidarity, possibly to remind himself he still held enough power to maintain his claim over his mate. Dean wormed himself to the side until Michael’s defeated slump held the wall up alone and he panted hopelessly into the painted surface, leaning into it on his forehead. Dean didn’t leave him, but their roles flipped.

“Hush, now, Omega. You’re not losing me. It’s not hopeless. He was a massive dick, and he’s going to answer for that and fix it. I’m not going to let him treat you that way and get away with it. You hear me? Babe, you have to know by now that that isn’t how he really feels. He knows who you are and how much we all need you. He loves you, Michael. Hang tight for me for a little while and let me talk to him. I need you to trust me, Michael. Can you do that? Without turning into the Spring Break episode of ‘Girls Gone Wild’?”

“I trust you, Dean. But I don’t like being unwelcome and unappreciated. I thought this was my home. I thought I was family. I actually believed it was unconditional. Why did I let myself turn that stupid? When have things ever worked out like that for me?”

“Shh, come here. It’s not that bad. You are loved, baby, and this IS your home, unconditionally.” Dean pulled Michael into a tight, intimate embrace. “I’m gonna castrate the fucker next time I see him, man. I’m not defending what he said. That was way outta line. But I need you to trust that that’s not who he is. I’ve known him a long time. I’ve only seen him lose it like that a few times, and it’s the Alpha going off the reservation. He can whip it back in line, but it’s going to take a little bit of time and some effort. We’re going to give him that, you hear me? We’re not going to throw the whole Pack away over a moment of bullshit passion. And one other thing I’ve learned about him: he makes a lot of mistakes, just like we all do, but once he focuses his attention on fixing one, he never makes that one again. He’s going to learn from this, Michael. I’ve seen him do it a thousand times. You don’t have to walk on eggshells from now on waiting for it to happen again. He’s a lot like you in that. Once his eyes are on an issue, he rams straight through the heart of it and figures himself out. He’s nothing like a standard alpha. He’s not going to waffle around and avoid the problem and blame everybody he knows for the fuck-all. He’s gonna look for a fix inside himself, and he’s gonna emerge a better man.”
Their faces were close enough to create a humid miasma of intense breath around their heads. Michael’s hands clutched desperately at Dean’s waist, still pulsing with the rhythm of his run, with the impulse to dart away and put distance between himself and the source of his pain. Running wasn’t going to help though. Deflection, distraction, and defiance weren’t going to help. It hurt. Michael couldn’t stop seeing those cold, furious blue eyes canted at him, that accusatory finger pointed at his chest, that half-step forward toward the stairs that spoke of imminent violence halted only by Dean’s stance between them. He’d almost bolted, but his instinct stopped him. A dash up the stairs would have triggered the Alpha to give chase, and Dean’s body would not have stopped him. Just like the moment of paralysis in the E.R. archway, when he froze in place to become invisible in non-existent underbrush when his nostrils scented alpha aggression violent enough to kill, Michael froze on the stairs behind his mate. He hated himself for that. He hated his own weakness. He hated Dean for being strong enough to stand still out of volition, out of courage, not out of instinctive self-preservation, an attempt to turn invisible.

Most of all, Michael hated Castiel. Luring him in with promises of respect and safety had been utterly unnecessary unless his ultimate goal was to destroy Michael’s spirit entirely. Michael would have struggled in his bindings, but he would have settled eventually into the strata of the Pack hierarchy. Omegas sit at the bottom. Everyone knows that. Why the elaborate pretense? Why give him a voice and a space and free range and respect? Why allow him to negotiate for touching rights with Dean? All of it was bullshit. And for what? So the Alpha could reel him in with promises of human agency only to strip the rug from beneath his feet once he was convinced they saw him as a person? How humiliating it felt now to sit flummoxed on his ass where he’d fallen in place to become invisible in the aftermath and look at his naïve self of yesterday believing the Alpha cared about him. Fuck! He was so stupid! When had any alpha EVER cared about him? Cared about a soft, slick channel, maybe, cared about the invigorating thrill of feeling an Omega take charge for once and the excitement of touching the taboo. But cared about Michael Lancet, the man? No. Never. It was never going to happen.

“Hey, buddy. I can smell you, you know. I can feel you spinning.” Dean’s voice broke through again, and Michael clung to it. “You’re okay, sweet man. I’ve got you. You think I would let you down? You’re my mate Michael Quentin. We need each other. And this little spark needs all four of us.” Dean stroked his fingers down beneath the edge of the towel at Michael’s hip and around to his lower back. “We can fix this. You gotta trust me. We’re gonna face the day like it’s any other day, all right. You go to class. You’ve got Joshua today, so you don’t have to wind yourself down to try to cope with Hannah. Focus on your lesson, and don’t do anything rash. I’m taking April with us so she can spend some time with Cas. She’s got more explaining to do, and he’s got a hell of an apology to make to her. I don’t know where his head is this morning. God, Michael, Gabe will be home by noon. Can we please hold off the hara-kiri until we get Gabriel home? Dude, I know what you’re feeling is important. I’m not trying to sideline you. But we can’t fix anything until Cas gets his head screwed back on right, and he needs time for that.”

“You don’t get it, alpha,” Michael whined into Dean’s hair. “That little display of his was exactly what Pete and I saw coming. It was inevitable. She knew, man. She’s known all along that he can’t bend that far. He CAN’T do it. It doesn’t matter how much time we give him. He’s Alpha. He can only bend so far. And all your hours of research and book-writing is for shit because it’s all manufactured whitewashing. It’s not real. You know what’s real? That display yesterday was real. Everything else is make believe.”

“NO! Bullshit! I’m alpha, too, Michael. Don’t tell me what an alpha can and can’t handle. We’re people before we’re beasts. Look, this fucking society stripped everything from us. Everything! And we have to build something new in its place because the old ways are gone. All our art, our music, our stories, all of our history, our culture – GONE! We’re a pile of lost fucking souls drifting through space with nothing to hold us together, and we’re reaching for each other, trying to get enough people in one place to form a colony and start again. If we’re just rabid beasts and nothing more, we
never would have lived this long. If we have no humanity, then every Omega who gets raped because she couldn’t get indoors fast enough when her Heat hits is just an unfortunate casualty of evolution. Or, hell, not even a casualty, right, cause from an evolutionary standpoint, rape is as viable a means of reproduction as anything else. Is that who you think we alphas are? Really, Michael? Castiel went out in his POS car, picked up his brother in Heat and fucking drove him home. In Heat, Michael, and he didn’t lay a hand on Gabe. You know as well as I do that being brothers doesn’t have any effect on the Breeding drive when an Omega’s in Heat. You haven’t seen him over the years, man. You haven’t seen his control. He’s stood in front of a stranger in Heat and singlehandedly staved off a mob of hungry alphas, all the while with his own cock hard as a rock and sticking out from his slacks like a flagpole. He’s not an animal, man. He’s got a couple of them inside him, and one of ‘em got loose for a second yesterday. Give him a little bit of time. He’ll figure out how it managed to do that, and he’ll reconfigure the leash so that it can’t happen again.”

“He’s a hypocrite, Dean.”

“Yeah, he kinda is. But, God, man, he’s doing the best he can. Yesterday was bad. I’m not saying it wasn’t. He’s not perfect, Michael. But it’s not right that everyone in this Pack but him gets to fuck up sometimes. Promise me you’ll call Balthazar and have him hold off. Promise me you won’t do anything else out of an urge to strike him back. Michael, promise me.”

“Yes, alpha,” said Michael pulling away from his mate. His bonds clearly showed what he thought of that instruction. He was bracing to be a martyr, and Dean could do nothing but sigh in frustration. Dean left him to get dressed. A peek into the kitchen showed Tony setting bowls of porridge on the table at each setting, but no April. He found her sitting listlessly on the side of the tub, scrubbed clean, but naked and making no move to dress. A few simple words in her ear and the light blinked back on behind her eyes. He kept her hand in his all the way down the stairs. She needed the connection, and he needed to be sure she wouldn’t phase out again. Breakfast was silent. Kali never showed. Jess grabbed a tray and fled back upstairs. Dean reminded himself over and over again to keep putting one foot in front of the other. He couldn’t falter right now. God, please, not right now.

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After a morning that felt like a wind-up to an imminent explosive confrontation, the first few hours turned into a massive disappointment in that regard. Dean handed April off at Castiel’s suite door. Cas thanked him, kissed him lightly on the cheek in a dismissive way, and then ushered her in and closed the door. Dean stood in the hallway, gathering his bearings. He wasn’t sure what he had expected to happen, but it wasn’t that.

But there was work to do. So much work. He shook it off, checked in with Sarah who had Charlie beside her, and then spent the first three hours in his own office. Jamming two incompatible systems together was going to be a nightmare. Dean knew that to make it work, they needed to strip each side of everything nonessential and start with the basics. It would have been easier to slap Band-Aids and workarounds into place with a promise to get back to it later. But the easy way out was going to mean a lifetime of headaches, several lifetimes. Dean’s Training Department sat right at the center of everything that both organizations were built to do. He was determined to do it right the first time, and that meant a hard road ahead. His brow furrowed as he worked through the organizational charts and system requirements. Nothing, it seemed, about the two facilities was the same. Dean was going to have to dismantle everything and rebuild from scratch. His phone buzzed again and again, and as
he slogged through the morning, keeping Michael close enough to the front of his head to feel him sulkily settle, Dean came to appreciate the expertise of the Keller Training staff. They were amazing, and they really knew their stuff. Each call started with a feeling of facing a hopeless roadblock only to untangle slowly with the discovery that there was a pathway through if everyone was willing to give a little. That didn’t stop his head from aching by the 10:30 Leadership Team meeting.

Dean’s eyes flashed up to meet Castiel’s as the Alpha swept into the conference room at the last minute to start the meeting right on time. Cas looked at him, but his eyes were guarded, nearly blank. The meeting proceeded without any sign of emotional trauma from either of them. They were good enough at hiding their personal crap that there was no pall of tension over the conference room table. Castiel was Alpha as always, and Dean followed his lead. As always. Nearly always.

It wasn’t until the meeting wrapped up and Cas dismissed the team with an offhand request for Dean to linger behind that Dean felt his heart rate remind him he had words that needed saying to the starched blue-eyed Dominant across the corner. He merely nodded his acquiescence, and leaned back in his chair; a submission, if an impertinent one. The room emptied. Castiel stood beside his chair and looked at Dean. Dean signaled the wolf to lie back down and relax. It obeyed with a huff of impatience. The wolf knew that tone from Cas. They needed each other. Waiting wasn’t going to help matters. It never did. Dean ignored its petulance.

“Thank you for looking after April last night, Dean. She’s shaken this morning, but she’s much better than she would have been without you.” His words weren’t clipped, but there was a telltale stiffness to their delivery that put Dean’s wolf on notice. Dean signaled the wolf to lie back down and relax. It obeyed with a huff of impatience. The wolf knew that tone from Cas. They needed each other. Waiting wasn’t going to help matters. It never did. Dean ignored its petulance.

“She’s my Pack, Alpha. I wasn’t doing it as a favor to you.”

“Yes, I appreciate the difference, but I’m grateful nonetheless.” Cas was mad. His control was slipping, and the anger began to eke from his pores in a palpable way.

“These doors aren’t soundproof, Alpha,” Dean reminded his fiancé. “If we’re not talking shop, maybe we should move to my suite. If we are talking shop, perhaps you could cut to it and let me get back to work. I have a million and seven things I have to do before the end of the day.”

“How’s Michael this morning?”

“What?”

Cas stood upright again and paced the length of the boardroom. “Your mate, Dean. How is he? Yesterday can’t have been easy for him. I’m concerned.”

“Concerned. Cas, you told him he was a poison to the Pack. And now you’re concerned. Forgive me, Alpha, but you can shove your concern up your ass.”

Cas stopped pacing and turned to face Dean directly with a befuddled frown on his face. Dean studiously didn’t tense or change his slothful slouch in his chair. He did quirk a single brow in inescapable challenge. The brat, it seemed, would have his say no matter where Dean sent his wolf.

“Yes, perhaps relocating to a more private space would be advisable,” Castiel conceded.

Dean gestured toward the door in a wordless, ‘lead on, Alpha’.

The door had barely snapped shut in Dean’s suite before they rounded on each other. “You’re putting the weight of what happened on ME?!” Cas demanded.
“C.J., when all of this shakes out, I don’t know where we’re gonna be, but one thing I know is that you’re gonna feel like an asshole because, man, you’re being an asshole right now. I need you to snap out of it. Michael is not the problem with our Pack. Right now, YOU are.”

“How dare you!” Castiel spat in outrage.

“No,” Dean countered. “Get off your high horse and listen to me. I know you and me are fucked right now. Man, I broke the rules bigtime, and you’re pissed as hell at me. We’re going to get to that. Later. Right now, all I want to talk about is how you owe Michael a massive fucking apology and a commitment to NEVER do that to him again. How IS he? He’s a fucking basket case, thanks to you. The guy didn’t do anything wrong, Castiel. He’s followed every rule we set for him, and he fucking trusted you! He’s an Omega, for fuck’s sake. You don’t get to lash out at him when your feelings get hurt because your mate turns out to be a whole person and not your private personalized sex doll! Wake the fuck up before you break everything!”

“Dean, he’s been posing as a compliant Pack Omega from the beginning, but it’s been one long manipulation. He was never interested in learning anything from us. All he cares about is tearing us down.”

Dean felt a wave of sorrow hit him like a tsunami. “No, Cas. No. You’re thinking with your wolf. You’ve missed everything that matters. You’re scared of what you discovered about April, and you’re turning that fear on someone who can’t fight back. Look, I know you’re in there. Look at me, Castiel James! You love me! Right? Right?? He’s my True-Mate, Cas! He’s my other half. He completes me. Do you really believe I would find completion in a destructive bastard bent on mindless revenge? You’ve got it wrong, and it’s going to break us apart if you don’t slow down and think about it. He’s not doing that. He’s come so far, man. Don’t throw him back to the start and make him crawl on his hands and knees to get back to this place. You’re the one who’s out of kilter, Cas. Not Michael.”

“It all makes so much sense, Dean. He was angry about me from the start, and he’s never let that go. He’s just changed plans as he needed to, when he figured out how best to hurt me. One scheme didn’t work, so he shifted to a new one. I’m not apologizing because I’m not a bit sorry for calling him out.”

Dean lowered his chin and stepped slowly closer to the venting Alpha. “Castiel, can you hear me at all?” His voice was soft and low, soothing as one would use when confronting a wild beast. Cas’ eyes flashed dangerously, but the signature tilt of the head told Dean he wasn’t swamped entirely. “Michael’s no angel. Yeah, he would love to see you get a comeuppance. Yeah, he’s still hurt and angry. He’s honest enough about it that he’s never tried to hide how he feels. He feels cheated, Cas. That’s no secret. But he’s not trying to hurt you. God, Castiel, he loves you! Life’s not simple, man. It’s complicated as fuck, and it’s totally possible to resent someone you love – to want to punch them in the nuts and cling to them for dear life – all at the same time. He’s done everything you asked him to do.”

Cas appeared to consider Dean’s words, but he shook his head stubbornly. “He deliberately focused on seducing April. He did that, Dean! Don’t deny it!”

“Yeah. He did that. He totally did. At first. He spotted a weakness in your great Pack vision, and he’s asshole enough to press into it. I’m not defending what he tried to do. But, God, that was months ago! You can’t seriously believe that he’s still on that trip anymore. That little ploy fucked him way harder than it did you. The bastard fell for his own play. He thought he could make a big show of how unfair it is that you and I get to play house with our mates on the side and skip away unscathed. Then he lost his whole fucking heart to your mate. Cas, Michael saw her for who she is
way before you or I did. He thought she was a piddly high school lightweight too, and he only meant to flirt harmlessly with her to try to set your teeth on edge. It was a shit thing to do, and he deserves to stand and take the reckoning for how stupid a trick that was. But she didn’t flirt back the way he thought she would. She opened up to him, and he got to see everything she’s been hiding from you. How is that on Michael? Man, that’s on YOU. If you didn’t know your own mate well enough to see that she’s way deeper than you expected her to be, dude, ask yourself why not! Don’t put your failures on Michael.”

“My failures?! Really, Dean?” Cas rounded on him. Everything about the Alpha’s posture screamed righteous indignation. “She buried herself and played pretend with me for months when I did everything to prove to her that I’m not going to stomp her out of existence. Then she casually allows that jumped-up BOY into her most intimate aspects. She trusted HIM! I bent over backwards for her, but she trusted HIM!”

“Yeah. She did. And that’s what hurts, Cas, not Michael’s adolescent attempts to flirt with her. Michael is not the problem. You’ve got to talk to April. Find out what she wants out of life, man. Quit trying to be her father and her owner. She hid from you because all your promises are really just talk, and she could sense that. You’re the Great White Hope for millions of repressed Omegas, but you can’t imagine loosening up on the reins in your own house. It’s time to confront your Alpha, Castiel. You need to decide once and for all who you are. Throwing bricks at Michael is a deflection of your anger, so stop it. Stop it now! If you want to try that again, you’ll have to go through me, and that would kill me in more ways than one.”

“My promises are not lip service,” Cas protested. “I could only work with what I knew. Yes, I was disappointed at how shallow my mate seemed to be sometimes. I struggled with the impulse to try to make her more than that, but that would have been wrong. We are who we are. But then, every now and then I saw a flash of something more. She always buried it again so swiftly and so thoroughly that I doubted what I’d seen. When she plays her piano. When she composes. She’s breathtaking. There are no words, Dean. When she stands in my bindings and screams beneath my lash, she’s… astounding. I knew there was something there, but I thought it was all Tertiary. For her to lock me on the outside and let Michael into that, it hurts worse than I can bear.”

Dean watched him pace and scrub hands through his already messy hair. Finally, Dean sat slowly on the arm of the couch. “Michael’s not a part of that, Cas. That part of her is just for you.”

Cas stopped and looked at Dean, puzzled. Dean went on.

“They don’t relate as Tertiaries from what I can tell. Her wolf is not part of what she’s offered to him. Maybe the musical side is. I don’t know for sure. What I know is that Michael is an empath too. He can sense base desire in people, even when they don’t realize they’re broadcasting. But he said he can’t make heads or tails of April. It’s been making him crazy that he’s back in seventh grade trying to figure out how to tell if the girl likes him back.” Dean raised his palms in supplication as Cas began to flare up again. “Hey, hey, I know. He’s not supposed to be crushing on your girl in the first place. Dude, can we get past that? Please? You already knew about it, and you dangled her in front of him like yarn to a kitten. We need to stop pointing fingers at each other and move on to the real point here. The point is, I haven’t figured out why it works like this, any more than I’ve figured out anything about Michael, but his version of empathy is targeted just for what he can use. He can’t see anything that isn’t his to work with. If it’s not on the table, he’s blind as a bat. And April’s Tertiary is not on the table. That’s yours and yours alone. Whether she’s willing to share some of her Omega with him is less clear. Mostly, they seem to relate on a skewed level. Michael is closest to her when he’s stable as an Omega, and April relates to him when she’s Primary.”

“How do you know all this?” Cas accused.
Dean scoffed and played with a loose strand in the seam of the couch arm. He studied it as if it were fascinating. “ Cause I talk to them both,” he admitted at length.

Cas’ face struggled with that. Not only did his mate trust Michael more than she did her Alpha, but she clearly trusted Dean more too. Dean peeked up at Cas through his lashes. He couldn’t tell if any of his message was really getting through. Castiel was not a stupid man, but everyone gets a little stupid when their deepest insecurities get shoved unceremoniously into the light.

“ Castiel, they are not dating behind your back. They’re not sleeping together. All that’s happened up to now is that they’ve admitted that they have feelings for each other. That’s not something either of us wanted to happen, but what exactly do you think you can do about it? Michael’s pregnant. He needs you as much as he needs any of the rest of us. The way I see it, and forgive me, Alpha, I know you didn’t ask, but I’m giving it to you anyway...the way I see it, we can tear the Pack apart trying to stop them from forming a connection, or we can be strong enough to help them figure out what it really is. My mate is not going anywhere, Cas. He’s mine. Nothing he does is going to threaten that. That gives me enough confidence to take this terrifying development and stand beside him while we see it through. Alphas are not supposed to be strong like that, right? Everyone knows we’re strong, but brittle. We break at stuff that Omegas laugh about. You and me? Cas we’re different. We can do this. The worst that happens is they fall madly in love and then fall disastrously out of love again. That’s not a pretty image. I don’t want to see that happen for all our sakes, but I’ve got faith in the Universe. I believe we wouldn’t have been brought together the way we were if we’re destined to crumble apart at the next shifting breeze.”

“ The Universal Balance concept is a mirage, Dean. There’s no great balancing scale. There’s no righteousness to events. It’s all chance and chaos that appears to form unexpected patterns sometimes. We’re wired to expect patterns even where none exist.” Cas was pacing again.

“ True-Mates exist, Castiel. That’s not chaos.”

“ It’s chemistry!”

“ Fine! Our chemistry matches, then! April’s fucking perfect for you if you would pull your head out of your ass and just LOOK at what you’ve got, instead of at what Michael’s NOT trying to take away from you! She’s perfect for you. Michael’s perfect for me! It’s not an unfathomable leap of logic to think they might be good for each other! Damnit, Castiel! God-fucking-damnit! Quit hoarding gold pieces and look around you! What are you even mad about, huh? That your Ozzie mate tricked you? Alpha, that’s on no one but you, and you know it. You’re the Alpha. Or that Michael swooped in and provided her something you didn’t – a level of acceptance she didn’t sense from you? You’re so terrified of screwing up her care and losing her to mental instability the way you’ve lost everyone you’ve ever loved, that you’re crushing her under the weight of your fears. Don’t go blaming Michael for being there to give her a sympathetic body to cling to. At least she didn’t fall for Gabriel.”

Cas’ face had gone into a pale rictus. He panted with the dread Dean so casually unearthed. His eyes overflowed, and his fists clenched. “ I can’t lose her, Dean. I owe her everything. I can’t fail at this the way I failed Gabriel.”

“ Jesus, Cas.” Dean had the Alpha in his arms. The two of them sank together to the floor. Cas wept miserably into Dean’s shoulder, and all Dean could do was brace the back of his head and snug his body in close. “ You’re not even close to losing her, you moron. She’s stable and strong and healthy. She’s primed to give us a whole litter of pups, just like I know you want. You don’t need to keep her in a kennel all the time to make sure she’s safe. She’s safe, baby. She’s incredible. But, C.J., you’re so scared, you’re missing it.”
“She’s not as simple to manage as you think,” Cas snuffled. “She’s always close to the edge. One wrong move, and she’s going to tumble off. What if I can’t get her back?”

Dean huffed a laugh into Cas’ mop of hair. “You’re looking at it backwards, man. How long, on average, does it take for TMs with extreme opposite designations to settle into Mated life? Just on average? Come on, you know this.”

Cas sniffed again. He turned his head and mumbled, “Two years.”

“Two years. Have you and April been Mated for two years?”

“No, but Dean…”

“Shh, no ‘buts’. You thought you were different because you’re Castiel the Great. You know more than anyone about Omegas, right? You don’t need two years to learn each other and adjust. You and all your research are the experts on the subject. All hail the lucky Ozzie who falls into your lap with all your eminence and experience. Am I right? Castiel, it’s bullshit. You’re no better at this than the rest of us. You still have to feel each other out and unwrap the layers piece by piece. Yeah, but maybe you are better, because your mate is unfolding like a flower before our eyes in just months instead of years, and she’s beautiful. She could never have had access to her Primary side before you settled the rest of her. She’s not been hiding from you and running us around like baited fishhooks out of spite. She’s just a kid, Cas. Her front brain is amazing, but she didn’t even know it was there before you unlocked that room for her. She’s been poking around in it for a few months now, scared out of her wits at what she’s seeing, and clueless as to how to bring you into it. On top of that, she could feel your Alpha pacing furiously at the gate, waiting for a chance to pounce on her and truss her up for her own good. Cas, answer me truthfully, if you were born with the brain you have now, all of it, from the analytical genius, to the visionary, to the righteous need to level the injustices of the world, to the coldblooded talent for tricking people into doing what you want them to do without ever letting them know it’s you pulling the wires, all of it…if you had that, but you Presented Omega, can you imagine you would have behaved any differently than she did?”

“I’m NOT Omega! This is a pointless hypothetical.” Cas sat upright and wiped his eyes with his palms.

“No, it’s not. Think about it. She’s just like you, but where you’re a left-brain analyst, she’s a right-brain composer. Only, she’s shackled by societal expectation, and she’s twenty years younger. Who were YOU at 18, Cas? Did you have your head together half as much as she does? Everything she’s done has made this Pack stronger. Could you really say that’s how you would’ve approached it? Or would you have been more like Michael? Would you have lashed out in resentment at the injustice and hypocrisy? Damnit, Castiel, I didn’t know you when you were 18, but you were a self-righteous, judgmental, manipulative bastard, weren’t you? You hunkered down in your little wolf cave and snapped at everyone who dared approach you in all your agonizing greatness! You had grand plans for changing the world, but no one wanted to hear you because you were a rich-ass kid with no world knowledge and a cold blue eye that made people feel about four inches tall. Don’t you look at me like that! It’s true, isn’t it? Don’t forget, Gabe and Bobby will both tell me the truth. Hell, I’ll poll Nicholas if I have to!”

“What do you want from me?!” Cas shouted from his slump in the middle of the floor.

“I want you to man up and admit that you fucked up. You are wrong about Michael. He shouldn’t have tried to wind you up like he did, but dammit, Cas, April played that game way deeper than Michael did, and she wasn’t in it just to highlight the hypocrisy and the entitlement of an alpha upper caste that puts all the boundaries in a different place for each designation. You get me? She was in it for real. Your mate had a vision of the perfect nest as soon as she laid eyes on Michael. If two alphas
in the Pack is good, then two Dominants is better. That’s why she went after Sam. And look, Sam would’ve joined anyway, eventually. All April did was speed up the timeline and give him a reason to keep close, really commit. But then we showed up with Michael, and April saw an even better angle. Still with me?"

“She wanted to close the inner circle. Make it impenetrable,” Cas muttered. “She went after Michael first? Dean, is that true?”

“Do…on’t go getting your army guys lined up yet. I don’t know it all for sure. But it fits better than your cockamamie seduction ploy. Michael’s not slick enough to pull that off, man. He’s all bluster and bombast. He blows his own cover half the time because he can’t wait long enough for things to fall out right. I know you understand this. Dude, we’ve tiptoed around it for years, but I’m no novice to the games we’re talking about, and neither are you. The only one who couldn’t have pulled this off if he wanted to is Michael. You look me right in the eye and tell me you have a moral objection to manipulating people for your own gain. Go on, C.J., I dare you.”

Cas didn’t answer. He studied the tiles at his knees with a frown.

“Castiel James.”

Dean’s voice had shifted again, and Cas looked up at him.

“Cas, there’s not a thing in the world that could ever tear me away from you. You know that. I love you.”

Cas blinked and huffed an uncomfortable breath. “There’s a ‘but’ coming,” he surmised miserably.

Dean nodded somberly. “You wrap your head around who you really are, and then you let me in on it, yeah? I can put up with imperfect, man. I love you for not being perfect. I trust you. Always have. But what happened yesterday was an experience I don’t know how to deal with. You put me between the man I mean to marry, and the one I’m obligated to protect. And I love you both. When you did that, C.J., I made my choice. I couldn’t ever make a choice different from that. You know I can’t. The simple truth is that I can’t…” Dean broke on an unexpected sob, and Castiel’s eyes overflowed as well. “…I can’t put him in harm’s way. I have to put Michael and the pup first. If you can’t find a way through, and I mean all the way through, man, I…”

“I hear you, Dean. I don’t know what to say, but I hear you. Can you give me some time?”

“Time’s up on the 9th of September, isn’t it? You gonna be there?” Dean asked with a humorless chuckle.

“Yes, Dean. I mean to be there. I can only pray that you will be as well. You and Michael, both.”

Dean nodded. “That’s entirely up to you now, Alpha. You know where I stand. Just please swear to me that you’ll be straight about whatever you decide. Don’t lie to me and tell me you’re cool, that you’ve got it all settled in your head, and then hit us with a surprise grenade later. We do the hard work up front. Right, Alpha? Learned that one the hard way years ago, didn’t we?”

“I want to come home, Dean.” The Alpha’s voice was so filled with sorrow that Dean had to almost physically resist curling into him.

“It’s your house, man. I didn’t say you couldn’t come back.” It was rare that Dean couldn’t make himself meet the man’s eyes. Usually it signaled profound feelings of guilt. This time, he couldn’t bear the anguish on Castiel’s face, and he knew if he looked, the voices in his head would convince him that he’d put it there. Dean stared at the floor, fought the tears that wanted to flow, and chanted
to himself that Cas had made the bed he was in himself. Fred told him to take a stand and stay there. Dean prayed the old man wasn’t off his rocker. Please, God, let Fred be wise and not a crackpot. The two sometimes looked the same.

Castiel gulped and sniffled. “Perhaps…it would be better if April and I stay here…for a few days.”

“I’m taking her home with me tonight, Cas. Come with us or stay here. The Ozzie’s going home. She needs you, but she doesn’t need to be alone with you overnight yet.”

“You cannot make that determination, Dean! You’re not Alpha. Don’t press me harder than I can bend!”

Dean cleared his throat and flicked his eyes up before dropping them again. “Alpha, with all due respect, and that’s a hell of a lot of respect, pressing you further than you think you can bend is the whole point of the exercise here. All of it. You need time to explore where that line is, and you’ll get that time. I’m not judging you. But in the meantime, as first officer of our starship, I’m relieving you of duty until we determine the next best course. You want time? You got it. You don’t get to drag your mate through that with you. She’s suffering enough already. I’ll bring her back every day, and you two can spend time after the work day talking things out. She sleeps at the house though. That’s final.”

“You’re serious.”

“As a heart attack.”

Castiel blinked. His Alpha and his wolf chewed on it without coming to any conclusions. Dean’s Deep alpha had the standing to go toe to toe and expect to be taken seriously. Even Cas’ wolf conceded it wasn’t a ridiculous claim. But. But, his own mate. No one comes between an Alpha and his mate.

Castiel’s phone rang. He glanced down at it.

“Gabriel,” he breathed.

Chapter End Notes

And yikes. Full disclosure, I so wanted Gabe to get the first crack at ripping Castiel's head out of his ass, but I couldn't make that happen. Third might actually work better.

Hey, Nudge. Am I reading this right? Does Jo have it bad for Dean? Seriously? Did you have to go full formulaic with that?

Probably not, but I did anyway.

If the headache abates by tomorrow, I'm hoping to get a chance to write Gabe's homecoming before I go back to work.

Love to everyone. Lots of love.

(Is it unethical to give your dogs Benadryl during your own migraine to shut them up? Duct tape is too hard to remove. Asking for a friend.)
Chapter 93

Chapter Summary

Gabriel's home, and he needs his pack. Also, Gabriel's home, and no one understands Cas better than Gabe does. The Alpha is spinning 45 degrees out of plumb, so now's the perfect time to hit him upside the head with a new perspective. Dean's still holding the rudder steady, but he may not be steering the ship clear of the rocks. And Sam and Benny get their long views aligned.

Chapter Notes

I broke 1M words. Dude. What the hell?

This chapter gave me fits. I'm not gonna lie. We're so close to having everything crack open and spill out. So damn close. It's a mess of different overlapping designations getting in each other's way and every explanation opening up new questions. What the fuck is actually happening right now? On the other hand, this mess of overlapping, in all its complexity is not something I feel like we could have made sense of at the beginning of the story. We had to peel layers back one by one until this absolute chaos tumbled out and scrambled together. As always, if it totally doesn't make sense, then that's on me. If it does, then damn, we're awesome! The thing to remember here, most of all, is that Cas is way out of balance with no clear path to get back to himself.

I really hope it makes sense. Writing an ensemble scene with too many players in the room at once is not something that comes naturally.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
NOW:

Naomi waved Michael all the way in when he poked his head around the curtain and held a board game up as an offer. She was pacing with her cellphone to her ear. It sounded to Michael like she was directing her Congressional assistant in something pressing. There was an energy about her movements that had been missing. Naomi hung up and beamed at Michael. “Scrabble is my favorite,” she enthused, gesturing him toward the square table in the corner and plugging her electric kettle in on the bureau.

“I may not have time for a whole game,” he explained. “I need to be back in an hour, but I thought I could have lunch in here with you. Little chance to catch up. How have you been? You look good.” Michael opened the box and began to lay the game pieces out. He ignored the nudge of discomfort he felt from his Omega about continuing to visit Naomi. He needed to understand. He needed to understand her and her connection to Dean. His alpha’s sparkle dimmed every time Naomi’s name came up, and while Michael knew he could just avoid poking at it, something told him that straight into the ant pile was the best course. And so – Scrabble.

“Much better, thank you, dear. My new condo will be ready for me in another week or so, I hear. It will be a relief to have a home around me again. This room has been such a trial.” She lamented pathetically while preparing a porcelain teapot. “Alpha’s orders though. One mustn’t challenge the Alpha.”

Michael “Hmmphed” with a heavy breath and flipped scrabble tiles in the box lid to face downward. Naomi turned to face him with a brow raised in interest. “What’s that, dear? Trouble? With Castiel? What’s my overbearing son done now?”

“He doesn’t react well to challenges, that’s all,” Michael replied vaguely. He turned one tile over to start the game. Naomi peered over her choices and flipped another. Michael won first turn.

“No, Alphas despise a challenge. Interesting turn of events, really, considering they are suited to little else but facing down a dangerous enemy.” Naomi settled. She set the teapot nearby but waited for the tea to steep before pouring. “Have you eaten, Michael? I can have your lunch delivered here, and then we have the whole hour. I want you to sit right there, brutally destroy me at this game of intellectual challenge, and tell me all about it.” Naomi’s assumption that the staff would treat her like a guest at a five star hotel said a lot about her state of mind. She was living in a world of delusion.

“I’d like that,” he answered. He also needed a sounding board, and Naomi was more than available. Her response would be predictable and singularly unhelpful, but he needed a chance to say some things out loud – to hear himself talk. Michael could feel Dean’s outrage spark up, simmer, flare, and settle. Dean was evidently keeping his word about confronting Castiel if the emotions Michael was feeling meant anything. It also didn’t feel like Dean was getting very much progress accomplished. There was no relief. There was no wash of adoration and affection that indicated the party downstairs had assimilated the message and resolved to make things right. There was weariness, sadness, frustration. There was stubborn determination. There was a backbeat of fear. Michael could almost hear Dean plead with Castiel. He glanced from his short row of tiles and found Naomi staring at him with much deeper perception than he wanted to believe she still held.
“I’m in love with Castiel’s mate,” Michael told her without fanfare.

“But of course you are,” she chuckled as her eyes flickered across her own tiles. “God works in mysterious ways, doesn’t He? Funny how all these years my efforts to stop his relentless descent into hedonism were a complete failure. All the while, God knew that the way to stop him was from the inside. I should have had faith. He knows best.” She rambled as she re-sorted her tiles. “I can accept my punishment for not trusting in Him, for trying to force my own path, for rising above myself in His eyes and presuming to take on a challenge that wasn’t mine to take. He knows best. Dear Michael… Promise me that when the dust settles from all of the ruination that will soon rain down upon your heads, that you will break free of that catastrophe. I can’t bear to think of you falling into the pit with those…those…brutes!”

Michael chuckled and played his tiles, his first word of the game: ‘Context’. Fitting. What luck to draw an ‘X’ right off the bat.

“Don’t worry about me, Congresswoman. I’ll be fine. I’m tougher than I look.” Michael calculated his score and jotted the number on the scoresheet.

Naomi beamed and poured two cups of tea. “Yes, you are.”

***************

“Come on, Dean. Bobby’s bringing him here first. We need to debrief. I need to see him.” Castiel stood, wiped both eyes with one hand spread impatiently across his face, and pulled Dean to his feet with the other.

The intercom buzzed before they opened Dean’s door, and Becky summoned Dean to come to the front to sign Kali in. Gabe must have reached out to her as he got close. Of course he did.

Dean nodded to Cas, squeezed his shoulder, and took off down the hallway at a jog. Cas practically bolted across the hall to his own suite. He threw the door open and found Bobby standing awkwardly in the entryway. Gabriel was travel-mussed but standing. He had his entire body engaged in an embrace with a very naked Ozzie with stringy wet hair. Cas stepped up to Bobby first. He wrapped a hand around the back of Bobby’s neck and drew him in, watching the stricken look on the old alpha’s face crumple in pain as he buried himself in Cas’ hug. Neither of them spoke out loud. They didn’t need to. They had enough shared history that each of them knew what the other was feeling.

Cas sniffed as he pulled back and looked Bobby in the eyes. The old man had no façade to hide his devastation, and Castiel’s heart broke that little bit more. Bobby would shift it all soon, layering it beneath a blanket of gruff alpha bravado so that he had the wherewithal to do what needed doing. He was old enough to know that he needed this first though. Cas nodded grimly and turned to stroll slowly up to Gabe who still had his face buried in April’s bare shoulder. Cas waited a moment. He could tell when Gabriel smelled his scent. Castiel’s big brother sobbed piteously and clutched April. Cas covered his brother’s back with his body. When had that become a thing between them? When Marina died? When Gabe emerged smelly and exhausted from the hardest Heat Dr. Singer had ever seen anyone survive? Something about framing Gabriel from the back and folding down over him felt very, very right. Cas wrapped his arms so far around that he totally swallowed them both, and Gabriel gave up trying to stifle his sobs. He wept in misery; in grief so raw, it scraped up his larynx in heaving ugly grunts of pain.

And then Kali was there, and April gave her room. The Ozzie pulled back, wiping her tear streaked
face with the back of her arm. She plastered herself at Castiel’s side, and he put an arm around her. Castiel couldn’t smell anything but despair and Gabe’s last shampoo. His tears tracked to Gabriel’s neck and followed the path of gravity on from there. They didn’t see Dean helping Bobby to the couch. Bobby wasn’t injured, of course, but he allowed the unnecessary tending anyway. Just the simple touch of Dean’s hands and the proximity of his body was a benefit. Dean spoke a few careful words with Bobby, but his eyes never left the tangle of people in the middle of the room. After a few minutes, he extricated himself to make tea for the Omegas and pour something stiff and bracing for Bobby. Dean casually handed April’s robe to Cas on his way back – he’d found it draped over one of the kitchen chairs.

Cas ran a hand through Gabe’s hair, then he pulled away and helped April into her robe. Kali kept Gabe’s face in her hands, and she was whispering to him fiercely. His eyes stayed trained on hers as if drinking from a fountain. His grief poured out of him in waves, but Kali’s voice began to grow slowly louder and firmer.

“Right here, baby. Stay with me. I’m here. You’re safe now.”

Gabriel frowned and growled. Fury mingled with grief in his eyes, and he grabbed her shoulder. “I’m not supposed to be safe! It was supposed to be ME, not ALEX! Why can’t any-fucking-thing EVER go right for me?! I was in the line of fire! Not her! Fucking bullets were meant for ME, but they whizzed right past my head, both of them, and hit the only part of her that my body wasn’t blocking! How?! Kali, how does that happen?! I don’t have a scratch on me! It’s all my fault!! I could’ve bought us a few more seconds if I hadn’t stayed behind at the first check. They didn’t need the cover. I couldn’t have hit anything from that angle. I should’ve run when Krissy ran. Kali…It’s all my fault!!” His eyes pleaded for mercy and condemnation both. They begged her to understand. Cas stood several feet to the side and watched silently, his eyes flicking from his brother’s face to Kali’s. He knew what Gabriel needed. He knew that look.

“Come on, Gabe. Come with me.” Kali took his hand and led him into the suite. She pulled up after only a few steps, realizing all three doors looked the same. She turned back to Cas.

“On the right,” he told her – like pulling teeth. He watched her lead Gabe into his bedroom and close the door. Cas felt himself break out in a sweat. His eyes went red enough to cast a visible pink haze over his view of the room. He breathed in shallow huffs through his nose and willed himself not to follow. April’s hand, sliding between the buttons of his shirt helped him focus. His brother was home and hurting, and he’d just been taken away by a beta who wasn’t fully Pack. Cas felt panic rising, and his eyelids fluttered, but he stood pat. There was no way Kali knew what she was doing. She would make everything worse, and Gabriel would emerge in more pain than he went in. Castiel swayed with indecision.

“We’ll make her Pack as soon as we can, Alpha,” April whispered. “And then this will get easier for all of us. I don’t like it either. You’re doing the right thing. He needs her more than you right now.”

Cas’ head whipped around, and he glared at her in misery. “He’s my brother!”

“He belongs to her more than you now. Remember? Alpha, take a breath and hold onto me.” She didn’t wince when his grip sank in painfully, but her eyes sought Dean. Dean was kneeling in front of Bobby with one hand on his knee and the other on his face, talking softly but rapidly, cooling the alpha’s despair to a low simmer. Bobby looked wretched.

“Dean?” called April. “We need Michael and Pamela.”

“Uh. Right. On it.” He texted with one hand, turning on his knee to take in Castiel’s state and clearly worrying over who needed him more. “Pamela I get, kid, but won’t Michael make things worse?”
“We need the scent of Pack, Dean. We need it as deep as we can get it. He’s fighting his instincts, and it’s too close right now.”

“Yeah, but Michael? April, are you sure? Maybe it would be better if we let Cas just bust in there and take over. He’s shaking. Jesus, April.”

“Do you trust me?” She continued to stroke Cas under his shirt, the simplest touch, but he’d lowered his chin, and his breathing smoothed out. His eyes were closed. April shifted to his front and kissed his neck softly. Cas stood still at April’s touch, taking comfort in everything she offered him. Dean was following her instructions. The world was upside down. But April felt sure. She felt so very sure. She sent that certainty through to Castiel through her bond and to Dean through her expression, and it was enough.

“Yeah, I do,” Dean muttered with a pat to Bobby’s knee. He stood up and moved his hand to Bobby’s shoulder. The old alpha clutched Dean’s hand like a lifeline.

“I’m all right,” Cas muttered, maybe to himself. “I’m okay. I’m here. Not going to kick the door down. Gabe’s fine. He’s fine.”

The sound of a sharp crack from the bedroom, followed by a yelp, had Castiel’s eyes snapping open and his body six steps forward before Dean could make a dash to cut him off, clearly deciding on the spot to lend his weight to April’s plan.

“He’s FINE, Castiel! Leave him.” Another smack. A far quieter yelp that ended in a wet sob. “They’re mates. Alpha, listen to me.” Dean planted his feet and braced his arms on Castiel’s shoulders. “She’s not hurting him. You know he works like this.”

SMACK!

Cas clutched Dean and April both and hung on, listening through the door to what only he had ever had the privilege of delivering to Gabriel after a mission. Contractors didn’t do this. Marina was long gone before Gabriel found redemption in the life he lived now. But the aftermath was always messy. No mission ever went perfectly, and the Omega in Gabe demanded penance for every mistake. Cas stood and trembled as he listened, and he wept openly at the brokenhearted sounds coming through his door.

“He shouldn’t have to pay for this,” he fumed. “It wasn’t his fault. This is wrong!” It was a false argument. If Cas had been in that room, he would be as Alpha as Gabe demanded. But standing outside the room and listening brought the little brother in him to the forefront. It wasn’t Gabriel’s fault. None of it was. It was Castiel’s first experience at registering just how unjust everything Gabe had been dealt really was from outside of his Alpha, and he seethed.

“It’s how he processes, Cas,” Dean reminded with his mouth close to Castiel’s ear. “It’s not about fault. He needs to wash it through and let it go. Go check on Bobby. Babe, your mentor is hurting too, remember? April and I will stand vigil here. We won’t let it go too far.” Cas nodded into Dean’s neck with great effort and pulled away to sink dolefully onto the couch next to Bobby who looked much less like the great Doctor Robert Singer than he had a few days ago in Dayton. Uninhibited, Bobby laid his head on Castiel’s shoulder and pushed his nose into Cas’ throat. Cas wrapped an arm around him, and they sat in silence.

The front door opened, and Pam slipped in, Michael on her heels. Pam made straight for Bobby. Michael stood uncomfortably in the entryway until Dean beckoned him. He wisely chose to take up Dean’s left side instead of standing by April, and he raised his brows in question. “Need your scent here, babe,” Dean explained. “You don’t mind taking a break, do you?”
“Are you kidding me? Any excuse to get out of that classroom, Dean. Actually, I was on my lunch break. Went up to visit the dragon lady.” Michael kept his eyes lowered, but he huffed selfishly a few times, and let himself bathe in the mingled scents from his two favorite people. “Is the jury still out about me?” he asked quietly, avoiding looking toward the couch and diverting his mate swiftly from thinking too much on Naomi.

“He’s coming around,” Dean told him vaguely. Michael took it as the deferral that it was. He shifted to face the bedroom. “You smell like Naomi,” Dean grumbled quietly.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! And a low, pained moan.

“Shit! That’s Gabe! Jesus, what’s this for?!” Michael’s outrage sparked fast and hot. “What’s the matter with you people?!”

Dean tightened his grip on his mate and pressed their heads close together, deepening the alpha in his tone. “You’ve passed this segment in your training, man. You know how most Omegas internalize the need for atonement. He’ll be fine.”

“I’m gonna be sick!” Michael tore away from his mate and dashed for the kitchen sink, retching pitifully. April followed him and put a bracing hand over his forehead. She rubbed his back while he lost his lunch.

Dean watched them sadly, but he kept his vigil by the door, noting with one ear that Gabe’s spanking was winding down.

“Where are Claire and Krissy now?” asked Pam, kneeling in front of Bobby as Dean had done.

“Stayed with the Omegas from the compound,” Bobby relayed in a gruff voice. “They bonded right fast, and they didn’t want to leave. It took an act of Congress to get that one to cut out for home. I had to threaten him with blowing his cover to get him on that plane. You can expect to hear about it, Alpha. He ain’t happy; not one bit.”

“Are they all safe, Bobby?” Pam asked.

“Safe?!” He startled her with his vehemence. “No, they ain’t all SAFE! One’s dead! Took a bullet into her face and one in her throat, and she’s dead! You don’t get much less safe than that!”

Pam dropped her head into his lap and full on bowed before him. She placed her hands on the tops of his feet. Her nose rested between his knees. The supplication calmed him, and he curled in over her, his hands tangling in her hair. He couldn’t curl down as far as he wanted to, age tightening his joints painfully, but he breathed in the scent from the back of her neck, and he felt Cas’ hand close over his own. “I’m sorry, beta,” he whispered to her. “Yeah. Everyone’s good. Everyone…else. Bastards stole those Omegas real young, but they didn’t get to keep ‘em long. Those pups are gonna be all right. They’ll get a chance to bounce right out of it and be good as new. None of ‘em is scarred yet – not physically at least. Looks like they’d just started real training out there and hadn’t put them to work yet. No signs of aborted pregnancies. No signs of internal trauma. All we gotta deal with is the emotional trauma, and we’re getting damned good at that. We’ve had too much practice.”

Bobby’s voice strengthened as he spoke, and he uncurled slowly. Pam lifted her head and gazed at him in compassion. “Too much practice,” she agreed.

“We’re sending them to Vegas as soon as we can. Keeping them on the far side of the border is a risk. The laws get itchy about transporting Omegas, and the sooner they disappear, the better.” Bobby scrubbed his eyes and looked around. “You all right there, Omega?” he asked Michael,
whose back was to the room as he rested his forehead on the cool countertop.

“I’m peachy, thank you, sir,” called Michael without looking up. “Occupational hazard.”

Castiel watched April tend to Michael with a new insight into the tenderness in her touch, but he didn’t intervene. Even his Alpha had to admit there was nothing inappropriate about her helping him find his feet after a bout of vomiting.

“It’s gone quiet in there, Alpha,” observed Dean. “You think Kali knows the next phase?” He stepped a little closer and raised his knuckles to rap on the door, but he froze at a singular moan that announced incontrovertibly that she did. “Guess so,” he muttered and took a deep breath. “Don’t guess I need to stand guard anymore.” Gabe’s need for penance was a strange balance that could go wildly wrong if a rookie attempted it without knowing Gabriel well, but sex wasn’t something anyone needed to worry about being implemented wrong. From this point on, if he was moaning like that, he’d be fine. In the past, if he hadn’t earned the Alpha’s ire by sneaking off when he was supposed to be locked down at home, Gabe’s need for a bit more enjoyable release was met by a contractor who filed in on the heels of Castiel and his strap. More recently, Cas was irritated enough with his brother that he followed penance up with a C.F. that rattled the windows in their frames. This time, no one was suggesting that Gabe face any more pain than he was swimming in already. He’d behaved like the perfect dutiful Omega before he left. He called Bobby with his info. He called his brother for permission. He was in the clear as far as the alphas were concerned. Dean clapped his hands and clasped them in front of himself awkwardly, then tucked them beneath his chin in a move reminiscent of his Submissive on its best behavior. Cas took note.

The Alpha blew out a breath and caught Bobby’s eye with a raised brow. Bobby frowned and looked away. “It hurts, Alpha. I loved the little goat, and I can’t think right now. I can’t believe she’s gone.”

“I know. Me, too. It wasn’t your fault, Singer,” he reminded the alpha, using his more common professional moniker as a way to break the cycle Bobby was falling into. Everything was too personal right now. “She died doing exactly what she was meant to be doing. You said so yourself. She wouldn’t have changed a thing as long as it meant four souls broken free of that hellhole.” Cas squeezed Bobby’s neck. Red circles surrounded his eyes, and Cas brought them closer to him, leaning their foreheads together. “You’re going to live through this. You told me that a long time ago, when my father’s body lay in the morgue, and I couldn’t make myself look at it. You told me everything was going to hurt for ages and ages, and some days even breathing would be hard, but that Gabe and I would live through it. I didn’t believe you then, but we did live through it. You will too. Take it day by day. We’re not leaving you. We’re all here any time you need us. You hear me, alpha?”

Bobby nodded. His face showed the wear and tear of years of accumulating sorrow, brought to a head by this latest blow that rivaled the loss of his mate when he was little more than a pup himself. He and Gabriel had more in common than they had differences. He scrubbed his hands over his face and nodded again, more sure this time.

Cas turned to Pam. “Get your debrief and write it up for me to review. I want it this afternoon. It doesn’t need to be pretty, just get it written and on my desk.”

“Yes, Sir,” she answered simply.

Cas patted Bobby’s thigh, gave his neck a squeeze and then turned his attention to Michael. Dean and April were walking him to a chair at the kitchen table, but Cas stopped them with a gesture. “Over here, Dean. Bring him in here.” Cas indicated the soft chair opposite the couch, and Michael’s mind flashed him a memory of sharing that chair with Dean months ago when they’d held a meeting
about forming a Pack. He didn’t need the escort. He wasn’t sick anymore, and he wasn’t weak. Now that his stomach was empty, the nausea faded fast. Still, he wasn’t going to pretend he didn’t want both Dean and April flanking him, so he held onto them as they made their way across the room.

A groan of pleasure escaped the bedroom, but no one acknowledged it.

“Sir, the kiss, it wasn’t what you think,” Michael began as he sat down. Cas knelt onto one knee in front of him.

“We can talk about that later, Omega,” Cas said stiffly. He pulled his scope from his shirt pocket and clicked it on, leaning in to check Michael’s eyes. “How do you feel?”

“I’m okay, Sir. Just the usual nausea. I feel better now.” Michael resisted searching out the comfort of Dean’s eyes with his own, but he clung to his mate internally and felt a strong grip in reply. Dean wasn’t about to leave him.

“You smell distressed. Are you sleeping well?”

“Not last night, no. It wasn’t the best night’s sleep I ever had.” Michael sat very still and let Cas feel the sides of his throat and peer into his mouth. April knelt at Castiel’s side, and Dean took the chair arm. Dean let Cas look Michael over, but when his fingers began pressing into the flesh around Michael’s Mating-scars, he said, “He’s not due for a physical, Alpha. It was just a bout of nausea. He’s knocked up. It comes with the territory.”

“How does he look from the inside, Dean?” Cas asked, moving on to check Michael’s pulse at his wrist.

“Other than freaked out because he has no idea what you’re doing, he’s fine,” Dean answered immediately. Cas looked up, startled.

“What do you mean, ‘what I’m doing’? I’m checking him over. He just vomited. He smells upset. It could be more than gestational nausea, but we won’t know if we don’t check.”

“He’s fine, Alpha, and you’re not worried about Michael. You’re worried about Gabe.” Dean looked to April for backup. “Right, kid?”

“Um.”

“Don’t put her in a position like that, Dean,” Cas shot, defensive of his mate without acknowledging the irony that ‘putting her in a position like that’ was only inherently dangerous because of Cas himself. Everything was so scrambled in his head, it made him dizzy.

“Just answer the question, April,” Dean retorted. Michael’s eyes were wide and round. He appeared to be trying to wish himself to Canada.

April shot Dean an exasperated look, but answered anyway, turning her eyes to her mate.

April shot Dean an exasperated look, but answered anyway, turning her eyes to her mate. “Everything about your emotions suggests it’s your brother who has you riled up, but you feel the need to take care of an Omega in distress, and you seem to be turning to Michael to fill the void. You’re still oriented toward the bedroom, not the chair in front of you. Sir, the difference is very clear. Forgive me if that’s overstepping.”

Castiel stared at her. “Is that right.” It was a flat and unappreciative statement, but he didn’t seem angry. April searched his emotions, trying desperately to understand what he needed.

“Yes, Sir.” She took a deep breath and cast a quick look at Michael, who hadn’t moved. “However,
since he really does smell distressed, it can’t hurt to check him over.” April lowered her eyes, but her flushed face carried only anticipation, not remorse, in its downcast visage. She expected to have a reprimand coming, but she didn’t feel she was mistaken.

“He’s distressed because the last time he saw you, you wanted to pound his head through the stair!” Dean told the Alpha. A quickly stifled chuckle from Bobby drew Castiel’s eye, but he brought it right back to Dean. With a solemn pause, he turned to Michael.

“Michael, son, are you frightened I’m going to hurt you? You needn’t be afraid. Whatever happened between us, we’re still Pack.” Cas seemed to be swiveling wildly from one aspect in his head to another, and Michael found the inconsistency pissed him right off. As bad as it was to be tied to a designation that was utterly dependent, at least he should be able to depend on those he was anchored to to hold their own shit together.

Michael’s face darkened. “Alpha…” The alarm was replaced by a cool fury that Michael used to stiffen his own spine. “I am not your son. And I’m not afraid of you, Sir. I’m angry. You didn’t let me explain anything yesterday. You just pounced. I didn’t do it. I didn’t do what you said. And I didn’t deserve what you said. And I don’t need a colonoscopy just because I puked. So, if you’re through…”

Castiel withdrew his hands, placing them on his knees. He looked at Michael for a moment with his signature robotic expression before pushing himself up to his feet. He backed up a couple of steps, and his face slowly shifted to confusion as his head tilted. He looked at Dean, and then he looked at April. She blinked stoically back at him, meeting his eye fully, but not challenging him. They seemed to be communicating for several moments, and then he huffed through his nose and turned on his heel.

“Cas,” Dean called, standing up, but Castiel disappeared through his bedroom door, and the door closed with a click. Dean’s face tightened with worry.

“Wow,” said Pam. “I could have written my thesis on the various sources and targets of tension in this room. Too bad I’m all out of thesis writing assignments. What’s going on, folks? That wasn’t just a matter of transference. He may be worried about his brother, but I’ve never seen him take that from an Omega before and walk away without turning his palm bright red.”

Dean ruffled Michael’s hair and helped April to stand up. “I don’t know if Cas mentioned it yet,” Dean deflected. “He wants you to look April over and make sure she’s in good shape mentally.”

“He does,” Pam said flatly. “That’s going to have to come from Cas, but let’s assume he’s getting around to asking. Tell me why.” Pam could obviously read the layered strain from all of them. She had her senses leveled to read everything they put out. Something critical was going on, and the Alpha stood at the crux of whatever it was.

“Turns out she can read him to his toenails, deeper than he knew she was diving. And…” Dean paused and glanced at April, who’d become utterly passive. “She’s been showing signs of a locked designation, just recently unlocked, and he’s worried she might have hurt herself playing around with it before he knew what was going on.” April stood placidly while Dean talked about her as if she wasn’t there. He smirked at her, and she smiled thinly, still passive, but with a touch of exasperation.

Pam made an impressed face. “Locked, but recently unlocked, huh?” She turned to face April. “Is that true? It’s gotta be Primary. You’re already an expert at using the other two.”

“Yes, ma’am,” muttered April, as Ozzie as she could get.
“Not right now though,” observed Pam with a hand under her chin. “I knew about her sensory skills. Jo talked to me ages ago. I told her there was no way Castiel wasn’t on top of it already, and to just note her observations for the record. That may have been a mistake on our parts, and I wouldn’t blame him for taking it out of our asses once he knows we discussed it all behind his back.” Pam kept hold of April’s chin and became pensive. She searched the Ozzie’s eyes for any sign of whatever flash of exasperation had sparked up at Dean’s smirking brat, but it was gone. “That was a quick switch. Is it usually that fast? Most Ozzies fade in and out from one aspect to another – most wolves in general do that. Hers seems to be more a toggle switch.”

“I don’t know yet,” Dean said, a touch warily. “That looked genuine to me, but sometimes there’s this calculating look behind the gold ring in her eyes, and I’m not sure who’s in charge. It’s gonna be interesting to see how it all fits together.” Something in Dean’s tone caught Pam’s attention, and she glanced up at him.

Pam dropped her hand. “Oh, for goodness sakes, Dean. She’s not damaged at all, is she? She’s just been pulling the old layering trick on you two, and you fell for it because she’s Ozzie. Crimeny, are you serious? Does Cas really think she’s put herself in danger?”

Dean nodded with feigned worry, and Pam blew out a frustrated breath.

“Great. And you’re going to make me explain it to him.” She turned back to April. “And you! Knock it off, would’ja? Give the old man a break. At least chill it out a little. He’s trying his damnedest to get you lot all balanced at once. You don’t have to make it harder for him.” April’s eyes widened in surprise, and she bit her lip.

“What layering trick?” Michael asked from his chair. He’d pulled his feet up onto the cushion and wrapped his arms around his knees.

Pam pressed her lips together and then squatted down in front of him, catching April’s hand to include her too. “It’s an Omega thing mostly, but almost anyone can do it. It’s a carefully threaded combination of designations where pieces of two of them are funneled through the third which presents as a front. It’s like a funnel. You, Michael, you could be fronted by your wolf but allow certain selected parts of your Omega to work through to the front without being visible. I’m sure you already have it down. Maybe you didn’t know what to call it.”

Michael frowned at her. “Isn’t that what had you guys so freaked out after the convention? Alpha said he’d never heard of having multiple designations show at once.”

“No, this is much simpler,” Bobby put in from the couch, and they all turned. His eyes were puffy, and his jaw worked a couple of patterns before he got up and joined them, standing opposite Dean and looking down at Michael. “There’s only one front face in layering. One designation takes the stage, but it lets a…call it a vortex or a funnel, through from where the other two are submerged. This is really Benny’s forte, but Pam’s right, Omegas do it all the time. It essentially multiplies the number of personality aspects they have from three to…don’t make me do the math, but to a lot more than three, depending on how good they become at doing it from different directions.” Bobby seemed much stronger than he’d been. He seemed relieved to have a diversion to turn to for the time being.

“Each combination, if they learn to do it on multiple levels, gives them virtually a whole new personality,” Pam completed for Bobby. “It’s not really a matter of layers exactly, but that’s what we call it. So, if our little Ozzie here has, say, an extremely developed, but submerged Primary designation, with access to elaborate creative talents, she could funnel bits of that through her Omega, which is the one she’s most comfortable displaying, and what results is a…well, it would vary with the individual. But there’s no danger to the practice. People do it every day. As long as the
individual is merely feeding one aspect through the pores of another, it’s all still the same person, there’s no danger. April may have been doing just that without ever thinking twice about it. It would come naturally. It’s totally commonplace. Where it becomes a danger is if her Primary aspect truly was submergent, underdeveloped, or repressed, and is only now starting to develop. But I don’t get that read from her. She’s too advanced as an artist to have an underdeveloped mind. It’s far more likely that that aspect has hidden deliberately to keep from making waves in the status quo. It may have been a subconscious decision – self-protective perhaps. Ozzies are masters at reading inherent danger and responding protectively.” Pam petered off slowly. “This is potentially a mess considering the Alpha on the other end of her tether.”

She looked at Dean. He grinned at her, but then he caught Bobby’s eye and dropped the smile. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Why do you call it a trick?” Michael persisted with a metaphysical pinch to Dean’s ass. Dean jumped but settled without protest when Bobby looked at him. He rubbed his butt a little.

It was Bobby who answered. “Omegas mostly use it to hide something from someone. It doesn’t often work on mates because a mate can see right through it. But, say an Omega planned to sneak out after curfew, and they didn’t want their scent or a guilty face to give it away, they could make the plan using their wolf if it’s conniving enough, and then spend the evening as a Primary or Omega, letting a piece of the wolf through to run the plan without being obvious about it – just layering the wolf through enough to keep the plan going without fronting at all.”

“Ohhhhh,” said Michael. “Yeah, that’s…okay, I get it. And that’s what Pete’s been doing all this time? Watching us with the front brain underneath the surface and making her Omega say things that she didn’t know why she was saying? Well, that doesn’t sound so complicated. Why is Castiel so upset about it? Doesn’t he read those books too?”

“Yeah, he read them,” Dean chuckled. “He did some initial editing on them for me.”

“YOU wrote the books on this theory?” Michael said in surprise.

“Well, yeah, a couple of them. There are more than just mine on the shelves, but…yeah. I guess when you told me you read them, what you meant was you looked at the pictures of naked wolves getting their asses beat.”

Michael stared at him. April had no comment. Pam was shaking her head, looking very much like she wished she could cuff Dean on the side of his head. Bobby went looking for the bottle to refill his drink.

“How long have you known that she’s layering?” Pam asked, mindlessly accepting the glass Bobby handed her.

“Dunno,” Dean defended. “A while. I guess. He never asked, really. Besides, layering is not the issue. That’s so classically standard, it would’ve been astounding if an Ozzie as bright as April hadn’t figured it out. And you, dude, there’s always a funnel in place inside your head. You’re never just one guy. It makes you interesting and keeps me guessing, and I love that,” Dean enthused.

“Right now, you’re, what…Primary layered with wolf? Just enough Omega beneath it all to keep you from getting really mad? Baby, this is the stuff that got me into this work in the first place. It’s fascinating. And now we have you both right in the house with us, and I’m as mesmerized about working it all out as Cas is.”

“Then what’s the issue?” Pam asked, mindlessly accepting the glass Bobby handed her.

Dean shot a look at the closed door at the far end. “She had more than half her personality walled off
from the Mating-bond all this time. He’s pissed because he just got a peek inside, and it’s not what he thought it was. And then there’s also, um… You know. You know he didn’t want her to see his Alpha OR the wolf in all their naked glory.”

April broke in. “He believed he had a wall up just like mine, but I can see more than he meant for me to see, doctor,” she supplied, interestingly having dropped the Submissive presentation again and slipped back into her Omega alone. “He tried to protect me from the more disturbing parts of himself, but it never worked. Neither of us knew that what I had a view of was more than he wanted to show me. We never discussed it. He’s worried that I might be traumatized by the full view of his Alpha.” April dropped her eyes.

“Well, now that’s a different worry,” Pam said seriously. “His Alpha is one scary sumbitch. I can see why he wanted it filtered.” She paced and then set the glass down without drinking.

“Wait,” said Bobby, turning to April. “You could see straight through his filter like it didn’t exist, and not only could he not see you the same way, but he didn’t even know your filter was there? ‘My getting that right?’

“A wall, Bobby,” said Dean, picking up Pam’s untouched drink and strolling past. “She put up an impenetrable wall, not a filter.”

Pam whistled long and low, the way Benny would’ve done if he’d been there. “No wonder he’s got his feathers all ruffled. That’s not a pill any A-D wants to swallow. His Ozzie mate succeeded in doing what he couldn’t, and it ended in… in his failing to protect her from two directions at the same time.”

“Pill that big’s gonna stick in Castiel’s throat and just hang there,” supplied Bobby in agreement. “What are you gonna do?” he asked Dean.

“Me? Why does it have to be me?”

“Boy, you’re a brat, but you’re not stupid. You’re the only one who’s got the footing with the wolf and the Alpha both to get close enough to try.”

“Try what, Bobby?” asked Dean explosively. “He knows everything there is to know now. At least, I think he does.” Dean turned a piercing look at April. “He does, right?”

She nodded vigorously.

He turned back to Pam and Bobby. “All we need now is time, guys. He needs to witness his mate in all her glory, acting like the adult she is, and the rest will fall into place. His ego’s bruised, but he’ll get over that. Once we’re all sure that she’s not permanently spooked by sitting vigil over an Alpha the size of the Chrysler building by herself, the True-Mate bond takes care of the rest. He’s not a monster. He can do this. We need to trust him just like we always have.”

Pam shook her head. “There may be more than a bruised ego to deal with. Please don’t blow it off, Dean. I don’t know everything that’s going on with him, but that display he just gave us was a bird’s nest of tangled emotions. And he took backtalk from Michael like he deserved it. Whatever Cas did, that’s not a healthy dynamic for any of you, and it can’t go on for much longer. We can’t simply give him time. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Yeah, well,” Michael pouted, “He did deserve it. Alpha or not, he was out of line.”

Pam snapped her attention to him and pointed a finger at his face. “Knock it off, Omega! When the dust settles here, you’re the one who’s going to feel it the hardest, especially if none of your alphas
takes you in hand. You’re going to spiral and drop, and it’s going to take weeks to pull you back up.” She turned her eyes to Dean, who was studying the floor at his feet again. “Winchester?”

“I know,” he admitted quietly. Dean glanced up at his mate but then resumed his personal thread count of the thick carpeting. “But Michael’s right. Cas was way over the line, and Michael doesn’t deserve to pay for that. He’s not Gabriel. I’m working on it. I can only manage so much at once though, Pam. Cas needs me more right now. April and Michael…they’re stable for the moment. And Michael’s right, dammit. Trying to balance him before he gets his apology from Alpha is pointless. It’s gotta go in this order, or it’s all for nothing. But Cas is going to bury as much as he can for as long as he can while Gabriel is in such a state. I dunno, guys. What do you think I can do here? I’m not a miracle worker.”

“No, but Gabriel is,” mused April.

They all looked up when Kali crept out of the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

“How’s he doing?” Bobby asked.

“Better,” she said sadly. “Not great. But better.”

Michael caught hold of Dean’s hand and reeled him in as the tight huddle dissipated. “I saw what you did there, brat of mine,” he said softly, green eyes locked on Dean’s. “You picked up the chess game right where April walked away from it, didn’t you? You think if you take it over and relieve her of the responsibility, that’ll buy Castiel’s leniency for her. You’ve been watching her evolve and held your cards close all this time, haven’t you? I wanna know what you’re up to.”

Dean’s expression solidified, and he faced Michael man-to-man. “We are each slaves to our nature, Michael.” It was all he offered by way of explanation.

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Cas sat on the foot of the bed, studiously not looking at Gabe. “She was in front of me, Cas,” said Gabriel. “I made sure I was between her and the guns.” He had Castiel’s white comforter wadded up at his waist. His bare chest glowed pale in the midday sunlight glaring off the lawn. “She was one, maybe two steps from the jeep. I let her pull ahead so I could block. I felt something whizz past my head, but I never even saw her flinch. She dove straight into the jeep, and I fell right on top of everybody all tumbled together. Claire floored it, and we took off outta there like we had wings. Everyone was whooping and laughing and grumbling about being sat on and whose butt had whose hand under it… We didn’t know she’d been hit until Claire called for the accounting, and she admitted she was bleeding. Then it was like the smell of blood hit me right between the nostrils. The one in her face made a fucking mess. Went in her cheek and lodged somewhere in the sinuses on the other side. The one in her neck though. Damn, we all thought she’d had a lucky break with that one. It was so close to the artery, I think one or two cell layers scraped off. But the artery held. The bullet was in her collar bone. It hit her from an angle, so it didn’t go through her windpipe or anything. We thought she’d totally dodged. She was bleeding from her face, and she passed out when she saw how much blood one person’s face can spurt. There was blood, Alpha, but head wounds bleed like that. She was fine. She was gonna be fine. It’s Alex, for fuck’s sake.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Gabriel.”
“You think that makes a difference?”

“It won’t bring her back, no,” Cas told him sadly. “But it’s true anyway.”

Gabriel looked out the window. Castiel looked at the floor.

“You smell awful,” Gabriel observed perceptively. “What the hell’s wrong with you? Don’t tell me. You got a dog and it shit in your favorite running shoes.”

“We don’t have a dog,” Cas answered in a muted voice. “Not yet.”

“Then what crawled up your ass and died?”

“Vivid,” Cas remarked. “Are you sure Kali did a thorough job? Roll over, I want to see the marks.”

Gabe rolled his eyes. “Kinky fucker, aren’t you, little bro?” He rolled onto his belly and hugged the pillow that smelled like Cas. He huffed into it as his brother examined the decidedly pink, but not red, patches on his butt.

“Is this enough, Gabriel?” Cas ran his fingertips over his brother’s skin to check the warmth. Gabe flinched.

“Yeah, maybe a full strapping was overkill all this time. Why the hell does this pillow smell like you?” Gabe asked, rolling back onto his back and snuggling back under the covers.

“Because it belongs to me,” Cas told him. “Would you like a washcloth?”

“What?” asked Gabe, distracted. “Oh, uh, sure.”

Cas stepped into the bathroom and turned on the faucet. “Warm or cool?”

“The other pillow doesn’t smell like Dean OR April. It’s neutral, like the detergent the laundry uses here.”

“Gabriel, warm water or cool?”

Gabriel got up, carrying the pillow. He followed Cas into the bathroom with the pillow under his nose. “It’s fresh. No more than half a day old. You slept here last night.” He looked up at Cas who was watching him through the bathroom mirror with one hand beneath the flow of water, waiting for it to warm up.

“Would you like your washcloth saturated with warm water or cool water. If I don’t get an answer, I’ll decide for myself.”

“Warm would be nice. You slept here last night, but you slept alone. Why?”

“I work late from time to time, and we’re merging with the Keller Foundation. Would it be too great an assumption to think I could have stayed over to allow me to work late without disturbing the Pack?”

Gabe made a face and shrugged. “No. Not really. But if that’s what you’d done you would’ve just said so. What’s going on?” He reached across his brother and picked up a clean cloth, wetting it in the flow of warm water before unceremoniously scrubbing it over his genitals and up the crack of his ass. Castiel took the pillow away from him and left him in the bathroom.

“It’s a long story.”
“Good. I’m for shit right now, and I need a long distraction. What the hell did you do to my sister-in-law? She smells spooked.” Gabe followed him out with a rewetted cloth, steaming with very hot water. He arranged himself on the bed then reached back and draped the hot cloth over his backside.

“Gabe, you should be cooling the area, not warming it further.” Cas reached for the cloth, and Gabe slapped his hand. The snarl/growl/snap from the Alpha took them both by surprise. Cas stepped back with a grimace on his face, and Gabe froze. Cold judgment replaced the pseudo-teasing tone the Omega had affected up to now.

“What did you do?” he demanded. Castiel moved to stand at the window. He didn’t answer. “Castiel? Your Alpha is only that close to the surface when you’re challenged. Who challenged you, and what did you do? Why does April smell like dread?”

“She’s worried about you,” Cas answered vaguely.

“No,” Gabe countered, sitting up and letting the cloth slide onto the bedsheet. “Dread is a forward looking emotion. She’s expecting something bad to happen. What the fuck did you do to her while I was off watching a sweet, angelic warrior take a bullet to her face?!”

Cas frowned. “I would rather you selected a more respectful tone, and it would be best if you avoided a direct confrontation with me right now.”

“No, you don’t! Answer me, you prick! What happened?”

“Gabriel!” Castiel snapped, turning the full force of his Alpha on his brother. Gabriel dropped instantly to his knees, but he didn’t lower his eyes. He fumed up at his brother, and Castiel couldn’t bear those amber eyes for long. He looked guiltily away but placed his palm on Gabe’s head like a benediction.

“Apologies, Gabriel. As you say, he’s close to the surface right now.”

Gabe slid his butt onto the floor and crossed his legs in front of him. “Why?”

Cas looked helplessly at him and then sank to the floor in front of him. “We’ve got a situation,” he explained cryptically. Gabe watched him but didn’t break in. Cas told his brother about April’s extrasensory abilities. He told his brother about how she’d been privy to all of the darkest places inside his psyche, and how he feared for her long term emotional stability. He told Gabriel everything. By the time he had it all out, he felt nearly as angry as he had when his mate confessed to submitting to a kiss that she should never have needed to fend off. Maureen still wasn’t answering his calls, and he didn’t have time to drive out and demand she explain the neglect.

“Hold up,” said Gabriel as Cas devolved to ranting rather than recounting.

“What?” he snapped.

“You really didn’t know she had a hand on the rudder? Come on, bro! I thought you were just letting her test her little fledgling wings. Dude, she wasn’t even all that clever about hiding it! Cas, come on!”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?!”

Gabe scoffed. “Well, maybe because no one but Dean has ever played you in your life! Oh, this is rich! Wait. What did you do to her?”

“I haven’t done anything to her.”
“You slept without her last night, man. You wanna explain that?”

“I told you, I was too angry to handle any of them safely. I needed to cool off.”

“You walked away? From a confrontation your wolf and your Alpha both wanted? From telling off an Omega upstart who kissed your mate while you were out of the state? You’re telling me you had them all lined up in a row, and walked away without feeding the beast?” Gabe fixed him with an eye that had seen the Alpha before he was alpha. Cas fidgeted under the scrutiny. “What are you not telling me?”

Cas sighed and slumped a little. “Dean told me to get out. Forcefully, I might add.”

Gabe’s eyes flew wide, and his shriek of glee couldn’t have been held private by the door of the bedroom.

“Shhh! Damn, Gabe!”

“Oh, shit! That’s amazing! Say it again!”

“No.”

“He kicked you out of your own house?”

“Our house.”

Gabe’s chuckles petered off. Cas’ cheeks were pink, and his fingers played restlessly with the fibers in the carpet. “You were really gonna do it? You were going to hang up both of them and flay them to their bones. If Dean hadn’t been there would you have gone through with it? No, don’t answer that. I know you.” Gabe wasn’t laughing anymore.

“I don’t know. I was angry enough. Not at April... I guess. At Michael. She was talking to me about everything the two of them did and talked about while we were gone, and I saw red. He waited until I turned my back, and then he swooped in to try to take advantage.”

Gabe frowned. “You know, if that’s what he did, I agree, string the kid up by his thumbs and flog him till he passes out. I’ll hold your cape.”

“I don’t wear a cape, you dunce. It’s not funny.”

“No, it’s not funny. It’s not funny at all. And who’s the dunce here? Jesus Christ, Castiel, are you serious?! Wait.” Gabe sat up on his knees and leaned forward, pressing his palms into the carpet to get eye-to-eye with his brother. “You said, ‘everyone keeps saying that’. Who’ve you already talked to about this? Does anyone else agree with you about Michael?”

“Would you please put some clothes on?” Cas pleaded.

“No! I had to wear clothes 24/7 for the last week. We’re in a bedroom. I just had a mind-blowing round with my soon-to-be, and I’m enjoying the breeze! Don’t change the subject!”

Cas sighed and looked away. “I talked it over with Dean and Ellen. I had a brief conversation late last night with Benny, but he was too tired to discuss it, so we decided to talk again when he gets back.”

“I approve. Dean, Ellen, those are good choices. Who else?”

“No one else. Just you.”
“Uh, I think you’re missing someone. Didn’t you talk to April?”

“Well, of course! I thought that would be obvious!”

“But it’s not. Did you really talk to her, Castiel, or did you lecture at her? Have you spoken to her at all since your intended gave you the boot all the way to the doghouse?”

“Good grief! Enough! That’s enough.” Cas got to his feet and pointed at the bed. “I want you napping, Omega. You need to recover. I’ll check on you in an hour…”

“Stop it, Castiel,” Gabriel told him in an intimate and careful voice, one that sliced through all the designations and spoke to the boy beneath it all. “Damn, but you’re terrified, aren’t you? What are you afraid of?”

Castiel dropped the pointing finger and stood helpless in front of the brother who had once been his only link to a kinder world. Marina had meant so much to them both. She swept in and obliterated all their assumptions. She laughed at the stodgy protocol, while managing to be the perfect beta, obedient to Castiel as if it was a privilege, and responsive to everything Omega about Gabe – instinctive, just like Dean. Marina would never have become this entangled in her own designations. Cas had adored her from the moment he met her. She had a sparkle about her that Gabriel reflected in so many ways, and when she died, Gabe refused to let the reflection die with her. He tended it for years in the recesses of his soul, sometimes tendered down to a single glowing ember, but never dead. And then finally, years later, fanned back to a hot radiant bed of furious coals, he fed off that heat to become something glorious and righteous, and now…now with Kali beside him, the coals had erupted into a beautiful flame of life, where Castiel had long ago given up hope that his brother could ever be whole again.

“You’re afraid she’s greater than you are,” Gabriel told him with certainty, and Castiel gasped in shock, a rebuttal on his lips that died before it ever touched air. Gabriel pressed into the wound he’d opened, pressed in brutally. “No one’s allowed to be greater than you are, are they Cas? Alpha Doctor Castiel James Novak Winchester. You can’t do everything, but you can do more than any other single blah, blah, blah. You know, I always knew you were a conceited dick, but I never thought you really believed your own press – not to that extent. Look at you, man. You’re pissed, and you’re terrified, about a ninety-pound Ozzie taking the spotlight from you. And you know what? If she had her way, she wouldn’t take it. She thinks the sun rises and sets with you. She’s going to explode in a blast of amazing musical genius one day very soon, and our lives are never going to be the same. And that’s exactly what she needs to have happen, what she craves, what she lives for, what she was fucking born for. But if she could put a lid on it so that you didn’t ever have to stand in her shadow, she’d do it in a heartbeat. God damn, Castiel, she tried her damnedest to make herself smaller for you. And you were gonna LET her! What the fuck is wrong with you?!”

“No, Gabe. I didn’t know!”

“Jesus, Castiel! Everyone else knew! What the hell happened to you? Did you stroke out when you Mated her? Did you shoot half your brain cells out your dick when you came that first time?!”

Castiel shifted to sit on the bed, then realized he’d perched in a wet spot and stood back up again with a rictus of disgust. “I don’t know! It all made sense to me before yesterday! I couldn’t react to what I couldn’t see, and she HID all of it. From me, specifically! She showed it to everyone else! Michael, Dean, YOU. Probably even Jo. Probably Sam. Maybe I should have known, but I didn’t! Ozzies can’t DO what she did, Gabriel! It’s unheard of! Why would I have been watching for something no one’s ever done before?!”

“Maybe, you shouldn’t have assumed you already had all the answers from the beginning,” Gabe
remarked calmly. He started to sit on the bed, then caught himself and yanked the covers off instead. Castiel took the loveseat in the corner, and Gabe sat cross-legged on the bare mattress.

“She could have been injured, Gabe.” The Alpha ran both hands through his hair and tried to change the subject to safer topics. “She was immersed in my psyche for six months without any filter and without anyone watching out for her safety. Add that to the dangerous level of interpersonal manipulation she was engaged in, and she could be permanently damaged.”

“Nice try, Alpha,” Gabe smirked. “If interpersonal manipulation is dangerous, then yours truly is toast. But then, my maraschino fell off my Sundae a long time ago. Maybe that’s what threw me off, not the years of constant tragedy, not repeatedly getting slapped down by trauma that would have snapped an alpha in half if it had happened to you. It was those quirky little games I played from the minute I figured out how to flip my ass out of my playpen and climb to the top of the refrigerator when I was one. You think I did that for the hand-eye coordination? I did it because Mother always screamed so loud, whacked my ass, and then gave me a kiss and a sweet. Think about it. It was as natural as breathing to me, man. I wanted a cookie? I climbed the refrigerator. It doesn’t take long to figure it all out. You just have to be willing to put up with the noise and a stinging swat or two here and there. April’s no different. Like breathing. In fact, dude, research brilliance here…you want an early childhood test to see who’s Omega without having to pay for genetic testing? Watch toddlers for signs of manipulative expertise before they’re even verbal. There’s the pre-Presentation assessment for ya. I guarantee a 90% correlation.”

Gabe paused until Castiel looked back up at him. “Here’s the thing. And you listen close, little brother. You need to wrap your magnificent head around this fast. You’re not worried about April’s stability. You’re just embarrassed. That’s all this is. It’s a fucking ego blow to a guy who’s tried his whole life to convince himself he doesn’t have an ego. She didn’t just beat you at a game you thought you were winning with your arrogant eyes closed. She fucking slaughtered you at it, and you’re humiliated, and your Alpha does not handle humiliation any better than your asshole handles penetration.”

“Gabriel.”

“Call me down, baby bro. It’s no less true. You’ve got to decide two things, and you need to do it fast, or both of those Omegas you say you love so much are going to lose it, but good.”

“And what’s that?” The red was back in Cas’ eyes as his question snarked out meanly, so Gabriel deliberately swamped his own with gold and spoke Secondary-to-Secondary.

“Number one. You listening?”

“I’m listening, but you’re pushing your luck!”

“Nonsense,” Gabe shunted. “I’m mourning, but I’m balanced right now, and Alpha or not, you have no call to hold my tongue when I’ve got something important to say.”

“I said I was listening,” Castiel repeated.

“Right, then. Number one: Are Omegas full people, or aren’t they? You grant me full agency unless I need a hand or something harder. You don’t even think twice anymore about Ellen. We’re people to you. I’m not gonna go into whether that’s really yours to grant or not.” Gabe waited for Castiel’s pathetic nod. “If we’re people, with no restrictions but to follow Pack rules and keep up with our daily maintenance and all that shit, then Cas, so is April. So is Michael. Full people. Full stop. And baby brother, that means that if her star shines brighter than yours does, you’re going to have to learn to live with it. Hell, you might even consider reveling in it. Just an idea.”
“And number two?” Cas asked dully. Every muscle in his body, every ounce of control was engaged in holding tightly to two leashes.

“Number two is harder. I’m sorry. I wish the world didn’t work this way, but it does. Or at least…” Gabe lowered his chin and caught Castiel’s eyes in that deeply earnest way that Dean did it. Who’d learned it from whom? Maybe it was another thing some people just knew how to do. Like breathing. “…it does when it’s led by an Alpha with his heart in the family, and not in his own comfort. Castiel, Pack life is one thing. It gives us a structure and a certainty we can’t maintain alone. The hierarchies are there for a reason, and every attempt we’ve ever made to change them has failed. But there’s such a thing as taking the hierarchy too far. You may be Alpha, but you’re not God. You’re not above the rules. All the structure that’s in place applies to everyone in the pack, even the alphas.”

“I don’t contest that, Gabe.” Cas felt a little more solid as Gabriel was moving into Pack structure, and that was a thing Cas knew he could follow. He and Benny had reinitialized the very basis of pack structure years before, formalized it and published the templates so others could set their own packs up with a means to do it right. Everything they’d proposed had been validated through countless studies and real life tests.

“And conversely,” he went on, slipping off the bed and coming to kneel before his brother. “The structures that apply to the alphas, also apply to the rest of the pack.”

“With exceptions,” said Cas haughtily. “There are limits to what an Omega can expect to be…”

“Not to the structures, Cas!” Gabe interrupted with vehemence. “You can limit Omegas as far as they need you to. Any more than that is despotism.”

“Of course!”

“So, you agree?” Gabriel posed.

Cas narrowed his eyes. He knew Gabe was leading him toward a cliff. “I’m not a tyrant, but the hierarchies are important, and they work!”

“They do. We agree on that.” Gabriel slowed his speech way down to emphasize its gravity, enunciating every word precisely and pausing between words. He kept his eyes on his brother’s. “And we agree that any pack structure that applies to the alphas that does not inhibit a required mitigating purpose for the health and stability of the Omegas is a structure that applies equally to all members of the pack, else a descent into autocracy.” Gabriel practically vibrated with anticipation, his choice of vocabulary a nod to Castiel’s intellectual side, the one he needed on board first and strongest. Without Castiel’s front brain, there was no hope of winning over the other two. And actually, the wolf was never going to agree to this, any more than Michael’s ever would. Gabe and Cas both excluded it from consideration. The wolf didn’t get a vote.

“You graduated law school and passed the Bar while you were in Canada?” Castiel prodded his brother, noting the odd verbiage.

“No. Cas. I rescued four raped, drugged, imprisoned, and enslaved innocents from a fate worse than death and lost one of my closest friends in the process. Can we skip the patronizing bullshit?”

Castiel scrubbed two very frustrated hands across two very frustrated eye sockets, and then he gritted his teeth. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for, but will you please get to the point?”

“The point is, you idiot, if you and Dean can have a relationship outside of your Mating-bonds, then
so can Michael and April, and I fucking dare you to come up with a single reason you have any say in the matter at all!”

Castiel flew to his feet with a furious roar, and he backhanded Gabriel hard enough to whirl him around and fling him to the floor, catching on his hands and elbows.

“Oh, shit! Gabe! Fuck! Are you…?”

“Damn, little brother. You got strong since the last time you did that.” Gabriel pushed himself up. Cas sucked in a breath at the mark on his brother’s face. “You remember? You were in the fifth grade, and we were doing that adolescent crap – testing our own strength. I was sure I had you, but you knocked me on my ass.” Gabe touched the abrasion at the corner of his eye and checked his fingertips for blood. Cas knelt in and moved his hand away, looking at it closely, checking for damage to the eye. Gabe huffed. “That was the very first time I ever saw your Alpha. Course, it wasn’t ‘Alpha’ then, but it was still fucking terrifying. Can’t say that’s changed much.”

“Shh. Shh. Come here.” Cas pulled him up and led him into the bathroom where he helped Gabe to sit up on the counter. “Does your eye sting?” Cas got a clean cloth and wet it, but the wound didn’t need cleaning. His hand shook anyway as he pressed it to Gabe’s temple.

“I’m fine, Castiel. I knew he had at least one good swing in him. I’m kinda hoping it was just the one though. You think he’s through? I could do the Christian thing and offer him the other side.”

“I can’t believe I did that,” Cas groaned. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“Listen to me, Castiel. You have to think it all through and decide. You can’t ignore it anymore and hope it’ll go away. It’s not going away.” Gabe reached up and stilled his brother’s trembling hand, taking the cloth and holding his hand tightly in a strong Omega grip. “You’ve been blessed with the most remarkable woman I’ve ever seen besides the woman I can’t ever see again. You hear me, right? She’s hardly human at all. She’s a gift from the Universe, and the irony is that the Universe gave that gift to you, you ungrateful Cretin! For anyone else in the whole fucking world, she’d be a taken in as a gift of unsurpassed magnificence. For you, she’s a lesson in humility. Please, Cas, for the love of God…don’t fuck this up just because you’re embarrassed. Remember, two things to decide. Two pretty simple things, and they’re yours to decide. Just know that the whole Lupin world is hanging in the balance of your decision, so…no pressure.”

Gabe kicked his legs out and hopped off the counter just as April tentatively peeked in.

“Alpha?” she asked meekly. “Can I…? Oh, Gabe, your face!”

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Benny hoisted his carryon onto his shoulder as their flight was announced, and Sam followed him out of the private lounge. The celebrity spotlight followed them everywhere after all the publicity, and they’d been forced to flee from public view while they waited at the airport. Both of them were beyond ready to be home. Mates and little ones beckoned. Keeping in touch by phone wasn’t enough. Their Mating-bonds gave them nothing useful at all from New York. Even crossing the terminal to the gate felt like too long a walk. Every eye turned toward Sam, whose height was a dead giveaway. Cameras clicked. Faces turned. People nudged each other with urgent whispering and nods their direction.
“Worth it,” Benny mumbled. “But only just. I’ll be glad to set foot on Kansas soil again. I’m not built for this.”

“I hear you,” Sam muttered back. Fundraising and awareness campaigns required a personal touch, just as every aspect of Lupin culture did, and if it was money the pack needed, New York was the place to go. Sam didn’t mind the work. He liked meeting people. No matter where he went, he liked making those connections and finding he could feel the soothing touch of pack. But he missed home more than he’d ever done before. Jess needed him, and he needed her. And the puppies. Hank had had another assessment of his eyes while Sam was gone, and the results weren’t promising. There was function there. They responded to light, but they were woefully underdeveloped, and they weren’t improving. Henry might never be able to see well. His perception might be limited to mere shifts of light in hazy shades of grey. They wouldn’t know for certain until the pup was older, but it didn’t look good at all. It rankled that Sam wasn’t there to help Jess process the news. He reminded himself as he reminded her by phone, Hank was fortunate to be alive, and they would take every advantage at their disposal to make his life all that it could be. His lungs had caught up beautifully. His senses of hearing and scent were fully developed. A wolf could more easily adapt to a deficiency in sight than anything else. Hank would be fine. God, Sam needed to get home.

Lawrence was no small town, really – not compared to the truly average American small towns that freckled the countryside. Compared to New York, it was a mere blip on the map though, college town and all. And Sam longed to be somewhere that he didn’t have to walk past glassy-eyed spectators trying to focus their phones to snap a picture before he strode by. No one looked at him. No one spoke to him. They pointed phones at him and talked about him. It was disconcerting as hell. How very different it felt than taking the floor at a convention or strolling the streets in his own little city. There, he felt at home, like a person, like pack. Here, unless he was meeting with someone intentionally, he was a novelty, an attraction, like the Statue of Liberty, something to brag about having seen but not considered a person in his own right. It made him feel dirty. Smudged. It made him feel starkly alone, even with Benny there.

“You got everything you need to start running classes at the ‘Y’?” Benny asked abruptly. They were already past the ticket reader and standing in line to board in the gangway as the first few passengers waited for a young man in a wheelchair to work his way aboard and then watch his chair disappear out the hatch door. The question took Sam by surprise.

“Yeah. I, uh, just need to put the finishing touches on the syllabus and make sure I can cover everything in four weeks. We’re offering it as a pilot for the first round, limiting enrollment to just six people at first. Sarah’s going to be there too. She’s offered to be an assistant, helping me bridge the cultural gaps. She catches on really fast. We understand each other most of the time, and she can help a lot. I just wish I was sure it’s a good idea to present this stuff to apes at all. You know Dean was all for it until he wasn’t. Cas was on board, and then he pulled the plug, too. Are you sure?” Sam stepped out of the way as the handlers wrangled the wheelchair to fold up and tried to maneuver it awkwardly out the side tunnel door.

Benny started to answer but was interrupted by a quiet cough and a soft tug to his sleeve. “Excuse me, sir? Are you Benny LaFitte? May I get a picture with you? With you both? Would you mind?” She was quite short and quite young, and her bright eyes were hopeful as she held her phone up to show her intent.

“Absolutely, sweetheart,” he smiled kindly at her, beckoning Sam in close. Sam played along too. They were tired, but being gracious cost them little. The end was in sight. They stood on either side of the young Primate woman and smiled gamely. They each signed a page in her notebook, and by then the line had moved enough that they could slide aboard and take their seats. First class had never looked so inviting.
“They’re scared, Sam. Wolves have made a lot of progress in the last ten years with Primates, and most of that was Cas and Bobby working the angles to keep us spit-shined and pretty for the cameras.” Benny stowed his bag and sank into his seat beside Sam. “But it’s time to start taking the blinders off. Cas knows it, and he’s itching to be a part of it, but he’s afraid of losing ground that cost so much to gain. His instinct is to rip the band-aid off fast and painful and get it over with, but he can’t ever make a move that big without looking deep inside himself to be sure he’s following the right instinct. Dean never cared about how we relate to the Primates. He just wanted funding so he can keep his classes paid for and get the genders all lined up to stop hurting each other. Dean’s focus is always going to be at the heart of the matter, in educating young Omegas not to take a lifetime of bullshit up their channels. Now that we’ve got backing from a reliable source, he doesn’t give a fig about Primates. If it was up to Dean, we’d stick to our own kind and never give two thoughts to whether the apes like us. I think that impulse has deepened since he Mated. When does your first session happen?”

“A week after the wedding. We’ve got the convention in Charlotte this weekend, and then Portland two weeks after that,” Sam answered. “Dean needs to back out of Portland, and focus on the wedding, but he’s not going to. I’m not looking forward to the stress coming off him from that one. He’s going to be a basket case.”

“Maybe,” Benny answered. “Maybe not. He’s got Michael to help him focus.” Benny fussed with his seatbelt and his headphones. “I assume he’s taking Michael with him to convention, right? That would make all the difference.”

“Nope,” Sam answered, peering out the window. “Dean’s benched Michael. Having him show up in Phoenix unexpected was more than Dean could handle, and he’s gone full alpha-protector. Won’t let Michael anywhere near a public appearance.”

“Well, that complicates everything. I guess it falls to you and me to keep an eye on old Dean-o while he’s on the road. How’d Michael take the news?”

“Not good,” Sam answered stiffly. “Michael doesn’t just want to be there to stay close to his mate. He wants to be part of the convention itself. He wants a role on stage and in the seminars. I think Michael wants to be a part of the grand showcase, but Dean’s got his heels dug in. He’s freaked out about Michael being an O-D. Thinks the mobs are gonna turn angry and pitch-forky any minute.”

“Hmm,” mused Benny. “Have you seen anything moving that way?” Benny pulled his phone out and began searching through social media and various discussion platforms. People filed slowly past like cattle.

Sam pursed his lips, navigating through his own phone before handing it to Benny. The article, a commentary from a particularly widely read newspaper, had been a slap in the face when Sam first spotted it a couple of weeks ago. The picture from PhoenixCon with three Winchesters squatting low at the front of the stage and no more than April’s foot to indicate she was there too, rested just under the headline. “The Dangers of Overreaching Omega Autonomy.” Benny skimmed the article.

“This is nothing new, Sam. They’ve been shouting this shit at us from the weeds since we started this movement.”

“Read the comments, Benny. It’s not just the article. They’re starting to froth at the mouth more and more and to cling to articles like this one like a lifeline. Michael may actually be the spark that ignites the opposition against us. And they’re fucking hypocrites, all of them. They scream that setting up a hierarchical pack is abusive, but then they don’t want to believe that Omegas can function outside the home. It’s almost like none of them has ever met a well-balanced Omega. Funny that. Everything they say is backwards, but they just keep getting louder. It’s gotten worse since Phoenix. Dean’s not
jumping at shadows here, Ben. He’s sensing something that’s real, and his mate stands right in the middle of it. If reaching out to the Primates by offering classes in strategies of Domestic Discipline can start to bridge the gap, I’m all for it. But the real challenge will always be our own people. It’s about to come to a head. The ones who were unsatisfied with the status quo, who felt like something was missing or had watched an Omega in their family go psycho and die screaming, those have been on our side for years. It’s the rest of them. We’ve got a division running smack down the middle of our culture, and the gap is only getting wider. How do we reach out to people who wouldn’t come to a convention unless we dragged them there? We can’t wait for generational attrition."

“I don’t know, Sam. Michael has seen both sides of the division. He knows what it’s like to be Omega under both umbrellas. Maybe he’s the key.”

“Say that to Dean, and you’ll be picking your teeth up off the ground. He’s not about to green light anything that puts Michael into a position to be a sacrifice. Michael’s pregnant, Benny. How far can we risk his safety? I’m not any happier about the idea than Dean is.”

Benny shook his head. “No, I’m not either. But Michael deserves to have a say. If he wants in, I think we owe him the respect of trying to find him a path. Lemme talk to Dean. If we can assure Michael’s safety, there may be a way to get his story out there. The boy is a posterchild for the differences between the divide, and there’s no fuckin’ comparison. He’d’ve been dead within three years if he stayed in Texas.”

“Whatever we do, boss, Michael’s safety comes first.”

“I agree. Hell, he’s still an ACRI student, and that binds us to tenet number one: ‘Nothing trumps student safety’.”

Sam chuckled dryly. “But also to tenet number two: Every student’s need is the most important need. What do we do if the two rules are mutually exclusive?”

“Then we revert to number one, and we protect the kid,” Benny told him decisively.

“So, you get where Dean’s coming from?” Sam asked rhetorically, pointedly skipping over the fact that “the kid” was Sam’s age. “We’ve got a lot of allies out there, but none of us is stupid enough to think we’ve won this war yet.” The airplane hatch closed behind the last straggler, and the flight crew moved to make ready for departure. Sam took his phone back from Benny, shot a quick text to Jess, one to Dean, a quick afterthought to Castiel, and then he shut it off. “All we’ve done so far is to fortify our armies. We haven’t really even started the war yet. Everyone’s just been choosing sides and setting their positions.”

Benny smirked wryly with praise for Sam’s insight. “There’s my long range ingénue. This war is going to outlast my generation, Sam. You and Jo, Dean, Michael, April, the whole lot of you in your twenties will still be fighting after we retire. You keep your eyes open for the next generation to come. They’re only about twelve years old right now, so you have some time to focus on yourselves and your fight, but keep the long game in sight, boy. Pace yourself. Don’t let it wear you down.”

Sam sighed as the future stretched out before him. “I know, Benny. But Jesus, you’re not THAT old, man. Stop planning your retirement. Don’t let Bobby talk you into thinking about fishing. You’re in your prime, man.”

Benny chuckled. “I’m not going anywhere, beta. I’m talking about keeping our eyes on the fight where it is right at this moment and keeping one eye on where it’s going to be in ten years, in twenty, in fifty, one-hundred fifty. You’re MY next step, and I’m damned lucky to have you. Don’t forget to keep an eye out for YOUR next step and where the direction of the fight needs to go from each point
“Yeah,” Sam agreed softly as the engines boosted and the plane began to move backward. Sam instinctively reached for Benny’s wrist before realizing that the alpha beneath his hand wasn’t terrified to fly, and Sam chuckled good naturedly as he removed his hand. “Sorry. Force of habit.”

Benny smiled too. “You’re a damned good man, Sam. Go out there and teach apes how to lay a strap down the right way, without shame or hesitation. Get a new perspective on the other species than we’ve had before. Take it six people at a time if you need to, but work it out. Keep going with Sarah, and let her guide you around them just like you’re doing with her for us. I’m telling you, Winchester, this is where we break through. Let’s stop trying to protect folks from the truth, stop trying to avoid pissing off the elements of our own guard that aren’t ever going to get on board, and just lay it all out there, exactly as it is.”

“That’s a tall order, Benny,” Sam whistled. “Are you sure it’s time? We’re not the first tribe to come along and try this. It never goes well.”

“It’s time. We have something on this round that the pack has never had before. This time we have muscle. We have Cas.”

“Alpha muscle only goes so far with Primates,” Sam reminded his boss.

“The instinctive stuff may not be something they can detect, Sam, but he’s more than that. He’s rich and handsome, powerful, erudite. He’s charismatic, and that does more for our cause than the rest put together. Tack on Dean and the rest of us, and I doubt any force in the world could stop this movement. We’re gonna push straight on through till we win everything over. We’re gonna break out of this prison, beta. It’s a damned exciting time to be alive.”

Sam chuckled. “When you’re right, you’re right. Could be the rush of takeoff skewing your brain though, alpha. You sound giddy, like maybe a little off.”

“Nah, brother. I’m good. I’m happy to be going home. I’m thrilled at what we pulled off together. I feel the momentum picking up, and I’m ecstatic to be a part of it. Your Pack Alpha and me used to sit in the Student Union, sipping flat sodas, sharing an order of fries ‘cause I was too broke to get one of my own, and Cas was too compassionate to try to cram charity down my throat, and he’d talk me through the whole plan. Sam, right where we are now – he could see it. Everything, just as it’s happened, even down to the backlash from the so-called progressive side who are really the traditionalists after all, only it’s not their own traditions they’re desperately clinging to. It’s the apes’. He told me all the way back then, we set out our plan, we bait our traps, we sucker them into sticking their necks out, and then we decapitate the bastards with their own rhetoric, because they’re just reactionaries. We’re the choreographers of everything that happens, and we can predict every fucking move they make before they know they’re gonna make it. Not one thing has happened that he didn’t see coming ten years ago.”

“Except for April,” said Sam. “I don’t think he expected to Mate, especially not the woman he Mated.”

“Too true,” Benny agreed. “He’s in over his head with that Ozzie.”

“Benny, you scrambled out of my room fast when he called you last night. That was about April, wasn’t it? It sounded like he was upset from what little I heard. Is everything okay?”

Benny glanced at Sam and sighed. “Just a little kink in the plan, Sam. He’s at odds with your whole pack right now, but it’s nothing we didn’t see coming. Sometimes the pendulum swings too far to
“one side, and it’s gotta swing back the other way to balance things out.”

“What happened?” asked Sam, alarmed, demanding. His mate and his boys were still at ground zero. If all hell was breaking loose, and he wasn’t there to protect them…

“Now, now, beta, cool your jets. Everybody’s still in one piece, last I heard. You can get all the details from the horse’s mouth when you get home. Don’t waste time worrying about it. Jess and the boys are not in the line of fire. Castiel phoned me up from his suite. I gather he slept alone last night. No, Sam, I want you thinking strategy. Focus, beta. Here’s the thing: Cas and Dean have the perfect answer to how to set our movement spinning even faster than they ever imagined, but they are too tied up in their own fears to take the opportunity. You and me and the others can talk all fucking day about how important it is to foster equality outside the household and strong structure within it, but if Ellen’s the only Omega who ever shows her face publicly, we’re just so much hot air to some people.”

“You mean Michael,” Sam clarified. “You want me to try to talk Dean into bringing Michael along.”

“Michael and April, both.” Benny pressed his seatback into its reclined position. “I’m telling you. Put the two of them on the stage together at the cons. Let them be themselves. Get them up there without a script. Just put microphones in their hands and let them do whatever the hell comes into their heads. I mean it, Sam. The whole world would be watching, riveted. The world would come to a screeching halt, and everything the progressives thought they knew about Omegas would crumble to dust.”

“It’s never going to happen, Benny. Dean’s dead-set against it, and Cas only wants April involved as a musician.”

“You’re thinking about it backwards, beta. We get Cas to work on Dean about Michael’s involvement. Put Dean to work getting Cas to loosen up on April. The problem solves itself. They are each other’s Achilles’ heels. Neither of them can say no to the other for long. Mark my words. We’re starting to win this thing, and putting Omegas on the stage is the clincher.”

“You can count me out, alpha. I may look stupid, but I didn’t survive this long by being suicidal.”

Benny laughed. “That’s what I love best about you, Sam. You think like a survivor. It’s survivors who are gonna win this for us.”

“Still a no, alpha.”

“We’ll see. I’ll take first crack at Dean, and then we’ll see.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay. Whew. That went well, don't you think? General rules of a dog-pack: There must always be an Alpha, and if the Alpha position isn't clear, someone will step up to try to fill the void. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it makes things worse. If your lowest ranked Ozzie is trying to fill the Alpha spot, something's gone badly wrong in your pack.Luckily, she didn't have to do it for long, and it's good to know she's got the chops to bridge a gap if she needs to.

As always, let me know if it's a confusing mess that requires explanation.
Smut and spankings will be back once Cas gets his head screwed back on right.
Chapter 94

Chapter Summary

Everything comes to a head, and the Alpha confronts his biggest challenge yet, a mouthy pregnant Omega who just won't take 'sit down and shut up' as an answer.

Also, Meg and Jo both jump into the dating pool with both feet, and Gabriel gets out of it.

Chapter Notes

Way overdid my usual word limit for a single chapter, but this is the big one, and I couldn't make myself cut anything. After this, chapters can go back to a reasonable length.

The plan to push through to the wedding before calling it a day hasn't changed, but that all assumes there's still going to BE a wedding. This chapter is where that decision really faces the music. So, for anyone keeping count, it took me 94 chapters to get to the frikken point.

My fingers are all crossed that it really says what I meant it to say. They are still all over the place emotionally, and contradicting themselves in multiple ways, especially Castiel. But it's difficult to make six months worth of personal growth in a single lunch break.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Right in here, ladies. Don’t be nervous. This is the fun part.” Charlie led them into the small room, lined with more chairs than were strictly needed, and a small fridge full of water bottles. Meg followed Jo in, and they stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, looking to each other for courage.

“Actually,” continued Charlie, oblivious. “The fun part is said to be the Mating, but this part is good too. I’ve got the scents loaded, and I can start them whenever you’re ready. I’ve got three for each of you. Who wants to go first?”

Jo frowned. “Shouldn’t you surprise us? I mean, if we know which is which, won’t that skew the results?”

“We can do it however you want,” Charlie nodded enthusiastically. “But it’s not a quiz show. The more you know about each candidate when you get their scent, the better you can be sure of your decision. It’s up to you. I have their profiles right here.” Charlie held up the sheaf of manila folders. Both Meg and Jo blanched. Meg clutched Jo’s arm.

“I don’t wanna do this,” she whispered.

“Nonsense,” said Jo roughly, shifting Meg’s claws until they were holding hands instead. “It’s a change, and change is scary. That’s all. We have nothing to lose. We’re doing this, Margaret. Sit down.”

Meg sank down slowly, and Jo pulled in a long breath. “Do me first, Charlie. You say I have three viable candidates? I thought it was just one. Last night, you said one.”

“Yeah, well, I also said these things move fast. Two more real hits came in overnight. Nothing says you have to act on them. Just take a whiff, all right? No pressure. The scents aren’t strong enough to fully Trigger you. They just give you a sense of what the real thing would be like. You’ve got your sensors in place? Nothing’s coming loose?”

Meg pulled her blouse outward and looked down. One sensor adhered just above and to the right of her left breast. The other sat below her right breast on the soft flesh over her ribs. She pressed into both of them through her blouse. She nodded, and Jo looked up after doing the same.

“We’re all set. Let’s do it.”

“Goodie!” squeaked Charlie, clicking the remote. She checked the display and handed Jo one of the folders. It didn’t take long for a spicy, latte scent to come through. Jo’s mouth watered, and her nostrils flared.

“Holy shit,” muttered Jo, handing the folder off to Meg to read. “Tell me, Meg. There’s no way this guy’s for real. What’s wrong with him?” Jo huffed frantically, stepping closer to the vents and pointing her nose upward.

“He’s in Saskatchewan,” Meg muttered back. “But that doesn’t matter. He’s an Omega, Jo. He’ll come live with you without question. You could have an Omega. Jo, babe, you could be a dad!” Meg flipped through the small pile of pages, looking for incriminating information. “Oh,” she said, disappointed.
“What?” asked Jo, jerking her head around.

Meg sighed and closed the folder. “He lists three different boy bands under ‘Musical Tastes’.”

“What!??” Jo sprang at Meg and ripped the folder from her, rifling through it and staring in horror. “Oh, God! Says he hates Steven King movies, and he only reads nonfiction! Next!”

Charlie giggled. “See? This is why this program is better than letting nature take its course. You’re both going to thank me. Here we go.” Powerful fans sent the air in the room swirling, pulling the scent of bad taste out and all hope that Saskatchewan had of making a Love Connection with it.

“Give me those folders, Charlie. Don’t push any buttons until I tell you to.” Charlie passed the other two over and waited for Jo to discard Arizona and shakily point to the number on the other with a cautious nod.

Charlie activated the scent as Jo sat down beside Meg, clutching her friend’s hand, and closing her eyes. This time it was mountain cedar and blooming heather. A beta. Beta-Neutral. Nice and simple. It was wholesome, wide open, and fresh. Jo panted shallowly, letting the scent touch the back of her mind and bringing her wolf right up to roll in it like found treasure in the grass. The wolf approved. Jo’s eyes rolled. Her alpha approved. She felt her hackles rise as a powerfully possessive sensation washed over her.

“Jo?” asked Meg. “What do you think?”

“I can’t think,” mumbled the alpha, breaking a sweat.

“All right,” said Charlie assertively. “I’m turning it off. We’ll let your brain cells catch up, and we’ll discuss it further after your nose clears. Unless…you know…I mean…unless you already know one way or the other?”

“I need to think, Charlie. It’s not just about me. I need to think about my Omega, too.” If Jo was referring to her mother as ‘my Omega’, she was solidly lost inside her alpha. Charlie killed the scent and cleared the room again.

“Okay, then. You chew on that. We can run it again if you need to,” Charlie purred, pleased as punch at her friend’s reaction. Jo waved her off, and Charlie grinned harder. It was extremely rare to catch Jo off center, and Charlie loved it.

Meg shook her head mutely. She shifted to sit on her hands, and she rocked back and forth in anxiety. “Shh,” Jo soothed, getting a handle on herself in the presence of a distressed Sub.

“Kay. Here we go. Candidate number one.” Charlie activated the remote, and Meg squeezed her eyes closed, huffing shallowly, trying to take the scent in and block it out simultaneously. Jo smoothed her hair and crooned gentle, calming words to her. Meg’s mouth fell open at the first real whiff and her eyes sprung wide. She took an impossibly deep breath through her nose. It seemed like she would never reach her fill as her chest expanded and her head flopped back.

“Meg?” Jo prodded. “Meg? You gotta breathe, sunshine. Come on. Let it out. You can take it in again. I promise. Release your breath. BREATHE, MEG!” Meg blew it out in a rush, and then clamped her mouth shut and drew in another as slowly as she could, relishing every second.

“Wow.” Charlie stared, transfixed. She clicked the remote again to stop the feed, but let the scent dissipate on its own so as not to startle the beta. “I’ve never seen a reaction that powerful.” Meg was bye-bye. She was gone, off in a land of her own, and her nose was the only part of her still moving.

Jo swallowed. “That the one in Turkey?”

“English? What?” Jo grabbed for the folder. “Says here he lives in Arkansas. Pretty damned far from England. Oh. Dude. He’s a transplant. Naturalized citizen. Hell, Charlie, did you see his pic? Meg! Babe, you with us? Sweetheart, this is the one! If you don’t Mate this guy, I’m taking him for myself!”

Meg growled, snapped her eyes open, and snatched the folder from Jo. “What’s his name? He’s a beta?”

“Yeah,” Charlie giggled. “Name’s Ketch, well, nickname anyway.”

“Catch? What kinda stupid…? Oh. Ketch.” Meg found the front page and skimmed his vitals. “He’s a Dominant.” She blinked up at Charlie, who smirked back.

“Of course he is,” Charlie shot. “He’s an Enforcement Officer, fully certified. You hear that Meg, he’s a paddle-man! Works for the Springdale Independent School District in their Lupin campus. This guy has sent his resume to us once a year, every year, for the past five years. Every time he updates it, he sends us a new one. I scanned through our call-back records. It looks like the only reason he’s not already here is because we didn’t have an opening. With Cole jumping ship and transferring to Dallas, voila. Opening. It’s kismet.

“You looked him up already?” asked Meg, clearly confused.

“I’m not gonna put a scent under your nose and not vet them first. I’m not turning you over to a douchebag, even if you think he smells like chocolate.”


Jo and Charlie both laughed. “Ya think? You nearly passed out!”

“What happens next?” asked Jo, dead serious.

Charlie looked at them both. “Next, if you’ve made an initial selection, we hand it off to Alpha to write up formal proposals, and we get in touch with the gentlemen in question. Toss the ball into their courts.” Charlie let Jo chew on it, and then she tapped her arm. “Jo? What are you thinking?”

Jo’s face straightened. “Jack, is it? Right?” Charlie consulted the folder and nodded. “From Tacoma.” Jo seemed to be tasting the words as she slid the folder away from Charlie and stared at the picture. “He’s my age. He’s adorable. Fuck, ladies, look at him. He looks like Castiel. You can’t catfish these things, right?”

“Jo,” said Meg, a single line of drool escaping onto her lap. “You gotta go for it. I’ve never wanted a pack this bad before in my life.” They froze momentarily in indecision, but then Charlie squatted before them both and squeezed their shoulders. As one, the three of them began to giggle, and then to laugh, and before long there were tears. And it was about damn time.

By the end of her lunchbreak, Charlie had two manila folders hand-delivered to Castiel’s desk with hot pink post-its stuck to the top of each. Change was scary, no doubt, but it was also exciting, and Charlie couldn’t stop grinning.

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“Alpha?” April asked meekly, peeking tentatively in. “Can I…? Oh, Gabe, your face!”

Gabe met her with a wink. “Come in, sweetheart. We’re through the heavy talk. And don’t fuss over a little scratch. Rough sex with the missus will do that sometimes, kiddo! You should see the marks I left on her.” Gabe let her pull him out of the bathroom to sit on the bed. He scented her throat, and she huffed at him.

“I’m fine, Gabe,” she whispered.

His face sobered as he sat up straighter. “You’re going to tell me everything next time we’re alone.”

She studied the red scrape near his eye for a moment before turning her attention back to him. “I love you, too,” was all she said, but there was more beneath the surface. At last, he found what he was looking for in her eyes, and he nodded, satisfied. He was still concerned, but he knew she wasn’t in danger.

“Oh, hey…” Gabriel edged his way toward his clothes, hoping to dress and scamper before Cas found his voice again. He really, really didn’t think he was up to the heartfelt apologies he knew he would have to sit through. He knew April’s timing was no accident. Not only had they all been listening at the door, she was bound to have felt Castiel’s flare of wrath, felt the explosive strike, and his abrupt switch to remorse. “So, me and that same missus are heading on up to the courthouse in a bit. We have to stop by the house to pick up the marriage license we got tucked away somewhere, trying to expire. I think I know where it is…gonna have to do a little digging…” Gabe stumbled in getting dressed, and his voice muffled when he lost his head inside his shirt. The door still gaped wide, and Kali appeared at his rescue with an amused expression as she helped him aim for the right hole, an unsaid joke on her lips and a twinkle in her eye.

“What he’s trying to say,” Kali explained coolly. “Is that we’d very much appreciate it if our Alpha could see fit to allow and attend our wedding this afternoon.” Kali pecked a kiss to the tip of his nose. Her eyes flicked to the corner of his temple which had turned an angry red, and then she met his eye with a silent question. He soothed her with a smile that lived in the crow’s feet of his eyes, to which she simply turned with a smirk and looked expectantly at the Alpha himself.

Cas looked up in surprise, tossing the washcloth into the sink. “You’re getting married? Today?”

“With your permission, Sir,” Kali repeated.

“I…um…Gabe?” Cas was bewildered. His mindset skittered wildly from point to point, and he couldn’t seem to make it stop. He didn’t like it one bit, but nothing felt right at all about turning his thoughtful, controllable brain over to the Alpha which was so angry it was no longer making any semblance of sense. His beast of a Tertiary sat leashed in the shadows, not slavering, but staring judgmentally at the mess Castiel had made for himself. The Secondary was caged completely, and it was irate. Castiel blinked at his brother. A wedding? Today?

“See, the thing is, Alpha,” he said, looking right at Kali and wrapping his arms around her waist. She grinned at him. “You kinda get a flash of clarity when bullets whiz past your head. The first thought that made any sense to me as I heard that bullet was, ‘Thank God I didn’t marry Kali yet, so she won’t be a widow on top of losing her mate’. The second thing I remember thinking was, ‘Oh, shit, I browned my pants’, but the third was, ‘Gabriel Allen Novak, what the fuck are you running from? If you’re less frightened of running through a hail of bullets than you are of following the woman you love to the courthouse and making sure she knows you mean it, then your judgment sucks, and you shouldn’t be making important life decisions in the first place’. So, I waited for you to summon me.
home, and I pretended I wasn’t aching to get on that plane…”

“Why, you little…” Bobby griped from the doorway. They’d drawn a crowd.

Gabe ignored him. His eyes brooked no interruption. “…I made a beeline for home, so no matter what happens next, no matter how bad it ever gets, my first thought won’t be, ‘Thank God I didn’t marry her.’” He kissed her softly on her lips. It was a wedding type of a kiss, and she shone back at him. Cas didn’t know what had passed between them in the short time they’d spent alone in here, but there was a look in both their eyes that was identical.

“See, Cas?” Gabe chided. “Some decisions aren’t nearly as hard as we try to make them.”

Castiel leaned against the door jamb and sighed. He didn’t answer Gabriel. It wasn’t a question, and it was rhetorical anyway. April tucked right into him like always. His arms wrapped around her, sliding inside her bathrobe and slipping it off her shoulders to hang in folds from the tie at her waist. Cas had slipped into an altered headspace, and he needed…something. He folded around her and mouthed at her shoulder and her throat, feeling his way with his eyes closed. He was spinning. Touching her slowed the crazy whirling in his head. He whined sadly as his arms tightened. He tested her from within, and he felt her smile internally with a warmth that Michael would never have access to, no matter what. He picked his head up and searched her face. She opened the entire, nearly bottomless expanse of herself to him, and he fell into her baby blue eyes and lost himself. Castiel’s face grew a grim pallor, but his mind scrabbled desperately inside her, into reaches he’d never explored before, and the beauty of her sent everyone else far away. He shifted her and pressed her into the bathroom wall, to the far side of the doorway, out of their view. Just having her right there in his arms slowed the spinning and gave him something bright and strong to hold. His eyes locked onto hers, Cerulean blue delving into limitless sky blue. Everything she was opened up to him. Everything. Her eyes held a hopeful kind of trust, a shaky tentative thing, so easy to break, so easy to destroy once and for all. Castiel feared that even glancing away for a moment might destroy the hesitant link between them.

“Ahem.” Dean cleared his throat. “I think they’re waiting for an answer, Alpha.”

Dean’s voice was no intrusion into this cautious place. Dean belonged here. And Cas responded with a snap of an order as if he’d not just been perched right on the edge, close to coming totally unhinged. “Well, then answer them. I would, but I’ve been relieved of duty.” Cas crowded April against the wall and kissed her deeply. He felt the possessive beat of his Alpha’s tantrum, desperate to put chains around her and hide her away from everyone, at least until he had first crack at all the new vastness inside his mate. HIS mate.

She chuckled meatily and pressed herself into his body, answering his summons with a Universal ‘YES’, and Cas nearly lost his footing as he slipped on the tile. The knee he had braced against the wall gave way, eliciting a full laugh from his Sub. His Submissive laughed at him, but from his vantage buried within her mind, he felt the warm endearment, full of devotion and a desire to kneel to his will, not ugly hard-scrabble mirth at his clumsiness, and he smiled into the kiss in turn. He was suddenly ravenous. Her wolf had slipped somehow right into the shadows with his, and the two of them hadn’t waited on anything as mundane as physical realities before they began to rut shamelessly on the ethereal plane. Castiel growled into her hair and let the lust of a horny hellhound send his body into electric want.

Dean sighed heavily. “What time do you think you’ll be ready?” he asked Kali.

“I dunno,” she said, turning to Gabriel. “What time did they tell you?”

“You already made the appointment?” Dean asked in surprise.
“I had access to the sky phone on the airplane,” he explained. “Someone who was supposed to be watching me was napping. Oh, and I think it was your credit card number I entered. Sorry, alpha.”

“Gabe, you are seconds away from a full strapping with all the witnesses you can handle,” threatened Dean, but he didn’t mean it. “Seriously. What time? We need to get situated here. This little interlude, traumatic as it is…” Dean had to speak over a simultaneous moan from Castiel and April both. “…doesn’t free us from the rest of our scheduled obligations. We’ll be there, all right? But give us a few hours if you can. And don’t plan to go anywhere afterward. You, Omega, are on lockdown until we’re sure there’s no one trailing you, and you miss…” He shifted his pointer finger. “…need to join the pack formally. We can do that tonight. For fuck’s sake, C.J., put a cork in it for a hot second!” Dean strode up into the doorway of the bathroom, hoping to catch Castiel before he went into a full knotting. They really didn’t have time for this.

Castiel had her robe pulled open, only the knotted tie still in place around her waist, and he was stroking her rapidly with his fingertips in time with the pummeling of his hips as he thrust, still fully clothed, up against her pubic bone and the softness of her belly. It didn’t look remotely comfortable to Dean, but what did he know? Dean went dizzy as his footing inside his alpha disappeared in mere moments. He fell straight downward metaphysically into a helpless position. April was lost completely to bliss as her mate gnawed heartily at the flesh near her Mating-scar. She stood braced against the wall with one hand splayed on the plaster and the other grasping his shoulder tightly. If he had a Mating-scar, it would have been right…there.”

“Dude, that’s gross,” Dean protested, far more uncomfortable than he was used to being when Cas lost himself in his mate. “At least get out of your pants. You’re gonna make a fucking mess.” The Alpha ignored his fiancé – probably didn’t hear him. Dean had rarely been this close to the two of them mid-performance. He sniffled the scent out of his nostrils furiously, and then turned to glower at Michael. Dean could feel his disquiet echoing from Michael in addition to the intensity of the odors coming from April – intractably feminine odors – that turned Dean’s stomach unexpectedly, and he closed his eyes.

“Come on, Dean,” Michael urged. “I know you don’t want to see the pretty girl come on your husband’s fingers.” The Omega’s attempt at a light tone didn’t fool anyone, especially Dean. He allowed himself to be pulled clear. They both needed to get out of there. Michael led him back into the living room where Bobby had already fled. Pam stayed in the doorway with an interested eye, carefully watching Kali watching Cas. Gabriel had to push past Pam on his way out too. Kali reluctantly followed, her lower lip caught in her teeth and a speculative look on her face.

“It’s just…I mean…eww! What the hell?” Dean was still complaining, but attempting to cast a playful light over it. His knee jerk reaction to the intensity of Castiel’s lust and April’s – well, April’s body’s reaction – was pulling him into a swift tantrum, and there were going to be follow up conversations about it, he had no doubt, but one Godforsaken thing at a time. If Dean could cut the spiral down into his Tertiary off at the knees by playing it up into light banter, it was worth a try.

“I’ll make it up to you later,” Michael soothed, ineffectively attempting to aid Dean’s playfulness, but getting nowhere. He could sense that Dean’s protests were more in effort to flip the tone from a heavily weighted desperation that Cas was giving off, to something easier to breathe through, and Michael was in full agreement that the attempt was worth it, even if it had no hope of working. Whatever Castiel was feeling, it was going to stink up the whole suite. Michael was torn. He didn’t need Castiel in freefall, as he’d seemed way too close to suffering before April nosed in beneath his chin and distracted him. But Michael didn’t want Pete beneath the Alpha’s chin in the first place. Not that what Michael wanted made a whole lot of difference. He opted for a change in tone himself. Distract, distract, deflect, and distract some more – anything but think about what Cas was doing to April in the bathroom. He caught Gabriel as he emerged from the bedroom with fingertips still...
tracing the mark near his eye. “Hey, Gabe. Can we...? Are we...good now? Did you talk him down? What did he say?” Michael grimaced in uncertainty and embarrassment at his own awkwardness, and Gabriel didn’t ease his fears. “Am I still Canus non grata?”

“Don’t play stupid, Michael. The lot of you had your ears pressed up to the door. Don’t think we didn’t see your shadows. Feet leave shadows under a door like that, and a bunch of feet block out all the light. You heard everything.”

“But he didn’t answer your questions.” Michael tried to ignore the sounds coming from the bedroom. He was struggling even more than Dean in his own way. Dean at least had a safe place to go when he was triggered thus. And too, the two mates were clearly caught in an echo loop, but each of them added their own dislike, if dislike was the right word at all. It wasn’t a case of one partner flaring up the other with emotions unrelated to the situation. They were both contributors, and that made it much more powerful. For Michael, this time was different. Michael could feel his wolf snarling possessively from the shadows. This time all his cards were on the table, and he found it much harder not to consider himself a claimant on her body. Dean sensed Michael’s struggle, and full clarity hit them both at the same time. The echo was getting louder, and they finally saw it for what it was. Dean’s disgust at watching Cas frotting madly against his mate’s willing body wasn’t all Dean’s. And Michael’s possessive fury picked up fuel from his mate’s disgust. Michael found Dean suddenly no longer playful, even awkwardly so, and no longer Tertiary either. He found his mate suddenly whispering in his ear. Evidently, watching Michael fight to hold onto himself when his wolf demanded a full storming of the castle, a suicide mission at best, was enough to snap Dean out of his own freefall.

“Not like this, baby boy,” Dean whispered, stopping the mantrum rolling on repeat through the Omega’s head, the mantrum of ‘mineminemineminemine’. “She’s not yours. She’s his. Did she tell you she wanted to start something new with you, man?” Dean whispered. “What’d she say? What’d she say when you asked her?”

“She said no,” Michael admitted, still sweating heavily. But his vision cleared, and his wolf laid back down, disgruntled.

“That’s right. Cool your jets, sport. You don’t wanna come on prematurely, right? That would embarrass the hell outta me. It’d be like I never taught you a thing.” Dean smacked his ass and gestured back to Gabriel. Michael pouted as he turned back around and faced the room. But he did it. And he was Secondary the moment he met Gabriel’s eye.

“Oh, is it me now?” asked Gabe acerbically, but Dean just raised his brows and nodded. “No, he hasn’t answered yet, and if you rush him, he’ll make you wait longer out of spite and with the power to back it up.”

“But you think...?” That had been a swift and wild ride through a torrential downpour of emotion. Michael buried everything he could as fast as he could. Focusing on Gabriel, he set his jaw and brought his mind back to the present. He felt Dean doing the same.

“Michael, I know my brother better than I know myself. I can advise you that if you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep your eyes and your grubby hands off his mate until he wraps his noggin around what he’s hearing from his Alpha. As much as I hate it, there may be something going on in there that we need to listen to. The Alpha’s not usually an asshole for nothing. And whatever my mother tried to talk you into over a game of Scrabble, you should forget all about it. She’s poison to this Pack, kiddo. Poison.”

Michael’s face drained of color at the wording, at the reminder, and his upper lip curled.
“Yeah, and that right there. Oh, hells yeah! You curl that sweet lip at him and see what it gets you. I’m gonna sell tickets to that show! Or you can act like a guy with BOTH lobes of his brain still working and get back in your place where you belong. Don’t like it? Fine. Take it up with the Universe you’re all so on about. Me? I’m gonna blow this popsicle stand and go get hitched.” Gabe snagged Kali’s hand on his way to the door, and she fell right in step. He left Michael gaping.

“What the…? How did he know about Scrabble?”

“He’s something else, isn’t he?” Dean enthused softly. “What about Scrabble?”

“He was morose thirty minutes ago!” Michael exclaimed. “You texted me to hustle my ass down here so we could intervene in a suicide attempt!”

Pam patted his shoulder, collected the glasses from various tables and took them to the kitchen. “He’s not as solid as he seems yet, Michael. Remember he advised you to bury your trauma long before you were ready to walk away from it. It’s his thing. From here on, you’re not going to see him mourn if there’s an alpha in the room; not now that his balance has been restored. But you can help a lot, Omega. Would you do that? Seek him out alone from time to time and give him an outlet to talk about it?”

“Of course,” Michael muttered. “But, Scrabble.” He stared at the door for a moment, and then shook his head and turned back to Dean. “And you people are going to let him make a major life change while he’s like that?”

“Like what?” asked Castiel, emerging from the bedroom with April shuffling behind him, donning her robe. He’d changed pants.

Michael froze, paused a beat, and then dropped to his knees. “Sir,” he said to the floor. Castiel regarded him coolly, but not angrily. He seemed to be trying to work Michael open with his mind.

“Alpha, do you want us to stay?” Bobby asked. “My Omega just took off without a by-your-leave. Pam and I can do the debrief in my office, unless you want one or both of us here.” Bobby stared at Michael’s bowed head. “I don’t know what this is, but anything that puts that Omega on his knees without a command is something big.”

Castiel’s gaze was fixed on Michael as well. “We’ll be fine, Bobby. Thank you. Come to the house this evening and eat with us. We have a new Pack member and a wedding to celebrate.” Cas never took his eyes off the top of Michael’s head, bent in supplication. He strolled forward a few steps, slowly.

“Plus, you don’t want me to spend the evening alone,” Bobby put in.

“Sue me, as Dean would say.” Cas began to circle the Omega, still evidently fascinated.

“C.J.,” Dean said, but then stopped.

“Dean, when you don’t put a verb to the sentence, it’s difficult to derive any meaning.” He passed around behind Michael and continued strolling.

“Sir, it might not be a bad idea to ask Pam to stay,” April suggested from the doorway, then she bit her lip. Cas looked up at her.

“The lip thing, is that part of the play?” he asked. She shook her head, but then shrugged. Cas nodded and turned back to Michael. After a full circuit, he stopped right in front of him again. “Pam, you may stay if you like, but the debrief is still due on my desk by the end of the day, and I assure
you, Michael is not in any danger.”

“Castiel, look at me, please,” she said from the kitchen, and he looked up. “You are not behaving like yourself right now. Whatever you have planned, I advise you to be careful.”

“Yes, Pamela. Thank you. Under your advice, and remembering what you and I recently discussed by way of ‘Anger Management Counseling’, I remind you that Michael’s mate and mine are both here and will remain. April, will you please tell the doctor what you sense from me?”

April stepped forward, flush with her mate, and looked him in the eyes. “Yes, Sir. He’s very calm on the surface, doctor. He’s angry, and he’s struggling beneath the surface to pacify the Alpha back into a rational headspace. His wolf is snarling purely from the excitement of the moment and a chance to snap at Michael again. It has no rational opinion, and so it’s not been asked for input. But his upper surface is calm, and he’s got a solid grip on it. Everything that’s happening below the surface will stay there unless he chooses to release it. At the moment, he is determined not to release it, and as long as no one deliberately provokes him, there is no danger. He’s interested in finding answers to his questions, not in beating unruly Omegas.”

April delivered her analysis and then stepped back one step and sank to her knees across from Michael. She caught him looking up at her, and she tried to send him a bolstering smile, but his wink seemed wildly inappropriate, and she frowned instead.

Castiel stared at her before she lowered her head.

“Cas?” Pam prompted.

Cas turned from April to Pam, wide eyed. “I couldn’t have put it better myself. I’m beginning to understand what I’ve bonded myself to.” He looked back at the meek form curled behind him on the floor.

“Dean?” Pam asked. “Does Michael feel frightened to you?”

“Nah. He wants to shove through to the other side of this, and he’s hoping a direct confrontation might force the issue. Weird way to confront, I gotta say, bud. Submission is kinda the opposite of confrontation.”

Dean squatted behind Michael and rested a hand on his lower back.

“Dean, remove yourself,” Castiel ordered.

“You all right if I step back?” Dean asked his mate. Michael didn’t move or answer, but Dean yiped and popped up and back all in one motion. “Really?! I’m trying to help here!”

“Come on, Pam,” said Bobby. “This is Pack business, and they’re fine. You and me got some shit to wade through. Good luck getting the full story from me though, and good luck getting Gabriel back any time soon.”

Cas squatted in front of Michael, about three feet away. Dean rounded him to sit on the floor beside April. No one moved for a couple of long minutes.

“I need your eyes, Michael.”

The Omega raised his head and golden eyes met red.

“Are you in love with April?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Cas rested his knuckles against his lips. “Did you at any point go about deliberately seeking that eventuality?”
“Did I fall in love with her on purpose? No, Sir. Not exactly.”

“Not exactly?”

“No, Sir. May I ask a question?”

“Yes, of course. This is not an interrogation.”

“It’s not?” he asked in surprise.

“You selected the format for the discussion, Omega, not me.”

“Only in a manner of speaking,” Michael countered. “Between you and me, any pretense of equality is misleading. It seemed appropriate to cut to the chase and accept what’s real between us.”

“All right. I see your point, and you’ve made it. I’m not holding you to this position though. You are free to move as you will, but as long as you are kneeling, my response to that will be appropriately Secondary. What’s your question?” Cas was fascinated by the Omega, as always. Caging his Alpha for long was impossible in the face of a kneeling Pack Omega. The nonconfrontational posture though, allowed the Alpha an easy route to control himself, and Cas had a firm hold of the leash he rarely needed. This was a dance they all knew the steps to. Cas could feel his blood move within his body. Individual blood cells, each a source of heat coursing through his veins, slowed his perception of time and lent weight to this moment. It felt meaningful in a way even his Mating hadn’t.

Michael didn’t take the out. Castiel needed to remember through the length of wherever this was going that they were not equals, however much it comforted them both to believe erroneously that they could be. Perhaps Michael was trying even more to remind himself. “Sir, you asked if I fell in love with April on purpose. I feel I have the right to ask you the question in reverse. Did you fall for my mate on purpose, knowing full well you could never Mate him, and knowing he had a mate somewhere in the world who held prior claim?”

Cas didn’t answer for some time. Michael could hear the air moving in and out of his lungs. He could feel the struggle taking place in the Alpha’s depths, though only in an inexplicable sense of compressed energy kind of way. Michael’s eyes flicked to April. Her head was still down, and she sat kneeling utterly still. Dean was close by, but he wasn’t touching her.

“No, Michael. I didn’t. I cannot pinpoint the exact moment when my feelings became undeniable and nearly uncontainable, but I can tell you that they were never really under my control. I’ll admit that I never tried to avoid them.” Castiel’s designations were a mess within his skin. His blood was on fire with fury and presence, but his mind was calm. A not-so-distant howling from his wolf, mournful in the knowledge that no one cared what he wanted, ceaselessly pulsed across the forested mindscape that Cas built around it.

“You didn’t have a choice?” the Omega asked.

“I didn’t, and I am not blind to the injustice of holding you accountable for a circumstance that was possibly outside your control.” Castiel’s Alpha broke form and snapped viciously at his calm sentient front. He dodged easily, an eye and an ear diverted to watching it. The true depth of the battle before him was becoming clearer. Michael was not his enemy, and he never had been. Castiel’s enemy was the prison of his designations. Just like his father. They weren’t going to bend for this.

Not easily anyway.

“Possibly,” Michael repeated, astonished at the gall. Alpha or not, that was some impressive cognitive gymnastics right there. Castiel’s eyes flashed at a particularly hard strike from the Alpha.
“You hit your brother just now,” Michael went on. “You hit him in the face for daring to suggest that you’re a hypocrite if you try to stand between your mate and me.”

“I was prepared for the message in general, but unprepared for the means of delivery,” Cas told him. “My brother is singularly adept at eliciting whatever response he wants from me, and that was exactly what he wanted me to do. That doesn’t excuse what I did.” Suppressing the satisfaction of the Alpha, the gloating over laying out the entitled Omega who tried to step onto the pulpit meant only for Alphas, was easier than suppressing its anger overall. They’d discussed Gabriel before, Castiel and his Alpha. They had an understanding where Gabriel was concerned, and Cas stubbornly held his Secondary to that agreement.

“No, and it doesn’t make you some kind of hero of restraint either. You are stronger than the rest of us, but that’s all, Sir. You aren’t better. You aren’t wiser. You aren’t more just. You’re just stronger. Knocking Omegas across the room with the back of your hand is a piece of cake for you. Why does that give you the authority to tell me who I can or can’t kiss? Who I can or can’t fall in love with? Why should I kneel to you? If you’re no better than the rest of us, why do you deserve my fealty? You don’t own me. If anyone does, it’s Dean, and so far, he’s been the only one to earn it. I’d do anything for him, Castiel. I would die to protect him, and he’s weaker than you are.”

“Michael, your progress has been nothing short of incredible, and I’m extremely proud to count you part of the Pack, but I must caution you from making assumptions before you have all the available information.” Inside, Castiel was at full boil. There was a hatred brewing into a tempest, and it was taking everything Cas had to keep it suppressed. He knew April could feel it, and he didn’t have to look behind him to know she’d tucked into a tight little ball. Michael Quentin Lancet Winchester. Of all the fucking nerve. Who did he think he was? Why did his very existence rattle everything within Cas? Everything. He was just a kid. Twenty-three years old, and with an answer to every question. Everything about him rubbed Castiel the wrong way. But why?

“Enlighten me, then.”

The challenge sparked. Both of their wolves felt it, and the air nearly crackled in intensity. Dean shifted up into a squat like Cas, ready to move. Cas sat down on his butt and crossed his legs like an Omega. Michael quirked his brow. Castiel told him, “You’re not going to provoke a repeat of last time, my friend. That was an intentional release to allow you the opportunity to learn what kind of monster you would be sharing a home with.”

“What’s not a matter of what’s right or what’s just.” Castiel told him patiently. Inside, he was sweating and foaming at the mouth, grappling furiously with a side of himself that refused to allow a change to the paradigm, no matter what that refusal would cost him. “It’s far more basic than that. If we ask more of him than he can cope with, I will lose him. The Alpha inside me is not tame, Michael. He follows my preferences from good will and mutual alignment, not the brute force that we both use to subdue my wolf. He is my ally, not my slave. I cannot pretend that he does not have a breaking point. Asking him to allow a breach to my Mating-bond would cross that breaking point. Beyond that, no matter what I want, I will have no influence over either of them, and I am lost to the same madness that took my father. We must all make sacrifices. Mine is to wrestle with the demons within me daily; not metaphorical demons, Michael, but true and very real monsters. Your sacrifice, apart from finding yourself strapped to a designation that you find restrictive, is that you will not be allowed to pursue a relationship with April, nor she with you. It is a matter of safety. Many, many people depend upon my holding my designations to a certain level of control. It is a small price to pay that we grant them something in return.” In his mind, he was at a stalemate. Neither of them could manage to gain an upper hand, even after using every trick they both knew. They were one
and the same. What the Alpha knew, his Primary side knew too. There would be no tricks. Only force of will was going to determine the outcome. But at Castiel’s explanation, the color tones in his head smoothed out to pacific blues, and the Alpha stepped out of the grappling for a moment, panting. Finally, his nearly insufferable cognitive android had admitted out loud that there was a right and a wrong way to manifest a pack. The Alpha paced in Cas’ head, willing the Omega to bow in defeat.

“You really believe that load of crap?” asked Michael. “Your Alpha won’t tolerate a breach to your Mating-bond? What about what April wants, huh? Look at you, almost twitching with it, hardly holding it in at all. So, if she and I dressed up one evening and went out to the movies together on a date, a real date, maybe necked in the car a little, maybe made out under the front porch light, the whole civilization you and Dean built from scratch with your bare hands falls back into nothing? Really? That’s what the big concern is? That’s a load of bull! This isn’t about safety! It’s about you being a possessive shit, and not wanting to share the way you demand April and I share, and feeling fucking entitled because you’re not Omega! Here, I’ll prove it.” Michael got up and walked around Castiel toward the other two. Cas’ nostrils flared, and his face reddened to match his eyes. But Michael didn’t stop at April, he knelt in front of Dean. Bracing Dean’s legs to support his mate’s position in a squat, Michael turned and winked at Castiel and then turned back and plunged his tongue into Dean’s mouth. Michael could feel the golden color abandon the pupils of his eyes as his wolf took him over with a snarl and one hell of a claiming kiss. Dean went lax immediately, surrendering to his Top and toppling over onto his ass. Michael followed him with a slow crawl up his body between his knees, never breaking the kiss, but pressing Dean onto his back with a growl. Dean’s nails dug into Michael’s back, leaving angry gouge marks right through his shirt. Michael kept a hand at the back of Dean’s head, but he used the other to work open first Dean’s slacks, and then his own jeans.

He heard Joshua’s voice whispering in his ear. “It’s not the Submissive’s choice how deep you wanna go. You’re going to want to surprise him sometimes to keep him on his toes and prevent him from getting lazy. Don’t be predictable.”

How was this for unpredictable?

Michael inadvertently scratched Dean’s thigh in ridding him of his pants, but Dean didn’t seem to notice. He was too distracted having his face plundered and trying to hold on. Michael flung Dean’s slacks carelessly to the side, his underwear still tangled with one of the fabric legs, but he merely shoved his own clothing to mid-thigh before forgetting all about pants. In one motion, Michael reached into his own stores, bringing forward a wealth of sweet, musky smelling slick and coating himself to the prickly-haired root before shoving Dean’s thighs wide in the air and slamming home. Dean’s shout echoed through Michael’s head, both aurally and metaphysically, and Dean followed it up with a feral grunt and a powerful rocking that deepened Michael’s reach.

Michael sent Dean a threat and a warning inside his head as his hand tightened on his hip, across the curve of his ass, and Dean desisted with a whimper of apology. Pulling most of the way out, Michael thrust right back in, deepening his penetration inside Dean’s hole and pressing back into his mouth at the same time. He began to move in rhythm, and his Sub made space for him, held onto him, moved in concert with him, just as Michael preferred.

Just as Michael fucking preferred, not Castiel.

The Alpha froze. Inside, all bonds of internal control burst at once. Already livid, the Alpha went totally feral. It took every ounce of practiced training Castiel had ever strained to master to keep himself planted instead of springing forward and tearing the usurper off his mate with a primeval roar of satisfaction. The Omega deserved to have his head unceremoniously ripped from his body for
daring to touch Dean; for daring to imagine he had a right to touch, to command, to Dominate Dean. Dean was Castiel’s. He belonged wholesale to Castiel and no other, and Michael was NOBODY! Castiel shook in place, watching the Omega-Dominant put a Claim on Dean, and watching Dean submit to it, welcome! The betrayal was unfathomable. Castiel’s wolf was off leash and rabid, spittle flying, eyes apoplectic with rage. Dean belonged to Castiel! They were mates! What was this travesty, and why for fuck’s sake wasn’t someone with power to command his arms and legs doing a damned thing about it?!

Panting, Cas’ body trembled as his eyes focused on the two of them, betrayal tunneling his vision until all he saw was sweaty flesh clutched between Dean’s clawing fingertips. Michael’s shirt had ridden up in his rutting, and Dean held on for all he was worth. It made no sense. Dean was Castiel’s. How was it possible that he was clutching tight to an Omega of all things? As terrible a crime as the Omega usurper committed in daring to take Dean, the only thing holding Castiel in place now was the inability to conceive of the evident clarity of fact that Dean wanted to be taken. Taken by Michael. Everything in front of Castiel swam in a dizzying miasma of ‘can’t be true’. Mates don’t…don’t…mates.

Cas mumbled crazily to himself and reached desperately for his mate through his bond, expecting to find Dean’s lust at the other end, seeking an explanation. But there was quiet, comforting trust. There was…love and faith and want…and…April. Cas’ chest heaved as he fought to make sense. April. Not Dean. Mates don’t stray. They don’t betray their bonds and let another into their sacred circle. And there she remained, still curled tightly into a protective ball, stroking him with comforting thoughts while Michael pummeled himself into Dean’s body.

Michael didn’t last long at all with an audience like this. He was listening carefully, and he could feel more than hear the presence of Castiel’s raging Alpha. So close to the surface and already enraged, Castiel was battling for his life, and April flattened all the way to the floor, her forehead on the ground. Everything came to a head as the fury within the Alpha peaked, and Michael expected at every moment to be snuffed out and spread like a bloody globule of jam across the pristine tile floor. That violence never came to pass, but the threat of it, so close over Michael’s shoulder, was the most arousing sensation he’d ever experienced.

Michael came with an echoing shout.

He lifted up from his kiss – HIS kiss – and took a brutally painful hold of Dean’s hair.

“What Submissive are you, Dean Michael?!” he demanded right in Dean’s face.

“Yours, Michael! Always yours!” Dean answered with no hesitation. His face was bright red, not as red as his lips. His pupils were blown, swamping the green. He panted, trying desperately to catch his breath in case Michael asked him another question or needed to kiss him again.

“Good boy,” Michael purred, lowering his volume. “And does my Submissive want to come?” Michael stayed buried in Dean’s body, but he moved his attention down to Dean’s straining erection, hovering a hand over the throbbing muscle. It pulsed with Dean’s breath.

“Sir!”

“Answer the question, Dean. Do you want to come?”

“I want to please you, sir. It’s…up to you.”

“You are magnificent, my Submissive. Someone told me you were a brat, but that’s not true, is it? You’re a very good boy, and when I dismount, you’ll get dressed, tuck that beautiful cock back
inside where no one else gets to see it, and let my come dribble out of your fucked out hole for as long as I want you to.”

“Yes, Sir,” Dean breathed. His breath was slowing back down, but his pupils stayed wide. Michael could feel the struggle within him. Dean felt wildly out of control, and he wanted a release desperately, but his Dom had called him a good boy and told him he could do this, could go on unsatisfied, could get up and take one breath and then another and live through it in the end. Michael could feel the struggle. Castiel, for all his power, couldn’t.

Voices swam in Castiel’s head. He heard an echo of Dean bluntly telling him, “You wrap your head around who you really are, and then you let me in on it, yeah?” He heard Gabriel say, “You’re just embarrassed. That’s all this is.” Ellen chimed in. “Inside, we’re all just people. You taught me that.” Bobby’s voice reverberated. He heard Benny’s calm Louisiana twang, non-judgmental but firm in his conviction. He heard Sam decry, “Why does she get what she wants, but I have to change?” followed by his own response, stated in a cool superior voice, that such was the fate of a Top. Zachariah. “Your brother is never going to be able to live on his own, Castiel. He’s deficient in a way you and I can’t fathom. You need to watch out for him. Do you hear me, son?” Gabriel again: “Are Omegas full people, or aren’t they?”

April: ”We spend all of our time and energy in figuring out how to live through each day without falling apart at the edges…”

Dean: ”Wrap your head around who you really are…”

”Who you really are…”

”You’re a selfish brute, Castiel! No one matters but you, do they?” Somehow, it always came back to Naomi. In the end, no one’s voice could ever ring as loud as Mother’s.

Michael pulled out and sat up. He wiped his cock off with his hand, and then wiped his hand on Dean’s underwear before disentangling them from Dean’s pants and handing the pair to his mate to put on. Dean nodded and lowered his eyes.

Michael left him to dress, trusting him to avoid any unnecessary touches that might invigorate him. Dean was a model of compliance. Michael didn’t give him another look, but he drowned him through both bonds in a sea of adoration that made Dean’s head swim and his eyes flutter.

Cas, once Michael faced him again, was a trembling, panting mess. He was up on his knees, and the knuckles of his fists were white with clenched rage and determined indecision. Michael sat calmly in front of him, slightly closer than three feet this time, and not bothering to circle back around, trusting completely that Castiel would win the struggle that was far more evident this time around. He would either win it, or how close Michael sat would make no difference. Michael heard Dean sigh behind him, and felt him move closer, once again squatting behind him and resting one hand on the small of Michael’s back. Castiel’s lip twitched several times in succession, his brow furrowed, forming a deep crevice, his eyes flashed brilliantly from scarlet to blue and back again. Michael could feel Dean struggle not to go to him. The two of them sat supremely still. April was a statue on the floor, broken into a million pieces for the moment, the Venus knocked from her pedestal to fracture into shards across cool tiles.

It took much longer to come back to himself this time than it had when Michael first met Cas’ wolf. That had been, he now realized, both the Secondary and the Primary aspects working together. This time, it was two against one as well, but two wanted to tear Michael’s throat out. He watched the blue in Cas’ eyes slowly take over and hold. He watched Cas’ nostrils lose their panicked flaring. He watched the man return from the depths of hell where he’d stashed the beasts, and Michael met him
where he sat.

“You see?” said the Omega softly and without his usual bluster. “You CAN control yourself — your Alpha, and your wolf, and whoever else you have stashed in there smoking you out when things don’t go your way.”

“That was…astoundingly stupid,” said Cas wearily.

“Why? I’m his mate, Sir. They have no business coming between us. Or, wait, do they?” Michael rediscovered his brash challenge, his posturing, but Castiel had nothing left inside with which to stand against him. The voices were fading in his head, leaving behind an impression, a resolve, and a weariness he’d never known before.

Cas looked to the ceiling and then let his eyes fall closed before he answered. “As I said, it’s not a question of what’s right. It doesn’t matter to either one of them that you have full Mated rights to be Dean’s partner in any way you two wish. It doesn’t matter. They don’t think like that. Once they’re riled, they don’t think at all.”

“But you do,” Dean spoke for the first time. Michael could tell Dean’s head was down. He could feel hot breath on his back. Dean still felt Sub to Michael, but he sounded otherwise. “You can still think, and you’re always going to have the upper hand. Maybe it’s not fair to ask it of you, but we can’t tell Michael and April no if there’s any way you can hold them back.”

“They’ll get used to it, Alpha,” April added carefully, lifting her head. “It wouldn’t always be like that. And Sir, I’m not ready to test that yet anyway. I told you, Michael and I talked about it, but we decided the time wasn’t right. If it’s there, it’ll grow on its own over time. In the meantime, we have a Pack to nurture.”

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about you, young lady,” said Cas, battling the weariness and finding his Dom voice, the one April needed to hear. “It wasn’t my idea to set up an inquisition to negotiate for custody of you in the first place. You still have to answer for your part in all this. Let me get this straight,” he breathed, shifting again to sit back on his tailbone like an exhausted runner at the end of a marathon. He wrapped his forearms over his shins with his knees spread wide. “You love him,” he posed to Michael and Michael shrugged. “And you love him?” April lowered her eyes again. “But neither of you found yourself at this crossroads intentionally except that you sort of did. Is that right? And I’m expected to fight the two strongest designations ever to exist on a regular basis just to win you the right safely to go on a date now and then, when it may not even be something you want to pursue? Do I look stupid to you people?”

Michael’s laugh exploded, and Dean chuckled, saying, “I think the kid is right, Alpha. It won’t always be like that. They’ll settle. I know you and yours hated everything about me Mating when we Triggered, man, but you pulled it together, and you helped us get through it. You could’ve stuffed me back in the car and drove off, but you didn’t, and your Secondary rallied and took Michael in. And, okay, maybe he’s not totally settled on the idea, if the sweat line along your collar tells us anything, but Cas, it settled down once and accepted what you demanded of it. It’ll get there again. YOU set the rules, C.J., not them. Plus, it’s not always going to be an intentional provocation. I mean, this puts us back at square one with the foursome, but that’s okay by me. And they keep saying there’s not a thing going between them anyway. Why worry about it being a thing when it’s not a thing?”

“It’s not a thing YET,” Cas reminded them all. All of the fury had flowed out of him with the fading of his red eyes. He just felt tired. “Don’t forget, that was the Alpha’s response to sharing you, Dean. We haven’t seen it react to watching another man touch April yet.”
“Yeah, we have. I mean, okay, it was her mouth on me, but I didn’t hear a single growl that morning.” Michael was staring at the floor, but he braved saying the words. “And no one snapped at me when she was in Heat.”

“I grow tired of repeating myself,” said Cas, sounding every bit as tired as he claimed to be. “That was a different circumstance. Omega bonding feels very different in my psyche than knowing that the two of you are…forming a deeper connection.”

“C.J., do you really think that wasn’t the Alpha at full power just now? You think it was holding something in reserve that it’s going to bring out to protect April’s virtue, something it didn’t care to use to protect mine?”

Cas looked up and met Dean’s eye over Michael’s shoulder. There was a needful question in Dean’s eye. ‘Do you love her that much more than you do me?’ Castiel’s face grew soft. “No. I think that was everything it had. It was an interesting experience. I haven’t had to fight them both together that fiercely since the morning after my father died. But it still doesn’t fully settle the question. I don’t see the Alpha accepting a challenge to its Mating-Claim. What you two just put me through – and put April through, by the way – may have been a full-force assault and an attempted mutiny, but it was also an argument I have weight to win. I will eventually settle once more in terms of your Mating-bonds, but I can’t know that I will – that my Secondary and Tertiary designations – will settle where my own mate is concerned.”

“What argument is that, Castiel?” asked Michael. Damn, the kid never let up, did he?

Cas took a deep breath and looked at Dean instead of Michael. He licked his lips. “You are not my mate. Calling them off the attack in deference to your mate’s Claim is going to be easier than holding them back in defense of their own. I’ve been suppressing it since you Mated. I never allowed myself to look it in the face before today. I didn’t realize it had grown into such an issue for my Alpha. I mean, I knew the wolf was struggling to accept you taking the Claim of another, but the Alpha? I didn’t know.”

Dean stared back at him. There was no easy way to talk about it, not with both of their mates present. “It sees me as your mate? Me and April both? Michael’s got no rights to me, according to two-fucking-thirds of your mind, and you never said a damned word.”

There was shame in Castiel’s slow nod, and he looked away frowning.

“Why is it only coming up now?” Dean asked. “We’ve been Mated for over three months. I knocked him up, Cas. Your Alpha has been right there the whole time. Why right now? I sat there in front of you and confessed everything to you – how hurt I was that you waited for your mate’s nod before you came after me, how much my soul constantly longed to Mate you – you fucking *pitted* me, man! Do you have any idea how that felt? You and your sorry, patronizing blue eyes…”

“Dean, God! It’s not like that at all! I had no idea. I told you, I suppressed it. Maybe that was wrong, but there’s no way for me to bring every urge the Alpha has up into the light and examine it. I’d go crazy. I have no choice but to drown it in a barrage of consistent messages and coax it into accompanying me where we need to go. You can’t know what this is like! I fight these battles every fucking day, and it never gets easier, and I get knocked on my ass by surprise attacks all the time! I never patronized you! Holy fuck, Dean, I *worship* you! I can win against them both now if I put my mind to it because I know it’s coming. I can change the barrage of messages to remind them both that Michael has a rightful, a *rightful*, Claim, and that you’re not my mate. I’m so sorry…” Cas sobbed involuntarily. April crawled around Michael and between his knees to curl into him. “I’m so sorry I put you through that.” He met Michael’s cold, hurt eyes, and he didn’t flinch.

Cas swallowed and clutched April’s shoulder. “I forget the word,” he started awkwardly. “My head is spinning. When you feel an uncomfortable emotion that you don’t want to admit is yours, so you…imagine that someone else feels it instead?”

“My mind went blank on me for a moment.” One by one, they both looked up at him. “Michael wasn’t the poison to the Pack, and I was very wrong to attack him as I did. The fault is mine. I know what I’ve got within me, but I arrogantly believed I had everything under control. We brought mates home, Dean. You and I, we built a Pack with them. It’s strong and resilient in spite of all that I’ve done to undermine it.”

“Save the dramatics, Alpha,” Michael protested weakly.

“It wasn’t you who needed to adjust to sharing your mate, Michael. I was a fool to think my Second and Third aspects were fully in tune with things the way they are. I was so focused on watching you, on preparing to curb your rebellions, that I was totally unprepared for my own. Where you confronted the distasteful subject head-on…”

“…As you say, you were allowed very little leeway. And you assimilated beautifully. I didn’t. I’ve harbored and suppressed gross resentments against you since you arrived. I recognize it now, and for that, I apologize.”

“Well, I mean,” Michael stumbled. “I can’t exactly blame you. Exactly…”

“I should not have sideswiped you with it in the way that I did. I accused you of bearing in upon the Claim I hold with my mate more from a resentment that I was powerless to stop you from taking Dean, than from any real fear that you could take April. That seems quite apparent based upon what I felt dripping from my Alpha’s canines just now.”

“Wait,” said Michael, sitting up hopefully. “Are you saying you don’t mind if April and I test the waters…?”

“No, not exactly. I’m saying I should not have assumed you had dark intentions and that everything that occurred between you was born of malevolence. I was no more immune to the internal struggle of trying to fit a four way polyamorous setup into my personal constructs than any of you were, and I was arrogant to believe that I was.”

Dean sighed and sat up to match his mate, but he left his leg thrown over Michael’s lap. “You’re talking gibberish again, Cas.”

Castiel worked his jaw. “What I’m saying, Dean, is that I don’t really want anyone but me to touch you. Not ever! Now, I get that that’s not something I have any right to expect. Give me some time. I’ll work through it. And I’m sorry that I turned that resentment into something that I threw at Michael. I will come to accept it all fully with time, even my wolf. What remains to be seen is if my lower designations can come to accept that there may come a time when they would be expected to share April as well. We are not apes. Omegas ARE fully human, and they deserve to expect all the rights to which betas and alphas are entitled. But, there is a fundamental difference in the structure of
those rights between Lupins and Primates. Our designations will not be denied, and we failed miserably when we tried to deny them. My Alpha insists that April is mine more deeply than I am hers. I don’t have an answer yet that will satisfy us both where that statement is concerned. I want it not to be true, but I cannot deny that I also want no one, especially not Michael, to win a place in her heart. That is present in all three of my designations. I am a singularly possessive person, Michael. That makes me a hypocrite. And I don’t really know what to do with that. I cannot see my Alpha ever accepting a challenge to his claim. The rest of me may come around eventually, given time and a certain degree of cooperation on both of your parts. Please, God, please don’t try what you just did again with April.”

“But if it can, if it can grow to accept it, like it did to my presence in the Pack, like it will to my Claim over Dean,” Michael began, wording the question carefully. “Are you still angry that we kissed without asking you?” He looked up carefully. His Dominant was gone, and his eyes were a brilliant gold.

“Oh, yes,” Cas answered. “Most of the conundrums we have as a Pack would never become so critical if we trusted each other enough to talk about it before they grow enormous.”

Dean snorted. “That’s easy to say now. Where was all that trust when you went haywire on my mate?”

Michael put a palm up to break Dean out of his aggrieved griping. “No, but, what I’m asking... Cas, Dean’s okay with the idea. He’s already mostly resigned to it even if he didn’t want it to happen this way…”

“I’m not thrilled, Michael,” Cas told him flatly. “But I guess it takes a serial clubbing upside my head for it to sink through my thick skull. What I want isn’t particularly relevant. I’m not going to have any luck directing anyone’s emotions. I can’t even control my own. All I can do is shift them around inside me and hope I don’t wind up with an ulcer by the time I’m forty.”

“You’re tilting at windmills, C.J.” Dean told him. “It’s all in your head. We can’t stop anyone from loving anyone. You know that. You tried as hard as I did to kill it between us, and it just wouldn’t die.”

“I never tried to kill it, Dean. All I ever did was encourage what I felt, encourage it to grow stronger. I ate up everything you offered me and I dove in headfirst. I gave in to every impulse to need you, want you, adore you, from day one, and I never regretted a single decision.”

“Jesus, man, the things that come outta your mouth. God! Look, the point is, and I love you too by the way, it doesn’t matter in the end whether you sign off on it or not. If it’s gonna happen, it’s gonna happen. And would it really be that bad? You and me are getting married in a few weeks. That is, unless you pull another stunt like that and I have to throw you over my shoulder and toss you in the pool to cool you off…”

Cas chuckled at the image. The scent of imminent danger was lifting fast, and with it, the tension. It left behind a surreal shared foxhole perspective. Light and time seemed oddly distorted. They’d all just been through something epic together, and it had cemented them into something new, something impenetrable.

Dean paused to take in the weird ambience and think for a minute, then he resumed. “Once we’re married, and I’m yours close to the way your Alpha obviously wants me, you’ve got a lock on everything. Anything that happens between our mates only seals it all in tighter. Go sit in that cave of yours with yourself and mull it over. Get to know your mate. Knock some pups into her. You wouldn’t believe how that’s going to chill you out. You’d think it would make things worse, but it
doesn’t. My alpha looks at this man right here, watches him pudge out, scents the rainy day smell of offspring, and thinks, ‘That’s MINE!’ The rest is all just laundry. I don’t want him to train as a contractor right off the bat, but, Cas, if that’s what he wanted to do, I can handle it. He’s mine. Nothing’s gonna change that. You need to get over it. You’re not going to lose your mate, and you’re not going to drop the baton. She’s good. She’s balanced. You know what you’re doing. You know what you need to do. Get out of the weeds, Alpha.”

Castiel raised his brows and then narrowed his eyes at Dean. “You wanted them together,” he said after a while. Dean stiffened and averted his gaze, and Cas nodded sadly to himself. “Hmm. All right.” He hunkered over his knees in thought, his face buried in April’s hair. Cas thought through their motivations starting from the beginning. Michael had gone at it to take a swipe at the status quo and illuminate the inherent injustice, to send Castiel spastic with impotent rage. April had wanted to wrap herself up in Pack coverage like a burrito. And Dean. Dean, as well. More than Michael even, Dean had been quietly…what? Stoking embers into flames? Had Dean orchestrated leaving both Omegas home alone last week to give them an opportunity to feel it all out? Cas raised his head and met Dean’s eye again.

“Are you through now?” he asked wearily. “You get what you wanted?”

“It’s really not like that, Sir.”

“Don’t ‘Sir’ me, Winchester. I’m in no mood.”

Dean fiddled with a stray fiber on the floor beside his hip, his eyes lowered and a frown marred the lines of his face. “I could smell it coming, Cas. I knew shortly after Michael and I cycled last. Maybe it was heightened senses following a Rut. I don’t know. I could see it all laid out like a roadmap, and I knew where they would wind up. There’s no stopping this, C.J. It’s coming whether you want it to or not. I knew you and all three of your designations would have kittens over it though, and I never figured out how to bring it up. And the thing is, once you get over the shock, assuming they don’t go all high school and break up in flames, a connection between them really does make us all stronger. April had the right of it from the start.” Dean glanced at her where she huddled between Castiel’s knees, and she flicked her blue eyes up into his, hope-filled. “Again,” he said with finality.

“He didn’t kiss me, Alpha. I kissed him. It was a moment of weakness, and it won’t happen again,” April interjected abruptly, on the tail end of Dean’s confession.

“Why don’t I believe it’s never going to happen again?” Cas asked her, burying his face in her hair again.

“I swear it won’t again without your permission, Sir.”

Cas sat up and looked at her steadily.

“Why does she get to say ‘Sir’, and I don’t?” asked Dean with a huff.

And just like that, with the preposterous familiarity of Dean’s brat, the world dissolved around Castiel and his Pack. It took him a moment to take hold of the spinning, whirling sights before him, to grasp what he was feeling, to let the immense weight he’d been carrying fall away as if it had never been and see the simplest and most welcome sight form in its place. All of the expectation and the certitude was gone. In his arms, right beneath his nose where she belonged was his mate, smelling deliciously fertile. Tangled in a messy jumble of limbs not two feet in front of him were his beloved and his beloved’s pregnant True-mate, and Castiel felt right-footed in a brand new way. They were his, all of them. Bonded to him by chemistry and purpose, by love and intent, these were HIS people, and all of the commotion was just so much noise. Cas shook his head slowly. What on
earth did he have to be upset about? His Alpha’s infantile tantrums over who *within his Pack* cared for whom? Cas chuckled in dismay. It all seemed ludicrous from this side. When had he turned into his father? When had his mother gained such a foothold in his head? When had he stopped trusting Dean to keep their family together?

“April, please sit up,” Cas requested. “The danger is past, and your crouching is unnecessary. You know you were never in danger in the first place.”

April straightened between his knees. She could read him well, and she shifted tone to match his relief. “But I like this robe, Sir. I didn’t want the front panel spattered with blood if you went for Michael’s jugular. And, you know, two men going at it like that is gross. The smell alone. All that masculine grunting. I didn’t want to have to watch that.”

Dean laughed openly and tossed a coaster from the table nearby at her head. She ducked and stuck her tongue out at him.

No one moved for quite a while. Then Dean shifted his leg and pulled Michael backward to lean into his alpha’s chest.

“Cas, I have another question,” said Michael.

Castiel had no trouble reading the worry and the hurt on his face. “Michael Quentin, I don’t know what we would ever do without you. I am so very sorry. I love you so much, and I was wrong to lash out at you the way I did. You were right. I never should have acted on my impulse without speaking to you first. I made a dreadful mistake, and I swear I won’t ever do that again. You’re not poison, my boy, you’re cherished. Please forgive me.”

Michael blushed and bit his lip. He nodded and turned his head into Dean’s chest. “And we promise never to provoke an Alpha response like that intentionally again, don’t we Michael?” Dean had his head canted downward to draw Michael out, but the Omega just nodded again and buried himself deeper.

“That would be greatly appreciated,” Cas stated. He shoved himself to his feet and then pulled April up. “We need to grab a quick bite and then get back to it. Michael, please join us for lunch, then head back to class. Dean, for the love of Hades, go change your underwear. You can’t go around all day smelling freshly fucked. April, I will adore you forever if you’ll stick to me like glue for the rest of the day and help me settle.”

“As you wish,” she said with a docile breathy voice, and then gloated at Dean. He made a face back at her.

“Dean, knock it off, and don’t you dare change clothes,” Michael said, looking over his shoulder.


“You’re a Sub, Dean. You do what your Dominant instructs.” Cas didn’t try to hide the smirk as he led the way to the door into his office.

“Oh, man,” whined Dean, looking back and forth between them.

“And Dean, I have a new rule for you,” Cas said, turning at the door. “I expect you to add a daily enema to your morning routine from now on. I cannot speak for Michael, but if impromptu sex is likely to be a thing from now on, and I surmise that it is, I would appreciate knowing that you are well prepared.”
Cas and April disappeared through the door, and Dean gaped. “I agree,” Michael added. “I’ve already had lunch, so I’ll leave you to catch up with the other two. Kiss me, alpha.” Michael turned on his butt and stretched his face toward Dean’s.

“Michael,” whispered Dean as they broke apart again. “I need to get cleaned up and change. I’m gonna chafe. Please, Sir?”

Michael smiled sweetly. “Of course, Submissive. All you had to do was ask.”

“Thanks,” Dean whispered, grateful that Michael hadn’t pushed the confrontation and had provided him a win-win instead. It was little struggles like that that Dean had fully expected from the very start. They had never materialized. Michael and Cas danced around each other, sometimes pretending blatantly that the other wasn’t there, but they always left Dean with no split loyalties. He’d never really had to choose whom to obey before. “That’s not going to become a thing, is it? You and him putting me into a tug-of-war? I would really rather you didn’t.”

Michael laughed and pulled him to his feet. “Nah. We’re just testing out our new spaces. We wouldn’t do that to you. We both care about you, and neither of us is that much of a prick. I mean, I kinda am, but I promise you I’ll be good. I feel like we dodged a bullet here today.”

“Dude, you loaded the pistol, aimed it at your own head, and pulled the trigger yourself,” Dean told him. “How you escaped from that in one piece, I’ll never know.”

“It was exciting though, wasn’t it?” Michael enthused, following Dean into the hallway and across to his own suite.

“You’re crazy,” Dean said, meaning it sincerely. “I thought you were going back to class.”

“Yeah, in a minute. You don’t mind if I help clean you up, do you? I could use a rinse myself. Alpha has a point about the enema thing. Going at it with no prelim kinda stinks.”

“Great. Thanks, man. That makes me feel…so very desirable.” He led the way into his tiny bathroom and started the shower flowing.

“It is what it is, Dean. Alphas aren’t built like Omegas. It’s not crazy to make allowances for the difference. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Don’t be stupid. You know I’m fine. Next, you’re both going to expect me to go around plugged all the time, so I won’t need any prep at all no matter which one of you wants to take a dip.”

“Don’t be like that,” Michael coaxed. He and Dean were naked and already stepping into the shower. “I don’t need you prepped. I just need you clean. And obedient.” He smacked Dean’s ass, eliciting a sharp hiss.

“I am, Michael. I am obedient for you. Aren’t I?”

“Yes, love.” Michael kissed Dean’s nose before guiding his head beneath the spray. “You’re perfect for me.” It was a quick rinse off rather than a full soapy shower, and it took no time at all. Michael barely blotted his skin dry before pulling up to sit naked on the bathroom counter while he watched Dean dress.

Dean felt Michael shift back to Omega and go still in his head. He looked up. “Something on your mind?” he asked his Omega mate.

Michael shrugged. “It’s been such a whirlwind since we Mated. We never go out. We rarely do
anything, just you and me, except train and scene. Talking about taking Pete out to the movies got me thinking. We never do that either. What say, we go out on a date, Dean? You and me.”

Dean smiled, buttoned his slacks, and leaned in for a soft kiss. “I would love that. The whirlwind isn’t letting up anytime soon though. I’ve got Charlotte at the weekend, and that stupid car magazine photoshoot tomorrow night. I’m already way behind on my book. I was supposed to have the outline finished and submitted to the editor for review by now, and all I’ve managed is to organize my notes and set a rough idea of the flow.”

“Can I watch the photoshoot?”

“You bet! I’m going to feel like an idiot anyway. Maybe with you there, I can focus on you and forget the cameras.”

“Thought you loved the cameras.”

“Not like this, man. These pictures, they’re going to strip me mostly naked, oil me up, bend me over the engine, and try to make it look like I’m not mortified to stand like that in front of a cameraman I don’t know. It’s gonna be humiliating.” Dean threaded his belt into the loops of his pants and buckled it.

“So, do it like you do when you’re on stage or like when you did contract work. Play into it. What’s the difference?”

“I don’t know. It’s just different. This car mag, *Classic Cars*? No one buys it but gearheads. Except this one’s going to be marketed wider, and that means they’re hoping that splashing my ass on the cover will put it into the hands of people with other things on their minds. It’s going to make me a laughing stock among people who dig cars, and that makes me feel dirty, Michael. I don’t wanna be some teenaged girl’s spank bank material. I wanna talk about the car! It makes a joke of what I care about. There’s more to me than an ass they can put on display.”

“So, tell them to fuck themselves, and do the interview with no photos. Just talk.”

“I already promised.”

“Mm-hm. Except you don’t want to do it.”

Dean leveled Michael with a look that reminded him that Dean wasn’t as in charge of things as most alphas and that, at heart, he wanted it that way.

“You make no sense to me, Dean Winchester.”

“We need to go. Get dressed, Michael.”

“Take me to Charlotte, Dean. Please?”

Dean froze by the doorway and thumped his head on the wall. “We’ve been over this…”

“Please don’t leave me again. Not yet. I’ll stay up in the room if you want. I’ll be so good. Dean… alpha…please. I’m begging you. I’ll do anything you say.”

“What? Why? Why would you want to go sit for four days in a hotel room? We work really long hours, Michael. You would barely see me. April’s not coming to this one either. If this is one of your manipulation strategies, it sucks.”
“No, that’s just it, Dean. Pete and I, we put our heads together, trying to think up a way to con you into saying yes. She wants to be a part of the movement just as much as I do. You know I want in, right? But this is different. I got to thinking about how to get you to say yes, and I realized it wasn’t about being there to help the cause. Not this time. Dean, please. I need you. I needed you when you left for Dayton, but you still left, and you didn’t take me. That hurt more than I can tell you. You can even see it for yourself. Go digging and see. I’m for real here. Baby, please don’t fly off and leave me again. With everything that’s happened, I can’t face a bed without you in it. That’s not a con. It’s straight, raw truth. I need my alpha.” Michael rested his forehead against Dean’s chest when Dean moved in close enough, and Dean put his hands on either side of Michael’s damp temples, easing them softly through Michael’s dark hair as a wet spot formed on Dean’s shirt. “I’m not as strong as I look. I know it scares you, but it’s not about pushing an agenda. I just need to be where you are. I can take some of my work with me. I could work on organizing your notes into an outline. Give me something to do. Please.”

Dean lifted Michael’s chin and kissed him gently on the lips. “You can come. You’re not to do anything I don’t tell you to do. You stay wherever I put you. Your wolf stays kenneled and out of sight the entire time. If you defy me in even the slightest way, you’re staying home for the foreseeable future, even when we have business in Dayton. You got me, Omega?”

“Yes, Sir!” Michael beamed. Dean searched his emotions, and found no sign of subterfuge. Looking into his own, he realized that half a week away from Michael wasn’t something he could stomach either.

“And Michael, I know today was hard. But you did good, man. I didn’t think anyone could bust him through the way you did. That was ballsy as hell. Promise me you’ll never pull a stunt like that again. You could’ve been killed. Do you have any idea how close he was?”

“Nonsense,” said Michael. “If he’d wanted me dead, I would be dead. He deserved it anyway.”

“Yeah, keep talking like that. He’s about over his grace period where he’ll take a cheeky attitude from an Omega and not bust your ass for it.”

Michael grinned as he slid off the counter. “Jesus, that was hot though. We gotta do a roleplay scene, Dean. I want to try that again – putting a Claim on an alpha’s property while he watches and can’t do shit about it. Maybe not for real like that. Maybe not with Castiel. I’d like to keep both of my testicles, thank you very much, but, like a contract scene or something. Or we could do it with just you and me, I think. We could pretend I stole you from an Alpha, and he was hunting us, bearing down on us, I had you under me…” Michael forgot about his clothing as he closed in on Dean, and his body responded to the fantasy.

“Get a grip, Michael. Not today, man. Not again. Once was enough for me, and the real thing is going to last me for years. Get dressed or I’ll make you walk back to class starkers, and I’ll make you sashay the whole way there.”

“I don’t sashay, Dean.” Michael’s eyes cooled. He stepped away and searched the floor for his clothes. Dean tossed a clean pair of underwear at his head.

“Right. All those musicals. I don’t believe you never once swiveled those perfect plump hips into one of the songs when you were showing off.”

“Stop calling me fat! I’m pregnant, all right!” The Omega stepped into the boxer briefs and then dressed quickly. Sucking his gut in tight to button his jeans didn’t help his case, or, well, it did. Michael shot a pained look at Dean, and the alpha smiled in sympathy.
“We’ll go out and get you some new pants at lunch tomorrow. You can get however big that pup needs you to get, sweet Omega. You’re the hottest man I’ve ever seen, and with a puppy inside you, you’re smoking.”

“I feel like a boat, alpha, and it’s only going to get worse.”

“You’re perfect,” Dean assured him, fitting his shirt over his head and scruffing his hair into chaos.

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Sam couldn’t believe the text when it pinged in on his phone after they landed, but he hustled Benny straight through the airport and into a waiting cab, leaving their luggage to be collected by Castiel’s security staff. Michael was waiting impatiently for the two of them on the courthouse steps, ready to guide them straight to the JP’s office on the third floor. They caught sight of Andrea at the corner by the balustrade, and she shouted on ahead of her, “They’re here! We’re ready!”

Sam, Benny, Michael, and Andrea slipped right past the bored receptionist in what had to be the oldest public functionary office in the state of Kansas, and into a large, sunlit space of golden oak bookshelves and green shades. It was a large room, but they filled it beyond capacity. Benny caught Castiel’s eye with a sunny grin as he rested his arm across Andrea’s shoulder, back home at last, and happy as a clam. Gabriel stood with Kali, facing the Justice, a stodgy old man with a handlebar mustache and a worn look about him. He didn’t seem solemn though, not today anyway. Dean smirked at Sam and then nodded to the Justice to begin. Try as he might, Dean couldn’t keep his thoughts on the words tumbling out of the old man’s mouth. His eyes found Castiel’s across the room, and he never even thought of tearing them away. He felt and smelled Michael lean over his back and drape languid arms easily across his chest, and Dean’s hands took hold of Michael’s forearms. The scent of Pack surrounded them, subsuming the smell of a busy county Justice’s office and a dusty old filing system. Everyone was here, and as Gabriel promised his life to Kali, and she hers to him, there was no mention of Omegas or betas, Dominants or Subs. There were simply two people and their mutual ‘YES’! It was such a resounding YES that even the Justice wore a full grin by the ending pronouncement, and the cheer that rose around the couple’s first married kiss knocked a sheaf of papers off his desk and startled J.T. into wailing.

A pop.
A rush of Champagne over the lip of the bottle, another wild cheer, and a quick passing of paper cups until everyone held a white cup aloft. Castiel decidedly didn’t tear up as he toasted his brother with dignity and a little humor. That Kali had no attendants of her own was a fact obliterated in the face of her overwhelming welcome into the Pack. Jess stood for her, toasted her, hugged her first, and then refilled her cup. Michael scowled into his cup. No one had thought to grab a bottle of unleaded for those who were expecting, so they both had the merest sips of the good stuff. As if a full two ounces would’ve hurt anything. Dean felt his displeasure and winked at him. Michael managed a real smile in the face of Dean’s adorable contentment, and he caught Benny passing his nearly empty cup to his mate to finish off. Pack scent covered everything. It felt very right to Michael, and he poked at Dean through his bond. They were echoing. He could feel it. But he liked it, and he let the feeling build on itself until it crested in a wave of euphoria like an emotional orgasm, and he outright giggled. Hank sniffled in his arms and began to fuss. Michael looked down. When had he acquired a pup?

Whatever. It was all Pack. And it felt good. So fucking good.
Michael felt eyes on him, and he looked up. The room was beginning to clear as the Justice reminded the crowd that he still had a job to do, and it wasn’t quite quitting time yet. April stood by the door, holding it open and watching Michael with a careful look and an empty paper cup. He cocked his head playfully, and she grinned in spite of herself before falling in beside her mate and passing into the anteroom.


“Yessir,” a chastened Michael slurred with a sheepish smile. Dean rolled his eyes, wrapped an arm around Michael’s shoulders and pulled him along, pup and all.

Chapter End Notes

I stressed so much over this chapter. Personally, I'm going on record as saying I really loved Michael’s pigheaded stubborn pushiness in this confrontation. But I'm dying to hear how this mess struck y'all. Put me out of my misery.

Love you. Packlife rules.
Chapter 95

Chapter Summary

Cas hashes it all out with April, or vice versa rather. And the pack celebrates Gabriel's wedding.

Chapter Notes

It has been too long a break for me. I don't handle stress well when I can't find time to write. And it's been a shitty month what with hurricanes on the coast, typhoons in Asia, and bullshit in the U.S. Senate. Hang tight, Pack. Stick together and read some fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 95 – Tuesday, August 15, 2017

NOW:

Castiel flung his attaché case and his trench coat on the kitchen table. His pores had begun to ooze aggression and frustration again, and the case toppled over onto the floor. He loosened his tie, stalked through to the parlor, and on into the grand foyer without ever slowing. April followed him at a more reserved pace. Gabriel’s impromptu wedding ceremony stood as an island of joy in the middle of an otherwise tumultuous day, and her mate was still in full pendulum swing.
The two of them had passed the afternoon in close communion emotionally, but they’d both been tamping down their impulses to finish a conversation that had only just begun behind Castiel’s office door yesterday morning, and Cas’ mood soured with the repression.

Michael and Dean drove off after the nuptials to see about throwing a dinner party together. They wanted to take over whatever local restaurant might have space for them and were already in the thick of negotiating reservations for a full blowout with karaoke, a dance floor, and an open bar on no notice. Gabriel had slipped back to the Facility with Kali and locked Castiel’s suite door behind them for the rest of the afternoon. Cas had handed Gabe his car keys outside the courthouse with a conflicted expression on his face before turning toward home and holding his hand out to his mate.

As requested, April stayed close to him, keeping a soothing touch on his emotions from the inside. What those emotions had roiled into on their slow walk home was becoming something that wouldn’t be put off any longer. He didn’t speak to her, but his hand clutched hers, and his jaw worked as his pace shifted from a meandering shuffle, to a determined full stride, and then back again as his mind swirled. Like a well trained Ozzie, April waited for him to break the silence in docile submission. They had danced around each other long enough, and they had nowhere left to turn for distractions.

The foyer was empty when April’s slow gait took her through the parlor, but she knew where he was. She followed him down the wide hallway along the rear wall that led to her Conservatory, and she felt a little touch of gratitude that he felt enough grace to allow her to face his wrath in a space of her own.

Because Castiel was angry, and there was no way out of the coming conversation.

April stepped into the grandiose space, full of light and elegance, with a heavy heart. She wasn’t afraid, but the aching throb of pain at the feel of his anger behind her sternum was a wall that would hurt terribly to climb, and it was time to stop deflecting and climb it. She stopped just inside the doorway and studied his back – his broad shoulders and the triangular shape of his torso, his starched white shirt with its sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He had stopped near her piano, elbows slightly askew with his thumbs catching in his pockets, looking out the tall windows at the lowering light over the duckpond, and the bond trembled.

She waited.

“I’m going to ask you again, April, and I want a truthful answer.” He spoke in a carefully constrained voice, neither Secondary nor Tertiary, but very human and very clipped. “What. Do you want. From me?”

He turned around and beseeched her with the weight of his eyes.

She met him without flinching. It would be dinnertime soon. She was free to speak her mind without constraints. Did silly rules like that matter anymore? Had all the constructs they’d placed to keep everything stable turned to rubble? April didn’t know the rules anymore.

“Nothing’s changed for me, Castiel,” she told him carefully. “Maybe I don’t know how to put it into words in a way you understand, but I’ve told you what I want, and it hasn’t changed.”

“Then say it again. I think we can assume I missed a few points if the last two days are anything to go by. Where does Michael fit in with what you told me? Where does kissing another man fit in? Where does running a long term manipulation scheme fit in? Where does pretending to trust me while hiding everything you are from me fit in?”
The ache in April’s body throbbed with his accusations. His anger wasn’t a spiky jab at her gut. It was a round, dull ache, based as it was in hurt and betrayal, and she lowered her eyes. “Your expectations are impossible, Cas. They’re too high and too low at the same time. You want me to be utterly moldable to your desires, not a person of my own, and at the same time, you want me to be years more mature than I am. I can’t be who you want me to be. I’m not that girl. I tried. But I’m not.”

“I never asked you to be someone you’re not!” he asserted. “All I ever asked was for you to be honest with me!”

“I couldn’t take that risk, Alpha!” she blurted. “You want to know what I want, but you couldn’t have accepted it, not at first! You’re no more truthful with me than I was with you, and I could see it all laid out inside you! You’re terrified of losing me, and your fears could be totally valid. I don’t know! You know so much more about the risks than I do. If you’ve done a lifetime of research on Omegas, and one look into my mind has you that scared, what was I supposed to think? And you’re no saint, Alpha. You’re dark and brutally cold down in your depths. How could I open up to you when everything I was looking at told me that one wrong move would get me chained to the basement wall for good?”

“I have never so much as considered such a thing! That’s fucking baseless!” His fury spilled over, but he kept his distance from her, and he watched her for signs he was frightening her. Neither of them had any idea how to get through this without breaking out their standard patterns. Standard patterns wouldn’t help with this.

But she didn’t falter. “It’s not baseless! You forget that I could see the truth from the beginning. I know what you wanted me to see and to feel from you, but your mask never worked, and pretending you’re a gentlemanly protector-droid is a farce. You want the real me? You first, Castiel! Who are you?”

He glared at her, but he had to scramble for a defense. “That’s not fair, and you know it,” he told her at a lower volume. “I have no control over the designations I was born with, but I had to attempt to protect you from the burden of dwelling on them, of living with them the way I must. I have a right and a responsibility to determine for myself how I present my actions to the world, and I have a right to be judged by those actions, not by the impulses I choose to repress. We are what we DO, April, not what we feel. I choose to be better than my base impulses, and I would never suppress your humanity for the sake of my own comfort. I can’t fix that you felt that from me, but it never would have been necessary to make assumptions about what it meant if you had told me what was scaring you in the first place!”

“You should have told me what you were wrestling with,” she stated firmly. “Whether you knew I could see it or not, I had a right to know the depth of what’s inside my own mate, and I’m the rookie here. How was I supposed to know how to digest what your Alpha has inside him? I’m supposed to go to the monster I can see for help against himself? You have no clue what it feels like to be an Omega, what it feels like to be tied to you, how terrifying the world is when all of your defenses are held by another person only to find that person is... You have no idea, Alpha. I’m not sorry it happened this way. At least now, now that everything’s in the open, we have a chance to start again and no real harm is done. I owe you for the deceit, but I don’t regret protecting myself, and I don’t regret stepping up to build something that brings all of us so much comfort and stability. We have a good thing here, and I’m proud I had a hand in it. Punish me for that if you must, but I’m never going to be sorry.”

Castiel crossed his arms imperiously. She was trying to prod him into a quick and easy end to the kerfuffle, but he wasn’t about to fall for it this time. She made good points though. He’d never
looked at it from that perspective. “You trusted Dean enough to talk it all through with him, but you didn’t trust me.” And in that moment, Cas was a man, not an Alpha, and he was brokenly grieving the simple hurtful choice, by an age-old type of betrayal that cut him to his core. She’d turned to another man when he needed her to turn to him.

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“Dean doesn’t hold my leash, sir. He was safer. I needed to figure out the likelihood of you ever being capable of seeing me as a person, and I thought he might be a good alternate. He’s an alpha, like you, and both of you have similar outlooks on Omega rights. I was feeling you out through him, but only because it was safer that way.” April was perplexed at how easy she found staying Primary. For the first time in his presence, she wasn’t pestered by a constant tapping at her mind by her Omega or her wolf, and she didn’t need to hold onto fury or frustration to keep her brain online. “I really am sorry that you are hurt. God, Cas, I never wanted to hurt you, but you’re not listening! I was terrified, and I did all of it to try and feel safe! Doesn’t that mean anything?”

“And Michael?” he asked, turning to face the window again. He shoved his hands into his pockets. “April, I want the whole truth.”

She sighed and slipped further into the room, sitting on her piano bench with her knees to the side, facing him even though he couldn’t see her. “I messed up with Michael, Cas. What happened there got out of control. I didn’t intend it to go like that.”

He turned and looked down at her. “Messed up how?”

April stroked the Mating-bond with an apologetic caress, and she skimmed along her mate’s emotions in his head, assessing. He would feel her touch, and she sighed a relieved breath when he pulled the corners back on his feelings and opened it all up as wide as it would go. Their eyes remained locked. She licked her lips.

“As I said, being Omega, especially being Omega-Submissive, is a scary place to live. I’ve been frightened constantly since I Presented. My father sheltered me from most everything that scared me, but he has no reach outside Lawton. I knew I would be forced out of his house someday, and I would fall prey to whatever the Universe saw fit to give me. There’s not a more helpless feeling in the world than that, Castiel. I had no choices of my own past high school. I was completely at the whim of Mother Nature and whoever Mated me. I beg you to imagine what that feels like and understand why I turned to trying to mold circumstances to my benefit without getting caught doing it. It was never to hurt anyone or to try to win points for unimportant things. It was a matter of survival for me, Alpha. Please understand.”

“What does that have to do with Michael? You’ve explained your motives for the manipulative scheming already. Tell me how that leads to messing up your exchanges with Michael.”

She tilted her head and then straightened again. “I feel a constant need to be surrounded by a safety net of protectors all the time,” she admitted. “It never goes away, and I have a kind of alarm system in my head when the safety net develops a weak spot. Cas, this pack is the best thing that ever happened to me. It used to be that my internal alarms went off all the time – all the fucking time – so that I couldn’t hear myself think. But now, with all of the depth and breadth of the pack around me, I finally feel a measure of real safety in a way I could only imagine before. And Michael…”

“Dean was right,” Cas mused. “That’s what he told me, but I didn’t want to believe that you pursued Michael in order to pull the pack tighter around you. I thought I meant more to you than that, and I thought you trusted my ability to keep you safe. Now it turns out you felt the need to seek protection from me.”

“I love you, Castiel,” she said simply. “I don’t want to Mate Michael. It’s really not like that at all.
But I admit that my vision included making a space for him in my life as a boyfriend, as a lover, and as someone who would feel a need to protect me above everyone else. I don’t like that need, Cas, but it’s there. I need layers of protection to feel safe enough to move about on my own and try my wings. I never expected to fall for him the way I did. I misread him. I knew he had a protective streak that I could hook into…”

She winced at the look Cas gave her, but she meant to come clean, and she had to speak the truth no matter how it stung to do that.

“…and I worked that angle until it was second nature to him. But I misjudged who he is at heart. I mistook the masks and his first clumsy attempts to seduce me as an indication that he was two-dimensional and vindictive and easily manipulated. I never accounted for the heart inside the wounded shell.”

“You knew what he was up to when he flirted with you?”

“I knew. He’s a clumsy manipulator, Cas. He’s got too much heart to be capable of playing people the way you and I do it. He’s a better person than either of us.”

Castiel huffed an unamused laugh. “Unbelievable.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair and down across his mouth.

“What do we do now?” she asked him. “Everything feels upside-down and turned over and awful, and I don’t want you to hurt like this anymore. Will you spank me? Use the whip. Whatever brings you back to balance. Please, Castiel.”

His eyes glazed over and broke to the ceiling. “It wouldn’t help, kitten. That’s not how this works. I can’t unleash emotion this raw on you, and you don’t deserve it anyway. I fucked up everything. I missed everything.”

“Why did you miss it, Cas?” she asked in a befuddled voice. “I don’t understand. Everyone says it makes no sense. I keep hearing that they all thought you knew what I was doing but you were playing a long game of your own. No one thought you were…”

“Clueless?” he offered. “Blind? Gabriel says it was arrogance, and he may be right. But April, dammit, I trusted you. I’ve had to fight for everything that’s good in my life, despite everyone’s perception that the world falls in a shower of gifts at my feet. That’s not true. It’s never been true. Some things are easier for me than for others, but the things that mean the most to me have always been harder – impossibly hard. I thought I’d been graced, for the first time in my life, with someone who fits me and is suited to match me without either of us having to fight for every fucking inch along the way. I thought we were made for each other, and that that meant I could trust that you wouldn’t lie to me and use me and trick me. I thought you had my back! But you trusted everyone but me, and for what? Because I have a dark side that I can’t do anything to mitigate and I tried to keep you from having to witness it? You could have told me the very first time I asked you what you need, what you want…you could have told me about needing that kind of depth about you. Don’t you think I would’ve understood that?”

“I can’t take it back, Cas.”

“And I can’t punish you for it.”

“And I can’t pretend to be sorry. I’m not sorry. I didn’t know enough about what my self-protective impulses were up to until I emerged from the fog I was in. It was a slow realization. It’s clear now, but it wasn’t at the start. All I could do was the best I could do, and I’ll never be sorry for putting my
own safety first. How it all happened is unfortunate. If I could go back, knowing what I know about you now, I would do things differently. I would throw it all into a pile at your feet, and we would untangle it together. You and I would have built this pack as allies, as a team, not in secrets kept from one another. But we can’t do it over. I do trust you, Castiel. I do now. I want you for my mate. I want you to love me as much as you love Dean. I want your blessing for me to grow up and meet you where you are. I want…”

She paused and let the burgeoning emotion wash into him. It was too much to say in words.

“Michael could never come between us, Cas, or splinter us. Only we can do that. We’re both scared of screwing this up, and we’re making a rat’s nest of it because of those fears. You want to know what I want from you? I want everything. I want to be yours. I want you to send me flying in ecstasy with your hand and your whip. I want you to overflow into me and find solace in my body and my heart. I want you to fill me with life, and let me give you everything in return. I want to point up to the sky at a star only I can see, and I want you to take careful aim and launch me just so, as only you can, so that I reach a height no one’s ever reached before. I want to compose revolutionary music that the world adores, and know that it’s all for you. I want to perform for kings and dignitaries with your scar on my shoulder, and then go home with you to dress down into sweat pants and play on the floor with a roomful of children with green eyes and blue, that we all four share as one entity. I want Dean to teach me to bake pies and Michael to massage my sore shoulders while I nurse your daughter.”

Castiel’s mouth fell slack. It was everything she’d already said, but it was so much more. It was backed now, not by a shallow teeming huff of flustered frustration as he had felt outside the music school after her audition, but by a bottomless depth of complex emotion and tangled need that would take years to understand.

“I’m too young for you, Castiel, and that got in our way. I’m not yet who I’m going to be in a few years. But I’ve already grown so much. I’m not who you Mated either. Please, I need you to wait for me. I’m getting there. Don’t you see? And…here. I wrote you a song. It’s for Nick’s show, but he told me to write what I need you to hear, and that whatever that was, as long as it was genuine, it would be Universal, and he was right.”

“April…I don’t know what to say.” Cas’ mind was spinning again, but all the colors had shifted. His anger dissipated. He got lost in the pace of her, in the passion and the depth and the truth. And he didn’t want out.

She turned to face the keyboard, her eyes alight, and her cheeks flushed. “We talked about how all the stories of young women finding their voices are all so similar, and we needed something different. And you know what they all have in common? I mean aside from rage and rebelling against society’s expectations of women and all that? All of them…the girls can’t find themselves, no matter how hard they struggle, until they leave. They all have to leave, Alpha. They have to get out from under the thumb of family and community, get out from where the constant hum of expectation drowns out their own thoughts and needs and feelings and hopes… All of them – from Dorothy to Elphaba to Elsa. Their stories change a bit here and there, but their own packs are so stifling that they can’t begin to find themselves until they break away. Men don’t do that, not in the stories. Men go home to find themselves. Luke and Harry were raised by foster parents away from home, and they found themselves after they reconnected with their home packs. You see? It’s different for girls.”

Castiel gaped at her. She was electrified, and he felt he might feel an electric shock if he touched her.

“But I don’t have that option, and that’s where we found the new take on this age-old story. I can’t leave. I need to be here. I need you. I don’t have the freedom of taking on a quest to find my voice
amidst the rage somewhere far removed from home and hearth and societal expectation. And that’s where we went with the song.” April’s hands drifted across the keyboard, playing a whimsical melody that Cas couldn’t fathom meaning anything significant. It was playful, not profound.

“May I play it for you? Please, sir?”

“Can I sit beside you?” he asked, unsure of everything in a way that felt hopeful, not dangerous.

She scooted over enough for him to join her, and she smiled shyly. “I’m nervous,” she admitted. “I haven’t played this for anyone but Nick and the musicians yet. I wanted you to be the first to hear it. It’s…Cas, it’s for you. It fits the story Nick wrote, but I wrote the song to speak directly to you.” Her fingers were still dabbling mindlessly as she spoke. Cas marveled at her ability to draw music from the instrument without seeming to pay it any attention at all. He had no means to understand how that was possible.

He leaned in close and kissed her lightly, and the bond shimmered with relief and hope. “Play for me, kitten.”

Her smile was blinding, and then she turned to face the keyboard and the sunset, and her face reflected the glow. She stopped her delicate melody and paused a moment, resetting her hands and breathing with her eyes closed. She began with a soft pulse. It started softly and simply, and the lyric spoke of an imprisonment of the mind and the spirit and a single hopeful view-scape tunneling out to something else far above, barely visible from here, and utterly unreachable. A single star in the distant night sky twinkled dimly, and beckoned, promising freedom, promising possibility. Every effort to reach upward was met with another shackle, another tie, another limit, and the prison walls thickened as the prisoner succumbed to rage and defeat.

Even for someone outside the cell’s chains, such a star was too high to imagine reaching. For a prisoner within, it was laughable. April let the volume pulse louder and the chords became complex and demanding. Her desperation turned into a plea and the sound of the chains laughed at her outrage. The Universe spoke to her nightly. It needed her to catch that single shimmer in the sky and turn it bright with the power of her voice as much as she needed to reach for it, but she had no way out without an ally. And with that, the song thundered, and she switched from begging to a furious demand, and Castiel’s heart rate kicked up. His mate’s desperation turned into righteous indignation, into fury, and he felt himself moved to slash at the chains that held her down, even as she felt new ones slide around her.

The song was an epiphany. Castiel’s head swirled with images. That star was everything. It was who she was, and who she was meant to be, but she couldn’t reach it on her own. She needed him to free her, to untangle and unknot her, to hammer the cell block to dust and to launch her bodily into the heavens where only perfect aim would land her safely instead of hurling her into oblivion, and it all depended on him. And that infuriated her in a way that her fingers on the piano and her voice, tearing through the lyrics, made abundantly, irrefutably clear. This was her star to reach, and the shackles, the cell, the earthbound prison, were insults that no one should ever have to face. What she could do if unfettered was a magnificent gift to the Universe itself, but the Universe saw fit to tie her hand and foot, making it virtually unimaginable that it would ever come to be. Impossible to do it alone.

And Cas felt chills as he recognized himself in the prisoner. He, too, was shackled and impotent without allies. He, too. This song was Castiel’s as much as it was April’s, and the universal theme came round full circle.

But he shook himself internally. The moment wasn’t about him, not for now.
In the end, it was the simplest of statements: I need your help to be who I’m supposed to be, please don’t fail me. And that’s where she ended it. And Cas couldn’t breathe. It wasn’t merely about feeling safe in a world that didn’t value her. She was breaking apart at the conflicting desires from within, desires to conform to what her pack needed from an Omega, desires to bend and submit to feed the needs of her own wolf, and desires to break free from everything and catch fire in a spectacle of powerful music that lifted all of them above themselves and touched the seams of life itself.

April placed her hands in her lap and kept her eyes on the keys before her. “I fly apart at the simplest of challenges, Alpha. I need you to put me back together again and again. I need you to bind me and hold me, to shore me up stronger than I was before. I need you.”

Castiel pulled her into him, and he held her tightly. “I’m never going to let you fly apart, April. I will spend the rest of my life tearing the chains from your limbs, holding you together, and lifting you up to however high you can go. We’ll build this pack as deep as you want it. You’re safe here, kitten, and I’m not going to let you down.”

She clung to him and trembled, the sensation of little bits of her body breaking away and flying into space, untethered, eased as he tightened his grip, and she buried herself in his scent. But it was already triggered merely by her bravely standing up to the injustice of being Omega and shouting a desperate ‘FUCK YOU!’ to the Universe. He pulled her in and stood with her in his arms. Her freefall was in full swing, but he knew how to arrest it and pull her back above the surface where she could gasp a frenzied breath.

Castiel settled on the couch and set her across his knees on her belly. She went lax as he lifted her skirt and slapped her backside hard. One arm cinched her in tightly, and his entire focus zeroed into her mind where her emotions had come unglued, skittering madly. Her body rested easy, in complete trust. He spanked her again, hard, and saw no response. He did it again, harder, lower, down on her leg, and he felt her breath catch. He set up a swift rhythm, keeping it powerful, keeping the strikes at the crease of her thighs, avoiding the switch marks that still crisscrossed her legs and ass to the extent that he could, and he reached determinedly for her inside her head. She was in there somewhere, and after what she’d just gifted him, he wasn’t about to let her suffer in freefall.

Cas whined involuntarily into his strokes, increasing the intensity, and becoming distraught at how something so seemingly simple as catching her when she fell, especially when he was right there at the outset, could be so fucking hard. Where WAS she?

He had never had a struggle like this, but then, she’d never opened up that wide before. Ozzies paid a price for every act of rebellious will, and it was beginning to look like April’s was going to be a steep one. Cas hardened his palm still further, and released his wolf to snarl and growl into her headspace. He felt her breathing quicken, and inside her mind, he saw her spark back to life just as another miserable sound escaped her throat, and she Released what little she had to give.

“Shh, shh. I got you,” he murmured, lifting her to sit on his lap and hold her tightly. He rocked her as she wept, closing his eyes in relief. “I’ve got you.”

Her presence in the Mating-bond strengthened and turned a vibrant shade of red. He’d arrested her fall, but the circle wasn’t closed yet. She still felt untethered, in need of a grounding hold to cling to. There would be no words. A dance this ancient required no verbal connection. Wolves don’t use words anyway. Castiel lifted her bodily again, set her on her feet by the piano, and bent her across the bend, lifting her skirt out of the way and freeing himself of bothersome clothing.

He shushed her firmly, and pressed into her body with deliberate callous indifference to the sore heat his body reawakened. She panted and struggled for a hold against the smooth wood, but he denied
her any kind of grasp. The Alpha pulled her arms behind her to catch both wrists with a single hand, and he clutched her hip with his other hand. She was too short for the piano, and her feet lifted free of the ground with the force of his thrusts, leaving her nothing to brace against and no means to catch her rocking motion as he forced her again and again into the hard mahogany edge. But as ever, April’s wolf reveled in the abuse, and she found the ground beneath her feet metaphorically in the sense that she was precisely where and how she ought to be, and she was safe in his hands, impaled on his body.

She felt his grip leave her wrists, but she kept them crossed behind her. His hot hand grasped her shoulder over her Mating-scar, but it only tightened enough to tease, and she wailed. The pain in her backside throbbed, both the ache of a hard spanking and the pressure of a hard fuck. And the discomfort in her belly where her body supported both her own weight and his, built up into a need for completion that he wasn’t giving her.

It was a test, perhaps. They’d been through this many times. Submissives ask, they don’t demand. Full circle. She’d demanded something from him with that song, and while that hadn’t been wrong from the perspective of her human side, her wolf lost itself in the disconnect between her training as his Sub and her needs as a person, and it fell hard. Alpha was bringing her back with a demand to be good, and April was more relieved at the structure and all it’s certainty than she expected to be. She whined at the unrelieved need. If she focused, she could come just from the hard pummeling against her heated backside and the barely-there touch to her scar. But that’s not what her Dominant wanted, and that was the grounding edge of the exercise. Don’t come. Not until he wills it.

April clenched her eyes and her channel, and he hissed at her in disapproval, fucking harder to increase the challenge.

Christ, she couldn’t stave it off. Her gut tightened and warmed, and she tingled with imminent release, and he tightened his hold on her shoulder, and she wailed with the difficulty of keeping it all at bay. It was a totally different kind of flying apart, and she fought for it.

“Breathe, kitten,” he grunted at her in staccato. “Relax your body. You don’t have to fight it. I’ve got you.” His thrusting slowed down some as he spoke, and it took some of her tension with it. Relaxing sounded like the worst idea, as close as she was, but he was the Dom, and it was an instruction she could follow. April stopped panting and squeezing her eyes closed. She breathed out a slow exhale, feeling at every moment that she would tumble over the edge, but her orgasm stayed one breath away as she circled through her muscle groups one by one as she’d been taught and released each clenched muscle. His hand on her shoulder tightened a bit more, almost pressing in enough that no amount of control would hold it off, but not quite. It took all of her will to stay relaxed and let her belly soften against the piano.

“Good girl,” he praised, slowing further and clutching her hip. “There’s my good girl. I’ve got you.” He slowed to a stop with his cock buried deep inside her. “I’m so proud of you, April. I’m proud you’re mine, and I swear I won’t fail you.” He started up again, but this time stroking into her in deep, measured thrusts that filled her and buried his knot inside her channel, a channel that was ripening with the cessation of her prophylactic and taking on a deep, rich scent. “God, you’re incredible,” he muttered to himself as if he hadn’t meant to say it aloud.

She was so close to begging that the ‘please’ was already formed in her mouth when he shoved in with a hearty grunt of effort, led by his wolf, and perceived by hers as a full Claiming thrust, and his grip on her shoulder cinched in hard. “Come for me, kitten,” he whispered right in her ear, and the two of them toppled as one, echoing into each other in a way that reverberated long after the pulsing rhythm dissipated and their bodies went still.
He chuckled against her back. “We’re getting good at syncing,” he observed. She smiled bonelessly into the wood, smearing the shiny surface with her hot breath and sweaty cheek. Freshly Released, freshly Claimed, post-orgasmic and knotted had fast become April’s favorite physical sensation.

The dismount was less elegant. A bit more practice was needed there, they agreed, but he soon had her settled on his lap on the couch, her back slumping into his chest, the two of them more or less covered by his shirt and her dress. He’d fumbled his way out of his shoes and pants on the awkward stumble to the couch, and they relaxed into each other.

A long stretch of silence lengthened as they lay together, not quite sitting, not quite lying down. Cas had a hand in motion across her belly, easing the ache where she’d taken all of their combined weight. She was quiet and still, at peace finally after days of dread. He spent those moments sifting through the complexity of her mind and smiling softly at what he found there. She was right that they couldn’t change what had been, but there was a new vista to explore, and from the looks of it, he was going to need years to see it all.

“How is it possible that you’re only eighteen years old?” he asked her rhetorically. “Teenagers don’t write songs like that.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” she mumbled sleepily. “You already had a whole vision of what you wanted to do when you were my age, didn’t you? Has that changed much over the years?”

He chuckled, and then grunted in satisfaction at the sensations a simple laugh sent through both of their bodies. “No,” he admitted. “It really hasn’t changed at all. I haven’t achieved everything I want yet, but the basic vision is exactly the same.”

“You see?” she said cryptically, and he nodded into her hair and nuzzled it aside to kiss her throat.

A soft cough from the doorway had them both looking up. Fred stood awaiting Castiel’s attention. “Sir, Michael phoned. He’s going to text you the address of the restaurant he’s secured for the evening. Arrival for the festivities has already begun, and he’s contracted for the entire evening, so he asks that you make your way there whenever you and Omega April are ready. Eunice has volunteered to babysit.”

“Thank you, Fred,” Cas told him. “We’ll be along once we untie and clean up. Please advise the staff that they and their families are invited as well. This is a Pack celebration, and you are all pack to Gabriel and me. Whatever tasks haven’t been completed yet will keep. And I’ll be doubling Eunice’s usual daily pay to make up for her missing this evening.” Cas rolled his hips a little to test the knot, but it was still firmly locked.

“Thank you, Sir. Michael expressed the same. The other ladies have already changed and departed.” Fred paused long enough to collect some cleaning supplies from the closet and a couple of warm washcloths from the bathroom in the hall. He came in and dropped the cloths atop a ceramic dish on the table at Cas’ elbow and made short work of the smears on April’s piano, all within the span of mere moments. April smiled at him and thanked him sincerely to which he sent her an affectionate look that was pure adoration.

“I will drop by my house and collect himself, assuming he’s followed instructions for once, and we will be along shortly.” Fred showed a momentary and infrequent discomfort.

“Having a brat uprising at home, Fred?” April asked him with concern.

“It still happens on occasion, Omega. It’s nothing I can’t handle.” His eyes darkened ominously, and April bit her lip as Cas laughed out loud.
“Well, if we don’t see you tonight, we’ll understand why. The dread that just came through my Mating-bond from a Sub who isn’t even on the other end of that glower of yours tells me you may be otherwise detained. Please stop by if you can. It would mean a great deal to Gabe,” said Cas by way of a dismissal. He was still laughing softly to himself after Fred nodded and excused himself. He sighed expansively and stretched his bare legs out, working the blood back into them. “Can we start over, kitten? I want to know you for real, and I don’t think I do yet.”

She snuggled into his body, soft in post-coital relaxation. “Yes, please. Did the song make any sense to you? I’d hate to think I went through a fall like that for nothing.”

“Mmm,” he agreed. “Yes, that was quite traumatic,” he teased, much calmer now that he’d pulled her back to level. Now that the flurry of anxiety was gone, the haze of a hard spanking and a successful Claim Fuck made him a little loopy. “Let’s never do that again.”

She laughed and slapped his hip good-naturedly. “Don’t be mean. I’m serious.”

“April, your song is incredible. I think I get what you’re telling me more clearly than I ever have before. Dean keeps trying to get me to imagine what it’s like to be Omega, but I’ve always resisted doing that. It seemed counterproductive. But your song grabbed hold of me and put me square into it no matter what I wanted, and it really opened my eyes. Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome. And thanks for listening. Thanks for catching me just now. That was…scary. I couldn’t find anything to grab onto. It’s a terrifying sensation.”

Cas wrapped her up in his arms and scented her throat. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“And the rest from the song?” she prompted. “The music, and the ambition? Can you help me with all of that? Cas, I really can’t do it on my own. I need more than a staff of advisors and agents. I need you.”

“Mm-hm,” he responded softly. “You do. You need me. And I’m here for you. I’ll always be here for you. You have to stop hiding when you’re scared though. I can’t read you as well as Dean can. Maybe it’s because you’re both Subs, but he understands you better than I do.”

“And Michael?” she asked carefully.

He didn’t answer right away.

“Cas, I am always going to love you and need you. Nothing about Michael alters that. I can promise you something, if it helps. I can promise you that all the pups I ever have will be yours. No matter where I end up going with Michael, even if it’s nowhere but a playful foursome like we planned, you and I need to hold that sacred as a part of our bond with each other. No one will give me children but you. I swear it.”

“That means he stays away from you during your Heats,” observed Castiel.

“That was your idea, sir, not mine. I jumped at the suggestion, but I would never have brought it up first. I belong to you in a way that includes my Heats and your Ruts. Michael doesn’t belong there, and even if something does blossom between us, that’s not going to change.”

“Dean’s really okay with this?” he asked sleepily, and she laughed.

“Dean was pushing for it once it looked to him like a forgone conclusion. He’s not as sneaky as he thinks he is.” She rested her head back on his shoulder.
“That’s what I thought,” he said. “I can’t imagine why he’s so placid about it. He’s alpha. It’s got to pull at every nerve ending he has.”

“I guess you should ask him, but Cas, it’s not all that complicated. Dean’s a Sub. He’s used to putting the needs of others above his own comfort. It’s how he’s wired. Plus, he could see the same vision I did – an interwoven pack where everyone’s tied to everyone directly. He wants that stability, too. Dean’s very practical, and he’s willing to accept a certain amount of pain if the end result is better for everyone.”

“Hmm. You really do have all of us figured out, don’t you?”

“Don’t patronize, Alpha. So do you, and you don’t need my assessment to understand where Dean’s coming from with this. He wears his heart on his sleeve. He’s totally readable to people like us.”

There was a pause where she sat still and waited to see how he would respond. His emotions balked for a moment before he laughed loudly and curled her into him, pulling at the tie and the drying fluids nested between them.

“People like us,” he repeated. “I’m going to need some time to get used to that, but it’s true, isn’t it? You and I are similar in a lot of ways I never saw before.”

He released the tight hug and helped her stabilize on his lap again. “But here, look. I meant it when I said I don’t want to live in a home full of ugly scheming and backstabbing, no matter the intention. I need to be able to read what’s going on in my Pack.”

She stiffened and started to protest, but he put a finger over her lips. He wasn’t finished yet.

“But,” he said judiciously. “We’re all four wired for a certain amount of assessment of our colleagues and associates and a certain degree of persuasive finagling at the very least. Every human interaction could be catalogued as manipulation of one type or another if you look deeply enough into it. So, here’s my expectation of you, and I’ll tell Dean and Michael the same: don’t hurt anyone, don’t do it for selfish reasons, and don’t get caught. Capiche? You do whatever you feel you need to, but if I catch you at it, if I untangle your knots and find you at some under the table scheme, your ass will feel it, and it won’t be pretty or pleasant. From today, we have seven Pack Rules. Number seven is an index on number five, and I don’t care that it’s redundant. It states, any act of interpersonal manipulation, once uncovered, as defined by the Alpha, will be considered a direct challenge upon the authority of the Alpha himself, and will be considered grounds for swift and severe punishment. Do you understand?”

She choked on her first effort to speak. “I…Yes, Sir. I understand. But…doesn’t that absolve you? Are you above this rule?”

“That’s right. I am.”

“Sir, that’s totally unfair! Why should you get to keep doing it when the rest of us can’t?”

He laughed. “Because I am Alpha, April. There needs to be a degree of ritual imbalance in the structures. Besides,” he said as she huffed. “I didn’t say you couldn’t do it. I said you shouldn’t get caught. I expect, if you’re right about his clumsiness, this rule will hit Michael the hardest, and that soothes my Alpha designation in a way that may allow a quid pro quo absolution for your relationship, should it ever get off the ground.”

“I’m not dating Michael, Sir. I just can’t swear I won’t ever need him like that. If I do, you’ll know it from me well before he does, and I’ll follow your rules. I’m not going to cheat on you.”

“That soothes me further still, kitten. Thank you for that.”
“So, you’re attempting to placate your Secondary? For me? Or is it for Dean? I know it’s not for Michael.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I owe all of you a great deal, and I saw this afternoon, in very stark terms, what lies before us if I can’t bend for this. There’s no version of a hard restriction that ends with the Pack I want us to be. It hurts like hell to think of you with him. I’m not going to lie and say it’s fine.”

“Cas…”

“No, you need to hear this.” He wiggled his hips again and held hers while he tested the give of his knot, only to feel the quick slip and a rush of warm fluid as the knot gave way. He grunted at the slick warmth, and helped her stand. April picked up one of the cloths and knelt before him to clean his lap. He remained still with his knees pressed together, keeping the couch dry and watched her tend to him carefully.

“April, I adore you, and I want nothing more than to fill you with my seed and have an enormous family of beautiful children, and I don’t want anyone else to win a place in your heart. But it’s too late for that, isn’t it? I missed it, and he gave you something that I didn’t when you needed it, and it’s a done deal. But you’ve been fighting the same battle from day one, haven’t you? You had no desire to share your mate, but you saw how much I needed him here with me, and you ran the models out the way I did today. There was no other way, was there? But that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt right from the beginning.”

She finished cleaning his lap, pushed his knees apart, and leaned in, still kneeling before him. She looked him right in the eye. “It hurt like a death in the family, Castiel,” she told him. “But I can’t imagine life any other way now.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, although the answer was obvious.

She chuckled sadly. “You would never have agreed if you knew how I felt. Besides, I was sure it would get easier, and it did. I love Dean dearly. He’s family. And now it doesn’t hurt at all. Truly. Go in and see for yourself if you like. You two belong together, and he settles you in a way I can’t. At first, it felt like a failure on my part, but it doesn’t anymore.”

He stroked her cheek with his thumb and thought about it. “What you’re telling me is that in time, I’ll come to accept, maybe even welcome, Michael as your lover and not just your Packmate.” She didn’t answer that, and at length, he blew out a deep breath. “All right. One day at a time. I’ve got your word that nothing happens with Michael that I don’t know about ahead of time, and I trust you to keep your word.”

“I’m good for it, Alpha,” she promised earnestly.

“I’m going to miss your sweet, helpless waif. Don’t get me wrong…” He stood up and helped her follow him, collecting his clothing, and getting dressed again. “I like this new you better. I feel like we have a much greater chance of a real connection intellectually and emotionally than we did before, now that I’m getting over my snit at being deceived…”

She blushed and glanced demurely downward, but he arrested the motion, abandoning tucking his shirttail in and lifting her chin again. His deep blue eyes took on an edge of red, and April’s heart stuttered.

“…But I’m more in love with you than I’ve ever been, April Renée. And I’ll find a creative way to make sure you feel you’ve paid for the deception in full, and we’ll start again. I’m in no hurry to
collect. It’ll keep. Tonight, we’re celebrating.” He held her chin for a beat or two, searching her eyes, and delving into her depths, still awed by the scope. “Are you all right now?” he asked her softly, tenderly, and she nodded.

“I’m fine, Cas. And just so you know – my waif isn’t gone. She’s real, and she’s an important part of me. We don’t have to start over from the beginning. You already know my Omega and my wolf. Who they are was never a deception. The deception was to lead you to believe that’s all there is to me.”

“Don’t do it again,” he told her in all seriousness, as if that cat was ever going back in the bag, and she laughed and ‘Yessir’d’ him with another blush.

“And April? You’re going to get a Grammy for that song if we market it right. It’s phenomenal. If I haven’t told you how proud I am of you, then let me say it now. I am in awe of your talent and your work ethic, and I’m going to be fighting Michael every step of the way to be your biggest fan.”

Her eyes widened, and she blushed furiously, stammering.

“Let’s go celebrate, Pack style.” He held his hand out to her. He found his phone and keys on the kitchen table. Everything else had been stowed neatly, and he smiled at his staff’s thoughtfulness.

“Tony, what are you still doing here?” he asked as the cook emerged from the pantry. “Did you not hear about the dinner tonight?”

“Um, yes, Alpha. I thought it would be a good evening, since I was planning to be here anyway, to get an inventory done. No use wasting a quiet kitchen.” Tony held his list awkwardly and waved it a little to show he was being productive.

“Nonsense. Put that down, and come celebrate with us. You’re Pack, too.”

“Me? Um.”

April hugged him and then caught his hand and stripped him of his inventory list. “It’s a Pack party, and you’re Pack,” she said decisively. “You don’t have to go to the party, but the kitchen is off-limits as of now, so you may as well come.”

Tony shot a glance at Cas, alarmed at hearing instructions from the Ozzie, whom he’d been coached to believe had no authority.

“You heard the lady,” said Cas jovially. “Come and have a meal on us. It’s a party. My brother got married today.”

“Thank you, Sir. I’d like that. I didn’t think Mr. Fred’s invitation meant me. I’ve only been here a few weeks…”

“Enough! Get out of my kitchen!” said Cas, laughing, and Tony took him at his word, disappearing with a quick nod and an awkward chuckle.

“You shouldn’t scare him like that,” April admonished as he held the door for her. “He doesn’t really get us yet.”

“WE don’t get us yet, kitten, but the best fix for that is to keep muddling through and being as authentic as we can. That was authentic of me. I wanted him out of my kitchen, and I told him so.”

She narrowed her eyes at him as he opened the door to a Lincoln he rarely drove. “Are you a brat,
He laughed again. “Perish the thought. But I have been known as an instigator from time to time when I’m in a jovial mood.”

“And the difference is…?”

“Get in the car, Omega.”

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“Well, if he’s already gonna be there, why not give him to me and let him help?” Benny asked Dean. The two of them, out on the patio leaning into the railing on their elbows to wave Pack in from the parking lot, had found themselves discussing Michael.

Dean shook his head and accepted the bottle Sam held out to him. “I’m not ready to let him go public, man. I know how you see this, but I can’t get on board with it. Find another poster boy.”

“I’m not talking about showing him off and putting him in the firing line,” Benny protested. “I’m talking about needing every pair of hands we’ve got available to us. He doesn’t have to leave the Control room. Sam tells me he’s a great coordinator, organizer, all that backroom logistical stuff. Give him a clipboard and a schedule and put him under Charlie’s wing in the back. Where’s the harm? You said yourself he wants to help.”

Dean set his jaw and turned red-rimmed eyes on Benny, who took a half-step backward. Gesturing with his beer, he pulled up into Benny’s space. “You’re not fooling me, alpha! This isn’t about keeping him in the back room. Your plan is to get him so invested that one thing leads to another and I’ve got a mutiny on my hands, and before I know it, he’s on stage with his cock in some strange woman’s mouth, leading a Dominance seminar, and freaking everyone the fuck out. Not happening, Benny!”

Sam shot Benny a ‘told-you-so’ look over Dean’s shoulder.

“Dean, dammit, we can protect him! You know we can! But we need to shift what we’re showing the world. Goddamnit!” Benny gave up the ruse and put his cards on the table.

“He’s pregnant, Benny! How many people are you planning to sacrifice before this shift of yours gets a good footing? I said NO!” He stalked away and was stymied in slamming the door behind him when its springs caught and eased it shut instead.

“That went well,” Sam observed with a wave to Pam and Rufus on their way in.

“Shut up,” Benny groused back.

Dean didn’t make it four steps in the door before pulling up sharply and freezing in his tracks. Gabriel was already nude, in all his glory on the dance floor, grinding himself into Meg in the nasty version of dirty dancing, and they were both having a blast. Dean rolled his eyes, took a drink, and searched for Gabe’s new wife. He spotted her at the back of the room chatting with Garth and Sarah.
“Don’t you have any control at all over your Omega?” he asked Kali as he joined them.

“No really,” she admitted happily. “Why? What’s he up to?”

Dean pointed through the crowd, and they all followed his gesture, bursting out into gales of laughter. Gabe was on his knees on the concrete now, and he had Meg at his back and Jo receiving some inappropriate attention in front. She had her drink glass held out wide to avoid spilling cocktail into his hair, and her head was thrown back in pleasure.

“Is she…?” asked Sarah slowly. Jo’s slacks were still in place for the most part, but by all evidence, from what they could tell this far away, the zipper was down, and Gabe wasn’t merely miming an explicit touch.

“Yes, well,” Kali said, turning back around, and ignoring the floor show. “We’re not sticking on a strictly monogamous version of marriage, and I’m too sore to play anymore for an hour or two. She can have him if he’s still that horny. I don’t know where a man his age stores that much energy.”

“Oh,” said Sarah. She couldn’t seem to pull her eyes away. “I’ve never seen an alpha woman this directly, doing…that.”

Garth and Dean both laughed. “That’s hard to believe,” Garth told her. “All that time you and Sam have been spending in her classroom? Surely, she’s pistol-whipped some poor kid here or there? Nothing? Jo’s not usually shy with that thing.”

Sarah shook her head slowly and watched the alpha on the dance floor pull out of Gabriel’s mouth and stroke herself to come across his chin with a groan they could hear from way in the back. Dean kept his eyes on Sarah, working out what she was thinking, and feeling, and thinking about what she was feeling, and might ask next.

“But this is a totally public place,” was what she went with. “I’ve lived here all my life, and I’ve never seen Lupins doing that in public. I would’ve noticed.”

Kali and Garth snickered. “It’s a private party,” Dean reminded her. “You’re the only round ear in the joint besides the restaurant staff and our household folks who are used to Gabe already. We keep track of who’s around.”

“But you’re hoping that someday that won’t be necessary,” she finished for him, and he merely canted his head a little in acknowledgment. Someday. Maybe.

“That’s a long way off, Winchester,” she said, turning back to face the others. “I can’t speak for everyone, but that kind of thing in front of my grandparents or my stodgy uncle would cause a riot.”

“Which is why we keep it on the D.L. for now,” he said fatalistically. “You’re welcome.”

Garth spewed his wine cooler, but missed hitting anyone.

“Excuse me,” said Dean with a quick squeeze to Kali’s shoulder. He’d spotted Michael talking earnestly with the bar manager and tapping a paper between them on the bar with his finger.

“Trouble?” he asked, stepping up and putting a hand at Michael’s lower back.

“I told him we’re not running an open bar for any Tom, Dick, or Harry who blows through here, Dean. There’s a guest list for a reason!”

Dean glanced down at the long list, considered how frustrating it would be for the barkeepers to have
to scroll through it before serving each drink, and how just a quick glance inside the restaurant was enough to drive the usual villagers away, and he considered intervening on the manager’s behalf, and then his brat kicked him internally. He had a sharp quip forming on his tongue, but he froze with his mouth open when Michael whipped around and glared a furious, brat-freezing stare at him.

“Don’t.”

“I wasn’t…” Dean defended innocently.

“Don’t help.”

“What’d I do?” The wide green eyes were at least as much a give away as the tones inside his head.

Michael’s eyes narrowed, and he pointed at the barstool beside him. “Hands on the seat.”

The manager took the opportunity to abandon the list and scuttle back to work. Michael glanced at his retreating back but then returned his attention to his mate. Dean hadn’t moved. “Now, Submissive. You’ve been creeping toward a blowout for days now, and I’m going to cut it off before you get there.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Dean protested. “I came over here to see if you needed backup!”

“Well, I didn’t. Thanks.”

They were in a standoff, but Dean wasn’t going to win it, and he didn’t really want to. He glanced over his shoulder, but no one was paying them any attention. Michael cut his thoughts off again – damned Mating-bond and its freaky clue-ins. “You don’t need an audience, Dean. Don’t even think about it. Get your hands on the stool and behave yourself.”

Reluctantly, or perhaps not, Dean shook his arms out, kept his eyes locked on Michael’s cool green gaze, and slowly leaned onto the barstool, splaying his fingers. He closed his eyes though when Michael reached around his waist from behind and unbuckled his belt and unfastened his slacks. A heavy belt in light fabric pulled his slacks to drop swiftly to his ankles, and he was bare in seconds.

“I didn’t DO anything,” he grumbled into his inner elbow as he dropped his head and found his headspace.

“And we’re going to keep it that way,” Michael told him, nudging his hip to the side to give Michael room to swing.

The first slap stung enough to send Dean fully into his wolf, and he tucked his hips under. The second, the third, reddened him and interrupted his circling thoughts. It felt hot and present and immediate, and he groaned low and then reset his hips to present his ass to his mate. Michael took the invitation, and soon Dean’s backside was a vibrant pink, and his mind settled into the rhythm.

It was over too soon, and Dean stood still, feeling the hot pulsing throb send fluid life through his legs and up to his heart. He released a long breath out. Michael bent down for his underwear and his slacks and re-covered what no one else was supposed to be looking at before pulling him up and into his embrace.

Dean sniffled and snuggled in. “Thanks,” he mumbled blearily.

“Shh,” Michael shushed. “Just let it settle, baby. You’ve been holding all of us up for ages now, and you need a break. I’ve got you.”
“Jesus, Michael…”

“Shh. Don’t talk. Hold on to me. Your mind is still not there yet. Come back to me, Dean. Dance with me.” Michael murmured softly, and his hands circled Dean’s hips, pulling them into swaying into the music from the front. Michael’s lips found Dean’s pulse on his throat, and Dean’s head shifted on its own. “Close your eyes,” Michael whispered.

“Sir…”

“Am I the last to know?”

Benny turned to face his mate, confused. “What’s that, cher? Last to know what?” He ushered her into a chair on the wide patio, cooled by fans in the hot late summer evening.

“You’re initiating a pack? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What are you talking about, baby? You feelin’ all right?”

“Benedict, are you or are you not starting a new pack with Charlie and Jo?”

He laughed as he squatted down beside her and placed a wide hand on her belly. “Where did you hear that?”

Her cold brown eyes didn’t thaw, and she kept them on him until he stopped laughing. “Nah, love. I don’t know anything about it. If those ladies are up to something that involves me, then it looks like I’m the last to know. What’d they tell you?”

“They said,” she leaned forward into his space. “That you’ve already agreed to be the Alpha for this thing. That it’s in the works, and you left me out of the discussions.”

“Sweetheart, I would never leave you outta anything. You know that.” Benny furrowed his brow and lowered his chin, meeting his mate’s eyes and opening himself to her as fully as he could.

“Then what’s going on?”

Benny worked his jaw. “Charlie and Jo, you say? There’s a third Musketeer missing from that scenario, and she’s the one at the heart of this. Give me a minute. You good here? I’ll send you something to drink.”

“Benny, is it something you’ve been thinking about? Is this totally out of left field?” There was an astute piercing depth to her look that stopped him.

He went with open honesty. “I haven’t said a word to anyone but you about what I want. You gotta believe that. But you know what I want. I’m good to wait until the time is right, and nobody pushes me into something I’m not ready for.”

She caught his hand and licked her lip. “The thing is, alpha, the time might be riper than you think. Both of those friends of yours are ready, and they’re good, solid friends. If we were going to do this…we could do worse.”
“You, too?” he challenged.

“I’m not playing you, Ben. I didn’t have any idea this was in the hopper until fifteen minutes ago, but it’s growing on me fast.” She lowered her eyes to her belly. “I wouldn’t protest having a settled pack before we bring the pups home, not if it was the right people.”

He frowned and knelt back down. “You sure? Andrea, you like these people enough to form up with them? Don’t bullshit me.”

“Don’t make any promises without me,” she told him with a hand stroking through his hair. “But it’s not a bad idea at all. And yes, I like all three of the three amigos, even if their attempt to push us into something we didn’t see coming deserves to land them sleeping on the porch for a month.”

He squeezed her hand, kissed her cheek, and stood. “I like the way you think, lady.” He strode purposefully back into the restaurant looking for Charlie just as Cas had the door held open for April. They exchanged a simple touch of each other’s upper arms and a nod. Benny was on a mission.

Inside was a dark haze. The music was too loud for Cas’ taste, but the scent of celebrating Pack overtopped his discomfort, and he relaxed quickly. April left him with a kiss and a promise to behave. She headed toward the stage where Michael was uncoiling a microphone cord, getting set up for karaoke. Cas watched her greet him and laugh happily at something he said. He spotted Gabriel’s full Monte, and he sighed. He needed a drink.

A whisky glass slid into his hand before he made it two steps, and Dean’s scent wrapped around him from his left side as if he’d been pulled in magnetically.

“Thought you’d never get here.” Dean leaned in for a kiss, and Cas was happy to oblige. “You smell good. Fuck, you smell good. You worked things out with April?”

Castiel nodded slightly. “We made a lot of progress. There’s a long way to go yet, but I think we’re both rowing the same direction now.”

“Good. ’Bout time. Come dance with me.”

Cas let himself be pulled toward the dance floor. “I’m not singing karaoke, Dean, not even for Gabriel.”

“Spoilsport,” Dean laughed, bringing his arms up to pull his fiancé close. Cas could only hold him with one hand at Dean’s hip, but they shared the whiskey as they danced, and it was sweet and intimate.

“You smell good, too, Dean. You smell…freshly leveled.”

“Michael roasted my butt over something I didn’t even get a chance to say.”

Cas laughed in spite of himself. Leave it to Michael to break through his lingering resentments with an action that Cas would totally have done the same way himself. “Good!” he said decisively.

“Castiel! Finally!” Gabriel shouted in an inebriated slur. “You missed half the party!”

“Go drink a glass of water, Gabe,” his brother instructed him. “And if you get arrested for public indecency on your wedding night, I’m leaving you to spend the night in jail.”

“Love you, too, baby bro!” Gabe toasted him and disappeared into the crowd – probably not to seek hydration.
April tapped at the microphone, and the music faded. She sound checked, adjusted the settings, and did it again. Nodding at the sound tech in the corner, April took the first song, a love ballad she dedicated to Gabriel and Kali, and the floor cleared to let the two have a moment alone. Gabe didn’t seem quite as drunk as before while he danced with his wife, despite being easily as naked as before. Kali didn’t care. She didn’t seem to care that he was nude, that he was drunk, that he was a goofball with a history of trauma and a heart in grief. She looked into his face like he was everything. Dean watched them with his arm around Castiel’s waist and laid his head on Cas’ shoulder.

“Nice party, Alpha,” Monica told him quietly, leaning in on his right. Cas smiled, his eyes misting and never leaving his brother.

“It was Dean and Michael’s effort, Monica. They did this, not me.”

“They did good,” she reiterated before slipping away again.

“Yes, they did,” Cas agreed softly to Dean, cinching him in.

“She’s amazing, you know,” Dean said. Cas tore his eyes away from the couple on the floor and followed Dean’s eyes to the stage. He smiled in pride.

“Yes, she is. She’s my mate, Dean.” Cas’ wide grin was back, and Dean had never seen anything more welcome.

“Down boy,” he teased. “You just pulled your knot out. I think everyone can smell that she’s your mate.”

“Good,” Cas repeated. He executively decided that it was time to refill the dance floor, and he led Dean out beside Kali and formally addressed him as a partner before setting both of them to slowly moving to the music, and Dean smirked. Others joined them, and it wasn’t long before the floor was full of couples. April ended her song and passed the mic off to Meg. The Ozzie accepted Michael’s assistance down the short flight and his offer of a dance, purely platonic and sweet. Meg’s voice wasn’t April’s, but she could carry a tune, and the floor remained full. Michael twirled April expertly to stop in front of Cas and smoothly took Dean’s frame for his own in one motion.

“That was smooth as fuck,” Dean told him. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“I’m not telling you all my secrets, alpha,” he answered, lifting his hand and touching Dean’s back to signal him to cross under for a spin.

Meg used a break in the lyrics to congratulate the happy couple and to mention offhandedly that anyone who was so inclined could join her in congratulating Jo on unearthing her own mate, too. Dean looked up at the stage and frowned.

“What was that?” he asked. Michael just shrugged.

“Sounds like Jo’s getting hitched.”

Dean stopped dancing and looked around, spotting Jo making a break for the door. He followed.

“Dude!” protested Michael. But Charlie slid in and took his place, filling Michael’s arms and placating his need to lose himself to motion and music.
“Joanna Beth! Hold it right there! Get your ass back here!” Dean leaned into the railing, assailing her with his Deep alpha, and pulling her up short. She turned in the parking lot with a look of impending doom, and she trudged back to him.

“What the fuck did Meg just say? You’re Mating? When? With who?! Why didn’t you tell me?!”

She shook her head and sank into a chair opposite Andrea. The beta sipped her drink and tried to appear uninvolved. Dean sat down between them. “Benny just dump you out here by yourself, beta?” Dean asked, giving Jo a chance to collect herself.

Andrea smiled. “It was too loud inside for me. I’ll go back in in a bit. It’s nice on the patio anyway. It’ll cool off fast now that the sun’s gone.” Dean rested a hand on her shoulder and turned back to Jo.

“It’s not just me, Dean,” Jo told him. “Meg found a match too. We’re both planning to go for it.” She looked up at the door as Castiel came through. “Cas planned it already. He’s offering our matches jobs here onsite.”

“Oh, really?” Dean looked up at Castiel as he approached, taking the deflection and running with it. “You knew about this?”

“I did,” Cas admitted, sitting down and leaning in to give Andrea a peck on the cheek.

“You didn’t anyone tell me?” Dean accused.

“It’s private, Dean,” Cas explained. “It was a personal matter, not a Facility one.”

“You unilaterally offer jobs wherever you want? To whoever you want? Doesn’t that have to go through the Board?”

“Whomever,” Cas correctly quietly. “And yes. I have that authority in certain circumstances.”

“I thought you were gonna stop skipping over my input, man. You said I’d get everything but the minutia. This is not minutia. My best friend is getting Mated.” He turned back to Jo. “When were you going to tell me?”

She huffed and leaned back. “I was going to tell you next time I saw you, Dean, but I never see you anymore.” He scoffed at her excuse, but she covered his hand with hers and went on. “I wasn’t keeping it from you. We’ve both been too busy to hang out and catch up. Just because you have a whole ton of people around who care about you and need your time doesn’t mean I’ve got the same. Was I supposed to put my whole life on hold while I wait for you to have room for me in your schedule?”

“Don’t be dramatic. I see you every day. You could have brought it up any time at all. You’re my best friend, Jo. And you went off and put your scent out into the Mate-match system without telling me?”

“WAS your best friend, Dean. Was. And, look, it’s cool. We grow up, we grow apart, we have lives of our own. I’m okay. But I can’t sit at home and miss you forever without doing something to keep myself that way. I matter, too.”

“What? Of course you…”

“I knew you would take it like this, Dean,” she broke in. “But I don’t see how you think it has
anything to do with you.”

“How do I know this guy is good enough for you, huh?” He switched directions. “Who is he? Where’s he from? How do we know he’s got the chops to handle a job here? How do we know anything?”

“I vetted him myself,” Cas put in unhelpfully, and Dean glared at him.

“Oh. Good. Thanks, man. Thanks for that. Some schmuck from Botswana is gonna fly in and make my best friend his mate, and I’m just supposed to sit here like a dumbass and not say anything? You vetted him?”

Castiel didn’t respond except to narrow his eyes. Jo rolled hers. “Dean, don’t do this,” she pleaded.

“This is stupid,” he proclaimed. “What happened to waiting for it to kick up naturally? We said we were gonna wait!”

“We were nine years old, Dean!”

“So!? I waited!”

“Really?” she challenged. “That’s what you’re going with? You wanna hold me to an oath we made when we were nine? Well, forgive me if I’ve grown a little past that now. I waited long enough, and Jack is a great guy.”

“Jack!” shouted Dean, frustrated beyond reconciling.

“Yes, Jack! He lives in Washington state, he’s a social worker in Lupin homesteading, and he smells like everything to me! Wrap your thick skull around how not everything you see belongs to you and get behind me on this, or get the fuck out of the way!”

Dean felt like she’d slapped him. “Jo, God, I’m…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean…”

“You’re an asshole, Winchester!”

Cas straightened and paled, facing the parking lot. His pupils tightened. “Shit,” he muttered. Dean and Jo turned to see Balthazar escorting Naomi between two cars.

“Great,” mumbled Dean, turning back around and slinking down into his chair.

“I’ll handle this.” Cas left the table and Andrea waited only a moment before she joined him, forming up to make a short but effective barrier between Naomi and Dean. Jo’s hand on his shoulder was a welcome touch, and he reached up to hold her hand. She smiled in solidarity, and he grimaced an uncomfortable apology.

“It’s just…” he started.

“I know, Dean.”

“No, not about Naomi. Jo, I’m not trying to be an asshole about this. It’s…there was a time when you talked to me about everything. I know I’ve been distracted, but I’m still around. I didn’t take off on you. I still care about you, and you ARE my best friend. You’ve always been. I’m here, kiddo. Please talk to me.”

She sighed sadly. “I miss you, you big dork. It felt like I’d lost you for good. I tried to be patient, but you were gone, man.”
“So, you filled the gap by going out and finding a mate? Ever think of sending me a text? Phones go both ways, bitch.”

“Don’t call me a bitch, you jerk.”

He smiled and looked up toward the entrance. Naomi and the rest were gone. Inside, apparently.

“You gonna go through with it?” He didn’t look back at her, and the question hung in the air.

“Well, I can’t mate you, now can I?”

That caught his attention, and he blushed. “Christ, Jo! What the fuck?”

She huffed ironically and rolled her lips. “Never mind.”

She prepared herself for the response she expected: a squirmy, disgusted ‘blech!’ such as a brother might recoil into at a suggestion he was turned on by his own sister. She’d pictured it many times, and she couldn’t fathom what had gotten into her at saying what she did right now, right here. But the reaction didn’t come. She braved a look up and found him looking seriously at her, a strange confusion on his face, but no disgust.

“Really?” he asked her with a degree of compassion that had never been a part of what she’d imagined. “How long?”

“Pshhh! For fucking ever, you moron.”

“Yikes.” There was no judgment. There was just a soft sort of sympathy, and it kicked tears into her eyes that she hated. This. This right here was why they were best friends, and they always would be.

“Asshole.”

He chuckled and looked away. She scrubbed her eyes. It was dusty this close to the parking lot.

“Tell me about Jack.”

“I don’t know anything yet. Just what I told you. Oh, and he looks like Cas from ten years ago.”

“Zat so? Omega?”

“Huh,” she snorted. “I should be so lucky. He’s beta. Neutral. Sounds like a good fit on paper, and he smells heavenly.”

“And Meg?”

“Yep. Alpha’s bringing the dude here to her, so she can stay on as Head Nurse. Some Englishman who goes by his last name.”

“I hate him already,” mused Dean. “What about Charlie?”

“Not a chance,” she told him.

Michael made his way out the door. Dean greeted him with a joining of hands as Michael took a place standing behind Dean’s chair. “You picked the right spot, alpha,” said Michael. “It’s getting hot in there.” He was right. Others were making their way out to the cooler patio and claiming seats before it filled up.
“You hungry, man?” Dean asked him. “Sit. Let’s get something in your stomach.”

“I’m craving peanuts and fried cheese,” Michael told him, sliding into the chair Andrea had vacated.

“Whatever you want, sweetness, as long as you eat the veggies I get you, too.”

“God, kill me now,” griped Jo, and Dean kicked her.

The evening was a magnificent success. Jess’ tantrum, overflow from her anxiety at being left alone for nearly a week, took center stage when she protested leaving her pups with Eunice for so long and Sam pulled her up by the hair at the back of her neck and put her solidly in her place with a violent D.F. over the table right in the middle of the restaurant. A little dazed and somewhat wobbly, she grinned in satisfaction at the end, and he spent the remainder of the evening feeding her by hand.

The dance floor stayed full, and a parade of wolves took their turns at the microphone, but more and more, the assemblage called for April and Michael to come back and sing one more, both alone and as a pair. Their voices melded nicely, and their chemistry on stage was palpable.

Sitting together on the steps after a duet, April asked him something she wasn’t certain he would welcome.

“You want me to be your manager?” asked Michael, stunned. “Me?”

“I still need an agent, but once your training finishes, I can’t think of anyone I trust more, except maybe Cas, but he doesn’t have the time or the skills for that. You do. Would you think about it?”

“Holy shit,” was all she got out of him by way of answer after that.

Kali, for her part, was happy to share the limelight with the pack, but she was through observing them and assessing their behavior. She asserted her Claim in a way even Gabriel didn’t see coming with a Dominance display when her turn at the microphone came around. She put Gabe over the edge of the stage and gave the microphone to him, instructing him to make sure everyone in the place heard the sounds she could draw from his mouth. She produced an enormous, bulbous rod, and she ‘sang’ for her, and the crowd cheered. The crowd loved it. Castiel, on his way out to the patio with a fresh beer for Dean, caught the portion where she pulled him upright and set him to fucking her with the toy still embedded between his cheeks and the microphone still at his lips. Cas nodded in approval and slipped through the door.

She could protest semantics all she wanted, but the woman was a Domme, and her approach was perfect for Gabriel’s Omega. Cas felt a weight that he’d carried for nearly a decade relax its hold over his shoulders a little bit.

Bobby arrived late. He stopped by Dean’s table first, pulled a chair up at the corner between Dean and Castiel, and explained that the three alphas believed to be involved in the murder of that pregnant Omega in broad daylight on the street had finally been arrested. Cas could expect to hear from the investigator in the morning. And the Omegas from Canada were across the border and on their way to Christian, accompanied by Claire and Krissy.

Cas thanked him and sent him inside to unwind with the pack and let it go for the evening. Dean was glad Michael hadn’t been in earshot for that. He would give him the news soon enough, but he wanted a different environment than this when Michael heard. Dean knew there was more trauma beneath the surface than Michael was sharing with him. He hadn’t tried to hide it, but it was buried fairly deep.
“Tired?” Cas asked him.

“Mm-hm.” Dean relaxed into his chair. The whir of the fan blades, the cool breeze, the soporific thinning of his bloodstream after a beer or two and a good meal. “Long day.”

“OH MY GOD!!! REALLY??!! YOU MEAN IT?!” Meg’s squeals jerked Dean upright, and he swung around. Meg had her arms flung around Benny, and he chuckled and lifted her off the ground in a bear hug for the ages.

“What now?” asked Dean quietly.

“It appears our pack has competition, Dean,” said Cas vaguely with a squeeze to Dean’s knee.

“Hm,” the alpha grunted and slouched back down. “It’s about damn time.”

“Yes, it is.”

Chapter End Notes

By the way, we’ve hit 1000 kudos, which is amazing to me. And kudos right back to all of you. Thank you for every hit, every bookmark, and especially every comment. It’s never going to be about the validating kickbacks for me directly, but they say something to me about shared experiences, and these connections are what mean everything. Thank you. I love you dearly.

And no, I’m not stopping at 1M+ words, cause fuck normal and fuck limits. :D
Chapter 96

Chapter Summary

It's a whole rambling chapter of coming back to themselves as a pack after all the trauma.

Chapter Notes

This one is for me, guys. I totally needed this one. I can't explain it. I hope you're with me on this. Either way, it's this right now, and it is what it is. It's seriously just one big long ramble.

Also, what the hell is going on in Indonesia? Enough already!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 96 – Wednesday, August 16, 2017

THEN:

Castiel wanted to feel surprise that his intuition proved right, but he couldn’t. All the signs, everything he’d seen and heard and noticed over the last months – everything pointed to his being right. His gut clenched in dread. And he wasn’t surprised that his father left the kitchen in darkness as he shuffled into it. Alphas never shuffled if there were witnesses. He thought he was alone. Moonlight from the wide front windows by the breakfast table meshed with pale porchlight from the bulbs over the grill through tall plate glass in the back near the pantry door to supply plenty of light for his purpose. Zachariah wasn’t planning to stop in the kitchen for anything but collecting his car keys, and he didn’t need extra light for that.

Still, the darkness left a surreal haze that Zachariah’s huffing sniffle broke savagely. That wee hour darkness was the stuff of stories, of the witching hour and fairies, goblins, and trolls – unreal and ineffable. The other was mundane to an absurd degree. It was grocery lists and oil changes and bland daylight truth that obliterates fantasy. It wasn’t an emotional sniffle either. It was a quick inhale to clear a nostril, and things don’t get more mundane than that.

Zachariah thought he was alone. And why wouldn’t he? At three in the morning, the house was asleep. But Castiel wasn’t asleep, and neither was his father.

He let Zachariah get past the kitchen island before he spoke from his seat at the head of the table where he didn’t yet belong.

“So, you’re actually going through with it this time?” he asked. At twelve, he shouldn’t have had
access to that tone of voice, but he didn’t have to stretch to find it. The Alpha’s sudden startle and whirling change of direction was satisfying in a way Castiel would never be able to justify later. Just that one thing stood out as a victory. He would win nothing else. But there was that. His father never expected to get caught or to be called to account for himself.

“Holy fucking Christ, you scared me, son. What on earth are you doing out of bed?”

“Blasphemy is a sin, Father, and I could ask you the same thing.”

It was a test, and Castiel would accept the consequences if he was wrong, but he didn’t think he was wrong. No one would have disturbed his fourth late night vigil if he’d been wrong. No one had disturbed his first three, but Castiel had a feeling tonight would be different. The witching hour should have come and gone, replaced by grocery lists and homework grades and blowing noses. But an Alpha, startled in the middle of the night by his recalcitrant somnambulant son, should not placidly excuse an impertinent challenge about his authority to shuffle about his own damn house at whatever hour he pleased unless he was up to something shameful.

Zachariah faltered in responding, and Castiel knew he was right. His heart seemed to stop beating. He’d prayed so hard that he was mistaken, had misread all the cues the way his mother had done.

Prayers, though, they go nowhere, and they can’t stop a bullet from shattering a breastbone.

Not if the breastbone is determined to be shattered.

“Go back to bed, Castiel. I’ll be along in a bit.”

“You don’t need car keys to get a late night snack, Father,” he insisted coldly. “There’s food in the refrigerator. I think there’s still leftover roast. It’s good cold.” Castiel felt rage fill his veins. He felt impotent to change his father’s mind. Here tonight, even now, he had no idea what to say to force the wheels of inevitability even to slow just a little. He needed Zachariah, and the man stood facing the window, not looking at him, thinking hard on how to make his escape cleanly.

Castiel might not be able to stop him, but he could deny him a clean exit.

He had only been alpha for a few months. He needed the asshole, even if he didn’t like him, even if he only expected to need him for a few more years, even if that meant forcing his father to endure monumental suffering that Castiel could witness but not fathom. It was Zachariah, not Castiel, who’d chosen to bear children in the first place. He didn’t get to leave yet. Not yet. Not like this.

“I’m going out, son. Drake has an emergency in town, and he needs me. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“What kind of emergency?” Castiel stood up. His father’s voice was changing, disengaging, already at least half gone, and he hadn’t stepped one foot out the door yet.

“I’m not sure yet. He needs me. I’ll be back.”

It was a good lie. Not too many details. No way to challenge its veracity until it was too late. Castiel planted himself in front of his father. Even with the odd hour and the storybook haze about the place, Zachariah’s voice was ethereal. He wasn’t drugged. Castiel knew what that looked like. His cheeks were strangely flushed, and his eyes locked onto the moon through the window.

“Please don’t leave,” his son begged simply. “Whatever it is…wait till morning. Don’t leave us…me.”
Zachariah’s hand came down lightly on Castiel’s shoulder and squeezed, not hard. His eyes flicked to meet his son’s. “I have to go, Castiel. It’s…important.”

“It’s not.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Father, I can’t do this without you. He’s too big. You’re the only one who understands. I need you. Please. Please!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Zachariah, nearly himself, nearly Alpha. “Go to bed. Go sleep with your brother if you’re having trouble falling asleep. You’ll rest easy that close to an Omega.” He paused, lifting his eyes back to the moon, and they glowed briefly in the ancient, incandescent connection. He went elsewhere in his mind, and when he spoke again, it was from somewhere Castiel couldn’t reach. “Take care of him. Your brother is never going to be able to live on his own, Castiel. He’s deficient in a way you and I can’t fathom. You need to watch out for him. Do you hear me, son?”

“You’re a bastard, and if you leave now, you’re not ever to come back,” spat the boy. “Don’t lie to yourself and tell yourself we’re better off without you. Maybe we’re the only ones who need you, but Gabe and me, we need you. You don’t get to leave and think it’s all right. It’s not fucking all right!”

“Shh, yes, it’s all right son.” The Alpha wasn’t speaking to Castiel, the pup could see it plainly. He was speaking into a dark place, from a world away, and he could hear neither the pleas nor the anguish that mounted in volume right before him.

Castiel thought about hitting him. A solid punch to his jaw or repeated pummeling into his chest, anything to break him out of his stupor. But Zachariah turned away as he was still frantically searching for a way to make him stay, and he shuffled out, closing the door behind him.

He stood paralyzed with dread, blinking against the light spilling out onto the gravel as the garage door rose. He should phone someone. He should raise an alarm. He should fucking do something, goddamnit, but he couldn’t move. Calling the police tonight would only extend the god awful wait and the trauma. Because there was no stopping this wheel, of that he was certain. Next time – if he succeeded in stalling his Alpha so that there was a next time – next time would break him. How fucked up was that?

An unearthly wailing started up in his head, and Castiel flinched. Something beat horrendously against the inside of his chest, and his stomach turned. He vomited violently on the tile floor, and then sank down against the island cabinetry and stared mutely at the moon through the window. Some alpha he was. Some vigil. It had meant nothing, stopped nothing, proven nothing.

And now all he could do, impotent and paralyzed as he was, was watch the moon and wait for the sunrise when things like gunshots and dewy riverbanks would be replaced by scrambled eggs and the whir of the washing machine, shrill complaints about the rising price of coffee, a gentle touch at his back from the butler when time to leave for school rolled around, and mundane life that jumped from sunset to daybreak, straight over the witching hour.

Things like this night did not really happen. It wasn’t really happening. Father would come home soon, rumpled, tired, bitching about calls in the middle of the night to go out and collect a buddy who had been drinking out on the riverbank and couldn’t remember where he’d parked his car.
But his father didn’t come home. Castiel had known he wouldn’t.

NOW:

Dean rifled through a rack of men’s maternity pants, scowling. Seriously? They were kidding, right? A day or two in these and no guy he knew was ever likely to get knocked up again. He couldn’t make Michael wear this. He glanced over his shoulder, holding the only pair of slacks that didn’t scream douchebag. Michael was in deep consultation with the Omega shopkeeper who had her tape measure out, checking his height, his chest circumference, his inseam.

“Whoa! Is that really necessary?” Dean objected, scaring her enough to startle backward onto her butt, but at least it cleared her hands away from Michael’s junk.

“Don’t be a dick, Dean,” Michael chastised crossly. They were both out of sorts. He helped the woman to her feet and brushed her back off for her, glaring at Dean as if the terrible options in the shop were his fault.

“This is nuts, man,” whined Dean. “There’s nothing that doesn’t look like…like…fuck, I don’t know, but…bad! There have to be better choices somewhere.”

“It’s too bad we don’t know any competent tailors,” Michael grumbled under his breath. Dean stopped, staring at him, and nearly dropping the slacks in his hand. Michael quirked a brow at him. “What?”

“You good with sweats until we can get her to fix you up with something nicer?” the alpha asked, ignoring the shuffling of the shopkeeper at Michael’s shoulder.

“I can’t wear sweats to Charlotte,” Michael told him carefully.

“Why not?” Dean challenged. “You’re staying in the hotel room, right? You don’t need pants at all for that.”

Michael’s face took on a closed, careful, flinty look. “I’m not wearing sweatpants on the flight,” he answered. “I need something comfortable but attractive for the time, the very short time, that I’m visible to the public.”

They were sparring again, and Dean’s jaw twitched. “You’re hoping I’ll let you work down in the Control room with Charlie,” he countered.

“I am a compliant and obedient Omega, and I’m thrilled to be going with you at all,” said Michael in return, his face utterly passive. The shopkeeper looked back and forth between them and then remembered suddenly that she had things to do elsewhere.

“Uh-huh,” said Dean flatly. “You really want me to go digging for the truth, or do you want to tell me straight out and save me the trouble?” He crossed his arms, black slacks still clutched in his fist.

“What about those?” Michael pointed to the pair Dean was holding. “Let me try those. Or I could pick up a couple pair of standard pants in a size or two bigger – wait another month before I switch to the elastic panels. It’s just around my hips that I’m too big at this point.”

“Forget the pants, Michael. Man, you gotta be straight with me. I agreed to take you, but I never said
you could work the floor. God, you know what that does to me! What happened to ‘don’t leave me, alpha’? What happened to ‘it’s not a con-job, I just want to be where you are’? Have you been reading the stories they’re writing about you? I’m not overblowing this!"

“Fuck them, Dean! Fuck them all! You’re proving them right if you lock me up! You know how to shut their fat faces right up? Fucking, show them!” Michael abandoned the mirror and advanced right into Dean’s space, using his exceptional height to put him on par with his mate and make it impossible for Dean to downplay his presence. “We’re out of time for being nervous or scared. It’s time right now to shake it all up. Goddamnit, Dean, you have to see the big picture here. The risk isn’t what you think it is. I’m not in danger! All they can do is talk about me. They can’t touch me. They can’t reach me. Castiel would never let anyone get close enough to hurt me. I’ve got our pup in my belly! He’d protect that even if he couldn’t stand me at all, and that’s a close thing right now.”

“Carrying our pup didn’t stop you from going suicidal yesterday when you flipped him the bird with a Dominance display he wasn’t prepared for. You’re not showing the best of judgment these days, Omega.”

“Carrying our pup was my ace in the hole, alpha. He wasn’t going to hurt me,” Michael told him conspiratorially, touching the tip of Dean’s nose. “And I didn’t hear you protesting yesterday.”

“Right. Using a human shield of your own son shows the best possible judgment,” Dean responded sarcastically, flinching away from Michael’s touch and scowling. Michael took the pants out of his hand and shook them out, holding them at his hips.

“He wasn’t going to hurt me. How many times do I have to say it? And what makes you think it’s a son?”

Dean didn’t answer the question. “Man, I’m exhausted fighting about this,” he said instead. “I agreed to take you along because you said you needed to be close to me. You promised me you’d sit this one out. You fucking promised!”

Michael slipped his jeans off and pulled the slacks on in their place, tugging the elastic panel into place and testing the give of the upper band. He checked his backside out in the mirror with a glance over his shoulder while holding his shirttail out of the way. “I will, alpha. I’m going to keep my promise.”

“Then what’s with the subterfuge?”

“I didn’t promise I wouldn’t challenge your decision. I never promised I wouldn’t keep asking.”

Dean rolled his eyes and huffed.

“Look, you’re not wrong about the assholes, but all I’m asking for is a backroom coordinator role. No one out front will even know I’m there. Charlie told me she could use the help. What do you think? These aren’t too bad. They feel good, not too short, the legs hang right. There’s lots of room to pudge out.”

“Charlie,” Dean muttered caustically under his breath. “And the next convention?” he asked.

“We’ll be too wrapped up in final wedding plans to go to that one. Jo’s taking your place. She told me so.” Michael responded. “And we miss the next two out on the honeymoon.”

“You and April are going with us on our honeymoon?” Dean frowned, catching Michael’s ‘we’.

Michael chuckled and kissed Dean’s lips sweetly. “That’s the plan. We’ve got reservations all set up
for a full month as a foursome. Of course, the two of you get the lion’s share of alone time, just like you and I did after we Mated. But can you really envision Castiel leaving his Mate for a month? It’s their last frolic before pups, too, man. If you don’t think he’s planning to make the most of our last months of freedom, you may not know the man at all.”

“Reservations for where, exactly?” Dean asked with an uninvested expression.

Michael laughed at him. “Nice try, alpha. My lips are sealed.”


Michael smiled. He edged up close again and whispered into Dean’s ear. “You’re going to do that anyway, Winchester, because you don’t have a leg to stand on, and the hypocrisy is going to eat at you until you give.”

“Got it all figured out, don’t you, smart guy?” Dean pulled back sharply in offense and turned away from his mate.

“Don’t blame me, Dean Michael. You’re the one with the bright-white righteous soul. It’s not my fault that makes you predictable.” Michael faced the mirror again. “Should I get this pair?”

“Uh, yeah. Those look fine. Let’s get you a couple, same cut, if they have ‘em. We can get Kali to fill in the rest of what you need.”

“Yeah. Sounds good.” Michael changed back into his jeans, but he left the button open and pulled his shirt down to cover it.

“Babe, listen.” Dean took the black slacks away from him and tossed them over a nearby table. “I’m not going to fuck around with your safety out there. You and our son mean more to me than you can possibly know. I’d sell our whole species down the river if it meant keeping you safe. I’m not Cas. It’s not a driving need that envelopes every facet of my life the way it does him. I want people to stop being dicks to each other, and I want people to be able to go about their lives, doing whatever the fuck makes them happy without having to justify it or fight to keep it legal every damn day, but at heart, man, I’m a meat and potatoes, home and hearth, family kinda guy, and that’s all I need. I need you to understand that.”

Michael was ready for him. “We don’t get to settle into that with the world how it is right now, Dean. You know what it’s like out there for people like me, right? You know what I went through after I Presented, don’t you? You’re not that selfish. You’re just scared. I’m willing to take it slowly, but I’m not going to give up. I have a story to tell, and it’s an important one. It could make all the difference to people on the fence. In Charlotte, we try a baby step, see how I take to the chaos and confusion of the backroom. After that, we get a reprieve of two months before Chicago. We should spend some of that time talking about how to face up to the scary shit and how to make it work. But, Dean…if Omegas are full people, that includes me, and that means that what I do with my life choices are up to me, not you. You need me to go through whatever certification process all the others do? Fine. Sign me up. Where do I start? You don’t get to black me out just because it scares you.”

“You think you can handle a full training schedule AND manage April’s career at the same time?” Dean asked astutely, plunging back into the rack for a similar cut of pants.

“You know about that?”

Dean glanced up at him without lifting his head. “What’d I tell you about assuming I don’t already
“I don’t need contact training to be a guest speaker, man. Trot me out on stage to give folks real life perspective to go along with all the rhetoric.”

“Mm-hm,” Dean muttered. “That’s what I thought. You’re running on fantasies of performing under the spotlight. Dude, that’s not really what we do. The dog and pony show is just to get them through the doors. The work all happens upstairs. You’re not ready for what that’s like, and I’m not putting you on stage unless you pay your dues like everyone else. There’s not a coattail ride in this midway. So, you can come to Charlotte.” He advanced slowly, stalking his mate with a predatory pace. “And you can be Charlie’s sweaty little gopher, and you can fantasize all you want about the lights and the adoration and telling your compelling story – and it is compelling, Michael. Damn, I get it. But you wanted to be a mother, and you want to shoulder up to your Ozzie girlfriend and hold her coat for her, and you want to be the star attraction up under the stage lights in cities all over the U.S. But you can’t do all of that, Michael, not and do any of it right. You’re still training in the basics, man. And don’t get me started on that mash in your gut from what happened in the E.R. that we’re pretending you’re not still reeling from. It’s too damn much! Something’s gotta give, and it’s not going to be our pups.”

“Parents have careers all the time, Dean.”

“Yes, but how many careers are you aiming for? You think you can half-ass April’s management? And this! This is not a part-time gig!”

“Why not?!” Michael objected, taking the slacks from Dean with more vigor than he meant to and handing them off to the saleslady. “You’re telling me that if an Omega who’s not part of your pack but had all the right story bits and a willingness to talk about it on stage came along and volunteered, you would make them invest in hundreds of hours of classes first and commit to a 9 to 5 schedule?”

“Will this be all you need, dear?” her voice broke in shakily. “Perhaps some shirts, too?”

“We don’t need any shirts today,” Dean told her.

“I need three shirts,” said Michael without looking away from his mate. Dean paused and then gestured for Michael to select whatever he preferred with a touch too much grandiloquence.

“That’s one point to Michael,” he muttered to himself under his breath. “Bossy alpha types suck.”

Michael glowered as his purchases were rung up. Dean stood back and shuffled his feet, frowning at the floor and trying to work it all out. “I’m not seeing how it’s going to work, babe.”

Michael handed his credit card over and turned his back to the counter to watch Dean struggle. “It’s not Calculus.”

“Yeah, it kinda is. Look, we’re having a family. Kids, man. Pups. Probably a basketful. April’s never going to be home – when she is, she’ll be tied to her piano. Cas will be in Dayton more than Lawrence…or New York, or Seattle, or where-the-fuck-ever the mission takes him. I’m here except for the conventions. Right here, man. I’m at home more than I’m gone. That’s my role. I’m putting book writing at the top of my professional plan because it lets me stay close to where the pups are and keeps my hands in the big picture. Where are YOU going to be?”

“You never said you were shifting your work plan,” Michael said softly, taking his card back and slipping the bagged clothes off the counter. “You’re stepping out?”

“Not entirely, but in the next five years I’ll be spending way less time away from the house. There’s
Michael ruminated on it in silence for a couple of blocks. He let Dean select a sandwich shop on their way back, and only after they settled into wrought iron chairs on the sidewalk with their wrapped meals did he answer the question.

“I have to tell Pete no on the manager thing. I’m not suited to anything that directly interpersonal anyway. I would hate it, and I would hate watching people trying to get close to her and feeling obligated to run interference all the time. I’d be more a handicap to her than a help.”

Dean opened his bag of chips and crunched through a couple of them. “Mm,” he agreed. “Doesn’t mean we can’t be there for guidance though. She’ll need advisors she can trust – people who will always put her welfare above the craziness of her career success.”

“And people who will quietly beat the thunder out of anyone who tries to take advantage of her,” Michael added darkly.

Dean chuckled. “Dude, we can do better than that. We can legitimately make folks vanish if we want. Cas has mob connections.”

Michael chuckled darkly for a moment, but then shifted to avoid Dean’s eye. “They arrested all three of the attackers?” he asked Dean, uncomfortable suddenly in the epiphany that the corner they had chosen for lunch was the same type of street corner that a young man lost his life only a week or two ago. Michael shivered. Dean’s hand rested over his and squeezed.

“They picked them up yesterday afternoon. Bail’s way up there, bud. Those assholes aren’t getting away with this. There’s enough evidence, according to Cas, to link them to the murder and hold their feet to the fire. And with the pressure Alpha can put on the prosecutor, there’s not going to be any plea deals. They’re going for everything they can make stick. He’s serious about making an example of these guys and sending a message to all the other dickwads out there who think the world’s theirs to fuck with however they feel like. Baby, we’re putting a stop to it. I told you: I’m not fucking around with your safety – not yours or any Omega’s. It ends, man. It’s got to.”

Michael pursed his lips in an effort to keep his face stoic, and he squeezed Dean’s hand back.

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“Then we’re agreed,” Castiel finalized with a sturdy tap of his pen. “Bela Talbot transfers to Boston under Jim Murphy. Jonathon Miles stays on in Dayton and selects his own assistant in his own time, and Victor Henrickson keeps his Directorship provided Pamela Barnes accepts the role of Assistant Director under him. I’ll speak to Pam this afternoon. Billie, please assume she will accept and get preliminary documents drawn up for a posting to replace her here.”

“And if she doesn’t accept, Alpha? No one really wants to leave Lawrence,” Billie asked him.

“One bridge at a time,” he told her. “I’m flying to Dayton Sunday afternoon, and I’ll return Tuesday night. My schedule will be completely full for those two days, so I’ll need you to cover everything here in my absence.”
“Yes, Sir. I’ve got you,” Billie replied.

“Thank you, Billie. It’s comforting to know the Facility is in good hands. That’s the meeting folks. You’re dismissed.” The phone blipped with disconnections through the conference call, and everyone in the room shuffled about.

“Cas, take Crowley out to dinner on Monday evening.” She followed him into the hall and took her place at his shoulder. “Have a man-to-man with him. Give him the spiel, and see if there’s any chance you can win him over. It’s going to be a long five years if you have to hold his ‘nads in your fist the whole time.”

“I plan to do that, but I’m not especially hopeful. Fergus Crowley is a creature of habit and upbringing. He won’t be easily swayed by a good glass of wine and a passionate argument.”

“How about a swift kick up his ass?” she asked in an undertone. “Use your foot or whatever appendage is handy.”

He shrugged and pushed into his office. “I’m hoping it won’t come to that, but I’ll do what I must. He will follow the company line, whether it’s by his own choice or by pressure to his nether regions.”

“Are you taking April with you?”

“No, not this time. She’s got too much work to do, and my schedule keeps throwing hers off.”

“You can’t lean on Maureen every time you leave town, boss. What are you going to do?”

“Benny and Andrea are going to stay over this time. But you’re right. We need a stable, long term solution. She needs a permanent alpha chaperone, a business manager, and a professional agent, and I’m too swamped at the moment to give it the attention she deserves.”

“So, get Michael busy searching.” Billie didn’t think about the ramifications of putting Michael in charge of April’s safety and her career, but Cas hadn’t filled her in on the drama from home yet. His face told her there were extenuating circumstances. “That’s not a good idea?” she asked. “Why?”

He sighed heavily and dropped into his chair. He told her everything.

“Alpha, do you need me to step in and take care of it for you? If things are moving as fast as it sounds for her, she needs support yesterday. Michael can do this, sir. He knows how to put a search together and vet people properly. I worked with him on the cook posting myself. He’s a smart guy. But I understand if you can’t see your way through letting him…”

“No. Thanks for the offer, Billie. This is a Pack matter, and we’ll see to it ourselves. Michael is our manager, and he’s a fine one. He’s sharp and resourceful. Dean and I have barely had to lift a finger to plan our wedding. He’s arranged everything seamlessly. You may have guided his process, but he found Tony on his own, and Tony has been a godsend. I have to trust this to him. I don’t have a choice if I want the Pack’s trust in return.”

Billie nodded. “By the way, on the subject of the wedding. Bobby’s found you a photographer. He’s flying a woman in from Belize. He asked me to ask you to approve the expense.”

Cas gaped at her.

“I believe that’s checkmate to Bobby on that one, Sir.” She smiled and let herself out.
Castiel let his eyes fall closed while he counted to one hundred in his head, chanting, “Don’t sweat the small stuff,” over and over again. Dean was going to kill him for the wasted expense. But then, it had been a preening display to show his muscle off for Dean that had led Cas to throw selection of the photographer in Bobby’s lap in the first place. Perhaps a repeat performance would temper the man’s reaction to the price of a visa and a round trip flight from Belize. Perhaps this photographer was really that good.

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Castiel’s new favorite song was pounding down the hallway when he arrived home and stepped into the foyer. He smiled and picked up his step. Matt and Mark were both leaning over the edge of the piano with their eyes closed, concentrating hard. Mark still looked pale and weak, but he was much improved over last time Cas saw him.

Primates. They fell ill so often. It seemed such a dreadful evolutionary weakness. Colds and flu, all kinds of weird digestive dysfunctions and respiratory ailments, strange pains that hit out of nowhere and took months to diagnose, Castiel didn’t know how they could stand it.

He watched his mate and listened. She smiled without looking up, but he could only see part of her face. It didn’t matter. He knew the smile was there, and he mirrored her.

“Start over at 48,” Mark said stopping her. “Leave out the lyrics. There’s a catch in the flow right there. Play it again at tempo, but listen for it.”

She started playing mid-piece, and they had their eyes focused on each other this time, trying to hear something Cas couldn’t.

“What about this instead…?” she posed, and she played it again. It sounded the same to Cas, but Mark nodded. Cas slipped around and sat silently at the far table, pulling his phone out for a quick sweep through email while she finished up. It didn’t take long. Mark took a seat across from him while April argued with Matt about pacing or something.

“We’ve found a house in town, Alpha,” Mark told him. “We move in in a couple of weeks.”

“Excellent,” said Castiel. “We’ll rally the Pack on moving day, and help you get sorted. It’ll be good not to make that long drive every day.”

“Sir, I think it may bear repeating…she’s exceptionally talented. But she’s very naïve. We need to bring in help, and we need it now. She’s not ready for what’s coming, assuming Nick’s show doesn’t tank. If it does, that buys her some time. She needs to get up on some stages. She needs to perform in front of live audiences.”

Castiel listened, and he nodded. “Thank you. We’re going to be hiring the help she needs. Can we count on you two to advise us? If you know anyone suitable, we’re open to starting there. April and I would appreciate any assistance you have to offer. And as for playing live, what do you suggest there?” He tuck an arm around his mate as she joined them, still flushed with the joy of playing something new.

“Start with the skeevy clubs in Kansas City, if you can stand to let her do that,” Matt told him, following April over, but obviously having overheard the conversation. “You don’t want her recognized yet, and she’ll be playing for audiences who know what they want. It lets her sharpen her
claws in a place where all they care about is the music, and they won’t let her get away with a poor performance.”

“That place Dean learned to play,” April suggested.

“I doubt he meant that skeevy, kitten,” Cas squirmed. “But we can check into some options. You aren’t going without a cadre of guards though. They can blend in, but they’re going.”

“Will you come hear me play?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he told her. “Go grab your shoes, we’re going out. Thank you, gentlemen. That’s it for the day.”

“Where are we going?”

“You haven’t changed your mind about wanting a dog, have you?”

Her eyes flew wide, and she scuttled out to dig up a pair of shoes. Cas laughed softly. A dog was the last thing they needed, but… Well. She wanted one.

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Michael held the door for Dean as they tucked back into the Pack stronghold after a brutal day, and he reiterated his point with an air of certainty that was getting on Dean’s nerves.

“Look, it’s all about timing,” the Omega repeated. “We can’t do it before Charlotte or you’ll be limping around while you need to hit Deep alpha notes. I don’t want to wait until after the wedding, man. We’ll be out of pocket for a month after that. That leaves next week. Unless you’re stringing me along here, and you don’t want to do it at all, next week is what we’ve got. Are you in or not?”

Dean took Michael’s bags out of his hand with an air of patience he wasn’t feeling, and he set it all on the kitchen counter. He paused a moment with his hand on Michael’s shoulder, right over the lesser of two Mate-scars, and he gathered his thoughts.

“I’m in,” he assured his mate. “And I know you feel like we should’ve had this on the books weeks ago. I know you feel like it’s a power trip to keep stringing it out. But I don’t think you realize what a big step this is for me. You’re asking me to leapfrog over every insecurity I have and jump into something that’s always scared the living shit out of me.”

Michael paled, whispering, “I thought you wanted to do this with me.”

“I do. Damnit, I really do. It’s just that it’s a milestone for me in a weird, freaky way, cause Subs just don’t balk at shit like this normally, not Subs with an exhibitionist kink, especially not Subs with an exhibitionist kink AND a masochistic kink. But I’m not normal like most wolves, Michael, and I need you to cool it with the pressure. I didn’t think I was an exhibitionist until you poked it out of hiding, and then there it was, plain as day, itching to get scratched…”

“So, let’s get it scratched, Dean.” Michael had his hands low on Dean’s hips. He smelled good. He looked good. He had that reverberating ping going on through his groin that Dean could feel as clearly as if it were his own, and the alpha closed his eyes and centered himself in the embrace of mate. “I’m not pressuring you about pushing through insecurities,” he insisted. “If you tell me you’re not ready, we don’t do it. But that’s not what I’m feeling from you, and I think what’s going on is
that you’re hesitant to put another decision on Castiel’s plate right now. You’re not sure he’s going to lift the restrictions he slammed down on everything, and you don’t want to risk setting him off again by asking him.”

Dean had his answer forming in his head – something about not taking deliberate advantage of a vulnerable emotional state – when the door swung open, and a small black puffball of pure energy burst through and ricocheted off Michael’s calf before losing its footing and scrabbling off through the parlor door.

“What the fuck?” wondered Dean with his eyes wide.

“I think that answers whether the restrictions are lifted,” Michael said with a chuckle, turning to watch their packmates come in. April dropped a tangled pile of canvas and chain on the counter beside Michael’s bag and hustled after the puppy. Cas followed more slowly, an enormous bag of kibble over his shoulder, and an amused look on his tired face.

“Seriously?” Dean said. “We’re all going out of town for days, and you pick right now?”

“There’s never going to be a good time, Dean,” Cas defended. “And April’s not going out of town. Besides, Benny will be here, too. He’s bringing Rudy, so he and Andrea can work with April on training techniques. It’s the perfect time. Andrea has already agreed to watch Portia while we’re away on our honeymoon.”

“PORTIA?!”

“Yes, Portia. April said it’s about honoring strong female archetypes who struggle for standing even while bound to a flawed societal system. She’s a border collie – hound mix, we think. We’re not sure. She’s mostly fur right now, so it’s difficult to get a read on her body structure, but the ears and the muzzle look houndlike to me. The fur looks collie. I don’t know. She didn’t come with a pedigree. She’s a rescue, they tell me…something about raiding a puppy mill and pulling out some ‘accidental’ pups that were likely to have found themselves at the bottom of the river if they didn’t grow up to be sellable as designer crosses. The business owner is facing charges, and the puppies were on the shelter’s list for euthanizing. I couldn’t leave her to that, Dean.”

Dean stared at him as he spilled. “You’re adorable,” he said at last. “Portia, it is.”

April came back in, glowing, holding the fluffball up under her chin. “Look at her, Michael! She’s so sweet. Here, smell her paw! It smells like cornflakes.”

“Um, no thanks. I’ll take your word for it.”

“There are more supplies in the car, fellas,” Cas told them. “Would you mind helping us unload and figure out how to situate everything? We will need to puppy-proof the house. I’m not giving her free reign over everything.” He dropped his shoulder and let the bag slide onto the kitchen table before leading them back out to the garage. “We need to get a crude dog run erected outside the kitchen until something more permanent can be built, and we need to get a dog door installed.”

“Slow down, Alpha,” Dean protested, taking in the rolls of chicken wire fencing Cas had somehow crammed into his trunk. “We’ve got a gardener to do the outdoor work. Philip can install the dog door, all that stuff. You’re going manic on me. Cool it a little. Slow down and talk to us a second. Michael’s got something to ask you.”

Cas closed his car’s rear door, holding a dog bed in his hand and looking ruffled. “Ask me? What is it? Is it about the convention in Charlotte? I said yes to that already.”
“No, it’s not Charlotte, Alpha,” Michael told him, taking a large bag of toys and raw hides from the trunk while Dean wrestled a flat baby-gate out from beneath the chicken wire. “Not directly, anyway.” He slammed the trunk closed, and they made their way back into the house.

“Did you get the water and food bowls, Dean?” Castiel asked him, still flustered.

“Michael’s got them,” he answered. “He has all the bags that were in the trunk.”

Monica met them at the door and took ownership of most of the supplies. The whole staff seemed to have engaged themselves in setting Portia’s living spaces up and taking turns cooing at her.

“I need to know where we stand on the restrictions now that it looks like your Alpha is over the worst of…of everything. Are we greenlighted to do the scene Dean and I had in the works? Can we try the foursome again? I mean, if I promise to keep my distance from Pete, and not set you off just yet? Maybe all of us taking it slowly but in the same space, like we all said we wanted. I still want that, Alpha. And I want to know your opinion about me getting a chance to speak at conventions. Am I reading this wrong? It feels like we slid into a new phase, and maybe the boxes have opened up a little more.”

Cas scoffed, and watched Portia scramble happily between Eunice and Tony who were rolling a ball back and forth on the floor between them. April and Fred had the baby-gate unpackaged and were trying to figure out if it required screws to hold it in place, or simply tension.

There was easily enough chaos for one evening already, and Michael’s timing struck Cas as an opportunistic jab. But Michael had obviously been chewing on it before he knew there was a puppy to contend with, so perhaps it was Cas who was guilty of distractions, not the Omega. This conversation was overdue, and wishing otherwise was a copout Cas was too invested to take.

“Michael, you’re not reading it wrong,” Castiel told him, assuming a directive tone. “We need to talk through it all. I want the air as clear as possible before the wedding.”

It took time, obviously. Dinner arrived on the table a bit later than normal. Cas had a hell of a time rousting Gabriel and Kali to join them, but he needed to check in with his brother considering the latest trauma’s freshness. No amount of sex or endorphins could wash away what Gabe had experienced, and Cas knew his brother well enough to want to see his behavior live for himself. At least for an hour or so.

Gabriel looked good. He was not hiding behind a mask of solemn silence. His eyes were haunted in a way that seemed appropriate, but the laugh lines touched them when Kali made a joke, and their interactions weren’t stressed. Kali had an easy way with Gabe, like she wasn’t built from the same material as the rest of them, and whatever she was made of passed right through his barriers as if they weren’t there and touched him precisely as he needed to be touched. Marina had been the same.

Gabriel felt his little brother’s eyes on him, and he quietly lifted his wine glass in a subtle salute that Castiel returned.

“You’re keeping the dog in the kitchen?” asked Kali. “Where our meals are prepared?”

“The alternative,” Castiel told her. “Is that we portion off a part of the house for her adjacent to YOUR suite. There is space outside your room by the back door where we can arrange a nest for her and she can have access to the yard. Of course, if she turns out to be a barker, whiner, or crier, that may be disturbing to you far more than having her on this end of the house. Besides, she’s barricaded from the preparatory portion of the kitchen.”
They left the puppy where she was.

“How much did you pay for her?” Gabe asked, watching her scratch futilely at the gate.

“Standard adoption fees and a down payment on having her spayed when she gets a little older,” Cas answered thoughtfully. “And a substantial contribution to the shelter to provide the means of supporting the rest of the litter until homes can be found. It took some convincing to get the “Kill list” scrubbed.”

“We’re not adopting all of them, Alpha,” Dean warned him.

“No, we’re not. That doesn’t stop it from hurting. I want them all out of that place. All of them.”

There wasn’t much to say to that. Portia turned out to be a whiner, the hound in her leading her to make liberal use of her voice to communicate her disgust at being separated from the Pack at large. But pack hierarchies were something the family already understood, and her complaints went unanswered for the moment. They all knew how to handle a brat, whether human or four-legged. She would be showered with attention and adoration in due course, but not during dinner.

Submissives don’t make demands in Castiel’s household.

He glanced at her and couldn’t resist smiling.

Dean leveled a look down the table at him. “Does it ease the burn in your gut any?” he probed.

“No,” Cas told him, but his face remained soft.

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“Not completely blind, then?” Michael pressed, settling down onto the bench at the picnic table as they’d done the first time they talked through starting to open their beds into a full pack kennel.

“Hank’s eyes respond to subtle shifts of light,” Cas said somberly. “But the irises don’t behave the way they should for his age, and his ability to focus phases out unless objects are very close to his face. He may improve, or he may be extremely near-sighted. It’s too soon to be sure.”

“They aren’t going to get worse though?” Michael frowned.

“They shouldn’t get worse for the foreseeable future. It seems to be developmental, not degenerative.” Cas held the puppy’s leash when April handed it to him. She filled a bowl with water and set it to the side beneath a short, scrubby tree and then collected the puppy and tied her off.

Michael nodded, relieved. “We can get him a pair of those tiny eyeglasses with a wrap-around strap and cushioned nose piece. It doesn’t sound that bad. I was worried he wasn’t going to have any function at all.”

“Well, it’s not going to be easy,” Cas sighed. “He’s already got a hill to climb as he gets older and learns the truth about his origins.”

“Everybody has a hill to climb, Alpha,” Dean said, stepping over the bench and sliding in beside Cas with a nuzzle along his hairline. “Some get more than others, but we’ll help them both figure it out. They’ve got pack. He’s a healthy little guy, other than his peepers, and he’s got a stubborn streak just
like his dad. He’ll be fine.”

“Stubborn like his dad?” put in April. “You should have seen Jess while you two were gone. She dug in and wouldn’t shift for anyone! Even Michael gave up on her. I thought Ozzies were the troublesome ones.”

“I didn’t give up on her, Pete. I just wasn’t in the right frame of mind to help her. I was dealing with a load of crap of my own.” Michael handed her a bottle of water as she sat beside him.

“Yeah, about that load of crap,” Dean prompted. “How are you doing now? Having those assholes locked up helps, right? What do you need?”

Michael sighed. “I need to keep poking at it slowly, Dean, but I need to do it on my own terms. Let me handle it myself, all right? I’ve got help here, and I mean to make use of them. This is one of those things that feels like it needs a circle of Omegas to untangle it. And it’s going to take some time. It’s not a quick fix.”

“Circle of Omegas? So…not your mate?” Dean clarified. He was a little hurt, but Michael was open enough to have a raw edge to him, and Dean was careful.

Michael shook his head. “I still need you, too, Dean. This trust thing is new to me. I’ve never tried this before because I never had family I could turn to like this. Gabe and Pete have offered to help me shoulder this mess and shift it when I can. I want to try to see how that goes. You can understand that, can’t you? Aren’t there things you struggle to handle that you need to work through with other alphas?”

Dean flicked his eyes to meet Castiel’s. “Yeah, there are. Some things.”

“Ask me about it whenever you’re curious though, Dean. I’m not hiding anything from you…from either of you.” He met Cas’ eye to include him, and Cas nodded in acceptance.

The Alpha picked up the thread with Michael and shifted it. “You said you wanted to discuss the role you’ll be offered when you attend conventions in the future. I assume you and Dean have not yet come to an agreement about that.”

It hung in the air as a question.

“He keeps telling me we need to talk it over with you, sir, but we never do,” Michael griped. “He’s stalling because he really doesn’t want me there at all.”

“Is that correct, Dean?” Cas asked the man, and Dean couldn’t pretend otherwise and make it stick. Michael’d called it.

“It’s too risky, Alpha. We can’t keep the tide from turning against him and in turn, against all Omegas who want to assert themselves into a role society isn’t ready to allow them yet. We’re not ready yet.”

The silence lengthened. Dean didn’t back down, but he could see that his mate’s determination had already seeped into Castiel’s vision. Cas had been saying the time was ripening for a long time now – well before they ever met Michael.

“I see your cogs spinning in there, Alpha. It doesn’t have to be this Omega. Find someone else! Put your own mate up there with a target on her chest and tell me how safe she is!”

“What do you think is going to happen, Dean? Do you imagine he’s in physical danger? More so
Castiel’s voice was infuriatingly warm and compassionate. “You don’t really believe the words you’re saying. I know you better than that. You know as well as I do, and Michael and April no doubt know with even deeper certainty, that the only way things are truly going to improve for Omegas is to show society the truth about who they are and what they’re capable of doing. We’re treading water right now, my love. We’ve been doing that for long enough. It’s time.”

“Why Michael?” Dean begged plaintively. “I can’t lose him, Cas. I’d die.”

Cas chuckled warmly and put an arm around Dean. “It’s not about you,” he echoed Dean’s words in a whisper. “He needs this. You know he does. We promised him we’d give him everything he needs, and he needs to play a role in the progress we’re making. It’s his fight, Dean, even more than it is ours.”

“You’re going to make me go along, aren’t you?” he pouted, pulling away from the embrace.

“No, I’m not,” Cas assured him. “He’s your mate, your Omega. It’s your decision to make. But you’re fighting a battle from the wrong side right now, Dean. It’s fear and nothing else that’s making that decision for you. Don’t let fear choose your course. You know where that leads. Look at your mate. He’s Omega, and he’s in need. He’s asking for help from his alpha. He needs your support and your assurance that his voice matters. It’s really that simple. The rest is fear. We can’t make people love a dominant Omega. We can’t turn the tide overnight. But we can refuse to perpetuate the false limits. I believe he can do this, Dean, and I believe he’s the right person for the job. It’s not our job as alphas to put chains around our mates’ limbs to keep them from harm. Those chains are a harm in and of themselves. April convinced me I was right there doing exactly that, and I was wrong to do that to her. Dean, it’s our job to cut the shackles off and to stand guard to keep any more of them from taking hold.”

Dean frowned. He’d been hoping Cas would join him in forming a wall between the hostile world and his naïve mate.

Cas sighed. “You challenged me to face myself internally,” he reminded Dean. “And to bend for something I didn’t believe was possible. It turns out, it was not only possible, it was inevitable. I’m not fully reconciled to it all yet, but I’m certain that in time, I will be. I only ask that you accept the same challenge, and get out of Michael’s way when the time comes. We can’t ask the public to accept something we don’t accept ourselves.”


“On that note,” Cas declared, letting the topic go. Michael looked tentatively hopeful. “…I have some things to say on another matter. I request that you all give me your respectful attention for a moment and allow me to get through this before we continue discussing future plans.” Castiel was pleased to note that they all seemed invested and attentive without any insubordinate undercurrents behind their eyes. Even Michael. Even Dean, once he shrugged his frustration off and squared back up.

“I’ll start with lifting the restrictions that I placed previously, although it’s evident that the horse has already left the barn on that. Michael, you administered a Dominant response yesterday at the restaurant when your mate showed signs of spinning toward a Submissive flareup, and that clearly went counter to my instructions to refrain from any form of Topping behavior without my approval.”
Michael stiffened and started to defend himself, but Cas held a palm up and lowered his head in acknowledgment, saying, “But you did the right thing, and you did it well. I commend you for your swift response. Dean has been holding the ship’s course for days now, alone and unaided. He is capable of doing that for as long as we all need him to, I’m pleased to realize, but the fallout afterward will always be severe if he isn’t offered a steam vent.”

Cas shifted his attention to Dean. “I’m very grateful to you, my love. You stood strong, and you were right. About all of it.”

Dean smiled softly. “Knew you’d come around if you chewed on it long enough.” His sheepishness told Cas he’d assimilated how similar their struggles really were and how the tables had flipped.

“I can’t tell you, any of you, how grateful I am for the trust you showed in me.” He rested a hand over Dean’s on the table, and he included Michael and April with his eyes. “I’m an arrogant, presumptive jackass, and I’m far from perfect, and yet, you trusted that I could find my way through it all anyway. Thank you for helping me. Thank you for not giving up on me. I’ve learned a great deal in a very short time, primarily about my own failures…my own weaknesses. I vow to all of you that I will take my own assumptions with a critical eye and a grain of salt from here on. I will endeavor to take your input to heart before I act as often as I can, and I will attempt to be open minded and far more fair than I’ve been in the past.”

He took a deep breath and gathered himself. “That said, I still have a responsibility for the direction and the stability of this family. I ask for your faith, your continued faith, in my leadership and my authority. I want more than ever to be sufficient to the challenge of providing all of you the direction you need. Can you honestly tell me that you still trust me enough to accept my leadership? I cannot second guess myself constantly and still be an adequate Alpha. I can’t do this halfway.”

Michael cleared his throat and looked around at the others. “Sir, we trust you. I think I speak for all of us. I’m sorry about smacking Dean’s ass without asking you first. I should have waited. He probably needs a real scene anyway after the last several days and all that captaining he did.”

“Thank you, Michael. I’m trying to assure you that you did the right thing yesterday. Yes, Dean’s going to need a good, hard blowout to re-center his alpha, and we’ll do that for him. But what you did yesterday was the perfect stopgap. My point is, and this was recently explained to me in very clear terms, I often overthink critical matters to the point that I impede our progress rather than protect us. Sometimes I am too careful and too slow to act when actions are necessary. In retrospect, what’s become quite obvious is that, while my words and my rules set up a hard, unbendable matrix that makes me feel as if I’m maintaining a modicum of control, my actions subvert that control again and again, and prove that the rigid structures are a limit, not a necessity.”

“English, C.J.”

“What he’s trying to say,” April added. Cas snapped his mouth closed. “Is that he gets in his own way. We’ve had a lot of talks where we all promised to go slowly, do things in a particular order, work it out one step at a time and talk it all to death, and then his Alpha jumps in and does whatever it wants without regard to what we discussed, and those times always jump us forward way better than the careful pace does.” She faced her mate and reached across to lay her hand on top of his on top of Dean’s. “Alpha, we trust you. Maybe it’s time for you to trust yourself. Your instincts aren’t always bad. When it comes to the four of us, they’re usually dead on.”

“No, kitten, I can’t ever trust my instincts without taking a moment to examine them before I act. Doing so is what led me to that disastrous confrontation against Michael.”

“Middle ground for us, then, C.J.” Dean suggested. “Let’s work on how to pick up the pace of
checking over those impulses to weed out the destructive from the good. I get that you have to be supremely careful when it’s rage you’re feeling. Tearing new orifices in folks who don’t deserve it is a shitty thing to do. But, dude, if you wake up horny in the morning, and you reach for one of us, I don’t think any of us are going to want to check where we are on the schedule before we roll into that. God, Cas, go for it! You’re Alpha for a reason, and it comes with some fringe benefits. *TAKE them!*

April laughed and turned away a bit. Michael smiled and bit his thumbnail. Castiel frowned.

Dean leaned forward. “We are so fucking close, man. So close to getting this right. Forget taking it slow and feeling each other out. Man, we’re there. We’ve felt each other out ‘till our balls are blue… even April’s! I’ve run contract scenes with you, Alpha. I know what you can do. Turn your wolf on and get out of your own head and run us a scene. Use all of us! Put us wherever your wolf wants us, and get some sweat flowing! Holy shit, we’re so close!” Dean had to get up and pace. He found himself squatting down to scratch Portia’s head while she happily mouthed at his shoes. He tried to shake her off, but she persisted until Castiel hissed a snap of a correction without leaving his bench, and the puppy froze, wide-eyed, her whole body turned to the Alpha and her mouth paralyzed mid-chew.

“C.J., you’re beating yourself up over being inconsistent. You make a declaration, and you hold all of us to it, and then you bust through it yourself like a bull in a china shop. Man, you do that all the time. You always have. Seriously, you always have. And that’s not a complaint! What I’m telling you is that we…” Dean circled his finger to include all of them from his squatted position. “…We all work fine with that. If you need the declarations, the limits, the restrictions, whatever you wanna call it, to give yourself some time to work it out through that big noggin of yours, that’s fine! We can do that! We’ll wait. But if your instinctive side gets there before your front brain does and plows through the rules without asking you first? Dude, that’s between you and your wolf. Paddle HIM if you want to. None of the rest of us are judging you for that. We need consistency from you, but we don’t need THAT kind of consistency. Me? I need to know how you expect to see MY behavior. I’m not clocking yours. If you give me a rule, and I break it, I expect you to whack my ass over a barrel. That’s the consistency I’m craving. I don’t care if you break your own rules.”

Cas frowned at him. “It makes no difference to you if I’m wildly unpredictable from one moment to the next? How can that be true, Dean? You need to be sure I will keep my word. Don’t you?”

Dean shrugged. “‘Bout some things, yeah. When and where and how we fuck, not so much. You’re actually way more predictable than you think you are.”

“Wait. Hold up!” Michael protested. “Why do you need that from me and not from him? You’ve got me practically filing a treatise on the gangbang we both want before it goes forward, but it’s okay for him to plow you whenever and however?”

Dean licked his lips. “It’s different, Michael. Cas already knows all my insecurities, and he knows where my pressure points are. For all his restrictions and worries, his wolf is not going to do anything to harm me. Or you. Or April. He could run a foursome scene with all of us without thinking about it beforehand, and I know he’ll keep us safe the whole time. He’s not going to hurt any of us, man. He couldn’t if he wanted to. I think you proved that yesterday.”

Dean was locked onto Cas’ blue eyes before he got halfway through his explanation to Michael, and what he found there was everything he needed. Cas nodded slightly.

“But you’re worried that *I* might,” Michael finished for him.

“We’re still building, you and me,” Dean admitted. “We have a lot to learn together. And I’m
looking forward to every step of the way. That gangbang is going to be awesome, and I’m in. But, no, don’t surprise me with it, and don’t pressure me to schedule it sooner than I’m ready just because the schedule’s getting tight. I’m not saying no to next week. I’m saying that the time constraints aren’t the most important consideration.”

“If we talk it over there’s a chance it could go forward before the wedding?” Michael challenged.

“A good chance, babe. I want to do this. With you. I want to try. Just give me a hot second to wrap my head around it.” Michael’s sultry smile was all the reward a Sub could want, and Dean melted just a little.

“April?” Cas prompted.

“I agree with Dean.”

“About everything?” He couldn’t help feeling amused at their teaming up.

“What he and Michael do together isn’t any of my business, but about how it’s fine with us for you to wrestle your own worries and override your own plans if you want to. You can do anything you want to do to me, Castiel. I’m not afraid of your Alpha, or your wolf, or of you. You’re not going to hurt me.”

“I did hurt you, love,” he reminded her sadly. “I left you to struggle alone in the mess of my psyche.”

She met his guilt-ridden eyes bravely. “That’s over now, Cas. Nothing like that is ever going to happen again. I’m through hiding, and you have a job to do. I’m yours, sir.”

He nodded, and the mantle of Alpha, uncomfortably askew for the last few days, slipped back into place. He took a deep breath through his nose. Dean left the puppy and stood up, unconsciously squaring up to his Dom again. Michael’s spine straightened.

“The other thing I realized through my most recent introspections,” Castiel continued. “Is that I often woefully underestimate the extent of intensity my wolf plans to unleash upon your bodies when I give the reins over to him. That is unacceptable in a Dominant, and it’s what I’ll be focusing on correcting first. With that in mind, I am restricting the four of us to keep our first full scene together relegated to a Friday or Saturday evening when we can be assured of having a good long lie-in the morning after. This is not one I will alter with my wolf’s impulses.”

Dean squeezed in between April and Michael with a significant look into April’s eyes, a fully raised brow, and a deliberate rubbing of his right ear.

“I mean it, Dean. If we’re doing this, it’s on my terms, and at my timing. If either of you attempt to provoke an episode before I’m ready, I’ll lay you both over the back of the couch side by side, switch you until you can barely walk, and then send you off to work as usual.”

“Yessir,” he responded with a shiver.

“On the other hand,” Cas went on. “Short of a full Dom/sub scene, I see no reason not to extend our four-way Pack sleeping bed to a four-way Pack fucking bed. I want to direct activities though, and I’m claiming that right for myself here and now. Michael, keep your hands off April unless I instruct you to put them there. April, don’t touch...or KISS...anyone but me without permission.”

She laughed and ducked her head but managed a quiet, “Yes, sir.”

“She can’t kiss Dean ‘hello’?” Michael asked acerbically.
Castiel stopped himself from snapping back. He took in the energy he could feel around him, the scents, the pressure in the air and in his body, and he let the knee jerk tension go. “Let me put it like this,” he said calmly. “If you are unsure whether I will take exception to a particular touch or kiss in light of what you know of me and all of my designations, then don’t do it. Is that clear enough?”

“Yes, Alpha,” April responded immediately.

“Michael?”

He worked his jaw for a moment. He looked at Dean.

“I’m not helping you with this one, buddy,” Dean told him. “You know the answer to this.”

Michael ran a hand over his face. It was another of those moments where he could feel a chance to assert himself in a way that felt good in the immediate moment, but those so often proved to bite him later on. It was academic. April had told him to pull up and wait. Waiting might take years. He didn’t sense anything from her but a firm stance where he was concerned. She wasn’t wavering, and he wasn’t about to find her standing over his bed in the middle of the night pleading with him to take her in his arms in any way but platonically. Not yet.

It wasn’t about April.

Pete.

It wasn’t about Pete. It was about Michael and his distaste of submitting to the will of a superior.

“It’s clear, sir,” he said at last.

“How do you understand where the boundaries are?” Cas asked him.

Michael paused again, digging into his Omega for guidance in this unfamiliar landscape. “The boundaries are clear, Alpha,” he said. “I need to know if there’s a chance they may ever shift. I need to know if what’s in your hands right now might someday belong to Pete instead. They are boundaries that she should have the final say over. And if she says they can move, do they move?”

The weight in the air shifted again, and they all held still from the pressure of it. Castiel regarded each in turn, but he settled on April.

“Kitten? Would you like to answer that question?”

April sat forward and Dean settled back a little to let her see Michael. “It’s really my decision at this point, Michael. Ultimately, it’s you and me who decide what we do. Castiel would find a way to accept us even if we push the envelope before he’s ready. But I owe a great deal of respect to my mate, and I’m going to be honest with him about anything and everything, just as I will be with you. You know I care for you. He knows as well, and it’s a touchy subject that we all have to be aware could divide and hurt us. We are not the same as the alphas, Michael. And I am not ready to make a choice like that. Can the boundaries shift one day? One day, I hope they will. Until then, Alpha’s rule protects me as much as it does him. Or you. You told me that you would still have my back and that you would be there for me however I needed you. I hope that’s still true.”

Michael reached across and touched her cheek. “I don’t go back on my word, Pete. Whatever you need from me. No questions asked.” She smiled sweetly at him.

“But I don’t think he’s saying our foursome is just going to be two isolated couples in one bed that never cross the centerline. Right, Cas?” She transferred her gaze slowly from Michael to Castiel. All
of them looked across the table and waited for the answer to that. Dean’s hand found its way to Michael’s thigh.

“Will you agree to follow my lead?”

“Of course, sir,” she told him. “You’re the Alpha.”

“And you’ll understand that if I instruct Michael to pleasure you in a way that pleases me, that doesn’t give you both permission to seek one another out on your own later?”

“For God’s sake, man, we get it! Stop torturing them both with the teasing! Just say yes already!”

Dean’s brat slapped the table in front of him, and both Omegas jumped.

Castiel didn’t jump. “Would the two of you excuse us, please?” he asked the Omegas without looking away from Dean. “I believe that’s all we need to discuss for the moment. I’d like a few minutes alone with my fiancé. Please take Portia with you. See if you can get her settled.”

Michael and April returned to the house hand in hand. April carried the water dish, and Michael handled the puppy’s leash as the black mop gamboled along happily beside him. Dean watched them go.

“You, uh, never really answered the question, Cap’n.”

“What question is that?” Cas stood up and circled the picnic table, sliding up onto it the face Dean.

“Whether it’s to be an all hands on deck situation kind of foursome, or we all stay in our lanes but drop the cubicle walls between us.” He paused a moment and then looked up at Castiel towering above him. “Are you going to spank me now?”

Cas laughed. “Do you want me to?”

“I always want you to, C.J.”

“Walk with me,” Cas said instead of answering. He stood up and held his hand out in invitation.

Dean took it and let his Dom pull him to his feet. “Yeah, that works too. I miss you sometimes, babe, even with you right next to me.” They began a slow circuit of the duck pond. Cas cut away from it once they’d reached the far side, and he strolled casually through his dominion like he owned the place. Dean matched him step for step, releasing his hand and circling his waist instead. Under the trees toward the property line, Cas pulled him to a stop and kissed him. Dean pressed himself in as close as he could get and let all the sensations be, exactly as they were. They were all good ones. His eyes slipped closed, something he never would have allowed before the ring and the mates and the casual surety of Castiel’s affection.

“If I haven’t told you today,” Cas whispered into his left ear, above the spot where no scar marred the curve of his shoulder. “It’s still Yes!” He growled out the last with an intensity that went straight to Dean’s groin.

“Nnghh!” was Dean’s response, followed by a roll of his hips and a nip to Cas’ throat that woke his wolf. Woke them both.

By the time they made it back to the house, neither was wearing shoes. Dean had leaves and dirt in his hair, and his backside throbbed both from within and without. Castiel wore a shit-eating grin that Dean decided he’d earned well enough that Dean left him to his smugness.
“We’re down to a matter of weeks, Pet,” he mused, holding Dean’s hand in his left and all four shoes in his right, comfortably allowing the tertiary fog to follow them back up the lawn. Dean seemed reticent to let it go, and Cas had no issue with that. “Any qualms about meeting me at the alter?”

“None at all,” Dean responded to the grass a couple of yards ahead of his stride. “…Sir. I don’t want Hydrangeas in the floral arrangement. Other than that…I’m good.”

Cas chuckled. “I leave the flowers to you and Michael. It makes no difference to me.”

They walked on a bit. Dean broke the silence after a minute. “Is Naomi coming?”

Cas didn’t falter. “I had not planned to invite my mother.”

“Michael says we should bring her and let her see for herself how the Pack stands now.”

Cas stopped walking and faced Dean. “It isn’t Michael’s decision though. It’s mine and yours. He seems brazenly nonchalant about your emotional wellbeing for a mate. Why would he suggest such a thing?”

“I dunno. It’s just that I think he may be right. Cas, once she slides under from the weight of her broken beta, I won’t get another chance to close this thing up. I kinda want to look in her eyes and make her see me as what I am. I want to see that acknowledgment. I think I need it.”

“Dean, I don’t doubt that could do you a world of good…and me too for that matter. But at our wedding? Really? What if you don’t respond the way you’re hoping to? What if she doesn’t?”

“I want to take a stand, Castiel. I think I need it. I think I need it in a big, showy way so it’s decisive. Definitive. Incontrovertible, to use one of your words.”

Castiel lingered on the lawn, dredging the lines of his Claim over Dean to try to pull truth up to the surface. He searched the green eyes, grey in the darkness, for anything telling. “Are you hoping she’ll misbehave and provoke me to humiliate her in front of all our friends? You know I’ll do that without hesitation if she pulls one of her rants.”

“Maybe a little,” Dean admitted. “Mostly I want to win over the anxiety I get in my belly every time I think about her. It’s the same clutch I feel when I think of Michael up on that stage where people can sneer at him and tell him to get back in the kitchen. It’s all part of the same thing. It’s the old guard who think they know how everyone has to behave, and even though I know they’re as wrong as they can be, I still hear it in my sleep, chirping at me to get back in my place and behave my fucking self. I don’t want to sweep Michael up into that, but I can’t stop myself. Cas, I gotta stop myself.”

“It’s our wedding though…”

“No better time and place to make a stand.”

“Are you sure? This isn’t Michael browbeating your sense of familial obligation…?”

“I don’t have a sense of familial obligation where Naomi is concerned,” Dean countered. “I answer to you and Michael. I owe family commitment to Sam and Gabe and April and everyone else in the Pack – the real Pack. She’s part of my past, not my future, and I need to put her there.”

“Does Tessa know about this?” Cas asked, starting back up the slight incline toward the house. He angled to take them right toward the kitchen entrance where Philip was digging post holes for the puppy run.
“Yeah. She’s on board. Says it’s a crapshoot, but she thinks I’m ready to face the dragon without getting scorched.”

“Well, that’s encouraging.” Cas stopped near the gardener and studied the layout he had sketched. Dean couldn’t tell if he’d meant that sarcastically or not. “Looks good, Philip. It doesn’t have to be finished tonight. We sprung this on you. Tomorrow is soon enough.”

“It won’t take me long now, Alpha. I got all the holes dug. From here, it’s just a matter of stringing up the fence. Done in a jiffy. I’ll put in the door tomorrow though. It’s gonna be noisy. I need light, too.”

“Thank you, Philip. That will be fine.”

“Good night, alphas,” he said cheerfully and stooped to collect fence posts from the pile at his feet.

Dean stumbled after Cas. ‘Alphas’ had a nice ring to it. The household staff saw him as belonging to the manor house as clearly as Castiel did. He didn’t know when that happened. He missed it as it shifted, but it was entrenched now. There was no denying. Once, he was an esteemed guest, a favorite, but still a guest. Now, he was their alpha. Cas caught him smiling to himself.

“Just a few more weeks, Dean. Then you’re mine forever,” he said in a dark but warm tone…like chocolate…or good coffee.

“I’ve been yours for years, Alpha,” Dean reminded him. “You just had to claim your property. Was always yours.”

“Too sore for another round, alpha?” Cas asked, leading him into the kitchen. Portia looked up from her soft basket and thumped her tail hopefully, but the alphas didn’t invite her to join them, and she settled back down.

“It’s not my call, is it?” asked Dean in confusion. “You don’t usually let me make that one.”

“We’re not scening now, Dean. I want you in my bed, and I’d like to make out with you naked under the blankets. If something erotic develops from that, then so be it. I’m asking if you’re interested in making love with me with no construct of rules this evening? That’s entirely your choice.”

“Castiel, if I ever say no to that, shoot me. I’m rabid.” Dean stepped up his pace and hauled the man up the stairs and into their bedroom. It was empty. Mates had evidently found something wholesome to occupy their evening with, if Cas’ bond link told him truthfully, but his intentions were far from wholesome, and he kicked the door closed with his foot as he walked Dean backward toward the bed. Dean went where he was put, and he rolled his face up to meet Castiel’s as the Alpha curled down over him, laying him out flat on his back.

Making out took them into late evening, no more than the simple physical connection of skin to skin, swollen lips to swollen lips, tongue against tongue, and hands always in motion. Dean didn’t mark when it shifted to something more or what time it was when they lay tangled and still, a little sweaty, a great deal satisfied, and more than a touch sore in a few places. He listened to Castiel drift off into gentle snores at his hairline. He focused on watching Michael settle in for bed down the hall, no lingering resentments evident, no hard feelings at all. The mates touched and held through the distance in a way that made Dean smile into the darkness against Castiel’s shoulder. How odd a balance they’d found. How unlikely. One might say miraculous if one hadn’t been there to see the hard scrabble elbows thrown, the dodging deflections, the stubborn refusals just before it all slid into place.
Everything was still and dark. Castiel snorted in his sleep and rolled away, seeking a cooler section of the bedding. He slept hot when he slept hard, and he needed a good night’s sleep desperately. Dean let him go, curling onto his belly, and wrapping his arms beneath his pillow with a deep sigh.

So close to getting everything right. So damn close.

Dean fell asleep with Michael lazily stroking his bond link.

Chapter End Notes

The U.S. is still a mess. Stay sane, folks. Register to vote. And vote. Just sayin’.

My laptop went haywire, so comment responses are from my phone, and that’s always an interesting exercise. :)

Also, it’s my birthday again (AGAIN!) in a couple of days. I’m boycotting this year. Shh.
Chapter 97

Chapter Summary

Full disclosure: Not a lot of forward progress in this chapter. Fair warning. :P

Michael settles up with his mate for crimes against their Mating-bond. April playfully regresses, much to her mate's approval.
Gabe and Kali enjoy a home cooked meal. Dean and Cas go through the agenda list together.

Chapter Notes

Y'all, I'm becoming more and more disheartened by the state of the world every day. I turn to the therapeutic embrace of fanfic for an escape, but even after spending hours tapping upon my newly repaired laptop, I still found time to vote. If you're a U.S. voter, and you haven't cast a ballot yet, it's imperative you do so. The soul of our nation is at stake.

Heartfelt condolences to the communities and families of the slain in Kentucky and Pennsylvania. I'm devastated at the range and audacity of hatred. Murdered for nothing but one's existence is a fucking horrible reason to die.

So, on to another rambling chapter that serves no great purpose but to help keep one person sane enough to keep moving forward.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
NOW:

Wednesday rolled into Thursday, and the delicate peace held.

Dean sucked in his gut and his sense of humiliation and went with Michael’s suggestion to sparkle for the cameras from his stage persona. He was pleased that the camera crew didn’t insist he bare his chest, but they rolled his sleeves up 50’s style and oiled his biceps a little. They had him staged in front of the open hood of his beautiful automobile, and took more shots than he preferred from behind him as he pretended to fiddle with valves and hoses and bits. There was the requisite flexing of muscles and a strangely posed shot of Dean squinting into the setting sun and leaning into his open driver’s side door, only his well-loved boots peeking out below the door. All in all, it wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d been picturing – nowhere near the Playgirl centerfold he first envisioned. And the interview really allowed him to delve into the techie side of his love of mechanics. Charlie would be proud.

Michael took him over once the crew left, forbade him from showering the oil off, and the two of them debased one whole section of the garage that Cas and Dean hadn’t got around to baptizing in all their years together.

“They’re gonna put a shot of me from behind on the cover, Michael,” Dean groused in the aftermath.

“Yes, of course. It’s a very shapely behind. They’d be fools not to.”

Kali never batted a carefully curled eyelash at the oaths when she spoke them, nor at being the only naked wolf in the room, nor at the rather explicit instructions she received from Castiel in reference to what was and what wasn’t allowed by way of honeymoon activities just before her Keller test on Friday. She smiled passively and thanked him for his clarity of message before stooping to collect her clothes and leading her husband back to their suite in the rear of the house. They’d both politely declined a celebration feast, selected to feast upon one another instead, and they didn’t need the rest of the pack for that.

Gabriel’s bouncing step in her wake told the alphas to expect at least a little pushback to the limits Cas just set. Dean glanced at Cas, and Cas simply shook his head.

There was so much that still needed doing. The teaching staff up at The Facility was stretched to its breaking point. Cas let Dean and Jo raid the Health Services and Contracting departments for extra pairs of hands, even while Dean spent every spare moment tying off frayed ends and holding classes together as a stopgap while teachers made all the ends meet in the middle. Castiel put in an hour or two here and there, but he and Dean had begun wearing their headsets everywhere they went. Neither could afford to be out of range of a phone if Keller or one of the satellites called.

They left Sam alone. By explicit directive, Sam’s core mission to guide Sarah’s perceptions was one they were not permitted to impinge upon. He was engaged in a higher calling at the moment than any one fire that required dousing…although…there were times…Dean wondered just what color Sarah’s perceptions might take on if she saw Sam really work a room. She had been nearly catatonic after Sam’s dominance display at Gabe’s wedding party, frozen in place a mere eight feet from the table Sam chose and unable to tear her eyes off of his aggressive assertion. She hadn’t talked about it yet, not to Dean’s knowledge. But she showed up to The Facility the next day. That was something.

Dean watched Sam guide Sarah through a classroom door at the end of the hall, an enormous moose
hand at the small of her back, and he wondered if a single ape’s perspective was ever going to bridge the chasm. Dean shrugged it off and turned the knob of the room he’d been summoned to. Bedlam hit him square in the face, and he began the painstaking process of untangling a frazzled knot of passionate Ozzies who hadn’t been Released on time. At this stage of their training, they could go from compliant to massive pains in the ass in no time at all, and they shouldn’t have been given that opportunity. Dean had his hands full for the rest of the afternoon.

He tried to take advantage of Michael’s schedule when he stopped by to pick his mate up after class. Today was primarily Dom work for Michael, so he should be well primed to catch an exhausted Sub and ease the sting of failure by adding sting of his own.

“Save me,” he muttered into Michael’s throat as he wilted into the Omega inside the classroom. He heard Joshua chuckle behind him. Michael scented his throat and then scoffed.

“You’re not dropping, Dean. You smell fine. What’s wrong?”

Okay, maybe it wasn’t bad enough to call out the cavalry, but Dean still felt like an exhausted toddler at the carnival who begs his dad to carry him, not that he would’ve put it that way, exactly.

“My right arm is gonna fall off, Michael,” he whined fruitlessly. “Had to paddle the whole fuckin’ class and then take both of the teachers down the hall and lay into them too. It was like a paddle-athon, and I’m dying.”

Joshua stopped tucking supplies away and frowned at Dean. “Alpha, you need me in there with… whose class is that?”

Dean slumped and stepped away from Michael. “It’s Garth and Skyler. Neither of them have enough hours under their belts to run a class on their own, but I really thought they could handle it together. You should’ve seen it though. Chaos.”

Joshua nodded. “What I’m doing with Michael here, Dean, that can hold off. We can do it in the evenings if we need to. He needs this work, and he’s making good progress, but it doesn’t make sense to dedicate two teachers to one student when you’re strapped this way. Michael might do well in the beta-Dom class at this point. He’s got most of the basics down. Could do him some good to work with others and not just old-timey me all the time.”

Dean caught Michael’s eye. Michael had his face emotionless, waiting. “He’s got a point about resource distribution, Michael.”

“Up to you, alpha,” Michael told him stoically.

And Dean frowned. Old Michael, newly Mated Michael, the one full of piss and vinegar with a chip on his shoulder and a curse in his mouth would have used the same words. But he would have meant them very differently.

Michael watched Dean think, and very slowly he smirked. Dean huffed an affectionate laugh. “Let’s, uh, rework the schedule for the rest of the term, Joshua. I want you in with Garth, and I’ll put Hannah in with Lisa. Michael, you’re with me and Cas for the remainder of your Omega training, and you’re with the betas for the Dominance stuff. We’ll finish up our side at home. For D & S stuff, you haven’t learned everything you need yet, but you’re far enough along that you can catch up to them with a little one-on-one work.”

“Why would I be behind them?” asked the Omega. “I started first.”

“Because you’re balancing Omega work with Dom work. The betas, it won’t surprise you to know,
don’t have to do that. They’ve moved faster because they can concentrate on one thing. Grab your shit, let’s go home.”

“Yes, alpha,” Michael murmured, the honorific coming much easier than it once did. “Good night, Sir,” he offered Joshua, and the old Dominant nodded serenely.

Michael hustled down the hall after Dean, noticing that Dean was rubbing his forearm to get blood flowing again. “Let’s do a thing this evening, babe,” he suggested as he scooted up beside his mate. “I can take you apart and make you forget about your arm hurting. What’dya say? Good idea, right?”

Dean smiled sideways at his enthusiasm and then slid into Cas’ office, propping it for Michael. “I wish. That sounds like just the thing. But you and me still have an issue to deal with first. Remember?” Cas put his fingers over the microphone of his headset and accepted a quick and simple kiss from Dean before focusing back on his interminable conversation with Crowley. He gestured to the two of them that they should pass through to the suite and wait for him there. Michael held the door this time.

“Issue?” he asked, perplexed.

“You asked me for a stay of execution while the pack was all fucked up in all the wrong ways, but it’s been a couple of days, and I think we can safely say it’s over. That’s done and locked up now.” Dean turned right in the middle of the room toward his mate with the face of the Righteous Man holding court across his features. Michael sighed and broke his eyes to the floor, classically, decidedly Omega.

“Forgot about that, alpha. My bad. Yeah, that’s first, um, I guess.”

“Good to hear you keeping your word, Michael,” Dean told him softly. “Thank you for not fighting me on this. I know it’s unpleasant, but you need it. We need to settle up. You lied to me, man.”

“I know. You want to do it here?” Michael looked around and rubbed his ear uncomfortably between his thumb and finger. “Get it over with?”

“We need to be at home,” Dean told him assertively. “It’s not one I feel like we should try to rush through. We need to talk about what happened. And why. We’re gonna take our time, big guy.”

Michael’s eyes widened at the implication. “You won’t forget I’m pregnant, right alpha?”

Dean chuckled. “Dude, you were pregnant when Cas left cane marks on his desktop right through your ass. I think you can handle me. I’m gonna take care of you. I swear.”

“Thought your arm was worn out.” It was a pathetic last ditch effort, and Dean simply smiled at him and flexed his fingers. Michael sighed in resignation. “You’re right. I did this to myself. Whatever. Can we go now?”

“Not till Cas is free. One car, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Michael faded out as he sank down onto the couch.

“But, hey,” Dean brightened, sitting next to him and turning into him. “We’ve still got tomorrow night. We don’t fly out until early-as-shit on Saturday morning. Wanna pull an all-nighter with me like the old days? I’ll be putty in your hands. Let you do whatever the hell you want. Get me souped up and ready for Charlotte. They love it at convention when I have new bruises to show off.”

“Dean, I don’t want you facing the convention stuck in your wolf, especially if word gets out that
I'm onsite. I need my alpha watchdog.”

“That’s, uh, kind of you to worry about me and all, but the best way to make sure the wolf stays in its kennel is to run it ragged right before we leave.” Dean massaged Michael’s thigh through his jeans and looked plaintively into his eyes. The Submissive wolf’s green eyes glowed with anticipation.

“Jesus Christ, you flip fast for an alpha,” Michael muttered just as Cas walked in from the office.

“That man!” he pronounced, but he didn’t clarify. “Let’s go home. I’ve had enough for one fucking day! I’m turning my phone off!” Castiel led the way to the parking lot, barely pausing at all as the other two scrambled in his wake. Dean fished his keys out as he fought with the turnstile, dropped them, got stuck in the bars, and had to shuffle awkwardly forward while Michael maneuvered the turnstile for him so Dean could kick his keys free. Michael smirked provocatively at him as he held the car door for the Alpha and then climbed in the backseat. Dean’s face took on a flat forbearance that Castiel noticed immediately.

“You’re stressed as well, Dean. We need a scene. I apologize for allowing you to get in such a state. Are you free this evening? I realize it’s short notice…”

“I can’t tonight, babe,” Dean explained with his torso torqued around to reverse the Impala from its space. “Gotta work. And besides, I owe Michael some attention. We need to do it right.” He resettled in his seat and switched the gearshift to drive before squeezing Cas’ hand. “I’m not stressed. I’m good. You caught the tail end of my Omega taking a swipe at me while he still can. You know, I thought he was smarter than to go poking the bear like an honest to God brat just before he was due for a butt whoopin’. But, guess not.” Dean winked into the rearview mirror, and Michael couldn’t help but flush a little and smile back.

Dean’s corrective style still surprised him sometimes, but more and more, he realized how comforting it was to soak in his alpha’s affection even when they both knew he’d fucked up. Having a painful correction on the horizon didn’t stop Dean from caring about him, or showing casual affection. That one singular little bit of Mated connection was such a dazzling comfort it nearly hurt. It was the exact opposite of how Castiel handled Dean’s corrections. Michael wondered if he should bring it up again.

“Oh. Well. I guess I can find an alternative for tonight to blow some of the steam off.” Cas sounded more than a little disappointed. “But I’d really rather set some time aside with you before you leave for North Carolina. Can we do that? What does tomorrow look like for you? Can you do a long lunch break?”

Dean chuckled good naturedly again and pulled out onto the straight road before him. “It’s good to be wanted, fellas, but there’s only one of me here. And tomorrow is Kali’s big day. You gotta stay focused on her, Alpha.”

Cas frowned a little and turned in his seat. “Did the two of you already make plans for tomorrow as well? Shit, I should’ve asked. My apologies, Michael. We’ve fucked up our routine, and that’s my fault. You two go ahead with whatever.”

He was ruffled, scattering a pile a papers on his lap and failing to catch the few that slid onto the floor at his feet. “Damnit!” he cursed as three more slipped off his lap to the side and tucked up beside his door.

“Alpha, I don’t have concrete plans for Friday night,” Michael ventured. “You go ahead. Looks like you need it more. I know Dean needs it. Besides, he and I can make use of the hotel bed in
Charlotte. Or the exercise room,” he finished with a cheeky smirk at his mate.

“Or the pool,” Dean added with a grin.

“You are forbidden from fucking in the hotel pool,” Castiel told them seriously. “OR the workout room. You are to behave as if I were standing at your shoulder at all times. Am I understood?”

Dean laughed outright. Holy shit it felt good to laugh. He caught Cas stifling a soft smile too, and he reached across to touch Cas’ shoulder. “We’ll be perfect angels, Alpha. Promise.”

Cas shrugged him off in feigned irritation, but Dean could smell nothing stronger than mild exasperation in his scent. Cas turned back to the back seat. “Michael, are you certain about Friday night? Don’t feel obligated to step out if you need something substantial before you go. I can get what I need from April, but you have only the one option.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake! I didn’t mean…!”

“For Pete’s sake?” teased Dean. He could feel Michael trying to stifle a strong distaste for Cas’ chosen excuses, but Dean wanted everyone to spend more time thinking on a Michael/April connection, not less, and he’d decided to take every opportunity that came along.

“Keep it up, and you and I will be spending time together this evening no matter what else you have planned. I have no issue with sending you in to paddle Michael with your own backside bright red. I’m sure it wouldn’t be the last time that happens.”

“Crimeny, Cas, I was just teasing.” Dean grumbled. “You’re the one who had to rub his nose in it. All I said was that was a little bit mean. Besides…” Dean turned serious, tucking the brat swiftly under. “…I need to spend a few hours on my book tonight. If you really have to spank me, could you wait till bedtime?” He shot a look across the bench that begged Cas to take his condensed time allowance into consideration.

Castiel regarded him with a raised brow, and then broke into laughter at the absurdity of penciling in a correction to fit into an impossibly tight schedule.

“Keep your mouth shut, my brat, and you might escape the evening unscathed,” he laughed with a fond shake of his head as he focused back down onto the unkempt pile in his lap. Dean slowed at the turn off into their driveway, and saluted the guard at the gate before negotiating the curved gravel drive into the cool darkness of his beloved garage.

They headed in, noting a shrill yapping that ended sometimes with a piercing bay, and Michael ground his teeth. “I don’t do puppies, Dean,” he muttered quietly.

“Not your problem, Omega,” Dean reminded him cocking his head toward Cas. “It’s his.”

Michael was about to protest that the ‘problem’ was supposed to be Pete’s but he decided not to when he saw her, frustrated and mussed, squatting on the floor with the pup, making no headway in shushing the noise. Cas took one look at the little dog, met its eye, cleared his throat with a frown, and did what April couldn’t. The puppy quieted immediately and scampered to him, nuzzling his shin with her fluffy head and wagging her little tail off.

April “Tchhd” in disgust. “She’s been screaming for twenty minutes, Cas. And then she shuts up for you with just a look. What the fuck?” She stood up and stuck her tongue out at the tiny dog, making a face. Cas smiled at her and offered her a hug. “Give her some time. I have faith in you,
kitten. She’ll come around.”

“What did you expect?” Michael asked her. “She’s canine. He’s Alpha. None of us are immune. Everyone rolls. Blah, blah, blah.” But he, too, offered her a smile and a quick one-armed hug before kicking off his shoes and nudging them into a niche beside the beer fridge. “How’d it go today?”

“Better,” April told him cryptically. “I think we’ve got most of the kinks worked out. We actually spent more time today filtering through potential agents than working on music. I’d like your help with that if you don’t mind. Are you still thinking about what I said, Michael? About managing for me?”

Michael wilted. He realized all eyes were on him, and he scowled. Even Tony had stopped basting and was eyeing him. “Pete, I can’t. I’m sorry. I can’t do it. Besides, you need someone who’s been in the industry for a while. You need a professional.”

“But…”

“I can’t! Not and give the pup the attention he needs. I’ll help you any way I can. But I’d just fuck it all up for you if you put me in charge. I couldn’t… I wouldn’t be able to let you schmooze the scumballs in this industry the way you would have to. I can’t watch that. Pete, please understand.” His voice had taken on a pleading tone, and April’s jaw dropped slack. He advanced and took her upper arms in his hands, firm, but gentle. “I swore I’d do anything you asked, no question, but I can’t do this.” Their eyes locked, and both their faces flushed.

Cas sighed a little dramatically. “All right! Spare us the melodrama, Michael. You’re not the only option she’s got, and to simplify things, I wouldn’t have approved it anyway. You’re dead right. She needs a professional manager. You’re a bright man, but you’re not qualified to be a music industry business manager.”

Michael tore his eyes away from the bottomless baby blue in front of him. Cas had the puppy in his arms, and he was mindlessly stroking her head while she made playful grabs for his fingers with her teeth. “Yes, sir. That’s what I meant.”

“And as for schmoozing scumballs,” Cas went on, turning his attention to his mate. “That’s not something I can watch either. So we won’t be doing any of that, will we, kitten?”

“No, Alpha,” she said breathily. The waif was back.

Everyone in the room saw Castiel react except perhaps the ape.

Dean nudged Michael into motion, sparing a scratch to Portia’s head as he passed. “Put the puppy down before you fuck the girl, Alpha. Don’t wanna hurt the wrong pup,”

Cas growled menacingly at him, but he was already gone with his Omega.

“Alpha, Sir…?” Tony broke in bravely. “Dinner, Sir, it’s gonna be ready in an hour. Sorry it’s late. Had an issue with the oven temp.”

“An hour?” Cas asked without looking at him, but with a curious cocking of his right eyebrow. “Perfect.”
“Why are we in the H/R room, Omega?” Dean prompted once the door clicked shut. His brat was once again tucked well out of sight, and he faced his mate as an alpha with a weight to shift.

“Probably because it’s sound proof,” Michael guessed with his eyes tracking Dean carefully.

“That’s a good guess,” Dean agreed. “But so is our bedroom, the master bedroom, the playroom across the hall… Got another idea?” Dean’s somberness struck Michael right in the middle of his chest and set his heart rate speeding up a little. It was very similar to the tone that his Pop and his teachers always went for – went for, but missed. Dean didn’t miss. What the fuck was the difference? Michael’s nostrils flared a little in anticipation. He knew his scent had shifted to dread.

“Um, because we don’t use it every day?”

“Mm-hm. I’m not going to spoil our play space or our bedroom with associations of punishments any more than I have to. This room is used for Secondary situations…well, mostly, anyway, and that’s what we have here, isn’t it?”

“Yes, alpha.” Michael’s palms were sweating, and his stomach fluttered.

Dean nodded. “It is also, as you mentioned, sound proof. You don’t need to try to stifle your cries, Michael. Go ahead and let it out. No one but me is going to hear you. Come over here, please.” Dean sat down on the side of the bed, right in the middle.

“Aren’t we going to…talk first?” asked Michael hesitantly. He shuffled his feet in consternation.

“We’ll talk plenty when we’re through,” Dean assured him.

“You don’t have a paddle.”

“I don’t plan to use one.”

They stared at each other. Dean, patient. Michael, anything but.

“God, alpha, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt…”

“Come here, Omega. Don’t make me count at you like a five-year-old.” Dean patted his own thigh easily. Michael noted that Dean’s body held no tension. He didn’t seem angry, just stern. He stepped forward slowly and stood before his mate. Dean pulled him in to stand between his knees. He rested his chin against Michael’s solar plexus and gazed up at him. “I know you’re sorry. We’ll talk after. If you feel like crying, go ahead and cry. Leave the bonds open – both of them.”

Michael grimaced at the reminder that shutting Dean out was what brought him into this position in the first place. His face crumpled, but Dean didn’t make him suffer the indignity of witnessing his meltdown for long. Dean unbuckled his belt quickly, stripped it completely out of his jeans, and then bared him just as fast from the waist down. He tossed Michael’s clothing on the floor to the side.

“I want you over just my left leg, Michael. Lay your body out on the bed a bit. Get stable. We’re going to be here a while.” Dean helped him over, letting him find his balance on the bed at an angle. Michael’s body curled across Dean’s thigh to round his butt out and make it an easy target with nowhere to dodge. Dean cinched him in and propped his own right leg up into the backs of Michael’s thighs to hold them in place. “Good. Hold for me just like that. Let me know if you need a break.”

Dean’s right arm may have had a workout already, but that didn’t mean he was weakened. He hardened his palm and slapped it down hard on Michael’s right cheek to make a resounding SMACK that echoed in the contained room. Michael gasped. Dean swatted his left cheek the same
way and then straight across the middle. His pace was quick and hot. His left hand tucked around Michael’s ribs and held him still, and his powerful thighs held Michael’s legs like a vice. The Omega wasn’t going anywhere until the alpha wanted him to. He struck the undercurve and the sit spots and the tops of both thighs, straightening his right leg to reveal a few more inches of Michael’s thighs without letting him loose. He sometimes concentrated on the same spot until Michael was a writhing mess before turning to a new spot and doing the same.

Dean didn’t talk much, but he listened. Michael came apart slowly. He was already firmly Secondary when they began, so Dean didn’t need to watch for the acceptance as he usually did. Michael wasn’t tensely holding out for a reprieve before finally succumbing to the needs of his Omega designation. He was already there. But the Omega still had a journey to make, and Dean was paving his path brick by raging hot brick. Michael’s breathing paced along mindfully for a time, but as Dean’s palm heated, and Michael ran out of virgin skin to redden, his breathing took on a chaotic quality. He needed to cry, Dean could sense it through their Mating-bonds. But Michael had never really cried during a spanking from his alpha mate before, and he seemed unsure how to make it happen.

“Let go, Omega,” he said. He struck that sensitive undercurve several more times in a row. “Just let it all go, baby. I’ve got you.”

“Dean, I…”

Dean’s hot hand stiffened immediately and whacked much harder for about eight strokes before switching right back to the quick hot pace that he could hold indefinitely.

Michael shouted out at the correction, and he clutched the bedding before curling his torso a little to cling on to Dean’s hip.

“I’m so sorry!” he wailed.

“Straighten out, Omega,” Dean instructed in a very simple voice. “I need good access, and all I can get to now is your hip. Let go of me and stretch back out. You’re doing fine. You’re strong enough. It’s okay to cry when you need to, Michael.”

Michael let go and turned back into the bed, stretching his body out flat as he’d started. He sniffled.

“Good boy,” Dean praised. Then he started the swats back up, turning the power up a little bit. Just a little. The pace stayed the same. Michael’s backside was too sore to miss the intensity shift, and he stiffened and wriggled, working to find a way out of the painful blows. Dean had him tightly held though, and he couldn’t dodge.

His sniffling turned into sobs without any notice. One moment he was holding in everything but his own nasal discharge, and the next, he was weeping pathetically. He took great handfuls of comforter in each hand, buried his face in the soft darkness, and he cried. Dean’s hand went on right through it all. Michael stopped attempting to dodge.

Finally, after so long Michael was reduced to miserable heaving sobs, Dean slowed to a stop. He sat still while Michael came around enough to realize it was over. Dean’s hand swept softly across the stinging red surface he’d just thoroughly abused.

“And the…the belt?” snuffled Michael.

“No, baby,” Dean crooned. “You’re done. You did so good for me. My sweet Omega boy. So, so good for me.”

“I wasn’t good, alpha!” Michael protested as he rocked in place across Dean’s knee.
“Baby, you’re the best,” Dean said sweetly. He loosened the press of his right leg into Michael’s.
“Come here and talk to me a minute. Sit on up. Slowly. I’ve got you, Michael.”

Michael eased up onto his feet and then let Dean lower him back down onto the bed more fully and in a much dryer spot. Somewhere, Dean collected a clean tissue and wiped Michael’s face. He held it while Michael blew his nose, and the tissue disappeared.

“All the way up on the bed, baby. Lay on your tummy. Let’s talk.”

“Aren’t we supposed to talk first?” Michael asked again, this time a touch less nervously and a touch more sleepily. He had more than a little weepiness still seeping out around the edges.

“Eh. Maybe. We’re trying some stuff out. Work with me here. All right? Can you talk yet? Baby, if you need to do some more crying, I’m right here. Take all the time you want.” Dean held his arms out as he slid in beside his mate, and Michael curled into him, but the Omega stifled his sobs.

“So, you aren’t angry at me anymore?”

“I’m not angry, Michael. What I was, was hurt. I guess a little betrayed. You feel it?” Dean lifted the emotions he’d experienced back in Dayton when it had become evident that Michael closed their bonds without telling him, lifted them all up to show Michael. He didn’t force them through the bonds though. He let Michael reach through and sift slowly through what it’d been like for Dean. Michael’s touch felt tentative and careful. He paused when he touched Dean’s vibrant strains of self-recrimination.

“I worry about you when we have to be apart. I know you can look after yourself, but I worry anyway, and having you in my head helps me in ways I can’t explain to you. You’re MY Omega mate, man, and I need you in there, in my head. Shit, I never imagined I’d want that, and now I can’t stand not to have it. But I feel like you knew if you’d asked to have a few days to yourself, I would have said yes. Michael, I would have said yes even if you did this first, and then you asked. I get it, baby. I know what your emotions were going through in those days. I don’t know what was in your head, but I know you were set way back on your heels emotionally. You went into shock for fuck’s sake.”

“I know, alpha…”

“Punishment’s over, man. It’s okay to use my name.”

“Look,” Michael turned a little and propped himself up on his elbow. “There’s no way to say it nicely. I was a dick. It was a dick thing to do, and I knew that when I did it.”

“It hurt me, Michael. It felt like you didn’t want me, like my presence was an inconvenience or an annoyance, and that hurt. I don’t want to be a burden to you the way I am to my brother, and that was the first thing that went through my head.”

Michael wanted to interrupt and comfort his mate, but Dean plowed on through his obvious effort to break in. Dean set two fingers across Michael’s lips.

“It hurt that you lied to me every time we talked, even to my face. You recall, I bitched about hating that I couldn’t feel you better from that distance, and you…you lied to me. That hurts. The more I think about it though, the more I feel like it was my own fault. You weren’t in any condition to be left with an alternate, but I left you anyway.”

“No, alpha. I’m glad you didn’t go easy on me. I deserved to be punished. When I did it, when I closed the bonds, I was feeling overwhelmed by everyone telling me what to do, and not letting me
deal the way I wanted to. It made me angry that you left instructions with Fred to keep me from burying myself in the pups and the pack like I thought I should. I didn’t want to have to focus on what I was feeling, and I got mad and sulky. I thought you were treating me like a child, but I’ve thought about it, and it was me being a child. You were right. I needed to stop distracting myself. Dean, that Omega and his pup were fucking stabbed to death in broad daylight, and I thought I could just go about my life like I hadn’t seen blood dripping off Alpha’s hand. I lashed out at you, wanted to deprive you of something I know brings you comfort because you’d done that to me. It was an immature thing to do. And then later, I found out Pete had shut hers too, and what I thought was going to get me caught and blasted within a few hours turned into a dangerous game of chicken. If I let you know and opened up my side, that would’ve clued you both in, and she’d be in trouble too. I can’t pretend I didn’t use the knowledge that you couldn’t feel me to let myself go a little when I talked to her. I was like a fuckin’ teenager who swiped the family car to go joyriding. I was a childish dick.”

“Nah, man…”

“Stop excusing it, Dean. I did it because I wanted to hurt you for leaving me alone at the house. I wanted to hurt you. And I did. I practically stomped into my room and slammed the door in your face to make sure you knew I was pissed. And now I feel like an idiot, because…” Michael’s eyes teared up again and his voice thickened with emotion. “You’re everything to me! Help me stop being such a vengeful jerk! I always have to slap back when I feel hurt! I don’t want to be that guy anymore. I wanna be better than that.”

“Shhh, it’s all right, Michael.” Dean embraced him again. “There’s a lot of ways to learn how to change how you react when shit happens to you. I’m really proud that you even saw that about yourself in the first place. You bet I can help you with it. But, dammit, Michael, I shouldn’t have left you. I should have taken you with me to Dayton, and I damn sure shouldn’t have left you the day before just to go to work. I should never have left you.”

“Why did you?” Michael asked in a very small voice. “Was it because Castiel told you to?”

Dean rolled onto his back and then shimmied himself to sit up against the headboard. He sighed heavily. “Good question. I get pulled in a lot of directions these days. I’m trying hard to trust Castiel’s vision for the pack, and that means I follow his lead. He needed me that day nearly as much as you did, and I had to make a lightning fast decision. Looking back, I chose wrong. I thought he was in a worse spot, and I knew he’d need a spotter for what he was going to be doing later. I’m possessive, Michael, and I didn’t want to turn that over to Benny. I feel like he needs it to be me in the room when he goes through those exercises, and I damn sure want it to be me. I feel like it’s an honor for him to trust me that much, and I don’t like knowing that in a pinch, Benny could do it too. I thought what you really needed was some quiet time to think and calm down. I shouldn’t have allowed selfishness to intervene in my responsibility to be there for you. I should have stayed home and watched over you. Michael, I’m sorry.”

Michael scoffed. “Selfish?”

“YES, man, selfish! And it ate at me all day long. I had to fight my own instincts all fucking day to keep me from driving home to you. I know better than to fight my instincts like that. They’re right nearly all the time. I should’ve left Cas to Benny and Bobby and Pam, and I should’ve… I’m sorry, baby. Maybe your tantrum wasn’t the most mature response, but I understand where it came from. I’m not mad at all.”

“You were when I opened the bonds back up and you caught on. I could feel you rage up all the way from here. It’s still there in that bundle you’re holding.”
“Yeah, cause it scared the shit outta me, Michael! I felt like a fuckin’ moron, sitting there thinking how much it sucked that I had to suffer through being so far away that you were just a blip in my head. I felt like a fool, and I was pissed off that you did it on purpose. But then I took a breath and looked around, counted all the variables, assessed the fuckin’ situation, and I realized I was more to blame than you. I left you.”

Michael took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Worked out for me though. I guess. Being here without you two looking over our shoulders. Worked out for both of us. We needed that, Dean. Needed a chance to talk about it all in private.”

“Mm,” agreed Dean. “I appreciate the two of you showing the restraint you did. Truth is, I more than half expected you to take advantage of the situation way more than talking.”

“So much for having faith in my judgment,” Michael grumbled.

“Love makes the wisest man stupid, Michael. I have faith in your judgment most of the time.”

“Be honest, Dean. Did you set us up to have a few days to ourselves on purpose? Was there a part of you that thought maybe, just maybe, leaving me at home was better than taking me along? That having me in a vulnerable state emotionally might work to move us all closer to your end goal?”

Dean stared at the ceiling without answering, but his forehead wrinkled in thought, so Michael pressed.

“I mean, I’m not accusing you of staging that disaster in the E.R., but once it happened and it hit me as hard as it did, was there, perhaps, a touch of fate about when and where you decided you needed to be with me versus without me?”

“What are you asking me, Michael?”

“Were you and Pete both scheming to tumble me in the same way, Dean? Be honest. Do you want me to connect with her? Have you been pushing me that way this whole time, and did you deliberately set us up that week to make it almost a given that we’d fall together for comfort through a painful episode?”

“Dude, I’ve already admitted I had a hand in some of that. What do you want me to say?”

Michael grunted heavily as he rolled over and sat up, paying no mind to being only half dressed. “You admitted some of it to Castiel. But he’s really not involved the way I am. I want you to say it to me. I want you to look me in the eye, and tell me what you did – everything you did.”

“Fuck,” Dean muttered and got up. He stood to the side of the bed where he had the door to his back, and neither of them missed his sudden need to have an outlet for escape, even if he didn’t use it. “You see why we needed to do the talking afterward? I knew this was gonna come up, but you needed that first, Michael. You needed the fire and the crying.”

“I know how it works, alpha. You don’t hear me whining, do you? Can you answer the questions? I was honest with you.”

“Yeah. I owe you that. Weird feeling here, Michael. It feels like all this time we were all working around each other under a heavy drape, and now it’s been pulled off, and we’re caught red-handed. It’s time to come clean, man. And I’m not innocent. I just hope it helps to know that everything I pushed for was to end with all of us happy. That’s all I want. I want everybody happy.”

“Very noble of you. Thanks for that,” Michael said flatly.
Dean rolled his eyes and turned away, but he didn’t protest. “You and April. Michael, God, the two of you are inevitable together. You slide right into every part of her that needs a little more support. She does the same damn thing for you. You fuckin’ light UP when she’s in the room, and her eyes follow you everywhere. You…buddy you trust everybody. Maybe that’s why you keep an arm’s distance between you and the masses, for your own safety, ‘cause you don’t stop and consider anything, you just throw right in with whoever. I know that’s not what it feels like to you, but take it from someone who doesn’t, all right? You trust without hesitation. All except April. You don’t trust her. And that Ozzie, man…she can’t trust anyone or anything, but you. You see? You trust everyone but April, and she doesn’t trust anyone but you, and Tah-dah! KISMET! She teaches you restraint, and you teach her faith – without even trying.

“Plus, you need someone to watch over, and I don’t think being a mom is going to fulfill all of that for you. You need to be needed, and you need friends that you don’t ever have to work to keep. She’s perfect for you. The two of you can look up and worship each other. She’s so frikken’ lost on you. She looks to you for approval even more than she does her own mate, ‘cause she’s trying to figure out the Omega side of every issue, and she respects your balance.”

“MY balance? I’ve been a basket case since she met me!”

“No, you haven’t. She’s never felt like an assertive person as an Omega, and she watches how you do it. She’s learning from you and Gabe both. But Gabe doesn’t make her blush the way you do.”

“So, you thought it’d be a grand idea to step in and help the process along.”

“I smoothed the path here and there. That’s all. It wasn’t my intention to give you the chance to cultivate your relationship while we were gone, but I didn’t exactly dwell on making sure that didn’t happen either. I moved a barrier out of the way a time or two. You two did the rest.”

“Did it never occur to you that I might prefer you to come ask me about it instead of going behind my back?” Michael asked, direct and brutal in one swipe.

Dean worked his jaw. “Look, I should’ve. I know. Why are you pissed at me but not at April? You said you like being wanted enough for her to do the pursuing. But she didn’t do any direct pursuing, Michael. It was all under the table. She did the same shit I did. Why was it okay for her and not me?”

If Dean had hoped to scratch the scab off Michael’s wounds, that question did it. Michael’s carefully tamped emotions boiled to the surface, and he turned on Dean in ferocity. “Because I think her motives were pretty damned pure! She would’ve had her head chopped off if she did it in plain sight. But you! What the fuck? I’m your fucking mate, Dean! So, not only did you ditch me before we met and run off with Cas, you tried to pawn me off to the first chick you ran into as well! And don’t give me that, ‘it’s all to make you happy’ crap. You felt guilty about marrying Castiel, and you wanted to ‘GIFT’ me someone in exchange to even things up! You were soothing your own conscience!”

“NO! Damnit! No, I sure as fuck wasn’t. You wanna think that because it’s what YOU would’ve done. If I’d been aiming to hook you up with a plus one to make me feel better, it would’ve been a dude, so we could all play in one pool together without having to worry about getting squicky. OR…” he added as the epiphany hit him, “I’d hook you up with JO so she would join us and not go off looking for a mate from Siberia and leave me!”

“Right. You didn’t see it as a perfect nod to Universist balance that might just need a little nudge along the way…” Michael’s sarcasm dripped heavily, but Dean wasn’t one to accept an accusation he didn’t deserve.

“I don’t give a fuck if it balances the whole fucking world, Michael. That’s not what this was. And I
hate to be brutally honest, but I don’t feel guilty for marrying Cas! What I did was take in the realities around me as they evolved, and I stepped in with a vote in favor of something that has the potential to solidify every fucking thing we’re trying to be, and the potential to make you happier than I can do by myself. Damnit, Michael, you mean everything to me, too, and it’s my job to keep you stable and make sure you’re happy! She makes you happy!”

“Goddamnit, Dean, why is it so hard for you to ASK ME first, before you try to step in and perfect my life? Do Omegas just never get a say?! Fucking alphas, I swear!”

Dean dropped his head into a hand that scrubbed across his eyes until they blurred. “Michael, man... I don’t have a valid excuse. I thought I was helping. And I thought that if I brought it out into the light, it would put you and April both at risk. Cas isn’t a monster, and he IS gonna get there on this, but we all knew ahead of time that his first realization was going to blindside him. There was no way it wasn’t gonna be explosive. I needed to make sure you were clear of that when it happened. I couldn’t conspire with you directly and keep you safe at the same time. And we had to go at it like this, April and me, or all the chips wouldn’t fall the right way when the explosion hit.”

“You and she were working together?”

“Uh, no, not exactly,” Dean admitted. “I knew what she was doing, but we never talked about it, not in so many words. She’s quick though. She picked up my loose ends when I dropped crumbs for her, and I did the same with hers.”

“Starting when, Dean? When did you and she silently start collaborating to collar me?” Michael grimaced uncomfortably and rolled his hips a little to relieve the sting.

“You’re free to slip that collar whenever you want to, Omega. We never made you do anything.”

Michael’s face said enough for him that Dean sighed and moved on. “’Bout the time she got busted for writing my lines for me.”

“You told Cas you didn’t know anything until after your Rut.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You lied?”

“It was just a couple of weeks apart. There was a lot going on. Timelines get shifty. I don’t know.”

“You lied.”

“Fine. I lied.”

“But you expect me to believe you. He’s your husband.”

“He’s my fiancé.”

“Don’t toy with me, Winchester.”

“Look, Michael, you can see straight through me. I’m not about to lie to you. You and me, we have a totally different thing going on than what I have with him.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Michael, I kept shit from you that I wanted to bring you in on, but I couldn’t. Not at the time.” Dean kneed up onto the bed and tried to literally shove all of his earnestness through their bonds. Michael
sighed at the weight of it. “But all of that was pack establishment stuff. We’re done with it. It’s locked. From here on, I want to be a team. You and me. I’m not about to stop maneuvering under the drape, but I’m gonna stay clean with you. From here on, you and me move in lockstep, just like we’re meant to. Anything you don’t wanna be a part of, we don’t do.”

“What if I don’t want to do any of it?” Michael posed.

“I don’t buy it. You tried to play me the moment we met, and I had to block your punches every day for months. Dude, join WITH me. I can teach you so much!”

Michael laughed and reached for Dean, pulling him in to sit close. “God, you’re such a BRAT! What am I gonna do with you?”

Dean chuckled, but he didn’t defend himself.

Michael wrapped an arm around him, thumbing along his bicep idly. “Pete’s going to make me the same offer, isn’t she? It’d be three against one.”

“Comes out about even,” Dean reminded him. “Cas has all the visible power banked up behind him, and he’s got a chess-master’s brain as well. It’s self-defense. And don’t think he doesn’t know it’s destined to go this way. I love the man, and I’m gonna swear everything away to him. Babe, that’s a done deal. But that doesn’t mean I’m going dumb inside my shackles. He needs a good solid challenge, and I plan to keep him on his toes. Anything that affects more than just me and him, I’ll let you know about before I do it, and you get to weigh in. How’s that for an alpha/Omega dynamic?”

“I don’t know, Dean. He says he wants us to be straight with him. Pamela kicked me in the nads for making shit more complicated for him than it has to be. I’m so fucking confused.”

Dean pressed his lips together. “You set him on edge just by being yourself, man. He’s trying to figure you out, and he’s stumped in a way he’s not used to.”

Dean chuckled again. “Like, you keep cozying up to Naomi, and that’s got him stymied. Why the fuck would you do that?”

“You know why!” Michael interrupted.

“Yeah, I do! But he doesn’t.” Dean laughed. “You’re a puzzle to him from every direction, and it’s killing him.”

“Is he going to invite her to the wedding?” Michael asked.

“He’s considering it. I asked him to.”

“You told him Tessa said it was probably safe?”

“Yeah.” Dean adjusted his position so he could look at Michael. “I told him it would allow me some closure that I won’t get if we wait much longer.”

“She’s had her claws in you long enough, Dean. I want her surgically removed. I want her out! If I ever see her sink her fucking talons in you again, I’ll take her out myself with my fucking teeth!”

“Damn! Cool it a little, Omega. You know how that protective shit turns me on.” Dean wasn’t kidding. He felt his face flush a little.

“Shuffling her off to a happy little retirement is not going to help you heal from everything she’s done. You don’t work like that, Dean, and neither does Gabriel. We don’t have to make a big scene, but she needs to be there to watch Castiel promise you his heart. She needs to see how adored
Gabriel is by the whole pack – see him stand as the Best Man, deliver a toast, and bask in not being an utter failure as a human being. She needs to see it, and you both need to know she saw it.”

“All right, mama grizzly, put the claws away. I hear ya.” Dean slid back off the bed and collected Michael’s jeans from the floor. “You want these back yet?”

Michael stretched and then nodded. He stood up and dressed with care. “It’s really not bad, considering,” he told his mate after examining his ass over his shoulder and slowly pulling his underwear into place. “I hate to admit it, but you’re good at that.”

“Years of practice.”

Michael scoffed rudely. “Yeah, I’ll bet.” He cocked his head in thought and looked across the bed at his mate. “Why do I trust you, Dean?” he asked rhetorically. “I shouldn’t. It’s more than just the brat thing. Everything about you tells me you’re going to play me six ways from Sunday, and I shouldn’t ever trust a word you say. Is it my stupid habit of trusting everybody? – which I’m totally not convinced is true. Maybe it’s the Mating-bonds. Am I doomed to be a schmuck because we Mated twice, and I’m so deep in the hormone mix I’m f***ed?”

Dean shrugged. “Hell if I know,” he added. “I’m kinda fun though. Kinda cute...sometimes.”

Michael shook his head in dismay. “You’re 100% trouble, is what you are, Winchester.”

“Yeah?” Dean sidled seductively around the corner of the bed and slunk into Michael’s personal space without reaching for him, daring Michael to resist, and smirking victoriously when Michael didn’t even try. The Omega’s hands circled Dean’s waist and pulled him close. “What are you gonna do about it?” Dean asked him suggestively.

“You know what I wanna do, alpha,” Michael whispered into his ear.

“Ah, yes.” Dean backed up a step or two. “I was wondering how you would worm that little nugget into the conversation.” Michael wasn’t talking about a quickie. The depth of colors in his head spoke of a much grander show than that.

“Talk to me, alpha,” Michael said, abandoning his sultry posturing and switching to his front brain. “Where’s your head about this?”

Dean felt the switch, and he mirrored it without thought. He sat down on the bed and looked up at Michael. “God’s honest truth, Michael. I’m scared. I’m scared I’ll be laughed at. I’m scared someone in the room will think less of me when I fight so damn hard to be taken seriously. Bottom line though, that’s gonna be a part of this until I get the nerve up to do it, and maybe putting it off is making it worse.”

“We don’t have to do it at all,” Michael responded plainly. “We don’t ever have to shift it from fantasy to reality. This is not a fear that it’s critical you overcome – not to me, anyway.” He knelt between Dean’s knees and looked up at him, reversing their roles further still.

“It’s critical to me,” Dean whispered. “I’m sick of being afraid of what someone else thinks. It makes me feel like a fraud when I stand up in front of crowds and encourage people to be brave and go right out there and state what they need without the shame I’m feeling. It’s easy to do that when it comes from their wolves. Tertiaries don’t feel shame. So, just saying it that way means we’re all talking about Primary urges, not Lupin ones. I have the gall to call people out in public and try to convince them to take on their own Primary shame, to face it and overcome it, and I have _never_ been able to do the same.”
“I don’t care one whit about anyone but you, Dean. If you’re not ready, we’re not going to do it. That’s final. You don’t make progress if you shame yourself into this. If we do it, it’s because we both WANT to do it, and for no other reason.”

“I WANT to do it, babe! I can hardly think of anything else! I’m just scared.”

“Do you trust me?” Michael asked softly.

Dean took Michael’s head between his palms and leaned down over him. “Yeah.”

“And do you trust Castiel?”

Dean laid his cheek on the top of Michael’s head. “Yeah,” he breathed.

“Then know this,” Michael said into the curl of Dean’s belly. “We’re both going to be there. We talked over everyone who’s been invited, even the alternates. We talked TO everyone who’s been invited. You have the list in your email inbox. There aren’t going to be any surprises. No one who would ever think to shame you or blink twice about it ever has to know it’s happening. You are safe. You don’t need to be afraid of anything. We will always take care of you, Dean. Everything vulnerable about you is beautiful and precious, and we would never put that in jeopardy simply for a thrill. You are safe. If you want, we can go over every step of choreography I have planned. You can speak in private to all of the participants. You can have any failsafe you want. You can call it off anywhere along the line, and no one will think less of you. Dean, this is FOR you. It’s there whenever you want it, even if that’s not for another twenty years.”

Dean picked his head back up, and Michael looked up into his eyes with a look of deep affection. Laugh lines sprayed from the corners of Michael’s eyes. “Of course, if we wait twenty years, we’ll have to pick a different cast, and you might require knee pads.”

“I don’t get kneepads now?”

“No.”

Dean chewed on his lower lip, and Michael reached up to rescue it, letting Dean pull his thumb into his mouth instead. The Omega felt Dean’s tongue delicately feeling out the flesh around his nail, and he let Dean think. “Cas has me tomorrow night.”

“Yep,” Michael affirmed. “And I want you to myself at least one night while we’re in Charlotte. Sunday night, maybe.”

“Mm. Or Monday. We run over on Sundays all the time. I’m gonna be wiped.”

“Monday night then.” Michael paused with the ball in Dean’s court. Dean stared straight ahead, deep inside himself.

“Dean, we don’t have to do this.”

“No.” It was a simple admission that Dean understood where the lines of power truly fell, and that everything was his to decide.

“If I sense you forcing yourself through a wall, I’m not going to go along.” Maybe not everything, then.

“I wanna do it. And I trust both of you. And I’m going to be nervous no matter when it happens.”
Michael could feel him weighing the pros and cons. “No pressure, baby. Forget everything I said yesterday. I don’t care when or if we do it at all.”

Dean scoffed and looked down again. “Yes, you do. You’re practically drooling.”

“You matter more than getting my rocks off, alpha. You oughtta know that by now.” Michael felt his wolf nosing in beneath his arm and edging persistently forward, but he blocked it.

Dean sighed and looked up. “I want to do this, Michael. I want to do it with you. I’m dying to know if I can. Worst thing that happens is a few assholes who’ve already seen me make a fool of myself more than a few times get a new chance to line their banks with another view of the priss who thinks he’s an alpha.”

Michael’s eyes flashed, and his hands clenched. “What the fuck did you just call my mate?”

Dean scrambled backward, nearly kicking Michael in the face. “Shit. I didn’t mean it. It just slipped out.” Michael didn’t move.

“Castiel told me never to allow you to get away with crap like that, Dean. He said it’d tear you down.”

Dean frowned and looked at his lap. His chest was heaving.

Michael stood up. “But I think you need a chance to stew in it for a little while on your own. I’m not going to correct you. I want you to do it for yourself.”

“I didn’t mean it. It’s a shitty old habit!” Dean scooted back up and stood before Michael. “I didn’t mean it! I want this, Michael! Let’s do it. Let’s do it next week after Charlotte. I’m all in! I’m sick of feeling torn in two and letting the shittiest side of me win out every time! Please say yes! I know I look unhinged right now, but I’m not. I’m sure. Please, Sir!”

“Not sir, Dean. Not yet. Let me think about it a little bit more. I’ll give you an answer before tomorrow night.” Michael kissed Dean simply on the lips. “Go on, alpha. Go put some time in on your book.”

Dean cracked his neck to the side. “Yeah. Yeah, good idea.”

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Kali stepped out of the shower, dried off, and found her husband had arranged a feast for her on the bed, sundry sauces spilling from their dishes and making a sticky mess. Gabe sprawled right in the middle with an apple in his mouth and a maraschino cherry glued to the tip of his penis by a spritz of whipped cream. He grasped the apple, took a hefty bite, and lay gazing at her adoringly as he chewed.

“Hungry?” he asked cheekily.

“Not for food,” she teased back. Then added, “It’s a good thing the mattress liner is water-proof. You’re making a mess.”

“Hmm.” He reached down beside him, dredged his fingers through a mess of gravy and smeared it
across his belly. “And you just showered. Such a shame.”

Kali smirked and set to work cleaning him with her tongue and teeth. She left behind irritated marks where she was more enthusiastic than strictly necessary in her eating. The cherry disappeared in a way that made him gasp and clutch the wooden rail behind him, and all the whipped cream went with it. She delved into his mouth with her tongue, searching out any of the apple he hadn’t swallowed, and she claimed it for herself.

Kali upended a flask of warm maple syrup right over his lap and down each leg to his kneecaps before setting to collecting back every last drip. He was trembling by the time she finished, and his cock stood proud, sticky but determined. She leaned in and kissed him again, holding his face in a tight grip and moving to straddle his lap, a move that overturned at least three plates.

“Alpha forbade us from fucking this evening, Omega mine,” she reminded him while grinding against him harshly. “And while I appreciate the food, I’m displeased with the flagrant attempt to entice me to break my promise. You want him to call off the test and make us go through it all again? Hmm?”

She worked her hips forward and back in a painful facsimile of fucking. His cock was trapped beneath her, and the sauces absorbed quickly into the bedding, working their way underneath the supine man. He took hold of her hips and tried to leverage her to allow him to fill her up and satisfy the hunger that sweet and sour sauce couldn’t slake.

“Oh, no, you don’t, Gabriel. No fucking. I’m supposed to arrive tomorrow morning fresh as a daisy, with plenty of sleep, and not an orgasm to my name for at least 16 hours. If I have to suffer, you’re suffering with me.”

“They’ll never know, Kali. Just one more. C’mon, please! I’ll be good. I’ll change the sheets and everything. I’ll feed you by hand.”

“You’ll do no such thing, Gabe! Get up. Up on your knees and face the headboard. If I can’t get off, at least I can play with your ass a little more.”

“Fuck! Now you’re talking! Hit me, Kali. Smack my ass hard enough to hurt.” He waded on his knees through the clashing bowls and plates to present for her, and she grinned despite every effort to appear stern. “I love the way you do it. Knock me sideways!”

“How many?” she enthused, kneeling up behind him through the wasted mess they would never eat.

“Just start swinging, and I’ll let you know when it’s…OW!”

Kali laughed happily as she turned his sticky ass pink. The man somehow touched all the places that made her light up. She didn’t wait for him to call enough. If left to his own, he’d let her go for hours. She turned his ass sore enough to carry him through the night, and then she stopped and coated it with a slick layer of honey. She buried two of her fingers deep in his channel and stroked his prostate with one hand while stroking his cock with her other. She had no idea what was lubricating her work anymore, but it seemed to be up to the challenge. It surprised neither of them that her bluff to make him wait for satisfaction with her was just that – a total bluff.

“Wanna bury my face in you!” he wailed, shaking against the headboard.

“NO!” she told him firmly, tingling at the response that word sent through them both.

“Kali, please! I need to taste you!”
“NO, Gabriel! You don’t deserve it!” She pulled her fingers back out of his channel and left 10 or 15 hot handprints on his ass before sinking them back in again and picking up the pace on his prick. He whined and moaned, bucking into her hand and very nearly weeping in both frustration and supreme, sublime satisfaction.

“Wanna make you come!!” he tried again, desperate to be slammed down and sidelined, desperate to hear that word shouted at him in fury.

“NO!! I said NO, and I fucking meant NO!!” She leaned in close and licked his ear from the pinna all the way up to the tip. What was the flavor that’d coated his ear?

“Come for me, beautiful,” she whispered softly, and he exploded, trembling against the headboard and clenching around her fingers. Slick dribbled out to merge with brown gravy at his knee like a convergence of rivers whose turbidity and density don’t match. Kali was somehow as out of breath as Gabriel, but she wasn’t shaking the way he was. She slipped her fingers out slowly and massaged the meat of his ass in a possessive clutch. Everything was sticky. The wall would need sponging again, and not all of it was Gabe’s release for once.

“We made a mess, Omega,” she mused as she helped him off the bed backward.

He blew out a breath and concentrated on sending stability to his knees. He chuckled. “Let’s see if Tony will come in and help us clean it up. He might be happy to know his efforts were so appreciated.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, Gabriel. We’re not going to traumatize the new guy because YOU think it’s funny.” She still had amusement in her eyes when she kissed him, but it faded quickly into something decidedly not funny when he pulled her into him. There was a desperation and a pitiful sadness in his returned kiss, and it broke her heart.

“I’m not going anywhere, Gabe,” she told him for the hundredth time. “I’ve got everything I want right here.” Her words topped up over the questing reach of his mouth against hers, frantic to keep the connection that he still didn’t fully believe in. She broke into unstoppable giggles as his desperation turned ludicrous. It wasn’t funny. Why was she laughing? Kali hadn’t giggled more than four times in her life before she met Gabriel, but he broke everything he touched in the most fantastically life-affirming way, and she absolutely dissolved into hysterics that made tears stream from her eyes. A swipe across her face to clear the tears left a brown fragrant streak over the bridge of her nose. It smelled strongly of chicken stock, and she burst out even harder into gales that doubled her over. Gabriel followed her to the ground, moving to clean the streak, the tears, whatever else might still be on her face, and he sat her down on the floor and attacked her throat, determined to leave a mark.

“Gabe!” she managed. “I need air! Can’t breathe!” She was still laughing as he backed off and looked her over quizzically.

“I’m supposed to be the crazy one,” he observed.

“You’re rubbing off on me,” she told him.

“I noticed,” he told her with a careful touch to her tummy where she had a messy smear smudging her recently scrubbed skin. He put his finger thoughtfully in his mouth and sucked it clean, appraising. “Duck sauce? I dunno. What got you so happy?”

“Nothing in particular,” she said, running sticky fingers through his hair. “I’m just happy. That’s all.”
He closed his eyes to the touch. “Wanna have a baby with me, Kals?”

She didn’t stop stroking his hair, but she waited to answer until he opened his eyes again. “Gabe, I can’t.”

“What? Why not?” He sat up and back, surprised.

“A pup needs both parents. I can’t agree to something that I can’t do alone as long as it’s this likely I’ll eventually be alone.” He frowned and began a vehement protest, but she set a manicured finger against his lips. “I’m not asking you to change anything,” she said. “I promised I wouldn’t, and I never will. You get to make all the decisions about your life and your work. But as long as you’re working at what you do, it needs to be you and me. Gabe, we can’t bring pups into this.”

“You’ve got a whole pack at your back now, sweetheart! I’m not gonna die anyway. This last round proved it to me. I’ve got some kind of freakish forcefield around me. I’ll always come home to you.”

She smiled a sad smile and touched his face. “Good. I pray every day that forcefield doesn’t weaken.”

“But?”

“But… millions of people every day pray and don’t get what they’ve prayed so hard for. You tried to scare me off before we married, and I wouldn’t go. Baby, whatever the future brings, I’m here – right here. But I’m not going to put a pup into that uncertainty. Not the way it is.”

“Is this an ultimatum?” he asked on a downward inflection, but she pulled his head up with a palm beneath his chin.

“Don’t play games with me, Gabe. You’re not that irresponsible. If I pressed you, if I told you yes, and I wanna try, you’d pull the brake yourself. Is this about needing me to tell you ‘no’ more often? Because I can do that however else you want me to. But not like this. It would kill you to walk into a dangerous mission knowing you had a pup at home who needs you. It’d kill you in a way it doesn’t just for me. That’s not a complaint, Gabe. We both know who we are and what we have together. I don’t tell you what to do. You don’t tell me what to do. But don’t pretend children have any place in what we are to each other.”

His eyes flicked back and forth across her face. “I’m tired of always needing to fight, Kali. I wanna come home. I wanna STAY home. I’m so tired.”

“You’re grieving,” she said with a soft kiss to his lips. “Give it some time and see if that feeling holds. We can’t afford to make any decisions yet. If you get itchy feet two months into a pregnancy, we can’t take it back.”

“But… if I did stay home? Found myself a real job doing boring ass legit work or something… could you ever see it?” Her heart seemed limitless in the number of ways it could shatter, in the number of times.

“I could see it, Omega. Maybe someday. Calm down and breathe with me. We have years. We have the rest of our lives.”

“Fred’s gonna kill me,” Gabriel said in the same sad, sleepy, mournful tone. He looked down and ran his fingers over a smear of brown gravy that collided with thick strawberry glaze on the carpet near his thigh. Kali laughed at him, a simple thing that broke right through her tears.

“Yes, he is. I want to watch,” she added wisely.
“That’s the kinkiest thing you’ve ever suggested, Kali, and that’s saying a lot.”

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Cas found Dean hard at work over his laptop in the Pool house, a stubby pencil between his teeth and a pair of glasses on his nose.

“How have you already killed a pencil?” Cas asked, taking it out of Dean’s mouth and examining the tooth marks. It was only three inches long.

“What? It’s got plenty of life left. I suppose you throw them out as soon as the first sharpening wears away.” Dean was incensed, and he swiped his pencil back.

“How goes it?” Cas asked, settling his butt on the desk.

“Slow,” breathed Dean. “Slower than I expected.” He saved his work, just in case. “I thought I’d be on the actual writing by now, but I’m still struggling with the effing outline.”

“Want to run anything by me? I’d like to help if I can.” A simple touch to Dean’s face had him leaning into Cas’ hand.

“Nah. I’ll get it. It’s just that there are a couple of different logical paths I could follow in getting the order of presentation arranged, but both of them have some downsides. There’s not one that really flows, point to point. I don’t wanna lose people with a huge jump that skips over stuff we have to come back to later. And everything relates to everything. This isn’t the kind of subject that progresses stepwise. It’s everything, all at once. I don’t know how to change that. Every time I think I’ve got it, I realize there’s a piece of another point that HAS to come first to make the next bit make any sense, and then before I know it, I’ve run myself in a circle again. Everything has to come first! The whole fucking CLASS has to come first!”

Cas laughed. He smelled like April.

“Yeah, thanks. Love it when you have a good laugh at my expense.”

“I’m not laughing at you, Dean. You’re stuck in an age-old conundrum. You’re right. You’ll figure it out. I’m here to help if you want me.”

“I’m gonna dump it on Michael in Charlotte,” Dean confessed. “He doesn’t think like I do, and he’s Omega. He may see something about the logic I missed. Plus, it’ll keep him busy between sets with Charlie.”

“I like that idea,” Cas told him sincerely.

“Yeah, that’s the plan. Doesn’t free me up tonight though. I still need to work on it at least another hour. Gotta get all the options clearly marked out for him.”

“I’ll try to keep this brief, then,” Cas said standing back up. “I want you to begin shifting the vocabulary when you’re on stage in Charlotte. I’ve got a seminar coming up, and I’ll do the same. The term ‘Gender Designation’ is outdated and limited. Limiting. We need to begin steering people away from seeing Lupin Secondary and Tertiary aspects as a facet of gender at all. It’s time. Bobby’s newest study publication comes out in a month, and we’ll be ready to highlight what he’s found. Our
“words must evolve with the research.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same,” Dean agreed. “There are ways to make the same references without pointing to gender or sex at all.”

“So, you have a plan to roll it out?”

“Yep. We’re all set.”

Cas nodded and sighed. Dean waited him out. He was exhibiting classic Alpha stress signals, and working his way through a verbal to-do list often helped.

“I’ve upset Billie by transferring Clay to Dayton. He liked it there, and Jonathon had a position for him. It seems he was antsy to get out from under his Pack Alpha’s thumb. But Billie bonded with him, feels responsible for him. I need to find her a new pet.”

“No, you don’t,” Dean told him. “If there’s a position to fill, open it through H.R. Don’t coddle Billie. She did fine without a pet for years. She’ll survive again. You’re not running for Senior Class President. Don’t start worrying about being everyone’s best friend. You’re fucked if you try to win a popularity contest. Be Alpha.”

Cas didn’t answer. He rubbed his face. Finally, he shifted topics.

“I sent hiring approval through for Jo’s and Meg’s mates.” He waited for a response from Dean and looked down when he didn’t get one. Dean was fiddling with his pencil. “We’re flying them both in at the same time, and I’m going to bring them here first. I don’t want them to Trigger until we’re prepared. I want Benny to meet them before the ladies do. And I want you there. Your opinion means a great deal.”

“My opinion means dick, Cas. You’ve already hired them both. Besides, it doesn’t matter what any of us thinks except for Meg and Jo. What jobs are they gonna do for us anyway?” Dean didn’t look up.

Cas let him sulk. “Ketch – his first name is Arthur – is taking Cole’s Enforcement position. He’s a beta-Dom, and he showed an extremely powerful Trigger match with Margaret. Jack Kline was harder to place. He’s a Certified Omega Trainer, and I know you need teachers, but I’m not going to force him on you without your full agreement. If there’s not a teaching position for him, I plan to ask Bobby to create an Outreach Coordinator position. That’s more in line with what he’s been doing in Tacoma. I believe he would work well with Ellen and Missouri both.”

“Beta-Neutral, right?” Dean asked. “Yeah, we still have more than one empty spot for a teacher like that. I need a floater badly. He’d be working side-by-side with his own mate though. That could turn weird. Weirdly uncomfortable.”

“You and I have worked side-by-side for years,” Cas pointed out.

“Yeah,” Dean scoffed, “And it got weirdly uncomfortable for everyone but us, apparently.”

“I’m going to put them up in the Guest house,” Cas said. “We may need to play host through their honeymoon period if founding the new pack gets tangled. There aren’t, as yet, many homes in the area that are suitable for a full Lupin Pack compound such as Benny wants. He’ll probably have to build from the ground up. It won’t be easy.”

“Nothing’s ever easy,” Dean observed sadly.
“You’re not losing her, Dean. You both grew up, but you’re still friends. It will take concerted effort to keep your connection strong, but it’s worth that effort. She’s important to you, and you are important to her. It will mean a great deal to Jo if you get behind her decision to Mate. She needs the support. And if Jack really is a True-Mate, you’re very likely to feel comfortable around him by natural proclivity.”

Dean flicked his eyes upward without lifting his chin out of his palm. He held Cas’ gaze for a minute, and then nodded and changed the subject. Something was eating the Alpha, but they hadn’t touched on it yet. Dean could tell. “How’s the FBI investigation into the explosion coming?” he asked.

“It’s ongoing,” said Cas with a smirk that had Dean huffing at his predictability. Bobby kept his network watching the FBI’s progress closely. So far, they had taken every baited hook and followed every wild goose Bobby set for them to find, and they hadn’t unearthed one iota that Bobby wanted hidden. “There hasn’t been any progress to speak of in weeks.”

Dean sat upright, turned to face Cas, and sighed heavily. “Then what’s under your skin, Alpha? You’re tied in knots – worse than when we left work.”

Castiel smiled at Dean’s perceptiveness. The smile didn’t linger.

“I received the investigators’ report this evening about my mother’s case. There aren’t any surprises. She’s been declared incompetent for her own care, and her wounds were verified to be self-inflicted. I’ve won my request to be named her custodial Alpha for life. Pamela’s assessment is as grim as I expected. Dean, my mother essentially sealed her fate that day in her basement. The investigation unearthed evidence that she’s been at this monstrosity of a coping mechanism for decades, possibly even before my father died.”

“Jesus, Cas…”

“It’s…” he took an unexpected breath that hitched a little. “It’s going to take me some time to process that. I feel like I should have known. There had to be signs.”

“It’s not your fault…”

“No, perhaps not. But coming on the heels of my failure to realize what was happening with my mate, as it does, I’m feeling…rather a bit…less certain than I might normally about where faults lie.”

“Cas. Hey, come here, man.” Dean stood up and pulled the Alpha to him. He wondered briefly if managing a pack like theirs was destined to mean they’d joined the cast of a soap opera, but he squished that thought into a tiny little box, shoved it deep down his gullet, and swallowed it. “This is not your fault. She hasn’t ever really been your responsibility. She’s not Omega. She wouldn’t have allowed it. Don’t spend another minute wondering about it. This is on Naomi, on her and on her parents, who never taught her anything about her own internal self. She was gone before you even came of age. You hearing me?”

“Yep,” Cas breathed. “That doesn’t make it easier.”

“Yeah, I know. Look, take the report, sign off on it. Get her into her new condo when it’s ready, and be the Alpha she needs for the person she is now. She’s still a person, C.J., and she needs you. Don’t look backward, man. You can’t do anything to change what brought her here. It’ll just drive you crazy.”

“Dean…” He pulled back. “Do you want me to have her at the wedding?”
Dean left his fiancé, heading to the kitchen for a beer. “Would it confuse you all to hell if I said yes?” he asked over his shoulder, holding an extra bottle up in offer. Cas waved off the drink.

“It might. But it’s your decision. If you say you need her to attend, whether I understand your reasons or not, I’m going to respect your decision. If you ask me to invite her, she’ll be there. And I will be extra vigilant about your state of mind, as will Michael. I’m not putting you at risk with that, am I? Be truthful.”

“What the…? Why does everyone keep telling me to tell the truth?! I’m not a liar!” Dean strode past, dropped onto one of the soft wide chairs and took a long drink.

“I think we both know better, my love,” Cas told him with a careful smirk that reminded Dean they were two of a pair, and sometimes a reminder did them both good.

“No, really. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. I don’t want her to be there for the inner ceremony. She can play hostess to the reception before we get there. She’ll love that! But, I think having her at the wedding – Michael had a good point. She knows I’m gaga for you, you know? But I’m not sure she realizes it goes both ways. I’m not going to be watching for her reaction or anything, but I need to know that she saw you make vows to me. Is that too much to ask? Am I off my rocker?”

Cas stared blankly at him. “You’re concerned that my mother isn’t aware that I love you? Dean, we’re engaged. What else could she possibly think?”

“It doesn’t really matter what she thinks…”

“Dean Michael.”

“She thinks I’m a money-grubbing fortune hunter, all right? She thinks I lie to you and fool you into believing…whatever…and that I stole the last vestige of decency you had left!”

Castiel’s laughter exploded out of him, and Dean startled upright.

“It’s not funny!” he declared. “People file lawsuits over shit like this!”

“Incompetent people do not win lawsuits over shit like this,” Cas reminded him.

“Well, that’s a bit of a new development,” Dean pointed out. “The point is, she thinks you’ve been hoodwinked and led astray by your hedonist gay lover, and it would be a great favor to your hedonist gay lover if you’d go to a little trouble to set her straight…um, or something.”

Cas squatted down in front of Dean. “I can do that without inviting her to the wedding, Dean. In fact, I believe we did that together with the state we left her bedroom in before she moved into it. Say, ‘hedonist gay lover’ one more time for me.”

“Shut up. And get out. I’ve got work to do.” Dean stood up and shoved past Castiel, hoping to knock the man unceremoniously on his ass, but he caught himself with a hand on the coffee table.

“You want her there?” asked the Alpha.

“Yes. I want her there.”

“All right. Done.”

“Kiss me, Alpha.”

“Your wish, my sweet one.” The kiss he planted on Dean curled toes even without breaking the
plane of their lips with his tongue. “I’ve got you tomorrow?”

“Yeah. I’ll be ready. Purely play, right?”

“Expect it to hurt a bit, love, but yes, purely play.”

“My favorite kind.”

Cas made his way to the sliding glass door and pulled it open.

“Oh! Cas!” Dean remembered. “Talk to Michael before you go to bed. Our gangbang is a go for late next week.”

“Is it, now?” he said with a challenge in his voice, stepping back toward Dean a little bit. Dean’s forehead thumped against the desk.

“Look, whatever,” he said without raising his head. “Take it up with him. I’m in, if it’s a go. You got a problem with it, talk to my Sir.”

Cas laughed softly again. “No, I don’t have a problem with it. But don’t you care one way or the other? I’m surprised to hear you pass the matter off to Michael…that you weren’t willing to argue for it with me yourself.”

“I shouldn’t have to,” Dean pointed out. “Besides, it’s not really my place anyway. Perks of being the submissive.”

“Among other perks. I’ll put off our next foray into a Pack bed until you heal up from Michael’s plan.”

“Is that really necessary?”

Cas huffed. “Late next week? Thursday? Anything after Thursday runs directly into my proclamation that we start on a Friday or Saturday. What are you asking for, Dean? For us to roll you right out of one bed, hard used, and into another, ready to take another round of abuse? No, we’re not doing that. You don’t make demands, Submissive, even obliquely. Expect your scene with Michael to go ahead as planned, and expect me to postpone my plans accordingly.”

“Yessir,” he muttered, lifting his head and putting his glasses back on.

Castiel left him to it, and Dean enjoyed the squiggly feeling low in his belly, knowing he’d just given Cas a bit of fuel with which to stoke his fires tomorrow night. Whether Cas knew it was intentional was immaterial. It would work anyway. Cas hated to have his surprise play called before he could unveil it. How Dean knew that Cas had been planning to bring both Michael and April in to witness him working Dean over some 24 hours from now, Dean couldn’t say. And he mourned a little that that wasn’t going to happen now, but he knew Cas would find a way to make up for it, a way that hurt sublimely, beautifully, reverently.

Dean went back to work with a bit of smugness in his shiver. It had been too long. Even if it had been but yesterday, it would’ve been too long.
Love, love, love to you all. Thanks for reading.
Chapter 98

Chapter Summary

April takes a swing and a miss, while Dean knocks his out of the park. If that's the case, why was April's punishment no punishment at all while Dean can hardly sit down?

Michael and Dean are finally in full sync. Sarah gets the whole lecture from Sam (possibly the longest speech Sam has ever given). And Kali doesn't like to be tested, but she and Cas find a truce afterward.

Chapter Notes

Tag edit: There's a CBT scene in this chapter. Be aware of that.

So, election day came and went, and... yeah. So, anyway. Lots of good stuff happened. Oh, look! Is that a squirrel? :P

Congrats to my very favorite judge for winning another term.

I want to point out that I've altered the strategy a bit over the last few chapters. My lovelies in the Winchester Pack have an innate need to manipulate each other no end, and that's been there from Chapter 1. Over the last few chapters though, I've started to really lift the veil to show how they really work both with and against each other. Now that it's more out in the open, so to speak, so are their thoughts. I do hope it makes sense. All the way through, there've been little exchanges between them that are total game play, but it was never fully acknowledged. Now that all of the wolves see it, so do we. A lot of it is in the eyes. Watch their eyes. :o)

See the end of the chapter for more notes
THEN:

“Will you just think about it, Sam? You’d be wasted as a cop. You’re better at this than you know. Wolves respond to you, and I know how much YOU get from it.” Dean had him cornered near the rear of the bar. Sam closed his eyes in an effort to find some patience. It wasn’t a new argument, but Sam had had his sights set on training for the police force since he could hold a pencil – or the plastic badge and toy pistol he got for Christmas so long ago.

“Do we have to talk about it right now?” Sam asked. “I told you I’ll think about it.”

“But you’re not,” Dean guessed. “You made up your mind when you were seven. Look around you, man. The world is changing! We’re gonna change it!”

Sam growled in his throat. He didn’t appreciate being ambushed, and looking around the bar, it dawned on him that everyone here at the ‘celebration’ was already either an ACRI initiate or primed to be a recruit. It was a surprise Rush party, and he was one of the Rushees.

“I thought this was Bobby’s birthday party,” he accused under his breath. “You suck, Dean. You and Novak both! I’m not interested in learning to stalk the halls of your little school, scaring the daylights out of whoever you con into signing up for training. I got my fill of those assholes from the receiving side, thank you very much. Why would you think I would ever want to do it for a freaking living?”

“Because I know you, little brother,” Dean calmly gave up all pretenses and pressed the advantage. He DID know Sam. “We’re going to forge a new way of doing things! You would get to stand forward in the van and lead the way. I know you hated those asswipes with their paddles and their sneers back in school. And you know what? So does everybody. Don’t be that, Sam. Make it different. Make it about the need, not the power. Goddamnit, don’t you see? You could take what you do for me and turn it outward to help thousands, tens of thousands. You’re not gonna fool me into thinking your wolf doesn’t feed off it when you take me on. I know better, man. You might fool a lot of people, but you’re not fooling me. Look, just listen to what Cas has to say. Give him this one chance. Drink his free beer. Eat his snacks. It’s all on him. If you listen to him, and I mean really listen to his vision, and you still want to be a cop, I won’t say another word.”

“What about him?” Sam asked with a jut of his chin to indicate the huge alpha at the corner of the bar with the gentle blue eyes that Sam surmised were deceptively canted.

“Who, Benny?” Dean turned and followed his brother’s eyes. “You let me worry about Benny. He’s a teddy bear.”

“Sure he is,” muttered Sam. “He’s in charge of the Behavioral Department. I heard Jo talking about it. It’s getting too thick in here with the nepotism and networking, and he’s not going for you and Novak bringing in everyone you were ever on a first name basis with. You want me to sign on with him as my boss, when he doesn’t want me here?”

“Pssshh! Relax, Sammy. We gotta start somewhere. We need people we can trust to kick things off. We’ve barely gotten anything off the ground, and there aren’t enough good people to start with yet – not that we can be sure of. Have another beer. Grab a seat. Cas is gonna speak in a minute. If you
listen to him and think it’s all a load of crap, then walk away. You let me and Bobby get Benny on board with giving you a pass. You’re handicapped by bein’ my brother, but it wouldn’t be fair to hold that against you your whole life. It’s not your fault, man. You couldn’t help it.”

“Jerk,” Sam said with a sneer, but Dean had him. He looked around, spotted Charlie, whom he’d always liked, and left Dean’s side to slide into the booth beside her with a sense of foreboding. Dean chose to let him go without the requisite response. That alone should alert Sam that Dean’s intentions were pure and that he was operating from his best, most responsible, most adult, alpha self. Right? Right.

He nodded minutely to Cas from across the bar, and the Alpha nodded serenely back. Dean’s whole body flushed. Dang it, when was that reaction going to temper from experience? They’d been scening together for more than a year. Surely the virgin blush should be waning by now. Dean lowered his head and grimaced at his own reaction, but he couldn’t stop himself from peeking up through his lashes.

Fuck.

Cas was openly smug, amused at Dean’s embarrassment.

The asshole.

Every fucking time. All it took was one look of real connection between them, and Dean was a wobbly adolescent mess again. Every. Fucking. Time.

Dean stayed rooted in the back near the bar for this one, with Benny, with Bobby. This was Castiel’s show. He was the visionary, and he’d accepted Dean’s advice to use his charismatic Alpha voice to sway the recruits. There were nine of them in the bar this afternoon, most of them fully aware of the duel purpose of the gathering. Sam had had to be tricked into coming, but the others were all open to the idea of hitching onto a steam locomotive that may still be idling in the station but which seemed to show enormous potential for forging a pathway for a whole species. Cas made it sound both exciting and inevitable. His three partners standing together at the bar as he spoke, backed him up, and none of them interrupted him. The three of them spoke volumes to the authenticity of the endeavor. Where Winchester was young, charismatic, powerful, and passionate, LaFitte was measured and sure, a calming presence in an otherwise potentially volcanic mix of people, and Bobby Singer knew everyone who mattered – knew them, supported them, sometimes carried them. If Singer was behind Castiel Novak, then Novak was someone who merited listening to.

Dr. Harvelle was the first of the nine to raise her voice in assent and officially sign on, but one by one, all of the others followed her lead. Sam was last. Mostly, he hated the idea that his older brother had bragging rights to a lifetime of I told you so’s. But Sam couldn’t deny that the picture Castiel painted was an enticing one. More satisfying by far, for a wolf like Sam, than cruising the streets for street thugs and locking them up; than having his hands tied from going with his gut until it was too late and an innocent had already been harmed. Cas promised an environment where waiting until after the affront had taken place was considered a failure, not a requirement.

That idea alone sold Sam. He could help people – potentially the instigators of violent acts – BEFORE they harmed the innocent. He could take a preemptive role in a way that didn’t infringe upon their rights. It spoke to the inimitable truth that ate constantly at Sam that apes and wolves shouldn’t be treated the same way by law enforcement. Where apes had no defining tells to prove their actions would or would not necessarily take a given path into criminal behavior, Lupins DID. A wolf projected its intent through scent. A wolf reasonably could and SHOULD and MUST be seized pre-action and brought back into a stable line with its packmates before it ever had the chance to go full rogue and cause harm. Could Sam see himself playing a role like that? Hell, yeah, he could. That
was the only thing he’d ever really wanted, only he’d always assumed that law enforcement was his only path to realize it. Castiel told him otherwise. It was a radical departure in vision of an ‘Enforcement Officer’ from the skulking, scowling drones who terrorized students with their ever-present oak paddles in the Lupin school hallways.

So when Castiel finally turned his deep blue eyes, ringed subtly by red, on to Sam in the booth beside Charlie, Sam shrugged. He pretended not to notice Charlie nudging him in the ribs, but in the end he nodded. A quick look past Cas told him Benny hadn’t been convinced just yet that Sam was a solid wager, and Sam bristled a bit on the inside.

Fuck that guy.

Sam’d show him.

If he was gonna do this, by George, he’d be the best fucking Enforcement Officer Benny LaFitte had ever seen.

And damn Dean Winchester and his amused crow’s feet. That asshole doesn’t always know best, goddamn it.

Dean winked at him.

NOW:

Dean was up to something, and Cas’ instinct told him that his fiancé had just won a hand. He needed to think it through to be sure what it was though. The brat never really stopped adjusting the rudder, Cas reminded himself, even while Dean was deeply ensconced in a mature and rational head space. There was always something happening beneath the surface. Watching for clues to what that something might be was as good a mental exercise as all the puzzle apps that purported to stave off early onset dementia put together. Dean was a puzzle that Castiel never tired of prying apart. One thing he was sure of was that Dean would soon find himself pried apart.

Rule Number Seven was going to turn out to be Castiel’s favorite hammer yet. He could feel it. And while it may have had its roots in an effort to trap Michael and tame April, catching Dean in the webbing might prove the most delicious.

The pieces were falling so delectably into place for Cas, and the depth of webbing was filling out nicely. Learning to see April’s efforts to establish a secure home base threw him briefly, but once he really ruminated on Ellen’s words – about how meaningful Cas found his mental escapades with Dean, and how April offered him the same rich cerebral challenge, provided he was brave enough to see it as such – he realized he was surrounded on all sides by people who made him feel needed, challenged, adored, respected, valued, and trusted. Cas sank into April’s cushy armchair with a feeling of having been a monumental fool from the beginning. It was high time to change that.

Portia hopped up and down at his knee, unable to jump into his lap. He reached a hand down to support her ribcage and hoisted her up.

“Uh, okay…” April commented judgmentally from the bed where she lay relaxed on her belly with her heels up and ankles crossed. She had her tablet flat before her, composing an email to Michael with her top candidates for the position of music agent and a request for him to review them and add his input. “She’s allowed on the furniture?”
Cas looked up from scruffing the puppy’s chin with his knuckle, a guilty look on his face. “She’s not on the furniture. She’s on ME.”

“I’m sure she appreciates the difference,” April added caustically. “And she’ll be able to distinguish the difference when she’s too big to fit in your lap, as well.”

Cas frowned a touch petulantly, but he set the puppy back on the floor with an apologetic scratch behind her ears. “I’m sorry. You’re right. Your puppy – your rules.” He turned back to the fluffball who’d resumed her bouncing at his knee. “Sorry, kiddo. Mama said no. Off!” Portia sat, wide-eyed, and then lay down at his feet.

“How do you do that?!” April turned and sat up at the headboard, taking her tablet with her.

“I expect Michael’s right,” he said. “She can sense our positions in the pack.”

April began muttering mutinously under her breath, shaking her head slightly, and typing into the tablet harder than she needed to. Cas moved across to sit on the edge of the bed beside her. “Keep at it, kitten. She’s a puppy, and you’re an adult. You have authority over her. It’s a matter of making her acknowledge that. These first few weeks, you may need to be almost Machiavellian in your approach to gain her respect. Don’t be cruel, but try making her earn your affection instead of giving it away for free. A dog’s psyche is an immature version of our Tertiary wolf. She’s a Profound Submissive, further down the scale than you are, and an adolescent to boot. Address her Submissiveness rather than looking to use her cuteness as a comfort for yourself…at least at first. Think of her as your offspring. Would you accept backtalk from your children?”

“You make it sound so easy. She doesn’t see me as an authority figure. She sees me as a litter-mate, I think. If she could laugh, she’d be laughing at me.”

“That’s disrespectful, April. Will you allow Michael’s pup to disrespect your authority when he grows old enough to challenge you? What about your own pups?” He was doing that eyebrow thing, the one that, when partnered with the lowered chin, made her midsection decidedly squirmy.

“Nosir.”

He laughed good-naturedly and ran fingers through her hair. “You’ve got the instincts to hold your own against rebellious youngsters, April. You just need to learn to trust your own assertiveness.” Portia was still curled up beside the chair, but her eyes stayed trained on the Alpha, and her body quivered with the desire to go to him.

April sat beside him, still and thoughtful as he stroked her hair. It hit her out of nowhere, and she suddenly felt quite stupid for missing it before:

“You got me a practice puppy,” she accused. “So I could learn how to manage human pups.” She was pouting again.

He grinned.

“How do you know Michael’s having a boy?” she changed the subject before she said something that got her in trouble. “Male Omegas can have girls, you know, even if the father is a guy, too.”

He touched his nose and then leaned in to kiss hers playfully. He clearly thought he’d just won something.

“You can smell it?” she challenged, and Cas nodded and climbed back off the bed. “Boy pups smell different than girls, even this early?”
“They do,” he told her, collecting the puppy in his arms and scenting her throat. “It’s a hormone mixture. Michael’s pup is beyond the developmental stage where its genitals begin to take shape. The hormones that make that happen have a signature scent. It is already giving off a male scent, quite unlike Portia’s. You can detect it as well, if you know what to smell for. Come, scent Portia.”

April slid her tablet onto the bedside table and followed his instruction. “Males and females both have a unique scent that underlies their identifying personal odors. As they get older, it sinks down beneath that personal scent until it’s hardly detectable. People who work with infants or pregnant mothers get good at scenting for it. Once you learn to filter for it, you’ll be able to tell too.”

“What about intersex people? What do they smell like?” she asked, taking the puppy into her own arms. So, he thought he’d won something, did he? April wasn’t ready to concede yet. She didn’t need a practice pet, and her only route to scoring on him now started with getting him out of his Alpha.

He began to strip off his clothes to prepare for bed. “They carry both scents, kitten. Their genetics send instruction to the developing parts to code for a hormone mix that includes contributions from both sexes. And following that line of questioning, transgender individuals, at this stage of development, smell in concert with their developing physical sex. We know that Michael’s pup is developing physically into a boy, but we can’t possibly know until well after he’s born if he might, perhaps, be trans in his Primary aspect – altering all those pronouns to the feminine version, of course. Such individuals are rare among Lupins, but not unheard of.”

There. That was what April wanted. Discussions like this nearly always pulled him into his brain.

April buried her nose in the puppy’s fur. It was a pure, wild, unadulterated scent, and it sent a happy flow of simple rightness through her. April didn’t particularly care if Michael’s pup turned out to be transgender. Everyone she’d ever met was such a baffling mix of conflicting pushes and pulls from within, that one more aspect variable just meant one more variable to account for when learning how to relate to them. She’d never met anyone she would call simple. Maybe Sam.

Cas inspected his outerwear, decided it was all clean enough, and hung everything but his socks up in the closet he shared with his mate. His belongings had slowly begun to spread across both bedrooms about evenly, through no intent of his own.

“Have you ever met anyone who was trans, Cas?” April set the puppy back on the floor and began to slip out of her own clothes, dropping her dress straight to the ground where Portia pounced into its folds.

Cas turned a quizzical look on her. “I’ve spent my entire career studying the complexity of gender and sex, kitten,” he said.

She looked up at him, standing in the middle of the room in his undershirt and boxer briefs. “Stupid question. I’m sorry. I meant to ask more into the meat of the subject. Like, how can you be sure what kind of care they need, or, how do they… I don’t know… how do they present their needs? How do you determine if a surgical change is the best option? How do you help them?”

He continued staring at her for a bit longer, trying to pare down to where her ignorance picked up from the manipulative hand she’d just played. She wasn’t that provincial, despite growing up in a small town. Finally, he turned back to the closet for a bathrobe. “Every individual is an individual. Whether we’re focusing on their Primary, Secondary, or Tertiary designation, we start by getting to know the person: who they are, what they want, where their biggest pressure points are, and where they require untangling the most. Everyone I’ve ever met starts out tangled after their Presentation. Surgery is neither appropriate nor feasible for everyone who’s trans, but for many people, it can
make all the difference. It’s important to remember that there is no, ‘one size fits all’ approach to helping people find their most authentic selves. Everyone is unique. Does that answer your question?”

“If one of our pups was born trans…?”

He couldn’t contain the small smile. Every image of the ever-closer reality that his house was finally starting to welcome pups home again after so many years, brought a smile to his face. He closed the distance, petting Portia’s soft fur and sinking into April’s eyes. “We will address every unique facet our children present as a welcome challenge, and we’ll be there to lift them all up into the greater world with a sense of pride in the intricate tangle of inimitable ‘self’ that each of them has to shower upon all of us. They will be honored and cherished for who they are, not for who we may have expected them to be.”

“What if one of them follows Naomi’s example and turns against everything you’ve spent your life teaching?” she asked quietly.

“Then we will convert the downstairs den back into a chapel, as it was years ago, and we will argue a lot. We don’t need two game rooms after all, and there’s not one of us in this house who shies from a good argument.”

He took the puppy in tender hands. “Lie down on your belly again. I want to look you over.” Portia found herself back on the floor, so she scrabbled about under the bed, looking for treasure.

April lay down without complaint. His touch along the backs of her thighs, a series of firm sweeps up and down the length of her legs, matched the tone in his head that enjoyed the unequivocal truth that her flesh belonged to him, and all of the marks on her body were his.

April let out a careful breath and relaxed. Her effort had been a close call, she realized. Unpracticed at having her careful choreography unmasked, she had been clumsy at trying to pull him into his front brain, out of his Alpha. She loved the Alpha aspect, but after a difficult day like today, there was a tenderness to his Primary that she craved, and she wanted to be free to ferret about in his head without him noticing.

It hadn’t worked.

He caught her red-handed, and he had offered her a simple warning, all of it under the surface. She would have to be more careful, but he had switched into his front brain anyway, and his touch along her thighs was delightful.

A brisk pop to her sore ass broke her from her reflection. “Take Portia out back, and then settle her in her basket,” he told her. “You look pretty damn good to me. Meet me next door when you come back upstairs. I want to sleep four-abreast tonight, since we’re all going our separate ways again soon.”

April crawled backward off the bed and took the puppy. “Any chance we could stay up late and play a little?”

“All four of us?” he clarified.

“All four of us.”

“No, kitten, not tonight. Some of us are still running on a sleep deficit.”

She pouted beautifully on her way out, such an Ozzie expression, that Cas felt his Alpha respond
Despite having been fed its fill already only a few hours prior, he let the Alpha suggest an alternative that might encourage his Ozzie to suck her lower lip back in the next time she felt like pouting, and he chuckled at his own incorrigible nature as he activated the intercom to the Pool house.

“Dean,” he called through the intercom. “Save your work. Close it up for the night and come to bed. We’re nesting together this evening.”

It only took a moment for Dean to respond, a little muffled and a little strained from stretching across the space to reach the button. “Ye..eah. Coming. Can I, um, have five to finish up this last thought and get to a stopping point?”

Cas clicked back in. “I’ll be expecting you in the Master in seven. Bring Michael.”

“Can do, Alpha. I call dibs on the inside spot.”

Cas smiled. “Timer’s counting,” he declared and turned the intercom back to idle.

Once they were all assembled and jockeying for spots, Cas pulled their attention with an iconic clearing of his throat. “There is a new Pack Rule to announce,” he told Dean and Michael. They abandoned arguing about bed positions and looked up at him. “April, would you please do the honors?” All the men turned to face her, and she squeaked softly.

“Yes, Alpha. So, um, Pack Rule Seven…”

“Let’s reiterate the previous six first, kitten, would you do that for me? Simplified versions are fine.”

Michael shot Dean a confused look, but Dean had his smitten face on, so Michael gave that route up as lost. April met his eye as she counted them out. “Rule one, be obedient,” she quoted. “Rule two, be safe.”

“Good,” her mate praised. “Go on.”

“Rule three, be respectful and kind. Rule four, be tidy.”

“Two more,” he prompted, taking hold of her hand and massaging it gently.

“Rule five is don’t lie.”

“Don’t lie or…?” he prompted again.

“Um, don’t lie or manipulate.”

“And number six?”

“Don’t break the law.”

By number six, the mates had tucked in close emotionally, buried inside one another to the exclusion of the other two in the room, touching places within each other that no one else could reach. Dean cleared his throat loudly. April startled and looked across at him in surprise.

Dean raised in eyebrows. “And? Number seven is Michael and me gotta stand here and watch you two eye-fuck each other while the clock ticks?”

“Don’t be rude, Dean,” Cas chastised. “You’re pushing.”

“I’m tired, Alpha. Could we get on with it, please?”
Cas turned brilliant blue eyes back on April. “Tell Dean the new rule, kitten.”

“Yes, sir.” She turned to face Dean who was sneakingly shifting himself toward the middle of the bed. “Number seven is a clarification of number five,” she said. “Anyone caught being manipulative by the Alpha faces punishment by the Alpha.”

Michael scoffed. Dean pulled the comforter up to his chest and snuggled in. “Everyone in this room is manipulative,” Michael pointed out. “Look at Dean right now! You think no one noticed you worming your way into the center while we were distracted?”

Cas raised a brow, but didn’t object. Instead, he went back to the original point. “To be clear, all of you, I define manipulation, and I decide punishment. Is this rule understood? I do not condone the use of indirect handling tactics for any of my subordinates to get what they want. If you want something, ask for it. If I catch you doing otherwise, I will punish. The severity of the punishment is up to me and me alone.”

Michael pointed to Dean with an offended air, and Cas chuckled. “Minor offenses may be waived on occasion at my discretion.”

“Oh, well, that’s a load of crap!” Michael protested.

Cas cocked his head and regarded the Omega. “Would you care to rephrase?” the Alpha asked him.

“Not particularly,” Michael answered, and Castiel laughed. The two Dominants might flare up against each other, but they also shared a degree of simpatico that bought Michael more forbearance than the Subs would ever be allowed.

“Very well. Moving on. I would like to illustrate how you can expect this to work. April, dear one, you expressed dismay a bit ago that it seemed I allowed you to bring home a puppy because I meant you to use its care and training as practice toward your parenting skills. Is that correct?”

“I don’t need a practice puppy, sir,” she stated. “I can learn how to be a mother the way everyone else does it.”

“So, you see? Manipulative tactics are disrespectful and hurtful. It would have been far better if I had admitted to April weeks ago that I worried that her submissiveness might carry over into child rearing and that having a means of practicing exercising her parental authority could do her some good. If she found that suggestion offensive, she could have raised the complaint at the time, and we would not have adopted Portia at all.” Castiel couldn’t stop his eyes from glittering.

“What?!” she exclaimed. “Cas, I’ve always wanted a pet dog! I wanted one my whole life, but my parents never let me have one.”

“What you wanted,” he rounded on her, and his eyes flashed dangerously. “Was a stand-in for your innocent waif-like persona to assuage my Alpha designation when you finally found the nerve to stand up to me!”

She gasped and took a quick backward step, unaccustomed to the heavy weight of his full presentation focused in offense directly at her. He’d always tempered it before. His eyes were fully red.

He stepped toward her and went reprovingly on. “You’ve been shifting playing pieces around the board for months, and this is just one more of those.” He wasn’t tempering anything. “Be careful what you wish for April. You wanted the chance to let me see you, and that’s an enormous gift that I don’t take lightly. But now that I’ve seen how you operate, you’re going to find me much harder to
fool. I believe we can both assume all of the masks have been removed at this point. You wanted to know me for real as well, correct?”

She stared at him. Michael frowned and looked back and forth between them. Dean snuggled in deeper and turned onto his side facing Castiel.

“Do you deny the accusation?” Cas asked her point blank, obviously deciding she wasn’t going to answer his prompt but was in full agreement. He clarified without giving her another chance to answer. “You knew that once all of your hidden aspects were out in the open, I would mourn the loss of a pure innocent to guide, so you finagled bringing one in, one that I never have to watch grow out of need of my Alpha’s particular style of direction. Instead of facing the issue head on and talking to me about it, you sneaked an innocent in under my nose, under the pretense of having always wanted a dog. You knew it would answer strongly to me. You knew it would be an uphill battle ever to teach it to answer to you. Every single aspect of this plan was to placate me, not you. Am I right?”

She fought to hold his eye, but she nodded bravely. His face showed almost no reaction except for the slightest twitch of his lip. That gave her courage. “You can’t make the rule retroactive, Alpha,” she asserted. “That plan took root well before you set down the new rule.”

He quirked that singular brow. “Indeed? I would remind you that I make the rules and how they are applied, so should I choose to enact this one retroactively, I will do so. I would also remind you that you acted upon your deception even after I made the new rule known to you.”

“Wait! Hold up!” Cas closed his eyes in forbearance. Michael was utterly predictable. “It’s fine for you to be sneaky as hell about why you said yes to the dog, but it’s not okay for her to be sneaky about why she asked for it in the first place?!”

“DING! We have a winner!” Cas told him abruptly. “That’s precisely the point, Michael. Thank you for pointing it out. THAT’S why this illustration is so instructive.”

“The fuck…? Dean, are you just gonna lay there? Doesn’t this upset you at all?” Michael stood up and faced his sleepy mate.

“Upset me? Why would it? It’s hierarchy, man. Chill out. If you don’t play the game, your ass won’t be on the line.” Dean pressed the side of his head in deeper into the pillow, but he flinched when Michael pinched his ass metaphysically. “Ow!” Dean ended on a giggle.

“And you! Are you going to stand still for this? It’s not even a little bit fair,” Michael asked April. The Ozzie had her head cocked to the side, fully engaged within the depths of her mate. She didn’t answer Michael.

“Game on, sir?” she asked softly at last, focused intently on Castiel. His slow smile spread millimeter by millimeter.

“I believe so, kitten.”

“Well, fuck that!” said Michael. “You people are all crazy!”

“I believe I owe you, then, sir,” she continued as if Michael hadn’t spoken at all. And this. This was why April shouldn’t be deciding which designation he occupied. She had thought she wanted him cognitive and gentle, but she didn’t. She really, really didn’t.

“I agree,” he told her, taking a seat on the edge of the bed, still wearing his bathrobe. He looked up at her expectantly.
“You’re going along with this?!” Michael asked when she smiled shyly and approached Cas’ left side.

“I’m guilty, Michael, just as he said,” she told him from her trance.

Cas closed his hand around her wrist and pulled her down over his lap. He began a slow, measured pace of strikes against her already marked skin. Michael frowned. That was no punishment spanking.

Cas’ hand lingered every few strikes, to ease the sting with a soft petting up and down. He had begun to nearly purr through his throat. April’s eyes were bright, and she held Michael’s in a way that Cas couldn’t really see, focused as he was down on her ass. He smacked her three times fast, then rubbed the sting out and pushed his fingers between her thighs to stroke her moistening vulva then even lower down to nudge teasingly against her clit. April moaned and spread her thighs apart.

Michael’s pupils dilated. His jaw dropped. Castiel spanked her again, much harder, and she thrashed under his hold.

“Easy, kitten. Not yet. Remember what I said. We’re not playing a foursome tonight. He eased her with soft swipes up and down her thighs. “Did you lie to me about why you wanted a puppy?” He thumbed her clit again, and she moaned low and filthy.

“Yes, Sir,” she breathed.

“You were a very bad girl, then, weren’t you?”

“YES, SIR!” she shouted as he wrapped his left hand down around her chest and tweaked her nipple brutally hard. Another fast and powerful round of spanking right on the meat of her backside had her thrashing again, and he slowed down to soothe her once more. He nudged her right leg outward so that she lay splayed out before him, such an easy target for anything he wanted to do. Michael couldn’t look away. Dean lay still, his eyes peaceful on Castiel’s back, but a quicker breathing pattern would’ve given him away if anyone was watching Dean. They weren’t.

Cas stroked her clitoris with quick easy flicks, enough to make her breath catch, just before another forceful pinch to her nipple and another ten hard slaps to her ass. She quieted on his lap at an internal cue he fed her through their bond, and he grimaced a little as he applied himself diligently to putting her control to the test.

Torqueing April up to lose control was often a matter of overwhelming her, finding new ways to surprise her, staying one stroke ahead of predictability. She could hold out for hours, if he kept to a predictable routine, but she would fold like a pup tent if he overwhelmed in ways she didn’t see coming – so to speak.

Cas manhandled her left leg around his body until her torso fell and she had to catch herself on her hands or risk smashing her chin into the floor. He wrapped her legs around his waist, leaned way down and scratched his blunt fingernails the length of her back from her shoulders to her ass, dragging them painfully over the scorched red flesh, leaving white streaks in their wake that slowly turned into red welts.

He began another harsh round of swats, this time, mindfully hitting her sit spots, using her youthful flexibility to get her thighs spread as widely as he could and roasting her where she lay spread. She groaned, trying to peer over her shoulder. Her channel wept copiously, and the rich, wet smell from her pussy turned Michael brainless where he stood. He took a couple of tentative steps forward.

Castiel’s bathrobe sat disheveled. His engorged cock angled playfully upward, at no good angle to
sink into her, but he pulled her upward by her thighs until he could rub it against her ruthlessly, making her squawk in surprise. April planted her hands and pushed backward into him, unleashing his most vicious round of strikes upon her ass yet, and making her lose her breath completely.

Michael stepped another two steps closer, still entranced, one hand poised at the elastic of his underwear, ready to strip them off.

“On your knees, Michael,” Cas instructed with no warning. Michael glanced up at him in alarm. A part of him must have meant to somehow sneak into the action unnoticed. “Kneel in front of her, and let her suck you. She’s very good at it.”

Suddenly a pragmatist, Michael didn’t wait to be told twice. He dropped his soft boxers and went onto his knees before the Ozzie, whose eyes were hungry. She couldn’t reach him easily though. Her head was too low, and the angle strained her neck.

“Lean in, Michael,” Cas told him. “Get close. Get underneath.” Michael shimmied closer, spreading his knees wide and leaning back to angle under. Cas took hold of his right hand and used it to stroke across April’s flaming backside just as her mouth engulfed the Omega. Michael sucked in a quick breath. Castiel lifted Michael’s hand, arranged his hold to take him by the back of his wrist, and slapped Michael’s hand down onto April’s ass. All three of them groaned.

“Yeah, Alpha,” Dean moaned quietly from behind them. “You show her who’s boss.” It was a sleepy slur, but there was lust embedded in a distanced kind of way, as if Dean was inside a delicious wet dream.

Michael needed no further encouragement. He spanked the Ozzie hard enough to jounce her down to where her mouth suckled his cock. Michael was not going to last, even if he’d been the last one in the pool. He braced his body with a hand on the floor by her ribs, and he thrust his hips rhythmically into her mouth, never slowing the flat steel-plate strikes of his hand. Cas angled his hips to rub his cock against everything wet and swollen before him, and he used his spank-heated hand to press it even harder against her folds as he sought frantically for his climax, picking up to a fast pace. He clutched his left hand around her to force her upward and against him as he thrust, pressing up onto the balls of his feet to give him room to move.

Michael tumbled first, pulling out frantically, and swatting her backside once more before he came across the bridge of her nose and her lips. Cas moaned and followed him over, holding Michael’s hand hard against April’s bright red butt, entangling their fingers, and clutching at her flesh through Michael’s hand.

April groaned thickly and pressed backward, but Cas got a hand on the inside of her thigh and stopped her from finding sufficient friction. She was swollen and desperate, enflamed, engulfed in need, coated in his thick come, and she throbbed.

“Not tonight, kitten,” Cas said in a gruff voice. “You don’t come when you’re being punished. You know better.”

She collapsed against the hold of her arms and meagered a defeated, miserable cry of disappointment. Somehow, even though he’d never once allowed it when he meant not to, she always held out hope that she might get to come, if she could just sneak it in before he found his. Surely, there would be a moment or two just before he toppled that he would lose focus enough that if she could just… There was a reason she worked so hard on orgasm control. If she could learn to reach that magical moment the instant she felt his focus waver, she could win something for herself that he didn’t intend to allow her.
It wouldn’t please him, but it would be worth it, she hoped.

Not tonight, obviously. She panted with her cheek against the carpet. Michael’s thumb traced the narrow line of his mark across her nose. He sat in front of her and pressed his thumb between her lips, his eyes intent on his thumb as it disappeared into her mouth.

“Breathe through it, Pete,” he advised her sweetly, his face pressed into the carpet close to hers.

“Nooooom…” she whined, pulsing her hips against nothing and turning a desperate eye on Michael.

“Up you go, my love,” Cas said cheerfully. He uprighted her then swept her into his arms to carry her into the bathroom where he stood her by the sink and began to give her a painstakingly slow sponge bath. Michael stood balefully in the middle of the room, totally lost, unsure of what had just happened or what it meant.

Dean huffed at him, then whistled lowly and beckoned.

“Quick, kiddo, slide under. I can get you close to her again if you’ll lay there and keep your mouth shut. You want me to get her a spot next to you all night?” Dean didn’t look so sleepy anymore. Michael frowned and spared a glance toward the bathroom.

“You’re playing games again already? What the fuck, Winchester?”

“Only if you want me to. We’re all four sleeping here tonight, but I can arrange you to get a cozy spot right up next to your girlfriend. Yeah? Game? You don’t have to say anything. In fact, better if you don’t. Shh. They’re coming back.”

Michael rolled his eyes, and lofted another pinch to Dean’s ass, right in the same spot as the first. Dean flinched and rubbed at the spot, but he didn’t cry out this time. Michael slipped under the covers beside Dean, still nude, still unsure what had just occurred, still hesitant to trust his mate but incapable of not. He sighed heavily. Castiel dropped his mate beside Dean, turned off the light at the wall and climbed in beside her. She turned her back to Dean and curled into Cas.

“What the…?” Dean said into the darkness, in surprise and hurt. “Cas, I called us dibs for the middle, man. Wanted to sleep next to you! I fuckin’ called it!”

“Good grief, Dean, don’t be a child. Go to sleep.” That was his Alpha voice. Cas was exhausted. Dean could feel Michael’s muscles bunch as the weight of him in Dean’s head suddenly felt leaden. Michael was about to call it off. Dean reached behind him and touched Michael’s hip.

“She had you twice tonight, Alpha!” he protested. “I’m not askin’ for a tumble. I know you’re wiped. I just want to have your neck right there where I can scent you in my sleep. April doesn’t mind. Right? Right, kid? You don’t mind switching to the outside, do you?”

Dean was sitting all the way up, shuffling and messing with the covers.

“She DOES mind, Dean!” Cas shot in irritation. “She asked me for an inside position as well, and I promised. For fuck’s sake, this is absurd! You got what you asked for. You’re in the middle. Go to sleep!”

“Well…I mean…there’s TWO inside spots, man. Here, kid, swap with me.”

April’s terrified eyes were visible even in the dark, and she shook her head and clutched the covers. “I don’t…” was all she could get out.
“Seriously?!” Dean spat. “What happened to all that B.S. about making room for me? Or was that just when it was convenient?” Dean worried a little that he’d turned it up too high, and that he was about to get the not fun kind of red-hot rear end and a pallet on the floor or banished to another room entirely, but he had already thrown in his lot, so he stared April down and went for it. “You spend practically every free minute with him now days, and I’ve gotta put in for a nooner three weeks in advance! All I’m asking for is a night beside him, April. One night. You can sleep next to him tomorrow after he and I play. I’m not gonna get another cha…”

“Dean! Knock it off, and go to sleep! It’s not cute anymore!” Cas punched his pillow a couple of times and then dropped his head soundly.

“What? Fine! Whatever! You’re not leaving until Sunday, but whatever! TAKE your happy little empty house and your uninterrupted mate time and roll in it! I don’t want to sleep in this room anyway! Fuck this! Come on, Michael!”

Dean crawled over his mate, stormed out the door and returned to their room down the hall.

“What the bloody fuck was that?!” Michael asked as he followed Dean in. Dean stood fuming by the window, still in nothing but his underwear. “You were just trying to get your places switched, but you went over the damned cliff!”

“Michael, would you please excuse us?” Castiel’s voice was calm and a little sad.

“Yeah, sure. Um, back to bed, sir? Or…should I wait in the hall? If it’s all right with you, I’d rather sleep back where we started.”

Cas graced Michael with a tender look, a bracing hand on the Omega’s shoulder, and a soft answer. “Go on back to bed. We’ll be there in a bit.”

“Go on back to bed, Michael!” Dean jibed. “She’s waiting for you!”

“That’s enough, Dean,” Castiel told him, closing the door. “Come here.” He held his arms open, and Dean bolted into them, sobbing miserably.

“What’s wrong with me, Alpha? Couldn’t shut my mouth! Didn’t mean it to get outta hand like that, but…”

“Shhh, shhh. I know, baby. We waited too long, that’s all. You’ve been strong for everyone, but your wolf knew it was time. What set you off this time? Let me guess, you were hoping to wend a way through to allow Michael and April to sleep side-by-side?”

Dean’s silence was all the answer Castiel needed, and he chuckled into his brat’s hair. “Even after I gave him a thorough taste of her right there in full daylight? What are you trying to prove, Dean? I can see the ball rolling between those two, Pet. It doesn’t need any help, and you certainly don’t need to hurry it along. We’re on her schedule now, not mine. Leave it alone. That’s an order from your Alpha. Understood?”

“Wanted to sleep by you,” whined Dean, snuffling.

“And you wanted me to lie uneasy in the dark all night thinking about our mates in such close proximity with each other. Yes or no?” Cas stroked Dean’s hair, his nape, out across his shoulders.

“Yes,” Dean muttered with his chin on his chest.
“What was that? Speak up.” Cas pulled away a little, but he didn’t lift Dean’s chin for him. Dean looked up on his own.

“Yes, Si…I called myself a ‘priss’ earlier, and Michael didn’t do anything about it.” Dean interrupted himself, running the words into one long stream with a confession he didn’t know he needed.

Cas’ eyes bored into Dean’s. “Did you, now? What did we agree to about that?”

“Um, not…to. Sir.”

“Come on, let’s get on with it. I’m falling asleep on my feet, and so are you.” Cas led him to the bed. “Down on your knees. Face the bed. Drop your drawers. In fact, slip them off altogether.”

Dean stumbled in removing his underwear. He got a foot tangled and almost fell over. Castiel caught him.

“Lean into the bed and present your ass. Pull your back down, Dean. Get a good arch going.” Dean adjusted and readjusted his knees on the carpet. Widening them when Cas nudged against each from the inside with his foot. “Good. Like that.”

The Alpha disappeared from directly behind him, and Dean’s eyes sought Cas’, but his Top was searching through Dean’s upper drawer not looking at him. Eventually, he pulled out a small bag, and Dean groaned. Cas knelt behind his fiancé, reached into the bag, and began to line Dean’s testicles with clothespins that pinched brutally hard. He put six on each one, arranged to cascade down each side, poking the insides of his thighs. These weren’t Dean’s playing pins. Those were tight, but not like this. He didn’t know where Cas had found pins with springs like a mousetrap, but they hurt like a motherfucker, and Dean was panting into the bedding in no time, sweating up a storm, and trembling.

Cas stood up behind Dean and let him sweat in silence. There was a limit to how long those pins could stay attached before they would do real damage, and Dean left it on trust that Cas was counting down accurately. Mostly, Dean couldn’t think straight enough to worry about it. He was throbbing clear down to his knees, and his balls ached like fire brands. He whined in pain after about a minute, and that’s when the cane landed.

Dean lost it.

Flight was beyond him. Pain was everywhere, and he desperately wanted to escape it, but the was nowhere to move to that didn’t hurt – hurt like a lightning strike, like an electrocutioner’s chair, like falling into the sun until his body dissolved.

Dean came back to himself slowly, as always. First, there was the realization that the pain had ceased climbing upward, had softened somewhat, had settled into a hot throb. Next came the darkness, soothing in the way it asked nothing of him when he had nothing left to give. Then there was the recognition that his body, HIS body, was intact and still, that he had a body at all, and that he occupied space in a place of cool dark warmth separated unfairly from other bodies with whom he’d so recently been melded. Finally, the rest of his senses returned. He heard soothing words and felt a gentle stroke up and down his back. He smelled family. He smelled adoration. He smelled trust. He smelled awe.
“Are you back with me now?” asked his Top. “That was a bit longer of a flight than you usually take, Pet. I was beginning to be concerned.”

“’M okay. Need some water or sumthin. Please?”

“I’ll get it,” April’s voice sounded from behind him on the bed. Dean turned his head to find Michael beside him, watching him closely, poised to touch his cheek and gift him a simple smile. He was back in the Master bed.

When the caress to his cheek landed softly, Dean felt a tear break over his lid and trace down his cheek.

“100% trouble,” said his mate fondly into the darkness. Dean felt his chest tie up into a tight knot.

“You’re all right, Dean. You’ll feel better in the morning. Here, sit up a little, roll up on your hip. I’ll help you.” Michael braced Dean as he struggled to get his head high enough to drink from the glass April brought.

Dean thanked the Ozzie and handed the glass back to her. He collapsed back down onto the bed, turned a little onto a hip, and curled into Castiel, who wrapped an arm around him and told him he was beautiful, told him he was loved, was perfect, had better go the fuck to sleep. Dean chuckled wetly and nuzzled in.

He felt the bed behind him shift and realized that Michael had shifted backward to allow April in between. He didn’t know if either of the Omegas had even asked Cas, or if they were counting on his being too exhausted by this juncture to notice or care, but Dean smiled as she tucked in close as well.

Her back touched his, and that much bare skin should have been too much heat, too close, too intimate, but it felt like a mooring to Dean.

“Happy now?” asked Cas so quietly the Omegas probably hadn’t heard it.

“Yes, sir,” he whispered back.

“Can we please go to sleep?” There was that adoration again. Dean didn’t really understand what Castiel found so adorable about him, especially when he repeatedly tumbled off his perch and required a constant, steady hand to stabilize him. How could anyone look forward into decades and decades of that and not groan under the weight of the burden? But Cas’ touch was light and affectionate. Understandable or not, he was hopelessly in love with Dean, and Dean had no reason not to cling to him right back.


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“Holy shit!” exclaimed Dean in the morning, looking downward for his morning pee. “They’re huge! And BLUE!”

Michael peeked around the corner. He knew already, merely from the physical sensations he could feel through their bonds. Dean’s testicles were swollen and bruised, but they looked more damaged than they truly were.
“You need to get a move on. We’re running late. Do you want help with your routine?” Michael offered.

“Uh, yeah. Do you mind? Everything down there aches like a son of a bitch.”

“Come on over to the bed. Got you all set up. You wanna lay on your tummy or your side?”

“Works best on my side,” the alpha told him, sliding down into place and pulling a knee upward.

Dean lay still and let Michael work. He explored the bonds with a mindful eye, poking into places he often didn’t. Michael looked up toward Dean without raising his head. “Looking for something?” asked Michael.

“Not really. Kinda just poking around. Having you do this for me doesn’t embarrass me at all the way it does when it’s Cas. I was picking around to figure out why that is.”

Michael focused back down at the tubing. “It’s because of the bonding,” he said. “Our minds accept each other as ‘self’. It’s not embarrassing to go to the toilet or bathe yourself when it’s just you in there. You don’t even think about it. Having me in the picture doesn’t change that. It’s still that same sense of ‘self’ because you know all my emotions, my physical sensations, and I know yours. I can feel when your bladder is full. I mean, it’s hard to stay embarrassed 24/7, when all that stuff is impossible to hide. ‘Kay, I’m pulling out the nozzle now. Hold it. You good?”

Dean responded from inside Michael’s head, and the Omega smiled.

He cleared the apparatus away, and Dean headed into the bathroom.

“Alpha, do you want a plug for today? Is Cas going to expect you to pre-prep for him?” Michael scrounged through the few toys they had in the room. None of them would do the job he was proposing. “I can swing by the Play room before breakfast and grab you something.”

Dean spoke loudly from within the inner room. “Would you ask him for me at breakfast? I like listening to the two of you working things out for me.”

Michael smirked to himself. “Yeah, Dean. I can do that.”

Michael dressed quickly. Dean had promised him that there was no requirement in joining the beta-Dom class for any specialized apparel. His usual jeans would do. And he wasn’t exactly nervous, just uncertain. He caught Dean on his way out of the bathroom. “You told Castiel that our gangbang is on for Thursday. That was premature considering I haven’t agreed to it yet.”

“No,” Dean said in surprise. “I told him I was in and that he should talk to you.”

“That’s not what he said he heard from you. He said you told him it was scheduled already.”

“Are you pulling it?” Dean asked.

“I said I needed to think about it a little more and that I’d let you know.”

“And I told Cas he should get with you about it. I don’t see the problem. I’m just trying to keep all the oars rowing in the same direction. He needed to know. And it’s a good thing I mentioned it when I did. He said he was planning our first full four-way scene for the day after. Now he wants that postponed so I can heal up. We all know there’s gonna be some damage.”

“Uh-huh.” Michael blocked the door.
“I thought you didn’t wanna be late for breakfast.” Dean’s face was blank. His bonds were blank.

“What are you after?” Michael asked suspiciously. “Why did you tell him it was scheduled and not simply proposed? It’s not like you to say something in a way that you know will be taken outside of the full truth unless you’re trying to nudge something somewhere. What is it? Don’t even think about lying to me.”

Dean didn’t blush at being called out. “He was planning to recruit both you and April for tonight’s… whatever – not as a scene, as a play date. He hates it when I anticipate his surprises and spoil the plan. He hates it that I can still stay a step ahead of him. Now he’s declared that he won’t be starting us off as a foursome for another couple weeks. That killed his plan for tonight too, and it means he has to start over scrambling to make a new plan.”

“But…Dean…WHY? You said you wanted the foursome. Why would you deliberately sabotage it?”

“It’s not sabotaged, man. He wasn’t doing a full foursome tonight. It was probably going to be a tease for you two, and a chance for me to exercise within the ring of having spectators. We’re still gonna do that, eventually. The real foursome shit is still totally on, but if you and I turn my backside to pulp next week from a gangbang, then there’s no way he would’ve done the four-way scene on schedule anyway. I didn’t change anything that matters. He adapted. That’s what he does. He moved the mingled spirits spectator play up to last night, pulled you right in – and I didn’t hear you bitching – and the rest proceeds as scheduled. What I get out of it is a torqued Alpha on my ass tonight. He feeds off that stuff, Michael. He fucking loves the challenge. He lost this one, and I’ll pay for it. That’s what I’m after. I didn’t bring you in on this one because it doesn’t directly involve you. You still got your taste. He’s gonna be rationing those out to you and April a bit at a time to get his Big Dog used to it. Whether it happened last night or today makes no difference. The only thing that changes is how he faces off to me tonight after dinner.”

Michael stared at him. “This whole fucking house is certifiably insane.”

“This way, you didn’t get a tease, you got to come all over the girl’s face. Don’t think I didn’t feel you right there in that moment, Michael. You’re fucking welcome, man.”

“Dean Michael, get you bare ass downstairs. We’re late for breakfast.”

Dean winked playfully. “Yes, Sir.” His strut was encumbered by the sore swollen flesh that dangled into regions it didn’t usually reach, but he did the best he could.

Michael dutifully asked Castiel how he preferred the Sub to prepare for the evening’s activities, and he followed that up with a confirmation that he planned to schedule Dean’s first attempt at Subbing for a select group of contractors for the Thursday after Charlotte, giving Dean a squeeze to the nape of his neck beneath the table.

And then Dean dropped the anchor on top of everything as he drove them toward the Facility after breakfast.

“Cas, I’ve been thinking. We need a moratorium on sex, you and me.”

“We need a what, now?” Castiel asked, still somewhat distracted by the email on the phone in front of him.

“I’ve been thinking,” Dean repeated. “We’re getting married. It’s no use pretending we’re frikken’ virgins or anything, but if we’re doing this, we should do it right. Two weeks. Whatcha think? No
sex for two weeks to set the stage. You know, get in the ‘marrying’ mindset.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nah, Cas. I mean it. Take the edge off with your mate if you need to, but maybe keep that down to a bare minimum even.” Dean looked across at his fiancé. “What? I’m not worth the wait?”

“You’re not sore enough this morning, apparently,” Cas deflected. “Good. I can fix that tonight.”

“C’mon, babe. Don’t make me beg.”

“Why, Dean Michael? We are not apes. What are you trying to prove?”

Michael had his head down in the backseat, his eyes locked onto his screen and bored with the incessant nauseating sophomoric interplay. He lobbed a simple internal cuff to the back of Dean’s head.

“I’m not trying to prove anything. Just want to ramp the good vibes up a little. You know, stoke the fires.” Dean’s teeth took a delicate hold of his lower lip.

Castiel watched him drive. Finally he said, “The claiming would break the streak, not the wedding night consummation. You realize that, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Dean on a soft breath.

“God, Dean…” Now that the idea was planted, Cas couldn’t have stopped imagining it if he tried, a vicious aggressive mounting on the heels of two weeks of chastity. Screw the wedding vows, Cas would be lucky if he could hold himself back long enough to get to the second portion of the evening.

Dean glanced across at him, reading his mind as easily as ever, a light of potential burning in his eyes. “Right? You see it, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea,” Cas said carefully.

“What? Fuck that. It’s a GREAT idea.”

And just like that, Cas was trapped. Two weeks. Dean had maneuvered him right into either scrapping his foursome plans and going with Dean’s original schedule, something he’d already determined not to do, moving it up such that he didn’t have enough time to think to through, or delaying it until the honeymoon. If Cas admitted his conundrum to Dean, they could work out an alternative together, but Cas was too stubborn for that.

“One week,” he proposed.

Dean’s eyes danced. Those crow’s feet deepened. “Don’t think you can swing it? Come on, Alpha. If I can do it, so can you.”

“One week or no deal.” Cas navigated back to his email.

“Fucking spoilsport,” Dean muttered, pleased with himself no end. Tonight was due to be fun.

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“Sam, would you permit me to interview your mate?” Sarah asked. She perched on his office visitor’s chair and stirred two packets of sugar into her coffee. “I need to get a handle on that D.F. It really threw me, to tell you the truth.” She kept her eyes on the swirling liquid, not on the enormous beta across the desk. “It seemed so out of character for you, and I’m frankly having trouble seeing you the same way I did. No one but me seems to be having any trouble with it. I assume that includes Jess. So, it’s just me? The only thing I can think to do is to incorporate what happened into my paper and explore it. I’d need to talk to Jess directly for that.”

“You need to interview me, too, don’t you, if you’re going to make it a complete topic examination? Sarah, you can ask me anything. I’m not a threat to you any more than I was before Gabriel’s wedding party. I’m really not a threat to anyone at all as long as they don’t try to hurt my family.”

Sarah’s control slipped. She’d been putting out a terrified and judgmental scent since the party, and Sam knew she needed to vent. “Not a threat to anyone? How can you say that with a straight face?! I watched you brutally rape your own mate. I watched you slam her face onto the table and RAPE her. I can barely stand to sit near you! And you’re beta! I can only imagine what it’s like when an alpha does it. Where did all your caution go? You tossed everything away and turned into a beast. She was begging you to stop, for God’s sakes!”

“Only with her voice,” Sam said quietly. “You have to know that I tried every avenue available to us to keep from having to do that. She’s my mate, and I love her. I don’t ever want her to hurt, and even more, I don’t want to be the one who causes her that kind of pain. There’s no use trying to pretend that a Domination Fuck doesn’t hurt. It’s not a rape roleplay. It’s rape.”

Sarah leaned in. “See, you’re about to follow that up with a ‘BUT’, but there isn’t a ‘BUT’. That sentence should end right there. You’re a rapist Sam Winchester. How can I take anything else you say with any credence?”

“Is this really YOU talking?” Sam asked her carefully. “Or have you been speaking with your advisor?”

She didn’t squirm much, but Sam caught it. At least she didn’t lie to him. “He told me I had a free hand in this project, but he asked me for one thing. He asked me to call him the first time I witnessed a full D.F. in person and talk it through with him. It’s the only oversight Dr. Meyer has requested, and I thought he deserved that one allowance. Students don’t usually get this much freedom, even for a PhD thesis. Sam, if I’m going to succeed in staying unbiased, I need to be open to all viewpoints, at least at first.”

“Mm-hm. Sarah, you’re aware of the logical fallacy of ‘Poisoning the Well’, right? Let me guess. He’s already talked through all of the explanations I’m going to throw at you, and he’s already planted a counterargument to dispel each and every one of them. Am I right?”

She continued to challenge him with her eyes, but she didn’t reply.

“Right. So, then, why are you still here?” He had a challenging bearing of his own.

“I want to hear it for myself. I want to talk to Jess.”

“Why would talking to Jess tell you anything? You’re convinced now that we’ve brainwashed her into believing abuse is for her own good. It’s a wolfish version of Stockholm Syndrome. She can’t help you if she’s under a hypnotic spell, Sarah.”
“STOP IT!! I don’t know what to think, all right?! I know what I saw, and I know what it really was. You’re never going to convince me that wasn’t rape!”

“Yeah? So? We already covered that,” Sam reminded her. His instincts wanted him to swoop in close and touch her in some way, but he’d learned already that she didn’t respond to that the way a wolf would. Touch meant something different to apes, and she was more likely to feel compressed or loomed over than comforted. “We told you that on day one. We laid it right out in the open, plain as day, and it didn’t faze you enough to give up then. The only thing that’s changed is that it moved from theoretical to a real occurrence. Everything we’ve told you and shown you is true. Call me a rapist if you must, Sarah. I don’t object. That’s not a false statement. But I’m not a liar.”

“How can you sit there and live with that? How can you live with yourself? There has to be another way!”

He huffed a quick laugh. “Well, I’m going to skip right over that admission that there’s something gained by the practice, cause we’ll get back to that. You saw Jess that evening. You commented that she seemed upset. Sarah, she wasn’t simply upset. Even for a Lupin who doesn’t share a bond with her, her stress level was obvious from her scent. She was in what we call freefall. It’s an emotional turmoil that has progressed so far that it’s impossible for the person to arrest it on their own. She was drowning in Cortisol, and she had no way to deal with it. For anyone who could scent the odor but not feel her from the inside, it might have seemed that a quick hot paddling could help her out of it, but we already tried that, and it wasn’t going to work, not once she got as bad as she did.

“Jess is a rare type of Submissive. She doesn’t just provoke the way many brats do, she needs a no-holds-barred full Domination every now and then. It looks like she’s fighting it, and she is – with everything she has. But, Sarah, that’s part of the schema. It only works for her with a Top who can hold her down even when she’s throwing her full strength against it. She NEEDS to be weaker than me to feel secure, to remain stable, and she’s one strong woman. If she can overpower me, I’m not strong enough to protect her. If she can’t, using every last ounce of her power, and I not only hold her down, but make a big show of debasing her, of taking everything from her, of humiliating her… Sarah, I know it sounds awful. I know watching it was awful for you. But you’re missing what all of US have access to, and that’s the scents. We can smell what actions like that do for all parties involved.”

“That doesn’t make it okay,” she insisted. “There has to be another way.”

“There’s not. I wish there was. And we haven’t given up looking for an alternative. Every year we have at least one new research study initiated with the sole purpose of seeking alternatives. Usually there’s more than one going at once. Right now there are four of them. I can walk you over to the research wing, and we’ll talk to the folks in charge. They’ll give you straight answers. But so far, nothing. Nothing else works.”

“She’s not Omega. It wouldn’t kill her to live with an increased Cortisol level. It won’t drive her crazy,” Sarah insisted. “Most of the people I know would take a higher median stress level over being systematically and brutally raped over and over again.”

“That’s likely true,” he told her. “But most of the people you know are Primates.”

She got up from the chair in front of his desk and paced. “Don’t you know what sexual assault does to people? Sam, I didn’t take you for a barbarian, but this is insane!”

“Yes, I do. I know what it does to Primates, and I know what all of the various presentations of violent physical assault does to Lupins, and you’re still not truly understanding that there’s a fundamental difference.”
“Because there’s NOT ONE!” she shouted.

“Yes, there is. Come to dinner with me tonight. It’s Friday. We eat with the Pack on Fridays. I can arrange it with Castiel. I want you to talk to Jess. You can sit with her before or after dinner. In fact, it’s a good chance to talk to several people who might help you see it better. I’d love for you to spend some time with Fred, Cas’ butler.”

“I don’t know. Dinner with the whole Pack?”

“We’re not going to bite you, and we don’t eat raw organ meat. That’s a myth – one of the stupider ones.” Sam watched her for a moment. “Look, at the heart of it, it’s not that complicated. You react to a situation from the only vantage you have available to you, from your own species. I need you to stop being a Primate for a bit, and be nothing but a scientist. You’re merely observing. Can you suspend your gut for a second?”

“I guess. Maybe. I can try.”

“Okay.” He wiped his hands along his thighs, stood and crossed to the sofa, sinking down and resisting reaching for her hands once more. “Look, it’s animal instinct that developed very differently between the species. We’ve always been closer to our roots than you Primates. Over the eons, as your forebears moved down out of the trees and out onto the plain, your brains developed intellectually and emotionally, and you suppressed instinct. You favored reason, problem-solving, and language to keep your societies tight and your families safe. Your emotional bases filled to favor familial bonding, even some altruism which Lupins lack entirely. But you lost most of the instinctive stuff. It was a trade-off, and it worked for you. Your pups are born more fully developed intellectually than ours, more ready to understand the world. You with me so far?”

“Go on, Sam.”

“We wolves evolved differently. Our intellect was the last thing to develop, not the first. We started using rudimentary tools early, but they were crude at best. What worked for us was to focus in on interconnectedness, very personal, very intimate interconnectedness. We became utterly interdependent as a species, and our evolution for a while, turned inward. We went for millennia without any intellectual advancement at all, and most scientists concluded that we had hit a rut in evolution that only a great crisis broke us out of. We now know better. It wasn’t stagnation at all, it was just difficult to see externally because it left no archeological stamps as we changed. We were reaching down into Pack memory, down into the roots of instinct itself, learning how to tap into the core of everything canine and then reach outward from there to connect with other individuals inside our own minds. We were evolving to use the metaphysical link not simply on instinct the way most animals do, but intentionally.

“The weakness to that is that it makes us emotionally vulnerable. Metaphysical connections and instinct all work through the emotional centers of the brain, not the intellect. It keeps us housed so much of the time in emotion. We became masters of reading each other’s emotional states, but we also became extremely susceptible to the widest swings of emotion. Our interdependence was both a blessing and a curse: a curse because there are times we cannot modulate our own emotions without assistance from the Pack, but a blessing because we are so much stronger as a Pack than any creatures have ever been alone.”

He sighed. “The point of going through all of that is that because you and I evolved to perceive emotions, violence, connection, and everything in the physical world differently, we can only describe those perceptions to each other. We can’t bridge the differences in any real way. You, who are a Primate, witness a D.F., and your mind insists it is violent and destructive, but only because your society has no construct to understand a violence that is anything BUT destructive. Your
emotions insist you are in danger and urge you to fight or flee. You have no one connected to you with whom you can reach for solace or understanding. You are alone in a frightening and violent world, watching a brutal act occur, and you have no means of seeing it any differently. You can’t smell the need or the resolution. You can’t sense the deepening Pack connection. Your sense of empathy, based as it is on intellect first and emotional sensation second, tells you to imagine yourself in the place of the ‘victim’ and insists that she is experiencing what you would experience under the same conditions.”

“That’s not how empathy works,” Sarah rebutted.

“Oh, but it is. It is the core of empathy. It’s a two-stage process by which your mind – your intellect – projects you into the shoes of another being to imagine what their experience is, and then you return to yourself, richer for the revelation, and prepared to act if need be to assuage any damage you perceived occurring. That assessment of risk is intellectual as well. We Lupins aren’t empathetic in the same way at all. We don’t imagine ourselves well in another’s shoes. We depend upon sense of smell and whatever bond links we’ve placed to actually feel what another feels. The further apart we are on both axes of the scales, the more we need a Claim-bond to help us jump the gap.

“The mistake that is made over and over again by Primates attempting to understand what we do, is that we don’t respond the way you would to the same situation. We respond very, very differently. It is human nature, regardless of which species of humanoid we hail from, to assume that at our core, all people are the same, but that’s not true at all. You need to understand that first and foremost.” Sam waited for her to nod that she was following.

“That Domination display that you witnessed. I want you to imagine the same thing but from actual wolves, not people. In a wolf pack, a highly stressed member is a vulnerability to the entire pack. They behave erratically. They are unpredictable. They make poor decisions if there’s a hunt or a need to protect weaker members. The pack cannot allow one member to endanger everyone else, but they can’t abandon them either. It’s imperative they correct the issue. The higher strata wolves MUST act to eliminate the problem and realign all of the individuals. Sometimes one stressed individual causes an avalanche that affects everyone below them. It has to be nipped in the bud so it doesn’t get out of control. A Top wolf isn’t gentle about a correction like that. It’s a harsh flash of teeth that means business, a physical muscling of the lower wolf’s body straight to the ground, and a terrifying growl to back it up. The Top doesn’t stop until the lower wolf rolls, even if blood is drawn. Everything depends upon the hierarchy. And in the wild, mounting is as good a means as biting for any Top, male or female, to put a lower wolf in its place. For a female, it’s all show and force, a physical Topping without any sexual penetration, but research shows she can send her message just as clearly as he can.

“Wolf packs depend entirely on that hierarchy. Lower members of the pack aren’t going to follow a weak leader, and weakness in wolves isn’t evidenced by intellectual prowess, Sarah. It’s force of WILL, physical strength, Dominance, and leadership aptitude. If the leader isn’t the strongest wolf in the pack, then the truly stronger have a responsibility to challenge for rightful position. That’s not pretty either, and it nearly always involves a mounting at the end as well. There cannot be any lack of clarity about who the leader is.”

She was pale by this point, but she remained silent.

“It’s that interconnectedness. We can FEEL and SMELL a Top, and we only work as a pack when we take our rightful place. Every effort to alter that has fallen flat on its face because we ARE those wolves with the teeth and the snarls and the growling and the Topping. We haven’t evolved away from our roots the way Primates did. We evolved more deeply INTO them. We dug right down in until, if we chose, we could live and thrive without intellect at all, purely from instinct. That’s almost
what the aboriginals do. They have language, and they use it, but they use language the way you use visual cues, as a secondary means of communication. Smell, touch, and eye contact are much more important to wild Lupins than words. If you want to understand us, if you really do, then just through this one piece that is so frightening to you, see us as animals first and people second. Allow for the bestial to have its rightful place in who we are. If you can make that jump, then you will be lightyears ahead of Karl Meyer and everyone who’s going to be evaluating your thesis.”

“Sam, look, it sounds good.” She rallied a bit. “You’re saying all the same words. But I know what I saw. I don’t know how to set aside what that felt like and pretend it wasn’t destructive.”

“I’m not asking you to pretend anything. I’m asking you to step outside of your biases, the Primate ones that tell you with all certainty that family touches are meant to be gentle, kind, firm, supportive, uplifting touches, not hurtful ones, and try to see it through your intellect without your emotions getting in the way. I want you to use the benefits that being Primate gives you.” This time he did lean in close. He couldn’t help himself. His eyes blazed with fervor. “Follow the tracer lines from the quadrupedal wolf in your mind’s eye, the one with the teeth who would mount his own mother if she was unbalanced enough to endanger his pack – mount her, roll her, subdue her, and then walk away fresh and calmly assertive to watch over the pack. Follow those lines down the years of evolution and picture how they must have evolved with us, deeper inside us even than they are within modern day quadrupeds. It’s still a quick flash of teeth and a wild furious red eye. It’s still a powerful rolling of a lower wolf to stave off a greater danger to the stability of the pack. We haven’t changed, Sarah. Primates did. You changed at your core. We didn’t. I need you to see that. Come to dinner with me tonight. Talk to Jess and Michael. Talk to Fred. I think he might be your best source of all because he can give you the ape view that I can’t.”

“Fred’s not Lupin?” she asked in dismay.

Sam chuckled. “No, he’s Primate like you. But he’s been a part of the household there since he was a boy. If any Primate alive truly understands wolves, it’s Fred.”

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Kali emerged from her Anchor round a little bit wobbly, clutching at her robe, and letting Charlie do most of the work to keep her upright and moving forward. Cas caught up with them as they staggered down the hall.

“There was no reason for you to hurry back to the locker room, beta,” he chastised gently. “You’re encouraged to take some time getting your breath back after an encounter that strenuous. I’m certain Charlie told you that.”

She had. Cas had been watching through the glass. Charlie had tried valiantly to get Kali to stay in bed and allow the adrenalin to dissipate before attempting to stand and walk, but Kali proved too stubborn. And she needed to move.

“I’m ready to get home, Alpha,” she told him. “I can get my breath back better in my own room than with a million jack-offs watching me through that stupid mirror. Gabriel needs me, and I’m going home.”

“Very well,” he conceded. “But you’re not driving. I’ll get someone to drive you home. Come to my office once you’ve changed. Charlie, you’re in charge of making sure she doesn’t leave on her own.”
“Yes, Alpha,” Charlie replied.

By the time Charlie delivered a freshly showered and much more stable beta to Castiel’s office, he’d had time to cycle through some of the initial instrument readings from her test. “Have a seat,” he gestured.

She eyed him and then the chair. “You told me I could go home,” she reminded him.

“Yes, Billie’s going to drive you, but she had to finish up something right quick. She’ll be here in a moment. Please. Sit.”

“I prefer to stand,” she told him.

“Very well. Stand then. Kali, please don’t misunderstand. I don’t have a full picture yet, but the test today has set off an aggressive response in you, and I’d like to make sure I understand that at least a little before I send you home to vent your spleen inappropriately on my brother. Is there any danger you might do that?”

“Inappropriately?” she asked. “No.”

“But you do intend to use him as a release valve?”

“Isn’t that one of the things husbands are for?” she asked, looking right into his eyes.

“Yes, it is. Vent all you need to as long as what you do remains mutually consensual. Gabriel will probably love every second of it. Tell me what’s angered you. Was it the institutional setting? The audience? Did you feel harshly judged?”

“I don’t like being made to dance for your asinine test like a little trained dog!” she spat. “I had enough of that back home! I swore I would never let it happen again!”

“Kali, breathe please, and calm yourself. You were never compelled to participate. You had access to the stop button…”

“Oh, that’s bullshit, Castiel! If I called Red anywhere along the way, you would’ve just scrubbed this one and rescheduled later.”

He angled his head and steepled his fingers. “I wish you had shared your malaise with me sooner. I believe we could have worked out an alternative. I am not the taskmaster that I’m often accused of being, and I am only harsh with people who need that from me. You don’t. You are remarkably self-regulated for a Domme with no formal training. Had you told me this was likely to be a traumatizing event, I would have tabled the test entirely until you were ready. IF you were ready. Why didn’t you speak up?”

She stared at him. “You never would have let me out of it.”

“Oh, I assure you I would have. I don’t need the test results to know the strength of your wolf or the characteristics of your beta. I’ve watched you closely to make certain you are well-suited for Gabe, and for our Pack as a whole, and I’m satisfied that it is we who are the lucky ones in this transaction. You’re a gift to us, Kali. Of course, the test has its purposes. For matters of minute detail, it can elucidate issues that we might never have seen without it. For someone like Michael or Dean, it is crucial. For someone like you, well, let’s be honest. Nothing you’re going to learn from this test will change anything you do or think. The results will go on file and never see the light of day again. You already know who you are.”
“Then why the hell am I here right now?”

“Because I asked you to be.”

“Goddamnit! You’re a piece of work! You put me through that as a TEST of my obedience? Fuck that, Alpha!”

“Rephrase that, beta. I don’t accept disrespect from within my own pack – not from you or anyone.” His face was stony, and she scowled.

But she apologized. And she paced like a caged tiger.

“You’ve been watching us right back,” he remarked out of nowhere, and she turned on her heel.

“Did you learn what you needed?”

She shook her head and looked down, clenching her lips together and wrinkling her nose. She needed to remember her place. It had been a very long time since it mattered to anyone, and Kali’s impulses had forgotten restraint. Finally, she looked up with an engaged expression. “Uh, yep. I think I did.”

He laughed. “Good! Because we could never have too many brats.” She tried not to smile in return, but the Alpha when he smiled like that… Damn, but there was an irresistible quality to his happiness. Her smile tilted off into a little disgust at how easily she toppled for him. Maybe it was in the genes.

Those Novak genes.

Whatever.

“I’m extremely happy Gabriel didn’t turn tail,” he went on. “And I think you’re going to do Jess a world of good. I’m sorry her state of mind fell so heavily on you last week. That should not have been your burden.”

“She’s not a burden, Alpha. She’s family.”

“Thank you for taking her in so quickly, then. Do you have any questions for me while we wait for Billie?”

“Sir,” the word wanted to catch in her throat, but she forced it out. She sat in the chair before his desk. “All my life, I’ve struggled with natural lines of authority. I did much better on my own than I’ve ever done in a pack. I really don’t know how well this thing is going to work. Your brother’s worth it, but that doesn’t mean I’m not facing an enormous sacrifice. Please don’t ask more of me than I can give.”

Many pack Alphas would’ve taken that imperative as a cry for help, a demand from within to have those natural lines of authority clearly delineated. If she admitted to struggling with them, wouldn’t it be better to write them out in bold, black marker? Castiel regarded her. He leaned way back in his chair and faced the ceiling.

“It’s going to take us some time before we know for sure what you can and can’t give,” he mused. “I wonder if you know yourself, especially if it’s been some time since your name was listed on the rolls of a formal pack. Let’s start with this. You’re very near the center of the pack in hierarchy. I’d like to start with giving you a free hand to find a place of your own. You gravitate toward stabilizing Submissives. That’s something we’ll always need a hand with. You also have a keen analytical mind that is nearly perfectly balanced with an artist’s free-flowing creativity. You’re the perfect fulcrum for this pack. As long as you stay balanced yourself, I have no reason to ask much of you at all. Take
care of Gabriel. Watch over Jess and all of our Submissives, as long as that doesn’t become burdensome. You may find yourself drawn into a close friendship with Sam. Let’s see what happens, shall we? If you feel yourself struggling unduly under the weight of authority, my door is always open. Please talk to me before you find yourself beside yourself with rage again. I’ve been known to make exceptions to the rules on occasion.”

“I will, Cas. I’ll try.”

Billie knocked twice and poked her head in. “Ready to go?”

“More than,” Kali told her. Cas waved her off with a flick of his hand, and he went back to scrolling through the readings, counting himself more and more lucky as he read them.

Chapter End Notes

Bye for now. It'll be several weeks before I can get back to it. We really, truly are starting to wind things up.

Comments are gold. Ask about anything that confuses you. As always, if you're confused, it's probably my fault. *Mea culpa.*

Love to the Pack.
Chapter 99

Chapter Summary

Sarah gets to know Pack Novak, and we get to know Fred.

Point of clarity: This 'THEN' section takes place about five years in the past - give or take. Don't make me do math.

Chapter Notes

Hello, happy campers. I hope those of you who celebrate Thanksgiving had a magnificent one. I ate a massive amount of food. No regrets.

This chapter is the result of one of those virtual nonstop typing-fests that makes my family worry. Fear not, dear ones, this IS my self-care, and yes, I'm hydrated. :P

Edit: I meant to include this link on the original go-round. My bad. Y'all, this is NOT the mentioned "Witch Thing" that April's composing. (It totally is) That would be plagiarism. Also, God, kill me now, this is a Taylor Swift song. I didn't know that when I found this cover, but the cello, the viola, the lyrics...it's perfect for Nick's show. So, Taylor Swift it is. Check out this cover. No, it's not the big anthem April sang for Cas. I haven't found that yet. Also, expect Ms. Bean to make other appearances as I wrap this thing up. She's the sound I've been looking for for my Ozzie. Can you hear it?

Here it is: That Witch Thing

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Castiel was so certain that Dean wouldn’t spot him outside the classroom that he didn’t attempt to hide at all. He stood framed in square glass and watched Dean’s face light up with the joy of teaching. The beauty of the man was a physical pain in Castiel’s depths, a pain that he hoped never to lose, but one that he never thought to act on. Dean’s voice was muted to near silence, but it was his face that reeled Cas in anyway, and here in the hallway, in the absence of that voice, the Alpha found himself so much more tightly entranced by the man’s face in its vivacious silence even than he was when Dean’s words were his to savor.

Someone in the back had foolishly engaged Dean in a rapid fire back and forth, a duel of wits, a test of wills – Cas could tell just from the sparkle on Dean’s face and the crinkle around his fiery widened eyes. Dean was on the attack, but a playful one, and he was about to fire the winning strike, and then he gloated into the laughter that made it through the heavy pane of glass. God, it was glorious. Dean was glorious.

But in his triumph, a flick of his glance told Castiel he’d been spotted. He wouldn’t have seen it if he hadn’t known Dean’s tells well enough. No one else would have seen the abrupt change in his body’s posture. No one else could have placed a cause to his suddenly lowered gaze and flushed cheeks. The beauty of Dean, so evident in his strong jawline, in his perfectly straight nose, his full delicate lips, the emerald glow of his eyes, was nothing Cas had yet put a name to. It wasn’t just about how he looked, although Dean certainly had looks – there was no arguing that. It was in the life behind his eyes, in the compassion that told of his own difficult past, in the stubborn set of that perfect jaw that proved he was no one’s patsy. Dean was alive in a way Castiel could only witness, he couldn’t partake the way Dean did. And Dean was magnificently righteous. Cas caught the edge of his own reflection in the glass just as Dean arranged to nudge a book off the edge of his own desk so that he had to bend at the waist to collect it, flashing his Dominant with a lovely view.

“You were right about the donor base from Arizona, Alpha,” Billie’s voice interrupted his thoughts, and he jumped. “Every one of your guests left a five figure donation in the plate on their way out. That puts us over the top for phase four.”

Castiel nodded mutely without looking away from Dean, who had resumed his class with a light snap of his fingers and an assertive set of instructions that set the students scrambling, eager to please him.

“Not going to gloat this time?” Billie pushed, sparing a glance into the classroom herself.

“Gloating would be pointless,” he said with little enthusiasm. “I called this one. Next time, it’ll likely be you.”

Billie scoffed. “Now you’re just throwing charity.” She stepped back a bit, and Cas took the prompt to walk alongside. There was a meeting he couldn’t skip. There was always a meeting he couldn’t skip. He let Dean’s image cast another permanent impression on the back of his mind as he accompanied his assistant down the hallway to see about a new legislative initiative. His careful, precise words kept finding their way into the laws of Kansas state code, and he was ready to offer something of substance up to the big houses in D.C., but he couldn’t do that with Dean’s derriere at the forefront of his mind.

“No, really, Sir,” she went on conversationally. “How do you always know how to read people? I
was sure that leaving them in a bare reception hall alone after your presentation was the worst idea you’ve ever had. And at first, it looked like I was right. They waited for you to show for ages without talking to each other at all. Then they got bored. Then they got angry. Then they began to talk – and I mean really talk – to each other in a way I’d bet none of them has done at home in years, maybe not ever. Before I could blink, it went from a Sunday night cotillion in the church basement with too many bucks, to something real and raw. It was like they all woke up at once from a loopy dream and saw the world as it is for the first time, and then all the checkbooks started coming out. I’m telling you, I wish we had it on video. It was electric.”

“It wasn’t my idea, Billie. It was Dean’s. He told me that people need a shove sometimes, a shove into being uncomfortable, into a space outside of what they expect, and that sometimes that jars them out of their wheel ruts. Everyone in that room came all this way hoping to be wooed, but we don’t have the manpower to court the number of donors we need, not enough to get what we need from them. We had to find another way. We left it in their hands in the end, in the exchange of experiences between them, separated from their home crowds in a place where they had the freedom to speak their fears honestly.”

“Winchester’s idea? Well, shit.”

He cocked a brow at her and frowned quizzically.

“Don’t mind me, Alpha,” Billie deflected. “Have you been just roaming the halls while your big contributors fumed in there on their own?”

“Mostly,” he answered vaguely, realizing only now as he thought about it that roaming the halls had been his plan, taking in the day-to-day health of the place in a way he didn’t usually get to see it, at leisure and with no other place to be. He couldn’t go back to the office. Someone might’ve come searching for him there. But that’s not what he’d done. He made a beeline to the classroom wing, and he’d been watching Dean teach longer than he meant to.

“Sir, he’ll be along in a little bit. He’s coming to the Director’s meeting, although a little late.” Billie’s tone was carefully neutral.

“Who’s joining us?” Cas asked absently, still mesmerized within his own memory. He was certain now that Dean wore that particular pair of pants on purpose, just for him. Billie cleared her throat.

“Dean, Castiel. Dean’s joining us.”

“Right. Of course. We’re finalizing the new Facility sites.”

“He’ll be late, but he’s not about to miss something this important,” Billie reminded the Alpha.

But that was for later. First, Cas had to finesse some outdated Federal laws.

When Dean joined the Director’s meeting, Cas noted the shift in energy that swept them all up. Benny sat forward into his crossed arms, alight with invested hopefulness rather than leaning way back in his chair in apparent frustration. Bobby was suddenly up on his feet, strolling around the room and adding his unique brand of counterargument. Dean was relaxed and powerful, pulling from his Deep alpha in a way he did so frequently when meaningful decisions were on the table,
pulling himself into something breathtaking without a second thought. Castiel took the role of
mediator more to allow himself the chance selfishly to observe the man at his best than out of a need
to keep the others balanced.

“The U.S. has pockets of Lupin communities sprinkled all over,” Dean explained, poking at the map
in the center of the table. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows, and his eyes glinted seriously. “We
can’t afford to strand any of them, guys, but we don’t have the resources to cover the map yet. The
east has Florida, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. There’s nothing in the deep south except Florida,
but they’ve got no one at all advocating for them. We got north Texas and frikken ALL of Arizona
that needs a station. And our packs are spread out so evenly along the Pacific, we may as well drop a
pin anywhere on the coast at random. The thing is, that’s three, maybe four spots in dire need of a
Lupin support facility, but I’m telling you, we can’t muster enough cash to build more than two.”

Bobby nodded, deep in thought as he strolled. “Two won’t do it, pup,” he said quietly, firmly. “What
about Colorado? What about lower Missouri? Those communities are small, but they’re so isolated,
they’re drowning.”

Dean pounced back in. “We can increase our outreach program to hit the isolated regions, man. Send
the resources to them. It’s not enough, God knows, but it’s better than having them out there with no
connection to the pack whatsoever. We can’t do scent-bonding over the internet. I’m not suggesting
we abandon them in the darkness, but fellas, if you try to blanket the whole fuckin’ country in one
sweep, we’re gonna overextend and lose our footing here. I’m telling you, we don’t have the
money.” Dean ended with an assertive tap of his finger to the map.

“The money will come,” said Henrickson from his place at the center of the long table. “We just
banked a huge windfall from Alpha’s talk with the Arizona delegation. We can’t wait for every dime
to roll into place before we make the jump. We need the full blanket, or we’re never gonna catch up.
Cover the east coast with a school in Boston. No one of note ever goes to Rhode Island anyway. Set
up one in the west, maybe in San Francisco or Tacoma. Then build one in Arizona. It’s as good a
spread as we can make, geographically, and it puts an ACRI site at the center of the largest Lupin
communities.”

“It’s too soon,” Dean disagreed staunchly. “Do Arizona and Boston maybe, but it’s too soon for all
three.” There was a wisdom in the depths of Dean’s firm countenance that caught Castiel and held
him. Cas could nearly see the wheels in motion in his head.

“Jim?” prompted the Alpha. “You’ve spent a lot of time on the west coast. What do you think?”

Jim Murphy tore his gaze away from Dean’s face reluctantly, and Cas felt validated in having been
sucked in. He wasn’t alone in that, it seemed. Dean, at his most invested, was entrancing.

“No, Alpha. Whatever moves we make going forward, we can’t afford to leave them out of it. It’s
not the tight population concentration that we wolves have in the east, and that makes it all the more
complicated to provide service, but there are more packs, per capita, on the west coast than anywhere
else in the country. They’re just all spread out. If you’re asking for my input, I’d remind you there’s
already a perfectly situated, half-built, fully staffed facility in Las Vegas that is ripe for a sweep-in.
Christian wants in, and we’d be lucky to have him. It’s really just a matter of who gets to him first,
and it would be significantly less expensive in terms of capital investment to take over what he’s built
than to start from scratch.”

“Las Vegas isn’t on the coast,” Dean grumbled. “And it’s hours away from where most of the people
are.”

“There are some benefits to the isolation of Nevada, Dean,” Bobby told him cryptically. Darkly.
Dean scowled, but he didn’t object. Some things couldn’t be openly voiced in a conference room. Christian was already well-ensconced under the ACRI umbrella, but the work he was doing wasn’t common knowledge. Jim Murphy had no idea. Yet.

Benny cleared his throat. “If we’re doing this – and it looks like we are – then half measures will hobble us more than help. I say we build in Providence and Dallas, put in a bid for the Vegas facility and see if we can get it on sale.”

“Boston and Tucson,” put in Henrickson, and Jim nodded his agreement. “The folks in Arizona have invested heavily in us, and they’ve always been our loudest cheerleaders.”

All eyes turned to Castiel when he shifted in his chair. He caught Bobby’s eye, then Benny’s. He settled on Dean’s face and exchanged a sense of determination through the Claim-bond link they shared. “We can’t build in Arizona,” he said calmly. “The regulatory climate is unwelcoming to Lupins to say the least. We’d be on the defensive and overtaxed from the moment we broke ground. Texas is both wolf-friendly and business-friendly, and there are almost as many wolf packs in the area as in Arizona.”

No one voiced any objections to that unless you counted Benny’s mutterings about how ‘wolf-friendly’ was a matter of opinion. Victor leaned forward and drew a circle around the Dallas/Fort Worth region with his pen.

Eyeing the map, Cas went on. “And there’s a greater need for a facility in Boston than in Providence. The Rhode Island packs are the strongest and most stable in the country. We should keep close ties with them. Lord knows we should keep studying them to make sure we understand what they’re doing right, but geographically, they’re close enough together than it makes no difference. In terms of transportation, a wolf who can get to Providence can get to Boston. I want a presence in the urban areas.”

Victor circled Boston with his pen, then put a ring around Lawrence Kansas while he was at it.

“We don’t have the funds for three, Alpha,” Dean said starkly, as all eyes noted the gaping chasm in coverage that was the entire American west.

“Las Vegas is more than half-built,” Cas told him. “It would cost us a fraction of what we’d have to invest if we built from the ground up.”

“Crossing the streams is a dangerous idea,” said Dean vaguely, risking opening a line of conversation that Bobby didn’t want divulged. Cas mused silently, steepling his fingers below his chin and studying Dean’s face. Everyone else in the room seemed to vanish in the intensity of their locked gaze.

“We can’t ignore the need in the western states,” said Cas at last.

“We can’t save everybody, Alpha,” Dean responded, but the words seemed forced out, as if it hurt him physically to say them.

“You wanted me to try leaning on faith for a change, didn’t you?” It was a cheap blow, and Dean’s narrowing eyes told Cas he hadn’t missed it.

“There’s faith, Alpha, and then there’s bad business. We don’t have the money. Fundraising is already stretched thin. Income won’t meet projections for another couple of years.”

Cas held his eyes. “Those ‘Meet and Greets’ that you and Sam have been doing…” Cas started.
“You hate those,” Dean reminded him.

“I find the level of debauchery tacky and self-destructive,” Cas countered. “But it’s no secret that they make money. Look into expanding those into something less frivolous and more remedial. Look into putting one in the centers of population density where the need is greatest, like Phoenix maybe. And for fuck’s sake, tone them down into something I can put my name on. You want money? Go out and earn us some.”

“You’re going to greenlight all three new facilities no matter what I say, aren’t you?” Dean challenged, and Cas felt his groin stir. It wasn’t the words so much as the determination behind them.

“Do you trust me?” Castiel asked him.

“With my life,” Dean answered without pause.

“We can do this, Winchester,” the Alpha said. It took another few interminable moments, and then Dean conceded with a raised brow and a deep breath through his nose. He lifted his palms in surrender, the only stalwart with real standing still playing devil’s advocate, the only barrier Castiel still had to cross. Victor leaned in and circled Las Vegas with his pen, finalizing their decision, but although Victor didn’t have voting rights, his opinion still held weight.

“I guess if you live in Montana or Washington state, you’re just fucked,” observed Victor softly.

“We’re not finished with the blanket, Henrickson,” said Bobby. “But as has been pointed out, we can’t save everyone, and we’re short on cash.

“Yeah, but Lawrence and Dallas are no more than a day’s drive from each other. And the need is greater in Arizona than Texas.”

“Arizona is a no-go, Victor,” Dean told him in a dead cold voice. “We’re not building there and that’s final.”

Victor looked up in surprise at the vehemence from the usually affable alpha. He caught Dean shooting a furtive glance at Castiel. Switching his eyes to Cas’ face told Victor Dean was right. Pressing Novak to change his mind on this matter was a dead-end. Victor grunted unhappily. “If the two of you had let the rest of us in on whatever crawled up Arizona’s butt and died, we might have saved a lotta time and trouble researching the place.”

Dean scoffed. “But then you wouldn’t have had the joy of getting to know all those lovely people, Victor.”

“This have anything to do with the recently elected governor, perhaps?” asked Jim astutely.

“Perhaps,” mumbled Benny in confirmation.

“Governors come and go, Alpha…” Victor tried.

“I said no, Victor,” Cas told him in his Alpha-Dom voice, and Victor snapped his mouth shut.

The Alpha had spoken. All eyes wandered back to the map. It wasn’t perfect. They needed coverage in isolated Florida. They needed something permanent in the Pacific northwest. Arizona couldn’t stay on the shit-list forever, especially not when the largest packs there had been so graciously generous and had thrown in their lot with Castiel’s from the first whispers of a movement. Dean was itching to start up a college degree program in Lupin development, and he really wanted to do it at Brown University first. His fingers twitched with the impulse to open that conversation up again. But
Alpha had spoken, and Dean was nothing if not a well-trained submissive. He wished he didn’t feel a funnel forming beneath their feet that would siphon away all his hard-won funding.

Alone in the conference room with the map still centered on the table, Cas eyed Dean in silence. Dean was studying the map and thinking hard. His lips moved with unsaid words, and his eyes danced as figures and calculations scurried through his head.

“I want the truth, Dean,” said Castiel at length.

Dean continued to study the map, tracing lines between cities and Lupin populations as if measuring out a travel path. He frowned more than once. Finally, he glanced up, as firmly serious as Cas had ever seen him.

“I mean, it’s not going to be easy…but we can pull it off with some belt tightening. We can’t take any unnecessary risks though. We need to reassign from within. Don’t hire any newbies for the satellites, not yet.”

“I didn’t expect you to dig your heels in over Las Vegas like that,” Cas said.

“We’re still a startup. We have boatloads to learn, and it could all crumble if we stick our heads out too far, too fast. We had a plan, remember?”

“We’re still on plan,” Cas said firmly.

“Christian isn’t tamable, Alpha. You’re inviting trouble.”

“Other than Las Vegas, did you get everything you wanted?”

Dean scoffed loudly. “Are you gonna ride my ass if Sam and I keep our parties lively? Toning them down is the shittiest idea you ever came up with.”

Cas studied him, his head tilted in interest. “Dean, do you get something personal out of the Meet and Greets? Are you trying to tell me something?”

Dean flushed and huffed a laugh. “I guess you could put it like that. It’s an itch, I guess. I mean, you’re the boss, but I’d like to keep them…I’d like to keep them debauched if it doesn’t turn your stomach.” He kept his head down for a beat then braved a glance up. Cas was smiling knowingly at him, and Dean rolled his eyes good-naturedly.

“A trade-off, then,” Cas continued. “I get Las Vegas, and you get to debauch yourself.”

“The deal’s already done, Alpha. Why are you still selling?”

“I know you don’t always speak your whole mind in meetings, Dean. I need to know you’re on board. It’s important to me. You’re important to me.” Cas let his simple honesty speak for itself, and Dean melted a little bit.

“You gonna go canvass the others and make sure you know the whole picture from everybody else?” Dean asked the tabletop.

“I am,” Cas admitted. “But your opinion is the one I value most. You have the clearest head when it comes to realizing this vision. I know you’re not crazy about extending ourselves this far. I need to know where we really fall on that continuum. I need the truth from you.”
Dean studied him for a time, and then he sighed and looked back at the map. “Yeah. If we’re careful, we can swing it. You need to grovel to the Tucson and Phoenix packs and give them something of substance, but we can do this. Promise me we’re not through yet. There’s a hell of a lot of need out there.”

“I promise. I have a great deal of work to do yet, and I won’t rest until all of our packs have the resources they need to grow strong and healthy.”

Dean finally smiled back. “That’s all I ask, Alpha.”

“That and a chance to be a bawdy showoff a few weekends a year,” Cas said sourly.

“Jealous, Alpha? You know it’s just pack stuff. You’re my only Sir, sir. That’s not going to change.”

Dean was teasing, but it hit way, way too close to a carefully protected nerve, one that Dean couldn’t know was there. God, Hell, Dean couldn’t know.

Cas scoffed and dismissed his subordinate with a playful swipe, but he stayed in the room staring at the map for so long that Billie came hunting him.

NOW:

They were arguing again, well into the late afternoon, but having a thousand miles or so between them, and a threadbare connection by Skype made Nick bearable. April felt overexposed, raw, scratched thin to the barest bones of herself and utterly on display in a way she attempted always to avoid. Castiel knew everything, and that made her vulnerable to everything she feared, no matter his promises. And Nick. Nick barreled in like a rabid stag on speed, rampaging through the few defenses she had left and scattering them like so many snowflakes under the sweep of a shovel. She was naked before them all, and Nick was still just Nick, incapable of hearing her, incapable of understanding her fears. She considered hanging up on him again, but Matt lay a calming hand on her shoulder and then reached over her to plunk the melody on the keyboard again, shifting the key.

“Like this?” he asked into the laptop screen, letting April have a minute to pull herself together.

“Yeah! That’s where it starts,” enthused Nick across the distance. On the screen, he turned back to Keira and Jackson, and counted them off to a sweeping fanfare introduction, only a few phrases, but building to power so steeply, it felt longer. April’s fingers took the keys from Matt, and he hummed behind her, entranced in the grandeur.

“April, sugar, pick up the lyric after the third repeat. We want to prolong the anticipation,” Nick instructed.

“Don’t call me sugar,” she grumbled moodily to herself. It wasn’t the song. The song was fine. It was a secondary theme, a less critical piece than her big anthem, and it was down to polishing at this point. It wasn’t that. It was…she had other things pulling at her, other things she wanted to work on, more important things. But they’d laughed at her when she suggested that setting aside a chance to contribute to Nick’s new show made sense now that the wedding loomed close enough to taste. She wasn’t ready. She’d promised to take care of everything musical, and there was so much that wasn’t perfected yet.

Her mate’s wedding had to be perfect.

They had the brass quintet contracted. They had a string quartet who could throw a wedding procession down with their eyes closed. They had selected a four piece band for the reception, one
that promised to make room for a few guest vocalists at key moments in the evening. But April still had the most important work unfinished, and it ate at her. She wanted to wow her mate into tears, and she didn’t have the words to do it.

“HEY! KIDDO! We lost you again. After three repeats, kid, not sixteen! You can’t vamp it forever. People will walk out. Wake up out there.”

“Sorry, Nick. Start over,” she murmured.

“You start over, chick. It’s your entry.” Nick’s patience was on a thread, but he was tempering it so well, she felt bad about pushing him.

Mark looked up from the coffee table where he was copying out the piece longhand, carefully combining April’s version with Nick’s notes. “April?” he asked and then left the question unstated. She nodded and began to play again. Halfway through, she zoned out, her blue eyes focused on a point in the distance.

“That’s enough,” said Mark softly enough that Nick wouldn’t have heard it. “Hang up and let’s move to something else.”

April shook her head stubbornly, her eyes filling with frustrated tears, and her fingers going back to the beginning. Matt’s hands covered hers and stilled them. “Enough,” he mirrored his partner’s words. “Pushing through isn’t going to make it better.”

She looked up at him. “So many people are depending on me, Matt. I can’t let them down. We need to get this finished, so it can go to the choreographer. They have to start laying out the counts and the steps.” She was shaking.

“Nicholas,” Mark called from the table. Nick couldn’t see him, but he could hear. His face filled the screen. “That’s it for today. Do you have what you need? She’s done.”

“What? Done? Uh, sure. I guess. I can, um, take it over from here, polish it up, get back to you…”

“Monday,” said Matt decisively.

“Monday,” repeated Nick, disappointed.

“She needs the weekend,” agreed Mark, coming into view. “It’s only a couple of days.”

“Well, I mean, there’s not really any such thing as a weekend in this business, fellas,” Nick protested weakly, ignoring the two musicians bickering behind him.

“Monday,” said Mark again.

“Fine,” groused Nick, and the screen went dark immediately.

April had curled in on herself on the bench. She jumped slightly when Matt touched her shoulder, but he didn’t flinch. “Do you need me to call Castiel?”

She shook her head.

“Let’s go to the kitchen and eat something,” suggested Mark. “Get your mind off the pressure. It’s really not as bad as you think. Everything’s coming along fine. You can take a break and not throw anything behind. It’s fine, April. You need a breather.” He helped her stand and guided her toward the kitchen. “How about spending the weekend finalizing your wedding music?”
She nodded glumly, leaning into his chest as they walked. He wasn’t Pack, but he was sure and strong, and he never seemed to stop watching her for tells of feeling overwhelmed. April loathed the weakness that sent her flailing into the arms of strong men. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t remotely fair. But it was what it was, and Mark never failed to catch her when she started to come apart. He always knew when it was close, and he always pulled the plug in time. What a nightmare it would be if she didn’t have that oversight and she shamed herself and her Alpha by crumbling to pieces when Cas couldn’t get to her.

What Mark offered her by sharply focusing on her frailty, Matt offered by ignoring it completely. Matt changed the subject as he dug through the refrigerator, turning to light topics and making Mark laugh at his off-beat humor. They talked briefly about their own upcoming wedding. They talked about blues dives in Kansas City. They talked about which songs at the reception in a couple of weeks would be the best to throw at Michael in effort to embarrass the hell out of him, and then they argued about whether it was possible to embarrass Michael in public at all.

April smiled at that – smiled ironically. Embarrassing Michael wasn’t hard. You just had to pull him into his Omega and then throw him off balance. It would have been easy, but April didn’t want him embarrassed. She wanted him spotlighted as one of the chief insiders at the wedding of the season. She wanted him dressed up and polished and beautiful and glowing. She wanted to sing with him as their mates took to the floor, create a buzz that would grow louder the further it travelled. She wanted Michael honored for the wonderful man he was, not struck rudely from behind by a mudball to the head that made him look foolish.

April felt the ground at her feet again, and she wondered if the two apes she liked so much had played the conversation that way on purpose, to re-center her into herself. She breathed and counted and pushed her awareness through the bottoms of her feet into the deep earth as she reached out and down with her mind into the source of canine power, into the deepest well of sentient life. Color returned to her face, and she stopped trembling.

“There you are,” said Mark fondly, reaching for her hand and squeezing it. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “I’d like to work on wedding music for the rest of the day.”

“Good,” Matt said with his mouth full of half-chewed banana. “I can’t listen to that ‘Witch’ thing again without screaming. That’s never a good sign.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Mark teased. “He hasn’t got the patience for composing. That ‘Witch’ thing still needs some work, but you’re getting there, and a break will help you face it again with fresh ears. I don’t want you so much as humming it between now and Monday. We clear?”

“Yes, sir,” April said in rote.

“Oh, and Matthew,” Mark said over his shoulder. “If you don’t start chewing with your mouth closed, I’m withholding sex for two weeks.”

Matt’s eyes went wide, and his jaw snapped shut. April laughed.

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Sam opened the door for Sarah – something of a surprise given the size and formality of the house. He ushered her in with a blank expression, and she paused with a frown.
“You told them I’m coming,” she pressed. “Right?”

“Of course,” he replied, but his voice was strained. “Come on in.”

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked bluntly.

Sam cast a look up toward Fred as the man walked up with his usual stately air. “Uh, Sarah, this is Fred Heyerdahl, our butler. Fred, Sarah may like to speak with you personally for a few minutes, if you don’t mind. She has some questions about Pack traditions that a Primate might be able to answer better than I can.”

“Oh,” Sarah responded, taken aback a little by the formality that mixed so comfortably with true well-meaning hospitality. She was charmed, and she smiled. “I don’t need my purse, Fred, but the larger bag has my notes and my recorder. I’ll need those.” She handed over the purse, and he took it with a subtle bow.

“Very good, miss. If you’ll excuse me, I have several small tasks to see to, but I can meet you in the parlor in a very spare few minutes. Would you mind waiting for me? I shan’t be long.”

“I’ve got her, Fred,” Sam told him, pulling Sarah through.

“What’s that music?” she wondered aloud. “It sounds live. Is that April playing?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, crouching down by the drink cart to get to the ice bucket. “Something to drink?” Standing back up made him grimace for a moment, grunt softly, and close his eyes.

“Sam, what’s wrong with you?”

He sighed heavily and opened his eyes again, looking at her for a second before deciding whisky on the rocks was the best option for them both. “Friday night Pack dinners are a big deal in this house,” he explained. “And they’re supposed to be limited to Pack members only.”

Sarah stared at him as she took her drink. “He spanked you,” she guessed. “He spanked you for inviting me?”

Sam grunted again softly and adjusted his stance. “I should have asked before I issued the invitation, that’s all. I know better.”

Sarah set her drink on one of the tables and looked around. “I should go…”

“No! No, please stay,” Sam calmed her. “It’s not your presence that’s out of order, Sarah. It was the way I did it. Please, stay. You’re welcome here, I promise.”

“That you are,” said Castiel jovially as he strode in from the kitchen. “Welcome to our home, Miss Blake. Please don’t let a little thing like Pack discipline dissuade you from your mission. I’m happy to host you, and I’m happy to offer you the express opportunity to interview my butler if you wish to do so. Would you like a tour of the house before we eat?”

Castiel was at his charming best, and his carefully selected clothing, not quite the same attire he worked in, but no less formal, spoke of the importance to the Alpha of this evening’s meal.

“Sir, I don’t want to intrude. This is Friday. It’s important to your Pack.” Sarah moved awkwardly
toward the exit while trying to hide that she was doing so. Castiel’s brow went up, and Sarah froze.

“It’s entirely up to you, of course, if you feel the need to be elsewhere…” There was a cheerful lilt to his tone, and Sarah shot a look at Sam, who was watching her sheepishly with his head down. “…but please know that you are entirely welcome at our table this evening. I’m a little embarrassed not to have thought of it myself. I’d like you to feel at home, Sarah.”

“But…Sam…” she stumbled, not sure how to voice her concern.

“Yes, Sam was derelict in his advance invitation, and he’s been called to task for his presumption, but please understand, it was the presumption, not the invitation that was in error. He offered Fred’s cooperation without giving Fred the chance to weigh in on his own regard, and he offered up the sanctity of this Pack without offering me, its guardian, the chance to consider the ramifications of your presence. I assure you, both oversights have been suitably addressed, and we’re happy to welcome you with open arms.”

“Th…thank you, Alpha. I hadn’t realized…”

“Calm yourself, Sarah, please,” he soothed, collecting her drink and handing it back to her. “These are not issues that should be your concern. Fred is happy to help, as is Jessica. We have time before we eat for you to talk with Fred. I regret that he has duties after dinner that will keep him busy, but Jess is free afterward, if you wish to stay.”

“I’d like that,” Sarah told him politely. She looked toward Sam again, and he smiled gamely. “I have a question, if I may?”

“It’s a formal dinner, my dear,” Cas told her. “…In it’s way. But it’s not that formal. You’re not required to ask permission every time you have a question.”

“I understand,” she demurred. “I’m curious why you wanted to give the butler the chance to say yes or no, but it appears that Jess didn’t get the same choice…or have I misunderstood?”

“Fred’s an employee,” Sam explained, still leaning on the drink cart with both arms braced. He looked to be casually leaning, but the tension in his lower arms spoke of a tight grip and a carefully postured stance. “He has full say in what he does or doesn’t want to do for us outside of his usual duties. It’s not our right to assign him something like this without asking him.”

“And Jess?”

“Jess is my Submissive. She wasn’t given a choice, no.”

Sarah narrowed her eyes in thought. “What would happen if she didn’t want to speak with me?”

Sam’s eyes softened. “Then I’d speak with her, find out what her concerns are, try to allay them, try to assess if she’s got a reasonable objection, or if there’s something else going on. What I judge to be the base cause of her objection informs what happens next. If she’s right to be noncompliant, for whatever reason, then we call the interview off. If she needs some reassurance, then I reassure her, maybe sit with her through the interview, whatever will help her. If she’s being a brat, and that’s a common occurrence, then she would face the consequences of provoking her Dominant, and the interview would proceed as scheduled.”

“I, uh, I would feel better knowing how she responded to the news that I was coming this evening to speak with her.” Sarah held her glass, but she didn’t drink it.

Sam chuckled. “She’s fine, Sarah. She’s looking forward to it. I promise, the only one sitting tender
tonight is me, and that was all my own fault.”

“Ah, very good Samuel.” Fred breezed back into the parlor. “I see you’ve poured our guest a beverage.” He turned toward Sarah. “I am at your disposal, miss.”

“Fred, would you give our guest a simple tour of the house?” Castiel asked.

“Of course, Alpha. It would be my great pleasure. Would you like to join me, Miss Blake?”

“Thank you,” she said, following as he glided out into the foyer. A quick glance over her shoulder told her that Cas had closed in on Sam, but whether to obtain a drink of his own, to continue castigating the beta, or for some other reason, she didn’t know. Sam didn’t look worried. His gaze on his Pack Alpha’s face was focused, not fearful.

Fred pointed out the architecture of the grand entry, how the style of the times had been so carefully crafted into every detail. He showed her across the foyer, from the tiny Omega calling room, past the library and the sundry office spaces, to the wide corridor from whence piano music very nearly thundered.

“The house has a total of five gathering spaces of various design,” he said, gesturing across the corridor to the living room where April’s palm had twice reddened Michael’s cheek, not that Fred would have seen fit to mention that, even if he knew. “This is the formal living room, although it is perhaps the least utilized room in the house. Alpha Zachariah preferred to use this room to receive business visitors. Alpha Castiel has very little use for it whatsoever, although it enjoys a lovely view of both the pool and the back lawn.”

“It’s so elegant,” mused Sarah, peeking in. “Such a waste to leave it empty all the time.”

“You’ve seen the parlor, miss. It is perhaps at least a step higher on the scale of elegance than this space, and it is in the parlor that this generation of the family most readily gather, owing perhaps to its more central location, directly between the kitchen and the entry foyer and allowing access through the rear directly into the dining room as well. The parlor also opens up to a narrow hallway that leads outside to the pool. It’s a hub of traffic in a way that this room isn’t, and it’s possible that is why Alpha Zachariah preferred this space. He was an intensely private man. Too much traffic was a burden to him.”

“Not to Castiel?”

“Oh, no, miss. Alpha Castiel is happiest when surrounded by his pack. In fact, since the inception of the Pack in its newest form, I have rarely known him to be happier.”

“And down the hall is the music room?” she prompted.

“Indeed. Alpha Zachariah’s mother was a strident and powerful Alpha, but she softened considerably whenever she had the opportunity to play. The Conservatory was very important to Alpha Gertrude, and she was quite talented musically.” Fred led the way down the hall and in through the tall double door into a massive space, decked in plump, comfortable furniture and the tallest windows Sarah had ever seen in a home. They surrounded her on two sides, leading the eye outward to the sweeping back lawn, a small duck pond, and a hazy row of dark trees in the distance. April looked up and spotted them, pulling her hands from the keyboard as if burned.

“Please excuse our intrusion, Omega. We won’t stay. Dinner will be served in an hour.” Fred’s easy comfort soothed the Omega, and she graced him with an effervescent smile.

“Oh! Sarah, right? Come in! Do you play? Here, sit with me!”
Sarah took a second to process the onslaught. April was a force of nature in her excitement.

“I can play chopsticks and Für Elise. That’s about it.” Sarah joined April at the piano. Half-filled pages of sheet music littered the top of it and all the nearby tabletops.

“Beethoven! My favorite composer! Come! Come play with me!” April made room for her on the bench, giving her the upper range. Sarah looked to Fred, but the man stood noncommittally near the entrance and had absented himself in the way that a good butler does when not needed. He was utterly passive. April took her by the arm and pulled her forward.

“It’s been years,” Sarah countered weakly. “I’m not sure I remember. I don’t want to interrupt your…”

April, having sat her down where she wanted her visitor, ignored her protests and started playing. Sarah was instantly transfixed. April nodded toward Sarah’s side of the keyboard with her chin, goading her cheerfully to join in, and Sarah obliged hesitantly.

She’d forgotten most of it, but as they played, it came back, and soon she was laughing, completely captivated by the intricate whirls and dips that April added on a whim.

“I really shouldn’t do that,” April confided, leaning in close. “It’s Beethoven. He deserves more respect. But sometimes it’s fun to play around with it. Oh! You know who’s fun to play with? Schubert! Listen to this!” And she was off, fingers flying, back arching and bowing as she brought an elaborate and melodic piece of contemplative music to life with some kind of magic that Sarah couldn’t put her finger on. She was enthralled.

A throat cleared, and Sarah startled out of her hypnosis, her fingers still touching keys, but frozen in a moment from what felt like ages ago. She looked up at Fred and then at April, who grinned at her happily, never slowing the flow of her fingers.

“See? So much room to play.”

“What was that you were playing when we came in?” Sarah asked her. “Is it something you’re writing?”

“It’s a secret,” April confided, pounding out a stiff statement with her hands. “It’s for the wedding.”

Sarah chuckled. “How do you keep it secret when your playing is audible all the way to the parlor?” Watching April’s fingers was mesmerizing. They seemed to be alive, each independent of the others.

“No one pays any mind to what I practice,” the Ozzie explained, pausing to tinkle a high spray of notes. “I play all kinds of stuff while I warm up. They’re used to hearing a lot of nonsense. They ignore it.”

“I think it’s lovely that you’re composing music for your mate’s wedding,” Sarah told her, still staring at her hands. “Do you feel any discomfort about him marrying someone else when he’s your mate?”

April chuckled without slowing her fingers. “That’s a very personal question. I assume you didn’t mean to pry.”

“I’m…” Sarah stood. “I’m sorry. You’re right. Please excuse me. I didn’t mean to interrupt.” She backed toward the door where Fred waited patiently, but April never stopped smiling cheerfully, never stopped sending swirls of delightful, playful notes into the vast room.
Continuing the tour, Fred gestured down an offshoot hallway, dimly lit and narrower than the grand corridor. “Omega Gabriel’s suite is down this hall, but we will leave him to his privacy. He prefers not to be disturbed.”

“Of course,” Sarah said, wondering for the millionth time about Gabriel. He seemed an unexplained mystery. He had been so lively at the wedding party, but she had rarely heard anything of him whatsoever outside of that. He never made the news the way Castiel did. His image was so rare in the media, many people didn’t realize that Castiel even had a brother. Prefers his privacy, indeed. Sam had flat refused to discuss him other than a simple confirmation that he existed. And then the sudden invitation to attend a party, thrown in a public venue on no notice at which the man ran around stark naked and performing like a porn star.

Sarah had questions.

The music from the end of the corridor behind them changed tone, turned quick and anxious, pounded and stomped like a tantrum.

“This is the billiard room,” Fred continued, paying no mind to the swirl of questions in Sarah’s head. “It was once the family chapel, but Alpha Castiel had it converted during his stint as a medical resident. He claimed he needed respite of leisure more than of spirit at the time.” Fred let Sarah poke her head in. It was a man-cave so classically designed, she was surprised not to find lithographs of hunting dogs on the oak-paneled walls. Billiards, poker, darts, an oak bar with leather bar stools. Sarah tried to imagine a younger Castiel in this room, attempting to allay his stress by striking billiard balls violently, but she couldn’t see it. He’d either changed drastically since then or he was keeping a large portion of his personality private. Perhaps that ran in the family.

Heading back down the corridor, Sarah realized that the tour served an interesting and likely intentional purpose of humanizing the pack. This house was grand and elegant. It was old money, spruced into modern good taste. There weren’t claw marks down the warm wooden wall panels. There was no broken glass, speaking of violence unkenneled. The art work on the walls was fascinating and thoughtful, not crude. The house was a powerful statement to the humanity of the people living here. They couldn’t be beasts and choose to live this way.

It was massive, but it was a home.

“If you’ll accompany me upstairs, we can settle in the upper living room and talk. I assume that would be acceptable?” Fred began to climb the wide staircase without waiting for a response.

“Isn’t that the Pack’s personal space?” asked Sarah, hesitating on the first step.

“Indeed,” agreed Fred, but he didn’t pause. A glance over her shoulder told her the foyer was empty. Then a small door at the rear, near the exit out to the pool caught her eye.

“Fred, where does that door lead?” she asked him, pointing.

He looked around in interest, leaning over the bannister a bit. “That provides access to the basement levels, miss. Down there are Alpha’s ‘Heat and Rut’ room, his workout room, and the Playroom. I can show them to you, if you like. They aren’t in use at the moment.”

“Oh,” said Sarah, flushing a little. “You mean Playroom, as in sex dungeon?”

Fred smiled kindly. “No, miss. We don’t have a dungeon. But it is most commonly used for sexual activities, for scening, for play, sometimes for punishment.”

“But it’s not a dungeon?”
“It’s not,” he assured her. “Would you like to see?”

“Maybe another time,” she told him, tearing her eyes away and following him up the stairs. “We really should get started on the interview. I have quite a few questions.”

“This way,” he held an arm out to lead her to the left.

“These rooms…” she began.

“These are the family bedrooms. We shan’t be opening any of these doors. There is a living room down the hall where you may set up your recording equipment.”

“It’s just a digital audio recorder,” she mumbled, staring at the corridor lined with closed doors. Turning down a wide hall to the left, Sarah heard an unmistakable moan and a ‘WHAP’!

She stopped.

“This way, please,” Fred encouraged.

“What is that?” she demanded, her feet planted.

Fred cocked his head, listening. Another slapping sound, of something hard and flat striking flesh. Sarah had witnessed enough punishments to know what a paddle sounded like. She heard Castiel’s voice, a little strained, but she couldn’t make out the words.

“It appears some of the Pack are in the Game room. Do not be alarmed. We won’t disturb them. Our destination is across the hall, and we can close the door.”

“Fred, I don’t get it. Doesn’t all of this disturb you?” Another loud strike, this one followed by a yelp. Dean’s voice. Castiel’s low moan. Michael’s voice, inflected up in question, and Castiel’s response, seemingly through gritted teeth, followed be a long groan of pleasure.

“This way, Sarah,” he repeated.

As they approached, the sounds increased in volume. The door was wide open, and Sarah realized they would have to pass it to arrive at the door on the end where Fred was heading. Fred was not disturbed in the least. In fact, he stuck his head in the door and spoke to the occupants.

“Dinner will be served on time, Alpha. You have time for a shower if you prefer.”

“Thanks, Fred,” Castiel gritted out. Sarah tried not to look. She tried. She tried valiantly.

She failed.

Cas sat in a cushioned chair, bare from his shirttail down, his head thrown back. Dean was on his knees, completely naked, feverishly blowing the Alpha, both hands encircling what his mouth couldn’t take, his eyes rolled up high, not quite closed, but showing only whites. Michael stood behind Dean with a paddle in his hand. Michael was dressed. He seemed relaxed and easy. As she glanced in, against her will, he swung the paddle backhanded, easily, almost lightly, and popped Dean’s upraised ass. Dean’s eyes clenched closed and he picked up his pace. Castiel moaned again.

“Try rolling your sleeves up, Michael. I find that helps me feel the swing better.” Cas adjusted his position in the chair, but Dean followed him, never losing connection, and Cas’ hand wound into his hair and scratched at his scalp.

All of this Sarah saw in just a glance. Her ears and face were burning by the time she reached the
living room, a much less formal room than the one downstairs. It looked loved and lived in. The TV at the far end was massive. The couch looked ripe for day napping. A large cabinet clearly held a sophisticated gaming system, and wide windows looked out over the southern lawn, past the garage, toward the Facility, although it wasn’t visible from here.

Fred efficiently produced two glasses of ice water and set them on a round table by the window.

“How may I call you Sarah?” he asked abruptly.

She chuckled. It was the formality juxtaposed with explicit lewdness. It felt surreal. “Of course,” she replied. She set her untouched whiskey on the table.

“Thank you. I have done so already, I know, but I’d like for you to feel comfortable here, and I’d like for a few moments to step out of the role that my position dictates. I assume that is what you would prefer as well, that is, unless you want to interview a butler.” His eyes twinkled. There was a kindness to him that flowed over a vein of steel.

“Yes. Thank you, Fred. I’d really rather talk to you than to the butler.”

“That’s what I thought.” He sat in a chair near the couch and nodded her toward it. It didn’t take her long to arrange her notes and recorder.

“You seem to have known Alpha Castiel’s grandparents,” she started, more chatting than interviewing. “How long have you lived here?”

“I don’t actually live here at all,” he said. “I have a house of my own close by, not a part of the estate. But I was a very small boy when I first began to accompany my father on his rounds. It was a fascinating way to grow up. I was born in 1940, during the war. My father had a bad leg. He limped most of his life. He wasn’t suited for combat, so he remained behind and worked for the Novaks. They’ve been the wealthiest family in the region for some time, and during the war, they took in a great number of locals into their service. Many people were in need of a good job, my father among them. He was a widower, raising a young boy on his own, and Gertrude Novak allowed him to bring me along with him when I was out of school. She doted on me, let me be her personal attendant. I had access to the entire house. I helped Cook. I helped the gardener. It was a magical place to grow up in. It was as if there was no war.”

Sarah smiled as he spoke.

“And your father?”

Fred nodded. “He was good at the work. He liked it here as much as I did. It always felt like a world unto itself. It felt safe. Predictable. He was promoted to head butler rapidly, and I became a ‘boy of all trades’.”

“Those days were very different from today though, weren’t they? The family was different?”

He nodded. “Yes, quite different. Gertrude and Allen Novak were among the fiercest of believers that it was incumbent upon Lupins to assimilate into Primate society. They were devout religiously. They were pillars of the community. They were charitable, both in heart and in action. Sarah, I hope I convey this well, as I am the only person left who can speak of them as a witness.”

She looked up, saw the earnestness in his eyes, and nodded.

“What has come to pass, especially over the last sixty years or so with Lupins…the frailty, the mental instability, the degenerative nature of many of their afflictions…none of that touched this house back
Gertrude and Allen Novak were both healthy, fulfilled people. They loved their community. They got on well with their Primate neighbors. I will admit, even as a young boy, I was quite aware that their sexual habits were quite a bit less private and more boisterous than anything I witnessed from my own species, but to me, it seemed normal – witnessed as it was from a very young age. And as I said, I spent virtually all of my time here in the house. I knew that they were Lupin. I knew that there was a difference in the way they comported themselves, in the way they communicated with each other, in the way they processed emotions. They were different, but they never seemed less than human.”

“So you believe it was having grown up around it that inoculated you from being disturbed by what they do to each other?”

He nodded somberly. “I think that is a very likely outcome. It also helps that Alpha Gertrude always made time for my many questions.” He smiled a private smile in memory. “She was an endearingly kind woman and at the same time, fierce enough to shake the walls if pressed hard enough.”

“Much like her grandson?” posed Sarah.

He smiled again, this time broadly, and he nodded. “Very like her grandson. Her persona seems to have skipped a generation and then come back home again. It is fitting, is it not?”

“Hmm,” said Sarah, scribbling some swift notes. “But Zachariah was different?”

Fred sighed. “Alpha Zachariah and I grew up together, you see. I am older than he by six years.”

“What was he like?”

“Zachariah was an austere child, studious and grim. He rarely played with toys other than to build things on occasion. He never played with other children. He had no use for me at all as a child. He spent most of his time reading or shadowing his father, who was an astute business man. Allen Novak was a business genius, and to his credit, he taught much of what he knew to his son.”

“It sounds…so much like a Primate family,” observed Sarah shaking her head a little.

“It was, I suppose,” Fred acknowledged. “None of the Novaks of those generations Presented as Omegas, and that allowed them to miss much of the tragedy that struck all around them. Alpha Gertrude’s Ruts were rapidly hushed affairs. From my perspective as a child, she seemed to grow ill a couple of times a year, just as many people do, and she was hustled away for a few days with her mate closely attending her. I didn’t know until I was perhaps twelve, what was actually happening. Of course, my father knew. It was his job to provide them with food and clean bedding.” Fred’s face softened.

Sarah let him stay in a memory for a moment, and then she shifted. His eyes popped back from the distance, and he smiled wistfully. “But you were asking about Zachariah,” he reminded himself.

“Yes, well. It was too much to hope that the ills of the world would stay at bay forever. Zachariah was ill-suited, I suppose, to much of the less pragmatic side of a wealthy inheritance. He had no impulse to charity, nor to forming sustainable relationships with friends or neighbors. He was a very insular man, trusting only himself. Needing only himself. He was sent away to Scotland to boarding school for a number of years, and I believe that broke him even further from feeling connected to this community. It was a shame. He was so very lonely.

“When he Presented, and he was alpha, they brought him home to private tutors for the remainder of his pre-college schooling. Where he’d been, in Scotland, had been amenable to Lupins. Scotland is perhaps the best example of an integrated social climate. He was never ostracized there, but once he
Presented, his mother wanted him home where she could guide him. Being an alpha is no easy matter. And being an adolescent alpha has to be hellish. As if being adolescent isn’t hard enough, imagine having impulses to mount and to mate that are nearly unbearable to fight. The only outlet for many young alphas is to turn to violence as a way to funnel some of the energy out. That wasn’t an option for Zachariah, so he turned to incessant masturbation.”

Sarah looked up in surprise. “When you say ‘incessant’…”

Fred leaned forward. “I mean all the time.”

She stared at him. “Like a toddler…?”

He chuckled. “Much worse. Although luckily, those initial hormone spikes don’t go on forever. He grew out of it. His parents were set on having him mate young to avoid the seemingly inevitable outcome that he would turn to a life of promiscuity and sire a bastard or mate accidentally to someone unsuitable. It may need to be noted at this point that Zachariah was never going to be promiscuous. He was asexual as far as I could tell, only seeking a partner during his Ruts and only at biological mandate. I cannot speak from actual knowledge, I’m afraid, as he never confided in me, but I believe even during Rut, he would have preferred a solitary experience, had his body allowed it.”

“So it was his parents who chose his mate?” Sarah asked, fascinated. She hadn’t intended to focus on the Novak family history, but it was turning out to be mesmerizing.

“Not exactly,” Fred responded after a sip of water. “They held parties, introduced him to a great many young women. They flew across the country more than once to attend galas where they hoped he would meet a True-Mate. He never Triggered though, no matter how many events, no matter how many ladies.”

Sarah looked up at a sudden thought. “What would they have done if he Triggered with a man? You said they were still assimilated and devout. Was homophobia a part of their world view?”

Fred nodded sadly. “Yes, I’m afraid it was. It was common in those days to downplay a same-sex True-Mate and bring in a substitute for public display. If Zachariah had Triggered with another man, they would have brought the poor man home to the mansion and kept him a virtual prisoner here, securing a lovely young thing to parade on Zachariah’s arm in public, preferably a young widow, already Mated and left bereft who could not Mate again. It was seen as charitable for all parties. It was a barbaric custom.”

Fred went still, his face set in anger in a way that looked unfamiliar to his muscles. His eyes drifted far away.

“Fred? Are you all right?” Sarah asked carefully.

“If I may speak frankly, Sarah,” he said, bringing his eyes back but retaining the hard angles that defined the angry set of his jaw. “You’re looking to understand this species that is at once so like us and yet so very different. You think them barbarous. You think them uncivilized because there is a violence to their interactions that you don’t understand. I have to tell you though, if you’re seeking barbarity, you’re looking chiefly in the wrong species.”

She didn’t respond. The anger in his face was slowly supplanted by pain. Eventually, he found the words to continue. “I am a gay man. Such has always been the case. And while I cannot pretend that the Novaks, neither Gertrude’s generation nor Zachariah’s, truly understood me, what I can tell you for certain is that they, all of them, were lightyears more accepting of me than my own friends, my
own community, my own species.”

“Fred, I’m sorry.”

He shook off her consolation. “My father knew, of course. We spent so much time together. He was very attentive as a parent. He loved me unconditionally, and he knew before I did that I had a difficult road ahead of me.” Fred’s face softened again in a way that Sarah was beginning to see tied to his memories of his father. “He tried to help prepare me by teaching me techniques of distraction and deflection. He taught me self-defense. He taught me ways to keep myself hidden from public view. None of it was particularly useful, I must say, in protecting me from bigots, but it’s been quite useful in my professional life. It’s important that the butler be truly visible only when he’s needed.” Fred smiled a secret smile, and he winked playfully at Sarah, lightening the mood.

“So you and Zachariah both had a difficult time coming of age?” Sarah prompted.

“Day-to-day, this house remained a bubble, separate from the rest of the world. I believed nothing could ever really change here because there was an enchantment on the estate. I used to pretend that the stone wolves at the door were magical, and that they protected all who set foot inside from real evil. Zachariah was not a happy teenager, nor a happy young man, but he kept to himself, and he didn’t bother anyone. He lived by a code of morality so engrained that it defined his every action, his every word. I wonder sometimes, looking back, if he needed that code to keep himself in check from the darker impulses of his wolf.

“I was shaken from my childish pretenses that no ill could ever descend upon this house one April. Zachariah was 17. I had assumed the role, some time earlier, of assistant butler. It all happened so fast, I still wonder that it was within the span of a single month. First came Naomi Leaven. She was young and rich and polished. She attended a party at the house for the youth of the church the Novaks attended. She wasn’t beautiful by any stretch of the imagination, but she was shrewd. She dressed well, spoke well, she was charming, gracious, charismatic, and the single most ambitious person I’ve ever met. She took perhaps twenty minutes to appraise Zachariah, and then she went to work on him. He toppled very quickly, and the two were engaged to mate within the week. In those days, it was tradition that high society youth announce their intent to mate, and allow for a Primate-style engagement. That allowed both families to delve into any unsavory aspects of their own child’s intended, calling off the engagement before it’s too late if any off color details were unearthed.”


“Virtually everything about their union was indeed ghastly,” he agreed. “Perhaps the best that could be said was that they shared their dislike of each other to enough of an extent that neither was left heartbroken when the dust settled. What they had in common was their religious devotion, their business aspirations, and their shrewdness. But where Zachariah was private and insular, Naomi was extremely social. Where he had no time for social climbing, that was possibly the only thing she truly valued. In him, in the Novaks, her path was paved to have power, wealth, and standing. As a beta and a second child, she couldn’t count on inheriting from her family. She found Zachariah a monumental weight around her neck, but he was the one with the money and the business connections, and so she went after him with everything she had.”

“What else happened that April?” Sarah reminded him gently.

He looked up at her from where he’d been staring into his lap, and he took another sip of water, using the action to look away.

“My father had accompanied beta Allen and the chauffeur into town to help attend him at the tailor. It was quite a normal outing for them. Beta Novak preferred to have his own butler’s hands present
to assist rather than rely on the tailor who wouldn’t be there every day in the same way. They had done exactly the same thing countless times in the past. This time, none of them came home. They were all three killed in a collision. I was 23 at the time, well into my adult years, but it felt as if I’d been orphaned as a young child. Having never known my mother at all, I felt the loss of my father terribly, and had I not been employed here already, I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Sarah sincerely.

“It is perhaps true, at least for me, that if you really wish to understand Lupins as a species, you have to watch them mourn,” Fred said unexpectedly. “Gertrude and Allen were True-Mates. She loved him intensely. She was unabashed about showing him affection whenever and wherever she chose, and there was a solidity, a predictability about that that made everyone here feel stronger, wolf or ape either one. She adored him. He adored her. And he was submissive to her in all kinds of simple ways that, as a young gay man, I felt honored to be allowed to witness and line my sense of self with in how flagrantly it broke the heteronormative patriarchal mold. He was unashamed of his submission. It was his privilege to offer her that. It was his gift. And it was a quiet, simple, elegant thing, not a coarse, raucous, debasement.

“When Allen died, when George and my father died, Gertrude mourned. At first, I didn’t realize what I was seeing because I was so very lost myself, but over time some things became clear. Gertrude surrounded herself with all of his possessions, anything that might hold his scent. She wore his clothing, the little bits that fit her. She spoke of him and of my father constantly, until it hurt me too much to be near her. I began to avoid her, but she sought me out. She brought her wider pack family to stay at the house, and they sat together for hours in silence, just breathing, and she included me in as much of that as my duties would allow.

“It was very different from the way we Primates mourn, at least as far as I’ve seen. She did it intentionally, with a fury and a steadfast purpose that was a little frightening, and she kept it up for ages, years. Every day there was a part of her day that was turned toward him, and she never stopped seeking me out to surround me in her presence. And it helped. It made the hurt hurt so badly, that it flamed up and consumed me, but she was always there. She spent hours alone with Zachariah, sharing scents, sharing pain. Looking back, it’s really impossible to describe. I can’t imagine what it’s like to lose a True-Mate except to have stood witness to the rubble in the aftermath.”

“And Zachariah?”

Fred’s facial expression, torn into a grimace of remembered agony, smoothed to a closed-off mask. He took a deep breath. “Zachariah Mated Naomi in May. They didn’t have a honeymoon. He Mated her on a Tuesday with no fanfare, and then attended his studies the next day. They both enrolled at Kansas University for college, so they could continue to live here. Zachariah loved his father, and he mourned too, but there was a notable difference. He had internalized all of the lessons his parents taught him about upright living in a social strata at the top, but he only listened to the lessons of the mind. He ignored everything they had to teach him about how to nurture the heart. It didn’t help that one of the last things his father saw to was to have both Zachariah and Naomi tested to determine the characteristics of their internal wolves. I suspect beta Allen was hoping, as a last ditch effort, to discover that they were incompatible from a Tertiary standpoint. Of course, had Allen liked Naomi, he wouldn’t have cared how her wolf compared with his son’s. He died before the results were published, and Zachariah didn’t attend the consultation.

“At the loss of his father, Zachariah turned even more deeply inward. He was never overtly unkind, that I saw, but he was cold. His business sense and his need for order commanded most of his attention. And his mother was still Alpha, of course, but Zachariah took over most of the Pack business, day to day. He promoted me to Head Butler, and he assumed control of the various
business initiatives. He left Naomi to her own devices, which mostly meant making social
c conn ections and planning parties that neither Gertrude nor Zachariah attended more than they had
to.”

“And then Gabriel was born,” Sarah cut off her notes to look up at him.

His face had dropped twenty years in a flash. He was outright grinning.

“Oh, lord, he was a terror, wasn’t he?” she guessed.

“Gabriel was the life and the breath that this house was sorely lacking for so long,” Fred admitted
happily. “His grandmother came back to life the moment she laid eyes on him. She doted on him,
carried him, fed him, bathed him, rarely left his side. Naomi’s response to that was very Lupin. She
couldn’t assert her rights to her son over the will of the Alpha. Some things are engrained within
them to the point that no amount of assimilation can break it, and hierarchy is the strongest impulse of
all, I’ve found. Naomi was devastated to lose custody of her son, and before you jump to
conclusions, let me assure you that she had not lost custody. Gertrude was smitten, and rarely put the
child down, but had she realized that her actions hurt Naomi, she would have backed off. I’m certain
of it. But Naomi is a hateful woman, and she imagines that everyone, especially her mother-in-law
share her vitriol, and she would never have lowered herself to go begging for her son back. It was a
simple misunderstanding, a strange happenstance where too much adoration for the same child
caused a rift that never healed.”

“That’s horrible!” Sarah interjected, making a face.

“Naomi is a mystery to me, I admit,” said Fred. He paused and seemed to be thinking. “All of this
that I’m telling you, Alpha Castiel has promised me a free tongue, and has promised to review your
notes before he allows you to publish words that could harm this Pack. I need to be sure that you
understand my loyalty to him is unwavering.”

Sarah nodded, she hoped in a comforting manner. “Yes, Sam explained the limits. I’m not going to
use anything you tell me in a way that could hurt the Pack. I’m not looking to write a tell-all book. I
just want to understand why the violence, the rape, is acceptable. You have my word I’ll be careful”

He nodded distractedly and took another deep breath and another sip of water. Sarah hadn’t touched
hers. “In a Primate family,” he went on at last. “It might be expected that a situation like this could
cause friction between the two women, but that the mother would ultimately win out and assert her
rights to parent the child. Some families recover, and some harbor resentments forever. Some
mothers may not have any ill feelings at all.”

Sarah nodded.

“In a wolf pack, the Alpha’s rights are supreme. If the Alpha takes a liking to a pup and assumes its
care, their instincts lead the mother to surrender the pup and the Alpha to assume the role of parent. It
happened very quickly. Gabriel was no more than six months old when I realized that Naomi had
relinquished all of his care to Gertrude. She abandoned her son entirely, emotionally and physically.
And when Gertrude sickened a few months later, Zachariah assumed control as Alpha, and Gertrude
died in her sleep. At that point, it was too late for Gabriel. Naomi wanted nothing to do with him. His
care fell to nannies, many of them Primates, like me.”

“Oh, God. Poor Gabriel…”

“You must understand the push-pull of the wolf’s instincts never lets up,” Fred said on top of her
dismay. “Having witnessed it from the inside my entire life, I can attest honestly, that the worst of the
damage that wolves do to one another is when that push-pull collides with their attempts to assimilate into Primate society.”

“How so?” Sarah challenged. “You said that Naomi abandoned her son through instinct.”

“I did, but had she been fully invested in listening to her instinct, she would have been invested in the Pack emotionally and wired to protect all of its members in their need. When Gertrude died, Naomi’s instincts will have been urging her to take him back up and tuck him close as her son. I believe that Naomi arrived at Zachariah’s doorstep already severely damaged by her own parents’ attempts to assimilate. She was taught that the impulses of her wolf were a weakness to be destroyed, and indeed, the one time she heeded her instinct, it meant the irrevocable loss of her own son.”

“Irrevocable?” said Sarah, astonished. “He’s right here!”

“Not to Naomi. Her bitterness is a bottomless pit, and her vengeance is limitless. She turned her powerlessness at Gertrude into relentless spite aimed at Gabriel. I watched it helplessly, trying my level best to provide him warmth in a way that didn’t overstep my role. We all did. But Gabriel was resilient and beautiful. He inherited his mother’s charisma, his father’s shrewdness, his grandfather’s devotion to family, and his grandmother’s zest for life. He is a delight to know, and he has been his whole life.”

“And then Castiel was born,” Sarah said into the lingering silence.

Fred huffed a laugh, and then looked haunted. “You can imagine what it must have been like to bring Castiel into the pack, but you would probably imagine wrong,” he said laughing quietly. “Castiel is his own person. He’s the stubbornest person I’ve ever known. And I’ve neglected to mention that while Zachariah had no interest in understanding his own Keller score, he was in fact, exceptional for the time, and others wanted desperately to study him. I assume, as a researcher yourself, you’re familiar with his scores.”

“Zachariah’s? Yes, I am.”

“What those scores mean within the construct of the pack is something I very much hope is changing. Zachariah was, as I said, cold and distant. He was a strict disciplinarian, and a bulwark for the Pack. Anyone who wanted to approach his family had to face Zachariah first, and few made it through. Internally, Zachariah suffered massively. His Tertiary aspect, as we understand it now, found very few outlets for rebalance. He had almost no relationship with his mate to speak of. They didn’t share a bedroom, although he insisted she accompany him while he was in Rut. Sarah, if you’re concerned about rape among Lupins, I more than suspect that what happened during Zachariah’s Ruts was criminal rape. What you’ve witnessed yourself was much more likely to have been mutually beneficial, mutually consensual rebalancing. Lupins NEED rebalancing on occasion. Without it, they devolve into irrational and nonsentient beasts. I’ve seen it happen. I watched it happen to Alpha Zachariah. I watched it happen much more slowly to his mate. What rebalancing Zachariah found often came through his endeavors to raise upstanding sons.”

“He was abusive?”

“No, not as such. But it seemed that when they’d earned a spanking, every now and then he seemed to allow a trickle, perhaps more than a trickle, of his wolf into the events as they unfolded. I doubt he could help himself, despite being a master of self-control most of the time. I worried about the boys when they were very young, and I stayed close while Alpha applied his hand or his strap. I never once saw him cross the line from discipline to abuse, but you know as well as I that that is a hazy line at best.”
Fred pondered for a moment, and then sighed, years and years of unsaid thoughts spoke themselves into oblivion on that sigh.

“When Gertrude died, I considered leaving my post and looking elsewhere for work. It seemed that all of the simple goodness that made the house a home for me was gone, but Gabriel needed me, and he was such a happy child, I couldn’t leave him to be destroyed by a mother who can’t love him. I came to realize that Zachariah needed me as much as the children did, and in a way, I needed them too. House service was all I knew. This house was my home even if I never slept here. And now, if you’ll pardon me, I need to see about assisting Tony in serving dinner.”

It was a startling end to the interview, and Sarah realized she never got to her most important question.

“Fred, please! How can you stand by and watch them hurt one another the way they do? How can you take that in and think it’s okay?”

He stood, but he smiled down at her. “Sarah, I don’t stand by and watch. That would be sublimely rude. I’ll share with you what my father taught me. First, ignore your own gut. You aren’t a wolf, and you can’t feel what they feel. Second, moans of pleasure mean walk away. Moans or cries of unexpected pain mean stand out of sight but close at hand and await the outfall. Crashes of breakage mean come running. We don’t interfere in their exchanges. We don’t offer them advice unless they ask for it, and then only if we have decades of experience to lean on. We don’t pretend to understand what they sense from each other. We follow instruction and protocol.”

“What if something goes terribly wrong? How would you know?”

He chuckled. “When you’ve seen as much of it as I have, you know. It’s really not that complicated.”

“What is your overall impression of Castiel? Would you tell me if it was less than complimentary?”

“My dear, if I had less than complimentary insights into the Alpha, I would not have been granted license to speak frankly with you in the first place. But if you want my honest answer, serving as a Primate witness to all sorts of Lupine behaviors and coping mechanisms, healthy and otherwise, I sincerely believe that Alpha Castiel is both as good an Alpha and as powerful a man as he seems, and that his vision is a good one. Is it the best possible? I don’t know. What I do know is that his parents, even his grandparents were crippled in a way he’s refused to be, and everything he’s done for his species has made a tremendous difference both in the macrocosm and the microcosm. I would do anything for him, if that tells you what you want to know. And Sarah, I’ve seen him release his wolf upon another person. It is terrifying, make no mistake. But it is meant to be terrifying. What would be worse would be for him to release it arbitrarily on an innocent, and that I’ve never seen, nor will I.”

“How can you be sure?” She stood and followed him slowly to the door as he opened it for her. All sounds from down the hall had ceased.

“Because I know who he is, and I trust him. Don’t we all make the same calculation about each other every day? You’re no alpha, Sarah, but what’s to stop you from taking a butcher’s knife and stabbing my husband to death while he sleeps beside me one night? You’re physically strong enough.”

They walked slowly down the hall. Sarah had turned her recorder off, but she left it with her notes in the living room.
“That’s an oversimplification,” she countered.

“Is it? Or is it merely a lack of familiarity on your part? Wolves seem unstable and unpredictable to you because you’re not yet familiar with their patterns and their rules. For me, I find Primates far more violent and unpredictable.”

They descended the stairs together.

“You mentioned that you’re married. Did you have children?”

“No,” he said simply. “David wasn’t interested in being a parent. He had a much rougher childhood than I did, and many of the scars followed him into adulthood. I can’t complain though. We’ve had a very full life, and I got to raise two boys who grew into exceptional men. I hope I’ve been of some assistance. If you’ll excuse me.” Fred disappeared through a back hallway, leaving Sarah in the parlor where Sam and Jess were waiting for her.

“Oh, the pups!” gushed Sarah. “May I?”

“Knock yourself out,” Jess told her. “I’ve had my fill today. Hank won’t stop crying.”

Sarah cooed at him and clucked her tongue as she lifted the squalling twin to her shoulder. “They’ve grown so much!”

The small bassinet they were in was on wheels, so Sam pushed it toward the kitchen. “Did Fred have some good insights for you, Sarah?” he asked over his shoulder. She followed him, and Jess took up the rear. The kitchen was bursting with activity.

“Yes, he did. I understand now why Castiel took exception to offering him up for feedback without running it by the Alpha first. He was very candid.”

“All my childhood exploits, out in plain view for Dr. Meyer to pick through?” asked Cas, handing off a basket of bread rolls to April.

“No, sir. Nothing like that,” Sarah told him with her eyes on the pup at her shoulder. Somehow looking at his face was a challenge after seeing him at his leisure in his own house under the attentions of his own Submissive. Dean, for his part was arguing with Tony about whether the sauce needed more salt or not. His clothes were back on, and he didn’t move as if his backside was sore. Unlike Sam, who still had a stiffness about his gait. “Although he was quite open about your family history. I’ll leave my recordings and my notes for your review when I go.”

“I appreciate that courtesy, Sarah. Won’t you join us? Dean, leave it alone. You can add more salt to your own portion at the table if you must.”

Dinner wasn’t what Sarah had expected either. It was exactly like any formal dinner hosted by any patriarch anywhere. Michael and April teased (flirted?). Dean ate two full plates and endured ribbing from his mate about which of them was eating for two. Cas had a way of steering the conversation away from topics that touched too many nerves. Sarah was reminded of a ship’s captain making minor adjustments to the rudder to wend a way through dangerous waters. Gabriel had a funny quip at hand whenever Michael needed tweaking. Sarah sat between April and Kali. She watched the subtle interplay between Castiel and his mate. It was clear they had a connection that no one else could witness, and there was a warmth to the way they interacted that was soothing to watch. Sarah felt a little voyeuristic.

“So, tell me,” began Castiel, helping himself to another roll and passing the basket to April. “If he didn’t spill all my childhood secrets, what did Fred have to say?”
“Oh, well, he…” Sarah took a roll and passed the basket to Kali. “…told me a lot of your history, like I said. Somewhere in there, I feel like I learned a great deal about Lupins, but it’s going to take me some time to analyze the details.”

“Of course. We’re a complicated species.” Cas buttered his roll, and then tore it in half and placed half on April’s plate.

“He has a great deal of faith in you, sir.”

“I’ve had to earn every ounce of trust the hard way, Sarah,” Cas responded. “Something’s still eating you though. Out with it. Friday Pack dinners are for meaningful discussion. You’re here, so you’re Pack. Let’s talk about it. What are you concerned about?”

Sarah frowned. Everyone was looking at her. Here in this posh space where every fiber was positioned with intent, it seemed silly to worry about violence. About rape. “Sir, what’s to keep a Top ranked wolf from committing atrocities in the name of Pack hierarchy. We Primates can’t sense the difference. How can we, can I, be sure that what I’ve witnessed is really a necessary thing, and not an abuse of power?”

Castiel set his utensils down and thought carefully. “I’m not sure how to answer that, Sarah.”

“Pssh!” came from Dean at the end. “Why does it matter if an ape can tell or not?” he asked. “As long as the wolves in the vicinity don’t get their panties in a wad, you can go about your business.” He spoke with his mouth full, and then paused to swallow. “Like at the party. Don’t think I didn’t see you freak.”

“It’s a bigger question than that, alpha,” Michael added. “All of this is great as long as we keep ourselves separate from the apes, but if we’re ever going to be successful at integrating with them, we can’t ignore that question. It’s really the heart of everything.”

“Exactly,” said Sam. “We can tell the Primate populations that what they’re witnessing isn’t destructive, but let’s be honest, in certain circumstances, that might not be true. We can’t lull people into walking calmly past an actual assault and not realize what it is. We have to be able to define the difference so they can judge for themselves.” Sam put up a hand at Dean’s intended interruption. “And they can’t just go by how the other wolves respond. Sometimes there aren’t any other wolves.”

“To really answer your question directly, Sarah,” said Cas. “What keeps us from committing violence upon our own people is the same thing that prevents Primates from doing the same. There are the internal connections between people that leads us to care for rather than harm each other. There are our internalized value systems. There’s the sense of self-preservation that tells us that the more violence there is in the world, the more likely we are as individuals to fall prey to it ourselves. There are laws, of course, but those are not really a deterrent, more a means of applying consequences in standardized form after the fact. I could well ask you the same question.” He paused and looked up. “Yes, please, Fred. Coffee for me. None for Dean or April. Everyone else may decide as they like.” He focused back on Sarah. “What keeps you from harming others in the absence of witnesses, for that is the heart of your question, since Primates make unreliable witnesses to Canid behaviors?”

She sighed. “Morality, I guess. It’s against my religious strictures. It’s antithetical to who I am.” She faded out with a thoughtful look.

“Well, there you go,” said Gabriel. “You answered your own question. Potatoes, please Sam. I’m starving.”
“Dean, Pet,” Castiel said in a quiet voice. Dean looked up. “You’re through eating. Go downstairs please and wait for me. Leave your clothing here.”

“Yes, Sir.” It was said with a grin, and Sarah’s face pinked as he stripped off before bolting out.

Cas lowered his face into his warm cup of coffee, so he missed the quick look April shot toward Michael and the baffled look Michael shot back followed by a quick look up the table at the Alpha.

“Whatever you’re planning, Kitten. Go ahead with it. But that’s ‘One’.” Or perhaps he hadn’t missed it.

“Yes, Alpha,” she said into her lap with a smile.

“Pie, miss?” asked Fred at her elbow.

“Yes, please,” she answered trying to puzzle out why April and Cas both looked pleased, and Michael looked ready to run for it.

“Sarah,” Cas broke her out of her reverie. “You have one hour with Jessica and no more. Leave your recorder and your notes in the living room where they are. Fred will be gone by then, so Sam will see you out and take responsibility to see that you don’t leave my house with anything I’ve asked you to leave for my review.”

“Of course, Alpha. Thank you for your hospitality. I won’t disappoint you.”

Cas tilted his head a bit as he studied her. “No. I don’t believe you will.”

The rush of warmth was at odds with her determination to stay objective. God, he was a powerful warrior and a wounded puppy all at once, and she thought it might kill her if she ever had to disappoint him. Luckily, she had no such intention. And apparently, he knew that. Damn the man and his intuition.

Gabe snickered.

Chapter End Notes

First, the author mentioned something about there being shorter chapters from this point on...then we LAUGHED and LAUGHED!!!

Be well, take care of yourselves and each other. Drop a note if you want.
Chapter 100

Chapter Summary

Fred's got a bone to pick. April needs a duet partner. Sarah's whittling down to the core of it all. And Cas needs someone to vent his spleen on. Who, oh, who could that turn out to be? Oh, and Michael's awash in pregnancy hormones.

Oh. And Happy 100 to all of us. :)

Chapter Notes

Stop right here and go back one chapter to catch the link that I forgot to post in the pre-chapter notes. It's a preview of April's 'Witch' song. I stole it, but whatever.

I owe a huge debt of thanks to mljmorris for talking me through how rigorous the interview process is for a PhD candidate while she's gathering supporting data from a live subject. I would make a terrible PhD student. Fuck that, let's just tell each other stories. Sorry, Michelle.

To all of my friends who are going through something right now, and that's more than a few of you, this escape is for you. You know who you are, and if you're not sure you're included, I assure you, you are.

This chapter comes with all the hugs in my body!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 100 – Friday, August 18, 2017

NOW:

Castiel sat alone in his office, waiting. Fred would check in before he left for the day, and Cas expected he was in for an earful. He felt like a right prick, and Fred wasn’t one to let that go without comment.

Dean could wait.

Would wait.

Fred didn’t bother knocking.

“If that is everything you require, Alpha, I will retire for the evening. The house is in repose for the most part. Sam has the little ones. Jess and Sarah are settled. April and Michael are in the
Conservatory with their heads together. Gabriel and…"

“Fred, stop. I get it. I don’t need a cast list.”

“Very good, Sir. I will return on Monday morning unless you require me over the weekend. I will see you again on Tuesday when you return from your journey.” He stood framed by the door – not leaving. Waiting to be dismissed.

Cas ran a hand over the back of his neck and stood to cross in front of his desk and settle his weight there. Better if he started it off. Right?

“I’m sorry I had to ask that of you,” he said with his head down just a little, gazing unfocused at Fred’s wedding ring. The wrinkled hands clasped so politely in front of the man was one of those ineffable constants in Castiel’s life. “You’ve always given more than I had a right to ask you for, and this was…probably a step too far. Please know that I am grateful. I know what it cost you.”

“Do you?” asked Fred, stepping in and closing the door. He stood before Castiel, straight-backed and dignified.

“Was it that hard to be truthful?” joked the Alpha in return, more than a shade too light for the sharp look in Fred’s eye. “I need her to understand, and the things you’ve seen… Fred, you know more about us than anyone. She can’t hurt you. She can’t hurt me.”

“She can hurt you, if you let her, Alpha; if you open yourself up to that possibility, and what’s more, she can hurt Gabriel. I beg you to consider someone other than yourself for a change.” Fred’s eyes flashed angry. Rarely did he take Castiel directly to task, but he’d never hesitated when he felt a threat to his Pack.

Cas didn’t stir. He sank down inside himself and considered. “What did you tell her?” he asked at last.

“Probably very little that you expected me to,” the butler responded cryptically. “But you’ll hear it for yourself in the morning.” Fred’s eyes suddenly turned uncharacteristically dark and unsure. “I would like to warn you,” he added. “The recording may contain pieces of your family’s history of which you are not yet aware. It involves Gabriel in his infancy. You should gird yourself.”

Castiel’s face paled. “Thank you for the warning.”

“I did my best, Alpha, at your instruction, but I cannot leave without being certain you understand what you’ve required of me, and of what it cost. A butler has no higher duty than to protect and defend the privacy and the sanctity of the family he serves.”

“I know, Fred…I’m…”

“No, pup. I believe you don’t know. It is my sworn obligation – my responsibility! – My CALLING! …to defend this pack from filchers of private affairs, and I’ve just contaminated myself for you and your need to control everything! I am debased, Castiel. And I did it for you. You owe me more than you can repay.” Fred’s iron-toned voice plated a steel cage around Castiel, and the Alpha’s jaw dropped suitably. He was speechless.

Fred held his eyes for a moment, a long, brutal moment that incorporated all their long years together and robbed Castiel of his sense of authority. He was six years old and busted with his hands in Fred’s personal bag looking innocently for sweets, but about to be schooled in the inviolability of other people’s dignity.
At last, Cas dropped his eyes, chastened. “Apologies, my friend. But as painful as it is, what I asked of you was necessary. She needs to understand. You have served this Pack well your whole life, and that is not in question tonight any more than any other night, but you are the only one who remembers. I will protect Gabriel as I always have.”

“Protect yourself as well, Sir,” the old man reminded him gently, his ire spent, his eyes easy. Cas nodded, his own demeanor back in place, if a little shaken.

“When you listen to the recording tomorrow,” Fred said, turning toward the door. “Keep in mind that your grandmother cast an intimidating presence, but that she meant no harm, especially not to Gabriel. Keep in mind that sometimes, in our selfishness, we of powerful persona may trample loved ones underfoot without ever seeing them there. It is a lesson that could resonate down through the years, if we are amenable to hear it.”

Castiel’s brow pulled down in confused apprehension.

“Also, Sir, I must confess to having been dishonest with Miss Blake at one juncture.” Fred put his hand on the knob and looked up at Cas. “I explained to her that we in House Service routinely keep our advice to ourselves unless requested to give it. I admit that wasn’t a truthful statement on my part, but I beg you to overlook the lie in this instance given the purpose of the interview.”

“You’re a treasure, Fred,” sighed Cas – subtextually saying, ‘I love you like a father’. Fred would hear it loud and clear. “I’d be lost without you.” Fred nodded serenely and turned to leave but paused as Cas went on softly to himself: “I can’t always tell anymore,” he muttered. “…When I’m using people, and when I’m not. I’m starting to lose the difference.”

Fred chuckled. “Then I’ll be sure to remind you, Castiel James.” And then he was gone.

Michael finished the dishes with Sam and hung the dish towel up neatly. He checked his phone. April was adamant he join her in the Conservatory, but Michael hadn’t spent enough time with his nephews lately, and he missed them.

A look into the bassinet spoiled his plan. They were both fast asleep. His phone pinged again.

Sam snickered. “She’s nothing if not persistent,” the beta commented, reading her summons over Michael’s shoulder. “Go on and see what she wants. These two won’t stir again until eleven or so. They’re dead to the world.”

“I’ll help you get them upstairs,” Michael told him, collecting J.T. into his arms without waking the pup.

Sam looked over the little black ball of fur in her enclosure. Portia was happily settled in her fluffy bed, not managing more than a couple of thumps of her tail for Sam. He chuckled and hoisted the bassinet with Hank still sleeping inside, following the Omega up to his room at the top of the stairs. “Are you worried at all about what Jess might tell the Primate?” Michael asked as he resettled J.T. next to his brother.

“Who Sarah? No, not a bit. She’s finally starting to make some progress in her understanding of our culture. I think this could be a real breakthrough for her, if she’s willing to listen.”

“You like her,” Michael deduced, watching Sam’s face. “A lot.”
Sam gave it a little thought. “Yes, I really do. She’s got a good heart. She’s smart and tenacious. She could do our movement a lot of good…”

“Or royally fuck us back to the dark ages,” put in Michael.

“Don’t be a cynic,” Sam chided. “She’s got her eyes wide open. She’ll figure it out. Have some faith.”

Michael’s phone chirped again, twice in quick succession, and Sam laughed.

“Speaking of tenacious,” the beta teased, and Michael pulled a face. “What’s she on about?”

“I’m not sure. Probably trying to take advantage of our mates’ absence tonight to do something else wedding related. She loves planning surprises. I haven’t packed yet though…” Michael faded out as he tested his bonds. Dean had them pinched tight. Soon he would shutter them completely. Michael and April both had the night to themselves as they often did when the engaged couple made time for themselves.

Michael was much less excited to take advantage of that than he had once been. Things had changed.

“Michael?”

“Hmm?” Michael was focused inside his own head. He’d forgotten Sam.

“I’m fine here for the night. You should go see what she wants.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m going. You’re sure you don’t need anything? I mean, you could wheel them down the hall and keep me company while I pack.”

Sam gave him a wary look. “Are you afraid to go downstairs by yourself?”

Michael flustered, offended. “I’m not afraid, beta! Don’t be stupid.”

“Look,” said Sam calmly. “I know all about the mess you guys made of yourselves. It’s natural to feel cautious about sticking your hand back into the flames once they’ve burned you, but surely she’s not…”

“No! She’s not,” shot Michael. “Are you settled here, Sam? Do you need me to bring you anything?” His words snapped, and his face closed.

“I’m fine, man,” Sam told him smoothly, laying a soft blanket over both sleeping bodies.

“Good,” Michael snipped, and he fled.

Stupid Sam. Stupid April. Now the whole fucking house knew he was on the hook and caught in his own net. Michael stormed down the stairs, into the Conservatory, and confronted the girl, advancing on her aggressively. She straightened, and her eyes flew wide.

“Thought we agreed you would leave me out of your stupid games!” he spat. “What the fuck do you want, and why was it necessary to put me in the line of fire again? I just got myself untangled, no thanks to you! Now Cas thinks we’re meeting in secret! What was with all the goo-goo eyes at the table? Are you insane?”

“What…Why are you angry? I just wanted to take advantage of the privacy to work on our duet. For the wedding?” She took a couple of tentative steps backward toward the piano bench.
“What duet?” His brain had skittered to a stop. It came out like an indictment.

She grinned. “I wrote a song. I think you might like it. I want to sing it with you on stage at the reception while they dance their first dance. Michael, I need you to do this with me. Here, sit. Listen.”

She sat him down on the loveseat nearest the piano bench, and then she settled herself. She began to play a tune, an unfamiliar one, and Michael’s brow knit in consternation.

“Pete…”

“Shhh! Just listen!” She played on.

“No, we shouldn’t do this here. Cas is still in his office, I think. He’ll hear. It won’t be a surprise. We should go up to the piano in the Game room.”

She laughed. “Now who’s trying to meet in secret?” She continued playing, vocalizing softly and watching his face as he thought. Then she began to sing quietly, and his eyes narrowed.

“You want me to sing this with you?” he asked, scooting closer to the edge of the couch, clearly fighting an impulse to go to her. “In public?”

She smirked into the lyric a little, but then went back to a simple delivery. It was slow and thoughtful. It bespoke pain and distance, coming to a deeper connection from places of fear and rejection. It spoke of core-deep acceptance after years of rebuff, and it made Michael’s soul shimmer with promise. He wanted desperately to sit beside the girl, to look into her eyes and ask her in song to open herself to him, but his feet wouldn’t move. He wanted to fall wholesale into the words her lips spoke, into the melody that lifted and carried him, and he fought the yearning that battled anger inside him. She wasn’t singing it to him anyway.

He imagined a sparkling black dance floor, sprinkled with colorful autumn leaves, where the two men they loved would dance. Slowly. Deliberately. Intentionally. And he envisioned the stage: Pete at the piano, himself standing at the end of the keyboard, wearing a crisp tuxedo and with a microphone in his hand. His eyes would be fixed on the couple turning slowly alone in the spotlight.

He could see it.

Clearly.

Too clearly.

And it hurt. God, it hurt.

April ended the song. She looked at him, the distance between them meaningless.

“Sing it with me? Please, Michael?”

Michael was never going to be able to deny her anything. He nodded, still perched precariously on the edge of the cushion.

God, what an ass he was. Totally befuddled. A complete fool for a girl. What was the word?

Twitterpated.

Right? From Bambi? And that was Michael now. Lost to his own machinations.
He still didn’t know how Castiel had caught on to him. He’d been making careful, stealthy moves on Pete over those two months, but they’d all been in secure moments just like this one, when all the bond links went dark to allow the alphas their privacy.

Privacy.

It had its uses. And he’d been careful to let a good night’s sleep cover his tracks from the night before, snuggled safe in her arms in a way that was wholesome in the morning light.

“Michael, it’s okay,” her voice brought him back to the present.

He breathed deeply, grounding his feet, clenching his fingers into the soft cushion. “Is it?” he asked softly. He felt achingly sad suddenly. What the fuck was wrong with him, and when had he become so very lost?

“Sweetheart, it is,” she assured him.

A sob broke over his Adam’s apple, and he curled into himself, hiding his tears. Damned pregnancy hormones. April’s warm hand slid into his, and her scent surrounded him. He reached for her, and he pulled her close, weeping pitifully.

“It’s all right, Michael,” Pete whispered into his ear. “Breathe my scent. I’m here. I know it hurts.”

“What’s wrong with me?” he wondered aloud, holding so tightly onto her that it had to be painful. She crooned soft words at him and stroked his hair.

“Nothing at all, baby. Nothing’s wrong with you. You overflow sometimes, just like I do. Let it out, Michael. It’s fine. I’m here.”

“Please don’t leave me, Pete,” he begged, feeling weak, feeling broken. Images struck again…a bloody medical glove, a forlorn beta mate alone in shock on a hard-plastic chair, a pale Alpha doctor with no words of comfort, a warm Omega pianist in his arms…

Michael clung to her.


The wave of powerful emotion passed slowly, and it left Michael staring out the far window and down the lawn. His chin rested on top of her head, and his hand held hers in a light touch, the clutching gone, the tears wiped clear. They both sat still, tangled together, coming down, calming down.

“I’m sorry,” he told her after a very long silence.

“What on earth have you got to be sorry for?” she wondered from beneath him. “It’s my fault. If anyone should be sorry…but I’m not sorry.”

“Pete.”

She huffed a laugh. “You still think I’m Peter Pan?”

They still weren’t looking at each other. The air went crystalline, as if they were caught in an antique snow globe and the wrong motion would destroy the stillness and the perfection.

“I took advantage of you,” he said.
“I liked it,” she admitted. “It felt good to be pursued.”

He laughed at hearing her mirror his words. They’d become so intertwined in their plays to trap each other that it was no longer possible to tell where one started and the other ended. He took another clumsy swipe at his eyes to dry them. He wanted nothing of his breakdown to show, just in case Castiel checked in on them before heading downstairs and locking himself in with Dean for the night.

Michael was ensnared so tightly by this point that he was hopeless ever to find a way out. And April, the same. It was such a disaster though. There was nothing innocent about what they’d done to each other. A therapist combing backward through each carefully laid trap would be dismayed that they could even begin to trust one another.

Michael had seized on every opportunity, every time the alphas locked their door and their minds behind them, so they could play hard, every millisecond of privacy when his connection to Dean went dark. Had seized those moments to lay his traps. Like a spider. Like a troll under the bridge.

But in all that scheming, he’d never crossed their lines. He’d been so very, very careful. Don’t touch. And he hadn’t. Neither had she. Cuddling in an Omega Pack bed was allowed, and God, how they made use of that little allowance.

Dean hadn’t guessed the half of it. Castiel probably knew, but he was clearly going to play his hand out slowly over time, not all in one flop.

But the sticky web Michael spun around his prey had turned on him, catching his arms, his legs, up in a tangle he didn’t feel tightening in on him until it was too late, only then to realize that his prey held all the ends in her tiny fists. She was a much greater spider than he.

No, they had never done a single thing that crossed the lines that were set by their alphas. Never once. Well, once. Michael’s mouth still watered sometimes as he recalled her kisses. Just that once. A single flare up of flame where there had been deepening smolder for too long – long enough that it couldn’t hold any longer.

But it had stopped there. One kiss. One moment of honesty, when their game broke through the façade, and they couldn’t pretend any longer. Maybe Michael had started it, and maybe it had been April. Each suspected the other. But neither of them was innocent, and neither of them had escaped the web in the end. And apologizing about it now was fruitless.

“It’s all right to grieve, Michael,” she told him somberly. “I’m safe. You can lean on me when it gets too heavy to carry.”

She offered him an out, if he wanted it – a quick-release. His trauma still sat so heavy, and it overbalanced his top-heavy emotions often enough that it was a valid excuse for him to skate away on if he’d wanted that. Trauma and pregnancy combined in an Omega to make them tender to the touch. Michael was no exception, and he wasn’t going to pretend otherwise. But neither was he going to pretend that listening to her sing something that he knew she’d actually written for him – sing it in duet to their mates – didn’t hurt so much that his insides no longer felt solid.

Why did it have to hurt so much?

Why did it have to hurt at all?

Wasn’t his life a win now? Mated, impregnated, a toppled Alpha – just as he’d always imagined – a beautiful girl at his shoulder, deeply in love with the whole lot of them – wasn’t it enough? Why did
it hurt? What was he still mourning?

Hadn’t he needed something to grow in beautiful light and not in darkness? Hadn’t he needed a love story he could tell his pups about in years to come? What did he have to tell them now? That he’d stolen something that wasn’t his to take? Was his love of this woman cheaper for its origination down in the muck of wrongness? Was he so lost to beauty that the only option to find it was to wrangle it away from someone else? Did he deserve the woman who sat warm between his knees? Would he ever?

“Shh, you’re thinking too hard,” Pete told him.

He huffed, and her hair moved.

“Look, if you don’t like the song, you could just tell me,” she said, and again he laughed.

“I loved it,” he said, pulling away and finding a grounding in her eyes. “It’s perfect.”

She studied his face for a moment, down on her knees before him. She reached out and smudged a thumb gently beneath his left eyelid. She smiled. “Not yet, Michael,” she said – a whisper. A secret.

“I know.”

“Come on.” She stood and pulled him to his feet. “Let’s make good use of tonight while they’re busy with each other. Come sing with me. I’ll go easy on you. I promise.” She led him out and up the wide stairs to the Game room where they could close the door and not announce their melody to the whole house just yet; where they could use the privacy offered up to them in the way it was always meant to be, in a way that held no shame in the aftermath.

It was a beautiful song.

The alphas were going to love it.

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Sarah set her recorder up again and settled back on the couch. Jess took her place opposite, open and ready. Sarah marked the date, the time, the site, and the identity of her interviewee. She had so many questions, and she only had an hour. It wasn’t enough. Perhaps she’d be granted a follow-up later.

Sarah was only a couple of simple questions in, background questions. They weren’t into the meat yet. A tap at the door preceded Fred’s head poking in.

“Pardon the interruption, ladies. I’m taking my leave. Do either of you require anything before I go?”

“Good night, Fred,” said Jess warmly. “Thank you for your help today.”

“Not at all, beta. Pups are exhausting to the strongest among us. I hope you sleep well tonight.” Jess beamed at him. The butler turned to Sarah. “Miss Blake, I must apologize for monopolizing our exchange earlier this evening.” He waved off her negating protest. “I would very much like to make it up to you and allow you to conduct an interview at your own pace. I know we never reached the details you need from me. Would you please allow me to showcase my beloved’s love of entertaining by accompanying us for dinner next week? You’ll have us both for the evening, and you
may ask anything you like.”

Sarah was gobsmacked. “Fred, that would be delightful! Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.” He winked. He smiled a very unbutler-like smile. Was the old man flirting? Sarah grinned and saw Jess in her peripheral vision, mirroring.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Sarah told him, flushing. He’d once been dashing, she could tell. Maybe David would show her some old photos.

After he was gone, Jess broke out in a belly laugh. Sarah turned a baffled look on her, delighted. “Have you ever…?”

“Never,” Jess assured her, laughing. “Sam is never gonna believe me. I want stories when you get back.”

Sarah saw Jess in a new light and wondered if the two of them could be friends. There was a mysterious light in there that spoke foreign words, words Sarah couldn’t translate, but words she felt compelled to dig after. Jess wasn’t like the others. She floated on a different plane somehow.

Sarah refocused and drew Jess back to the subject. They went through the beta’s history, through her upbringing, her experience with physical discipline as a child, her experience with the various aspects of Lupin culture…did her parents display their sex life in front of the pups (no, not really), did they raise their children with a strict hand (yes, quite), had she felt secure as a pup (definitely). Sarah went through these questions rapidly, marking places where deeper investigation was needed. Where had she lived? What was her family structure: A Pack or a nuclear, Primate-like family?

Then they moved from the whats, wheres, whens, and whys of her childhood into her adult life. What had she experienced in preparing for the Bar? Had she had biases to face? How did she overcome them?

Then they dove in more personally. Sarah asked Jess to describe what it felt like to be a wolf. How did she experience being a Submissive? How did she know it was an authentic aspect instead of implanted? What was it like to ‘fall’ or to ‘float’? What did she value about her connection to the Pack? Sarah asked for stories, and Jess delivered them: Her rage at being torn from the boy she’d hoped to mate. The strapping she took from her father after the tantrum she threw. Her illness. Her devastation when she realized she was barren. Her determination someday to return to Lawrence. Her plans, carefully followed, month by month. How fiercely she’d fought to gain the position in the Public Defender’s office that would let her come home to Sam. How living without a pack and without a Dominant left her feeling precarious in everything she tried to do. How nothing ever felt complete or satisfying in the absence of a firm, grounding hand. How frightened she was to think that Sam might already have Mated. How scared she was to face him at last.

It had been so long.

Sarah made notes and let Jess talk, listening carefully for important hints. She needed to delve further into the differences for the young woman in the three phases of her life: her childhood where her Lupin needs were handled for her, her early adulthood where they were neglected to the extreme, and her Mated life, where she and her mate worked in tandem to keep each other balanced. Sarah was finding a running vein of truth within the stories that she thought she could bring forward and highlight.

She would need much more from Jess about those years on her own. Sarah needed proof, not anecdotes. Would Castiel allow that? Had she left a data trail at all?
Her hour was running out, and she had so much left to ask. Even more than the data trail, tonight was supposed to be about finding a justification for what an ape had witnessed and put into a light that withstood scrutiny by other primates. Sarah pivoted.

She cut the beta off. “Jess, I’m still lost. I need you to help me understand…”

“He rapes you.”

Jess was shocked. “No, he doesn’t.” Her voice was cold steel. Her eyes flashed. “How dare you!”

“Explain it to me as you would a wolf pup.” She scooted forward, abandoning her pen, her hands holding each other in her lap. “Like you will explain it to your sons. I need to understand.”

“Why do you need to be humiliated?” Sarah abandoned her questions, abandoned her plan. She let herself fall into Jessica’s brown eyes, hoping to discover the answer.

“Humiliated?! No! Humiliation would be to be carried with kid gloves, to be coddled like a child who cannot bear the brutality of the real world. Me? I am strong! I am unbreakable! You want to know how I can stand it? His power unleashed on me? God, how can you stand your mealy existence? Don’t judge me, sister! You’re not even truly alive! Have you ever been really challenged in your life? Have you ever once tested your mettle against a power so raw it should destroy you? You have no basis on which to judge me at all. You’re a pathetic facsimile of a living woman.”

Sarah’s jaw gaped. She wanted to protest. The gall. But the fire in Jess’ eyes was compelling.

“It’s liquid fire poured out on my body,” Jess told her calmly. “It takes all of my selfish desires and burns them to ash before my eyes, destroys so completely everything that I think I want, that there is nothing left but him. Only him. It’s a religious experience, and it’s a catharsis. It comes at the highest point of my most self-centered tantrums. Jesus, those get bad. It always feels like the world’s against me, and it enrages me, and then his arms encircle me, and he holds me down. And I fight. God, I fight. But the harder I fight, the tighter he holds. And everything burns, and I’m sure it’s the end of everything, but he’s strong, and he’s got me, and he rages so much greater than I can, and I realize when the pain peaks that he’s got me, not to drag me down, not to humiliate me, but to lift me up into brilliant flames, to wash me clean, and to give it all back, my self-control, my self-respect.

“We are wolves, Sarah. It may not always be easy to watch, but you don’t get to turn it into something ugly. It’s beautiful like an Old Testament purification. Don’t you people seek the same
thing from that God of yours? Don’t monks up in the mountains try to flagellate themselves to regain their purity through pain? You think your God loves you, but he never comes down from his lofty throne to touch you, does he? Imagine having that God, the one you say loves you, love you so much he sleeps beside you every night and makes pasta salad for you when you’re exhausted. He’s a God, Sarah, not a man, and he chose me. And I’m strong enough to house him when he’s enraged. Are you strong enough to house your God?”

“Holy fuck,” whispered Sarah, forgetting the recorder.

No, this wasn’t helping to convince the researcher that the wolves were stable rational beings. This was insanity. Every cult leader with a hard-on had tried that line on his followers, and Jess’ tone held mockery on the aftertaste. How much was real?

Jess chuckled, coming back from her frenzy. “It’s really not that complicated,” she said in her courtroom voice, abandoning the mockery and laying it out as if it were the simplest concept possible. “I get tangled up in my own emotions sometimes, and the best way out of it is a painful flush. Sometimes spanking is enough, and sometimes it’s not. Sometimes, I need my own voices drowned into oblivion by a stronger, louder, more forceful entity, and I need a wash of real pain, a little fear... It takes a powerful flush of hormones to wash it all the way out.”

“How do you and Sam determine that it’s the right time?” Sarah took the offer to calm back down. She leaned back and picked her pen back up.


Sarah tried not to laugh, but it burst out anyway. What a bitch. She wondered again what it would be like to have Jess as a friend. Never dull, probably.

Sarah was missing the core somehow. It had seemed like they were so close, but Jess pulled the rug out from under her just at the critical moment. Dr. Meyer was going to review this recording and demand that she alter her thesis conclusion to match his opinion. He would gloat over it: he was right all along. They were uncivilized, and they needed to be saved from themselves. But Sarah wasn’t ready to concede that yet. It didn’t fit. It didn’t fit the statistics.

“Jess, what does it feel like if Sam doesn’t put you down when you need it?”

“Is that what you call it?” the beta asked, quirking a brow upward again, taunting. Sarah sighed, annoyed at herself for provoking her interview subject. So much for staying objective. So much for passively observing. Jess leaned in again, stage whispering. “Call it what it is, little one. It’s a Dom-i-na-tion. It’s a powerful and painful fucking, Sarah, right up the ass. Unprepped. And it hurts. Fuck, does it hurt. Have you ever been fucked raw in the ass without lube, without prep? It burns! It feels like you’re going to rip in two. And there’s sweat that isn’t yours trailing down your back, and there’s hot breath on your neck, and then his teeth clamp down, and his hands hold on impossibly tight, and OH, GOD, he growls right in your ear!”

“But that’s crazy! Jess, it’s crazy! That’s not healthy coping! Jesus, have you tried therapy?!”

Jess laughed loudly. Rudely. “Therapy?! And miss the sweetness of the power in his hands? Are you kidding? I wouldn’t give this up for anything! It’s...it’s incredible!”

“You...” Sarah frowned, looking deeply into Jess’ face. “You...want to be raped.” It wasn’t a question, it was a revelation. The piece fell into place. Jess wasn’t crazy, she wasn’t forced into
anything, despite the appearance. It was a role play after all, only a spectacularly realistic one.
“You…love it.”

“Now you’re getting it.” Jess sparkled. “Just don’t leave here thinking I’m brainwashed. I’ve had all of that from the monkey-troop I can stomach for one lifetime.”

“But you fought so hard.”

“Didn’t do me any good, did it?” Jess teased.

Sarah couldn’t stop the smile. She really wasn’t accustomed to interviewing someone so utterly shameless. “Talk me through it, beginning to end.”

Jess sighed, sad to have her fun cut short. Being a brat when there was no dominant at hand wasn’t any fun at all. “It’s always a last resort,” she admitted, dropping the taunts entirely, reading Sarah’s worries that Jess’ refusal to take the subject seriously might undermine the study if she didn’t straighten up. She flushed, imagining Sam’s displeasure if he found out Jess had run the Primate around in circles and not given her what she really needed. And Castiel. He’d be unimpressed in the extreme.

“Sam hates the whole practice, if you want to know the truth. It has to get really awful before he’ll go there, and to make him do it in public like he did; he would only do that if I was really hurting badly. If it was up to Sam, he’d put me in a hot bubble bath surrounded by flowers and feed me chocolates. But that’s not me, now is it?”

“I’m confused,” Sarah mused. “I thought True-Mates were sure to match sexually. How is it possible that you and Sam don’t share the same affinities? The same kinks…?” She let her question lead Jess forward, and the beta was suddenly uncomfortable.

“Jess?”

“I don’t know,” Jess admitted.

Sarah looked back at her notes. The little box by ‘True-Mates’ near the top of the questionnaire was checked. She looked up at the beta.

Oh.

OH.

Sarah left the box checked for now. She made a note to speak with Castiel about it.

Moving on.

They didn’t have much time left. Jess described what her emotional journey through a D.F. was like from the inside. Sarah tried not to blush. As if.

A tap at the door announced Sam checking in.

Then they were shaking hands. Sam waited in the doorway. His eyes bore heavily into his mate’s. There was a promise there. His face seemed chiseled from granite.

Sarah lowered her eyes, collecting her bag, straightening her notes on the low table. Sam would have sensed Jess’ taunting headspace throughout the interview, Sarah realized. He was displeased. Sarah saw Jess straighten her spine on the way out. Sam’s eyes followed her coldly. Sarah tried to scent the
air, but there was nothing but the clean crispness of the well-tended space and a little scent of jasmine from a bowl near the window.

Turning hazel eyes on Sarah, Sam softened and smiled. “Did you get what you needed?”

She licked her lips. “Nearly. I’m closer than I was before. Do you think we could do this again after I’ve had a chance to go over my notes? I need to make sure the narrative corroborates my hypothesis. Some of today’s interview was…”

“Useless?” he guessed astutely.

“She was very cooperative, Sam,” Sarah said, shouldering her bag and looking around to make sure she’d left everything she’d promised.

He scoffed. “No she wasn’t.” He ushered her out and accompanied her down the stairs. “Or if she was, it was despite her turning brat, not because of it. I’ll get you another interview. She’ll take the next one seriously, I promise you.”

“Sam,” said Sarah, stopping him with a hand on his arm. “She really did help me a great deal. Hearing it in layers that way may have been the best way through where I was stuck. There are just so many layers. I’ve been picturing a Lupin’s psyche as tri-part, each a separate segment, and each mostly independent of the others. Jess’ psyche unfolds in layers like an onion, and I’m not sure she has a lot of control over how she accesses the deepest ones. I think that speaks to the hypothesis in and of itself. Please don’t be too hard on her. She helped me a great deal.”

Sam sighed. His height was a little bit of an encumbrance, but he managed to lower his face a little. “We agreed that you would observe, Sarah. Observe, and not interfere. Right?”

“It felt to me like she wanted to be helpful, but something inside her was throwing up barriers. Is it fair to punish her for that?” Sarah adjusted her bag. Sam opened the front door and walked with her toward her car.

“It is. But I’m not going to explain it to you again. You need to do some thinking. You’ll get your recorder and your notes back tomorrow. Expect Castiel to want to talk them over with you.”

She nodded. “Thanks Sam. Thank you for your hospitality. Dinner was delicious, and I enjoyed seeing all of you at home in your own space. It was enlightening. I’m sorry to have been the cause of…” she gestured lamely toward his backside.

Sam clucked his tongue. “You’re not responsible for our mistakes, Sarah.” It was a reminder and another piece of the puzzle for her to think on.

She let him hold the door for her, and he tapped the roof with his knuckles before heading back into the house with an uncomfortable limp.”

“Wrap it up in fifteen minutes, folks,” Sam told the Omegas, peeking into the Game room on his way to bed. “The van leaves for the airport at 4:30, and you,” he indicated Michael, sitting backward on the piano bench. “…haven’t packed yet.”
“Sam!” said April cheerfully. “Can I talk you into doing a song at the wedding? I have the perfect one picked out…”

“Not a chance,” he laughed. “I don’t sing.” He abandoned the doorway and came in to accept the tight hug she offered, still chuckling. “I’m going to miss you in Charlotte,” he told her.

“I’ve got important work to do,” she reminded him. “Matt’s going to talk Cas into letting me perform in public tomorrow night. It’s ‘Diva’ night at the Duck Pond.”

“Diva night,” Sam repeated skeptically. “I thought they wanted you in serious venues. Isn’t that a Drag bar?”

“Don’t be judgmental. Performing with divas can teach me a lot about stage presence. Besides, only about half of the performers are men. It’s not about drag. It’s about being fabulous! I’ll fit right in. It’s a good place to start where the audience expects a mostly female song repertoire, and they like a lot of over-the-top flair.”

Sam shook his head and sighed, catching Michael’s eye. “If you say so.”

“Besides, they want me to fly under the radar for a while, and what better place than somewhere that most of the performers are hidden beneath layers of makeup and costuming.”

Sam frowned at her. “Kiddo, I know you didn’t mean it that way, but you need to watch what you say. Drag queens aren’t ‘hidden’. Promise me you’ll be respectful of the men you meet there. For many of them, dressing in drag and performing on stage is more authentic than when they wear slacks. Often, it’s the least hidden version of themselves. I need to know you’ll be careful.”

“No, I get it. I’ll be good,” she promised. “Performers are performers. I’m there to learn, not to judge people. You’re the one who suggested it’s not a serious venue. Who’s being dismissive?”

He swatted her ass lightly. “Fine. You win. Go be a diva. I want at least one song recorded. Send it to me as soon as you can.”

“I will,” she beamed.

“Michael? You good?” Sam asked, heading back out.

“Hmm? Yeah. I’m peachy.”

“One more run-through, Michael,” April commanded, taking her spot beside him again. “It’s really sounding good. Put your heart in it.” And she swept the intro back up again. Sam didn’t stay to hear it.

“You’ll need a full gospel choir back-up when you record this,” Michael mentioned offhand, just before she began to sing, and her ears went bright pink at the notion that Michael expected her to record it.

Watching the praise light her up, more than anything in the whole world, Michael wanted to straddle her hips on the piano bench the way Castiel so often did. He wanted to taste the pinkness of her inhibitions for himself as she shed them. He wanted to feel the muscles in her torso moving her arms, her hands, her fingers, as she turned piano keys into magic. He wanted to press his lips against the back of her neck – long and elegant – when she bared it in a sophisticated upswept hairdo.

He wanted.
God, he wanted.
But he waited.
And he sang.
Anything…
…for her.

Cas knew Dean was pissed off before he ever opened the door. Their double-Claim vibrated with impatience. Cas took a couple of deep breaths. Jumped lightly on the balls of his feet twice, thrice. He blew out through his lips.

He stillled.

The door slammed behind him, encouraged by an extra push from the Alpha whose eyes were hard when they found Dean’s.

Oh, yeah. Dean was pissed.

Good.

Dean’s green eyes glowed with fire. He was nude, centered in his safe space, kneeling perfectly.

Not perfectly.

Dean’s palms were supposed to be flat on his thighs, but they were both clenched into fists. His shoulders were supposed to be relaxed. They weren’t relaxed.

“Is that so?” asked the Alpha, not willing to take the provocation further until Dean was out of his blue square, but it was enough. Dean’s nostrils flared.

He was beautiful.

“*I see.*”

Cas paced a wide circle around him, assessing from every side. It was a brutal tease, but it was also a necessary evaluation. Dean’s whole body was tense. Left in here alone for nearly two hours, Dean had abandoned his training and turned to fuming silently. That was not like him. Cas noted the flex in the balls of his Sub’s feet. His feet were straining, but the color was still good. His backside, recently paddled but not heavily taxed, was barely pinker than it would have been on its own. Cas could see a portion of the cane stripes he had left last night. Those would need to be considered today. His plug was still in place, the base flat against his rim, securely held and comfortable.

They couldn’t push any limits tonight. There wasn’t time. Dean needed a good night’s sleep, and he needed a relatively whole body at the end of their play. Short and powerful, but not damaging.

Cas squatted behind Dean, still not talking to him. He lowered down onto a knee and bent down low. He looked at the swelling that remained in his testicles. They were almost back to normal. A
dark stripe defined each along its outer edge where the clothespins had been.

That had probably been a step too far without any prior discussion, but Dean had borne it beautifully, and Cas had followed Dean’s lead. It hadn’t been a flight really, not a fun one, but Dean had tells when he was on the track he needed, and even into a dark tunnel like last night, Dean’s body was the guide. Cas took a deep breath and stood back up.

He rounded back around and backed up several steps, watching Dean watch him. Castiel absorbed the anger, letting it feed his own needs. Castiel found himself deeply in need this night. He felt powerfully masculine, unequivocally male, and he wanted strength, hardness, the unique version of force that he could only get from a man, could only give to a man. It was in the scents of masculine musk and the rigid planes of flat, hard muscle; he wanted to grunt against those planes and force them to give way to him.

Castiel’s blue eyes held Dean’s green ones. He let no softness through. He stripped slowly, never breaking their gaze. He could nearly see all the words Dean wanted to say cascading through the Sub’s head.

So, it was like that, was it?

Good.

Castiel gestured with his left hand, and Dean’s face twitched with dislike. He wanted something much different. But he moved anyway. And that was the whole point tonight.

Dean slowly flattened himself onto his belly, abandoning his square and slithering forward like a snake toward his Dom. His nostrils were still flaring, but his body was breathtaking. Those shoulders, feline as he crawled, flat to the floor, his buttocks moving of a piece with his lean thighs, his rounded calves, the flex of his feet. It was amazing. Castiel considered backing up a few yards. He could watch the sculpture that was Dean’s body forever.

Dean met him in the center of the room, square atop the softened surface that could be raised as a platform but for now was flush to the floor. A new signal from Alpha’s hand put Dean to work, laving his feet with his lips and his tongue. Dean’s hands took hold of Castiel’s legs while he worshiped the man’s feet with his tongue. He could do this for hours. It wasn’t his favorite, but he was good at it. Each foot received its share of adoration.

The slow body worship, intense but methodical when done correctly, would calm the Sub and light a smolder beneath the skin of the Dom. Dean settled, splayed out on his belly, covering Castiel’s feet in wide, warm strokes up his feet from his flattened tongue, one hand around each of his heels, pulling in counterpoint. Then he worked his tongue between each toe, flicking it expertly to tease up against the balls of Castiel’s feet.

It was delicious. Dean managed to put his whole body into the work of his mouth, flexing his feet, his ass, bringing the play of muscles in his back into a meditation of intentional movement. Castiel swallowed.

“I won’t have it, Dean,” he said in a hard voice, and Dean winced, but the tension in his shoulders didn’t ease. Castiel let him stew a bit in silence.

“I can wait all night, if I must,” he reminded the man at his feet. He heard Dean huff angrily through his nose without pausing his attentions, now working their way up Castiel’s bony ankles. Cas stepped his feet wider to give him room, mindful of Dean’s hands and arms.
“We’re not moving on as long as you’re in disobedience,” he stated, setting the parameters. “If you make it all the way to the top of my head, and you’re still throwing a tantrum, we’ll simply start over again at my feet.”

Dean’s shoulders trembled, tightening a bit before settling back as they were. He didn’t speak, but his teeth grazed Cas’ shin lightly, followed closely enough by his tongue that it could have been a mistake.

It wasn’t a mistake.

“Stop that,” the Alpha told him, rigidly. “Do it right, or it ends right here. Don’t test me tonight, Dean.”

The Sub would have noticed the lack of his pet name by now, and Castiel was itching to move on. He heard a series of hoarse breaths from his Sub, and he felt hot moist breath around the turn of his foot. Dean was trying, he could feel it. He was angry at being made to wait so long, and he’d whirled up into a tantrum inside himself, and he wanted to explode in rage, but he was trying to bring it back down.

God, he was magnificent.

Dean panted and rested his forehead on the flat of Castiel’s left foot. Every muscle in his body was in subtle motion, and no marble facsimile by the likes of Michelangelo could ever do it justice.

He whined.

His grip tightened around the back of Cas’ ankle, and he leveraged himself up to his elbows, committing his tongue and his lips and his eyes back to the painstakingly slow progression up his Dom’s body. His toes curled under and pushed against the floor to jostle his flattened body forward.

Upward motion had to progress along the line of Castiel’s body, in a slow climb like a cobra. He couldn’t get up onto his knees until the strength of his back and his core proved insufficient to hold him. His knees widened against the floor to help stabilize him, and even more muscles engaged. Castiel, looking downward at his charge, watched himself respond physically. He hardened, and as he watched, a stringy drop of precome fell into Dean’s hair.

Castiel heard his own breath, shallow and fast. Dean wasn’t the only one panting.

The Sub was at mid-shin now, and he came to a halt with his face nestled between Castiel’s shins, whining softly. His toes twitched.

“No, Dean,” Cas told him. “You don’t make demands. You know that.”

The Claim-bonds rankled.

Castiel knew what Dean wanted, and Cas wanted that too. But the submission had to come first, and they weren’t there yet. An impact punishment for greeting his Dom in temper would be no punishment, not when it’s all Dean really wanted. This slowdown was harder – a true struggle and finishing it without losing his temper again would be a victory for Dean’s self-control. Dean’s fingernails dug into the backs of Castiel’s calves. The Alpha could wait as long as it took provided Dean didn’t out and out explode on him or refuse to comply.

Castiel waited. Dean breathed, huffing. From this moment it could go either way. The Alpha steeled himself to walk away if Dean forced his hand.
“Trust me, Pet,” Cas commanded. He knew Dean would hear the multitude of messages buried in those three words. He’d called Dean ‘Pet’ again, and that would give him hope. He’d also reminded Dean that a visible spark of rage right now was a promised end to the play, full stop. ‘Trust me’ to see you through this, but also, ‘Trust me’ to end it on the spot if necessary.

Dean’s tongued traced a thin line across Castiel’s shin, all the way around to his calf.

“Good boy,” he whispered.

Back at it, the Sub proceeded slowly upward, slipping into a meditative trance, beginning very slowly to slough off the tension and the frustration of having been left stewing in his juices long past when his anticipation had peaked into disappointment. His breathing evened out. His eyes slipped closed. His hands began to knead Castiel’s calves as they slipped ever upward.

He spent a long time on Cas’ knees, pulling his own knees under him and bowing his back to press the line of his body to curve against his Dominant’s shins. He reached one hand upward to Castiel’s ass, gripping like a mountain climber and bracing himself as he worked his tongue over Cas’ thighs – both of them. He flowed upward, a backward stream flowing upward against the Alpha’s height, as if gravity repelled him rather than pulled, and he worshipped every inch that he could touch with his tongue and his hands. He left the hardened cock alone, passing around it and bowing his body to avoid touching it.

Up to the jut of hipbones, over the ticklish flat of the runner’s belly, a tracing of the fine line of dark hair that ran from his groin upward, a dip with pointed tongue into his navel.

Castiel’s breath was coming ragged now, and he closed his eyes, feeling Dean’s hands around the bones of his hips. Up high on his knees, Dean stretched higher, straining his neck, ignoring the insistent press of Castiel’s rock-hard length against his throat. Dean’s arms came around Castiel’s waist, and he clung on, pressing his cheek into Cas’ belly, touching closely along the length of him, from his knees all the way up, clinging to him as if a moment’s weakness would leave him flailing for purchase as he fell into darkness.

“There you are,” said Castiel, gripping his chin lightly and turning his head to look upward. “Better?”

Dean’s green eyes looked lost, mournful.

Not better.

No longer angry, but not better.

Cas found his fingers in Dean’s hair, scratching, soothing. Dean had wrangled himself into a torturous submission, and now he was hurting. That wouldn’t do at all.

Cas sank down onto his knees – slowly, so as not to unbalance his partner. He touched Dean’s cheek. Dean’s eyes drifted closed, and Cas hissed softly to correct him. They opened again, a little stronger, a little less distraught. “I’ve got you, Pet. Trust me.”

Dean nodded, holding his lower lip lightly in his teeth. Cas smiled patiently and removed it.

How many times had he done that over the years? How many more were yet to come?

“Come with me,” he said simply, feeling the prickly tickle of the hairs on his legs pulling free of the drying spittle that had plastered them against his skin. It was a little bit itchy, but he ignored it. Dean gave him his hand and let him pull him to his feet.
“First thing’s first,” the Dom said. “Let’s get you ready. Lay out on the bench for me.” Cas pointed without looking. “That one.” He left Dean to get himself situated as he perused the cabinet full of options. Cas hadn’t really put any planning into this evening. The clench in his gut demanded power and pain and fierce reckoning, and he knew he could deliver that for them both without a script. Accounting for Dean’s state of mind meant he needed to take his time, but it didn’t deter him from his purpose. If anything, Dean’s tantrum fueled him, even now that the Sub was levered back down where he belonged.

Castiel wanted him hurting. Lord help him, it’s what he wanted.

He selected a sturdy paddle – drilled through with multiple holes and an extra-long handle – and a leather flogger, grabbed a partial bottle of slick, and he sauntered back across the room where Dean was waiting for him, watching him. Cas made sure his face was blank. That may have been the most difficult part, as his wolf was practically dancing on his leash. Cas maneuvered the silicone plug out of Dean’s ass, setting it upright on the floor beneath the bench. His movements were deliberate. Dean was already tensing again, but this time, in anticipation, not anger. His flesh twitched beneath his skin.

Cas had his prize racehorse back.

So beautiful.

So powerful.

So delicate.

He set his chosen implements on the side cabinet within reach.

“So, tell me, Pet,” he said conversationally as he slicked up three fingers and sank them all the way into Dean’s hot body as far as they would reach. The Sub clenched down on them. His breath caught. Cas found his prostate easily and swiped across it a few times to make sure he had Dean’s attention.

“When you spoiled my plans yesterday, did you already know what you were spoiling, or was it a good guess?” Cas attacked Dean’s prostate furiously, and every muscle spasmed at once. Dean panted and whimpered. His anal muscles tightened their grip around Cas’ fingers.

“Answer me.”

Dean huffed a few breaths, looking for his voice. “Good…good guess, mostly.”

“ Mostly? Be precise, please, Submissive.”

Dean’s fingers whitened on their grip bar. He pressed his ass backward into Castiel’s fingers. Cas stopped moving. “If you do that again, I’ll put you in a cage for the night,” he promised darkly. Dean blew his breath out and relaxed intentionally. His nipples prickled against the bench. Endorphins were beginning to light him up from the inside. He could feel everything. He’d begun to sweat.

“I knew you had plans,” he admitted. “But I didn’t know for sure what they were until you mentioned how Michael’s gangbang scene conflicted with our foursome. That’s when I figured it all out.”

Castiel removed his fingers and he slapped Dean’s right thigh hard several times. “That’s for deliberately interfering in my plans. You know I despise when you do that, Pet. It’s disrespectful.”
“Yes, Sir,” Dean responded politely, flipping his head to keep the Dom in his sights as Cas walked around behind him.

“And you continued to try to corner me by setting us a moratorium that we don’t need. Be honest, Pet. Does that request have anything whatsoever to do with a desire to let our appetites build to a crescendo at our wedding? Anything?”

“Yes, Sir!” Dean told him emphatically.

Cas spanked his left thigh, harder and longer than he’d done to the right. The slaps echoed magnificently. Dean’s ass clenched tightly in response, and he ducked his head.

“Try again,” said the Dominant coldly.

“Yes, SIR! It does! I wanna build up to it with you! What if I get stage fright and can’t perform like I want? What if I’m too satisfied from before, and I freak out?”

Castiel breathed himself back to the ground. “That’s not a concern of yours, Pet. You’re not required to perform at all. You need only Submit. Do you worry that you won’t be capable of turning your will over to my keeping if I keep you well fed before we marry?”

Dean whimpered into his elbow.

“Answer in words,” Cas corrected.

“No, Sir.”

“Then please explain. What’s the purpose of the moratorium?”

Dean huffed deeply and very nearly lost himself in hyperventilating. The full truth would get his ass lit up enough that sitting tomorrow’s panel on stage would be a nightmare.

“I’m not going away, Pet, and I’m not asking you again.”

“Just do it, Sir,” Dean huffed. “I deserve it.”

Cas stalked around to the side and crossed his arms over his chest furiously. “Tell me the truth!”

“Please, Sir! Use the whip if you want!”

“LOOK AT ME, DEAN!”

“Fuck,” Dean muttered, forcing his eyes to meet the Alpha’s. Castiel’s eyes had gone red. Dean had called up the Alpha, and he wasn’t getting out of anything.

“I wanted to piss you off,” he admitted.

“Obviously,” Cas responded, tapping his bare foot impatiently on the floor. “Mission accomplished. What else?”

Dean’s whole body deflated as he sighed. “And I wanted you so worked up at the wedding that you turned animal for the Claiming. Wanted you to put off your foursome plans until the honeymoon so Michael would focus just on me all the way through Thursday’s gang scene. He’s been distracted by April, and I miss the one-on-one attention.”

Cas pursed his lips. His eyes, already red, grew flinty. “We have rules for a reason, Dean Michael
Winchester! I’ve had to install TWO of them to address the manipulation that has shaken the very bedrock of this Pack! What’s it going to take to get you to TALK to me?!!

Dean sucked his lips under, rolling them in to cover his teeth, and he closed his eyes.

“Look! At! ME!”

“Sir, PLEASE!”

Castiel stilled himself and brought his tension mindfully back down. He watched Dean squirm.

“Who calls the shots, Pet?” he asked conversationally, and Dean whined pathetically.

“You do, Sir.”

“I don’t think so,” Cas told him, strolling around him and shaking his head sadly. “It rather seems that you believe YOU do. Is that correct?”

“No, Sir!”

“I’m not stupid, Dean. You wound me up very like a mechanical toy. Must I remind you that it’s an unpleasant experience to be played by one’s own Submissive?”

“I’m sorry, Sir!”

Cas chuckled darkly. “Don’t waste your breath on untruths, Pet. You’ll only dig yourself deeper.”

Dean buried his head in his arms again, and the two of them, in tandem, felt the moment ripen. Cas let the adrenalin course through his body. He wasted no time once he’d taken his stand. He lubed his cock unceremoniously, then positioned himself behind the Sub and sank into him.

Dean stiffened and gripped the bench. “Sir!” he shouted in surprise.

“Shut up!” Castiel told him rudely. “You’ve said enough!” Cas fucked him powerfully, up on his toes, and gripping bruises into his hips. This was precisely what he’d been craving: a release of epic levels of passion, hard and bruising enough to be worrisome had there been onlookers. He wanted to be angry. He wanted to unleash! And he put his back into it. The bench creaked and rocked dangerously.

Dean, for his part, went passive, bowed over the bench, ass up, head down, silent, holding on for all he was worth to keep himself from toppling over the end.

“Let GO!” commanded the Alpha. “Hands behind your back!”

Dean made a questioning noise, but one by one, he let go of the bars with his hands and got his arms moving enough to get his wrist into the grip of his fist. It was all on the Dom to keep him stable now, and Dean began floating at once. The onslaught continued, Dean’s body slipped a little in his sweat against the leather, but he didn’t fall. Cas was pissed, and he made sure Dean knew it. His knot began to bulge, and Dean could feel the girth of it swell painfully as it was pressed into his body again and again. Cas’ hand closed over Dean’s fist. He leaned down over Dean’s body and took the meat of his back in his teeth, right over his shoulder-blade. Dean’s instincts flared up in warning, but Dean’s wolf braced its paws and held its ground.

He breathed a long, shaky breath out while the rabid wolf at his back shook him out like a doll and fucked him stupid.
Dean came spectacularly, groaning low and guttural. Cas’ fist took hold of his hair and wrenched his head back. Spittle hit Dean on the cheek.

“Who’s in charge?! SAY IT!”

“You are! SIR!”

”SAY IT, DEAN!!”

“YOU ARE, SIR!!”

Cas exploded inside Dean, both hands going back to his hips to help him grind in tight without sinking his knot in where he so wanted to be.

So satisfying. All the sweat and the power and the planes of hard flesh. All the miles and miles of hot skin under his hands. Cas pulled out and took Dean by the hair again, wrenching him up to straddle the bench. Cas torqued him backward and buried his tongue down Dean’s throat. Dean’s hands broke apart, and he flailed a little, but Cas collected both wrists without looking and held them tightly before him in one hand.

Dean was in pain, sitting uncomfortably with his balls squashed where they didn’t belong, and still too sore to handle, but Cas didn’t give him a chance to adjust. He kissed Dean hard, angrily, furiously, clashing teeth and catching at lips, and Dean folded for him.

“Push me too hard, Pet, and you’ll regret it. Hear me?” He broke his lips away and breathed heavily into Dean face.

“Nnngh!”

“You’re not in charge, Dean.”

“Sir, I’m sorry.”

“You’re about to be,” Cas told him, still sweating heavily across his back. “Lay back down.”

Dean let Cas arrange him. The bench was slick with semen and lubricant, sweat, maybe a little bit of slobber. Dean didn’t think about it too hard. He felt Cas run light fingers along the cane stripes that crisscrossed his butt. There were four. Dean’s body shivered.

He floated. His hole clenched around nothing.

“Be still!”

Dean lost his breathing. His Dominant was still displeased, even after the completion of his climax washed through him. Now he was calmer, more in control, still angry.

Not good.

“Hands on the back of your head.”

Dean complied.

“Set your feet.”

The muscles in Dean’s thighs flexed and rolled, centering his weight and making sure each foot was grounded enough to hold him without the use of his hands.
“Tell me the truth, Dean, if I push you to your limits, will you stop me before I cross? …
Knowing you have an early call in the morning, a long flight, numerous panels tomorrow, a full seminar…can you keep an eye open for the lines before we cross them?”

“Not my call, Sir.”

Castiel let the words hang in the air. This was the side of him he showed only to Dean.

Cas tapped the flogger against his own thigh to thrum down his leg in a wave. He walked back around to the front of the bench and let Dean see his blank eyes, red-rimmed, but emotionless.

“Good,” he responded flatly. “That’s right. It isn’t.”

Dean let out a breath all at once. He’d been holding his breath after he answered that last question, and Cas had missed it.

Damnit. He couldn’t afford to miss something like that.

But it was relief that Dean was feeling as he released it all. Dean didn’t want to change things any more than Cas did.

Cas resumed his position. He rubbed the curve of Dean’s ass with his hand, adoring everything about the man. He considered saying so, but then decided to hold the thought until a riper moment. The flogger in his left hand, Cas held the handle up against Dean’s hip, a circumstance of not wanting to put it down while he warmed his target zone up, but the leather dangled down Dean’s leg this time, and it would be a supple reminder to the Sub of where they were heading.

Cas struck Dean with the palm of his hand. Not hard. Not yet. He enjoyed watching his hand move the muscle and the flesh – the curving layer of fat and connective tissue – every time he hit Dean. He liked watching how it was different from different angles, over different spots, at different power. Dean’s ass pinked rapidly. The mess that was their previous activities’ remainder smeared down the insides of Dean’s thighs. Sometimes Castiel’s hand splattered it out onto Dean’s cheeks.

He began to strike Dean harder, keeping an even pace. The flogger dug into Dean’s hip as Cas’ fingers clutched at him. It couldn’t be comfortable. Chill bumps broke out repeatedly over Dean’s back.

“Sir…!”

“I thought you were going to shut up for me, so I could work,” observed Castiel coldly.

“More, please. Harder?”

“Ah,” was all the Dom said.

He ignored the request, continuing his slow build. Dean’s cock was hardening again, and that would drive him crazy if Cas let it go unnoticed long enough. Oh, if only they had all night.

“Sir, please!”

Cas slammed the flogger back on the cabinet top and pulled Dean upright by his hair. He squawked in surprise, dragging painfully behind the tug on his head.

“Plan B, Pet. Your mouth is too free. Let me fix that for you.” He dragged Dean off the bench and all the way across the room.
“Knees!” He pointed to a spot on the floor. Dean knelt at once. His back reflected in a floor-to-ceiling mirror. Cas stared at him for a moment. Dean was out of breath, panting hard, staring into the depths of Castiel’s eyes, and he was utterly perfect.

“I love you,” said Castiel without thinking. Adoration flashed in his Sub’s eyes before he caught himself and tucked himself back under. The mask wouldn’t last.

Castiel scurried back to the bench to retrieve his implements. He cleaned himself quickly with a washcloth at the sink. He calmed himself, leaning onto his arms and breathing deeply. Then he returned to his Sub.

Standing before him, Cas schooled his face back to stern and unresponsive despite the liquid adoration that looked up at him. He shoved his cock unceremoniously into Dean’s mouth. Dean quickly pulled in his lips to cover his teeth, and Cas snarled at him, grasping his chin painfully.

“No, Pet. No barrier. Leave your teeth uncovered. Relax. Look at me.” Dean let his lips come back to their relaxed position, but he couldn’t hide the confusion in his eyes.

Cas studied Dean’s face. Their eyes danced in expectation. Dean trusted his Dominant implicitly. Was it not time to return that trust? How far did trust like that go?

“Will I be pleased if you hurt me?” Castiel asked rhetorically. Dean’s eyes flew wide. “Don’t answer that. Your job, Pet, is to concentrate. If you bite me, if you cause me any pain whatsoever, the consequences will be extremely unpleasant. Do you believe me?”

Dean nodded awkwardly.

“Good. Know then that when I say unpleasant, I do not mean this kind of unpleasant.” With his left hand, he lightly waved the handle of the flogger over Dean’s back so that the tails brushed his skin gently. Dean groaned, and chill bumps danced everywhere it touched.

With no warning, Cas used the paddle in his right hand to smack Dean’s ass from over his shoulder. With his mouth full, Dean was relegated to sucking in a deep breath through his nose. He stiffened and held on to Castiel’s thighs.

He didn’t bite down. He didn’t even graze the man with his teeth. Drool escaped his mouth, but both men ignored it. Cas wasn’t hard, but his length was still a significant weight inside Dean’s mouth.

Cas struck him again, his left hand once again stabilizing Dean with the handle of the flogger pressing into the flesh of his shoulder. The tails dribbled down over Dean’s chest to mercilessly tease his right nipple, and Dean bowed his back a little to make use of those little dangling strips of leather. His flesh had to be singing with sensation. Castiel watched his eyes, and he hit Dean’s ass again, harder.

What the Dom liked about this paddle in particular was its long handle. The mirror helped him aim with confidence, but the reach of the paddle sat perfectly aligned with the undercurve of Dean’s backside from this position. The flogger caught between them and pulled a bit, and Dean’s moan alerted Cas to the unintentional stimulation from the front. He let Dean have his play. It wouldn’t be enough, and that would become apparent over time. The straps flowed and gave way too easily to make them anything but a tease.

Dean’s nostrils flared wider, seeking air. Cas noted the color of his face just before flicking his eyes back to the mirror and striking him again.
Holes drilled in the paddle increased the sting and made for bright spots on his backside. Some of those would turn into bruises if Castiel wanted them to bruise.

He did.

He clenched his fingers into Dean’s shoulder, and he set up a vicious rhythm that was designed to make Dean fight to find his breath, far more painful than the simple training session under Michael’s paddle before dinner. Cas felt the graze of teeth when Dean swallowed, but it didn’t hurt, so he passed it. Dean’s eyes unfocused as his breath became a frantic pull and push through nostrils that couldn’t quite keep up.

Cas pulled him off by his hair and let Dean catch his breath. He couldn’t look away from Dean’s face. His cheeks were a vibrant pink, and his pupils were blown wide. He stared up at Castiel as at a god. Dean’s cock sat red and angry below his belly. Cas had wrenched a climax from his Sub many times by spanking alone, but usually those happened with Dean over his knees, and he usually had at least a trace of friction against Castiel’s thigh.

“Spread your knees wider, Pet,” he instructed, and Dean complied at once. “Get your feet clear of the paddle. I’m going to hurt you now. Here we go again. You may come if you like, but don’t touch yourself.” Dean surprised the Dom by releasing his thighs and grasping his wrist in his hand again, behind his back. His eyes stayed on Castiel’s. He licked his lips.

“Holy fuck, I love you so much,” whispered Castiel. Then he snarled with all the menace of his station and he thrust Dean back into place, his mouth taking in a fuller girth than it had. Cas hardened at the sight of Dean’s submission, at his trust, and although his teeth were there, Cas could feel them scrape just a touch, Dean didn’t hurt him.

It was a slightly different swing this time, with Dean’s elbow in his way, but he leaned over the kneeling man, a slight bend at the waist that gave him the reach he needed. He held onto Dean’s shoulder, and he watched the mirror as he swung the paddle. Dean began to groan a continuous note that warbled with the strikes to his ass. Cas twitched the fingers that held the flogger, and Dean whimpered when the movement travelled the length of it and rippled against his sensitive nipple.

Cas released a flurry of quick, hard pops, barely pulling back at all, building up the intensity of the sting in one spot until Dean was shaking in place, all of his concentration centered upon keeping his mouth open and still, even while his body became so over sensitized that he couldn’t think in words anymore. Cas could tell he was floating. It was a tone he knew well through the Claim he’d just renewed, and he slowly began to ramp the power back up with his paddle, pulling Dean higher, splitting him in two between his attention diverted toward not touching his Dom’s delicate flesh with his teeth and all the sensations in his body. It was hell, in its way, and it was glorious.

Dean’s fist tightened around his wrist. Cas saw it in the mirror, and he responded with a flurry of fast pops, each to the center of Dean’s ass, where his internal nerves could take the blow and vibrate from it just right.

Dean dropped his jaw as wide as he could, the last intentional motion he managed before his balls pulled up tight, and he came in spurts between Castiel’s legs.

Cas tossed the paddle onto the floor and pulled out of Dean’s mouth. He sank down onto his knees in the mess and kissed Dean hard, smearing the drool on his chin and nearly weeping in joy. Dean was lax, kissing back lazily.

Cas kissed his fill, whispering love between breaths, and then he let Dean clumsily urge him back to his feet, so the Sub could finish him off. Cas went willingly. Dean pulled out all the stops, wrapping
his lips around Cas and using his expert tongue to coax him along. Cas whipped him gently with the flogger, along his back, down into his lap, over his heated ass. It didn’t hurt at all. The tails were a warm, expressive extension of Castiel’s touch, and everywhere they reached was a caress. Dean hummed tunelessly after swallowing as much of his Dom’s length as he could, and he worked the muscles of his throat again and again against Cas’ head, swallowing over and over in a massage before pulling off for a breath.

His hands stroked rapidly, and Dean almost choked when the Alpha came, caught unprepared for another swallow just as the gush of fluid reached his throat. Sputtering indignantly, Dean pulled back enough to catch the rest in his mouth, swallowing most of it.

Cas was on the floor beside him in a heartbeat, cradling him, caressing him, running the warm leather tails of the flogger over him until Dean giggled at the tickle. They kissed deeply, sharing the taste in Dean’s mouth. Cas couldn’t get enough of it. He delved deeper and deeper with his tongue until he risked choking Dean. The Alpha’s hand at the back of Dean’s head pulled him in. Cas couldn’t get close enough, couldn’t bring Dean all the way into him the way he wanted. He whined, pulling Dean up into his lap and holding onto him with one hand splayed across Dean’s flaming red ass and the other at the back of his head. It wasn’t enough.

Dean, for his part, seemed to be feeling the same. He wrapped both legs around Castiel’s waist and curled them tightly to draw their groins close. He, too, had a hand locked in his love’s hair, and he had his mouth open as wide as he could get it to make a space for Castiel to join him in a single space.

They didn’t keep track of how long or how frenzied they kissed. They didn’t talk about it. Eventually, they slowed, laying out side by side, the sleepiness of a spent member lulling them both into dozing, each of them caressing lightly as they fell into and out of sleep.

At length, it was Castiel who stirred. “Jesus, that was good,” he muttered quietly. He sat up slowly, uncomfortable in the sticky mess. “Dean, baby, are you awake?”

“Nuh-unh,” Dean responded, flinging an arm over his eyes. “Fucked into oblivion,” he added, rolling over and seeking Cas’ warmth with his body.

“Come on, you lightweight.” Cas swatted his butt with his hand, and Dean flinched, rolling back the other way without opening his eyes. “We need to get cleaned up.”

“Carry me,” whined Dean pathetically.

“Not a chance, Winchester,” said Cas, laughing. Dean couldn’t keep a straight face. He let Cas pull him up and look him over. Dean watched in the mirror.

“Good?” Dean asked once Cas seemed to come to a conclusion.

“You’re going to be very sore tomorrow. These are going to bruise,” he explained, running a careful hand over the worst of it.

“Am I going to live?” Dean asked him, turning and examining himself in the mirror.

“You’ll live,” Cas told him. He started up the shower and then collected the items he’d scattered everywhere. “Almost out of lube in here,” he observed, tucking the bottle back in its drawer.

“Michael’s on it, I bet,” Dean mentioned, still checking out his spotty backside.

“Hey,” called Castiel in a soft voice. “Come here a minute.”
Dean looked up. Cas was standing near the shower. He had an odd look on his face. Dean padded over to him lightly and wrapped his arms around the man, saying, “If you’re about to break up with me, this is not the way to do it.”

Cas chuckled. “This is definitely the way to do it,” he disagreed, but he walked Dean backward into the shower.

“You’re thinking much too hard, my love,” Dean told him, allowing himself to be washed. “We’re good, right?”

“Yes, Dean. We’re good. I’m not breaking up with you.” Cas used that deadpan voice that never failed to make Dean grin like an idiot. “Pack your brat away for a minute though and talk to me.”

“Oh.”

Cas couldn’t not grin back at Dean’s crestfallen face. “God, you’re such a brat, Winchester.”

“You love me.”

“I do. Duck your head under and rinse.”

Dean rinsed off and then traded positions, following Cas’ gesture to go ahead and dry off. The Alpha soaped himself and talked over the flow with his eyes squeezed tightly shut. “You said some things tonight, Dean. I need to know how much of that needs my attention. You know I’ll give you anything you want, right?” He ducked under the water himself and rinsed, emerging after wiping his face with wet hands to find Dean holding his towel out for him.

“Can you give me Jo, unmated and living in our basement, happy to be my celibate best friend forever?”

Cas gave him a reproving look, and Dean shrugged. Castiel took the towel and dried himself efficiently. He didn’t miss the catch in Dean’s gait as he collected bathrobes.

“Jesus, man, you made a mess!” Dean deflected, looking around.

“I beg to differ,” Castiel told him from beneath that brow. “And don’t change the subject.”

“What? About why I torqued you before we got here?” Dean slipped his robe on and then began to collect Cas’ clothes from the floor, looking each item over before deciding the whole lot needed cleaning and dumping it all in the hamper with his towel.

“Are you really worried about your public performance at the wedding?”

“No, babe. That was just to turn up the volume here. I’m fine. I promise.”

Cas studied him.

“Is Michael really neglecting you?”

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Dean protested, rounding on the man. “You’re not using me to stymie those two. You know that was a part of the scene, too.”

“Do I?” posed Cas. “Something got you thinking that a postponement of our foursome was in the cards. I know a lot of the timing has to do with how you were hoping to tweak the tone for tonight, but Dean, level with me. You put two major cards on the table, and I need to be sure I understand what’s real and what was play.”
“It was all play, Cas. You oughtta know my moves by now.” Dean made for the door, but Cas got an arm across the doorway ahead of him.

“Oh, so then, you don’t want a weeklong moratorium on sex between us?” Cas’ face was so wide open, Dean knew he couldn’t be asking that question in innocence.

“I wanted two weeks, actually. And thanks for reminding me of that right on the heels of ‘I’ll give you anything’.”

Cas chewed on that, cocking his head in thought. “If you want two weeks, I’ll give you two weeks. Is a ramp up more important than our mates are?”

“That’s low, Alpha.” Dean swatted his arm away, and Cas chuckled. Dean opened the door and held it for his fiancé. “You’re a train wreck where those two are concerned anyway. You’ve got Michael jumping at shadows. What’s with throwing him into the middle of getting your swipes in on your mate yesterday, anyway? You’re gonna confuse the fuck out of him.”

“No, I’m not. He understands. We’ve discussed the boundary lines, and he’s been advised that if he keeps between those lines, he can expect to enjoy more contact where he wants it. And you changed the subject again. I had been planning to roll out and orchestrate the full foursome in all its glory next Friday. Dean, you had to know all about that when you scheduled your scene with Michael.” Castiel led the way up the stairs and toward the kitchen. “And that’s fine. If that’s the best time to do it, I’m so very there, you’ll be seeing three of me…”

Dean snickered at the image.

“…But you were up to something. You told me it was a done deal on the schedule, but Michael said it was still tentative.”

“Jesus Christ! The two of you!” Dean stopped in the kitchen archway.

Cas flipped on the light and turned to look at him. “Which is it?”

“It’s scheduled, Cas. We’re go for Thursday right after work. Got our room reserved and everything.”

Castiel stared at him, obviously confused. Dean hobbled past him, headed for the fridge. “I’m not required to explain it all to you, Alpha,” he asserted cheerfully. “Nothing in Rule 7 says we have to fill in all the holes for you.”

“Then I’ll refer you back to Rule Five and remind you that manipulation and lies are already forbidden.” Cas watched Dean reject everything the refrigerator had to offer.

“Ah, but you have to prove it before you can come after me,” said Dean, deciding on a beer instead. Cas narrowed his eyes, but he didn’t challenge the proclamation with a reminder that Rule One demanded obedience. They could go in circles all night. Having Dean in his kitchen, comfortable in the space, well-spanked, well-fucked, and playing sparring games…it was all Cas had ever wanted. Dean looked up after popping the top from his bottle, expecting to have to parry again, and he was caught off-guard by the sappy look on his fiancé’s face.

“What?” he asked, taking a swig.

Cas took the beer and drank a hefty dose. Dean snatched it back, but Cas didn’t let go. He used his grip on the bottle to pull Dean in and nuzzle into the space behind his ear.
“You know what?” Dean asked.

“What?”

“We’re getting married.”

“Yep,” answered Castiel.

“You ready?”

“I’ve been ready to marry you since the first day I saw you on the lawn outside the Engineering Building.” He followed that up with a nibble along Dean’s throat.

“You say the damndest things, C.J.”

“It’s simple truth,” Cas told him, walking him backward toward the kitchen table. “Drink that, or you’re going to spill it when I fuck you.”

“Wanna bet?” sassed Dean.

Cas spun him and bent him over the redwood table. Dean saved the bottle, bracing himself on his elbows and getting a good gulp down before the bottom of his light robe fell over his head, tangling him in darkness. He struggled free and spread his legs. He settled comfortably on his elbows. Drinking wasn’t as easy as he’d boasted, but Cas’ ruthless frotting against the crack of his ass jostled him a lot. Cas used the friction to harden himself enough to press into Dean’s sore hole. He went slowly, testing that there was enough fluid left inside to work into a good coating of lube – in a little, out a little, in a little more, out nearly all the way, in almost to the root, hold for a breath, tremble a bit, out again.

Dean made a show of keeping his bottle in motion, but it was only a show. Cas had the angle in this position to grind himself against Dean’s prostate, and he knew precisely where it was.

“Give me one more tonight, baby,” Cas cajoled. His meaty hand encircled Dean’s dick, bare now that his robe was thrown up over his back. The Alpha moved his hand in time with his thrusts, slowly and sensuously. He was in no hurry. Dean shoved the bottle down the table until it was clear, and then he circled his arms beneath his head and buried his face.

“Marry me, Dean Michael Winchester,” proposed Castiel as he moved his hips and his grip. “Marry me, and you can come,” he babbled.

“That’s a dirty fuckin’ trick, Alpha. I’ll do anything for a great orgasm.”

“I know,” laughed Cas. He admired everything he could see and feel, knowing that the experience for Dean was more than a little painful, knowing that Dean wouldn’t have it any other way.

“You’re incredible, Dean.”

Dean grunted. “You’re just flattering me, so I’ll say yes.”

“Is that a yes?”

“No, it’s not a yes, C.J.! Did it sound like a yes? Oh, fuck, yeah, right there. Just like that. Oh, GOD!”

Cas applied himself, right where Dean melted under the strain. “Better answer me quick, or it’ll be too late.” He kissed Dean over the soft fabric of his robe, between his shoulder blades.
“Ah, c’mon, Mom” Dean whined as if sleepy and begging for extra time. “Five more minutes.”

Cas bit him, and Dean yowled, turning away in surprise, then laughing.

Cas shook his head to get the corner of Dean’s robe out of his face. “Every time I spank you, I worry that I’ve gone too far,” He told Dean sternly, righting him with a hand at his hip, and continuing his ministrations. “And not fifteen minutes later, you always prove I didn’t go far enough!”

“That feels amazing, man,” Dean told him truthfully, hiding his face in his arms again. "It hurts in the most incredible way."

“You like it slow?” Cas asked him seductively.

“Mmm…”

Cas let Dean dribble sticky white spurts over his hand, and then he held Dean by the hips and pounded into him, shaking the sturdy table. The bottle wobbled precariously.

“G’night, boys!” Kali excused herself with her glass of juice.

“Ni..igh..ght, Kal…i!” Dean pulsed.

Cas came with a soft moan, pressing his hips forward and holding them close, pressing everything but his knot into this man he adored so much. He breathed into Dean’s ear for a minute. “Grab your beer. I’m sitting down, and I’m taking you with me.”

Dean scrambled for the bottle as Cas pulled a chair around with his foot and sank down onto it, pulling Dean by the hips to keep him connected. They shared the remainder of Dean’s beer there in the chair. Cas’ cock slipped free, and Dean made a face at the sensation of fluids dripping free and running down under his thighs into Castiel’s lap.

Cas ignored it. He kissed Dean, a hand holding his chin, his eyes serious.
“I love you,” he told Dean. He let Dean escape the intensity and curl beneath his chin. “I wish you Godspeed tomorrow. I expect great things from you on your journey, and I’ll be waiting for you when you come home.” He kissed the side of Dean’s face, and then whispered, “Come home to me, Pet.”

“I will, Alpha,” Dean promised. “Always.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the continued support.

I have a song chosen for April's duet with Michael, but it's not time to post it.

If you missed my late addition of April's show tune from the previous chapter, there's a link at the top of that page. It's another example of April writing more than a little autobiographically from her darker side, and it's meant to be performed in the show by the witch protege and her witch mentor, so it's a little on the nose, but doesn't that song NEED to be a show tune?

FUCK! I have to go back to work tomorrow! ;o) Love you guys! Lots!
Chapter 101

Chapter Summary

Sarah hears an alternate offer. Naomi moves into her new home. Jack and Ketch say goodbye to their old lives. Dean and Cas spend some time with their mates. April debuts as a diva. Oh, and Cas forgot all about condoms as a thing. **Good job, Alpha.**

Chapter Notes

I didn't get it up in time for Christmas, but whatever. I hope those of you who celebrate bringing some light in at the darkest time of the year found something to celebrate this season. It's pretty dark out there right now. But the solstice has passed, and the sun will return, as it always does.

Happy New Year to the Pack!

A big thank you to all of you who sat in the darkness with me this last round. You help more than you can possibly know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rowena McLeod
beta-Neutral [A/B/D: 0], [D/N/s: 3], [Z-Scale: 37], no Pack affiliation
cis-Female, Pansexual, b. 1967
unMated
Wolf Avatar: Tundra Wolf, mythical/fantasy achromatic - full

Chapter 101 – Saturday, August 19, 2017

THEN:
“What about a badger? Do you think I could identify as something like that? You said it doesn’t have to be a wolf.”

“Mr. Winchester, focus, if you please.” His instructor paced past his desk, following a strict pattern through the smattering of low classroom tables. He rapped his knuckles sharply atop the pile of photos and drawings that the others at Dean’s table were still pawing through slowly. “No badgers. No skunks. No sea lions. We are Canids, young man. You will never connect with your wolf if you cannot properly envision him, and he will NOT be a wolverine or a beaver!”

“Maybe you’re a golden retriever,” suggested Linus to Dean rudely.

“You’re an effing golden retriever,” Dean mumbled back quietly. Dean had about had it with this class. Once a month the Lupin students had a three hour session away from the population of Primates, predicated on providing them some better insight into learning to live in a society that didn’t particularly want them in the first place. He’d been looking so forward to today’s exercises, a chance to try to find resonance with a particular image, but everything he tried fell flat, and he was flatly discouraged.

And he’d already been working on it at home, under the supportive eye of his mother, who seemed to know which images to pass across to him and which to discard. It rankled that she tucked all the beefy, angry-looking power beasts back into her folder without a second thought and only offered him the skinny docile-looking mutts. Surely here at school, with a guide who knew how to read a successful resonance, he would find what he’d been looking for.

He would be powerful, with gaping maw and dripping nostrils. There would be a flame of intensity in his eye. There would be muscle in his shoulders and his legs.

But there was nothing – not a twinge of recognition from any of those images – and Dr. Suisse just pointed him on, reminding him that not everyone was a wolf at all. There were even Dingoes among the pictures. And then Dean remembered an argument with Sam from breakfast. Caniformes, it seemed, encompassed all kinds of predatory mammals, categorized by the shape of their jaw and the formation of their teeth and claws. And by their diet: Carnivores with powerful canines to devour meat ripped unceremoniously off the bone, Caniformes took so many forms that Dean’s head spun at the possibility. Maybe the photos were too limiting.

His Wolverine comics notwithstanding, the pup could easily imagine himself unique in his community. It wouldn’t even matter if he Presented Omega if his avatar was a grizzly bear. The image stuck in his head, and for a moment he thought he’d hit upon something. “What about a bear?” he asked, looking hopefully upward toward his instructor as he made another slow pass.

“Eyes on your table, Mr. Winchester,” came the stern correction, and Dean deflated. “Bears are not Canine. They are Ursine. You are not a bear.”

Dean sighed. Nothing on the table was working for him. Another few minutes and they would all shift again to begin digging through a new pile at another table, but Dean wasn’t excited any longer. So many wolves lay before him, and none of them did anything at all for him, even the vicious, teeth-bearing wretches. Nothing.

Jo had hers – an almond-eyed beauty with a sleek coat that shifted in the light, merled between grey and light brown. She was all wolf, and she was breathtaking. Dr. Suisse confirmed the resonance with a look deep into Jo’s eyes and a whiff of scent at her throat. Jo sat rapt by the image, sitting off to the side with a handful of others who had already found a picture close enough to draw their own wolves out into the light. Jo was gazing at her photo in complete adoration, entranced to the point that she didn’t even notice her best friend flailing.
This lesson was supposed to be fun. Everyone said it would be fun. But Dean wasn’t having fun. He slumped sloppily in his chair, shuffling idly through the remaining pictures with his head propped up in his hand, mindfully avoiding the domesticated dogs. There was a cocker spaniel on that side of the pile for fuck’s sake. What self-respecting Lupin could ever find resonance with a spaniel? How could he show his face in class ever again if…?

Wait.

That one? It was a wolf. A grey one. Hold on.

Dean glanced to either side of himself as he surreptitiously slid one photo out of the mass and pulled it down into his lap to inspect it more closely.

He felt an odd sensation in his groin, and he tightened up almost unconsciously like trying to hold it when he really needed to pee. He felt a little bit dizzy, and he lowered his head, careful not to breathe too loudly. He didn’t want to attract the attention of his tablemates. He bit his lower lip.

It was a wolf, and Dean went lightheaded with relief. All thoughts of walruses and pandas fled as he absorbed the image. No, it wasn’t a full-blooded wolf. It had an odd stripe of white running down between its ears, down the length of its muzzle. That was no wolf marking. There was more than a little dog in this wolf. But Dean couldn’t deny the sensation of familiarity that sent his blood quickening and wetted his mouth with saliva.

Cautiously, he sent a thought into the back of his mind. “Hey, buddy? You with me back there?”

Nothing.

Or…well…wait…a spindly little tremor answered him back. Dean gasped quietly to himself. He focused back down at the image. It was incomplete. He needed the rest of it.

A hand fell firmly onto his shoulder from behind, and Dean jumped, startling upward. His instructor stood behind him with a triumphant look in his eye. “Close your eyes now,” he said. “Focus on every detail you already have in place. Slowly, draw your eye back and out and let the image fill itself in. Don’t force it. You’ve got him on a leash right now, and that might spook him. Go easy. Be gentle. Let him have a minute, and then see if you can lead him out into the light. One breath at a time…”

Dean’s concentration, focused tightly inside, brought a bead of sweat to his brow. He could scent when Jo drew close, summoned by the instructor who knew the two of them to be close friends. He arranged her very close so that her scent would help surround and bolster the fledgling wolf pup, encouraging him out of the shadows to the homey scent of pack. Dean’s breath caught again as he got his first full view of an animal that he knew with all of his being was his own and no one else’s. It was him as clearly as if he were looking into a mirror, and it was beautiful.

Clear, bright green eyes blinked uncertainly back at him. The wolf’s straight narrow muzzle sat low to the snow around its feet, but the tip of his nose angled up daringly, boldly seeking. Pointed ears flickered uneasily back and up and back again. There was a trail of long soft fur trailing off of them – another indication that there was more than a little dog in this wolf. His tongue lolled uncomfortably and then disappeared inside his mouth again as he panted and licked his own muzzle. Those green eyes darted, careful, alert. Dean felt kinship immediately. There was a canniness about the beast that told him it wouldn’t miss much, and Dean liked that his wolf was that aware. He noticed the tail for the first time when the wolf – Dean was doggedly refusing to acknowledge that it wasn’t full wolf – stepped forward slowly with a deeper dip of his head and a careful wag of his long tail. Low shepherd hips and a healthy flag of long fur down his tail destroyed the last vestige of self-delusion
that Dean was holding onto.

He was a wolf-dog cross. A mutt. Clearly a submissive one if the body language meant anything. Dean might only be 9 years old, but he could read body language as well as anyone.

A submissive mutt.

But a clever one.

Those green eyes. He was sure they could read into his soul.

Dean watched him for a little longer before imagining extending his hand to the animal, palm down. Their eyes met again. There was no challenge. They were the same, his wolf and his imagined self. And as preposterous as it seemed there within his own imagination, Dean longed for its trust. The wolf stepped forward slowly, assessing the risks with eyes and ears and feet planted in the snow before each tentative step.

Dean felt warm breath over the back of his hand, and his whole body erupted in chill bumps. His breath caught again, and even though his eyes were still closed, and he hadn’t said a word, he felt Jo’s touch on his arm and Dr. Suisse’s hand tighten on his shoulder. He huffed a delighted laugh, aware uncomfortably that there were tears squeezing out of the corners of his eyes.

It wasn’t what he’d imagined this would feel like. It was better. And worse. And…scary as fuck, and such a relief…all at once. It was overwhelming.

“There, you got him. Well done, Winchester.” The praise felt like a benediction, and Dean couldn’t stifle his chuckle of relief and delight and welcome. It wasn’t a wolf, but it wasn’t NOT a wolf, and it had so much life, so much potential. “Collect your things now, and take your picture with you, please. Join the others in the corner while the rest of us keep searching. Two minutes, class, and then we’ll switch tables again. Focus!”

Jo was at his shoulder when he opened his eyes again. His picture was still in his lap and visible from the right angle, but Jo wasn’t snooping. She smiled at him in solidarity and hoisted him to his feet.

“A badger? Really?” she asked, amused.

“It could happen! He doesn’t make the rules, Harvelle,” Dean protested, a little wobbly, a little punch-drunk. “Just because they don’t bring pictures of bears or seals doesn’t mean it couldn’t work that way. They’re Caniformes too! Sammy bet me, and I had to look it up.”

Jo rolled her eyes. “We’re mammals, too, you dork. Why not aim for a housecat or a white-tail deer?”

“I’m just saying,” he persisted. “They don’t have the first idea how far back this shit really goes. They’re all the same thing, like, a common ancestor is what the article said, back through bears and seals and weasels.”

“And skunks,” she said with a raised brow, pleased with herself.

“Yes! And skunks. I’ll betcha Sammy pulls a skunk outta his cave when his turn rolls round.”

Jo laughed right along with him, happy to tease their shared kid brother in absentia; knowing they’d team up on him later and taunt him with the idea he was intrinsically a skunk more than a wolf.

In the quiet that followed. Dean shifted his gaze carefully to Jo. “You told me yours…” he started.
“Only if you want to,” she responded, her eyes trained on the instructor halfway through another slow lap. Dean slid the photo from his lap to hers, upside down to keep it private from the rest of the class. Jo took it without looking and leaned back before sliding it up her belly and taking in the image of his most personal, most vulnerable self.

“He’s gorgeous,” she said softly, as honored that she got to see his as he had been when she pulled him aside earlier and showed him hers. “Those eyes…,” her ears bright red, and her own eyes bright with excitement. “He’s got some dog in him,” she observed without judgement. “Dogs are smarter than wolves, you know. Cleverer.”

“Easier to train, you mean,” he said, letting a touch of petulance through.

“No, I mean they’re better at reading people than wolves are. I think he suits you, and I mean that in a good way.”

“Hmm.” He took the picture back and considered it before sliding it between two pages of his math book and tucking it safely away. “Maybe.”

NOW:

Castiel answered his own door and caught Sarah unaware with a warm greeting and a fresh mug of coffee. “I appreciate your promptness,” he told her. “I have a great deal to accomplish today, and the tide waits for no man.”

“Is it the tide?” she asked playfully, following him in. “I though it was the trolley that doesn’t wait.”

He conceded with a slight nod. “And your being other than a man, it’s not a concern you evidently need worry about. I wonder what that must be like.” He led her to his office and held the door open as she laughed gamely.

“What it’s like not to be tied to the schedule of the tide or the trolley? I really wouldn’t know. I haven’t noticed either of them offering preferential treatment to women exclusively.”

“Ah, well, then, there’s another fantasy unwoven. Have a seat. We have a bit to cover this morning.” Cas picked up the receiver of the phone on his desk, punched two digits, and then said, “My office, if you please.” He sat down behind his desk, comfortable in a lighter pair of slacks than he wore to work and a well cut linen shirt. “Jess will be here in a moment. She owes you an apology.”

“Oh,” said Sarah dejectedly. “I don’t suppose it makes any difference that I don’t feel she did anything that requires an apology?”

Castiel graced her with one of his signature looks, and she sank back into the loveseat cushion with a sigh.

The knock came quickly, and Cas simply said, “Come.”

Jess walked in with her head high but a pink tinge to the tips of her ears. She spoke with practiced care. “Miss Blake, I was rude to you last night. I wasted your time and put your work at risk.” Jess looked right at Sarah. She spoke sincerely, but there was an edge that told Sarah Jess never would have offered this apology voluntarily. “I apologize profusely. It won’t happen again. I’d like to reschedule at your convenience.” A lightning fast dart of hazel-brown eyes to where Castiel sat with
his fingers laced and steepled beneath his chin begged his forbearance. Jess put her eyes back on Sarah’s before lowering them.

“Thank you, Jess. I really did gain quite a lot of ground last night even with…your…difficulty in talking to me. I would very much like to accept your offer to reschedule and build on what we started – if your Alpha allows it.” Sarah tossed the ball back to Cas. His eyes flipped from Jess to Sarah and back again before nodding.

“Of course,” he said somewhat curtly.

“Sir, please!” Jess pleaded. “I won’t do it again. I swear! I’m sorry!”

“I understand, beta,” he told her. “But it wasn’t to me that you were rude.”

It was terribly uncomfortable, but Sarah figured her role out before it could grow miserable in that tiny office. “I accept your apology, Jess,” she blurted. “I forgive you. I’d love to try it again.”

Jess wilted visibly in relief, and Cas nodded almost imperceptibly before turning his attention down into his drawers to the right side of the desk. “Thank you, Jessica,” he said without looking at her. “That will be all.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, a little stronger than she looked. She shot a shy smile at Sarah and then fled.

“That was entirely for her, wasn’t it? Not for me.” Sarah spoke into the silence Jess left behind her.

“It was for her and for the hierarchy in general,” Cas replied easily, pulling her notes and recorder from his desk and placing them before him. “It was also for you, Sarah. We are, first and foremost, civilized people, and when there is an affront, an apology is the appropriate response. She was deliberately rude, whether you noticed or not, and she would just as appropriately have owed you that apology had you both been Primates.”

“I noticed, Alpha, but I didn’t really feel there was any animosity in it. She seemed to be struggling with herself.” Sarah eyed her notes. There were brightly colored tabs attached here and there and notes in a strange hand.

“And that makes a difference?” he posed. “If your mother was rude to a houseguest of yours, would it matter that her problem was actually with herself and not the guest? Would that mean she owed no apology?”

“I see your point, sir,” she told him. “But that was extremely uncomfortable for me. If hierarchy weren’t involved, I would just as soon have let it go. In a lot of ways, I learned more with the way it all happened than I would have if she’d been completely cooperative.”

He was obviously as ready as she was to move on. His eyes twinkled. “That’s because you are astute enough to read between the lines of what she gave you. Very good, Sarah. Tell me what you learned.” He sat back and sipped his own coffee. Sarah’s sat abandoned on the table at her elbow.

“The critical piece to the success of the thesis, I believe, is going to be the evident and supportable stability of psychological strata at each life stage where a wolf is fully supported versus the untenable quality of the psyche when it isn’t. Jess is a prime example of that. I’ll need documentation, of course, but I see the same pattern again and again. Wolves cannot continue at length without the hierarchy in place. Here, look, Jess talked about pushing through college and law school, but her descriptions of her internal struggles…it’s not sustainable. She was hanging on by the barest grip by the end. She would have broken soon. And then, just then, she moved back here and Mated. That’s the pattern. A wolf can hang on long enough to bridge a chasm like that, but then they need support
or they fall over the edge. And that’s a beta. If any wolves have a natural propensity to self-stabilize, it’s the betas.” Sarah dug through the papers before her, turning them, searching. Cas let her dig.

She continued. “I had intended to select a few of your Facility students to highlight, but if I could, I’d like to see if I could use Jess’ case instead. She’s not ACRI trained, but she’s further along in the life cycle. She’s faced some real hardships, and she’s found balance with a mate. She’s well into her professional career and is already childrearing. Do you think you could allow that, sir?”

“Jess has been through a great deal, Sarah,” he told her heavily. “I will leave it up to her.”

“Sir…” Sarah paused. “Not that it matters, really, but…she said some odd things about how she doesn’t fit just right with her mate. Are she and Sam…?”

“Are they True-Mates?” he guessed. She looked up at him across the desk and nodded.

“Why is it such a touchy subject?” she asked.

“It’s not to everyone,” he answered. “Many wolves don’t care one way or the other. Jess doesn’t care. Sam does.”

“It’s important to Sam. Why?”

“Why is anything important to anyone? It’s more than a point of pride for Sam to feel that he’s Mated to his one true perfect mate. It’s a point of intimacy. He wanted her desperately. He wants her to be perfect. He wants their union to be perfect. Who among us doesn’t long for such a connection?”

“He loves her a great deal. Isn’t that enough?”

“Not to Sam,” said Cas. “I admit that it isn’t entirely rational, and I’ll leave it at that.”

“So, they aren’t True-Mates.”

“In the interest of clarity for the sake of science, I will answer. No, they are not True-Mates. But I caution you to keep that information private as it is, as you say, a source of particular touchiness to a beta whom I love dearly, and it makes no particular difference in any appreciable way other than to the integrity of your research. It is also a matter of opinion at this point. There is no data either way, nor any attainable.”

Sarah ruminated quietly for a few moments.

“The rape is a roleplay,” she said by way of changing the subject, and his eyes took their twinkling up again.

“What makes you say that?” he asked, leaning way back in his chair.

“If it was unwanted assault, her scent would reflect the distress of an assault, and he would stop. There’s no question that he adores her and would move heaven and earth to keep her safe. The rest is all choreographed motion and noise.”

“And that differs from what you’ve always maintained how, exactly?” he challenged her, taking another drink of coffee.

She took a deep breath, and her gaze unfocused. “I don’t know how to put it into words. The words all fall flat. It’s not truly rape, because there’s a constructive tone to it all even at the height of the violence, but it’s also not truly consensual because the decision is absolutely not in the Bottom’s
hands. But it never gets out of control, and the focus never leaves the welfare of the Topped.”

Cas watched her struggle with it for a few minutes. She tangled herself up admirably, and then even more admirably untangled herself once more, sighing in frustration as she petered off to silence. She still couldn’t get the words to mean what she needed to make them mean.

“It’s all exactly what we’ve already talked about,” she conceded pointlessly. “But without context, the words are meaningless.”

“As with so much human complexity,” Castiel reminded her.

“I need help, sir. I need help explaining this to Dr. Meyer. He’s not going to understand the context.”

“No, he’s not,” Cas agreed. He continued to watch her for a minute or two as she frowned and dug through the notes. “Your coffee is growing cold,” he pointed out.

She picked the cup up absently and sipped at it. “I can’t think how to present this to him that doesn’t set him up to turn it back around on me,” she grumbled.

“Then don’t,” he suggested vaguely.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t defend your argument to Dr. Meyer.”

She scoffed. “I wish that was an option, but I have to pass it by him or it dies where it is. I’ve got a deadline coming up. He expects me to bring my progress by on Monday.”

“So walk away and find another advisor.” He made it sound so simple, and his face was placid. She frowned at him.

“What are you suggesting?” she asked. “Apply to another program? It took me every connection I had to get this spot. I can’t walk away from it.”

“I’d like you to study under Jim Murphy at Brown University,” he said simply, like it wasn’t a nuclear bomb dropping from the sky. “Karl Meyer has already lined up his defenses against your hypothesis. If you attend that meeting on Monday, you’ll lose everything you’ve worked for. He has alternate plans for your research, and if it’s all the same to you, I’d prefer he not be given the opportunity to upend our progress.”

She stared at him.

“It’s your choice, of course,” he added.

“Jim Murphy?”

“He’s a tenured professor with Brown, on extended leave. He could advise you from Massachusetts without ever setting foot back on campus and without requiring more than one or two face-to-face meetings. We could overlap those with the semiannual meetings he attends here. You would be invited to move into the house here with us – all the better to continue studying the individual interactions that have so captured your imagination, assuming everyone agrees to be observed. You would, of course, be restricted to defining your scope to cover only those of us who participate willingly.”

She stared at him. “You’re not serious.”
“I am very serious.”

She scoffed again.

He sat forward, placing a wide palm on her notes. “You’re far more critical to the success of our movement than I believe you are aware, Miss Blake. You bring a fresh eye into something that’s been argued to death by the cynics on the inside until we no longer hear each other speak. You are beautifully naïve, perfectly unbiased. We need you desperately, and Dr. Meyer is inches from pinching you right off and casting your work into the file cabinet of obscurity forever. In light of that, I’m offering you an alternative that serves us both.”

“Sir!” She found her voice again at last as the shock gave way to simple disbelief. “That would be highly inappropriate! I can’t work under you and research you at the same time. It would be unethical to say the least!”

“You wouldn’t be working under me. You would be working under the advisement of Pastor Jim.”

“Who works for you.”

“As do forty-three other research fellows whose projects vary in scope and premise but all of which are targeted to understand our species better than we do now.”

“I…”

“Every contact that you knew prior to now got you a chance to put your foot in the door, Sarah. I’m offering you better. I want you to commit to jumping all the way in, and I’m willing to support you in your efforts. You have significantly better connected contacts than you once did.”

“Live here?”

“That’s part of the offer. It’s not a requirement.”

“Sir, how could I begin to stay objective?”

“Constant oversight,” he replied easily.

“Pardon me, but my head is spinning. May I?” She nodded at her notes and began to gather them up.

“How do you know all that…about Dr. Meyer, that he’s planning to subvert my conclusions?”

Cas met her eye. “You’re not my only contact in the department.”

“You’ve been spying on me?”

Cas laughed softly. “Not on you, per se.”

“On Dr. Meyer.”

“It is critical I know where my enemies are and what they are up to. Your presence doesn’t alter that.”

She frowned again. “I don’t want to be a pawn in a power play, Castiel. I won’t be used.”

Cas shook his head. “I know what I’m suggesting is unorthodox, Sarah, but I’ve put a great deal of thought into it. I believe in you. I’ve observed you closely, spied on you if you insist on that word, and I’m convinced that you are the way forward for all of us. You’re not a pawn. You’re much more important than that. What I’m offering you is exactly what it seems at face value. You may live with
us, observe us closely from the inside, ask anything you like, confer with Fred as much as you need to, and your conclusions, assuming they withstand the scrutiny of a well-respected academic researcher on staff at Brown University, would be your own. I will not lead you nor unduly influence you.”

“Sir, with all due respect, if I lived here day in and day out, how could you possibly not influence me? I’m already closer to you than I should be.”

“Indeed? In what way?”

She hesitated, and then she chuckled. “You’re teasing me.” She saw pride pass across his face. In her?

“I respect you, Sarah,” he told her. “I respect your integrity. You have never been untruthful with me, nor with anyone on my team. You are good at what you do, if a touch unpolished yet. Polish will come with time and practice.”

“Sir, I’m pursuing a doctorate. If I leave the position I fought so hard for, can you promise me I still have the chance to achieve that goal?”

“You doubt Brown University’s capacity to issue an academically respected doctoral degree?”

“Alpha, please. This is important to me. You’re asking me to throw away the last ten years of my life, just like that.” She snapped her fingers. “I worked very hard to get where I am. I can’t risk that.”

“Sarah, he knows everything you’re going to say, and he’s going to railroad you no matter what that means for the data or the conclusions. He’s not a researcher, he’s a crusader, and he’ll do real damage to actual human people if you put even the small amount you have now into his hands. Whatever you decide to do for yourself from here, I’m begging you not to give it to Karl Meyer.”

“Can you prove it?”

Her eyes were steel.

“I have email chains from two separate sources that detail his plan in depth. He hasn’t been subtle.”

“Sir, is it possible that you’ve been misled?”

He studied her. “It’s possible,” he admitted. “Does that seem realistic to you?”

“No,” she conceded uncomfortably. “No, that all sounds like Dr. Meyer.”

“As far as your work yesterday goes,” he indicated her notes with his chin. “I see little that I feel requires further explanation until I know how you digest it. Fred will be offering you a second interview if he hasn’t done so already. I caution you to stick to your planned questions when speaking with Fred, or you’ll never get what you need from him.”

She chuckled. “Yes, I noticed. He was far more forthcoming than I expected him to be. I hardly had to ask him anything.”

Cas cleared his throat and adjusted his position in his chair. “That’s my fault, Miss Blake. I asked him to break the family vault open and speak to you with absolute candor. I expected him to talk about me, maybe about Gabriel. I never expected him to talk about my father or, God forbid, about himself the way he did. He’s a sneaky old bastard, and he did that to spite me, I think.”
She raised her brows and stifled another laugh. “You, sir?”

“It’s a long story,” he demurred with a palm up to allay any further questions along that line. “Suffice it to say, he’s good at finding ways to chastise me even with our relative ranks and the many years that have passed since I was truly his charge.”

“He loves you,” she said, mostly to see how he would respond.

He smiled softly. “That is entirely mutual. We’ve been through quite a lot, he and I.”

“And Gabriel,” she added.

He didn’t reply to that. He sat in his chair, doing the ‘Alpha in its own lair’ thing with his knees kicked high to settle him way back, and his fingers steepling at his sternum. His gaze was cool, not really a challenge, but not exactly friendly either.

Okay, so Gabriel was still off limits.

“What are my options if I don’t want to let Dr. Meyer submarine me, and I don’t want to work for you?”

“I can use my connections – and Dr. Singer’s – to attempt to find you an alternate program that offers you a similar outcome to what you have now. Of course, you would have to start over on your research, and I cannot promise you continued access to our facility. You would, in many ways be starting over with no guarantees.”

She smirked. “You were all right with having me onsite while I was advised by Dr. Meyer. Who could possibly be worse than that?”

He leaned forward with an intimate air as if confiding. “The enemy you know, Miss Blake.” He winked.

Damn the man.

“And expenses?” she asked. “Tuition and board? Graduate responsibilities?”

“Ah, good,” he said, looking very pleased indeed. “If we’re down to negotiating, I will excuse myself from the conversation and refer you to Jim Murphy’s assistant. I have her card here somewhere. Woman by the name of Bela Talbot. I believe you’ll get along swimmingly.” Cas fumbled around in his desk. He obviously didn’t have a card. Sarah let him flounder just to see how far he would take the ruse, but he stopped after no more than a few seconds. “Perhaps I could send you her contact information?”

“That would be fine,” she replied. Damn the man. Sarah was running through the conversation swiftly in her head, searching frantically for any red flags. Surely, what he was proposing was inappropriate at best, but she couldn’t quite nail it down. And in the end, she didn’t want to. A chance to live amongst them – not just anyone, but the Winchesters – and study them up close. She’d be insane to turn that down, and his smirk said he knew exactly what she was thinking.

“I have a couple of months left on my lease,” she said at last.

“Understood, then. We move forward on your timeline, Sarah.”

She sipped her coffee, but it was cold. “I’ll submit my withdrawal from the University on Monday.”
“Hold off on withdrawing, Sarah. I think we can do a transfer. I should know by Tuesday. Can you put Dr. Meyer off that long?”

“Not with any integrity,” she answered and was rewarded with a real laugh.

“I leave it to your good judgment, then,” he said chuckling. “More coffee?”

“I’ve taken up enough of your time this morning, sir. I need to go and let you get back to work.”

“Very well.” He stood and escorted her out, helping her pack her papers and recorder away. They strolled casually toward the front door. Sarah could hear Jess singing softly to the pups in the next room. “Sarah,” Castiel began, bringing her attention back to him. “I cannot guarantee you the outcome you seek. No one can do that.” He turned to face her at the door, pausing before he opened it. “What I can promise you is that I will never use you in a way that you do not have a hand in planning. I’m not a virtuous man, but I am true to my word. If you can see within me the same fire that I see burning in you, then I ask for your trust – trust that I can steer us a way forward, trust that I can remove barriers from your path so that you may do the work you were born to do, unfettered by mundanities. I want you on my team, Sarah Blake. I cannot say it more clearly than that.”

“I think you’re expecting more from me than I can deliver.” She couldn’t hold his eyes.

“Good,” he told her, and he opened the door.

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Naomi secured the last of her personal effects, what she had with her – the rest was in storage – onto a cart with an elastic cord. “I believe that’s all of it,” she told the orderly. He smiled kindly at her and wheeled the cart out, mindful of the larger bags overhanging the edges. He knew enough of her sharp tongue to know that she wouldn’t appreciate an extra scrape to her expensive luggage.

Naomi looked around her room sadly. She wasn’t going to miss it at all, but she was once again completely untethered, and she felt an impulse to cling to the horrible space simply to have something knowable at her back. She felt small, a sensation she hadn’t felt in years and years.

“Waiting on you now, Mom,” said Gabriel from the hallway, not unkindly. “Got your chariot idling and your new digs all ready for you. Just need the woman herself – unless you’d rather stay here…”

He was teasing again. “Oh, for pity’s sake, Gabriel. Don’t be ridiculous. This was a stopgap, and nothing more.”

“Good. Come on, then. Kali’s in the car. We’re taking you to lunch.”

“Well, it’s about time,” Naomi told him sternly. “Not even invited to your wedding. Am I an afterthought to you too, son?”

He laughed. “No, Ma’am. Anything but.” He let her take his arm and made no bones about escorting her through the industrial corridor as if she were the most important wolf on the planet. “How about steaks for lunch?”

“Ugh! How can you eat anything so heavy in this heat?”
“Oookay. Salads and cold soup or something? Kali probably knows a place. She knows the city better than I do. We’ll go eat, and by the time we get you to your new place, you’ll be unpacked and all moved in. Come on, Mom. I know you’ve got a faster pace than this in there somewhere.”

“I’m old, Gabriel. I walk slowly. And I’ll thank you to call me ‘Mother’ just like always. You know I don’t abide this informality from you. It’s cheeky. I don’t like it.”

“Apolgies, Mother.”

“Oh, good grief!” she retorted. “That’s even worse! Would it kill you to show some respect?”

Gabe flagged Kali in her car where it was idling in the shade. She pulled around. “In you go. Sit up front with Kali. Omegas go in the back. How’s that for respectful. You go on and tell Kali what you want for lunch. I’ll sit back here and be seen and not heard.” He caught Kali’s eye in the mirror with a wink. She huffed.

“Don’t worry Mrs. Novak,” she told the ex-Congresswoman. “I know how to deal with smart mouths like his.”

“Well, at least someone has some sense around here,” said Naomi buckling her seatbelt. Kali laughed. Gabe grinned in the backseat.

“Oh. Yeah,” he interjected, forgetting all about his promise to be silent. “I have marks all over my ass, Mother. Wanna see?”

“Gabriel!” she shot back, scandalized. “Now I’ve lost my appetite entirely. Kari, dear, would you please select whichever lunch venue you prefer? I shan’t be eating with you. My stomach has turned queasy.” Gabe grinned even wider. Kali met his eye again through the rearview mirror as she pulled onto the street. She wasn’t enjoying his antics any longer. Too much, Omega.

Chastened, he sat back and grumbled to himself.

“If I’d brought you to the wedding, do you think you could remember her name?” he asked at the next stop light.

“Gabe, stop it,” Kali warned. That was her ‘not kidding’ voice. He looked at her face, and read the plea there. Today was hard enough. For everyone. A little less asshole in the mix would be much appreciated.

“Tell me your name again, dear,” Naomi asked with her most invested expression, leaning over a little to cut Gabe out of the conversation.

Kali gave her a simple smirk. “I really doubt you could pronounce my full name, Mrs. Novak. In the U.S. I go by a diminutive. You can call me Kali.”

“OH! The Destroyer? How exotic!”

“Mother, I swear, if you start up with one of your racist rants…”

“Gabriel! How could you say such a thing! I would never!”

“Mm-hm,” he said, guarded. He was trying. God, he was trying. Kali would learn. Keeping Naomi focused on his terrible sophomoric behavior kept her out of herself, and it made her bearable. This ‘getting to know each other’ thing Kali wanted to do was a disaster waiting to happen.
“How about a café?” Kali suggested, pulling in and giving no one much of a choice.

Naomi ate a healthy lunch in spite of her declaration of having lost her appetite. She selected the salmon and was pleased to find the small café served a wide variety of cocktails. It was a bit of a trendy favorite for wealthy alumni back for a Saturday of football, and it was designed for rich, fussy clientele. Gabriel behaved himself perfectly even when Naomi was recognized and pulled aside for pictures and a brief stint at a nearby table to share insider stories from the smoke-filled rooms in D.C. He worked his way quickly through three beers.

“How about a café?” Kali suggested, pulling in and giving no one much of a choice.

“Relax,” Kali told him watching Naomi glad-hand as if she were still campaigning. “Just another couple of hours, and then we can cut and run. It’s not that bad. She’s on her best behavior too.”

“Well, yeah,” he mumbled. “She knows her ass is on the line if word gets back to baby brother that she turned Wicked Witch of the West.”

“I thought that side of her was broken,” Kali put in, taking a sip from her water glass.

“Fucked if I know how it works. Shh! Here she comes.”

“Gabriel, you’re making me a nervous wreck,” Kali laughed. “Chill out.”

“Trouble?” asked Naomi sliding back into her chair. She was flushed with pleasure. She and Cas had that in common. A run-in with strangers in public – strangers who could do them good of one type or another – always made them both glow with happiness.

“Do you know what you’re wearing to the big wedding, Mom?” Gabe asked, apropos of getting her nose out of his business.

“Oh, well, the invitation was so sudden,” she demurred. “I would hate to have to scrounge up something from last season, but your brother really was quite the cad to spring it on me at the last moment. And *Mother-of-the-Groom* is not exactly a role I’ve ever played before, having been excluded from your wedding entirely, as I was. I may have to embarrass him by wearing a repeat!” Her face contorted in disgust just in case her lunch mates didn’t realize how horrifying that would be.

Castiel wouldn’t care if she showed up naked.

Gabe considered telling her that, but a look into the stress lines around Kali’s eyes stopped him.

“It’s, uh, short notice and all, but I’ll bet Kali can help you fix up one of your old dresses for the occasion if you asked her nicely.” Gabe kept one eye on his wife. It was a gamble.

“Oh? Do you work in textiles, Kari?”

“Kali, Mother.”

“Kali. Of course. How clumsy of me.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m an artist of sorts. I’m doing all the wedding party’s clothing up until the reception. I’ve finished everything that’s critical if you’d like me to look through your dresses to see what we can work into a Mother-of-the-Groom-worthy gown. I have some time. If you’d like to purchase something off the rack and have me perfect it, we can do that too, but we would need to hurry a little bit.”

Naomi stared at her in silence. She seemed not to know how to take Kali. Was she an artist? Artists held a high status in Naomi’s world view. But she made wedding clothes. So she was a seamstress.
That made her a servant of sorts.

“Close your mouth, Mother. You’ll catch flies,” Gabe suggested.

“It’s only a suggestion,” Kali said to them both, unsure.

Gabe chuckled. His mother was still bereft of vocabulary. He leaned way in. “What she means to say, Kali, is yes, and thank you.”

“Well, of course,” Naomi said on his heels. “Yes, dear, that would be very generous. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“She gets that a lot,” Gabe cheeked with a wink at her over his glass.

“Don’t be silly,” said Kali. “You would have had time to get a fitting in somewhere. We still have two weeks.”

“Two weeks,” said Naomi uncomfortably, blinking. Gabriel frowned watching her. In moments she had drifted away inside her head.

“Mother?”

Unfocused eyes stared into his face, aware that his word meant herself, but unable to place just how. “Jesus,” he muttered, putting a hand on his mother’s shoulder and looking around, assessing for potential danger. “We’ve gotta get her out of here. We can’t let anyone see her like this.”

Kali handed him her key. “Take her to the car. I’ll settle the check and meet you there.”

“Good,” he said. “Good. I can do that.” He put his napkin on the table and squatted in front of his absent mother, careful to keep his voice down. “Mother. Mother! Fuck. You gotta listen to me right now. We’re leaving, and you need to walk with me. Come on, Mom. Come with me.” He stood up slowly so that hopefully, her eyes would follow his and her body would go along too. She stood up in a daze. “This way.” He took her hand and wrapped an arm across her shoulders, shooting a worried look back at Kali. She nodded encouragingly to him.

An hour and a half later, Kali drove them away from Naomi’s new condominium. The attendant staff had her in its custody. Gabe slouched miserably in the passenger side of Kali’s car with an arm thrown across his face, shaking. “Jesus fucking Christ!”

“I know, Gabe. Try to relax and breathe for me. We’re going home right now. Your brother’s home if you need an alpha.” Kali was speeding.

“Slow down, babe. I’m not taking one for coming home with a speeding ticket.”

“Thought you were catatonic. What do you care if I speed?” she shot, but she slowed a little. His face was ashen and the trembling was still wracking his whole body.

“I’m…freaking out a little, I think,” he managed.

“I’ll get you home, baby. You just hang tight and breathe.”

“He’s leaving tomorrow,” Gabe mourned in a rare show of worry.

“But he’s here now. Just let me get you home, and we’ll worry about tomorrow once you’ve got color in your cheeks again.”
He chuckled sadly. “Yeah, okay. One thing at a time.”

“I’m never going to see you again,” his mother said simply, reining her mournfulness back to a subtle touch. It seemed like a simple conclusion.

“That’s not true,” said Jack, leaving a kiss on her nose as he passed her in the hall again. “I’ll come back to visit. Believe me. You’re gonna be tired of us visiting all the time.”

“We,” she said. “My little boy all grown up and Mating.”

“Really, Mom?” he asked, a touch exasperated.

“You still have baby fat on your cheeks, Jack. Humor me.”

He grinned. She tried to hide the sadness in her eyes when she touched his face, but she wasn’t completely successful.

“You’re going to be fine, Mom.”

“I’m going to miss you,” she said. “A lot.”

“Good,” he laughed. “I’d hate to think I could spend twenty-six years with you and move away without leaving a dent at all.”

“You’ll call me when you land?”

“Mom, it may come as a surprise, but I’m going to miss you too. I’ll call every chance I get.”

“You say that now,” she accused, taking the carry-on bag he handed her and following him into the living room. “But you’ll forget all about me when you Mate.”

He blanched. “Can we not talk about that right now?” He set the two suitcases in his hands on the floor, looking around to see if he’d left anything out he wanted to take.

“Nervous about Mating an alpha?” she asked him, reading his worry as only a mother could.

He sat heavily on the cushioned recliner in the living room, and she followed him down, taking a spot on the footstool, still covered in half-folded laundry. “I barely know her, Mom. All I have is a scent, a couple of emails, and a Skype conversation. What if she hates me? What if I can’t cut it at the big facility where she works? What if she tries to Mate me, and it doesn’t take? I never imagined Mating an alpha. What if she wants to Top all the time? I don’t think I’d want that.”

“Jack, listen to me.” Kelly found his eyes with hers. “She’s going to love everything about you. Your work here has been transformative to a whole community of Omegas. You are an incredible man, and you’re going to be just fine. And you found yourself a True-Mate, baby. Do you get how rich that is? It’s not all going to be easy, but a lot of it will be like you were made for each other. If you don’t want to be Topped, she’s your True-Mate, and she’s not going to want that either. You match. It’s not like other partners you’ve had. It’s like going home, only better. Believe me, Jack. I’ve been where you are. I know.”
“You miss him, don’t you?” Jack asked carefully.

Kelly’s eyes glassed over, but she kept them from spilling. “Every single day.”

“Mom, what if we Mate, and it’s just like you and Dad, and I lose her somehow? I’d have to be crazy to set myself up for that…or her. How can I do that to someone else either? I saw what you went through. It’s not worth it.” His eyes darted back and forth between hers, intent, seeking revelation.

She smiled again, and this time the tear flowed over and dropped into her lap. She carded fingers through his hair. “It’s totally worth it.” she said softly. “I wouldn’t trade a second of what I had with your father, not even if it meant I didn’t have all the pain that came after. You hear me? It’s worth it. You go out there and Mate that girl, and don’t you look back. You have a life ahead of you, Jack Kline, and your time has come. Call me once in a while, all right? And you’ll always have a room here. Come back and see me sometime.”

“I love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too, sweetheart. I’ll ship you whatever you forgot to pack.”

He rolled his eyes. “Who says I’m leaving anything behind? Besides, I’m not going straight into it. I’ve gotta settle up with the Pack Alpha first and make sure we’re copacetic. I don’t even meet her for more than a week. If worse comes to worst, I can fly home for the weekend and pack up whatever you want me to take.”

“Oh, because you’ll be made of money in only a week? Plane tickets aren’t cheap, Jack. You’ve got to be careful with your money from now on. You have a family to think of.” She ruffled his hair, and he dodged.

“I’m not the alpha though, Mom. I don’t have to be the breadwinner. That’s on Jo’s shoulders. She’s got seniority over me at the ACRI. She’s something like an Executive Vice-something or other. Probably makes a lot more money than I will for years. I figure I get to spend whatever I make like play money – buy string pearls and fur coats and shit.”

Kelly regarded her son with a frown. “You’d look pretty in a string of pearls.”

“I know!” he burst out, laughing. He stood up and buried her in a tight hug.

She pulled back and took his face in her hands. “Work hard,” she told him. “Protect your Pack. Answer to your Alpha and your mate. Don’t fight it, Jack. I know you can get stubborn and dig your heels in, but these ACRI folks, they don’t play. You could dig yourself in deep without realizing you’re holding a shovel.”

He nodded. “Take care of yourself, Mom. Call me whenever you want. I’m pretty sure phones still go both ways. And I want you to come visit us when we get settled.”


He laughed off her kisses. “I’m not sure ‘knock ‘em dead’ is the appropriate version of goodbye when your baby boy is heading out to get a Mating-scar on his shoulder. I’ll call when I get there. Promise.” Jack heard his phone buzz, and he knew it was a signal from the car at the curb. He collected his suitcases and stumbled out the door, decidedly not looking back at the house. His mother followed with his carry-on, and the driver helped them load the trunk.

He leaned down and kissed his mother’s cheek. Her warm hand on his arm was all the hug she
offered out here in public. She nodded wetly at him, planting a stubborn smile on her face, and he nodded back.

She watched the car pull away from the curb and disappear around the corner. He turned around in the back seat just before it would have been too late, and she raised a hand in farewell.

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Ketch slung his hanging bag over his shoulder, shifting a little to get it centered. He cast a final look around his now barren apartment. He sighed, wondering vaguely if being capable of carrying everything he owned in two bags was a bad sign at his age. He thought not, unless the fact that one of the bags contained nothing but toys and impact implements counted against him.

He wasn’t going to miss this place. It was five years out of his life, but it was nothing more than a void between where he’d come from and where he was meant to be going. It was high time the train of his life finally pulled out of the station. It was past time he built a real career out of his natural talents. It was far past time he took a mate of his own. Ketch’s blood itched under his skin.

It was time.

He closed the door behind him and dropped the key unceremoniously in the apartment manager’s box on his way to his car. The car would be collected from the airport by a work colleague and sold, the proceeds sent on to him in Kansas. Ketch was sweating heavily as he started up the car, but he left the windows down and settled for air conditioning as nature intended. Everything was finally starting back up again. What was a little sweat?

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“Feeling better?” Michael asked from his place on the bed, on his belly with his heels raking over his backside, and his chin cradled in his arms.

“You’re a tease, Michael Quentin,” Dean shot at him, feeling miles better, and wishing he could take the improvement and do something useful with it where his mate was concerned. Michael felt the familiar longing, and he spread his knees wider. Dean had somewhere important to be. But he couldn’t walk away from naked, freshly showered, pregnant, Omega mate; not like this. Dean ran a hand underneath Michael’s knee and manhandled him around, lifting his hips up with a grip beneath each muscled thigh to Dean’s shoulder level, eliciting an unmanly squawk and a hearty laugh from his mate, who braced his torso on the bed with strong arms.

All the running was beginning to shape Michael’s thighs and calves, and Dean noticed as he buried his face in Michael’s richly scented channel. He plunged his tongue in, spearing him as deeply as he could.

“Dean! Jesus!” Michael was still laughing, but his chortles took on a gruff tone as his arms gave way. Dean let him settle flat. He followed his mate so that the alpha ended up on his knees. Dean rimmed him with gusto, tasting and licking until Michael squirmed in agony.
“Touch yourself, Michael,” Dean instructed before diving back in to lap wetly at his rim and reach in with both thumbs to stretch Michael open, allowing him to lick deeper. Michael got his knees beneath him and stroked himself in time with Dean’s tongue. When the Omega came, he doused Dean’s face with richly scented slick. Dean moaned at the smell alone. The flavor was one thing, but that smell. His puppy had altered the scent of its mother’s slick to set off Dean’s instinctive alpha responses, and he very suddenly had no plans ever to leave this room.

Michael groaned and rolled onto his back.

“Well, that did it,” whined Michael. “You wanted me to sleep until dinner. I think I’ll be out until tomorrow morning after that one.”

Dean chuckled into the bedding. “Me too. Only I can’t stay and sleep. I gotta get up onstage. Opening panel is in twenty minutes.”

“You gonna wash my mess off your face?” asked Michael sleepily.

“Fiancé’s marks on my ass, and mate’s slick in my five o’clock shadow,” murmured Dean. “I’m good to go just like this.”

“You’re depraved, Winchester,” Michael told him affectionately, slipping his eyes closed.

“You love me depraved,” said Dean, struggling to his feet and nudging Michael until he shifted to get underneath the covers. “Sit up and drink this whole bottle of water. I don’t care if it makes you pee. Travelling dehydrates you. Charlie’s got a key, and she’s going to check on you in a couple of hours. Order room service if you get hungry. Don’t leave the room for anything but a fire.”

“Mmm,” said Michael, taking the water bottle without opening his eyes.

“Michael?”

“Yeah?”

“Baby, you’re going to stay here and be good, right?”

“Right here, alpha. Cross my heart.” He cracked his green eyes a little bit as he took a deep swig.

“I’m not fucking around, man. I will fucking flay you if you cross me on this. Don’t go thinking you can play word games with me. We both know what I expect, and I’m not going to fuck around with technicalities. You hear me?”

“Dean. Alpha. I swear on my oldest, most ancient relatives. I’m good for it. I’m gonna be right here when you get back. Not going anywhere in the meantime. Not letting anyone in the room. Not gonna Skype with naked men through the hotel WiFi. Right here. Good for you in every way you want me. Go break a leg. Don’t fuck anyone though, okay? Please?”

Dean huffed. “I’ll be back in a few hours. Love you. Get some sleep. Watch whatever you want on cable, but you know the rules. They don’t change here. Keep both bonds wide open for me, man. And take care of this while I’m gone.” Dean touched Michael’s expanding belly.

“Kiss me before I fall asleep.”

Dean wasn’t sure he met that deadline. Michael seemed out for the count before he even pulled away. He scrubbed a hand across the scruff on his own chin, smearing what was left of Michael’s slick and spreading it evenly so it would dry without flaking heavily.
“Jesus Christ, Dean, you smell pregnant!” protested Sam in the elevator. Dean smiled with all the smugness he could manage before he paled, remembering that he would never get a chance to tease Sam back in the same way.

Shit.

“Relax, alpha,” Sam told him, catching the scent of mortification and guessing where Dean’s mind had gone. “I don’t envy you this one. You reek, man.”

Jo was waiting for them as the elevator doors opened, and Dean got a nearly verbatim repeat of disgust from his best friend, but this time he didn’t temper his smugness at all. He pulled Jo in for a tight hug and rubbed his face on her throat just a little.

“Gross! Winchester, you need a fucking straightjacket! And a babysitter! God!”

He laughed, lifted a middle finger for her, and took his instruction sheet from Charlie.

“Touch me with whatever smells like that, and I’ll castrate you in your sleep,” Charlie told him calmly. “I have a key to your room.”

“What?” he asked in feigned dismay, inciting her to gesture that she would be watching him… fingers to eyes, out toward him, and back. Fiercely.

Spoilsports, all of them. Like they’d never smelled Omega slick before. Dean smirked happily to himself as Meg rounded the back of the stage.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” she called. “He broke you! Goddamnit, Dean, if you ever see me like that,” she pointed him up and down to indicate she meant the whole package. “Shoot me.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. He poured water from a bottle onto a handkerchief from his pocket and scrubbed his face with it. “Bunch of clenched ass-wipes, all of you,” he told Meg. “Your time is at hand, my friend. I give you a month. You’ll show up to work dripping wet.”

“Forget it, Winchester. We’re up,” she told him grabbing the handkerchief and throwing it into a trashcan.

“HEY! That was Castiel’s!”

“Well, it’s garbage now. Get your ass on the stage.” She shoved him with a hissed whisper: “And try NOT to advertise that you brought your mate with you. Jesus! It was supposed to be a secret!”

Oh. Right. Michael’s scent on his chin might be fun to tease his friends with, but would the audience notice? Sam slipped past him and held the curtain open, mouthing, ‘It’s fine,’ to him.

Dean took a minute to catch himself. He’d been happily floating away on the hormones that Michael was beating him over the head with and forgetting all about the job at hand. Dean looked up into Sam’s face. That familiar nod met him, centered him, steeled him.

He gripped his microphone and stepped into the lights. Just don’t fuck anybody. He was pretty sure he could remember that.
Castiel stopped in the doorway to the Master suite and watched her. An afternoon spent stabilizing Gabriel with calm supportive words and a hand always touching his body somewhere had left Castiel feeling particularly family-centered. He felt drawn to his mate somehow, even more than usual. The wave of affection that surged up from his gut when he found her dressing for the evening was warm and welcome. He braced his hands on the doorframe above him and stood there like a creep, watching her dress. She knew he was there, but she continued on without speaking or turning. Her body wanted him. Badly. That pull from within him that he felt turning his insides to goo was beginning to reflect back from inside her own. It was an echoing call for a pup by both bodies, where once it had only been his. But the physical connection wasn’t going to be enough to sustain them forever. They needed to build on the shaky ground beneath them and find a way to connect as people.

“I’m going to New York next weekend,” he said at last. “I need to do some business with some of our donors, and it can’t be done from here. I’m thinking of flying out on Thursday and coming home Sunday night.”

She turned to face him, and her breath caught. He was framed in the doorway with his arms raised above his head, leaning slightly in.

He was a god.

April collected herself with an internal grumble of irritation. She couldn’t keep letting his beauty derail her like that. “Three days without you is going to be hard, Cas, but I’ll be okay. Dean will be here.” She turned back to hide the fear and sadness in her eyes, but she didn’t even attempt to muffle what he could feel through their bond. She was through with doing that— for better or worse. “It’s close to the wedding though, and we promised to help ‘Martt’ move. Your absence is going to be missed.”

“Martt?”

She giggled. “It’s their ‘ship name. You like it?”

“Kitten, come with me. To New York. Please?”

She turned and gaped at him. He was asking? Why was he asking? What was that sensation he had roiling around in his sternum? He left the doorway, and she absolutely didn’t fixate on the way his shoulders shifted as his arms dropped. “I’m not taking Dean. He and Michael both have work here. There’s wedding planning still going on, and you’re right, I should help with the move. I’m the one who offered them our help. But I can’t put this trip off. I tried, but it can’t wait another month. I want you to come with me. I’ll understand if you need to stay here and work.” He arrived at her place on the plush carpeting just as she turned back around so that he came up behind her and wrapped warm palms over her hips.

“Come with me, Kitten. I need you.” His lips were soft and dry on her shoulder, and she rested the side of her head against his.

“How will you get any work done? You’d be too worried about me alone in a hotel room…”

“No, April,” he turned her with his hands at her waist. “I’m not leaving you in the hotel. I want you to see New York. I want to go there with you. I can get everything finished by mid-day on Friday—
by three at the latest. I want to take you to a Broadway show or two. I want to spend some time with you, love. Just you and me…and Nicholas, I suppose.”

Her eyes widened. “Cas…”

“Look, he’s been badgering me endlessly to bring you up there anyway. You can spend Thursday night and most of Friday in heavy conference with him and the others about the show. He has a guy he wants you to meet for the job as your agent. He can introduce you to people, April. I know you said you don’t want to use my connections to build your career, but this is how it’s done. You make a connection, and it spreads out from there. Go and meet the glitterati in New York. Do whatever musicians do. Make some connections of your own. You don’t need me for that; I’d just be in the way.”

“Go out into New York with just Nick? Cas, are you ill?”

“Well, Jenn watches over him, but he doesn’t really need a chaperone most of the time. And I trust him. He’s a brat, but he knows how to move around the city and in and out of the people around him without getting mauled. He’ll keep you safe. He’ll probably want you to workshop with the musicians and meet the show’s crew. I don’t know what all, but you can expect not to get a lot of sleep while you’re in his presence. I gather the important connections mostly happen in the middle of the night in his circles.”

She gazed up at him. His earnestness poured out. He was trying so hard, and the bond fairly vibrated with his unease. He licked his lip and sighed.

He braced himself and continued. “Friday night, Saturday night, I’ll get us tickets. What would you like to see?” His blue eyes danced. She could feel his body heat warming the air between them, what little air there still was between them.

“I don’t know,” she told him. “I should get advice from Nick, I think.”

“Good,” he nodded solemnly. “I’ll call him.”

“Are you all right, Castiel?” she asked carefully. She stepped away and collected her necklace from the bureau, handing it to him and turning her back to him while lifting her hair. He draped the necklace over her front and fastened it easily, then rested his hand on her neck.

“I’m fine, Kitten. It’s been a tumultuous few weeks. You and I need to start again at understanding each other, and that makes me wary for some reason. I can’t put my finger on why I’m still uneasy.”

“I broke your trust,” she told him, setting a hand on his arm. “I don’t expect a quick fix from that.”

His heavy sigh was the only answer she got, coupled with a wave of sadness from his side of the bond. He wrapped an arm around her front across her chest from one shoulder to the other, and he pulled her in tightly.

“I’m not going to give up on winning it back, Alpha. I’m good for it. You’ll see. I’ll wait.”

He hugged her even tighter still. “I’m conflicted, Kitten – turned all around and baffled where you’re concerned. I love everything about you, and we fit so well together in almost every way without having to try. I enjoy spending time with you, playing with you…If you feel up to the sport of playing mind games with me in the big sandbox, then I’m all for it. Let’s do it! What the hell am I still worried about?”

He released her and sat down right on the floor, his back to the bed, his knees up wide before him.
He looked up at her as at a puzzle he couldn’t unlock.

“Maybe we’re asking too much,” she said. “Being mates comes easy. Maybe we should settle for that.”

He cocked his head to the side. “That wouldn’t be enough for you,” he deduced. “That wouldn’t make you happy at all.”

“I would have Michael,” she murmured softly. “Cas, I don’t know if you have it in you to give me more. I can’t ask more of you than you can give. That wouldn’t be fair. After everything, after all the tangles and the talking, and the…after everything, you’re still holding back…something. Maybe it’ll come with time, and maybe you won’t ever be able to give me that part of you. I’ll take whatever you can give, and I can be happy with it. It’s enough. You’re enough.”

He studied her as if trying to determine if she meant it how it sounded. Then he frowned. “No, it’s not enough,” he argued. “Neither of us will be satisfied with the barest bones of a relationship. We are both more than the sum of our parts, and I don’t want you just to fulfill my chemical needs. I know we’re having a rough time connecting, but I love you, damnit!”

April risked mussing her performance dress by sinking down next to him. “I love you, too,” she told him quietly. “But I’m not sure if I love the real you or the public face. I’m coming to know you slowly, and everything I learn helps build us both up stronger. You make me laugh. You make me feel strong. You’re so much greater and smarter and more powerful than I am. I feel safe with you, but I also feel brave. Is that just the chemical needs thing? Is there more? Is it hopeless that I’ll ever know for sure?”

He reached over and gently straightened a lock of her hair. “You look magnificent. Don’t get too accustomed to believing your mate is ‘greater’ than you are.” His blue eyes glowed softly, a private vulnerable look that she didn’t often get to see from him. “You’re taking all that bravery, and you’re going to be phenomenal onstage tonight. That’s all you, April. Not me. I’m not smarter than you are. I’m not more powerful, although only people who really know you well might see how your power works. I’ve been underestimating you for a long time now, Kitten, but that’s not your responsibility to fix. God, I want so much to…”

His soft eyes grew troubled, and he looked away. She saw his jaw set with stubborn resolve, and he focused back onto her face with energy and light, pulling up onto his knees to face her.

“Come to New York with me. You do your thing with Nicholas while I’m doing mine with the corporate whores I have to pretend to respect. Then we’ll go out. You and me. We’ll stay out all night and make headlines in the tabloids. Come play with me, April.”

She laughed at his childlike exuberance, caught up in his charisma, swept off her feet by his enthusiasm. “When you put it like that…” she said as he leaned in and kissed her hard enough to remind her who he was on all levels.

He nuzzled into her hair as their kiss broke. “Baby, I’m sorry, but I can’t knot you for a while. We need to be careful. I don’t want to risk you catching before your Heat. Heat can cause complications to an early pregnancy. We have to wait.”

“So we’ll wait. Does this mean everything’s off the table? I mean, they sell condoms at the drugstore on the corner.” She bit her lip shyly and blinked up at him. The look he gave her was adorably confused, and then he laughed.

“I haven’t had sex without a bloodstream full of prophylactic hormones for so long, I hadn’t even
considered that,” he laughed and then erupted into gales hard enough to bring tears to his eyes, amused at his own idiocy. She chuckled alongside him.

“You’re joking,” she accused, but he fed her a tone of embarrassment through the bond, and she shook her head slowly in wonder, adoring everything about him in that moment.

April wasn’t sure quite what to think of the venue at first, but she was shocked when the Mistress of Ceremonies nearly trampled a Japanese couple in his haste to get Castiel in a bear hug. The man was enormous – easily over six feet tall without the stilettos, and Amazonian with them. He nearly smothered Cas, shrieking the whole time, and Cas emerged rumpled and laughing.

“Jordyn! It’s good to see you, too. We need a table in the back. I’d prefer not to be too obvious tonight. Can you slip us in unnoticed?” The question was preposterous. Everyone was looking at them, but Jordyn’s eyes flew wide, and he made an effort, putting a manicured finger to his own lips and stage whispering:

“Follow me!”

Mark disappeared into the crowd, but the rest of them, Benny and Andrea, Cas and April, Matt and Bobby all filed in, following the outlandish transvestite in bright crimson sequins. Jordyn’s hands were in April’s hair before they even made it to the table, cooing over its softness, begging Cas to let him take the Ozzie backstage with him for a makeover. He wanted to play dress up with her before the show began, and he had both Cas and April laughing as they sat.

“Actually, my friend,” Cas told him, pulling the gargantuan man into the empty seat beside him. “April’s why we’re here. I hear it’s Open Mic night. Do you think you could squeeze her in for a spot?”

“Oh, no, baby doll!” Jordyn over-emoted his disappointment, crushed to have to spoil her hopes. “We’re full to the brim. Some big new thing stuck her nose in and signed up in every empty space we had. I’m so sorry! Sweetie, you got to call ahead on drag night. It gets cray-cray around here!”

Matt leaned in and cleared his throat. “Check again, man. This girl IS the ‘big new thing’. She’s on the list already.”

“WHAAT!? THIS girl? Nooo! That was a Winchest…OH, FUCK!! You mean THIS girl?!”

April tried not to laugh. It was loud and effusive and everything Castiel usually despised, but she felt nothing but affection and amusement through the bond from him, and she couldn’t help smiling as well. Her smile vanished when the Primate man in sequins and stilettos grabbed her by the hand and launched her nearly airborne to get her backstage, declaring her ensemble completely unacceptable.

Cas watched her go with a smile on his face.

“You could have warned her about Jordyn, Alpha,” Benny rebuked.

“I didn’t realize he was working here, Benny. It’s wonderful to see him that happy.”
“Friend of yours?” put in Andrea, and Cas chuckled again.

“Bobby sent him to me years ago for one of my – our…” he amended, including Benny. “… gender studies in grad school. He was a wreck back then. Didn’t have the slightest idea where he fit or how to ask for what he wanted.”

“He blossomed fast once he met a few others in our study though,” said Benny. “He just needed a safe place to explore.”

“And money for shoes,” put in Bobby. “Those sparkly straps holding his feet to the pointy soles that are torquing his feet all out of alignment probably cost 500 bucks, easy.”

“Where did Mark go?” asked Castiel, looking around.

“Who knows,” answered Matt, distracted. “Networking, probably. He knows everyone in Kansas City. This might look like an amateur dive, but if there are insiders here, he’ll find them. It’s gimmicky, but my boy knows what he’s doing. This is going to be real music, Alpha. It’s not just glitter and posing. The set band is real. The performers are veterans. They only adopt new faces if the newbs can prove they have the chops to hold their own and fight for stage space. Divas don’t like to share. April’s got her work cut out for her here. Mark’s probably trying to see if he can get her a set at the piano.”

Cas nodded and sat back. He could still feel her, and she was not in any distress. He had promised to get out of her way and let her try her hand at performing. He had to admit, this wasn’t what he pictured at all, but it wasn’t his career, and she wasn’t alone.

Mark’s face was all business when he found them a few minutes later. He and Matt put their heads together in conference. People stopped by their table to talk again and again, passing over Castiel to speak with Mark, most notably a tiny Scottish redhead with a thick brogue and a long red cocktail dress who let Matt pull up a chair for her. She stayed through the first set, through April’s premiere song, and through Jordyn making a flourish of seating April, now caked in makeup and sporting plumes in her hair, to a seat at the piano to play with the musicians as backup for the next set. The redhead Scotswoman had a calculating look in her eyes. She whispered incessantly with Mark, and then abandoned her seat without so much as a backward glance.

Mark looked triumphant, and Matt smiled as he continued to take an epic amount of notes. This was a business meeting for the two men. April performed twice more at the microphone, bravely introducing a song of her own composition, and she backed up several other performers with her playing and her impromptu support vocals. She slipped in easily and highlighted the singers’ talents. The audience responded powerfully to her.

Cas thought she was brilliant.

But Matt’s face was stern when she made it back to the table on wobbly heels at the break. He set about going through the notes he’d taken, and April shot Cas one sweet smile before she buckled down to listen to her teacher.

Apparently, she made herself too present in her backup of others. Matt made the point emphatically: Divas don’t share the stage. Get out of the limelight, or get off altogether. Keep your head down and be invisible. No one’s looking at the band when divas take the stage. And for God’s sake, keep the vocals unobtrusive. There’s no faster way to make a bad name for yourself around here than be accused of stealing someone else’s performance.

April took it with the air of a student eager to learn, nodding in concentration. Cas watched her, and
Benny watched Cas. After she left again, wobbling off with a stinging swat to her ass by Mark, Benny leaned in. “I think this is harder on you than it is on her. You sure you’re okay, boss?”

“I don’t like watching her struggle,” Cas admitted.

“You think it’s adorable if she pukes, though,” Benny told him. “Put her up on a stage, and you can’t imagine there’d be anyone in the world who wouldn’t fall all over themselves to gush over how great she is.” There was a tease and more than a grain of truth to Benny’s words.

“She is pretty great,” Cas told him, missing the point flagrantly.

“ALL RIGHT!” cackled Jordyn, falling into Mark’s empty chair by Castiel. “Where have you been hiding her all this time?”

“You can’t have her, Jordyn,” Benny told him. “She’s already taken.”

Jordyn sat back in disgust, batting his fake lashes. “ECH! Thank you, Jesus, for small miracles! I don’t mean like that, you pervert! I mean…” He caught Castiel’s eye, and he was instantly smaller and quieter. The affectation dropped, and so did the timbre of his voice. “Cas, man, this girl’s the real deal. What is she doing here?”

Cas smiled and touched his arm. “She’s practicing, Jordyn. Most of us don’t have your natural polish without practice. She’s got a lot to learn.”

“Mmm,” he agreed. “But her instincts are good. Look at her up there,” he nodded toward the piano where April sat playing. “You see how she let her hair fall a little to cover her face? She’s using that to fade into the background. That’s not an accident.”

Cas glanced at Matt who was still furiously taking notes and mumbling to himself. “Jordyn, do you know the other man who was with us? The one who sat where you are? Have you seen him before?”

“Simpson? What kinda question is that? Everybody knows Mark Simpson. Alpha, that man IS Kansas City music.”

“Then what was he doing where I found him in a conservatory in Topeka?” Cas asked as softly as he could over the music, hoping Matt didn’t hear him.

Jordyn shrugged. “Hell if I know. Everybody has bills to pay, I guess. It costs a pretty penny to tie the knot, and he’s tying his balls to a chain any day now, if my news is correct. I heard he thought he could get an inside step on picking out the next great up and comer. Looks like he did.” He nodded back toward the stage. The heavily costumed singer was bowing his thanks to the crowd and made a point of directing some of the applause to the pianist, obviously pleased with her. April beamed. Matt glanced up but then tucked back down and kept writing.

They didn’t see Mark again for two hours. It took a while for Cas to realize that Bobby was gone too. Benny cast Cas a worried look, but Cas felt reassured rather than worried. The world was as it should be if the people he trusted to move silently through the dark places where the reeds were thickest were out of his line of sight. It meant they were doing precisely what he most trusted them to do – keeping his Pack safe and paving him a way forward. Cas raised his glass in a silent toast to Benny and then sipped.

Benny looked askance from his best friend, to the stage, and back again. He leaned in close. “Dean’s right about you. You’re a Mob boss. Don’t bother denying it.”
Cas chuckled into his glass. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

At the conclusion of the evening, one thing was clear. April needed voice lessons. She was passable by normal standards, far better than some performers whose recordings top the charts, but natural talent and an ear that could mimic others wasn’t going to cut it where Mark wanted her performing. The Kennedy Center didn’t hand out medals to ‘Passables’. She didn’t seem to take offense or count the advice as an insult or a defeat though. She glowed with triumph at having withstood the tempest of a crazy stage where ‘Over the Top’ was just the start. They adored her backstage, most of the performers trying to adopt her on the spot and scuffling over who got to apply her makeup.

She’d made friends. Her feet were killing her, but she’d stepped up and ad-libbed backups for some of the most demanding divas in Missouri, and walked away with their adoration. It was a step. Just one. And it would mean very little in the long run. It was just a practice run, a chance to let her coaches see her under the spotlights and focus in on where she was weak.

From here, there would be a lot of work. She had many more nights like this one yet to come. She had miserable work sessions in studios not yet imagined where nothing would go right for hours and tempers flared up hot and fast. She had marathon composing sessions ahead of her, when deadlines would be looming, and the notes didn’t want to come.

But not yet.

Cas sat across from her in the back seat, rubbing her feet, watching her think in silence. He basked in the sensation of her emotions, laid out before him in all their depth and rich, rich colors, and he wondered what she was thinking as she watched the street lights flow by one after another.

She looked around at him, and she smiled. A coy look down at her lap and then up again from beneath her lashes, and Cas no longer had to wonder what she was thinking. After a night as intense as this one, she would need help rebalancing. She was holding it together for the long drive home, but she could only do that so long.

Cas cleared his throat and tapped Benny on the shoulder. Benny looked up into the rearview mirror. “Something bothering you, Alpha?” he teased.

“See if you can find a 24-hour drugstore, Benny. I need a box of condoms.”

They’d been friends a long time, and had been through all kinds of trials together, but the great Castiel Winchester, Alpha of alphas, finding himself caught out on the town with a horny Omega and no protection, wasn’t something he was ever going to let his friend forget. Cas took the ribbing but reminded Benny that if there’s one thing Mob bosses know, it’s vengeance.

Benny wasn’t fazed. He was the one with the car keys after all.

They got the Winchester couple situated with little fuss, and the four of them giggled their way into the kitchen entrance. Only Cas was tipsy, but his playful mood infected everyone.

Benny and Andrea had decided to stay over so that their dog and April’s could bond, teaching the puppy some doggie social skills. And Benny had an early morning ahead of him. Jack and Ketch would both be arriving early, and Benny wanted to be there. He and Cas hatched a plan to bring
them in while their mates were away in North Carolina and let Andrea and Benny both get to know them. It was the first Convention Benny had missed in years, but he didn’t regret his decision to skip out.

Benny’s new betas would stay at the Winchester estate in the Gate house. It was an elegant plan. Cas needed to leave town tomorrow for a couple of pivotal meetings in Dayton, and Benny was taking custody of April while her mate was gone. Having his two new Packmates there as well meant that April could expect to be allowed to work uninterrupted, kept company by Andrea who was less likely to hover over her every move.

And the puppy would get everyone’s attention. A permanent yard for Portia was being fenced in over the weekend, so she could frolic outside at her leisure without the danger of getting lost.

The couples stumbled up the stairs together but parted at the top. Benny knew where he was going. He practically had a room of his own here.

“Hey, brother,” he called up the hall to the Alpha whose head was already bent low over his Ozzie’s neck. “It’s been a long time. You need me to show you how to use one of those rubber things?”

Castiel flipped him off, and Andrea pointed out loudly that with the current state of her own belly, there was no clear evidence that Benny knew how to use a condom any better than Castiel might. Castiel reached down and hoisted April up into his arms bridal style and carried her into his room, slamming the door hard behind him.

Benny snickered. He wasn’t drunk, just thrilled to see his best friend happy and excited to get his own Pack off the planning room floor at long last.

“Come on, Mercutio,” his mate coaxed. “Two couples can play at that game. And we don’t need a condom.”

Chapter End Notes

Only one chapter this month. Yuletide family stuff consumed a lot of my time. Everybody is well this year. They say hi.

I liked working some parallels into this chapter. That was satisfying.
Chapter 102

Chapter Summary

Gabe's losing ground in every direction and finding himself pretty OK with that. Benny sets the new guys some boundaries.

Chapter Notes

Oh, my dearest loves. I’ve missed writing terribly. It's been so long. Adoration and appreciation to all of you for being so damn supportive. You guys are at the forefront of my thoughts when the therapist asks me if I’ve got a solid support structure, and I say, Yep! I'm set! They're the best!

And I continue to be committed to actually finishing the thing at some point. We really are making progress. Just slowly. Think of it as a delay/denial kink of mine. Yeah, that's what it is.

This THEN section was born from a suggestion, as many are. I throw it out there: if there's something from anyone's past you want to see, no promises, mind you, but I'm very open to requests.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 102 – Monday, August 21, 2017

THEN:
Castiel didn’t like to frequent the clubs when he visited New York and other big cities, but he dropped in now and then to make sure he had a feel for the pulse of popular BDSM play styles. He couldn’t afford to lose touch with what the Primates were doing, even if a lot of it felt dreadfully off base to him.

He never took Dean. Dean wasn’t for play, and he wasn’t for showing off. He was a jealously guarded secret. He was Castiel’s and Cas’ alone.

Not for sharing, not even by harmless voyeurs.

He sat near the back of the public space, dimly lit, sipping red wine, and for the first time this evening, he was alone.

The orange wristband he sported advised others that he was not playing this evening, but most of them knew who he was, and they liked to sidle up to the booth he’d made into his perch and pester him with questions.

No, that wasn’t fair. Having questions has never been a crime, and it stands to reason that if Cas has answers, Cas should make himself available to answer. At least within reason. Cas knew no one here tonight but the proprietor, a wolf named Sandy, and a few of the employees. Most of the clientele were Primates, priding themselves on playing in a “wolf” space as if that added credence to the silly play-acting they did with each other.

Castiel grunted quietly to himself, disgusted at his own harsh contempt. Tomorrow, he would fly down to Providence to scope out the community outreach facilities there and meet with an investor who wanted an ACRI-style facility built on the Brown University campus. Cas wasn’t even seriously considering expanding the business yet. They were still feeling their way through in Kansas.

He sipped from his glass, watching the stage where a binding demonstration was turning more into a full public scene than a demo. Cas was pleased with the couple. They weren’t Lupin, but they seemed to have the subtle, nonverbal interplay down better than most apes. The Domme was quick to respond to discomfort that hadn’t been intended, and the sub spoke trust with his eyes, not fear as so many ape subs seemed to do, at least in the clubs Cas had visited. Would that he could alter that.

They were a good pairing, and Cas let his eyes wander out into the spectators, many of whom were so engrossed in the stage show, they stood slack-mouthed and lusting. The smell was cloying. Cas would need a shower.

He spotted a couple near the back, and he focused on them, not alarmed exactly, merely attentive. The Dom was dressed in an oozy white silk shirt and a pair of black trousers that probably came from a tuxedo ensemble. At his feet, a diminutive sub knelt, mostly nude, clearly uncomfortably cold and trembling. The man’s hand clutched harshly in her hair, mussing it at the top of her head from the tidy and sophisticated bun she had knotted at her nape. The woman looked miserable in every sense of the word, and the man was ignoring her except where his grip was causing her pain. His eyes were on the stage, and one hand stroked a flat palm over his erection. The sub couldn’t have seen anything if she’d tried.

Cas took another sip, scenting the air afterward, seeking any olfactory tell he might be able to get from the couple. There was nothing. The room was too full of horny escapades to pick out an individual scent. He watched them.
The demo ended, and the stage cleared, sweat and semen swiftly wiped away by staff, and all the binding ropes coiled neatly in the Domme’s carryall. The audience began to disperse. Cas’ focus went back to the pair near the rear. The Dom had pulled her bodily to her feet by her hair, and was speaking harshly to her in her ear. She winced, and her hands came up to hold his wrist and his hand, an effort to extract herself.

Her face turned from discomfort to frustration to anger in rapid turns, and her voice lifted above the crowd.

“I said no! I don’t want to do this anymore! Let go!”

Castiel stood up.

“You swore to me, little girl. You can’t be good for one fucking night? Didn’t I promise I would take care of you if you’ll just do what I say for one evening? You act like it’s all about you! Spoiled, useless, piece of…”

Castiel’s grip on his lapel startled him enough that he let go of her hair, and she dropped back down to her knees without his hold. Cas walked the man backward until his back thumped against the wall, and he held him there with a forearm across his chest.

“What the fuck, man!?”

“What’s that young woman’s safeword?” Cas asked him.

“Jesus! Let go of me, you asshole! It’s none of your business. She’s into humiliation shit! We were just playing around. Haven’t you ever heard of scening? She gets off on it. Trust me, man, she loves it!”

The man smelled out of control. He smelled like dominant aggression turned loose. He smelled dangerous.

“I asked you a question,” Castiel replied, steel in his tone. His forearm pressed tighter against the hard chest in front of him.

“And I said mind your own damn business!”

Cas could sense the club’s muscled bouncers taking positions flanking him, but he didn’t turn.

“I rarely repeat questions once I’ve asked them, but I’ll give you one more opportunity, as you seem rather dim to me. What is her safeword?”

“We don’t have one, all right? We agreed to a free night. Anything I want goes! She agreed, mister, so mind your fucking business and get off me or I’ll have you thrown out on your ass! Last time I looked, she called ME Daddy, not you!”

“You initiated a hardcore humiliation scene with no means for the sub to tap out?” Cas asked him, repulsed at the recklessness of apes.

“She. Loves. It.” He answered. “Leslie, tell this cretin you love it!”

Cas turned his head a fraction and found her with his peripheral vision. She was standing near one of the bouncers with his suit jacket draped across her shoulders, trembling too hard to speak and giving off terror in her scent.
“Bruce,” Cas said to the bouncer who had relinquished his blazer. “Take her to one of the empty rooms and calm her down. Call Carmen in. Get her some juice and something to wear.”

“Sure thing, Alpha,” Bruce answered, settling his massive palms over her shoulders and turning her gently with a soft word in her ear. Bruce could be the gentlest man Cas had ever known. Or he could tear a body in two. Cas thought it might be best to have him elsewhere. He turned his attention back to the ape in his grip.

“Look,” said the dickwad in tuxedo pants. “I get it. You misread what you were seeing. It happens. We should maybe play at home next ti…!?” He choked off his word as Cas shifted his arm to fall across his throat.

“I haven’t misread anything,” Cas assured him. “And YOU aren’t ever going to see or touch that young lady again.”

“You can’t tell me…” He ran out of air again and petered off.

“That may be entirely true, my friend,” Cas said lightly. “Or you may well find that I CAN instruct you in the proper care and treatment of a sub, and that I CAN decide whom you must never contact again. You may find that I can ENFORCE my instruction as well,” Cas enunciated the word carefully, and the douchwheel’s eyes widened.

“Who are you?” Cas was asked. It wasn’t the first time someone like this pathetic loser had asked him that, and he could hear Dean’s playful voice in his head… (I’m Batman) or (I’m no one to be trifled with), and Cas’ lip twitched incrementally.

“My name is Castiel, and you’ll find that my presence in this place holds weight. Given a chance to explain ourselves and our mutual actions this evening, you’re going to be gravely disappointed that my opinion carries far more credibility than yours. And that leaves you a couple of choices. Would you like to hear them?”

“Fuck you!”

“No, that’s not one of the choices.” The other bouncer at Cas’ back chuckled. Cas turned his head and spoke to him. “Jared, would you please give us some privacy?”

“Sure thing, Alpha. Folks, back up a bit!” Jared began shooing the crowd back to their regular activities, and Cas softened his arm a bit.

“I’m going to give you a little advice, mister…?”

“Fuck you!”

“Very well, I’ll call you Jim. Jim, you seem to be of the mistaken impression that an ‘Anything goes’ D/s scene means that you’re at liberty to assault a person without consequences.”

‘Jim’ struggled in Castiel’s grip, but Cas had him bound in place, even as it seemed like there wasn’t enough pressure exerted to hold him there. “It is critical if you’re going to attempt this type of play, that you are fully aware of your own compulsions and how to control them. What you’ve mistaken for an urge to dominate a partner is actually a psychotic impulse to release an unfettered and destructive level of aggression. You, Jim, are not a candidate for safe BDSM play. You are immature and impulsive, and your sadistic impulses pass unfiltered onto your unwitting victim. Don’t try this again unless you’ve sought and completed a concentrated course of intensive psychotherapy. You’re forthwith banned from this club and all others within a fifty mile radius. You need to find a safe outlet for your aggression. I hear that pounding old tractor tires with a sledgehammer works for some
‘Jim’ was irate. His face was bright red, although, to be fair, his airway was also partially restricted.

“Calm yourself, Jim. I’m going to let you breathe freely, and I want you to take in slow, deep breaths until your heartrate slows. Listen to me while you calm down. Shh, don’t speak.”

Jim’s furious glare didn’t leave Cas’ face, but he’d stopped struggling.

“Good. I need you to understand that a proper D/s scene gives as much to the sub as it does to the dom, but that’s not something you can take for granted. The very moment the Dom fails to listen to the sub or fails to notice distress is the moment he forfeits the right to lead. I’m not telling you this by way of instruction. I am NOT instructing you, Jim. Do you understand? I’m putting an explanation to the consequence you’ve earned, wherein your rights to Top other people has been revoked. Do not engage in any form or power exchange play with live people. Do you understand?”

“The fuck…? You can’t…”

Cas’ fist closed in a tangle of the man’s hair, and he slammed the 70’s disco wannabe’s skull into the plaster, leaving a slightly rounded dent in the wall.

“Ungh!” Jim grunted.

“Are you still listening to me, Jim? Nod for me.”

Jim’s unfocused eyes cracked open, and he nodded slightly, taking the opportunity to size up the man who seemed to be able to do whatever he wanted. Castiel shifted to bring his face very close to Jim’s. The man went completely still.

“Good. Here’s the kicker. Take this chance you’ve been given, once you’re released to crawl back to your lair without a stopover at the precinct for fingerprints and assault charges, and learn something from it. Tonight could well be the turning point for your life, but that depends entirely upon you. Jared is going to throw your ass out now, but he’s going to slip you a short list of resources that you can use if you’re interested in joining the world of adults who have mastered the skill of self-restraint. Do you understand?”

“Yeah…” Jim blinked, stunned at his own answer.

“Don’t forget your ban, Jim. Don’t forget that I will be very displeased if I learn you’ve attempted to break it. My name is Castiel, and I will be watching.”

Cas let him go and backed up several feet. Jim came off the wall looking dazed.

“You may gather your things and leave with dignity, escorted by my good friend Jared; or you may throw a tantrum and have you hip bruised by the pavement as you’re flung unceremoniously from the premises. Leslie will be escorted home safely. You may relinquish your sense of worry for her wellbeing now. She is not yours to protect. Have a lovely evening, Jim.”

“Chad.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Name’s not Jim. It’s Chad.”

Cas beckoned Jared, a Primate with the bulky body-type of a beta, but the disposition of an alpha.
“Jared, would you please escort Chad to the exit? You will want to retain a copy of his ID, so that you can blacklist him until further notice.”

“I got him, Alpha. Go enjoy your drink. Show’s starting soon. We got a strapping lesson.”

“Thank you, Jared. I do love a good strapping.”

NOW:

Dean’s back glistened with sweat which aggravated the scored fingernail marks striping him from shoulders to hips. He quivered, head tucked down between his arms, hands clutching the wooden slats on the headboard.

He held.

And Michael gloated.

That was all his doing, and the pair of them were magnificent. If only someone could see.

“You did it, angel,” Michael praised earnestly. “You remember what we said? You want me to take the ring off and let you feel what you just earned from me?” He crawled up onto the bed behind his mate, running a soothing hand along his heaving flank. Dean didn’t manage any words, but he nodded, his face turned downward.

It was too much.

Every molecule vibrated separately from every other, and Dean couldn’t catch the rhythm of breathing. What a way to go though, eh? Suffocate on his own ineptitude? Maintain perfect concentration through the whole ordeal and earn that tone from Michael only to succumb by failing to remember how to breathe, the first skill he ever learned? His chest heaved, and his back rounded, pulling at the welts and setting his body alight with a crisp stinging that caught his attention.

He gasped.

“Shh, shh,” Michael smoothed. “All done, sweetest. Goddamn, you’re beautiful!” Michael’s voice and his touch centered the Sub. Slow, steady strokes up and down his ribs gave him something to mimic when the concept of breathing fled once more. He slowed down to Michael’s soft, pleased voice, his careful touch.

“I’m reaching beneath you, baby. Gonna unsnap the ring. Don’t flinch. Be my good boy.” Dean squeezed his eyes closed. His body so flooded with adrenalin and endorphins, it felt separate from the mind holding him to a regular breathing pattern, frustratingly necessary if he intended to maintain consciousness through his reward. Separate too, was the wolf, panting in the sunlight, ears pricked forward, then laying swiftly down again in a circular repeat, looking for something solid.

He gasped again as the cockring released its hold and disappeared. A warm, dry hand circled him, applying a firm easy pressure but not going anywhere with it. Michael scuffled a little at Dean’s back looking for the best position, but he soon settled. The hand slid backward and squeezed his knot – full, swollen, sore, and hot.

“OH! SIR!!”
“Shh, it’s all right, sweetheart. Relax. Breathe with me and relax. Don’t talk. I’ve got you.” Michael adjusted his torso to lay over Dean’s left side, pressing his Sub’s chest into the bed so that only the structure of Dean’s thighs, set rigidly against the bedding from hip to knee offered him height off the soft welcoming mattress. The lightest push in the wrong direction would topple him, but that would spoil Michael’s reward. Michael moved carefully, mind wide to Dean’s senses – all of them.

Michael breathed smoothly and deeply, humming pleasure when Dean matched him with careful effort. The training that had gone into perfecting Michael’s Submissive…well, there was no use mourning that he’d missed out on that. All that was left was to put it to use and appreciate it.

Once Dean’s breathing stabilized, and Michael could sense that he wasn’t lost to tunnel-vision any longer, he increased the pace of his pulsing squeezes ever so slowly. Dean’s moans at the sensation…that was Michael’s reward for a job well done. Dean keened softly and began to pulse his hips incrementally into the clutch at the base of his cock.

He was so close already.

It wasn’t a time to draw anything out. He ached in so many places, and the places that didn’t ache, stung.

But he’d done it, and he deserved the touch, the grip, the warm fist and the encouraging voice, entreating him to let it all go and just feel.

So he did.

Michael stayed right there with him, but the Dominant let the Sub decide the tempo and the depth. Dean turned a gentle thrumming pulse of his hips into a desperate thrusting, using muscles he’d forgotten he had, clinging to the bedstead and pushing backward into the weight of Michael’s body, downward into the ring of his fist, wet with all the moisture from Dean’s efforts, slicked up from running intentionally over the head of his cock and spreading precome all the way down to the sensitive space behind his bulging knot.

Dean was too tired for this. It took longer than it should. He had to slow almost to a stop twice to catch his breath and let his burning thighs get a grip. There should probably be a conversation soon about his workout habits. But not yet.

When it finally washed over him, it was more an exhale of warm relief than a shock to his overwrought system. Dean whimpered into the pillow, and he began to shake all over, but it felt so, so fucking good.

And it went on, pulsing across Michael’s fingers, into the duvet that they didn’t think to move before they soiled it. Dean began to sob softly in relief. His shoulders shook with the force of his release. His pillow absorbed the sweat, tears, and slobber that he had long since stopped trying to contain.

Dean’s knees gave out, trapping Michael’s hand beneath him, and the Dom chuffed an amused laugh, pulling free and licking between his fingers. He ruffled Dean’s hair.

Dean floated for a while more, there in the wet spots. He was in no hurry, and no one needed anything from him at the moment. He was free. Free to feel.

Just feel.

He could feel each and every place on his body, from the coolness when Michael’s warm damp cloth passed across his back, to the cold tang of the juice that slipped down his parched throat when Michael eased him onto his back and sat behind him, holding a straw between his lips.
Thoughts evaporated before they coalesced here in Dean’s reward. Just as they ought to do.

He missed the passage of time. Had he slept? It was dark. He was naked and warm beneath clean, dry bedding. Michael’s lazy hand swiped up and down his arm, from shoulder to wrist where it lay on his belly.

It was dark.

“W’t time zit?”

“I dunno. Late. Early. Go back to sleep, alpha. I’ve got you.”

“Michael…”

“Shh.”

“Gotta pee.”

Michael chuckled. “I know,” he whispered. “I was hoping you would sleep a little longer. I was watching you come back down out of the clouds. It’s beautiful. You’re beautiful, Dean.”

“Feel like a wet mop,” Dean mumbled. “Gonna have to call in sick. Can’t walk.”

Michael laughed, quiet to fit the hour. “You can’t call in sick from your own convention because of a hard scene, baby. C’mon. Let’s get you walking. Just to the bathroom and back. I’ll help.”

“Can take a piss without you holding it for me, sir…” It was a pathetic effort at throwing a brat’s voice into the mix, and Michael ignored it. He hefted Dean toward the side of the bed carefully, and pulled Dean’s arm around his shoulders. Their first mutual step sent Dean’s breath into little huffs. He rocked back on his heels, but Michael steadied him.

“You’re going to be something to witness at the sessions tomorrow,” the Omega observed. “There’s no hiding this, Dean. You good with that?”

“A little late to ask that now,” Dean grumbled back, bracing his spine and hobbling forward with his teeth gritted. He wasn’t really resentful. He’d known full well what he was signing up for. Mostly, he just needed a bag to punch when the aches shot up from every moving part, and Michael knew that. Not all aftercare is tangible, ticked off of a checklist. Sometimes, it’s standing in place and letting the Sub grouse a bit.

And Dean knew what Michael was doing. Entering his sixth week of pregnancy, the Omega was beginning to feel the pressure of his swelling womb assert dominance over his guts, and his guts weren’t at all appreciative. The embryo would be no bigger than a sesame seed, but the support structures were taking over Michael’s lower half. He was uncomfortable most of the time, but he put it all aside to let Dean berate him with a lighthearted amount of self-pity.

And that to Dean and Michael both, was what being mates was all about.

Buck up, Winchester, thought Dean. You got a show to put on.

Michael helped him pee. Dean fell asleep standing before the toilet, leaning backward into his mate, Michael’s hand directing his flow, and his strong arm keeping Dean centered against him so his legs didn’t buckle.

And Michael was content.
Gabe’s face as he spoke to his brother over the phone, his face alone told Kali she should bugger off to parts elsewhere. It was probably time to head back to her apartment in Kansas City to finish packing everything that was left. And there was always work to do in the shop, even if it was closed on Mondays. Gabe wouldn’t meet her eye. He had a childishly petulant glower going – a damned good one – and he was kicking out at the table leg in increasing strength the longer he listened to whatever Castiel had to say.

Kali settled for backing out without a word, popping a terse text into his phone, and making herself scarce.

Gabe fumed silently.

“How did you find out?” he asked, a la fourth grader.

At the other end of the line, Cas huffed impatiently. “She told me, Gabriel. Look, I’m not upset that you’re teaching them survival and defense skills. Hell, that’s great! Keep doing it! They need all the confidence they can get. But you need to tell me precisely what you’re teaching them. I want details, Omega.”

“She told you,” he said flatly, running a hand through his hair exactly the way his brother did it. “Of course she did.”

“I’m waiting,” the Alpha reminded him. The power disparity fairly crackled down the distance between Ohio and Kansas. Hierarchies didn’t maintain themselves, and Castiel’s expression was audible through the land line.

“I can’t tell you the details, man. There’s a code.”

“I’ve HAD it with your fucking CODE, Gabriel! There is nothing in the world that my mate and my pack should be keeping from me. I demand answers, or so help me…”

“Alpha, listen. Take a day or two. Cool off. I can put together a rough sketch…”

“I’m not interested in a rough sketch!”

“If I give you my whole playbook, man, I got nothing left!” Gabriel begged.

“Watch yourself, Omega,” said Castiel coldly. “Informalities are not appropriate right now, and you know that. You have until I return tomorrow to pull yourself together and answer me.”

“Sorry, Alpha,” the Omega said deferentially, thinking fast. Across the distance, Cas sighed heavily.

“If I have to get the details from April, you will be grounded for two months. But, Gabriel, I will get answers.” Cas had imbued his tone with that ineffable alpha sternness that brooked no argument. Gabe’s eyelids fluttered, and he felt a tremor cross his neck and shoulders as if a weighty hand rested there.

Silence followed the Alpha’s declaration. They listened to one another breathe.

“I’m…” Cas tried, appealing to Gabe’s desperation to reach as many vulnerable individuals as he
could. “I’m parsing together a new curriculum, and Gabe, if the strategies you have to teach Michael and April are important survival skills, then we need to add them to the courses we teach. I don’t understand what’s got you so…”

“Defiant?”

“Stubborn!”

“There’s a code, sir.”

“So I’ve heard.” Cas didn’t hang up, and Gabriel wouldn’t until he’d been granted leave. The argument stalled though. “I can hear you, Omega,” Cas told him. “You’ve got your arms crossed, holding the receiver with your shoulder so you can hunker down better. I know you, big brother. But you’re not going to win this one. It affects my mate and Michael, and it’s about their safety. Gabe, you have to know, there is no barrier in the world big enough to keep me from getting every detail when their safety is in the mix. Don’t test me.”

Gabriel didn’t answer him.

“I’ll be home tomorrow. I expect you to be forthcoming when I get there. Goodbye, Gabriel.”

Gabe slammed the receiver down without answering. The concurrent feeling of contented safety and security that passed through him only served to fuel his ire. He wasn’t one to struggle in his bindings the way so many Omegas did now that their providential station was becoming more and more apparent, but COME ON!

He couldn’t hold it against April. Keeping things from her mate had nearly been catastrophic, and he knew she was obligated to meet her own needs before his.

But the code.

Was nothing sacred?

Gabe had to face up to the fact that telling Cas all his strategies would harm no one but himself. Years of sneaking in and out of the shadows – using techniques he developed himself and practicing relentlessly on his own brother until he felt certain he could wrap Cas around his pinkie finger and make him see any damn thing Gabriel wanted him to see – that might serve other Omegas in vulnerable places too, but mostly it meant freedom for Gabe. Telling it all to his brother was the hard snap of a lock cinching down on his movements.

April brought him tea on her break, and she questioned him with her eyes when she noticed the mood he was in. He shook her off. It wasn’t her fault. And he didn’t regret one moment of instruction that was meaning she and Michael had a toolbox full of options when shit got too real to think.

But damn that Alpha! Damn him and his omniscient insight. Damn his need to control everything. Damn this fucking universe that made sure Gabe knew in his soul that Cas had the right of it. Gabe closed his eyes. April’s hand on his was light and warm.

And Castiel was right, as usual. Not only would Gabriel not be winning this one, his gut reminded him that he shouldn’t, and that burned most of all.

“How’d it go Saturday night,” he asked, looking for any way to get his mind off his brother.

“Went great!” she beamed. “Benny’s got the video. I’ll have him send it to you. And, Gabe, I signed
an agent! Mark’s been circling her for weeks, and she’s been putting him off, but she was there on Saturday, and she signed me…just like that!”

“Breathe, kiddo.” He set the tea down just in time to catch her hug. “Whoa. Right. We’re excited about this, I know. But don’t lose your head. You’re not in the short game. You’re playing long, remember? An agent is going to want you onstage or recording right away, and that’s not what you said you wanted.”

“I know,” she admitted. “I’m still working the plan. It’s just a thrill to have people who don’t know me sit up and pay attention. I never expected anyone but my parents to think I have any talent – not really.”

He grinned at her. “But you knew different, didn’t you? Don’t lie to me. You knew you’re elite long before you let on that you knew.”

Her face grew drawn and distant. “Gabe, there are so many talented people. It’s a numbers game…numbers and luck. It’s hard work, but there’s so many other factors that go into having a successful career in music. The vast majority of professionals are making a living one gig at a time, taking students and all kinds of inconveniences just to get by. Do you know how many really talented hardworking musicians work two or three jobs in addition to their gigs? How naïve would I have to be to think I have a shot at something bigger? No matter whether I’m elite or not…whatever that even means. I’m a little fish in a great big ocean that chews up and eats little fish like me. I would’ve had to be delusional. I can’t afford not to be realistic.”

“Well, what I know about the big successes out there?” he said, nudging her in the ribs. “Is that they’re all delusional. They just don’t care. They do it anyway.”

She smiled demurely. “I didn’t stand a chance back at my dad’s house in Lawton. I never would have dared to hope.”

He caught her smile deepening, and he chuckled. “Mm-hm,” was all he said.

She blushed and looked back up. “It’s exciting. Next week I’ll meet with a guy in New York that Nick wants Cas to hire as my manager. And Nick is giving me full credit as a co-writer of the show now that I’ve had a hand in every piece he’s got. I’ll be listed right alongside him on the marquee, in the playbill.”

“Kiddo, you wrote two of the songs! You deserve that spotlight. He may have given you a chance that most composers don’t get at your age, but April, you pulled through. He heard you on your first trip to New York, and he zeroed in on you because he knows what IT sounds like, and you’re IT!”

Gabe turned in his chair to face her, his tantrum forgotten. “And Cas with his jaw hitting the floor! That was fucking rich!”

Okay, so possibly not completely forgotten.

“Who’s this agent? I want to do a full background.”

April laughed. “You can’t possibly think Cas hasn’t already scoped her…”

“Yeah, well, we don’t necessarily look for the same things, he and I,” Gabe put in, not ready to be put off.

“Her name’s Rowena McLeod. She’s a Scot. Thick brogue. I could hardly understand her.”

“And the manager wannabe?”
“Guy named Darius Cain. Nick’s worked with him for years I think. He goes by his last name. I’m not making any decisions until I meet him in New York next weekend.” She watched him chew on the news. He obviously didn’t know either name, but he was running through something in his head. Formulating a plan, perhaps?

“April, I need you to be a little circumspect about the lessons I’m giving you and Michael. Can you do that, punkin? For me?”

It came out of nowhere, and April sat up straighter, not falling for the affection and for once not playing that she might. “I’m done keeping secrets from him, Gabe. I told you that. If there’s something you don’t want him to know about, then don’t tell me.”

“Heaven give me strength,” he moaned, casting his eyes skyward, and she smacked his leg.

“You don’t care what he knows,” she accused. “As long as he doesn’t know *everything*.”

“Sue me!”

“And you don’t want him to catch you sneaking out!”

“Duh!”

She laughed, and after a moment, he joined her.

“He’s a good man, Gabe,” she said seriously once their chuckles died to an awkward silence. “He loves you, and he’s good at picking out the parts of each of us that need a firmer hand. He wants to take care of you. I think you should let him.”

“Well look at you, little miss ancient tree of wisdom.” There was no bite in the words, only fondness.

“You don’t fool me, Omega,” she told him conspiratorially. “You’re ready to hand off the wild adventures anyway. Having Alpha rein you in, however you manage to work it, lets you turn it loose guilt-free.”

He studied her closely, and then tossed his hands inconsequentially into the air as if a paradigm shift to his life’s work was of no moment. “I still have my computer,” he pointed out. “Still have my network. Only thing missing is…Alex.”

His face lost all color, and April moved fast to place her neck, the space just behind her ear, directly before his nose as she hugged him, and she breathed deeply. It was instinct; Alex’s death coming up randomly and slapping Gabe on the back of the head sent him reeling, and he needed Omega scent in his nostrils.

Minutes passed.

Both of their cell phones buzzed alternately. But they didn’t move. They didn’t speak. Until Matt came tapping on Gabriel’s suite door.

“April? Break’s over, hon. You okay?”

“Hm? Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Coming.”

Matt disappeared, and April pulled away from her brother-in-law. His amber eyes had so very much to say…so much he would never say…so much he would never need to.

“Don’t ask me for things you know I can’t give,” she whispered. “And take a good look at what’s
got you so turned around. Cas may have scratched a scab off before you were ready, but it was coming off eventually anyway. You don’t want what you once did, Gabe. Go figure out what it is you want now. And leave me and Cas out of it. Kay?”

He didn’t flinch when she called him out and laid him bare and hit the bullseye all at once. He held her eye and let her in. He knew she could see it – could see the fledgling creep of a desire long stifled. He knew there was no hiding from any of the three of them. His wife, his brother, his cohort, there was no hiding this. Gabriel was Omega above everything else, and he longed nightly in the same way Michael had until recently, until his fulfillment. Maybe it was having the twins here. Maybe it was the scent of pregnancy that followed Michael’s steps.

Whatever.

What good was a life spent saving others if he sacrificed what he risked everything to give them a chance at? And it had always been there, this longing. He pretended that his sequential traumas had obliterated what his body craved, but it had never faded; not even a little, not even when his rage at his own helplessness blinded him and sent him scrabbling away at it, seeking to scrape it out of his body like a lesion. Not even once he knew for certain he’d scraped away every potential to carry and nurture from within himself.

The longing remained.

Damn the Alpha and his intrusive questions! Damn the beta and her deep soulful brown eyes that reflected compassion instead of pity! Damn that Omega who could see him to his core, no matter how many masks he layered one atop the other!

She was still looking at him. One brow arched up slowly. She knew what he was thinking.

“Get the fuck out of my room, you brat!” he said, standing abruptly and overbalancing her. She tumbled and landed on her hip with a squeal and a laugh.

“I’m gonna be Aunt April,” she told him with authority. Smugly.

“You’re already Aunt April twice over,” he pointed out.

“It’s different.”

“You’re a bitch. I don’t want kids.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Omegas make lousy fathers.”

“Omegas make excellent parents,” she shot back. “The pup isn’t going to care who shot the sperm at whose egg. Be the mom anyway if that’s what your Omega tells you is right. Seriously, Gabe. Kids don’t care. They want love and security and trust. They want affection, direction, protection…hey, that’s a rhyme sequence. I should work that into some lyrics.”

“Get out!”

“I’m going!”

The pillow hit the door after she slammed it closed. Gabriel stood in the middle of his room, stunned. He’d only been toying with the idea. He hadn’t been serious. Right?
He looked around sharply. Where had Kali disappeared to?

Jack lazed in the jacuzzi, letting the afternoon sun heat his shoulders. The sun felt different here than back home, and he loved it. He closed his eyes and reminisced. That last Skype chat with Jo. His alpha. Holy shit. *His alpha.* He felt his cheeks warm at the memory. They hadn’t simply talked, and Jack smiled to himself.

He was a shy beta, normally. He’d never before really considered Skype video sex. They weren’t even Mated yet. He’d stuck with other betas his whole life, never put any real thought into what a female alpha might do for him. TO him.

He’d been tentative at first, treading carefully, knowing alphas have their own sense of space. Alphas Top. He’d always thought that was kind of a given, unless they were definitively Tertiary Subs. But Jo wasn’t – a Sub, that is. So…thus the light treads into dangerous topics.

So much wasted worry. Jack stretched his legs out under the water, leaning way back in sublime satisfaction. He was a little sore around his groin from their impromptu play, and he wanted to feel it. That had most definitely NOT been his intent when he opened the topic of preferences, but as they chatted honestly, unabashedly, as the words tumbled out so easily, and they both realized how well they lined up, one against the other, first Jack and then Jo had let nature and instinct lead them, and it had been a spectacular bit of unexpected debauchery.

She was beautiful. She was so much more beautiful naked and panting.

“The Alpha’s expecting us at the big house in twenty minutes. Get out and get dressed. I’m not waiting for you if you dawdle.”

The Brit and his overbearing presence broke the spell around Jack, and he ducked his head beneath the water to wash off the layer of sweat on his face.

“No one uses the word ‘Dawdle’, in America, Arthur,” he said as he climbed out. He grabbed a towel, slung it around his hips, and trotted into the cool main floor of the Guest house, hurrying a little regardless.

“The name, **boy,** is Ketch. It’s a single syllable that even your perverse, lackadaisical, pedestrian linguistic standard on this backward continent should be capable of enunciating correctly.”

“My bad. **Ketch,**” sassed Jack cheerfully, enunciating with care. “You don’t have to wait. I’m kinda prone to dawdling,” he called down the stairs as he hustled up them three at a time, smirking. The guy was a blowhard, but he wasn’t really that bad. He was just unsure of his status here in this strange place, and he wasn’t willing to give away a gram of standing he didn’t have to. Unsure far worse than a beta like Jack whose status was obvious. Didn’t mean Jack wasn’t going to tweak him when his bluster topped acceptable levels, but Jack was sure they would settle. There was a possessive, protective glint in the Dominant’s eye that Jack thought could mean good things, provided it was canted toward covering him, and not AT him.

Jack took a few extra minutes to shower the chlorine off his skin. He wanted his scent to speak for him. He liked the way people responded to his openness when they could smell him without interference. His scent spoke for him often when he couldn’t find words to speak for himself.
Ketch watched the pup take off up the stairs, dripping a trail of water behind him. Chewing the inside of his cheek to keep his face from twitching, Ketch turned and sorted the fruit bowl again, waiting. Somehow, the apples kept finding themselves congregated together on one side, leaving the aesthetic flawed to say the least. He redistributed them seemingly at random among the oranges, and then he froze.

Jack, the realization dawned heavily, brutally, had been taunting him, not simply digging through the fruit to select the best option, but mindfully, deliberately baiting him. It was just a fucking fruit basket after all, and Ketch had tumbled straight into a trap that an infant would have spotted.

Ketch removed the remaining apples and dumped them unceremoniously into the garbage.

Rearrange that, you little shit.

But for all Jack’s childish nonsense, Ketch was actually a little fond of the boy already. He didn’t have a spiteful bone in his body – not really, fruit bowls notwithstanding. He was wide eyed, but he wasn’t naïve, and he obviously genuinely loved his work. Ketch couldn’t fault him there. He was, quite sadly, envious of the young man.

They’d had a little more than a day together in this house at the back of the Winchester estate; time to get to know one another, to break the ice. And thus far, Ketch felt solid in his decision to drop everything and move. That he matched with the petite and spunky beta-Sub from the convention circuit was less of a surprise than that he felt comfortable with Jack and with the nominal Pack Alpha whose benevolent grace brought him here in the first place. At least, Ketch thought it was Benny behind the offer letter in his luggage. The signator was Novak himself – or…Winchester. Whatever. But big folk like that don’t muck around at ground level for betas like Ketch.

Ketch opened the refrigerator for no reason whatsoever, waiting on Jack to reappear. He couldn’t stand still. He slammed it closed again.

Nerves.

It was all down to nerves. He would settle seamlessly with Jack in short order. He kind of liked the boisterousness of the boy’s tweaking. It kept him on his toes, and he liked the way Jack’s eyes narrowed when Ketch lobbed a particularly barbed insult at him. Jack was not the issue. Nor was Margaret. His mate, no more than an image on a screen and a flirty tease over the phone at this juncture, would soon be eating out of the palm of his hand. Everything about her felt right, and he was antsy with anticipation.

But it wasn’t that.

It was Benedict LaFitte. Every inch an alpha, but barely a Dominant whatsoever, Ketch knew he and Benny wouldn’t settle until they’d faced off, mettle to mettle. And the ramifications of that weighed on the beta. What would he do with a Pack if he bested Benny? Traditional wisdom dictated – in fact, legal dispensation required – that Pack leadership could only be Topped with an Alpha. And Ketch wasn’t a man to pull his punches. So, if he won, then what? He and Meg would nod their respect and walk away, heads held high to live…what? Alone?

But they couldn’t skip it. And they couldn’t gloss it over with a customary ritual encounter that only
pretended to be a throwdown as was meant to occur. Ketch could feel himself rise up to the challenge every time he and Benny were within scenting distance. His wolf wanted a fight, and he wanted a real one. Benny’s blue eyes sparked hot and red more than once already as well. They were both itching to test each other, test themselves.

Ketch had rarely met another Dominant of his own rating. His cool, contemptuous gaze could silence most Lupins without a word spoken. Ketch did not shout. He did not command, as such. And while he may have postured a bit as the situation required, he certainly never swaggered. It was all in the eyes, he found. Speak softly, but carry a big stick.

Big stick, indeed.

None of that gave him any idea what to expect in a confrontation with Benny.

Jack came galumphing back down the staircase with the same ebullience he put into climbing it.

“Did he say what we’re doing?” Jack asked, eyeing the fruit basket with a telltale twist of his mouth and a quick look away.

“He did not,” Ketch replied haughtily. “Although, given that it is midday, I presume lunch might be a fair guess.”

“Good. I’m starving! Come on, slowpoke! I’ll race you to the cart. First one there drives!”

Ketch coiled his fist and then released it again, following the pup out the sliding back door and regretting not saving one apple to thump the back of that boy’s head with as he darted away.

Benny was waiting for them at the top of the drive, but rather than lead them into the big house, he guided them to his car instead. “Thought we’d grab a bite and then scope out a couple of prospects for a Pack lodge. You boys game?”

Jack hopped happily into the back seat, quickly immersing himself in the screen of his phone. Ketch ground his teeth and made a point of looking about for any other ‘boys’ in case he’d missed the presence of a plurality of youth. Benny chuckled at him.

“Don’t sweat it, beta. It’ll keep a while yet.” He placed a heavy palm on Ketch’s shoulder and nodded at the car, utterly content to let the tension between them stand. Reckless, it seemed to Ketch.

Benny dangled a set of keys. “Wanna drive? I can navigate. Lived here most of my life, but I figure you could use a little getting used to the map.”

Ketch regarded him in silence for a moment, weighing the relative strength that he could feel. Between the two of them, his beta had no chance. If that’s all there was, there would be no need for a confrontation at all. Certainly, Jack wasn’t about to challenge the Alpha, even if he wasn’t Alpha quite yet. No, it was the Tertiary Dominant wolf that was clawing at Ketch’s chest that needed a physical encounter to be sure of. He could feel Benny’s alpha, but he couldn’t feel his wolf. How would they fare when it came down to Ketch’s wolf against Benny’s alpha? Benny wasn’t simply alpha, he was Deep, but Ketch felt like he might just match strength for strength as a Profound Dominant, even if that strength pulled from a different source. There was no way to predict these things. Sometimes the numbers didn’t mean what they seemed to mean. They had to know though. They had to test where the boundaries were.
Benny’s eyes weren’t speaking challenge at the moment though, so Ketch let it go. He took the keys in a sweep of his hand and took the driver’s position without comment. Benny trotted around and got in the passenger side.

Jack kept his head down, pretending to be more attuned to his phone than he was. He could smell the imminent danger, and only a fool shuts himself inside a moving vehicle with two borderline confrontational Dominants without taking note of it and checking that the rear doors weren’t childproofed.

But Jack was also hungry, and he already kinda trusted the big bear of an alpha to handle the spark and make space for it when the time ripened. Not in a moving car. And Jack wondered if Ketch noticed that he was far easier to attack while driving and distracted from whatever his passengers were doing than Benny was.

He hoped so. He liked Ketch, despite the contemptuous ooze, and he didn’t want to think the guy was a simpleton.

“What are you hungry for, Jack?” Benny asked him.

“Pizza? I could go for some pizza, I guess.”

Ketch scoffed.

“What?”


“Um, yeah, sure. I guess that works too.” Jack watched the backs of both their heads as he fed fuel forward to see if they would argue with each other. Benny took him up on it, but nicely.

“It was Jack’s choice,” he stated firmly. “So, pizza it is. Don’t worry, KC isn’t about to run out of smoked meats. Turn left here.” Subtle power point score for Benny. Ketch’s neck reddened as he steered, but he showed no other outward signs that he’d just taken direction from a lesser Dom.

Jack could feel it build though, and it made his mouth water. Of course, that could also be hunger.

Lunch was a small dive pizzeria that had quite the lunch crowd. Benny talked them through his and Andrea’s plans for the pack. He listed out the standing house rules, and he listened to both men’s input. Ketch found himself in reluctant agreement with all of the rules, unable to find anything to press against. And both betas agreed on the spot to abide by them.

“We’re on a time crunch here fellas because I don’t want either of you to wait longer to Mate than you have to, but there’s a big wedding in less than two weeks, and both of your mates would scalp me if I didn’t make sure the schedule allowed them to attend unencumbered. You’re both invited of
course, and I expect you to be there. Any questions about that?”

“Jo said she’s back in town on Wednesday morning,” Jack said. “She said her Rut shouldn’t get triggered, but you just never know. Would it be better for me to, I don’t know, go to ground until after the wedding? She’s really looking forward to it.”

“Let’s err on the other side, kid,” Benny told him. “She’s back on Wednesday. Let’s put you two together on Wednesday afternoon. If she’s got a Rut coming, it’ll flame out before the wedding, and then you can go watch her wear a dress for once in her fucking life. You’re not real likely to see that again, Jack, so you might wanna grab the chance while it’s hot.”

“Wednesday is…” Jack stumbled over his words and paled. “It’s…it’s in…”

“It’s day after tomorrow, if you want to be exact,” put in Ketch. “Having cold feet?”

“I, uh, that is, no. I thought we had a week or more alone to get settled first. That’s all.”

“You need more time?” Benny asked.

“Can I ask you a question, alpha?” Jack said instead of answering the question.

Benny nodded easily. Their lunch was gone, and they were down to the business Benny knew was important.

Jack shot a nervous look across to the beta-Dom who sat with perfect posture, and he swallowed. “She’s alpha, and I’m beta, right? So, she bites me? But our Z-ratings are backward from that. What if I’m supposed to bite her because I’m more of a Top in kinks than she is? How do we know what to do?”

Benny’s eyes crinkled with soft humor, but he wasn’t laughing at Jack. “Your Tertiaries are oriented same as your Secondaries, Jack. You’re gonna feel that when you meet her. Don’t get yourself worked up over it all. The Z-thing confuses the hell out of folks. I want you to throw that out the window for this. It’s got no standing in Mating. Mating is a Secondary process.”

“Always?”

“Always, when the couple are not both betas,” Benny replied firmly, only to have a pointed clearing of a beta-Dom’s throat contradict him. Benny sighed heavily as Jack looked back and forth between them.

“You mean Michael, right?” Jack asked with his brows high. “Michael and Dean? They Mated backward, didn’t they?”

“They are, to date,” Benny answered him with a nod of concession to Ketch, “…the only known couple to Mate from Tertiaries instead of Secondaries, and they’ve since fixed that error.”

“I can’t wait to meet ‘em!” Jack gushed. “But then, okay, so…Secondary…that’s her alpha against my beta. Jo’s the Top, so she does the biting, and I wear the scar. Right?”

Benny nodded.

“And for Meg and Arthur…”

“It’s Ketch!” Ketch said through gritted teeth.

“Since they’re both beta, it skips down to their tertiaries? He’s a Top, so he bites, and she scars?”
Benny was looking back and forth between them. His eyes narrowed in thought. “Ketch, have you corrected Jack about your name more than once?” He said it lightly, but it sent a frisson of energy through both of his subordinates.

“Numerous times already, and it’s beginning to be a nuisance!”

“Mm-hm. And Jack, were you listening to the rules a bit ago? There was one about respect.”

“I’m sorry, alpha! I didn’t mean anything by it. It was just a bit of fun. He’s a little on the pompous side.” Jack’s chair scooted a few inches backward with his nerves.

“I’ll not argue that,” Benny conceded. “But I aim to start us off with a clear understanding of the hierarchy, and that was downright rude, given that you have already been informed of his preference.”

Jack bowed his head in shame, his whole face going dark.

“Ketch? It’s your name. Your response. You’re up.”

“What, here?” The usually unrufflable beta was looking decidedly ruffled.

Benny made a noncommittal face and took a swig of his tea. “It’s not my battle, but I don’t see why not,” he said.

Ketch looked around the restaurant. Everyone he saw was Lupin. “Right.”

“Wait,” protested Jack, scooting back a few more inches and putting up his hands. “I’m sorry, man… Ketch. I get it. That was rude.”

“Faster you comply, kid, the faster it’s over and done with,” Benny told him warmly.

“Jack Kline,” Ketch said with feeling, and Jack’s baffled face pivoted. “You knowingly broke Rule Number Three within twenty minutes of agreeing to it. On your feet.”

“But…we’re not even a pack yet!” Jack protested loudly enough that several people looked round.

Ketch didn’t falter. “Maybe not, but you sat there and told us you’d follow every one of those rules. Now, you’re either going to hold up your side of that, or you and I give the Alpha here cause to think we’re not committed. I don’t know about you, boy, but I’m not moving back to that one-bedroom flat in the middle of the Ozarks. You asked me when we met what my line of work is. Allow me to demonstrate.”

Benny took another drink. More than a few people were watching now.

“What are you gonna do?”

“Don’t be scared, Jack. You’ve felt a paddle before. I know how to swing it to make it do what it’s meant to do. I don’t intend to count the multitudinous smaller infractions that I could retroactively apply, such as your rearranging the fruit purely to torment me, and your deliberate soiling of every towel in the house so that I would have no choice but to scrounge naked and dripping for a clean one following my shower. None of that counts, Jack; only the poor choice you made to bait me with a deliberate and taunting use of my given name, when I’ve already explained that I detest it. On your feet, lad. Stand up.”

Something in Ketch’s tone and temperament pulled Jack to his feet even without a harsh command.
“Good.” Ketch removed the chair, nodding his thanks to the diner at the next table over who helpfully pulled it clear. “Trousers and skivvies at your ankles. Bend over the table. And please, as we may actually still be imbibing our beverages when this is over, I ask that you keep your genitals clear of the surface. You may hold on if you like.”

Jack swallowed and unbuckled his belt. He couldn’t look at Ketch, but Benny maintained a calm demeanor that he could hold onto. He shoved his clothing to his ankles, turning beet red in the process, and then he hid his face in his arms on the table.

Jack didn’t even see where Ketch pulled the paddle from, but its cool, smooth surface rubbed small circles on his backside.

“How do you call it, Alpha?” Jack heard Ketch ask.

“Up to you, beta,” Benny told him.

“Very well. I’m accustomed to a short ten-count for such an infraction, so that’s what we’ll do. Don’t count them aloud, Jack. I believe I can be trusted to reach ten without assistance.” There was a smattering of chuckles from the dining room. Everyone was watching, and Ketch was clearly preening in the spotlight.

Jack didn’t get a chance to think any further about how well Benny had crafted this whole exercise for Ketch’s benefit, to help him learn to trust that the Alpha knew who he was and what he needed. That thought had just entered Jack’s head when the first strike landed, and he whoofed in response, gritting his teeth as the sting set in.

It wasn’t a particularly hard stroke. Jack had received far worse before, but it really didn’t take a hard swing from a wooden paddle to sting. The second raised him onto his toes and sent his hands grasping outward for the table’s edge.

“I’m glad we have this opportunity to begin again, Jack Kline,” Ketch told him as he swung again. His tone was conversational, and neither of them saw Benny smirk at how well Ketch’s style fit in around these parts.

“My name is Arthur Ketch.” He struck Jack low on the crease, and the boy grunted, his face very red. “However, I am not overly fond of my first name…” He hit Jack again. “And I ask that you respect my preference, and call me ‘Ketch’.” SMACK. “Do you believe you can do me that honor, Jack?” SMACK!

“Yes, SIR!”

WHACK!

“Thank you, Jack. It’s an easy thing, really.” SMACK!!

“Aaahh!!” That one had hurt. One more. Just one.

“I’ll respect you. I expect you to respect me.” SWAP!!!

“GODDAMNIT!!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I mean, I’m sorry, Sir! It won’t happen again!”

“Good. That is all, beta. You are dismissed. Dress yourself please, and let’s give our attention to the Alpha. I rather expect he has more to discuss with us.”
From the diners, a light smattering of polite applause which Ketch acknowledged with a courteous wave.

Jack was already covered and slouched low in the chair that their neighboring table slid back for him wordlessly, glaring at Benny.

“Something on your mind, Jack?” Benny asked him.

Jack leaned forward, hissing in a voice that Ketch, still posturing in his pomposity, missed. “That wasn’t about me, Alpha. That was you and him. I’d like to be left out of it next time, if it’s all the same.”

Benny laughed and patted Jack’s cheek, leaving his palm in a soft hold of the lower part of Jack’s face. His eyes grew deeper blue, not red, although Jack could feel the alpha in him. “That was too for you, beta. I may look soft, but I don’t play around with the stability of this pack. You and Ketch,” he nodded as Ketch sat back down and joined them with a frown. “You two were starting off on a good foot. The playfulness, the teasing, Jack, I don’t have a problem with that. In fact, I wanna encourage you to play. But there’s a line you don’t get to cross, and that’s where consent and boundaries come in. This man’s name…” He pointed at Ketch. “…is his most precious belonging. Play with him all you want, if you think you can handle whatever he doles out in retribution. But you call him by the name he asks for. Do you hear me?”

Jack, truly chastened far more than the paddling had done, nodded. “Yes, Alpha. I hear you.”

Benny wrapped his hand around to the back of Jack’s neck and pulled him in to rest their foreheads together. “Good! I knew you’d be a quick learner. Let’s go find a place to live.”

They trudged through several dusty lots in the hot sun, most of them didn’t have a single standing structure. Benny explained that he had already ruled out all of the existing homes in the area. Even the big ones were too small for a pack such as he wanted.

“How many of us are there?” Jack asked, stepping into the shade of a maple standing out on its own.

“Got eight to ten as of today,” he answered. “Depends if the holdouts say yes in the end or not.” Benny kicked at a buried rebar sticking out of the ground. This lot had obviously been a construction dumping ground at one point.

“And pray, what does the mix stack up to be?” Ketch queried.

“Well,” Benny responded, joining Jack in the shade. Ketch followed more slowly. “I figure on two Omegas to start.” He nodded at Jack. “Jo’s mother is Omega and a widow, so where Jo goes, Ellen goes.”

“Dr. Harvelle?” asked Ketch in surprise.

“That’s right,” Benny told him. “And I’m custodial alpha to one of our contractors who’s unmated. He gets an invite, but I’m not going to force him. If he doesn’t want in, we’ll find him another alpha.”

“Pardon the confusion,” Ketch said, sounding pretentious in his ‘expertise’. “But isn’t it a bit pointless to bring along an unmated adult Omega into a newly formed pack? He’s bound to leave
within a year or two when he Mates.”

“No,” Benny told him sternly. “It’s not. Adam’s my family, even if he’s grabbed up by someone else two days after we sign the formalities. I promised him I’d look after him, and I’m going to do that.”

There was the snap-pop of a strap landing to the way Benny spoke.

Ketch made an oddly formal bow to the Alpha, bending his head at a bit of an angle and lowering his eyes. Jack didn’t think Benny was fooled by the submissive response. Ketch still held too much tension in his shoulders to have been completely mollified by a simple rebuke.

Benny looked around the empty lot. It was big – big enough for a full Pack compound with room for a yard and garden. “Aside from the two Omegas,” he continued, leaning up against the trunk of the tree. “There are five betas. We got Andrea, you two and Meg, and one more renegade who is hoping with all her digits crossed that she never encounters a True-Mate at all. I suspect if I dig back to the start, it was Charlie who came up with the idea to put a Pack together in the first place.”

“And alphas?” Jack asked, knowing that’s all Ketch really cared about in the first place. How many alphas would he need to fight through for rank? Benny’s eyes went to Ketch first.

“Three, if we’re lucky. I haven’t heard back from the third, but I’ve got the Omega she befriended on her first day at work, so I’m using him as bait.” Benny had a fond look in his eye.

“You think this is a game?” spat Ketch, unexpectedly irate. “I’ve already got to shoulder for room between you and Jack’s mate. And you want to entice someone else in just for kicks?”

Benny worked his jaw and took a deep breath. He shook his head with his eyes on the dirt and his lips pursed – not submissive, just thinking. “No, it’s not a game. But I don’t want a pack just so I can strut around feeling important. I want a family. Ketch. A big, stable one. And Lisa needs us. She may not know that yet, but she needs us. And we need someone like her.” Benny kicked casually off the tree. “I’m hoping that she’ll Mate in the next few years and bring us another Omega, but even if she doesn’t, I mean to offer her a home. And for the record, beta, you don’t actually have to shoulder in anywhere. We don’t hardscrabble for rank in my pack. We go by Secondary/Tertiary split. That means that if Lisa says yes, you’re fourth. Period.”

Ketch’s jaw dropped in shock.

“Next, you’re going to tell me this ‘Lisa’ is a Submissive,” Ketch said offhand.

“She is,” Benny confirmed. “She’s a Classic Sub. And an alpha. And she outranks you. If you can’t handle that, I suggest you rethink fast.”

Ketch looked stunned. He thought fast. “Margaret…” he started. “…”

“Yeah, Meg’s pretty keen on joining the Pack, so you’re gonna want to give it a hard think before you take that away from her. And, Ketch, if that’s what you decide to do, you tell her that before you Mate, not after. She has the right to choose for herself if there’s a choice to be made.”

Ketch responded only with a long, strained exhale. Benny nodded.

“Now. According to the land plot from the county, this lot is supposed to be 224 yards deep and 67 yards wide. I’m no cartographer, but it looks like the neighbors might have encroached on the boundaries over the years. Ketch, you good with pacing? You think you could walk it off for me and check? Just a rough feel for whether we’ll have a fight on our hands if we want to bid on this lot will
Best estimate."

Ketch looked around vaguely, but he nodded and headed off for the far end to start walking it off.

Jack watched Benny watching Ketch. “And where am I ranked?” he asked.

“You’re right after him,” Benny answered with a sideways head cock toward Ketch.

“Really?”

“We don’t have a lot of Dominants,” Benny replied, squatting in the shade and squinting out at Ketch.

“Just the two of you?” Jack guessed.

“Yup. It’s gonna be a strain until we settle our impulses. I have to admit, my wolf doesn’t want anything to do with his, but my alpha is startin’ to feel like a showdown sooner rather than later is the way to go.”

Jack chuckled humorlessly. “He could stand being taken down a peg.”

Benny nodded noncommittally. “Maybe. Not your job though, beta. You leave him be for a bit. Let him struggle however he needs to to wrap his head around it. It’s gonna be an adjustment for him, but that’s his work to do, not yours.” Benny stood up again and sighed. Jack tracked him as he paced to the edge of the shade and turned.

“How are you feeling now, Jack?” Benny asked, evidently changing the subject. “I think I took you by surprise at lunch. Tell me what you’re thinking about that.”

“Embarrassed,” Jack told him.

“’Bout what, exactly.”

“About having my ass paddled in public!” Jack answered loudly.

“Not about being called down for disrespect?”

“I mean, yeah, I get it. I was a douche. And I’m sorry. And I apologized for that.”

“And you’ve been punished,” Benny reminded him. “I’m not looking to drag you back through it again.”

“But did you have to stroke his ego at my expense in front of people? I would’ve learned the same lesson if we did it privately, back at the estate.”

“Is that what I was doing?” There was that calculating look in Benny’s eye again. He was working Jack out, figuring out who he was. He didn’t let Jack answer, changing the subject without warning. “I’m almost hoping the neighbors built their fences a bit over the property lines. You know why?” Benny asked abruptly, turning to watch Ketch sweating as he paced and counted.

Jack gave it a little thought. “So you can test whether they’ll be good neighbors before you commit to living next to them?”

“Very good,” Benny beamed. “Exactly. This lot has been empty for decades. It’s natural to bleed over a little over the years. No harm, no foul. But if it sells, and they wanna fight over squatter’s rights and make a big show in posturing where they don’t have a legal standing… It’s not that I
wouldn’t take that challenge, Jack, it’s that I gotta ask myself, is that really the kind of people I want to live next door to? If I put it to them, and they agree to pull everything back, that shows me something. You think we would get a chance to know that much about our neighbors if we don’t have a boundary dispute right off the bat? Do people usually show you who they are right at first? Or are they overly polite? What do you think, Jack?”

Jack scratched the pointed tip of his ear. “You jumped at the chance to punish me in public to see how I’d respond to your authority?”

“You and him both,” Benny agreed. “I got a policy, Jack. I trust people as far as I can, but in the end, I don’t believe what they say. I believe what they DO. You and Ketch are unknown quantities, and I’ve agreed to bring you both in and make you family. Don’t begrudge me a little precaution where my family is concerned.”

“And what did you learn about us?” Jack asked.

Benny strolled up to him, wrapped a hand around the back of his neck in solid alpha style, a comfort and a hold both. Jack breathed in sharply through his nose, and his pupils dilated. Out here, in the sun, that had to mean something. Benny set his forehead against Jack’s and closed his eyes. He could feel Ketch pull up short out in the sun on his way back with the number.

“You don’t have to be anyone you aren’t, kid,” Benny said quietly. “You’re not responsible to knock Ketch down a peg or two. That’s on me, if it turns out to be necessary. Let go of your fear. I’ve got you. I’ll always look out for you, and you’ll always be safe. Your only jobs are to back me up in defense of the Pack if you’re needed, and do everything in your power to make that alpha who’s like a daughter to me happy.”

Jack huffed. His hand came up to grip Benny’s forearm, clinging on. “You think I can?”

Benny smiled with his eyes still closed. “She’s gonna love you, kid.”

“Look, not to be intrusive…” Ketch called from several yards away. “But it may well be the hottest day on record, and there is a noticeable temperature differential between the full sun and the shade.”

Benny and Jack both laughed, pulling apart. “Well then, come on in where it’s cooler,” Benny gestured. “Got some water in the car. I think we’re through here. What do you figure for length?”

Ketch grumbled a little, mopping his brow and neck with an honest-to-God handkerchief that he’d pulled from his back pocket. “It’s definitely shorter than 67 yards side-to-side, but the back lot looks to be in its proper placement to me. We’d need a survey to be certain. Are you…considering this one, alpha?” Ketch’s tone hit an odd note, but Jack couldn’t tell if it was that he didn’t like the space or that he was struggling with the deference he needed to show.

Benny nodded, looking about him in satisfaction. “It’s close enough to the city center, but out of the suburban density. Andrea spotted it a week or so ago and asked me to take a look. I think she’s partial to this street.”

“Is a lot this large in the Pack budget?” Ketch asked. “We’d be building from scratch. It’s going to cost a pretty.”

“Are you asking out of curiosity, beta?” Benny challenged. “Are you going to be around to see the finished compound?”

“You truly expect me to bend my neck to a Submissive?”
“She’s an alpha, Arthur,” Benny replied factually.

There was a beat or two. Maybe time for a couple of breaths. The air crackled with heat, but it wasn’t the sun. The planes of Ketch’s face hardened, and he snarled faintly. That was all the warning Benny got.

Jack shouted in alarm and dodged around behind the tree, using its trunk as a shield as Ketch launched himself in feral rage at the alpha. Benny had time to drop one foot back to support his stance and raise his arms to catch the man, but they crashed to the ground, a mass of writhing arms and legs. Benny’s red eyes gleamed as they caught the light, and the once seemingly placid man snarled and snapped like the fighter he was.

Benny landed a couple of good blows to Ketch’s jaw once he managed to roll him onto his back, but the beta only grimaced and shifted, setting them to tumbling again, and Benny took a stiffened palm to the jaw as they rolled. He shook it off, working his lower legs around Ketch’s trying to trap his legs in a vice grip. Jack kept the tree between him and the increasingly sweaty men rolling around in the dust. They were both covered in dirt in no time, and both had blood flowing from their faces, Ketch from his nose, and Benny from a split lip. A dust cloud began to rise around them, stagnant in the still air, renewed constantly by the scrabble of arms, backs, and feet that kicked and dug in.

Jack watched in trepidation. Neither man was looking to really hurt the other. It was an exercise in restraint almost as much as it was in fury. It wasn’t about causing injury. It was about standing. It was about Dominance, the hierarchical kind, and much more was being determined than which man had the physical wherewithal to defeat the other. A great deal was happening under the surface for them both, even without a Claim-link between them. It seemed that Benny was spending a lot of time on his back, taking blow after blow to his face, a fierce grunt echoing from each of them with every punch.

But Benny’s quick hands were busy. He sacrificed the pristine nature of his face to allow him to worm his hands between them and unbuckle Ketch’s belt. The beta didn’t notice, too wrapped up in altering the color of Benny’s jawline. Ketch’s wolf, fully unleashed, was a frightening animal, and Jack panted in borrowed adrenalin. It wasn’t his fight. It felt like he was in there too though, taking those strikes, grunting in pain. Jack’s nails dug into the bark.

He saw Benny’s jaw set, and his shoulders shift before Ketch caught on. Jack had never been a wrestler, but that was some kind of Greco-Roman shit that Benny pulled out from somewhere. In the blink of an eye, Benny had Ketch facedown in the dust, clouds swirling over their heads, sprawled out on top of him.

“Easy way or hard way?” he asked into the sweat of Ketch’s neck. They were both panting. A car drove by 50 yards distant on the road. Ketch lay still except for the heaving of his chest, then he exploded in a burst of movement, struggling against the alpha’s hold. But Benny was ready for him.

“I know you can feel it, Arthur. I don’t roll for you or any beta, not in this lifetime. That might not be fair, but it’s the way it is. Accept it quick, or invest in a lot of lube, cause I’ll refresh your memory as often as I need to.”

Ketch let out a plaintive and furious keen into the dirt, and he struggled again, but he got nowhere. Benny had him pinned. Benny planted a palm at the back of the beta’s neck, his fingers splayed up into his hair, and he pushed his torso up. With his other hand, he yanked at Ketch’s pants, first one side and then the other until he had the fabric down below the turn of the beta’s backside. His briefs disappeared in a burst of ripping fabric that had Ketch shouting out in pain and scuffling for freedom again.
Benny snarled at him and flattened him into the dirt with both hands. “I don’t think so, beta! You started this. I get to finish it. Stay down!” Benny held him in place as they both panted in exertion for a few breaths, long enough to feel sure that Ketch had heard the message. Then he punctuated his statement with a hard shove against the beta’s shoulders and sat up, straddling his thighs.

Ketch had dirt-coated blood and snot running out of his nose and over his lip. He had tears of frustration leaking out of his eyes, clenched tightly against the reality of his position. He worked his hands beneath his chest, palms flat to the ground as Benny freed his own cock and moistened it with a packet of lube that Jack hadn’t known he was carrying.

“Don’t even think about it, Arthur,” Benny said in a hard, calm voice. “We can do this here and now in relative seclusion and be done with it once and for all, or I can decide you need weekly public reminders for some time to come until the message sinks in. You wanna test me? Go ahead and keep struggling. I know for a fact that Meg loves to watch a good D.F. She gets off on it. You want her to see you in this position?” Benny was moving as he talked. He all but released Ketch from his pin, walking backward on his knees to get Ketch’s trousers out of the way enough to give him room to maneuver. Ketch didn’t take the bait. He lay still, his palms still pressing into the ground, but his head bowed in acceptance.

“Good choice,” Benny told him when it was clear he was through struggling. With no warning, Benny wrapped his hands around Ketch’s hips and hoisted them upward until his knees caught him and held. Ketch shouted out in surprise and humiliation, but Benny didn’t torment him any longer than he needed to. He let gravity pull his body to drape over the beta’s, and once in place, he guided his cock to the tight, unprepped center of Ketch’s ass and pressed slowly in. He wrapped an arm around Ketch’s chest, high up where it would feel like a threat to his throat but not impeding his breathing, and he thrust in hard, painful, ruthless, dominant. Alpha.

Jack turned his back to the tree trunk and closed his eyes. His breath came in heaving spasms. He didn’t want to be here for this. Maybe he could escape to the car. But the keys were in Ketch’s pocket, and the car would be an oven right now. Jack had his fists pressed back against the trunk and his eyes squeezed tightly shut, but he couldn’t stop himself from hearing. Even pressing his hands against the sides of his head wouldn’t stop the sounds of a brutally painful mounting on the other side of that tree. There was no wind, but Jack could smell the musk of infuriated alpha. Benny wasn’t furious, but his alpha had been stoked, and it stepped up and responded. An alpha could only take so much goading before it leapt into action.

Jack’s legs felt weak. He slid down the trunk to sit in the dirt. The afternoon sun had shifted. He was sitting in sunlight now, wondering how long the ordeal was going to last when Benny answered that for him with a load groan that petered off into a series of short huffs.

Jack turned from his shoulders and peeked around the tree. They were both filthy and wet with sweat. They were still but for the efforts to catch their breath. Oh, Jesus, Benny hadn’t knotted him, had he? They would be stuck here like this for ages if…

No. Benny released the grip of his teeth from the back of Ketch’s neck, not a bleeding bite, just a subduing one. He pulled up onto his knees, pulling out with the motion and fell clumsily, tiredly onto his hip. He patted Ketch’s hip a couple of times to let him know it was over, and the beta slowly straightened his own legs out behind him and groaned as he rolled over onto his back. Leaves and detritus stuck to his shirt and his bare belly. The front panel of his briefs covered his genitals, but the back was destroyed. Ketch rolled to face away from both of his companions and breathe. His hands sought out the damage, both to his clothing and to his person, and he moaned, curling up with knees
“Goddamn, I hope once was enough,” Benny grumbled. “I’m gettin’ too old for this.”

Ketch laughed out a single guffaw, and then quieted again.

Jack slipped back to his feet and wordlessly collected the car keys from Ketch’s pocket. He met the beta’s eye with a look that he hoped communicated compassion. He wanted Ketch back. Maybe not the snide contemptuous version, but the solid steadfast adult-in-the-room vibe that Ketch gave off – Jack wanted that to remain.

“Trunk?” Jack asked Benny.

“There’s a small cooler of water in there, kid. Bring the whole cooler. And there’s a tub of wet wipes in the glove box. Bring that too.” Benny was kneeling now. He’d tucked back in without bothering to clean up, and he was bracing his weight against his arms on his thighs. He was already dressed, already back to himself. Ketch would take a while longer. Jack nodded and trotted out into the heat to get water.

The cooler wasn’t heavy, and Jack was back in short order. Benny had water and some light snacks packed which he fed to Ketch by hand after wiping him down and checking him for damage.

Ketch winced as he stood up. He kicked off his shoes, removed his trousers and the scraps of his briefs and then slid his legs back into his pants commando. Benny gave him space. Jack didn’t say a word. He stood by the tree with a water bottle and a snack-pack of crackers and cheese. Ketch took a few tentative steps, limping a little and making a pained face.

“You and me, Ketch,” Benny told him. “We’re all this Pack has by way of real Tops. And I see how it could feel like that should move you up the ladder a few spots. I need your Dominance to shine while we figure ourselves out. Everyone is gonna need your steady presence, even me. You hearin’ me? But that doesn’t mean that in the big picture we can ignore who we are. If I tried to put you above the alphas in a play to win your loyalty, every one of us would suffer. It doesn’t work, Arthur.”

The use of his despised first name popped Ketch’s eyes to Benny’s, and he held there.

“The response is, ‘yes, Alpha,’” Benny pointed out.


“And in a few weeks, maybe a few months, you’re going to forget what this felt like,” Benny went on. “You’re going to itch to try it again, and I don’t really wanna hurt you any more than I have to.” Benny’s busted lip and swollen jaw mocked that statement, but Jack could tell he wasn’t talking about surface level injuries. “So I want you to take a minute right now and take stock of how you feel; how you feel right now; how you felt while we were rolling around in the dirt like schoolyard boys. Look me in the eye, Arthur Ketch.”

Ketch looked up.

“Does it hurt?”

Their hard gazes held. Ketch’s chest heaved again, but Benny was calm. Eventually, Benny got a silent nod in answer.

“Were you close to winning? Maybe if we had another go, you might top out?”
Ketch sighed and looked down, sighing heavily with the weight of it.

“Look at me!”

“No, Alpha,” he said, eyes coming back up, full of fire. Disappointed in his own limits.

“If we do this again, how’s it gonna end? Answer me, beta!”

“The same,” Ketch conceded sulkily.

“The same,” Benny agreed. “So, can we agree that we don’t need to do it again?” Benny strolled casually to the cooler and brought a handful of ice up to his jaw, a clear concession that he hadn’t walked away unscathed. “If you say it out loud, Arthur, you’ll find it easier to remember when the pain has faded and you get the urge to try me again.”

“No, sir. I don’t wish to try again,” Ketch said softly, sincerely.

“No, I don’t imagine you do.”

“Alpha, if it’s all the same to you, I would prefer to be called by my family name, even if I must ultimately surrender that for yours.” Ketch had his politeness volume turned way up, and Jack had to hand it to him, the level of composure he was showing was no easy feat. Jack looked at Benny and saw a quick twinkle in his eye when he caught Jack’s eye. Benny winked at Jack.

“Duly noted, Ketch. From here out, you’ll only hear your given name from me when I need your undivided attention, got it? Sound fair?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Good. Let’s get outta this heat. I think we’re done here. What d’you say, Jack? Think this is our spot? Should we see what price they’re asking?”

“Yes, sir,” Jack told him, following him toward the car with only a single backward glance, and letting Ketch limp more slowly behind. “I like it.”

Benny chuckled. “Not much to like or dislike yet, pup. It’s just an empty field. We’ll make it a home quick as we can though. You wait and see. Oh, and Jack, maybe you better drive.”

“Yessir.”

Benny let Jack start the engine and get the air blowing as he dropped the cooler back into the trunk. He waited by the passenger door for Ketch to catch up. “Jack’s Mating is scheduled for Wednesday, Ketch. Do you think you could be ready for yours on Thursday, or do you need a few days to heal?”

“It’s not my call, sir,” Ketch responded, leaning into the car and then startling back when the top proved hot enough to burn.

Benny sighed. “Beta, look, I’m not interested in turning you into a Bottom. You don’t owe me your submission. I want you to be you. All I ask is that you don’t countermand or undercut me. Don’t challenge me or contradict me in front of others. If you have something you disagree with me about, come talk to me in private. I’m a fair guy. What I’m asking here is for you to make the decision that only you should be making. I tore you up a little just now. It happens. But you need a couple of days to heal. Tell me when you think you’re gonna be ready to move on. That’s all I’m asking.”

“You don’t want my submission?” Ketch queried.
“That’s all you took from that?” Benny popped back.

Ketch made a shrugging motion with his head and one shoulder.

Benny lowered his chin, pulling out the alpha again. “There’s a big difference between submission and deference. As long as I get some version of the latter, wherever you feel you need to draw the line is on you. Hell, crawl around on your belly if it suits you, but don’t play the martyr with me, boy. I never said you had to kneel, so if you find yourself itching to do that, might wanna investigate why.” Benny got into the car without another word.

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“Call her phone again,” the balding academic ordered. “She’s got ten more minutes to show, and then we’re leaving. She’s got some explaining to do if she wants my continued support.” He was furious. Students didn’t stand Karl Meyer up. Ever.

A breathless, sweaty face appeared in the doorway. It wasn’t Sarah. “I checked her office space, doctor. She’s not there. In fact…” the young graduate student went on. “It looks like she’s cleaned it out. It’s empty.”

“What?!”

Dr. Meyer stormed down the hallway and two flights of stairs to the basement where the grad students were graced with a tiny modicum of space – just a desk and a phone in clumped cubicles. Undergrads scattered in his wake, spilling books and papers, shouting at him. He ignored them.

Her cubicle was empty. He opened the file drawers, but there was nothing.

“Check online,” he demanded of his assistant who had followed wide eyed. “Make sure the…”

“It’s all gone,” she broke in on him, balancing her laptop on her forearm and typing quickly with one hand. “All the files she had in her folder are gone. It’s empty.”

“DAMNIT!”

Karl looked around and realized they’d all followed. The whole team was here. Of course, they were here. He’d ordered them here. He was set to take the reins of this project by force, and he’d rallied his troops in a show of intimidation, and they were all staring at him.

“Who leaked it?” he asked, turning his accusing eyes on one after the other. No one spoke. “Someone let something slip! And HE found out about it! I want to know who it is, and I mean NOW!”

Heads poked cautiously out from behind cubicle walls to gawk as the old geezer lost his shit.

He pointed a finger in his assistant’s face. “Stop her stipend. Put a hold on her status. She doesn’t so much as check out a book from the library until I find out what’s happened.”

“Do…we have that authority?” the assistant challenged, looking around. “Don’t you think we should wait and talk to her first? Maybe it’s a misunderstanding.”

“It was YOU, wasn’t it?” He was beside himself with rage.
“No, sir. It wasn’t me,” she told him. “But I don’t think we should jump to conclusions. What’s the worst that could happen?”

His eyes flew wide. “The worst that could happen,” he hissed in a strangled whisper. “Is that that animal who’s got his talons in MY project finds out that I…” He dropped his voice lower, realizing he was essentially in public, and he turned his head so that no one could see his lips. His assistant frowned, worried about his sanity suddenly. “…Finds out,” he whispered. “That I used a backdoor technique or two to get the right kind of spy inside his doors. If the full index of everything that happened to get her there comes out…” He left off as if the answer was unavoidably obvious. She stared at him.

“What did you do?” she asked just as softly. “Is your position in jeopardy? Doctor, you’re tenured. What could they do to you? How bad is it?”

“Dr. Meyer, if you have a moment, I’d like a word with you in private.” Karl and his assistant both jumped as the Dean’s voice intoned from the doorway. They spun around, clearly feeling like they’d been caught with their hands in a cookie jar.

“Of course, Seth,” Meyer told him with a shaky breath and a quick squeeze of Sharon’s arm. “I’m… all yours.”

Sharon watched him go, following the Dean a pace or two behind and flanked by the department head and his second, both upper level professors, both chair holders like Karl, but higher in status. She was in shock. This couldn’t be happening. WHAT was happening?

Sharon sank down onto Sarah’s desk chair and ignored the rumor mill that began spinning furiously around her. A quick look round told her no one was paying her any mind, and then she texted, “I think it worked.” Then she shut her phone off, dropping it with her laptop into her shoulder bag, and she slumped down in the chair.

“They can track text messages, you know,” a welcome and familiar voice said to her conspiratorially. She smiled without opening her eyes. She’d suspected her friend Hervé was the other contact that Dr. Novak kept referring to, but she hadn’t been sure until now.

“It’s a burner,” she told him, matching his volume, noting that the hubbub was dying down. People were scattering with their first hand news. “I’ll dump it. I’m sure he’s going to start pointing fingers, but none of us have done anything wrong other than not pledging him our undying loyalty.”

She opened her eyes and smirked at him where he stood draped over the cubicle wall, leaning on his arms, staring at her.

“That’s a crime in itself,” he reminded her in his deliciously rich Mexican accent. “To him.”

“Only to him,” she replied, flirting openly at last. She was trying to piece together the right words to ask him out to lunch when he beat her to it.

“Come on. Let’s gossip over coffee. I’ll tell you mine, and you can tell me yours, and we’ll tie a brick to your burner phone and drop it into the ocean.”

“There’s not an ocean for two thousand miles,” she said with a grin, letting him pull her up.

“Semantics,” he said with a wink, and then changed his mind with a startled epiphany. “OR… Roadtrip!”

She laughed. “Hold your horses there, buddy. I’ll agree to coffee and some light subterfuge, but I’m not sleeping with you just to get rid of my phone.”
“Gotta start somewhere,” he teased, but his hand felt good in hers as they left the basement hand-in-hand, so she didn’t release it. “And you’re right anyway. We’re about to be back on the streets without a project or a faculty advisor. Gotta watch our expenses like the broke college students we are.”

“What?” she asked. “You didn’t get paid for all that spying?”

He halted and frowned at her in alarm. “He PAID you?!”

“Kidding.”

“Jesus!” he exclaimed, clutching his chest dramatically, but he let her pull him along.

“My money’s on Novak long-term though,” she went on. “I mean Winchester, I guess. I think Sarah Blake’s onto something. We’ve each been researching the other species and our own, but there’s no crossover yet. If Meyer loses his job, you and me, we could look into what Castiel’s offering to Sarah and see if there’s a place for us at that table. Your tight organizational skills, my flashes of intuition. We have a lot to offer.”

He squeezed her hand, pleased more than he was ready to admit at her praise and the fact that she saw them both as a single unit.

“Gotta wait and see what happens to Meyer first,” he pointed out. “Keep our heads down a while longer in case he just gets a slap on the wrist.”

Two uniformed policemen and a guy in a suit who couldn’t have been anything but a cop passed them heading back into the building where Dr. Meyer was in the inquisition of his life. Sharon and Hervé both turned to watch them disappear into the building.

“Jesus,” he repeated.

“Winchester doesn’t fuck around,” she said in shock. “Remind me not to cross him.”

“Yeah, no shit. Still want that seat at the table?”

“Hell yes,” she told him, braver than she really felt. “But I want coffee with you first.”

Chapter End Notes

Shh! Just don't look at the word count, Nudge. It'll only freak you out. :P

As a reminder and/or clarification. I mostly get to work on this fic for one week out of every four. That means a miserable long three weeks of dead silence before we get back together briefly and then fall silent again.

Sending so much love to the Pack. Y’all are my rock. (Yes, that's subject/object agreement. It's a big rock.)
Chapter 103

Chapter Summary

The researchers have finally made some progress figuring Michael's weirdness out. Maybe. Michael gets a chance to show how far he's come in his relationship with Dean. Jo and Jack settle. Michael has another checkup, and Dean loses another little bit of his footing. But in the end, Dean finds he's kind of okay with that.

Chapter Notes

This one is one of those that delves way down in with all the words into the research. It may not be clear enough or investable enough to hold everyone's attention. Skip over to the next section if it's not your thing.

I had a very rough three weeks, and my feet are killing me. :( I meant to use my scattered off days to answer comments, but my mind was elsewhere. I will get to them. Chatting with you is my highlight, and I'm not skipping out on that.

I hope you enjoy this. I will probably have another soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

NOW:
Benny read the report with his forehead resting in his fingertips. Not only did he have a pounding headache, but the ramifications of what he was reading added weight that felt like a physical pull on his body. They couldn’t afford to be wrong, but so much of it was still speculation, tied loosely by strings and points of data that didn’t yet connect to each other directly.

Bobby sat across the desk from Benny silently, motionlessly. Waiting for his colleague to finish.

“It’s a stretch,” Benny said at last, laying the report that he’d coauthored on his desk. ‘A stretch’ may have been the mildest term possible for a paper with the lofty premise of attempting to tie the supernatural assumptions about the origins of their instinct that so many wolves kept close to their hearts to provable scientific theory.

“It’s been proposed before, pup,” Bobby reminded him. “It’s not a novel idea. Only, no one ever had enough supporting facts to back it up. We’ve been all metaphysics and no epistemology, but now... Maybe it’s a new day. And it ain’t just Lupins. This theory might explain the core of instinctive behavior for ALL animals. There’s no reason the same set of rules wouldn’t govern birds and fish and houseflies.”

They’d already been over how odd it was for the two of them, diametrically opposed on the topic for their entire lives, to suddenly find common ground, coming as they were from opposite sides and arriving at the same conclusions.

Benny nodded, but added, “Without Michael’s data points, we’ve got nothin’ – nothing that hasn’t been posited countless times before. Dean’s not going to allow this.”

“Cas will.”

“Come on, man,” Benny whined. “Enough. Don’t cut Dean out of it. You know that’s wrong.”

Bobby didn’t answer him. He simply sat in front of Benny and looked at him.

“No, you know what? I know this is important, but if it’s got staying power, it’ll still be there when the next Omega-Dominant comes around. We’re not selling Dean’s mate down the river. Bobby, this is Dean we’re talking around here – Dean and Michael both.”

“You read through that again and tell me there’s any other explanation that makes any sense.” Bobby was adamant, but so was Benny. “Occam’s razor, Ben. It’s the only thing that fits ALL the data and the stories.”

“No,” Benny argued. “It’s the only explanation we’ve come up with so far that fits all the data. Doesn’t mean it’s the only possible explanation. And old fables don’t count as data.”

Bobby leaned across and activated Benny’s desk phone, dialing their boss up on speaker.

“What is it, Benny?” Cas answered into the room.

“CAS, it’s Bobby. Could you grab holda your fiancé and head this way for a bit?”

“Um. Sure. Dean might be on a call, but I’ll see if he can break free. What’s this about?”

“The preliminary report off 68-437 is out. Wanted to go over it with you both.”

“…437? That’s the study of Michael’s data.”

“Yep.”
“On my way.”

The air was tense enough to slice. Dean paced while he read. Castiel leaned against Benny’s desk. No one pointed out the round table in the corner with four cushioned chairs tucked neatly beneath.

“Who did the data analysis?” Dean asked, flipping to the front where the cover sheet would tell him.

“The data structure, the whole organizational matrix,” Benny said. “Kevin put that together. But the theory beneath it all is Bobby’s and mine…and a host of old aboriginals.”

“This is where we jump from science into fantasy land?” Dean asked rhetorically. “I always wondered when that would happen.” He tossed the report onto Benny’s desk. “That all you needed? I have work to do.”

“Dean, please stay,” Castiel said calmly, still reading, studying the tables.

“You’re not buying this are you?” Dean asked him pointedly. “It’s a myth, man!” His voice had taken on a pleading tone. “They’re trying to use Michael to bring mythology into this. We’ll be a laughing stock. Jesus, I thought I was the religious one here!”

“Dean, sit down and shut up until I’ve finished reading.”

“You mean you’re serious about this?!”

Cas looked up and pinned Dean in place with his eyes. “I won’t know whether to take it seriously until I’ve read the whole report. Put your ass in a chair and zip it!”

Dean threw himself onto the couch on the far wall, saying, “Michael’s not for sale guys.”

Benny shot a look at Bobby, but Bobby was watching Castiel. Finally, Cas closed the packet and looked up with a heavy breath.

“It’s a stretch.”

“Cas, if the next word out of your mouth is ‘But’…” Dean warned, and Cas turned to him with an invested expression, interested in hearing the rest of the sentence. Dean subsided into grumbles, and Cas went on.

“…BUT... There’s a stronger argument here than I’ve ever seen before, and it’s got meat to it that we’ve never had before.”

Dean’s fury fairly leached out of him in waves. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and he was sitting down in no sense of the words except literal. Cas had told him to sit, so he was sitting. The Alpha shot him a look that mingled exasperation and patience with amusement.

“But Dean’s right too. The only way to fill in the gaps at this point is through Michael, and that’s not something we’re going to allow. We’ll have to find an alternative, or wait for the rest of it to trickle in from other sources.”

“Other sources?” Bobby asked in a flat voice. He was disappointed but not surprised.
Cas turned to him. “Science doesn’t stand still, Bobby. I learned that from you. If we’re sure enough about this to publish, even as an unproven theory, and we do so with full acknowledgment of where the gaps and the logical leaps are...If it stands up to scrutiny, then someone somewhere will add another data point, and then another. It becomes a puzzle the worldwide community works at simultaneously, each fitted piece paving the way for the next. We don’t have to subject Michael to anything. All we need is time and enough interconnected brains asking all the same questions from their own hometowns.”

“Sure would be quicker if we could...”

“What part of NO are you deaf to, old man?” Dean broke in.

Cas stepped between them. “Dean, knock it off. Bobby, don’t ask again.” Both men huffed like brats.

Cas looked instead to Benny. “Talk me through it. Pretend I didn’t read anything. Explain it to me. How do we substantiate something that has no physicality, that exists only in meta-space?”

“Claim-bonds and Mating-bonds exist only in meta-space, Alpha, and no one doubts their existence, because we poked at them long enough to learn how to mark them,” Bobby reminded him.

Benny pressed his lips together and pulled his crossed feet down off his desk. “Okay. Here’s what we determined. I’m explaining it through Michael because Michael is who we’ve got. You good with that?”

Cas nodded.

“Dean?” asked Benny, craning to look around Cas.

Dean looked up, sulking heavily and gestured moodily for him to go on.

Benny’s eyes crinkled in benevolent affection. “The theory is ancient. There’s a version of it in every extant aboriginal Lupin culture, and it’s one of the few touchstones that survived the cultural purge – probably owing to the fact that it’s ubiquitous among our people.”

Bobby turned away and helped himself to a cup of coffee. Benny eyed him but continued.

“The theory goes that a Lupin’s instincts pull from a wellspring at the base of our evolution, crossing somehow – metaphysically perhaps – through time in both directions to govern our instinctive behaviors and our thoughts. One version of the theory makes it out to be a type of hivemind that is built from nothing but the thoughts, actions, and response patterns of every Canid that has ever lived, somehow depositing their life history – every choice they made and its outcome – within that wellspring, adding to its sum total, and becoming a retrievable volume of innate knowledge that every other Canid can access in one way or another, guiding our actions toward the positive.”

Dean shifted and softly sang out the first few notes from the “Twilight Zone” theme. He was pointedly still sitting where Cas put him.

“If the peanut gallery can’t control itself,” Cas said to no one. “It will be gagged.”

Dean sat back and zipped his lips with a finger and thumb across them, his eyes still intense.

“Thank you, Dean. Go on, Benny.”

“Right. Well, it’s folk tales, obviously. It’s myth, as Dean so adamantly pointed out. But the thing is,
we keep finding evidence that there’s more there than stories. And it’s not just Michael, but I want to use him, because he’s unique. Let’s start with the hypothesis that this wellspring is real and attainable. Let’s suppose that it exists, and all we need to tap into it is the right code. What’s the code? How do we know when we’ve punched in the right sequence? And is Michael our Rosetta Stone?” Benny half expected a comment from Dean, but the Sub stayed mute, so Benny went on.

“What we surmise from other research, both our own and the volumes out there from ages past, is that we’ve all got a way to touch the database, but each designation either touches a different place, or we touch it in a different way, and no one does it consciously. No one’s got more access than one narrow arc of it at any one time. Access is limited to what’s needed for survival and success. Also, it appears that each designation pulls the information we get from it into a different part of our brains.”

“Are you merely theorizing, or is there evidence?” Cas asked.

“There’s evidence out there, but without the structure of this theory to build on, all the evidence means nothing. If we put the ‘Instinct Database’ theory beneath the data, then data points that never added to anything suddenly become relevant. We know that certain hormonal and chemical ratios pop up again and again where wolves report their deepest metaphysical experiences.”

“Where does Michael fit in?” Dean asked, his eyes on the floor in front of him.

Benny nodded. “Right, well, we’ve been playing around with what we know of Michael, everything about him that makes him special, and it’s interesting. Here, he’s got…these are his ‘special skills’ if you will: He’s both Omega AND Dominant. That’s not unique, but it’s close enough that we decided to include it as relevant, noting also the extreme dominance rating he achieved during his test. He’s got a heightened capacity to read base desire in people who have not outwardly communicated. He is unique in his ability to self-Release. Now, we’ve only witnessed that once, and he was admittedly engaged in sexual congress with a partner at the time, so that would have to be verified as an ability and not a one-off. Even as a one-off, it’s notable. He successfully sparked a Mating-claim on an alpha. He did it sans demonstrative aggression, and he somehow did it in a way that Dean’s alpha didn’t register that it happened at all, leaving the door open for Dean to Mate him right back.” Dean couldn’t resist touching the faint scar on his shoulder as Benny spoke, but he didn’t interrupt.

“Dominant or not, that shouldn’t be possible based on what we understand about the Secondary aspects of Lupins. It would be like discovering a rabbit that could fly simply from having an aberration in its genes that gave it bat-like webbing between its toes, then to discover it flies without using its webbed feet at all, and then to learn that it can pull a fish up into the sky alongside.”

“I’m a fish, Benny?”

“And finally, Michael has reported an extra-corporeal incident while his sentient mind was unconscious, an event that he is adamant occurred precisely as he reported it. An event that jibes with a host of folk-tales.”

“He wasn’t extra-corporeal,” Cas said, frowning. “He had a body. It just wasn’t his human body. It was his wolf.”

“Well, we argued that,” Bobby admitted. “But we put it into the file with the other weird wolf dreams we’ve got documented, and most of those are extra-corporeal. We think they all come from the same source. More on that later.” He waved Benny to go on.

Benny sighed and leaned in. “We focused on the two especially unusual abilities because they are
both provable and incontrovertible. Dean, Michael Mated you. There’s no doubt about that. And he self-Released. Neither of those should be possible, but Michael did them without any undue effort and no training whatsoever. We have to presume that they are both instinctive actions on his part. Of course, without the opportunity to interview him, we can’t know for sure how much thought he put into either prior to making them happen.”

“No, Benny,” Dean said tiredly.

“Right. Then, we stick with the assumption that he was acting on instinct. And that begs the question of the definition and source of instinct, which brings us to our ‘Instinct Database’ theory. If Michael’s getting more from instinct than the rest of us, we want to know why and where it’s coming from.”

“And you want to link his abilities to the ‘Instinct Database’ Theory.” Cas tapped his report with his finger.

Bobby handed Benny a bottle of water and took the topic up himself. “If you take Michael and try to figure him out by working on it from him as an individual and then moving outward,” Bobby said, looking at Cas. “You don’t get anywhere because there are a billion and twelve possible answers, and we’d have to slog through researching each one to eliminate a billion and eleven.”

“Not appetizing,” Cas agreed.

“But if you pick a theory, any reasonable theory, and you apply Michael’s oddness to it, you cut through the bullshit pretty fast.”

“It’s all bullshit, Bobby,” Dean pointed out.

Cas calmly walked across to stand before Dean. He slowly placed his own hand across his own mouth with a determined look in his eyes and a raised brow. Dean mirrored him by rote, trained beyond thinking about it cognitively, and Cas left him like that, returning to his spot at Benny’s desk. Dean sat on the couch, blinking passively, covering his mouth with his hand, effectively gagged.

“When you can contribute anything but contempt, Dean, you may rejoin the conversation. I leave that to you. Drop your hand when you’re ready.” Dean dropped his chin and his eyes, but he left his hand where it was.

“Please continue,” Cas told Bobby.

“As we said, this isn’t a new theory. It’s been kicking around long enough to have some understood structure. The most common form says that Omegas and Subs can touch and see the side of the database that allows them to read people’s wants. That gives them a leg up when it comes to being a confident Bottom in any relationship. Alphas and Dominants don’t have that access. They see the opposite side, the side that lets them understand a person’s core values. It’s not the same thing, and there’s very little overlap, even for someone like Dean who should theoretically get both views. It would be like trying to see both sides of the moon at the same time. You get one or the other at a time, not both.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with the theory and its constructs,” Cas replied.

“In all the models that fit the data that’s already out there,” Benny said. “There’s a conception of the four outlying aspects of Lupins as being either rigid or flexible, depending upon all of their various characteristics.”

“Yes,” Castiel said, thinking. “Alphas and Submissives are flexible, while Omegas and Dominants are rigid. The first two must mold themselves to the realities of their environment, adjusting
dynamically to whatever confronts them, while the latter two are bound to a strict behavior pattern that is imposed on them by chemistry, circumstance, or anatomy.”

“Now apply that to Michael,” Bobby instructed. “And apply it to Dean.”

Cas shot a look across at Dean. The alpha-Sub’s face had gone slack with his hand over his mouth, and his eyes fought to stay present, caught as he was in Castiel’s firm touch. Cas skipped a little of the explanation. They all knew it, and he didn’t see the point in doggedly repeating the visual of a ‘sphere of knowledge’ as it was usually portrayed. The moon metaphor that Bobby mentioned brought the proper visuals into play. It was a sphere floating alone in meta-space with thin cords connecting it to every living Canid all at once. The cords pulled instinctive knowledge out, but they also sent lived experiences in to add to the database over time. Many people envisioned that it existed outside of time so that early Canids had just as rich a wellspring as those alive today. But it was dynamic and ancient, defining the base of everything they had ever been as Canids.

Cas stepped into the center of the room as he worked through the question. “Dean would get a double-dose of flexibility. His flexibility gives him access to everything in the database, but he can only skim along the surface of it, too pliable to pierce though.”

“And Michael?” posed Benny

“Michael would be a spear. He’s rigid in every aspect. He could go straight into the heart of it and access everything at once from the inside outward because he’s got the highest rigidity possible.” Cas heard the words leave his lips, but he said them without knowing he was going to, a flash of intuition. As he rewound what he’d heard himself say, he nodded. It made sense, even if he didn’t know where he came up with the visual of a stiff pointed lance that crunches through the outer layer to lodge at the heart. The report he’d read hadn’t put it like that at all.

“The imagery of a ‘sphere of instinct’ is an apt idea, Cas,” Benny agreed. “Some people, mostly folks like you, way out of the edges, have reported feeling like they can draw information up from a much deeper well if they try. What they’ve described is the sensation that while their normal daily activities might be supported by a surface level touch, the same level as the sense we all have of our own wolves, an extra push when they need more gives them a much richer view.

“The Tertiaries are ancient, and we’ve all felt a sense of instinct leading our wolves. That particular part of the theory is accepted by the wider community already. Instinct travels fastest through our wolves. But our Secondaries hear it too. It’s just different. Imagine the Database as a crusted sphere with a thin layer of liquid knowledge at the surface. All of us have access to the top layer. Only a few can get to the rich crusty layer beneath the liquid wherein lie the layers and layers of repetitive life experience, letting the intent behind the instincts guide their Secondaries. And only an Omega-Dominant has the wherewithal to pierce the crust entirely and get down inside the thing and look outward. Imagine the view from there.”

“He says it’s as natural as breathing,” said Dean, staring at the floor, his hand now in his lap. “He and April said something a few days ago. Both of them. Said that it felt like sipping power from a deep well.”

“April said that?” Castiel asked him, startled.

Dean looked up at him. “Supposing this is true,” he said. “You say you have evidence that all of us flit along the surface like humming birds, sipping instinct from the surface while only a few can poke their bills into the muck underneath and get to the really good stuff. What’s the evidence? You got anything but anecdotes? Michael notwithstanding.”
“It’s not all anecdotal, Dean,” Benny replied. “Although anecdotal evidence backs the theory up in every way. One point that comes up again and again was so clear in Michael’s hormonal readings that we couldn’t pass it by. It’s a magic ratio, Dean. The magic ratio. Michael hit it dead square center. He hit it during his first and third Keller rounds. He hit it after you bit him the second time in the woods when you Mated him spontaneously, and both of you hit it in Oklahoma when he Mated you. You know the ratio. It’s Serotonin to Dopamine to Oxytocin. Those three are usually in flux with each other. But every time anyone ever has one of these odd-ball reports that we can’t explain, if there are readings available, we get the magic ratio of 3:2:4. That’s not a ratio people hit in their daily lives. You know that.”

“It’s not…and excuse me Alpha, this is not contempt, it’s skepticism…” Dean started, adjusting himself on the couch to sit forward again. “It’s not supported just because you can cram various data points into empty holes in the logic. It’s still chock full of holes. You say the visual representation of a sphere of instinctive knowledge works, but will it still work without the visual imagery? This idea of flexibility versus rigidity – what the fuck does that actually mean? How does an Omega combine with a Dominant to give the guy access to something no one else has ever touched, and how does that translate to him being able to masturbate his way to an Omesol Release? Seriously, guys. You took a beautiful and ancient myth, the cosmos in metaphysical terms, and you cut and pasted shit that kinda looked like it fit all over it and called it a Eureka moment.”

“Your skepticism is far more appreciated than your outbursts were, Dean,” Cas told him serenely. “Thank you for reining yourself in.”

“Call me your good Pet,” Dean joked, pretty damned proud of himself. “Please, Alpha?”

“No. Not here.”

“Later?”

“Perhaps. If you’re good.”

“Can we continue please?” Bobby’s face was flat.

“Apologies, Bobby. Go on. I’m certain you have a defense against that argument, or you wouldn’t have written the full report yet.”

“Dean, Michael’s data is incomplete,” Benny said. “We have more questions than we do answers, but every last point fits. His ability to put a Claim in amicably, his ability to cause his own Omega gland to Release its stores, it’s Michael occupying a place in the center of Canine identity, not outside of it like the rest of us. He can reach across the diameter of the space from the inside and connect the opposite points. In the moment of Release, he IS both the alpha and the Omega. He Mated with you twice from that same position. It’s telling enough that your body recognized an entirely different designation when you Mated. Your body doesn’t know what to make of Michael, but it knows he’s your Top, and it knows he wasn’t an Omega, not really, not in that moment. In certain high arousal moments, Michael is everything at the same time, centered as he is inside the heart of all Canine knowledge and instinct, inside everything that makes a Canine. We believe that your body, Dean, it was prepared to accept anything at Mating except another alpha. What it registered was an alpha/beta/Omega hybrid, and that was decidedly…not an alpha, so it accepted the Mating-bond. Michael’s Dominance willed it, and touching the interior of the sphere as only he can, your body was ill-equipped to deny that. He pulled your hormonal ratios into alignment with his, and he willed it into existence.”

Dean shook his head. “It’s still conjecture. You have no proof.”
“We have that scar on your shoulder,” Bobby indicated the round mark that Dean tried hard to leave visible. “That scar means that whatever’s going on, it reaches outside of Michael himself. He’s got enough mojo to let it roam around outside of metaphysics and his own masturbatory habits.”

“I thought you were going to determine that he puts out way more hormones than other Omegas, and that’s how he fooled my alpha into baring its throat,” Dean mumbled.

“Michael’s hormone outputs are all normal,” Benny supplied. “He’s as textbook a Central Omega as they come. It’s not the concentrations, it’s the ratio.”

“…And he just happens to be ‘The Chosen One’ of prophecy who can wield the great sword and save us all from Perdition, and dragons, and whatever,” Dean mumbled again testily.

“His dream sequence was no dream, Dean,” Benny told him. “He took his conscious mind inside the core of Canine instinct where only the subconscious can usually go, and it was too abstract a vision for his limited brain, so his instincts translated that experience into a wolf-scape dream that he could comprehend. In essence, for a short while, Michael WAS instinct as far as we understand it. He had access to view you in your most primal image because he was really there, inside of everything.”

Dean stared at Benny.

“Think about it,” Benny encouraged. “Take everything you know about how he moves through the world and try to apply any other explanation.”

“He’s not good at simultaneous designations,” Dean said weakly.

Bobby shook his head. “That stems from a different part of the brain. It’s a cognitive function. It’s intentional. This stuff, the weird stuff, is all instinctive. It’s hind-brain stuff. He IS good at layering designations, but then, that’s common for Omegas anyway. Think about it, Dean. Think about how he reads people and situations and knows on instinct how far to push before he steps over the line. Does he step over the line?”

Dean scoffed. “All the fucking time!”

“Does he really? Or does he push right up to the mark and then stop as if he can see the razor’s edge of that invisible line?”

Cas was nodding. “He challenged my alpha to a duel of wills that I thought for sure would get him killed, but I pulled it out, barely. He knew what I could take and still hold on. He wasn’t even worried. He could see it in a way none of the rest of us can.”

“Guys, come on! Michael’s a lot of weird-ass things, but he’s not the Messiah of dogs! If he had this instinct thing so cornered, he would be a wiz at manipulation tactics, but he’s not. He’s clumsy as hell. He trips over his own traplines!”

Cas chuckled, nodding and making an amused concession face.

“Here though,” said Benny. “Say you need to learn a new skill. Driving! Think of when you learned to drive. You’ve got no instincts yet other than universal ones like startling if something unexpected is speeding toward you. What are the first few weeks like? And I mean you personally, Dean, you’ve got great Canine instincts, and you’re not a clutz. Did you ever feel uncomfortable behind the wheel?”

“Uh, at first, I guess. Been a long time, Benny. Seems like I remember being overwhelmed at how many different things I needed to keep track of all at once, and it was a little challenging until my
“Exactly. When your instincts collide with your intentional actions, until you learn to harness the instinct and memorize a set of response patterns, you’re clumsy as hell.”

“That is a disturbing idea,” Castiel said. “If Michael’s an incompetent manipulator because his cognitive side hasn’t mastered the skills and is tangling up his instincts, it’s only a matter of time before he’s comfortable behind the wheel and outdriving all of us.”

Dean sighed. “Look, if you guys wanna publish that, be sure to put a disclaimer on it that says ‘we don’t know our asses from holes in the ground, but this is what our GUT says is right’. Don’t know when we started publishing scientific papers on gut feeling.”

“That’s pretty much the disclaimer that’s going in the preface,” Bobby admitted.

“I hope you alter the wording so that there’s less ‘ass’ and less ‘holes in the ground’,” Cas told them seriously.

Benny approached the Sub and put his hand on Dean’s shoulder. “No one’s saying you have to accept this at face value. The theory has been around about as long as Lupins have had language in the first place, but it makes sense in a new way. The point of all this isn’t to try to convert anyone into a mystical new religion. It’s to see if we can harness the power of our own instincts. We know they’re out there. We feel them. We act on them. We behave socially just as Canids have for hundreds of thousands of years. That has to come from somewhere, and even if it’s not this crusty round blob of knowledge floating out in nowhere, it’s still something. Envision it however works for you. But the base of the report is that your mate, specifically because he is two designations that don’t normally occupy the same body but are both designed to reach deep, has the reach to touch the core of who we are in a way the rest of us can’t, and he’s instinctively using the tools he has at hand.”

“And he’s got superpowers because he’s a spear, not a ribbon,” Dean finished for him. “Well, that’s a lot less painful than a radioactive spider bite.”

Benny’s phone rang, and he hit the speaker button. “Becky, are they here already?” He checked the time with a soft expletive.

“Yes, Sir,” she chirped. “And you might want to hurry. I think he can smell Jo. He’s looking really pale.”

“On my way,” Benny told her, hanging up. “Jack and Andrea are here. I gotta go get them. Dean, will you please find Jo? Tell her it’s time.”

“Um, yeah. I’m on it.”

Benny left in a hurry, and Dean followed him slowly enough to appear headed toward his own funeral. Bobby stopped him in the doorway.

“Dean, look, the paper isn’t actually going to tie in the myths. It’s going to stick to the theory from a scientific and metaphysical perspective, same as we do when we reference Mating-bonds. It doesn’t matter how you digest it all, the clear point is that Michael can do what he does because he’s got far more reach into whatever the source of our extra-corporeal connections is. Re-read the data tables. Check it out for yourself. Something connects us, pup. Something is tying you to him right now, giving you access to his emotions and sensations. It don’t matter if that something is a sphere or a cloud or a rainbow-brite doll. Whatever it is, it’s real. And your boy gets to drink from the deepest,
richest part of it. You visualize that however you think makes sense, and then come back and let’s talk.”

Dean nodded mutely, glanced to Cas, and left. He had a Mating to coordinate.

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Michael’s social media feeds had exploded since Charlotte. He kept one ear on Balthazar’s run down of the gangbang he planned for Dean, finalizing that everyone was in place and knew the goals and the rules. Michael wandered through the contractors’ prep room, circling Balthazar slowly, his head in his phone, and only nodding in agreement now and then. Balthazar sat straddling the dressing bench with his laptop on the bench in front of him, his locker door open beside him.

“We’ve got to emphasize the importance of everyone staying in their lane through the sequence,” Balthazar told him. “If we let them pick their own pace, it’s going to be a clusterfuck.” Balthazar looked up, hearing what he’d just said and adding, “Literally.”

“Mm,” Michael agreed without looking up.

“Am I boring you, Omega?”

“Hm, what? Oh. No. No, you’re good. I heard you.” Michael looked up, but his eyes twitched to go back into his screen.

Balthazar nodded coolly. “Michael, what’s going on?” He kicked his chin toward the phone, and Michael startled a little, looking back at it as if he’d been caught watching porn.

He smirked at his own jumpiness and turned to Balthazar. “Twitter is blowing up on me,” he admitted. “They know I was in Charlotte even though I never showed my face. Dean’s limp is all over YouTube and Instagram.”

Balthazar chuckled meatily. “Oh, yes. I saw that, too. He does self-pity better than any alpha I’ve ever seen. I want all the details, Michael. What did you even DO to him?”

Michael laughed outright. “I’m not telling you,” he declared. “You’ll work it into your scenes at work, and that will eventually get back to Dean. He likes privacy.”

Balthazar shrugged it off. He didn’t really need Michael’s choreography. He had plenty of his own, but he loved bringing the high blush to Michael’s cheeks. The boy was too easy to tease if he wasn’t in a Dominant mindset. But Michael had already moved on.

“Why don’t they take any Omegas to the cons?” he asked Balthazar. “Why don’t you go? There have to be plenty of Top-types who need a rebalance or something. Don’t they think you would have anything to contribute to the panels? They spend so much time up on stage saying ‘Omegas are this…Omegas need that’, but they’re just talking about us, not with us. Doesn’t that piss you off?”

“They do take a couple of Omegas, Michael. They work the one-on-ones.”

“They don’t do any panels,” Michael countered. “They’re never up onstage.”

Balthazar made an uncomfortable face. “Dr. Ellen does the seminar circuit,” he pointed out lamely.
Michael let that statement stand without comment. The silence lengthened. Michael’s phone buzzed in his hand.

“Look, it’s complicated,” Balthazar finally broke. “The cons, they’re…they’re not containable. Everywhere else they put us for work, the Facility has complete control over what happens to us. If we were up on that stage…I don’t know, Michael. I don’t want any part of that risk. I don’t want to be the reason that every other wolf on the stage is distracted, worrying about how to protect me if things go batshit.”

“Yeah, fine,” Michael said with feeling. “Doesn’t have to be you. It doesn’t have to be anyone who doesn’t want to be there. But they can’t keep this charade going forever! They let Omegas into the audience. What kind of safety is there for them? They literally sprinkle security everywhere, and it works. So, what, as long as it’s not someone they know and like, it’s perfectly fine to let the risks run a little higher? I’m sick of the double standard, Balthazar!”

Balthazar considered him curiously. “Did you send Dean up onstage limping to make sure the audience knew you were backstage somewhere? Hoping they’d raise the roof of the place until Dean brought you up onstage to join him?”

“Nah, I’m not an asshole, man.” Michael turned, running fingers through his hair. He kicked idly at the open locker door as he passed, and it rattled rudely in the echoing space. “Truth is, I gave him what he wanted. I kept expecting him to pull up when we started to get intense. He knew he was crossing limits of what he could sleep off, but he was so there for it… I don’t know what to make of it. He’s the one who picked the scene. The very first day, man, he coated himself in my scent just before he went down for the opening set. And he didn’t give it a second thought. Just, bathed in me, natural as you please, and then went onstage acting like he didn’t reek! And then Monday night. Dude, the guy could hardly walk! He had to have help hitting the target for his midnight piss!”

“Jesus.”

“I did everything he asked me to do, Balthazar. I stayed where I was put, helped out backstage, kept my nose behind the curtain the whole time and never bitched or moaned about any of it. It was fun, actually. Charlie’s a hoot.” Michael couldn’t suppress a slight smile at the memory of how seamlessly he and Charlie kept things running. He had a mild premonition that she would be growing more and more a close friend if they kept spending time in the same places. “But it was almost as if Dean was trying to out me without having to say the words. Why would he do that?”

Balthazar sat up and leaned slightly away from Michael. “Do I look like a shrink to you?”

Michael snorted. “Well, you’re a lot of help.”

“Alphas do that kind of thing when they’re on the nest, Michael. It’s classic posturing behavior. They need to advertise that they knocked up some poor schmuck by walking around coated in their mate’s fluids. You’re overthinking it. Dean’s a hedonist, like me. He’s never been one to turn the volume down on a scene if he’s got a partner who’s willing to play it up all the way to eleven. He got carried away. Doesn’t mean he’s trying to sabotage his own restrictions. Doesn’t mean he was hoping the audience would storm the backstage rooms hunting you down.”

Michael shook his head and checked his phone again. According to the little list to the side, he was trending. Michael was trending on Twitter.

“No, Balthazar, some part of him wanted it known that I was there. Dean doesn’t do anything by accident.”
Balthazar let Michael pace and stew. “I’m curious what you mean to do with that little revelation,” he said, looking only mildly curious.

Michael stopped walking and looked at him. “I don’t know yet. I need to think. If I’m right, then maybe I’ve already got a third of him on my side. If I’m wrong, then I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

“Have you considered talking to your mate?”

Michael chuckled. “Yeah. I should talk to him. It’s funny. A few weeks ago I wouldn’t have even considered that. I would have pressed in where he looked to be cracking to try to break him open.”

Balthazar’s brow rose in interest. “And now?”

“Now, I want to show him what I deduced, and see what he thinks about it. What’s happening to me, Balthazar? Am I turning into a compliant alpha-slave?”

Balthazar threw his head back and laughed. Michael waited for him to collect himself with a worried frown. When the older man caught Michael’s expression, he stopped laughing. “No, boy. You’re still you. You’re just growing up, that’s all.”

Michael didn’t agree. “Following his instructions in Charlotte felt really good,” he admitted. “Too good. I wasn’t even tempted to break my promise. He had me on a leash, and I was pathetically happy to be there.”

“Damnit, kid, you’re mixing everything up!” Balthazar snapped his laptop shut and shoved it clumsily into his locker before slamming the door closed. “Go talk to him about all this, if that’s what your gut tells you to do. Stay where he puts you if it feels right to do that. Learn to go with your gut and quit thinking so much!”

“And give up the idea that an Omega belongs wherever Omegas are being discussed?! You want me barefoot in the kitchen shooting out pups one after another?! Someone should be up on that stage representing our gender, Balthazar! Maybe it’s not supposed to be me, but it should be someone!” Michael’s anger unleashed on Balthazar, but the contractor didn’t take it personally. Michael wasn’t angry at him.

“That’s not what I said, Michael.”

“Then what?!”

“If it felt good to you to stay up in your room following his instructions doing something you’re not especially interested in doing, how much better is it going to feel when you get the chance to do what you were born to do with his full support?” Balthazar leaned back against the wall of lockers and crossed his arms over his chest. Michael gaped at him. “Think about it. Maybe you and he have a parallel life goal. Maybe you’re meant to be doing this crusade side-by-side. And I know you’re ready to get started, but he’s not ready yet. If you’re right about this though, he’s getting there. It sounds like he’s got a massive barrier to get around first. You and Castiel are chipping away at that barrier from the outside, and Dean – at least some part of him – is whacking away from the inside. Before you realize it, viola, no more barrier.”

“I should talk to him,” Michael posed, almost like a question.

“Kid, I’m no therapist. Do what you want.”

Michael turned inward, introspective, thoughtful. “If I hadn’t been so compliant at the con, he would
have been miserable, not playful like he was. He would have been on edge when he needed to concentrate. He wouldn’t have been in any kind of mindset for the scene we did.”

“Mm-hm,” Balthazar agreed, clearly growing bored with the conversation.

“I’ve been going about this all wrong. He doesn’t respond to pushing. He only digs his heels in harder. I need to flip it around, be a source of comfort to him, not worry, and let him come to the conclusion that there are holes in the con panels from a secure mindset. Dean’s never going to agree to putting me onstage until he trusts that I won’t push his boundaries while I’m up there. Balthazar, you’re brilliant!”

“Any time, Michael. Can we get back to the scene? I still have some calls to make.”

“Yeah! Fine. Everything sounds fine. I gotta go. I’ll see you tomorrow! Thanks, man!” Michael snatched up his bag and hurried out of the prep room, leaving Balthazar chuckling cynically to himself, still determined never to Mate. Mates were more complexity than they were worth. And he had absolutely no desire to join the circus act up onstage at the conventions either. Michael could have all of that he could take as far as Balthazar was concerned. What good was talking about sex when you could be having it?

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“You’re not still sore that I cut corners on finding my mate, are you?” Jo asked the man perched on the edge of her bed holding onto her tea cup while she scooted upward, positioning herself to take it. The blanket slipped down to her lap, but Dean had seen enough bare chests not to think twice about Jo’s. Hell, he’d seen Jo’s often enough not to find it notable. You don’t go through Presentations and puberty in someone’s back pocket and then get squeamish about nudity later. Dean handed the hot mug to her once she was settled.

“I’m not sore, pipsqueak. But you have to admit you picked a hell of a time to take a month off. We need you through this transition. I don’t know how we’re gonna manage without you.” Dean settled a little further on the bed, hiking a knee up and turning to face her.

Jo teased, “I’m sorry. I’m a little distracted right now what with this effervescent new Mating-bond ringing in my ears. Who needs me, exactly?”

“I do, you little snot! Ya happy? I need you. There, I said it. Don’t expect to hear it again.”

Jo laughed happily. “As long as we’re both real clear about that fact, I’m not gonna make you chant it to me.”

“Good, because that’s not going to happen!”

Jo sipped her tea, and Dean squinted vaguely toward the two-way mirror, trying to discern if anyone was still in the booth. “I’m not mad,” he repeated. “I’m really happy for you. How are you feeling?” He turned back to her, watching the play of emotions on her face and turning on his professional persona.

“It feels really strange. I guess you can relate. I’ve held a lot of Claims in my life, Dean, but this is something totally different. I can feel the hot water on his skin right now. Not just awareness that he’s warm, but I can actually feel the shower as if it was me in there.” Jo pulled her knees up to make a
tent in the blanket and rested her forearms on them. “It’s amazing. I can feel the wound on his shoulder sting when the water hits it. I can feel the emotions that make him want to keep running water over it and making it sting again and again.”

“Yeah, it’s…pretty great, Jo. I think you’re gonna love being that close to someone…”

“Even if it’s not you?”

He scoffed and looked at his lap, blushing.

“Dean Winchester, did I embarrass you?” She twinkled merrily.

“Shut up,” he mumbled. “You know, I didn’t ask how Jack was feeling. I asked about you. Should I go ask him?”

“I’m good,” she said serenely. “It feels good. I don’t think we triggered a Rut, if that’s what you’re looking for. I’m tired. Feel like I could sleep for a week. Kinda wanna snuggle right back down with Jack and doze for days.”

“Just sleep? Really?”

“Ah, well, multiple rounds of sleepy sex would be welcome too. But it’s not like Rut at all, this feeling. It’s a warm, contented blanket, not a hot, fast rush. I’m looking forward to kicking you out and seeing what being on the receiving side is like.”

“Oh, yeah?” Dean asked, interested. “Your boy Jack not a catcher?”

She smirked. “Not so much. That was actually his first time being the goalpost.”

Dean’s eyes widened, and he nearly spilled her tea. “You’re joking! You popped his backdoor cherry?! Jo! You pervert!”

“Don’t be an ass, Winchester. He’s straight, and he’s never been with an alpha before. When would it have come up?”

“Heh heh…You said ‘Come up’,?” he teased with a shove to her knees.

“Would you grow up?! Stop it, you’re gonna make me spill.”

“No, but, seriously?” he asked, settling back down.

“Yes, seriously.”

Dean frowned in thought, his mind back up out of the gutter and working through it from a clinical perspective. “Jo, you need the alpha connection. Do you know how you’re going to…?”

“Chill out,” she interrupted. “He’s got me covered when we need to touch a Secondary nerve. It’s not that he’s not interested, he’s just never tried it before. And I only need it every now and then. Most of the time, I’m happiest on the ‘Slot B’ side of things as long as his ‘Tab A’ is working.”

The adjoining bathroom door opened, releasing a cloud of steam, and Jack stepped in with a towel around his waist, still dripping. He was hunkered over, reaching for the small case on the floor by the bathroom door for his change of clothes. “Jo, babe, you wanna see about something to eat, or would you rather…?” He glanced up and froze, catching sight of Dean. “Oh, shit! Dean. Dean Winchester! Oh, my God. It’s you!”
“Hold up, there, cowboy,” Dean chuckled, standing up and backing away a couple of steps on the off chance that Jack had a possessive side to him. Dean hadn’t seen any hint of that, but he’d not seen them together near a third wheel yet either. But Jack didn’t care where Dean sat in relation to his mate. He was thrilled that the celebrity was in his room at all.

“Jo!” he squealed with his voice hitting three octaves too high. “It’s Dean Winchester!” He scrounged around quickly in his bag for his phone, mindlessly thinking of asking for a picture, and his towel slipped off.

“Yeah, maybe put on some pants, Jack,” Jo told him calmly. “He’s not going anywhere. In fact,” she winked at Dean. “He’s more a pest we’re going to spend a lot of time trying to get rid of.”

“Pants. Right. Shit. I’m a moron. Hold on.”

“And breathe, buddy,” Dean suggested, finding the whole thing quite amusing. Jo noticed his entertainment and flipped him off which only served to make him grin wider. “You know, if you pass out, we have to cart you down to medical, and it’ll be late evening before you get some alone time with the missus here. Try to avoid that. She gets cranky when she’s horny.”

“Oh.” Jack’s face as he glanced back and forth between Dean and Jo was priceless. He’d frozen again with his boxers at his knees. Dean didn’t know what emotion Jo sent him through their newly minted bond, but it seemed to do the trick. “OH!,” he said next, his eyes growing hooded, and the boxers changed direction.

“And that’s my cue,” Dean told them as Jack scuttled back under the covers and into the warm orbit of his mate.

“Dean, wait,” called Jo. “Didn’t you come in here to tell us the readings? How did it look?”

The alpha stopped with his hand on the doorknob. “You know I would’ve said something if it was a miss,” he told her with his eyes on the floor. “You kids did good. That was an honest-to-god True-Mate match sealing itself, and all the lights turned green. Your Pelio-readings bubbled like a teapot.”

“Good,” said Jo happily. Dean looked up and saw that she had curled down into Jack’s arms with her head pillowed on his chest. The green-eyed serpent in his chest dissolved a little bit. The two of them looked very much like they fit together. “Snap the lock on the outer booth on your way out, would you? I don’t really want an audience for the next round or two.”

“You know,” he suggested. “You could go home.”

“Not yet,” Jack told them. “We’re both a little shaky. It’s better if we stay here tonight and head home in the morning.” He glanced from Dean to Jo, craning his chin a little. “That is…if it’s okay with you?”

She smiled and nuzzled into his chest. “I like this guy a lot, Dean. Can I keep him?”

Dean’s face turned to invested innocence, and he pointed vaguely out the door at his back. “Kay, I gotta go throw up now. You two good here on your own?”

Jack looked worried, but Jo laughed. “It totally serves you right, you dick!” she reminded him.

“Yeah, and I totally told you so, too, Joanna Beth!”

“Dean!” she called again as he was heading out once more. “Tell April that Jack and I will take hers and Castiel’s place next weekend to help her Primate friends move into their new house. Find out
where we need to be and what time.”

Dean frowned in confusion. “Come again?”

“When April and Cas go to New York next weekend, her tutors are moving to a house here in town. They’ll be short a few hands and muscles. She asked if we could fill in. Tell her we’ll be there.”

Jack had slipped down enough that he could cradle Jo’s face in his hands and begin a slow worship of the delicate skin at her throat. She was ignoring him, stilled by the laser beam of Dean’s glare.

“Cas is going to New York? Next weekend?”

“I thought you knew. He’s taking April. She said they might even stop over in Oklahoma City and spend Thursday night with her folks.”

Dean stared at her. “April told you this?”

“Well, excuse me if I didn’t go through you to talk to her. We’re friends, Dean. We text all the time. Yes, she told me. What’s going on? Jack, sweetie, hold on a minute.” Jo pushed herself back up to sitting, and Jack snuffled a little as he pulled backward.

“He’s leaving town this close to our wedding without me?”

“Maybe he’s buying you a surprise gift in New York.”

Dean blinked. “That son of a bitch.”

“Dean, what?” Jo was beginning to feel real concern. Dean’s face said the ground had just dropped out from under him.

“They’re leaving tomorrow?” He looked dazed, like he’d just been struck by lightning and didn’t know yet whether it hurt.

“Really late,” Jo answered. “They’re staying through your…” she glanced at Jack, “…scene with Michael, and then flying out right after.”

“That son of a bitch!”

“You’re scaring me, Winchester. What’s wrong? He’s not skipping out. He’s just leaving for the weekend. It’s not like he’s not coming back.”

Dean had a fingernail in his teeth, thinking. “Son of a bitch,” he muttered.

“You said that already,” Jack pointed out helpfully.

Dean looked up. “He’s gonna give me those two weeks after all, the slippery asshole. I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming. He didn’t want to do it at all, but I won a point off him when his guard was down, and now it’s payback. He’s going to force my two week hiatus down my throat like an intubation tube.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Jo demanded.

“I gotta go. I feel a brat episode coming on. You two good here? Yeah? Kay. See you. Enjoy. Congrats. Stay hydrated.” He hustled out, forgetting to lock the hallway door. It wouldn’t matter. No one had any reason to poke into the room that had a newly Mated couple turning back into the warm embrace of bliss. No one was going to disturb them.
“Stop right there!” the authoritative voice echoed down the hall. Dean froze with his hand on the turnstile bar. He turned.

“What?” he asked his mate innocently.

“You’re not going anywhere without me. And you and I are going to talk about whatever it is you think you’re about to pull.” Michael strode confidently toward him. Dean’s body betrayed him as usual, turning into jelly at the figure Michael cut in his Dominant aspect, one brow pinning Dean’s feet to the floor.

Dean abandoned the turnstile, grabbing Michael’s hand instead and pulling him bodily down the short span to Dean’s suite. Once inside, Michael stepped the power down a notch and leaned against the kitchenette counter with his arms crossed.

“Did you know Cas is taking April to New York this weekend?” Dean asked him.

“I…what? We have wedding appointments. Like, three of them. There are decisions we’ve been putting off. We’re helping Mark and Matt move. We need to do everyone’s final fittings. He’s leaving?”

“It’s what Jo said.”

“How would Jo know? Isn’t she ga-ga from Mating? Why is she talking to you about New York?”

“She and April are BFFs, remember?” Dean shot back. “April told her. Jo mentioned it to me offhand, like she thought I would already know. They leave tomorrow.”

“Dean, our scene is tomorrow.”

“Yeah. They’re staying through that and then hightailing it out on the redeye.”

Michael gaped at him. “I have to reschedule everything,” he realized.

“Right,” Dean agreed. “He knows about all that. But he scheduled the trip anyway. And if he didn’t tell you, and he didn’t tell me, but he didn’t ask April to keep it hush-hush. That means he meant for us to find out by the grapevine and be sideswiped.”

“Son of a bitch,” muttered Michael. He visibly thought about it, but he wasn’t finding any explanations.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” Dean asked him.

“No, I’m completely lost.” Michael paused and then belched spectacularly, taking himself by surprise and going red in embarrassment.

“Excuse you,” Dean told him without heat as if the discourtesy had been his own. He fetched Michael a glass of water and dug through a drawer to find a chewable tablet for gas. Intestinal distress wasn’t really supposed to hit this early, but Michael was clearly uncomfortable.

Dean filled in the gaps for Michael while the Omega sipped his water. “I told Cas I wanted a two
week moratorium on sex to get the two of us revved up for the ceremony and the wedding night. I thought it would be dramatic and romantic.”

“He didn’t want to do it at all, if I recall,” Michael replied.

“Right, so we settled on one week as a compromise.”

“Except, you didn’t want a compromise. You wanted two weeks.”


“I’m still lost,” Michael admitted. “Why is he going to New York?”

“I maneuvered him out of the foursome he wanted to do. He meant to try it out on Friday, but I threw spikes in his wheels, and he lost the chance to get it in at all before the wedding.” Dean flopped down on the couch and sprawled.

“I remember that…” Michael said with confusion on his face, still not getting it.

“Don’t you see? Michael, I won! I scored off him. I slipped in the back way and pulled his chair out, and he fell flat on his ass. He can’t let that stand.”

Michael’s face clouded and lowered. “And he’s getting you back by giving you what you wanted in the first place?”

“Don’t confuse me with facts, man. I’m thinking here.” Dean got up and paced. “Should I be worried about your mental health?” Michael asked him.

Dean put up a palm in warning. “He’s up to something. I can feel it. I just have to work out what it is.”

Michael buried his face in his hands and rubbed. Hard. “Maybe he just has business in New York, Dean. Maybe it’s last minute, and he forgot to tell us. He forgets stuff almost as often as you do.”

“Rude,” Dean said, turning to face Michael.

“Paranoid,” Michael retorted.

“Come to New York with me,” Dean said, feeling tingles in his fingertips.

“Not a chance,” Michael parried.

“Not for the whole weekend. Just for Saturday evening.”

“You want me to spend three hours on a plane, each way, for one evening. You’re out of your mind. We have things we need to do here, and I’m miserable right now. I’m belching up ‘Old Faithful’ even with my feet flat on the ground.”

“I need to surprise him, Michael. I need to score one more hand.”

“What you need is a hard spanking,” Michael said flatly. “I can take care of that for you right now.”

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea,” Dean said easily. “Prolly help me think better.”
“Really? We just did a big scene on Monday.”

“Scening and spanking aren’t the same thing, man,” Dean told him as if it were common knowledge.

“Wait. Are you seriously asking me to spank you?” Michael set his glass on the counter so he didn’t drop it.

“Just a quick O.T.K.” Dean was already pulling his shirt over his head after unbuttoning the top couple. “Just get me present and clear my head.”

Michael didn’t move, so Dean walked over, took his hand, and led him to the couch, shoving him bodily into place. Dean slipped his slacks and underwear down to his knees and placed himself over his mate’s lap. He settled, breathing deeply. Michael didn’t move. Dean looked around at him.

“Come on, man. Help a guy out. Think of it as popping a zit on my back that I can’t reach. I can’t do this myself.”

“This is the weirdest experience I’ve ever had, Dean Michael.”

“Bullshit. You did drugs in college.”

“I did downers, Dean, not LSD.”

“Don’t make me insult you and piss you off just to get a…” SWACK! “Ouch!”

“Lay still, or I’m going to miss the mark. Jesus, this feels weird.”

He slapped a hard hand down on Dean’s perfect backside a few more times, the sight of bare skin sending him a message very different from the one Dean was seeking. Michael’s cock thickened, but he shoved the impulse aside. Dean was looking for a supportive presentation from him, not a roll in the hay.

“What are you planning to do in New York?” Michael asked.

Dean squirmed a little, changing his balance point and leading Michael’s hand lower. Michael obliged him, still feeling supremely awkward. He struck several more times. Hard.

“I dunno,” Dean grunted.

“Why is he going to New York?” The quick slaps heated Michael’s hand as much as they did Dean’s ass. He picked up the pace in an effort to shorten to process. Dean huffed at him and ducked his head down below the level of the couch, tightening the muscles of his thighs.

“Dean? Why is he going to New York, and what do you hope to do there?”

“Gonna surprise him, Michael!” It came out pained and far less enthusiastic, far less certain.

“To what end, dammit! Just to score a point?” Michael’s hand stung fiercely, but he kept the rhythm steady.

“Lemme up! Stop, man. Let me…catch my breath.” Dean wormed his way up and slunk backward onto the couch without covering up.

“Why is he taking April with him?” Michael asked, examining his own hand and rubbing the sting out. Dean lay out beside him at an angle into the corner with a knee knocking into Michael’s.
“I don’t know,” Dean replied. His face was rapidly returning to its usual color. “I just feel like showing up on Saturday night and popping up unexpected…feel like that would show him…”

“Show him what? That you know how to buy an airline ticket and track him down by his credit card receipts? He’s not going by himself. You said he was taking April. What if he’s got plans with her that are personal and intimate? You’re going to barge in on them?”

Dean hefted his feet into the air and made a grab for the elastic of his underwear. Michael helped him slide them up his legs.

“It’s how we operate, Michael. He’s gonna expect me to try something.”

“Come on, alpha. Think. Why’s he taking April?” Something about Michael’s voice indicated he’d made a guess of his own.

Dean lifted his hips and shimmied his slacks back into place before slouching back onto the couch in his undershirt and pants. He sighed heavily, glancing at Michael. “Are you going to make me say it all?”

“No. I’m not Top right now, just your mate. Dean, I need to know where your head’s at, that’s all. Do you have it?”

“Yeah,” Dean said, defeated. “They need the time together, don’t they? Just the two of them. They just went through an awful tangled up FUBAR, and I’d be a dick to spoil their bonding.”

Michael patted his leg, adding. “After the wedding, she won’t ever have him again the way she does right now. Give her the weekend. Stay here with me and remember that after the wedding, I won’t ever have you the way I do right now either.”

“Can’t you picture it though,” Dean asked wistfully. “They could go out dancing somewhere in the city, only to spot you and me dancing past as if we just happened to be in the same club a thousand miles from home.”

“Did the spanking really help?”

Dean smirked. “I think so. I would have come to the same decision on my own eventually anyway, but that sped me up. You did a good job.”

“You,” Michael pointed at him on his way back to the kitchen. “Would have bought plane tickets on the spur of the moment and then been too stubborn to back out once the credit card payment went through.”

Dean grinned at him.

“Whereas, I, on the other hand, have been a model packmate and all around good boy,” Michael told Dean with a wink. “I deserve a reward.”

“I’m not driving you out to see Naomi.”

“Don’t be stupid, alpha.”

“What then?”

“Let’s … spend some time together, Dean. Just you and me. Before the wedding. Before the little one turns my guts into his trampoline. Forget Castiel for a few days and come back home with me.
You don’t need to win every hand. Let this one go.”

Dean shrugged back into his shirt and rubbed his butt a few times before he began working his buttons. He advanced on Michael in the kitchen slowly, lost inside his own head and the sensations from his mate. He took Michael’s water glass and drank.

“I’ve never pulled up before, Michael.”

“You’ve needed to,” the Omega reminded him. “Needed to, but couldn’t. Turn away this time, Dean. Focus on me. I promise you he’ll still be there for you when you turn back around. He’s not going to disappear on you if you stop the mind-fuckery. It’s not his sense of watching out for your crazy turns that keeps him close to you. He loves you, Dean. Let him prove it in a new way. Let him come to you while you’re balanced, not just when you’re self-destructive. Let him go. Let him go for now.” Michael’s voice dipped into whispers, and his lips tickled Dean’s ear. “He’ll be back. I promise. You don’t have to reel him back to you in a panic to get him to come home. He’ll come back on his own.”

Dean clutched at Michael’s hips. “I know he will. I’m not afraid like I once was.” Dean’s whispers vanished into the air that thickened around them. “But it all feels so different now. It’s new. It’s a new kind of scary.”

“I’ve got you, babe,” Michael assured him. “We’ll do it together.”

“Can I have him tonight though?” Dean asked in a small voice. “It’s a long two and a half weeks from now until we marry. Can you give us this one last night?”

Michael smiled into Dean’s hair. Dean could feel it. “If he asks me nicely,” he said, evoking the old Michael.

Dean cinched him tightly then took a bracing breath and let him go. “Good. Done. Settled. Thanks, man. I feel tons better.”

“Where were you going just now, Dean? Home?”

“I needed to drive. I do that sometimes when my skin starts to flake off from hard emotions. It helps ground me.”

“But you’re all right now?” Michael was poking around in Dean’s head. Dean could feel the assessment as surely as if Michael held a stethoscope up to his chest. “You remember I have an appointment?”

Dean checked the time on his phone. “Yeah, man. I have an alarm. I wouldn’t have stood you up. Come on into my office for a bit. Let me get a few things done, and then we’ll walk down there together.” Dean held the door for Michael, and the omega kissed him lightly on his way through.

Dean blinked.

“What was that for?”

Michael chuckled. “Do I need a reason?”

“No, I guess not.”

Michael schooled his face and caught Dean frowning a little. “I’m proud of you, Winchester. That’s all. I’m proud of both of us.”
“Oh.”

“Go on and finish whatever you can. Don’t mind me. I’ll just hang out on your couch.”

“Right. Yeah. Got stuff to finish.”

Michael chuckled again at his mate’s fuzziness. Dean shuffled across to his desk and fluttered about on his keyboard for a few minutes before giving it up and joining Michael on the couch again, making out with his mate comfortably until the alarm sounded on his phone. Dean’s hand reluctantly left Michael’s soft belly to silence his alarm tone, and he even more reluctantly disentangled his tongue from his mate’s.

Their foreheads rested together. “Michael…”

“Dean, you don’t have to say it.”

“No, but, do you have any idea how lost I would be without you? Even with Castiel’s ring on my finger, man, I… I need you so much.”

“I know, Dean. I know. I love you too. Come on. Missouri will chew us out if we’re late.” Michael shoved Dean to his feet and let the alpha hoist him up as well. “Knock on Cas’ office on the way out, alpha. See if he’s coming too.”

“Yeah.”

Castiel wasn’t in his office, but the two weren’t surprised to find him already sitting in the tiny waiting area outside Dr. Mosely’s office with a tablet in his hands, clicking away at the touch screen and humming quietly to himself. He looked up when the mates stepped through the glass door and smiled warmly.

With no preamble, Cas scootched over on the bench seat to make room for Michael and began talking as if in the middle of a conversation.

“April and I take off at 11:30 tomorrow night. We’re spending one night in Oklahoma, and then the remainder of the weekend in New York. Michael, I rescheduled my tuxedo fitting, and I’m confident the two of you can handle the rest of the wedding plans without me. Dean, I’m still waiting for your last scene journals.”


“Yes, I am. I apologize for the short notice, but it’s actually good news. Benny and Sam set some wheels in motion that I can pin down if I go now. It’s the end of a very long courtship into some very deep pockets, and everything is ripe. I need to see this through personally.” Cas turned his tablet off and looked up at Dean. “I’m taking April with me, Dean. We need to spend a few nights together, get to know each other all over again. You understand, don’t you?”

Dean blushed and stammered, kicking his toe into the carpet. “I…uh…yeah…Cas. I get it. Just took me by surprise is all, what with Jo and Meg Mating and all the stuff going on here.”

“Jo and Meg have their Alpha to watch over them, baby. They don’t need me. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Me?”

“Yes, Dean, you. Will you be all right? I’ll be here long enough to examine you after your scene
tomorrow. After that, you’ll have Michael. We’ll be home Monday night”

Dean scoffed. “Of course I’ll be all right. You go on and do the big Alpha thing. Enjoy yourselves. Don’t worry about me. I’ll probably spend the whole weekend laying around in bed, recuperating.”

“Michael Winchester…” a nurse called from the doorway.

If Missouri was nervous with Castiel watching her work, she didn’t show it. She examined Michael thoroughly. She ran readings of his hormones, both those in his urine and the ones he expelled to the environment around him. She studied his measurements, comparing his expansion to her tables, and she asked him dozens of questions. The alphas let Michael do the talking, although Cas piped up with an answer now and then when Missouri strayed into technical jargon.

“No ultrasound today?” Michael asked when Missouri peeled her gloves off and began to wash her hands.

“Not yet, Omega,” she told him. “There’s nothing much to see at this stage except fat and connective tissues. Your uterus is too small to get a good picture, and the embryo is still tiny, much too tiny to make anything out.”

“But I feel so much bigger already.”

“That’s perfectly normal, Omega. Over the next few weeks, you’ll stop growing wider as fast as you are right now. Don’t go panicking on us. Give the little jelly bean a couple of months to catch up to your body’s preparations. Once the fat stores are done building up, you’ll plateau on your weight for about three months, and then after that, all the growth is your pup taking on weight.”

“Everyone says it’s a little boy,” Michael told her by way of asking.

“That’s right,” she nodded with a glance to Cas. “His sex organs are firmly established already, although they aren’t fully developed. Noses as sensitive as you have around you, you can trust them. I agree. I smell the same thing. You have yourself a little boy.”

“And he’s okay?”

She smiled at him and patted his thigh. “He’s doing great, Michael. Everything looks perfect. I told you before – you were born for this. You’re going to have a strong, healthy little boy. You just keep up the good work. You’re still exercising?”

Michael nodded. “Jogging won’t hurt him, will it?”

Cas answered him. “Jogging won’t hurt him at all, and staying fit will do you both good.”

“Michael, sugar,” Missouri continued. “You look fine. All your metrics are right where we want them. Any other problems? How’s your nausea?”


Dean cleared his throat. “It’s gotten better over the last week, Missouri. He’s gassy and bloated, but he’s less nauseated. It feels like he’s shifting out of the initial hormonal discomfort and into more of a physical one.” Dean caught Michael’s incensed glare. “What? It’s true.”
Missouri ignored the short fuse and nodded. “Right on time, then. It should continue to improve until it gets much worse, but that’s a worry for another week. Anything else?”

“Sex is still okay?” Michael asked sheepishly.

“Absolutely. Baby, you Top or Bottom all you want to right up until the time I tell you to stop. Even as much length as Dean’s packing when he’s fully engorged won’t hurt that pup. You’re not going to jiggle it loose. Your orgasms won’t cause a miscarriage. If anything, they help because they keep you balanced.”

Michael glanced at Dean and then at Cas.

“So, then, I can still play after the wedding, when we’re all on holiday for the honeymoon?”

“Well, now, that’s entirely up to your alphas, Michael. But I have no objection from a pregnancy standpoint.” Missouri winked at Castiel, and he grinned back.

“May I have a copy of your findings from today, Missouri?” Cas asked her. “I’d like to study his chemistry a little more.”

“What are you up to, Cas?” Dean asked him beadily.

Cas didn’t rise to the challenge beneath his words. He answered straight. “I want to compare the hormone ratios from today to what we saw during his Mating and testing logs,” he explained easily. “Just email them to me, Missouri.”

“Cas.”

“You promised me access to everything we would have organically, Dean. I’m holding you to your word.”

“He’s not your research subject.”

“He’s not a breakable jewel who needs to be kept behind a glass case either. There’s a middle ground, and I mean to walk it. I’d rather do that with your assistance, but I’ll do it alone if I must.” Cas was on his feet and preparing to leave before Michael had even wormed back into his clothes.

“What’s going on?” Michael asked them both, eyes darting between them.

Cas gestured for Dean to explain, and Dean turned heavily to his mate. “The research team thinks you’re the Golden Ticket that’s going to unlock the theory of instinct for us. It’s the ‘Holy Grail’ of Lupin research. They unscrambled some of the data we got off our Matings, and they’ve got a few new ideas. Old ideas, actually. I told them to keep out of your pants though. I’ve got your back, Michael.”

“They think I can help? How?”

Dean shook his head slowly. “Not like this, man.”

“Dean?” Michael asked as he pulled the elastic of his waistband into place and dropped his shirttail over it.

“Michael, man, I told you. I can’t put you in there and watch what they would do to you.”

“But what’s new, Dean? Cas? What have they learned? How do I help?”
Castiel forced himself to meet Dean’s eye as he answered Michael. “Some of the readings and observations the team has collected from you have opened up access to a new line of reasoning. Or, rather, a very ancient one. We can’t be sure what we know yet, but you present some unique opportunities. Dean’s correct in that you won’t be sacrificial no matter what.”

“But…?”

Dean stepped up, taking Michael’s focus again. “They want to ask you questions about what it feels like when you do all the weird shit you do,” he admitted. “They think it would help to understand how much thought you put into it versus you doing it all on instinct.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Michael mused, watching Dean. “Why does it make you so uncomfortable? It’s just questions, right? I mean, the team can compile them and then you and Cas can do the interview, right? I’ll answer whatever they want to ask, Dean. I want to help.”

“It’s a slippery slope, Michael…”

“I trust you, Dean.”

“Jesus, Omega, you’re gonna be the death of me.”

Michael moved into his space and placed Dean’s hands on his hips, as close to the tiny little beating heart as he could get his mate. “No, I’m not. I’m the opposite of death. I’m giving you life.” Michael’s voice was low and sultry.

“That’s a shitty blow, man.” Dean clutched on though, taking the comfort offered him.

Cas stayed near the door. “We won’t allow it to get out of control, Dean. You know that. You trust me with your safety. Can’t you please trust me with Michael’s?”

“It’s not a matter of trust, Cas.”

“Yes, it is. That’s precisely what it is. And it made sense when you thought you were protecting him from being forced to take part in a study he wanted nothing to do with. But he wants to help. Dean, he wants in. At this point, you’re standing more in his way than you are standing guard over his safety. You know I’m not going to allow anything that puts him at risk. Trust me, Dean. Please! Otherwise, what was all that craziness we all went through together for? What did we gain from pushing each other’s panic buttons over the last couple of weeks?”

Dean frowned and rested his forehead on Michael’s shoulder. “Just the questions? Just talking?”

Cas said, “Nothing but words, Dean. You and Michael have my promise. And it’s fine by me if you’re the one to execute the interviews. Just the two of you, if that makes you more comfortable.”

Cas had his back to the door, and he stood statue still. Dean’s resolve had watched one assertion after another fall by the wayside, and Cas knew this one hurt.

“I don’t mind talking, Dean,” Michael told him. “I want to do this. It could help one of our pups somewhere down the line. It could help me. You’re still learning new things every day.”

“Fine,” Dean said suddenly. “Fine. Let’s do it.” He sighed heavily and buried his face in Michael’s throat. “The best thing that’ll probably come out of the interview is going to be that we discover you’re not the ‘Chosen One’ after all.”

“Thank you, alpha,” Michael whispered to him.
Dean made an unsettled grumbly sound of irreverent dissent, and Missouri looked up from her computer in the corner. “Hoo, boy, if you were mine and you made that noise, you’d be lit up all the way home. Now go on and get out of here. Go on.”

Cas chuckled softly as he ushered the other two out.

“It’s a good thing he’s not yours, then, isn’t it, beta?” Cas added over his shoulder, and Missouri blanched a bit. It was a subtle smackdown, but it was enough to draw her up tight and get her attention.

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Good night, doctor.”

Sam stood in the doorway of the room he shared with his mate in the Manor house, watching her watch the twins sleep from her place stretched out on the bed. He had meant to bundle his family back home this evening, for all of their sakes, but Jess looked peaceful and comfortable, and Sam wondered if she might be better off staying. Certainly the pups thrived here with all the hands and warm smiles ready to lend aid to their care, but it was Jess who held Sam’s eye. She was lost to a dreamy, sensuous state of mind as she lay out on her side, idly stroking one finger along Hank’s cheek. The pup twitched in his sleep.

“We could stay, if you’d rather,” he said quietly.

Jess didn’t look up. The softness of her face lingered.

“I just got them to sleep. They were both so tired, and they fought it.” She couldn’t tear her eyes off her sons, asleep side-by-side in angelic perfect repose.

“You’re exhausted, sweetheart. Lie back and get a nap. I’ll keep watch.”

“Look at them, Sam,” she mumbled drowsily. “Have you ever seen anything so perfect? And fifteen minutes ago I was ready to launch them both out the window.”

He huffed a short laugh and sat on the bed by her hip so she could remain hovering above the bassinet. His eyes followed hers, and his heart agreed with her. His sons were perfect.

“Toss them out the window, and you’ll be following right behind,” he threatened with a hand running up her thigh and over the swell of her ass, still sore from her recent corrections. She was too sleepy for a full laugh, so she simply smiled softly.

“Sam…” Her hand made a grasp for his, and he gave it to her. She pulled him upward to nuzzle into his palm, and he went easily, shifting his weight over her hips with grace to spoon her from behind and bask in the soft, sleepy glow of pack. He could see the pups from over her shoulder. It seemed to Sam that he could see the whole world from here.

“I never knew I could love this hard,” she told him. “I would never throw them out a window. Even when I’m exhausted beyond thinking, I would do anything for them both.” Her voice was soft and drifting.
Sam smiled as he scented her neck. “Me too, baby. Go on to sleep. No one’s going to take them from us. Breathe out. Let go.”

“I’m not afraid…” she protested languidly.

“Yeah, you are. You’re all clenched up deep down like you’re terrified they’ll be stolen while you sleep. No one’s ever going to let that happen, Jess. Look…” Sam drew her eyes back across to where J.T. rubbed at his tiny face in a crinkly bunny nose of cuteness before settling back into stillness. “Look at him. Look how sweet and tiny and perfect he is.”

“I can’t do it, Sam. I can’t be strong enough…”

“Shh. Yes, you can. Not by yourself, maybe, but you’re not alone, Jess. You don’t have to try to do it alone. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Sam, I can’t. I get so tired! I’m tired all the time! I love them so much, and they need someone who can care for them properly!” She whispered fiercely and then sniffled. “Hank’s going to need…”

“Jess, stop! You’re tired because there are two of them and only one of you, and you’re not able to get enough sleep, not because you’re weak!”

“Hank needs more care than I know how to…”

Sam clamped a hand across the back of her neck and forced her onto her belly. “Shh!” he whispered into her ear. “You’re exhausted, and you’re panicking. We’ll figure it out, love. Breathe for me now. Just breathe. Don’t talk.”

“You don’t understa…OW!” Sam’s hand smacked her left upper thigh, and she cut off with a yelp.

“I said, don’t talk. Breathe like I taught you, and get some sleep. We’ll discuss it as much as you need to when you’re rested.” Sam leaned his body weight down over her, stifling her into the soft mattress, and giving him enough reach to caress J.T.’s tiny fist and Hank’s velvety forearm. They really were perfect. Sam knew exactly what Jess was feeling. Without a firm hand and a strong sense of his own wolf, the two newly minted parents were in danger of echoing each other straight into a full panic cycle. The years before them stretched out in terrifying unknowns, and they only had one chance to get it right. Such tiny little souls depending on the two of them to fulfill all of their needs for the next many years was a terrifying realization even for someone who wasn’t Submissive, someone who didn’t need a strong hand beneath them, stabilizing their stance. Sam felt the weight of both little ones and his mate all at once, and he knew exactly what Jess was feeling.

“Shh, shh. Sleep now, babies. All my sweet babies,” crooned Sam. Peace settled over his shoulders as he felt Jess slip away inside their bond. A Dominant satisfied was a strong pull for Sam. He felt giddy for a moment, a quick rush of gratification, and then he dropped a light kiss on Jess’ throat before he rolled backward and off the bed.

Sam dropped a light blanket over his mate and then pulled their soft yellow baby blanket across his sleeping sons’ forms. For all her protests that she couldn’t do it, Jess had them both glowing with health, ruddy and plump and growing. Sam smiled softly into the bassinet. He considered offering to take over on the home front for a few weeks to let her focus back on the professional world where she was most familiar, but he remembered what had happened the last time he’d made a suggestion like that, about how she should manage her side of their mutual life, and he sighed. If she asked, he would swap out in a second, terrifying as that would be, but the idea wasn’t going to come from Sam. He would get his turn soon enough.
Jess had wanted the first six weeks to herself, and Sam had the second. Time was running out on her time alone with the pups, and he knew that if she handed them off before her time was up, she would never shake the feeling that she’d failed somehow. That’s not how Sam saw it, but it wasn’t his job to direct her vision. Hank’s little fingers curled around Sam’s index finger and pulled it to his lips. He began to suckle gently, and Sam’s knees went weak. He breathed out a careful breath before slowly extricating himself. Warming up a couple of bottles was well within his capacity.

Sam trotted down into the kitchen, floating a little on a rush of oxytocin. He was on a timer at this point, in a race to beat the hungry wails of his boys before they awakened their mother from the much-needed nap Sam put her to. He’d promised her that she wasn’t in this alone and that he wasn’t leaving. He needed to make good on that promise.

“On the right side, beta,” Fred advised him when the butler saw him raking through the refrigerator. “In the back. We keep a warm pan of water on the back burner of the stove at all times. Just drop two bottles in, and I’ll mind them.”

Sam plucked two bottles, premixed and ready to warm, from the back shelf, shook each a little, and set them into the warm water.

“Thanks, Fred. You guys have an assembly line going, don’t you?”

“It’s a necessity while the pups are this small. They’ll grow out of it soon enough,” Fred told him, adjusting the burner and checking the thermometer clipped to the side of the pan. “Actually, Sam, it was Michael who put the assembly line in place. When they awaken, you can bring down the whole bassinet and change them in the parlor before you feed them. They have bouncers set up in the dining room in case you’re on your own and need to feed them both at once. It is fairly seamless.” He picked each bottle up one at a time and swirled the liquid inside.

Sam stood by the center island watching. Thinking.

“We were planning to go back home tonight, Fred.”

“Oh.” Fred turned with a look of such pathetic disappointment that Sam chuckled softly.

“But it might be better for us to stay on for a while. Jess is overwhelmed and worn out.”

“Yes, that would be far preferable,” Fred jumped in before pinking a little at the collar, swallowing noticeably, and turning to resume his study of fluid thermal dynamics.

Sam chuckled more heartily and scratched his forehead. “Level with me, Fred. Do you and the rest of the staff really enjoy having…”

“Absolutely, beta!”

Sam’s brow hit his hairline. Fred never interrupted. The primate stood pat, turned to face Sam, nostrils flaring.

“Why?”

The butler sighed and went back to the bottles. “I will never have children, Sam, not children of my own. I made peace with that long ago. But please don’t… They are not a burden to us. They are a gift. And they have brought a lightness into this house that it has not held in far too many years. Jessica is exhausted, as you say. You, yourself, have limited time at the moment to devote to them unencumbered. We are your pack, Sam. Let us take up some of the strain. It won’t be forever. It’s just for a spare few fleeting weeks. Please.”
“You don’t…uh…” Sam studied the countertop with a frown on his face. “You don’t think they might grow confused about who their parents are? What if they don’t know me, Fred? We brought them home at the start of convention season. I’m gone more than I’m here.”

Fred smiled patiently. “There’s no danger of that, Sam,” he assured the beta, and the strength of his conviction pulled Sam’s eyes up. “They light up when they scent you. They adore you, you and Jessica both. They always relax in your arms.”

“Maybe, but Fred, Michael has such a way with them. What if they’ve bonded more closely with him than with me?”

“Go fetch them, Sam, and see for yourself. They know who their father is. And please don’t take them away from us merely to be sure they don’t form bonds with Omega Michael. Linking with him does not harm them, nor does it pull them away from you.”

Sam let out a relieved breath. “Yeah,” he sighed. “Right. Love isn’t a pie, right? There’s enough to go ‘round.”

“There is at that.”

“If you’ve got the bottles,” Sam said, feeling much easier. “I’ll go grab the pups.”

***************

“One down, one to go,” Dean asserted as he backed out of the parking space. “Jo and Jack hit a homerun, and no sign of a Rut. Now we just have to get Meg pegged.”

“I gave Jo access to my suite for the night,” Cas told him offhand. “We need their Processing room back in the morning. Full slate of tests on the schedule. I wanted them to have the option to sleep in.”

Dean scoffed. “Benny has a suite too, man. Should be their own Alpha giving up his digs, not you.”

“Benny is using his suite tonight,” Cas informed him. “He wants to be onsite for them if they need him.”

Dean pouted. “She’s gonna stink up the place with girly alpha stench.”

“That’s reparable,” Castiel reminded him. “Stop whining. It wasn’t your decision to make. It’s MY space to lend, not yours.”

“You’re unlikely to be in there for a good long time anyway, Dean,” Michael commented from the backseat.

“Nooners, Michael!”

“Honeymoon, Dean!”

“Enough.” Cas’ voice was quietly commanding, and they both snapped their mouths shut. Cas turned slightly. “Michael, do you have any objections to my taking Dean in hand this evening? I will not leave him any worse off than he is right now.”

Dean scoffed quietly and grumbled under his breath.
“Excuse me?” Cas challenged, and Dean shot him a petulant scowl.

“I said: Don’t do me any favors. A scene that doesn’t leave a mark ain’t no scene at all.”

“Indeed?”

Dean blanched at the expression on his fiancé’s face. “Oh. Uh. Shit. I mean…” Somewhere along the line, Dean must have earned a shit-ton of bad karma to gift him a mouth that kept turning on him like that.

“Please continue. Tell me what you meant.” Cas was doing that thing. That thing that made Dean’s belly squirm. Dean responded by flashing his winningest grin.

“I meant, I’m putty in your hands, sir.”

Michael sat back on the long bench with a shake of his head. “Knock yourself out, Sir. Nothing you do tonight will change what I have planned for tomorrow.”

“Excellent.” Cas gloated across at Dean, who found an inexplicable need to check his speed and focus tightly on the road in front of him. His ears burned, and the squirming intensified. One glance in the rearview mirror caught the tail end of Michael’s eyeroll, and Dean chuckled in spite of his blushing cheeks.

Damn, he had an awesome Pack! He gunned his baby a little, and headed for home. If this was to be their last hoorah before they married, Dean wanted to make it worth the effort.

Chapter End Notes

I spent time at work, while I was supposed to be working, clarifying the timeline for this story. It was a great time to review all the dangling ends and think through how I want to tie it all up. It also showed me in stark terms just how slowly it all moves. There are several instances where a single day takes four chapters. Total calendar time span for the plot, not including flashbacks, is about 6 months, and that includes skipping right over most of March and all of April. How is that possible?? :D I'm not judging, just baffled.

Anyway, thanks for sharing this run with me. Running is more fun as a pack.
Chapter 104

Chapter Summary

It's the morning of Michael's big scene, and he's not feeling all that great. April, on the other hand, is invigorated. We're taking stock of the pack's state of mind for a minute. Dean's got some introspection to do. Cas is a rock for all of them, as he should be.

Chapter Notes

I accidentally wrote two chapters. I don't know how that happened. They are both finished, but here's the first. The second will come in a bit.

I hope everyone had a lovely Valentine's Day, a good President's Day for my fellow U.S. citizens, a wonderful "Love Your Pet" Day yesterday, and a delectable "Sticky Buns" day as my interwebs tell me Feb 21 is.

A big thanks to Hufflerin for the *THEN* prompts. This one and the next are both for you.

Cas, Nick, and Benny are all juniors here, if that helps situate them in time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rebecca (Becky) Elaine Rosen
Omega-Neutral [A/B/Dz: -21], [D/N/x: -4], [Z-Scale: -2], no Pack affiliation
cis-Female, Heterosexual, b. 1989
unMated
Wolf Avatar: Domesticated Dog, Breed – Yellow Labrador

Chapter 104 – Thursday, August 24, 2017

THEN:
“You’re staying on campus for the weekend?” Benny asked, poised in Cas’ dorm room doorway with a weighted satchel slung across his chest, and hanging low over one hip.

Castiel looked up from his computer, befuddled for a moment. “No. I’m leaving for home in a minute. I need to figure out how to word this. Apologies are hard through email. You’re coming by for dinner, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I’ll be there,” Benny answered. “Think I would send you into the lion’s den by yourself?”

He stepped into the narrow space and looked over his friend’s shoulder at the note Castiel was composing. He read it quickly. Cas sat back a little in his chair with a defeated slump.

“Again?” Benny asked him quietly.

Cas sighed. “I don’t know why she puts up with me, honestly. It’s not like we haven’t talked about boundaries a thousand times. It’s just that once I go fully under, I can’t control everything he does. He’s convinced that being the Dominant gives him the right to run roughshod over whatever we agreed to do together. He won’t follow my lead, Benny. It’s like having a bull elephant with the impulses of a six-year-old on a leash made of twine.”

“I don’t know many six-year-olds with an impulse toward barbed wire,” Benny pointed out. “You’re gonna hurt her someday, brother. You need to back out and get it together before you leave a mark that won’t heal.”

Cas shook his head and frowned. “I don’t think he’d really hurt her. And he always stops when she calls ‘Red’. We’ve got some protocols in place that work. But I spoil more scenes than I get right.”

“Thus the apology,” Benny nodded toward the monitor. The silence that followed made Cas twitchy. It didn’t help that he could feel Nicholas barely stifling amusement from his bed beneath their only window.

Cas sighed.

“By email?” was all Benny had to add.

“She’s not speaking to me right now,” the dark tone matched his mood. Castiel abruptly closed out of the note without saving it and parked his computer. He huffed miserably and stood to face the room.

“Are you coming?” he asked Nicholas. Nick shrugged and lifted the tome he was holding, an indication that he needed the weekend alone to study. It was either that or he was in no mood to nurse his roommate back to good spirits. Castiel didn’t give him a second thought. It was probably best that the Omega had a couple of days to himself.

Cas turned instead to Benny, his study mate and best friend. “I know what you’re thinking, Benedict, but you don’t know what he’s like. Campus mental health services can’t help me. The Helpline can’t help me. I have to figure this out by myself. And no, finding another partner won’t help either until I know what the fuck I’m doing. At least Marie trusts me enough to try.”

Benny stepped back toward the doorway, and Cas followed him, hooking his own bag up onto his shoulder. “Cas, you’re the toughest judge of yourself there is. I wasn’t thinking to harsh on you about anything but the email. That’s a dick move. Give her a little time, and then go talk to her face-to-face. Or call her up. Don’t send a fucking email, man.”
“You think?”

Benny shared a knowing look with Nick. “Yeah, brother. I do.”

Castiel came in through the kitchen from the garage. Cook was laying out Friday’s lunch table with soup bowls and linen napkins. He looked up as Cas stepped in, and he smiled warmly. “Just in time, Alpha. It’s baked potato soup and honeyed ham sandwiches today. Welcome home.”

“Thanks, Isaac. Is my brother around?”

“Gabriel is out for the weekend with friends, Sir. He won’t be home until Sunday evening.”

Cas nodded, trying not to let the man see his annoyance. “Benny’s coming for dinner,” he said. “Nicholas is staying on campus.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Fred moved in the archway, and Cas looked up. The butler’s grey eyes had a compassionate lilt to them. Apparently, hiding a tumultuous headspace wasn’t going to make it past the butler as it had the cook. Stepping in, Fred took Castiel’s satchel and nodded imperiously to get him moving through the parlor and on up to his room. Cas led the way, but he wasn’t actually leading. At the top of the stairs, he cast back over his shoulder and asked, “Where’s Gabe?”

“I believe Omega Gabriel is weekending at the lake for the next two days.”

Cas kicked his shoes off inside his bedroom. “He’s supposed to ask me for permission if he wants to be out overnight, Fred. Did you even try to stop him?”

“Stop him? No, Sir. But I did remind him of his responsibilities in that regard. I believe he gained permission from your mother.”

Cas scoffed rudely. His foul mood had found an outlet, and he didn’t try very hard to rein it in. “Mother would let him skydive without a parachute if he asked her,” he countered acerbically. “Does he have an alpha with him at least?”

“Yes, Sir. It’s a gathering of all the usual suspects, unless I’m mistaken.”

Cas took a breath to say whatever came to mind, ready to lay into the old man, then all the fight fizzled out of him, and he stood morosely, shoulders dropped, brow struggling to maintain an expression of authority, but failing entirely to do so. Fred stood by his bureau and watched him struggle.

“What is it, pup?” the Primate asked him softly. “Can I help at all?”

Cas sat heavily on his bed and scrubbed his palms over his eyes. “I don’t know what I’m doing out there, Fred, and I keep hurting Marie. I don’t know who to talk to. I don’t know what to do. It’s not getting any better with practice.”

Fred thought about it and stepped closer. Not close enough to touch. “If you mean sexually, Alpha, I’m afraid I cannot help, but if you mean interpersonally, I may have a few suggestions for you if
you’d like to talk it out with me.”

Cas made an irritated noise and looked sideways. “It’s wolf-based. It’s nothing you can help me with. Ever since I took that damned rating test, my wolf is always right there, ready to throw his weight into everything, as if shining a light into the den I socked him away into gave him permission to break the tethers. I don’t have anyone who can teach me how to do this. No one else is even close. My father could have, but the bastard left us!”

“Alpha, I must insist that you refrain from disparaging a man whose circumstances are beyond our fathoming. We don’t know that he…”

“The hell we don’t! He left me, Fred! He knew what I was. He knew what I was growing into, and he fucking abandoned me to do it all alone! You have no idea what this feels like! That’s just the point! No one knows! Jesus, Benny’s probably as close as I’m gonna get to a match, and he’s miles down the graph from me. I can’t control myself when I’m with a partner! That damned wolf comes out and takes me over, and all our plans go right out the window! Who the hell is ever going to want me, Fred?! I’m a monster!”

Fred’s expression maintained its placid softness, but there was steel in his eyes. “You’re no such thing, Castiel James, and wallowing in self-pity is the least constructive path you could choose at this juncture.”

“It’s not self-pity.”

“Indeed?”

“I’m scared, Fred!”

At that, the butler softened. He crossed the short space between them and sat down on the bed beside the boy he’d watched grow from an infant to the strapping young adult that he was now. He wrapped an arm across Castiel’s shoulder and gripped his arm, bracing him physically.

“Alpha, I don’t have the answers for you, but I know that you’re going to find a way through. You’re going to ram that thick skull of yours against the problem again and again until you figure it out. I believe in you, pup.”

“I don’t want to hurt anyone, Fred.”

“And that’s precisely why you won’t, not really. You’re a good man, Castiel. You’ve got a good partner in that young lady. She’s teaching you more than I think you’re aware. I see differences in the way you carry yourself from one week to the next. Sometimes it feels as if we are making no progress at all, when in fact, we’ve covered great strides.”

“I pissed her off again by going off script,” Cas admitted, leaning subtly into the man’s hold. “She’s not speaking to me.”

Fred lowered his head to meet Cas’ eye. “You know what to do when you’ve hurt someone. You take responsibility, you fix it, you apologize…in that order.”

“I know. But that’s just the point. I can own up to it, and I can apologize, but I don’t know how to fix it.”

“Have you consulted with Dr. Singer on the matter?”

“Fred, Bobby’s not a Dominant. He won’t be able to help.”
“That may be so,” Fred admitted starkly. “I wouldn’t know. But what I know is that I am not a wolf at all, and yet you and I have untangled some nasty conundrums together more than once. The good doctor has a great deal more experience than you or I combined, Castiel. Please don’t write him off without at least making the effort.”

“He’s busy,” Cas groused petulantly. “Too busy for me or Gabe, either one.”

Fred pulled away a little and fixed Cas with a stern eye. “I thought you weren’t going to wallow.”

Cas didn’t answer directly, but he met his butler’s eye with a rueful look. “I discovered that he and Marie have been talking about me behind my back. She’s told him very private things, things about me. I don’t want to talk to him. He betrayed me. They both did.”

Fred held his eye mercilessly, wordlessly compelling Cas to see the childish petulance in his conclusion. The Alpha huffed angrily and looked away. “I don’t want to take this to Bobby.”

“Don’t you get it? I don’t need an expert to talk to. I need a Dominant.”

Cas looked at Fred with a pained grimace. “Fred, you’re a dominant. You can’t give me any advice on the wolf directly, but maybe just some of the little things.” His eyes glittered. Fred’s mouth opened as if to respond, but nothing came out.

“Do you ever go overboard when you’re Topping your mate?” Cas asked abruptly.

Fred’s eyes widened in surprise. “I don’t have a mate, Alpha. David is my partner and despite the lack of legal recognition, he is my husband.” The reminder made Cas blush in embarrassment. That had been a stupid thing to say. “And I’m not sharing any details of our private intimacies with you. Nor are you welcome to pry into them.” It was said lightly, but Cas felt shame send a flush through him to the soles of his feet. He mumbled an apology.

Fred chuckled and cinched Cas in by his shoulder before releasing him and rocking back to his feet. “Nothing I could share with you will be of service in getting a handle on your own Tertiary gender, my friend. You need a Lupin mentor, and you have one, but you’ve jumped to conclusions about him, and you’re your own worst enemy. Go and speak with Dr. Singer. Let him explain this… betrayal.

“You have a momentous task before you, Alpha,” the old man continued as if he hadn’t been offended only a moment ago. “But you will overcome it. If any man alive has the wherewithal to conquer this particular demon, that man is you. Whatever your father failed to accomplish is not your task to finish. You do not carry your brother’s burdens, nor your mother’s. You bear your burdens and yours alone. Focus, Castiel James. Focus on what you must overcome, and do not allow distractions to pull you off course.”

“I worry, Fred. I’m afraid I can’t do it. I’m afraid it can’t be done. My wolf, he’s…massive, willful, impulsive, hateful sometimes. He’s a sadist. He revels in the screams of pain he wrings from her. And I have no control over him when he gets his feet set like that. He doesn’t listen to me!”
“Castiel, son, he is you. Perhaps your first order of business is to accept who you are. There are thousands of true sadists in the world. It isn’t a death sentence. It’s not a shackle. It does require that you learn control, but that may not be possible if you’re only willing to work on it from outside the beast.”

Cas stiffened and shot him a startled look.

Fred continued carefully. “You have the ability to shift your conscious mind in and out of your various mindsets, no? Such that at times you occupy a forebrain view and at other times you are decidedly Alpha?”

“Fred, that would be insane. You want me to go inside the wolf when he’s mindlessly lost in his own lust? He could kill someone! I could kill someone!”

Fred nodded serenely. “It is, as I said, not something I have any experience with. Perhaps the time to get familiar with him from the inside is not when your arousal is at its peak, but rather, while he’s at rest, while he’s sated, perhaps.”

Cas shook his head again. “I can’t. I don’t want anything to do with him. I don’t want to be saddled with him for the rest of my life. I don’t want to have to guard his lair and hold his chains forever, and I damned sure don’t want to go inside him and look through his eyes!” Cas released a momentous exhale, one that bore the weight of the world. “It would be best if I learn to live a celibate life like father did. It would be irresponsible to unleash this mess on someone else again and again.”

Fred laughed at that. “I should not need to point out that your father sired two sons rather late in his adult life. He was no celibate, Castiel. I should not need to point out that your Ruts are not going to vanish merely because you find them distasteful. You cannot solve this problem by avoiding it. You are a sexual being like the rest of us, and you need physical contact.”

“I need him, Fred. I need my father. I begged him not to leave.”

“Your loss is profound, Alpha. But you are not alone. Call Dr. Singer. Let him guide you. Then call your lady friend and grovel for her forgiveness. Take it slowly with her. Take it in small doses. Learn control one step at a time, and listen to whatever Dr. Singer has to teach you.

Cas didn’t respond right away. He fidgeted with his fingers tangled together in his lap. He avoided meeting Fred’s eye. He heard the soft chime through the intercom announcing that lunch was served. He looked up, troubled.

“I’m ashamed of who I am, Fred. The sadist inside me, he’s dreadful. How can you stand to know that about me?”

“Stand it? Castiel James, I’m honored to know you.”

“But it’s sick! It’s wrong!”

“No, son. It isn’t either of those things unless you wield it badly. And I believe you’ve discovered the source of some of your troubles. Unless you come to terms with who you are and make peace with your wolf in all his glory, you’re never going to gain a controlling hand over him.”

“You’re not ashamed of me?” Cas asked, puzzled. “If I told you some of the things I’ve done…”

“Spare me the details, Alpha. I beg you to consider that I am not wired quite the way your and your kind are. Nonetheless, I find no shame in your admissions. I believe it’s time you figured out how to reach that same conclusion for yourself. Perhaps then you may find that you have more control than
you expected.”

Castiel regarded him somberly. “Was *everything* my parents raised me to believe a lie?”

“No, Castiel, not *everything*.”

Cas stared at him in shock. What was he saying? Butlers did not say such things about their employers. But Fred wasn’t taking it back. Castiel felt his spine straighten. He felt the hot flush of resolve clench his jaw and spark his eyes to take on a red tint, and he exhaled a catharsis of intent. “I’m going to get through this, Fred. And then I’m going to figure out how to help others to do the same. We shouldn’t have to do it alone. It’s too much.”

Fred smiled gamely at him. “There’s the Alpha I know so well. Come now. Your lunch is cooling. There’s time for dog training this afternoon.”

“Dog training?” Cas huffed, following after his butler. “Weren’t you listening? He’s not a dog, Fred. He’s a wolf! Or a hellhound, maybe. Not a *dog*!”

NOW:

Portia whined and scratched at her gate through breakfast. She despised being separated from the pack, but she couldn’t control herself well enough yet to be allowed in where the Subs were hard at work down on their knees, and they didn’t need the distraction. For April, it was a distraction anyway, the sounds of her puppy’s displeasure keeping her from focusing on her Dominant’s commands. He wanted her focus, and she couldn’t keep her mind from straying across the kitchen to where her puppy begged for escape.

A hard grip took hold of her chin and startled a gasp from her. Her eyes shot upward to his. His eyes had gone red, and he was clearly displeased. “Have you more important things to be doing this morning, Omega?” he asked rhetorically.

She lowered her gaze in shame, but his grip tightened, and she looked up again plaintively.

“Do you need help staying present?” he asked. This time it wasn’t rhetorical. “We can remove the dog to her outdoor run if you need us to, or you can fight through and learn to hold your attention where it belongs in the face of distractions.” The choice he preferred for her was obvious, but he left the deciding to her.

“Portia, SIT!” he commanded from the length of the kitchen, and the puppy slammed herself onto her backside and stopped whining at once.

“I can do it, Sir,” she told him, not remotely sure that it was the truth.

He nodded sternly. “That’s two marks, April: one for losing concentration and one for failing to hold my eyes while we talk.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Back to work.”

She took a deep breath, let it out, and then moved back in to take his weight on her tongue once
more, swallowing awkwardly around the span of his cock to get him settled correctly, and then she closed her eyes and began a meditative breathing pattern. If it hadn’t been for Portia’s pitiful cries, this morning would have been a perfectly relaxing way to start her day. Cockwarming was April’s favorite morning ritual. Sometimes he put her through position training instead, shifting her from one to the next like a yoga vinyasa, a salutation not to the sun, but to the radiance of her Dominant. She liked that too, but the closeness of warming him, holding him, scenting him, comforting him… nothing else compared. Not that a rousing blow job that ended with his fingers tangled in her hair was ever unwelcome, but… No, this right here, this was heaven. This was where she was meant to be.

He’d fed her first, as he often did, letting his own breakfast grow cold while he cared for his mate intimately. Now he was reading the paper and crunching through a slice of bacon, mindful not to drop crumbs on her head. April knew that there were others at the table too, but she felt alone with him. She could feel his idle touch through their bond, carding through her emotions, through an absentminded assessment of her physical state even as his focus was on reading an article on the front page.

Portia’s high-pitched whining started up again very softly, gaining volume in doses, picking up momentum. Castiel ignored the dog. April swallowed again, tightened her hold around his calves slightly, sucked in a line of drool that threatened to dampen his slacks, and stilled. She felt his praise silently from within, and she shivered with pleasure. Portia would have plenty of attention later, just not right now. The little dog was also in training.

“We’re doing Meg at 10:30, Cas,” Dean said from down the table. “Benny asked if you and I can both be there for this one. Did you get a break in your schedule?”

April listened with half an ear, wondering vaguely why Dean was up in a chair and talking. Why wasn’t he on the floor enjoying his mate’s direction like she was?

“I may not make it,” Castiel admitted. “Crowley’s got Dayton doing backflips, and I’ve got a call at 9:45 to try to untangle it. He’s attempting to defy me through overkill, I believe, taking every instruction at its most literal and mind-numbingly intricate interpretation. He’s driving Jonathon crazy with details. He’s applying a three-year-old’s ‘Why’ tree to everything, and he’s grinding the whole enterprise to a halt. Give my apologies to Benny and Meg if I don’t show, but I have to do this first.”

April heard a low whistle from Michael, then a loud hiccup that sounded a bit like a cough-burp hybrid.

“Shit,” he mumbled. “Excuse me.”

“Try some more water,” Dean suggested. “Slowly now.”

“I know how to drink water, alpha!” Michael spat. April had to swallow again to stifle a laugh. She was certain that her mate knew that that had not been a gag reflex adjustment. His touch inside her head took on a flinty feel. She quieted, concentrating on her breath and the weight of him in her mouth. That answered to why Dean wasn’t on his knees though. Whatever Dean’s response to being treated like a doormat, April didn’t hear it. She wasn’t meant to hear it. She was meant to concentrate on pleasing Castiel.

The puppy began jumping against her gate once more. When his Sub didn’t react, Cas hummed in pleasure, plumping slightly on April’s tongue. She felt a drizzle of precome slide down her throat, but it was too far past her taste buds for her to pick up the saltiness of it. Real submission, the kind that took concentrated effort on her part, was a turn-on for her mate, and that made her nipples tingle in the open air.
April felt him home in on the sensation in her chest, and he hardened further still. They were echoing each other now. Concentrating was that much harder when he responded this way, but she knew her job. Whatever their bodies decided to do, she was to maintain her breathing rhythm and keep still. The thought of what was happening in his head, in her mouth, it set her to tingling everywhere, and she felt herself dampen at all of his favorite orifices. She wanted. She drooled a bit more. And he could feel it.

Her nostrils flared in an effort to suck in enough air now that his cock cut off her throat. She’d been breathing through her nose all along, but somehow now it was harder to draw in enough air. Her grip tightened. He thrust minimally into her mouth, riding the eroticism, unencumbered by alternate directives like she was. She felt him give over to a dreamy, lustful headspace, sleepily pulsing his hips ever so slightly. Her restrictions were an anvil she could beat her head against, but the control was so, so sweet.

April fought for it. Her jaw wanted to form a perfect ‘O’, wanted give him a tunnel with an embouchure of her lips that he could rut into, wanted to give him something to pulse against, but she dropped her jaw instead, going slack. His cock slid across her tongue without an answer from her, and his touch in her head glazed over in pleasure and pride. She swallowed.

“Cas, are you listening, man? Are you…? Oh. All right. I’ll shoot it all at you again in the car.” Dean’s voice faded in and back out again. April wasn’t listening. She was turned on, desperate, ravenous for her master’s touch, but she held. Whatever she needed, he would provide. If he wasn’t giving her what she craved, there was a reason. There was always a reason. Trust Alpha. She felt her body tingle with promise, a ripple of chill bumps that started at her forehead and spread across her entire frame. He went still in her mouth, and her eyes popped open in surprise. She felt more than heard him chuckle. Glancing up, she saw him smiling at her. The dreamy look was still there, but he wasn’t chasing it.

“You’re such a good girl,” he praised with a hand in her hair. “Hustle up and get dressed, then come down and kiss me goodbye. I’ll have someone come pick you up this afternoon. Be packed and ready to go.”

She nodded and pulled slowly off. She dried his cock with the cloth he handed down to her, and then she tucked him back in and zipped carefully, mindful of his erection. She slipped out from beneath the table, letting him ease her to her feet, and she chirped when he landed a hard pop to her butt as she turned to go. A look over her shoulder caught the smolder he leveled at her. His body went unsatisfied, but his wolf was pleased, and she blushed and trotted out, paying no mind to the maids at work in the parlor. April’s nakedness was no new thing in this house.

Her house.

Perhaps she was meant to come away from her breakfast ritual feeling small, bound, controlled, or owned, but she didn’t, and she didn’t really believe he meant her to. She felt powerful. April felt invincible as she scurried up the stairs to dress. He’d set her alight with potential, that mate of hers, the man who ruled others as easily as he sharpened his pencils. He would head in to work this morning invigorated, prepared to tear Crowley however many new holes the beta needed to get the message. Castiel’s message.

That vigor was April’s too. Whatever her tutors had in store for her today, whoever she was meant to wow with her fucking God-given talents or whatever, they could all fuck themselves! April was no one’s plaything but Castiel’s, and she danced to no one’s tune but his. And he wanted her emboldened today, she could feel it. He wanted her flying from her own potential. He wanted her to let go and soar! She giggled loudly to herself, enraptured, engaged, in love.
And ready for anything!

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“Menu, Cas? Cake? Flowers? Anything? Don’t you have any opinions?”

Cas blew out a frustrated breath and stepped out of the car into the heat of the dying summer. “I found the photographer and the venue. I chose the wording on the invitations. I don’t care about the colors or the cake.”

“Bobby found the photographer!” Dean protested. “And only after you handed it off. That chick’s going to cost us thousands! Belize, Cas? Really?”

Cas laughed. He held the front door for Dean and Michael, and all three of them entered kiosks of their own to gain medical clearance for the turnstile locks. Dean took it right back up as the door slid open on his kiosk while he was still zipping back up.

“All right. At least decide this. We got a gift in the mail from a fan. It’s a little ceramic cake topper with all of us sculpted. Can we use that or do we have to go formal?”

Cas paused at the turnstile with a charmed expression. “I think that would be perfect, Dean. If you like it, I’m certain I will too.”

Dean smiled shyly at the answer, but Michael silently put a finger gun to his head and pulled his finger-trigger to blow his metaphorical brains out. He slipped past Cas and held his entry card up to the sensor to gain admittance through the gate.

“Really?” asked Dean, starry eyed, a bit smitten by a pair of blue eyes, his crankiness forgotten. Cas touched his jawline with a knuckle and leaned across to kiss him chastely.

“All I care about is you.”

Michael stalked off down the hallway, leaving the two of them behind.

“Shit, Michael, wait up!” Dean scurried through after his mate, and Cas followed more slowly.

“Walk, please, Submissive,” he called patiently forward and was a little shocked when Dean slowed to a quick walk.

“Hey. Hold up! Dude.”

Michael stopped and waited for him. “Don’t you need to get to work?”

“Course I do, but I can walk you to class first. Don’t be like that.”

“I’m sorry, Dean. I feel awful today. It’s making me cranky.”

“Come here.” Dean pulled his mate into a tight embrace, but Michael stood stiffly, not hugging him back. “Was it missing out on our routine this morning?” Dean asked him. “You weren’t in the right space, baby.”

Michael looked away. “I can’t go into a Dom class like this,” he worried aloud. “I’m caught in my
Secondary. I feel stuck there. They’ll eat me alive. I want to go back to a one-on-one with Joshua. Or better yet, skip it until we get back from P…”

“From where? What was that?” Dean goaded playfully, adding a gentle tickle to the back of Michael’s neck. “Where are we going? Starts with a ‘P’?”


“Is everything all right?” asked the Alpha catching up.

“Michael wants to skip Dom class because being pregnant has him stuck as an Omega,” Dean summed up.

“Working through a tough headspace to find the right tone is an important skill, Michael. There will be times when your Dominant is needed in a real life situation, whether it’s a good time for you or not.” Cas lectured paternally, but a good look at the Omega had him rethinking swiftly. “Or.” He sighed. “We could cut you a break and let you spend the day with Charlie and Balthazar. It’s Dean’s decision.”

Dean scoffed and said, “Nice set up, Alpha. Here, Dean, be a great guy like me, or be prick to your mate and make him go to class.”

Michael giggled.

Giggled?

Dean frowned at him then decided. “Stick with me today, babe. I’m gonna get antsy the closer we get to tonight’s big do. I may need you. You can come with me to witness Meg’s Mating. That’ll be fun, right?”

“I’m not a child. Can we skip the patronizing shit?”

“God, you’re adorable. Come on. I got an early staff meeting.” Dean caught Michael’s neck in the crook of his elbow and hurried away with him. Cas stood thoughtfully, thinking hard about Michael’s errant state of mind. He shouldn’t be this trapped as a Secondary persona this early in his pregnancy, and his flip-flopping between amused and irritated – was that a sign of imbalance, or was that just Dean’s influence? Cas himself sometimes found it difficult to stay annoyed with Dean when his playful brat batted him around like an otter with an oyster shell.

“Alpha! You have to come quick! Meg’s having a nervous breakdown!” Cas turned. Becky catapulted around the corner and down the hall toward him. His advice to Michael about needing quick access to a Dominant presentation on little notice fresh in his head, Castiel glared at her, and she pulled up sharp with terrified eyes.

“Back the way you came right this instant! Walk calmly back to me, and tell me what you need to say all over again. March!”

Becky fast-walked, Olympic style, then she poked her head nervously around the corner and strode stiffly back to him.

“Hands on the wall!”

“Sir?”

“ONE!”
She dropped her clipboard with a loud clatter and splayed her fingers and palms flat against the wall. Cas didn’t waste any time. He nudged her feet wider with his foot and yanked her yoga pants to her knees. Tucking the long tail of her shirt into the neck of her collar, he set about spanking her bare backside harshly.

No quarter given.

She winced in pain and sucked in a hard breath.

“Meg will be fine,” he told her. “Her panic is not unexpected, and she’s not unattended. She’s had a watch on her since yesterday.”

He didn’t slow the speed of his strikes, nor let up while he talked. He’d had enough of Becky’s tearing through the hallways as if the Facility had caught fire. Becky’s grimace pulled her lips tight. Her eyes squeezed tightly shut, and her backside tucked as far under as it would go. Her fingers turned white against the wall.

“OW! Alpha!”

“I was clear last time, was I not? You are the public front of this operation, and the way you comport yourself sends a message to our clients.”

“OUCH! I’M SORRY!”

He set his jaw and laid into the Omega receptionist. Castiel rarely did the punishing onsite, but this particular employee had just triggered his last nerve, and he’d promised her his own personal attention the next time it happened. He let his wolf have a taste of her through the application of his hand which Dean always assured him somehow morphed into a steel plate when he was riled.

Finally he let up, slowed, slapped a couple more hard ones just to set punctuation to the moment, and then stepped back.

“Breathe, Becky. You’re done. You did it, and you’re all right. Come here to me.” His voice was still all Alpha, but the wolf was gone. She hiccupped, waddling a little as she turned, and dove into his arms. He held her and smoothed her hair. “Shh. You’re okay. What did you learn this morning?”

She sniffled grossly. “No running and shrieking in the halls.” Her voice trembled. He hugged her close, but they didn’t have the hallway to themselves.

“Nice work, Alpha,” said a flat voice coming toward them. “That ass glows enough to roast marshmallows.”

“Billie, keep walking, and shut the fuck up,” he told her sharply over Becky’s head. A snarky mouth turned against Cas was one thing, but Billie had no business mocking Becky.

“I would, Cas, but I’m actually looking for you.” Billie ignored the chastisement. She set her coffee right on the ground as she knelt to help Becky get her leggings back in place and tug her shirt free of her neckline. She handed the Omega her clipboard back and dug a tissue free from a small packet in her bag. Cas transferred the whimpering woman into Billie’s custody and took the tablet she handed him.

Becky snorfled loudly, but Billie rocked her with a maternal touch, cooing gently.

“What’s this?” Cas asked in surprise. “We had that Bill locked! How are we short of votes?”
“Shh, sweetheart. It’s all over now.” Billie took a moment to console the Omega and rub the sting out for her, but then she looked up, and the switch from Domme to beta in her eyes was a visible thing. “We lost Riley, Cas. She’s siding with the conservatives on this one, and she took Fieldman with her.”

“All right. Let me think. The vote’s not happening until Monday.”

“Yes, Sir. I thought you’d want to know first thing.”

“I do. Thank you, Billie. I also need to go pry Meg’s talons out of the rafters.”

Billie chuckled. “Yes, I heard about that. I believe she’s in the A-B prep room in the south wing. You can’t miss her. She’s shrieking. And throwing things.”

“Terrific,” Cas deadpanned. He looked back to Becky. “Are you ready to go back to your desk?”

“Yes, Alpha. I’m sorry.”

“I know you are,” he told her stooping until his face was at her eyelevel. “And I know that you do what you do out of a deep concern for the wellbeing of your colleagues. I’m not angry with you, Rebecca. But the chaotic behavior must stop, do you understand? Chaos and panic breed chaos and panic. We require a calm, confident, professional presence from our staff at all times, especially those working directly with the public. Promise me.”

She nodded vehemently. “I promise.”

“All right, Omega. Off you go.”

Billie let her go then turned back to her boss with a carefully studied flatness. “I feel certain that you logged that punishment into our system, sir, as you know that failure to log direct contact, even among staff, is vulnerable to garnering us another ISO noncompliance.”

“Of course, I did,” he answered strolling off down the hall. “Or rather, you’re going to do it for me. The count was somewhere around 75, I believe, and the power rating, based on the way my palm stings, was a seven.”

Billie stopped walking, forcing him to turn and look at her. “You doled out a class E punishment for running in the hall? Damn, Cas.”

“It was a third or fourth occurrence,” he said with a shrug. “I warned her.”

“Yes, well, log it yourself. I have my own kettle that’s boiling over. Do you want me to brainstorm a couple of scenarios for changing the vote count? I can send you something.”

“Thank you, Billie. I would appreciate that. Log the spanking first. Sign my name under your authority.”

Billie’s body went slack with her irritation. “You’re killing me,” she protested, but he didn’t give.

********************

Michael enjoyed the morning spent glued to his mate’s hip. Dean was in a professional frame of
mind. It wasn’t one Michael got to see all that often unless Dean had it turned toward him. Watching him work – focused on others this time – was Michael’s chance to really understand what drove the man. Dean’s book outline was now complete. Michael thought it was brilliant, and he was thrilled that Dean trusted him enough to let him have some input on the structure of the thing. It was one thing to know intellectually that Dean was an expert in Omega training and development. It had always been a given between them, and Dean had applied techniques to helping Michael find his footing that were subtle and sophisticated. But it wasn’t until Michael delved into the details of his new book, all the complex patterns of words that had somehow emerged from his mate’s brain to exist nowhere in the Universe but upon those pages, that Michael really digested the fact that no one was feeding this stuff to Dean as he trained Michael. Dean was the source of it. Dean was the real expert. And his outline hinted at intriguing connections of thought and pattern that Michael couldn’t wait to see fleshed out.

A couple of times on his outline review, Michael had needed to process an insufferable spike of exasperation at seeing evidence of the conditioning that Dean had put him to right there in bold type – what had appeared at the time to be impulsive decisions on Dean’s part – all clearly part of a greater pattern. But Dean hadn’t programmed him like a computer and set him free to wander about according to a preset algorithm. The alpha was very real and right there with him through all of it, fucking up left and right, working just as hard at his own Submissive training, applying a framework of structure around Michael that Dean knew would bring them both peace in the end. It had always been human, loving, warm, and very real, and Michael couldn’t hold any resentment at the way his training had proceeded straight out of a formula that his mate designed.

And here the alpha was in his professional capacity doing precisely that in ways that touched hundreds of people in a single day. Michael watched the staff hang on his every word at their morning meeting, seeking guidance from the man who could untangle their most complex problems, trusting him to take them seriously, and lead them out of the mire.

Michael found it ten shades of hot.

Especially when Dean slipped his glasses on to read from his laptop.

Damn.

Dean tucked Michael into a back corner in the processing booth. They had spent a few minutes with Meg, but she had too many people around her, and they were only making her more nervous. And besides, Michael’s wolf did not enjoy watching the Sub suffer. He couldn’t help her. She wasn’t his. And it irked him that her own Dominant wasn’t taking her in hand as she needed. Michael’s edginess communicated itself to his mate, and Dean ushered him out with a quick kiss to Meg’s forehead and a promise to make sure everything went perfectly.

Meg appeared in the Processing room first, escorted by Charlie and Hannah. The wait once she was placed seemed interminable, and she paced in misery. It looked like agony to Michael, although she hadn’t truly Triggered yet.

Finally, the word came through that her beta mate was ready. Charlie and Hannah scuttled out, and Michael watched nature perform one of her most riveting rituals. Ketch wasn’t what he’d been expecting. Where Meg was a playful, sarcastic brat, Ketch had a dourness about him, a dismissive cant to his shoulders, a presumptiveness about the way he looked about the room and judged everything he saw. He seemed far too dark for Meg to Michael.

Until he zeroed in on Meg.

And then Michael saw it.
They locked onto one another like strong magnets, percussive and violent. Michael startled with the force of it, his back pressing into the wall behind him, his eyes saucers in his head. Ketch was brutal in his Claim, furious in a way that only a True-mate can rev out of a Top. Meg went limp in his hold, bruising beneath his hands, moaning loudly as he tore at her hair and yanked her head back to bare her throat.

When the Claim hit, Michael felt it in his feet. The Top seemed frozen in place wrapped bodily around the small woman, barely seeming to breathe, covering her possessively with his bulk. There was blood on the sheet. It wasn’t a peaceful stillness, but a wound spring, all potential energy bound up in his grip waiting to explode. His back trembled. His toes twitched. His knees shuffled forward one at a time to pull his body in even tighter around her.

A single lock of Meg’s hair fell to the bed, the only part of her Michael could see. He worried that she would suffocate, but no one else in the booth seemed ill at ease. They moved fluidly, calling out readings and vital signs. Ellen had both hands in motion on her keyboard, eyes glancing up now and then at the couple on the bed. Ellen asked for specific data, and a different voice answered each question.

In the room, Ketch was growling softly and beginning a slow pulse with his hips. His head was low over hers, probably still holding on to the shoulder he’d bitten. Michael couldn’t really tell. He was reminded of a lioness guarding her kill from pesky buzzards, hunkered low, possessive, threatened.

“Looks good,” Ellen said with a glance up at Dean. Dean was staring at the couple with his arms folded across his chest, situated square in the middle of the booth like a ship’s captain, his feet planted. Benny had a spot near the door, but he was looking at the floor, his nostrils flaring as his chest heaved; second-hand arousal barely contained for the moment. Michael looked back at the couple. Ketch was working his arms beneath Meg’s shoulders into an embrace of sorts, but he hadn’t let up on the curl of his body.

Michael watched. It hadn’t affected him the way it clearly did Benny. That seemed odd to Michael, but it let him watch and process with a dispassionate eye. Ketch had used a startling amount of unnecessary aggression, it seemed. Meg wasn’t his prey, and she’d consented to Mate him. Why the terrifying attack? Why scare the crap out of her and cover her tightly enough that she couldn’t breathe? There were no external threats to ward off. What was the point of this display?

“He’s going to need a minute, Charlie,” Dean said. “Let him work through the first aftershocks. I don’t want you in there yet. We can’t count on a knot holding him in place, and that’s a hell of a possessive response he’s got going. Meg’s still with us, right?”

Michael found it reassuring that he wasn’t the only one worried for the Sub’s welfare even as a technician called out that her vitals were strong.

“We need to get a Peliomometer on them, Dean,” Charlie disagreed. “Time’s a-wasting. Trust me…”

“I’ll do it,” said Benny authoritatively, holding his hand out to Charlie. She set the meter in his hand, and he fiddled with it for a minute before stepping through the door. Michael held his breath as Benny came into view in the room before the large glass pane and began slowly to move around the bed, taking readings.

“Couldn’t you install meters on the bed itself?” asked Michael softly.

“Shh!” Ellen stifled him swiftly. The tension in the room mounted as Benny reached their heads and passed the meter slowly over them, much too close considering the sound Ketch was making in his throat. A firm touch to the back of the Dominant’s neck and a stern, “Don’t!” from Benny stopped
the growling, but Ketch was twitchy until Benny nodded at the glass and walked quickly away.

Ellen apparently had all the data she needed from the little handheld, and her fingers flew. “Yep. It’s good,” she told Dean. “Strong and tight. It’s a complete bond.” She switched to address Benny as he came in, blowing out a breath. “It’s stable, Alpha. We have ourselves a new Packmate. Hope you can handle him.”

Benny grinned out at the room before him. “Oh, I can handle him. Let’s hope he can handle Meg.” Benny caught Michael’s worried face, and he laughed good-naturedly. “Relax, Michael. That was textbook Mating. She’s okay under there. Not everyone gets to do like you two knuckleheads.”

“It’s been over and done with for ten minutes, Benny,” Michael said. “Why’s he still clinging like he’s waiting to shoot his load? What’s going on?”

Benny shrugged. “Bonding. It takes a little while to get comfortable with the new connection and feel secure enough to let go. The afterglow feels good, brother. They’re rolling in it a little bit, that’s all.”

“Peak outputs are starting to drop,” one of the technicians announced. “They’re coming back down. No signs of recess or instability in the bond.” The woman looked up at Dean. “Alpha?”

“Yeah, call it,” Dean told her. “We’re done here. Log it at 10:47 a.m. Wrap it up. Give them some privacy. Ellen, it’s all yours. Nice work as usual, Omega. You’re amazing.”

“I don’t have anything to do with it, Dean,” the Omega told him with a light dusting of pink on her cheeks, pleased at the praise. “It’s all Mother Nature. I just run the board.”

“You’re a godsend, and everyone here knows it,” Dean told her very softly, leaving a kiss on her temple. He collected Michael and escorted him out.

“Is it always that violent?” Michael asked.

“Have you never seen a natural True-Mating before?” Dean countered. “That was pretty tame because we had the environment controlled for him. He didn’t have to worry about countersuits or attackers.”

“I’ve seen a couple of them, Dean, but they weren’t like that. He looked like he wanted to dig a hole and bury her.”

Dean chuckled. “He’s massively Dominant, man. Maybe what you witnessed before didn’t involve a high-rated Dom or Alpha. Those guys always put on a good show.”

Dean led the way back to his office and began to click rapidly through his messages and emails with only part of his attention.

“We didn’t act like that,” Michael put in.

Dean looked up. “We did on the second round. It was way more violent between you and me in the dirt than what those two just did in a laboratory setting.”

“Our first round was an aberration,” Michael murmured. “I’m starting to get it now, how weirded out everyone was. Still, it makes no sense for the Top to be that aggressive when the Bottom is in full agreement about Mating. If they aren’t fighting it, what’s the aggression for?”

Dean smiled and shook his head affectionately. “Just the way it works, love. Don’t get me wrong
though. I appreciate that you didn’t tear into me on that first run. If we could train people to do what you did, it would save a lot of people a lot of unnecessary bruises. Now, shush. Find something quiet to do. I need to work.”

“Yeah. Okay. Can I read off your bookshelf?” Michael perused the options and didn’t wait for Dean’s go-ahead before selecting one that seemed interesting but not over his head with technical jargon.

The mates spent the late morning serenely. Each kept one eye on the other, Michael in awe of Dean’s easy rapport with his own staff, with the clients, with the new teams scattered across the continent who rang him up constantly for input on one question or another. Dean had a habit of using his speaker to take the calls, so Michael got both sides of each conversation. He enjoyed the irreverent humor that Dean wove into everything regardless of who was on the other end of the line. It held just of touch of his stage persona – that same confidence and a little bit of swagger – and Michael couldn’t help wondering which persona came first.

Dean, for his part tried hard to stifle the preening he knew he was doing under Michael’s distracted eye, but he couldn’t help himself. His Dom was splayed out on his couch, ostensibly reading a book about Tertiary designation emergence and development. His Dom was right there, watching him work, sending through a veritable hum of pleasure in how Dean managed his desk. How do you not turn such a moment into a porno?

Damnit, Michael.

Focus, Winchester.

A month’s absence for a Honeymoon on the horizon that overlapped Jo’s Mating moon, Dean and Jo both out of pocket at the same time, not to mention that Dean was still slogging through some of the work backlog from his own time off with Michael, the countdown clock was running low. There was still research data that Dean was close to giving up as opportunity lost since he kept shoving its review to the bottom of his priority list. He couldn’t afford to echo Michael into a break right now, much as he wanted to.

“Lunch?” he said by way of cutting the rising sexual tension. “It’s enchilada day. Come on, Michael. I need to get out of this room.”

“Yeah,” Michael agreed. “Do you mind if I ditch you for lunch? I’m meeting Balthazar. Final plans and all.”

“Um. Sure. Anything I need to be in on?” Dean asked hesitantly.

“We’re not changing anything, Dean, just getting all the pins set up. I’ve got to get the final write-up to Cas by one.”

“He’s making you write it up?” asked Dean, startled.

Michael’s face fell a little. “He doesn’t trust me yet,” he admitted. “I screwed up with you more than once after I promised you both I wouldn’t. He’s got my leash in his teeth right now. And this is a big one. I need to get it right.”

Dean’s face did that soft affectionate crinkly thing. It wasn’t a smile. It was something that lived in his eyes and his Mating-bond. It was warm. Michael sighed, saying, “I know you trust me, baby, but this is big for both of us. I’ve never done anything with this many players before, and you’ve never had a public scene. We’re both in uncharted waters. What if you don’t react the way you think you
will? What if I can’t let someone else put their hands on you? What if I fuck it up?”

Dean snickered and advanced on Michael slowly. “First of all, you’re not going to fuck it up because you’ve planned it well, you brought in experts who know what kind of landmines to watch for, and you’re overthinking everything to the point that you’ve already accounted for anything that could go wrong. Second, man, I should have told you. I did a public thing with Cas in Dayton. It was spur of the moment. His nerves were on edge, and he needed a pressure valve release. And I fucking loved it. You hear me? Wipe that worry off your list. This isn’t one of those fantasies that turn squicky when you try it out in real life, at least not on my side. I’m in, Michael.”

“You did?” the Omega asked cautiously. “How public?”

“The entire Lawrence contingent was there, babe. Watched me take it up the ass flattened against a clear glass pane and shooting off without a hand on me. All those eyes, Michael. People I knew. People I didn’t. It was harsh and rough and hot as hell, and I loved it. And you, by the way…” Dean held Michael’s eye. “You would’ve known about it before now if our bonds had been open when it happened. Not trying to rehash settled shit here, but truth is truth. So stop fretting over whether or not I’ll be okay in there, and relax. We’re gonna be fine.”

“Tell me one more time before I go meet Balthazar. Tell me what you want.”

“Sit,” Dean instructed, pointing Michael back to the couch. The alpha squatted in front of him, balancing by holding onto Michael’s thighs. “I want to be a piece of furniture in there. I want to be treated like I’m not even human. You get me? I want to feel denigrated, like I’m only useful if my body can get somebody off. I want you to treat me like a new sex toy you just bought off the internet, and you want to share with all your buddies cause it’s that awesome.”

Michael’s eyes bored into Dean’s. “Subhuman,” he breathed. “Animal?”

“Yup. Enslaved animal, maybe,” Dean clarified. “Go deep into your fantasies, man, and let go. I wanna be useful, but in the way a beer keg is useful, in how it gives pleasure to others, in how they take pleasure without thinking about the means. No one cares whether the spigot filling up their pint is enjoying itself. But no one takes a hammer to the spigot either, right? Abuse the damned thing and it won’t work right anymore. Are you following?”

“Oh, yes. I follow. I needed to hear you say it again. We could go so wrong if I misread you, Dean. Tell me you’ll stop it if it’s not hitting the right note. This is for both of us, not just me. Tell me you’ll safeword out if you need to.”

“Impala,” whispered Dean into Michael’s ear. “Not right now, obviously. That was a test.” He paused to let Michael feel around inside him. Then he said it again slowly, a whisper.

“Impala.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

Michael grinned. “If it goes well, I want to look into setting up a monthly party with you as the centerpiece.”

“Hold on there, Cochise. One thing at a time.” But Dean was laughing, not alarmed. “Let’s get through today before we start selling tickets. Come on. I’ll take you by Balthazar’s lair, and you two can put the final touches on the plan.”
Dean lunched with Sam and Sarah, and he learned she’d made her decision about sidling over to work for Cas, that her previous advisor was facing charges of ethics violations and had been suspended, that she would be staying with the Winchesters, observing them at home, while she worked on her thesis. He was far more accommodating of the idea than she expected.

“It’s time we ripped the band-aid off,” he told her with his mouth full. “Pussyfooting around the hard stuff is only tangling us up. So let’s do this. Stay outta my vinyl collection is all I ask.”

Sam nodded but shot Dean a sharp look.

“What?” Dean asked.

“You’re okay with having Michael under the microscope with the rest of the pack? You’re okay with April getting her share of scrutiny? We’re all going to end up published, Dean. You get that, right?”

“April’s not my problem, Sammy. She’s Castiel’s. And Michael…Jesus, I dunno. I’m starting to feel like I’m battling against myself here. I know the public isn’t ready for someone like him, and my bones go cold thinking about how they’re gonna start throwing rotten fruit at his head any damn day now, but… I can’t lock him in a closet either. So, band-aid, like I said. Rip it off fast and clean, and let the shit hit the fan however it’s gonna. Doesn’t mean I like it. Doesn’t mean I have to.”

“I’m proud of you, Dean.”

“Yeah. Whatever. Cram it up your ass, Sammy, I got work to do.” Dean grabbed his tray and dumped the remainder of his lunch into the trash, dropping Sarah a casual, “Welcome to the jungle,” on his way out the door by way of wishing her luck.

She gaped as he stalked out. “God, that guy is fascinating, Sam. I had no idea. He’s, like, fourteen different pressure points all firing at once. Like he could go postal any second. But he’s also the most lovable flirt, and the biggest nerd…”

“I don’t recommend flirting with him,” Sam said into his coffee. “You’ve met his boyfriends. There are two of them, remember. Psychopaths, both of them.”

Sarah giggled. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Dean stormed back toward his office, encountering Castiel headed in the opposite direction.

“Hey, hey…” Cas said sliding into his path and halting his forward progress. “What’s wrong? You look like you could chew glass. Talk to me, Dean.”

Dean let himself be stopped. He let Cas’ hands circle his waist and settle at the small of his back. “Five-thirty can’t get here fast enough, man,” he mumbled churlishly.
Cas frowned. He held his fiancé in the middle of the hallway and rocked him a little bit, pulling him in close and letting Dean’s chin tuck up over his shoulder where the scent was thick. “Just a couple more weeks, baby, then we’ll take a nice long break. You’ll see. It’s going to be so relaxing.”

“Who says I want relaxing?” Dean asked. “And hey, are we staying IN Paris or out on the outskirts?”

Cas started and pulled back to look at Dean with a shocked expression. “What?! How did you find out? That was meant to be a surprise!”

Dean laughed and kissed the baffled look off Castiel’s face. “Michael slipped a little. I wasn’t sure until just now. Thanks for being transparent.”

“You’re a brat, Winchester. Forget relaxing. I’m going to tan your ass until you forget how to sit down.” There was a growl emanating from Cas’ throat, and it soothed Dean, brought him right up from the swamp he’d stepped into and put him on his feet again. How fucked up was that, he wondered.

Whatever.

Dean was tiring of constantly comparing his comforts and kinks to an imaginary standard of normal. He was outgrowing the need to do that so fast he could feel it rub uncomfortably every time he moved. He wondered if crabs felt this way just before they molted. His old skin was too tight, and all of his old conditioned reflexes pulled and caught in ways they had never done before.

What would his father have said to that if he’d been here to watch Dean flail against his expectations? The realization that John knew Dean had always taken reprimand from his own brother, that he had always known Dean needed it, it’s as if that knowledge tore something loose that Dean couldn’t shove back inside.

Since he’d misunderstood John’s finger-pointing after Mary’s death, was it possible Dean had also misinterpreted John’s harsh judgments toward submissive men as well? Dean had labored long under the assumption that John believed what he believed, misguided as it was, and that it was Dean’s task to dig himself out from under the weight of paternal bias, that John was wrong, however staunchly he believed. But Dean wondered under the light of what he’d learned before his father passed: was it possible that John didn’t look down on masculine submission as a matter of course so much as he eschewed it personally because it wasn’t who John was? He’d never actually said words to any effect, but John Winchester bowed to no one. That had always looked like a declaration of his values to Dean. But what if it wasn’t? Maybe it had never irked John to have a Sub for a son. Maybe that was all projection of Dean’s own psyche, railing against something he found distasteful himself. Maybe John never put that weight on him in the first place.

Maybe Dean had done it to himself.

Now there was a topic for Tessa.

“Are you all right?” Cas asked with a look of concern.

“I’m peachy,” Dean responded blithely. “Missing my dad today…more than usual. Wish I could talk something over with him.”

Castiel fairly oozed compassion. His concern turned soft, tender. “I understand completely, love. Would you like to sit with me while I eat? Are you going to be okay?”

“I’m good,” Dean told him honestly. Mostly honestly. Not dishonestly. “I have to get back for a call,
and I gotta work out around Jo’s absence. We’re meeting in conference room 4 if you wanna join. It’s not going to be easy. We’re already stretched as thin as we can go.”

“What time?”

“One forty-five?”

“I can’t. I have a legislative vote to fix.”

“Ouch,” said Dean. “You win. Go fix votes, Alpha. We’ll manage. But look, this evening? With Michael? I’m planning to go all in, let my hair down, sink way under. I know you’ll be watching. Tell me I don’t need to worry about you getting possessive or worrying about me. I need to wipe that thought out of my head before I start or it’ll fuck me up bad.”

Cas nodded, understanding that his Sub carried a lot of responsibility around with him. Keeping both Doms at ease was one of the biggest. “I’m only there to help, Dean. If you’d rather, I can assign another alpha to stand watch.”

“No! I want you there. I do. But I want you there getting hot, not getting pissed. Or worried. Promise me?”

“I promise,” Cas told him. “Cross my heart. Dean, I’ve watched you work before. I’ve watched you with clients, students, and staff. I’ve never felt anything akin to anger or possession, and what’s more, as long as you have that ring on your finger and that scar on your shoulder, I know who you belong to. Don’t worry about me. I don’t judge your fantasies, baby. I adore them. Go let off some steam. I think we’ll both love it.”

“And if we don’t?”

Castiel’s eyeroll was epic. “Then either you never do it again, or the next time you do it, you don’t invite me to watch!”

“This isn’t like when I’m working, C.J. This isn’t for someone else, it’s for me. I’m the client in this one. You gotta make a space in your head for the difference before the big dog catches wind. He’s not going to like it one bit.” Dean lowered his face and leaned in conspiratorially. “Raphael is going to be there. Don’t rip his cock off, okay? We just finished a round of hiring. I need a break from reading resumes.”

“I swear to behave myself,” Castiel told him somberly. “I want you to release whatever might be worrying you, let go, and enjoy yourself. Don’t give me a second thought. That’s why I’m staying out of view. Focus on Michael, Dean, or he’s going to find a creative way to draw your attention back, and you might not appreciate that as much as the rest of us will.”

Someone in the hallway cleared their throat, and Castiel answered without turning. “Yes, I’m coming. Go on without me.” He kissed Dean rather soundly and reminded him to finish his scene logs before he added another one to the list. He sent assurance through their Claim-bonds and through his eyes, then he squeezed Dean’s shoulder and turned on his heel, disappearing before Dean’s vision refocused from the kiss.
The afternoon disappeared in a whirl of activity, the likes of which Dean was realizing was the new norm. Michael never showed back up, but Dean could feel him, close enough that Dean knew he was still onsite, and he dutifully checked in a couple of times by text message. When Dean’s alarm went off, he jumped, lost as he was in the chaos of managing a goliath that was growing into a behemoth before their eyes. Dean stared at the screen. He thumbed the alarm to silence and sat, transfixed by the display on his phone.

It was time.

He blinked a few times. He looked up at his monitor. Now or never. Fish or cut bait. Sink or swim. Shit or… He breathed. In. Out.

In.

Out.

Dean saved his document and logged off his computer. He sent his phone to the answering service. He locked his office door and stripped out of his clothes. He slipped into his suite for a restroom break and a chance to wash his face. Then he went back to his office. Kneeling gracefully in the middle of the floor, he gave thanks for plush carpeting.

Dean began a slow recitation of an ancient calming prayer in his head. He felt his heartrate slow. He felt warmth in his belly, and he pushed it out to the tips of his fingers and his toes. He concentrated on every body part one at a time, cataloguing the sensations from each area, sending in oxygen, heat, relaxation, gratitude, and peace. Dean felt himself morph into a conduit of sorts. He felt the sheer, inexplicable pleasure of releasing his will for the satisfaction of someone else, someone he loved, someone he trusted. Dean let his thoughts float. He rounded into each thought as if entering a room, looking around, getting the full picture, examining its depth and context, and then leaving it behind without commentary.

He got stuck in one room. It occurred to Dean, as it usually did at some point along the way during a good scene, that discussing a scene and planning it prior to submitting defied the concept that he was supplanting his own will at all. If his Dominant gave him what he asked for, how was that submission to the will of another? And in that thought came the natural follow-up – what would he do if his Dom took Dean’s gift of submission and turned it into something very, very real, taking rather than giving, only for his own pleasure and refusing Dean any for himself? Dean shivered at the thought. Chill bumps ran up his spine and spread out over the top of his head. He longed to know what that would feel like in a wider context. Today would come close. Certainly, there was to be a touch of humiliation to it, a distance that wasn’t normally part of Michael’s repertoire. But Dean was certain that in the end, Michael’s touch would be a giving one, not a take. If Dean followed the script, he would be rewarded as he’d said he wanted.

Was that more for Dean, or was it for Michael?

The mates had moved into deep waters in terms of their relationship. Michael caught on fast, and he had a fire about him at times that singed Dean’s fingers and toes. The young Dom was so close. He understood how Dean’s brat provoked action when he wasn’t getting what he needed, but did Michael really understand why? Would he be able to connect the dots in Dean’s psyche and realize that having to ask for it diminished the outcome? Was Michael ever going to be able to get ahead of the game running in Dean’s head, cut him off before his brat made a move, and snuffle him into the mud preemptively? A full body shiver passed across the alpha’s nude body, and his cock stiffened.
If Michael took the reins into his own hands tonight, if he set ruggedly handsome men to using Dean in whatever way he could imagine, sent him pride and pleasure straight into Dean’s head, and then left him gaping, sore, and unspent at the end… heaving in beautiful agony…

But that wasn’t Michael, and Dean could respect that.

But maybe Cas would. Someday.

It was an existential question at the heart of his very being, and it wasn’t going to be answered today, not by Michael, not by Castiel.

For now, Dean felt ready. He felt soft inside, pliable. He felt a frisson of anticipation, but no fear.

His alarm chirped softly. This one was set to be gentle, not strident.

Dean flowed upward to his feet, and he turned the alarm off. He took a deep breath at the door, turned his office light out, and slipped naked into the hallway.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, it's coming. I put it off way too long, hoping my muse would smack me with inspiration that didn't seem trite. I gave up waiting, and just wrote something. Posting soon.

Love to the pack.

Thanks again for hanging in there.
Chapter 105

Chapter Summary

So, Dean and Michael kind of do a thing, and there are some friends along for the ride.

Chapter Notes

Here’s the second of two. If you got caught off guard, be aware that there were only a few hours between posting this chapter and the previous, so if you missed one, head back and pick it up real quick.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 105 – Thursday, August 24, 2017

THEN:

Dean was drunk, raucously laughing at the bar with Benny. It had been a good day, and they all needed to let their hair down. Dean was also beautiful, and Castiel was listening raptly to Charlie across from him in the booth, but his eyes kept finding a perch on Dean’s laugh lines.

Charlie had been regaling him with a story of her latest conquest, a beta from the History department of KU, and throwing her usual impertinent tone across the affair as only Charlie could. Castiel laughed in all the appropriate places.
He hoped.

Benny winked at him. Cas turned back to Charlie with a startled blush.

“Are you planning to see her again?” he asked. That seemed adequate to the topic no matter where she’d been headed.

“Most def,” she nodded. “She’s got the best setup I’ve ever seen in a 600 square foot apartment. I’m gonna take lessons in config and storage maximization. The chick had, get this, an entire St. Andrews cross that recesses into the wall behind her TV. No good if you wanna binge Buffy and get your tingles going at the same time, but, and I say this with all conviction and all possible gravity, sometimes Buffy has to take a step back and share the room. Orgasms don’t orchestrate themselves, even for the queen of hot badasses.”

Cas laughed and took a swig from his bottle. At the bar, Dean had stepped away from his stool and was mimicking a punch drunk alpha buffoon, laughing hard as he ducked an imaginary punch and falling on his ass as the man picketing outside their construction site had done. Charlie followed Castiel’s eyes, laughing along with most of the bar. It really had been funny when it happened, funnier still in the way it was presented on the evening news.

Funnier still that the picketers had since been removed from the premises for their own safety. Would that Cas could have them removed to Missouri for their own safety, but it was a win if for no other reason than the construction contractors didn’t need to wade through crusaders every day on their way back in from lunch or risk assault charges for trying to access their work tools amid the chaos.

Dean looked across at Castiel, beaming, resting on his butt with his arms on his knees. Cas raised his beer in silent salute, and Dean grinned.

“Come on, alpha,” Sam said, extending a hand to pull him up. “You’re drunk. Let’s get you home.”

“Am not,” Dean told him. “And besides, Cas promised to go over tomorrow’s plan with me.” Dean let himself be hauled to his feet, and he collapsed in the booth next to Charlie. “Right, Alpha? I’m not drunk. I swear.”

“That’s a lie, Winchester,” Cas laughed. “But I’ll admit I’ve seen you drunker.”

“See?” Dean threw toward Sam. Then he turned his crystalline green eyes back to Castiel. “Oh, yeah, remember when our big grant came through? I was way drunker that night.” He pointed a finger across the table. “You made me postpone that scene we had planned, remember? The one where you were gonna, tie me down and put the…Um.” Dean’s ears went pink, and his eyes dropped to the table as he stammered an end to whatever he’d meant to say.

“I do, remember,” Castiel assured him. “You spoiled my evening, and all the produce went bad.”

Dean’s shoulders shook as he giggled into his lap. He peeked up at Cas through his lashes, grinning a private smile. Cas felt heat pool in his belly, and he changed the subject. Sam left them to it.

“We can go over the schedule in the morning. The only thing that needs our immediate attention is finding a new home for the Keller Certification classes. I’m determined not to lose momentum now that we’ve got it. Putting the course on hold in the middle of it will cast doubt on the competence of the initiates once they complete it. I’m not comfortable asking anyone to start over simply because we couldn’t provide a suitable classroom in time.”

Dean sobered. He frowned. He leaned across the table. “Worse comes to worst, Alpha, could we do them at your house? It’s not like there’s not enough room. You’ve even got all the equipment. I
know it’s a little unorthodox, but…”

Cas leaned in too, drawn magnetically toward his colleague’s body. “I can’t, Dean. If I don’t maintain a clear line between my professional realm and my personal life, I set myself and the whole mission up for accusations of exploitation. We’ve already got Karl Meyer claiming brainwashing and sexual grooming. I can’t bring business into my house.”

“Fuck that douchebag!” Dean cried, and Charlie nodded her adamant agreement.

“Yeah, Alpha, he’s a whiny little bitch. No one listens to him,” she added, looking to tap her bottle against Dean’s only to realize he didn’t have one. Charlie stole Castiel’s, placed it in Dean’s palm, clinked them while still holding him by the wrist, and then released him and his swiped beer with a wink. Dean took a long pull from Castiel’s beer.

Cas made a face of suffering forbearance, and signaled Zeke for another round. “People DO listen to him, Charlie,” he told her stubbornly. “Where do you imagine the protesters came from? No one had any idea what our construction project was until he stirred them up at City Council, made it seem like we were training prostitutes to walk the streets of Lawrence every night. He’s dangerous, and we’d be fools to ignore him.”

“When do we need a place, Cas?” Dean asked him. “I mean, last, last possible minute…how much time do I got to swing a miracle for you?”

Cas chuckled. He lowered his chin and fixed Dean with a somber expression. “It’s not actually necessary to come through at the very last possible moment, you know. A little bit of a cushion would be greatly appreciated.”

“No, but then I wouldn’t get props for being a miracle worker. Work with me here.”

“Right, I forgot.” Cas leaned back to let Zeke set down three beers and a single glass of unchilled water that he placed with a *thunk* directly in front of Dean. “It’s all about your image. Thank you, Zeke,” he called to the bartender’s back. Dean eyed the water but he didn’t drink it until he looked up and found Cas staring it him with a very particular expression.

Setting the empty water glass back on the table, Dean continued. “Mock me if you must, but I don’t just work miracles, Alpha. I do it with a flare. Round here, a little theatricality goes a long way in keeping morale up. Everyone’s nervous, man.”

“Exactly!” Cas exclaimed. “Don’t add to that by stretching a predicament into a downright crisis!”

Dean shook his head. “It’s not a crisis. We got kicked out of our space. So, fine. We go find another space. There are literally thousands.”

Charlie sat forward and set her old bottle near the edge of the table to be collected. “It’s not that simple,” she said. “I’ve had feelers out myself ever since we got the eviction notice. There’s nothing. Everyone knows we got the boot for political reasons and no one wants to take the risk that someone might vandalize their property. No one wants to be associated with us.”

“That’s because everyone’s looking at us as a risky bet,” Dean told them both. “We have to flip it, make it obvious that the bigger risk is to NOT rent to us, sell them on the big picture, point out the David-and-Goliath of the thing. You guys are missing the point. This is a buyer’s market! We’re the ones with cash in hand, and there are empty spaces everywhere. The political shit is just free advertising! It’s got to come off like Marie Curie just got kicked out of her lab, and the whole fuckin’ world is never gonna know about Radium if she doesn’t find new digs! What we’re doing here is
important, guys! We’re not gonna let a little thing like losing a training room stop us. Hell, it’s not even gonna slow us down! We all know that! So relax, chill out, trust that it’s gonna come together before the deadline, and give me a fucking break!” He sat back and downed half of his beer in one go.

Charlie stared at him, slack-jawed. Cas nodded, still somber. “We have three weeks, Dean. Considering time to negotiate a contract and getting the equipment moved, it would be best if we had a new location pegged by next Friday. We need adequate parking and security. It needs to be somewhere with reasonable accommodations for a classroom. An empty warehouse won’t do this time. I want working air conditioning and a janitorial staff included, unless you’re volunteering to scrub toilets. We need a way to ensure privacy…”

“Dude! I get it! Look I was there when we set the specs on the lab we’ve already outgrown. I know what we need. Trust me. I can do this.”

“Give it to me before Friday, and I’ll make it worth your while,” said Cas with a carefully non-flirty expression.

Dean studied him. “I don’t want your money, Castiel.”

“I’m not talking about money,” the Alpha shot back. Dean swallowed. He blinked. He went very still.

“A…reward?”

“Within reason,” Cas said holding up a finger.

Dean shot a look at Charlie. She gestured vigorously for him to take the deal. He looked back across at Cas, who sat relaxed in his booth seat, swirling his beer, one arm stretched up along the back of the booth. “Contracted before Friday, or just located with…wheels in motion and shit?”

“If you present me with an address, including suite number if applicable, before Friday next that ultimately becomes the location we move our Keller Certification class to for the remainder of the course…AND, we move in without having to interrupt the flow of the class whatsoever, I will reward you adequately.”

Dean licked his lips. “When you say ‘adequately’…?”

“Deal’s closing, Dean. Do you want in? Going…”

“How do I know I’ll like the reward?”

“Going…”

“Is there punishment if I fail?”

“No. That would be stupid on my part. You enjoy punishment. Do you want in or not?”

“Of course I want in. This is gonna be a snap!”

“Good. Then I believe that’s all we really need to discuss,” Cas said. He looked around. Everyone in the bar tonight was a part of the project. Dean hadn’t been wrong when he said that everyone was nervous. They were at a pivotal juncture. The construction phase was over-budget, but it wasn’t behind schedule. That was going to be key – having a home to move into once the training courses began drawing to a close. They could keep using the tiny lab on the corner, but it was too small to
house the whole team.

Castiel wasn’t truly worried about his Keller class. He had no idea how Dean would manage it, but he knew it would happen. It would happen, and all the specs would be ticked off the list perfectly. He half expected Dean to find a place with a Starbucks and a sushi bar built into it, or free childcare included, or some other crazy benefit that he’d never have thought to look for. Such was the nature of Dean’s miracles. Cas could let that one fall off his to-do list now that Dean had taken custody. One worry of many.

He looked across at Dean and found the man studying him.

“We can do this, Alpha,” Dean told him.

“Yes, we sure can!” Charlie agreed. “Oh!” she startled. “Bids came in for the monitoring equipment! I forgot! You wanna see them?”

“No, tonight,” Cas laughed. “I expect I’ll need a good bottle of Merlot for that sticker shock. We’ll do that together at the next staff meeting. Bring everything.”

“Including wine,” Dean added.

NOW:

People were leaving for the day, flowing counter to Dean’s path as they headed toward the turnstile at the end of the hall. A few of them spoke to him, but most of them recognized his unfocused eyes as a prelude to something, and they left him alone. He swam upstream easily, against the flow, a salmon heading toward spawn, on a mission and not to be deterred.

He found himself flanked as he entered the Contract wing, flanked by an alpha who stayed two steps behind and to his right, barely visible peripherally, a host, not a guard. Dean was already floating. It was a delicate feeling, but it survived all the mundane tasks like unlocking doors and speaking with the concierge.

The alpha host ushered Dean into a large empty room. He directed Dean’s attention to the mounted cameras, the restroom facilities, the bed, the cabinet filled with supplies, the door lock’s quick release function, and the presence of alpha monitors outside who would be listening and watching. He explained how to call for their assistance in an instant in addition to how to set them en garde should things become worrisome but not dangerous.

Dean could feel Castiel and Michael both. They were close. They were already watching. The host asked for Dean’s safeword, and Dean gave it to him, enunciating clearly for the monitors. He remained floating. Everything felt muzzily unattached and powerfully real at the same time. He answered plainly when asked if he needed a toilet, and he declined a drink of water.

At last, the tedious requirements fulfilled, the host directed him onto his knees and left him alone. Dean set his palms on his thighs and breathed. His hands were dry.

He stayed like that for some time, alone. The room was warm but not hot, spacious but not cavernous. Dean gave an internal nod to his fiancé and felt one in return. Then he turned all of his attention to Michael. The Omega moved. Dean could feel him leave the observation booth and round toward the entrance. Michael was zoned as tightly onto Dean and Dean was on him.
The door opened with a whisper swish, and Dean lowered his eyes, bowing his head in deference. He could see Michael’s polished black leather shoes. Fully dressed, then. Nice touch.

The door snicked shut again. No one else entered, just Michael. Dean could smell him – the sweet musky scent of pregnancy mixed with the rich cherry tones of Omega and the sandalwood scent of Michael himself.

“On your feet. Hands on the bed. Let me inspect you before we begin.” Dean obeyed, leaving his forebrain a mental note for later to remind Michael to use the proper terms for a Submissive’s positioning. He felt Michael’s hands roving over his body, and he broke out in chill bumps again. Soft, uncalloused fingers probed at his hole, tugged at his sac, stroked his penis. A sharp slap to his ass left a handprint. Dean could feel the warmth spread, and he smiled slightly to himself. Michael had been very clear about wanting to leave the first mark.

Michael’s splayed hands slid around his hips to his belly and dug in a little, a possessive clutch. Dean could feel Michael’s erection through his black slacks, pressed up into the crack of his ass. One hand came up and pinched Dean’s left nipple. A hot, wet breath dampened the back of Dean’s neck. A tongue traced his scar. Dean felt his knees go weak and his cock drip a single sticky line of precome onto the bedding. The scent of Omega slick wafted into the air around them both.

“My good boy,” Michael whispered into Dean’s ear. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir,” Dean breathed back, already a little lost, a little desperate. “Please.”

“Good, good boy. Down you go. Middle of the bed. Hands and knees. I want to show you off to a few of my friends. Be good for me now. I want them to see what an amazing fuck you are, Winchester. Wanna bask in letting them feel how lucky I am, yeah?”

“yessir,” Dean whined, sinking a little further under.

“Atta boy.” Michael got Dean situated on the double bed, head down, arms braced straight for the moment, a bow to his upper shoulders like a stalking cat, his ass facing the door. Michael left a resounding SMACK echoing against the high ceiling, and another handprint blossomed on Dean’s opposite cheek.

The door opened, and Dean heard the sounds of men, smelled them, felt the change in the air around him. His nipples prickled. They chatted easily among themselves. Dean counted scents. Besides Michael, there were five. Raphael was the first to touch him, a featherlight single finger that ran up his spine, sending chills out across his ribs. Balthazar was here. Oh, God, was that Adam? Dean’s mind skittered a little. He’d told Michael that he didn’t need to know absolutely every name on the list as long as they all pulled from the Contract wing and there were no girls, but Adam? The kid was straight.

It was more like a cocktail party than an orgy at first. Dean held his position, but the attendees weren’t paying him all that much attention. Michael leaned casually against the far wall and chatted amiably, accepting compliments that his centerpiece was a charming addition to the room. Hands touched Dean idly. Stroked across his ribs, through his hair, one finger tickled his foot, making him flinch.

He tried to follow their conversations, but his mind kept floating away, the sensation that nothing they said to one another need matter to him buying him a gentle peace. He felt the weight of someone joining him on the bed to his right, but a surreptitious glance told him it was Aaron sitting down, not approaching him, still chatting. Dean felt another drop fall from the tip of his dick. He felt every wisp of breeze as someone moved, walked by, shifted. Dean could feel every nerve in his skin
reaching outward, searching for a touch.

And then he had one. A hand tangled in his hair and jerked his head upward to stare into deep brown eyes. Chocolate eyes. Rich, hard, deep eyes. Raphael. He was nude. He was fucking beautiful. His eyes captivated exactly the way Dean had expected. Raphe thrust two fingers into Dean’s mouth and watched the Sub suck them in greedily, humming in approval, fucking them in and out of his mouth with a hungry expression.

“How many of us do you expect him to take, Michael?” Raphael asked calmly. “I don’t want to break your toy, but a fuck-hole that gives out after two or three rounds is a shoddy piece of ass.”

“There’s nothing shoddy about his ass, you prick,” Michael answered back coldly. “See for yourself.”

“Yeah?” Raphe responded. He mounted the bed on his feet and straddled Dean’s waist facing backward, leaning down and rubbing spit-slick fingers over Dean’s hole with no preamble. It was a zero to sixty kind of experience for Dean, and he scrambled in his head not to tuck under on instinct. He felt Michael’s metaphysical eyes narrow at him, and he got himself straightened out, even bowing his back a little to present to the man above him.

The chatting around him continued, and now that his head was up, Dean could see most of them. Some were naked, and some were in the middle of stripping. Balthazar stood facing Dean’s head with a hand on his own cock and a delighted expression. It was Christmas morning for the Omega, and he couldn’t decide which present to open first.

“Adam, love, give the lube to Raphael,” Michael instructed. “He’s going to open our boy up for us.” Dean felt a swoon pass through his head, an honest to God light-headed swoon. His mouth dropped open, and his muscles went slack. Hands from every side began to reach in toward him and touch. The bed jostled with weight from every direction. Dean wasn’t permitted to close his eyes, but he wasn’t permitted to focus directly on anyone either. It dehumanized everyone around him as much as it did the Sub at the center. Hands and fingers explored his body. So many. All over. They rolled over his shoulders, tickled along the backs of his knees, traced down the length of his dick, grasped his chin, kneaded the curve of his ass, and a single lubed finger penetrated Dean’s asshole. He sucked in a breath and ducked his head.

“No!” Michael corrected abruptly, and Dean jolted and pulled his head back up to where Raphael had placed him. A dark chuckle met his ear from above. A single sharp slap rocked him forward as it pinked his ass. Raphael’s finger slid deeper and began to pulse.

The idle conversations in the room, were they intentional? Everyone seemed distracted, not even all that interested. Someone appeared directly in front of Dean’s face and kissed him hard, thrusting a tongue into his mouth boldly. Dean dropped his jaw and made room for the intrusion. He couldn’t tell who it was, taken by surprise as he was. The man was gone as fast as he appeared, leaving Dean to lick the taste off his lips. Omega.

The floating sensation solidified rapidly, if solid is even a word to describe floating. Dean felt debased and adored. He felt ignored and cherished. He wanted to roll over onto his back, pull his knees to his chest and demand a hard fucking, but though he trembled in place, he didn’t move. His cock ached already, and they’d barely started.

Michael’s touch in his mind took on a ruddy mix of lust and appreciation. Holy fuck, Dean was pleasing him like he’d never done before, adding a totally new flavor to their mix, and the sensations pinged back and forth between them. Raphael worked a second finger into Dean’s hole and thrust smoothly in and out. Someone’s hand circled Dean’s dick and gave him an easy pull or two.
“If he comes before I want him to,” Michael warned. “You’re both in for it.”

“Can I put a ring on him?” Aaron asked thoughtfully. “Hold him off longer?”

“No,” Michael answered shortly. “He can hold by himself – as long as you don’t go jacking him off early. Touch him all you want, but don’t be a dick. He’s not superhuman.”

Someone’s tongue touched Dean’s rim between Raphe’s fingers, and Dean and Raphael both groaned. It delved in deeper, letting Raphael stretch him open to make way for a thorough tongue-fucking. Dean’s fingers clutched at the bedding. He started to drop his head again, and then stopped himself. Sweat erupted from his pores.

Pride swam through his bond from his mate. Dean exhaled slowly.

Everything felt so much better in real life than he’d imagined. He trembled.

Someone put a hard, knot-based dick in his mouth and instructed him to suck. Dean wasted no time getting to work, using tongue and lips and suction to work the man over since he wasn’t permitted to rock on his hands and knees. Dean risked a glance upward. Will. The contract alpha-Neutral had never worked with Dean before, but Dean had been on his interview panel and knew his work. The man thrust way back into Dean’s throat, forcing his way past the tight, constricting ring at the back of his mouth and forcing Dean to lengthen his neck to align his mouth with his throat, giving the man a pathway to fuck him deeply. Dean felt the bulge of a knot touch his lips, and he moaned pitifully on the outstroke.

“Nice, Michael,” Will observed. “He deepthroats alpha cock. Wish I’d known that before now. Would’ve hit on him when we first met. I could’ve been sinking myself into this warm hole for the last year. Damn, boy!”

Michael didn’t respond. His eyes were on Dean’s, narrowed to bare slits, unfocused, lustful, floating, blissed-out, and not yet overwhelmed by sensation. Michael let the team play on its own, but he was watching.

“Fuck! Oh, shit!” cried Will suddenly, taken by surprise. He pulsed in hard, then pulled back a bit and shot a thick stream of come into Dean’s mouth. The Sub took it all, holding it on his tongue until given an instruction. “Damnit!” the alpha cursed, frustrated. “Goddamnit!” He knelt down, looked furiously into Dean’s glazed eyes as if it were Dean’s fault, and he slapped Dean hard across the cheek. Dean let his neck go slack to take the blow, sealing his lips to keep his prize on his tongue. He returned to his position, still lax, still holding a full serving of alpha come in his mouth.

“Jesus Christ,” Aaron murmured, enthralled. He dove in to kiss Dean, plundering his mouth with his tongue, and Dean let the Ozzie take custody of the bitter salty fluid, passing it across to him placidly. That kiss. It was the same as before. It had been Aaron’s mouth on his earlier.

Good to know.

Raphael’s finger fucking continued. He was up to four, maybe. Hard to tell. Dean had lost count. The count wasn’t his to worry about anyway. That persistent tongue came and went, sometimes up high, tracing the dimples of Dean’s lower back, sometimes reaching into his hole as far as its pointed tip could reach, sometimes ducking down low to follow his taint and tickle his balls. Dean let someone’s hands spread his knees further apart. It had to be Balthazar.

He’d lost track of Adam. Was the boy participating? Was he really here in the same way the others were?
Michael answered that for him. “Dean, look at me,” he commanded. Dean turned his head. He found Michael had moved to where he could see Dean’s ass. Adam knelt calmly beside him, passive, nude, not aroused, his eyes on the floor. Dean’s vision blurred with the sloppiness of his senses. Hands never stopped touching. Some of them pinched. Some of them slapped. Most of them caressed sweetly.

Michael stared into Dean’s eyes, green into green. He dove deeply inside Dean’s emotions, and he chuckled darkly at what he sensed. “He’s ready, Raphael. Let’s light him up.”

Raphael pulled his fingers out, and Dean’s body followed them, earning him a swift, hot correction to his lower left thigh. He had no idea who had struck him. A lubricated vibrating plug slipped into his hole, and set his prostate tingling mercilessly.

He keened, lips pulled tight across his teeth. His eyes squeezed closed on their own, and even a swift hard ten-count spanking to his ass couldn’t pry them open again.

“Hands’ off!” called Michael. “Everyone back up!”

Dean shook in place on his hands and knees. He panted hard. His butt muscles tightened involuntarily.

“We’ll wait, Dean,” Michael told him. “Pull yourself together. You’re better than this.”

“NNnngh!” Dean whined. He relaxed his butt around the vibrator like lifting a boulder, like it was a near impossible task, and he opened his eyes with almost the same effort. His pupils were blown, his green eyes nearly black, sweat dripped from his belly, his nipples, his chin. He trembled. That had to be the highest setting on that damned plug, and it was ruthless.

“Look at me,” Michael commanded. Dean whimpered but obeyed. “Are you ready to continue?”

Dean couldn’t speak. He nodded vigorously. Michael nodded back. The Dom looked down at Adam. “Ready, sweet boy? Like I taught you, okay?”

“Yes, Michael,” Adam said with a breathy voice. The young Ozzie took the belt that Michael handed him, took it reverently in both hands and disappeared behind Dean, back where the alpha couldn’t see him. Dean’s eyes grew impossibly large, and he stared at Michael in shock.

“Go ahead, Adam. He’s ready.”

The first stroke landed dead center across Dean’s ass, right over the base of the plug which protruded just enough for the strap to jostle it unmercifully. Dean jolted forward. His spine twisted in divine anguish. His feet clenched with electric pulse, sweating from the adrenalin.

“Hold him!” Michael instructed, and hands caught hold of Dean’s arms and shoulders. He could smell Balthazar to his left, Aaron to his right. Raphael still straddled his waist. Adam hit him again, and Dean cried out. Where the hell had the Ozzie learned to swing like that?

“Nice, Adam. Good boy. I told you you’d be a natural! Again. Get a rhythm going.” Michael was goading now, an asshole of tortured teasing that set Dean a whole new challenge, or more than one actually. Dean’s alpha sparked up unexpectedly in challenge at being strapped by an Ozzie, and his ass burned with each strike, making staying in place that much more difficult.

“Submit, Dean!” Michael demanded, from both inside his head and without. “Submit to me. Let go.”

Dean moaned loudly and went lax again. He yiped at the next hit, but he didn’t fight it. His prostate
zinged with sensation, his butt was on fire in the best possible way, his alpha was confused as all hell, but Dean floated above it all, euphoric.

“Good, Adam. Let’s give him a break from the strap and move on. Who’s first?” Michael said, so casual it was startling. He seemed unaffected, but Dean could sense differently. Michael was soaring right there beside his mate, not from sensation, from the control. Everything Dean was feeling was his to grant or pull away.

“Actually,” the Ringmaster said calmly, offhand. “Give him one more.”

It had to have been choreographed beforehand because the belt came down on his ass before Dean finished processing the words, and coming as it did after he’d relaxed, it hurt like a motherfucker, and he yowled high and sharp, thumping his feet against the bed.

Michael grinned. “There you go. That’s the sound I wanted. My good boys.”

Dean huffed shallow breaths. His eyes fluttered and then held. His cock ached and throbbed. Michael was running a scene for Dean and Adam both, and Dean went dizzy with the implications. He heard a high-pitched whine, and drifted in his head long enough to wonder who it was coming from, long enough to realize it was himself, and long enough to curl into it in his head. It was a beautiful sound. Michael liked it.

God, Michael could have anything he wanted.

Raphael had dismounted the bed and was helping coordinate the participants. What a fucking brown-noser. Dean could tell he was reserving the last spot for himself, and Dean felt a twinge of resolve cut through from what he meant to hold in reserve for his mate, and that meant he had to focus. At this point, it was all about stamina. The plug in his ass shifted just at that moment, and set Dean’s teeth grinding in frustration. He looked to Michael with a grimace on his face, ignoring the roaming hands that spanned his body. The vibrator turned everything up in volume, and Dean felt his senses begin to overload.

Christ, not yet!

Michael smirked at him with lust-filled eyes, and Dean growled. Immediately, someone slapped him hard right over the welts from Adam’s well-applied strap. The plug pulled backward, wrested from its cozy spot without turning off so that it vibrated along his rim on its way out. Someone held it there for a beat or two. Dean huffed in alarm. Holy fuck, that felt amazing! His cock dribbled a hearty spurt into the sheets.

“AAAAaahhh!” he shouted as Aaron sank down into him from behind with no warning. He pushed in slowly, but he went straight in, not pausing, just one long steady shove from tip to base. Dean knew it was Aaron. He’d worked with Aaron before numerous times, modeling in class and contracting a threesome scene once or twice or…maybe more. Whatever. The Ozzie was a Bottom, not a Top, but he could follow instructions, and he liked to play being a puppet, making him ideal for someone like Michael to work with. Michael coached him now, pacing slowly around the bed, giving him subtle instructions, touching every nerve of Dean’s he possibly could without actually touching him at all.

Dean felt Michael release the worry that he wouldn’t be capable of letting anyone else touch his mate. To Michael, he was still the only one touching Dean.

Balthazar slithered in between Dean’s hands on his back and licked mercilessly at Dean’s dangling
cock, sucking down the salty drips and making Dean pant that much harder as Aaron got a hard, thumping rhythm going. Dean felt his floating begin to steepen into a soar. Balthazar’s cock bounced enticingly below his chin, smelling ripe, throbbing with anticipation. Dean forced his eyes outward, trying desperately to ignore the movement in his peripheral vision. The soaring picked up speed.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no! Not yet! Not yet!

Dean needed to clench his eyes closed, but he couldn’t. Not allowed. He clenched his jaw instead, clawed at the sheets with his fingers, sent as much of the strain out to non-erogenous zones like his calves and his elbows as he could, visualizing the strain accumulating there and shooting out into nowhere. It wasn’t working. Balthazar’s clever, clever tongue made a mockery of Dean’s efforts, and then Aaron lost his rhythm, froze up, pressed hard into Dean’s ass, and came with a loud groan, his fingers gripping tightly to Dean’s hips. He pulled out quickly and dove in to taste the mingled flavors at Dean’s hole, pressing in deep and licking in long, luxurious scoops of his tongue. Michael swatted Aaron’s ass lightly with his hand and nodded for him to back out.

“My turn!” shouted Balthazar, worming his way out from beneath Dean again. Dean used the break to catch his breath.

“You already shot your load, you Cretin! You forfeit!” Balthazar announced.

“I’m talking to your face, moron, unless your face is on the other end!”

Michael could feel the strain in Dean’s wrists, in his thighs. “On your back,” he told his mate without touching him.

“Can I hold him?” asked Aaron cheerfully. He jumped up onto the bed and lay with his legs sprawled, leaning up against the headboard. Michael chuckled indulgently.

“Rest your head on Aaron’s tummy, Dean, right between his legs on your back.” Dean fell into position, and the release of tension was an immediate high. He hadn’t realized how badly he’d tensed up, but lying down was like being lifted onto a cloud. Aaron immediately began to pet his chest and his face. Dean was in far more danger of zoning out like this than he had been on his hands and knees.

Michael had cuffed Will hard on the back of his head while Dean was getting settled, and the alpha stood rubbing the spot and sulking.

“Balthazar is next,” Michael declared. “Dean, knees up. Show us that hole. Will, make yourself useful and get your tongue in there exploring the slit of his dick. I want him out of his mind with sensation. Raphael, get busy tweaking his nipples. Those fuckers are mad sensitive. Make him scream. Let’s see how far we can take this toy before it tops out. Dean, damnit, knees up!!”

Dean nearly kneed Raphael in the head, but they all got situated. Will had his weight sprawled across Dean’s left thigh, pressing it in to grind against his hip. It hurt, but Dean pulled the discomfort into the same place he processed spankings, turning it into a warm and welcome ache. Dean’s feet pointed to the ceiling, his toes alternately curling and splaying as Balthazar crawled up to him, licked him open lasciviously, hummed in appreciation, and then pulled up onto his knees. He aimed his cock with one hand, tortured Dean’s rim with the head, and then thrust unceremoniously in.
Couldn’t anyone take a gentle approach?

Fuck!

Dean’s breath was punched out of him as Balthazar’s bottoming out percussively jibed with Raphe’s biting down on a nipple, Will’s soft nibble at the very tip of his cock, and Dean screamed.

“What can I do to help, Sir?” Adam asked. He was kneeling by the door, soft and sweet.

Michael looked across at him and then back at Dean. Dean was sweating again, so turned on he was shaking. It wasn’t all Balthazar’s fucking that set him shivering, although he pulsed with the motion. He was on fire, overwhelmed by the sheer multitude of singular places on his body that were all firing at once. Balthazar fucked hard, deliberate, precise. Big enough to pass for a young beta, Balthazar had reach inside Dean, and the Alpha’s prostate was set singing again. Dean’s mouth hung open. He couldn’t help it.

“Adam, son, you remember when I kissed you? You liked that, right?” The Ozzie nodded enthusiastically, lifting in his kneel high up until he was straining. “Would you like to see what it’s like to kiss an alpha? He’s a man, and that’s not your usual digs. Baby, you don’t have to. It’s okay if you don’t want to.”

Adam shot a look at Dean, whose eyes drifted in a dazed mist, whose mouth hung slack and welcoming – soft, like a girl’s – whose body jolted with the tangle of touches and punches from so many directions, he wasn’t really present to experience them all anymore. Dean was soaring hard. Adam nodded, standing, biting his lip in wonder. Raphael stretched out a hand to help pull him in from across Dean’s body, and Balthazar swore fiercely as Adam bent down slowly to lick a single line across the fullness of Dean’s lower lip. Raphael groaned and made a grab for the base of his own cock. Dean whined and reached upward with his head to seek the Ozzie’s soft kiss. Adam granted it. His wolf and Dean’s mingled at the contact, a rare occurrence, given their orientations didn’t match and neither held a claim on the other, but it was kismet, and Adam closed his eyes to the sensation.

“Oh, my fucking….” whispered Aaron from his front-row seat. Balthazar lost it. He came with a grunt and a series of sharp, short thrusts, the squelching noise from Dean’s hole growing that much wetter, and the smell of sex growing that much headier. Adam looked up and cast his eyes around innocently as Dean chased the loss.

“What?” the Ozzie asked.

Michael ignored them all. “Dean get your right knee back up where it belongs or I’ll have Adam cane both of your feet before we’re through.” Dean squeaked and lifted his foot skyward. Michael smiled indulgently. His erection poked a tent in his slacks, and he was far more affected by the scene than he let on, but he wasn’t through yet.

“Everyone off,” he instructed. Dean could feel Michael’s ecstatic rush when all of them except Aaron moved immediately. Michael’s cheeks were vibrantly pink. He looked Dean over, smiling serenely. Dean followed him with his eyes. Aaron’s hands cupped over his nipples, tweaking them between flattened fingers, the peak of each nipple easy to reach with flat palms. He scratched at Dean’s skin with his nails, not to hurt, just to keep him on edge. Michael smoothed a hand across Dean’s ass, letting his fingers dip and slide as they crossed the peaks and valleys of his Submissive’s offerings. He held Dean’s eye as he put his fingers in his mouth and sucked them clean.

Michael didn’t DO fluids. He didn’t like them. He… Dean watched him and panted. He wanted those fingers in his own mouth, and Michael’s smirk said he knew what Dean was thinking.
“Will? Are you with us again?” Michael asked him. Adam shifted back in and began to gently play with Dean’s lips with his own. It wasn’t kissing in the classic sense, it was more sensuous than that. Dean was lulled into a peaceful float once more when sharp claws raked suddenly down both sides of his torso from armpit to hip, leaving wicked welts in their wake and earning a yowl from the alpha who was caught totally unaware. Will grinned at him from his place, poised between Dean’s thighs, and he squished into Dean’s gaping hole with furious relish, setting up a pace and force that had Aaron scooting backward to sit up straighter and try to brace Dean’s shoulders from the onslaught. Dean grunted on each thrust with the power of it. Will growled ferociously, his hands wrapped around Dean’s thighs, slipping in the sweat there, and leaving whitened traces behind as he realigned his grip again and again.

As the force increased, Dean cried out, his toes curling in tightly, his cock bouncing proud parallel with his belly, and his legs flying akimbo, unrestrained. His breathing became a punched out affair, barely taking in enough air before it was knocked back out of him. What Will missed in finesse, he made up for in enthusiasm and size, and he tore into Dean’s hole like he was drilling for oil. Aaron laughed at Adam’s attempt to continue kissing, and Michael watched with apparent disinterest.

Michael wasn’t disinterested.

“How do you feel, Dean?” he asked over the sounds of slapping flesh and wet squelching. “Floating? This isn’t the craziest thing you’ve ever done, surely. But you’ve never done it like this, have you? Who are you right now, love? Are you worried about who’s watching? Are you comfortable being my good, good boy? I’m so proud of you.” Michael’s words, calm and easy as they were, belied the harsh treatment Dean’s ass was receiving from the randy alpha who had little self-control. Luckily for Dean, Will didn’t last much longer the second round than he had the first. He came with a shout, pulling out and shooting streaks up Dean’s belly. He followed his own effluence by leaning down over Dean and rubbing his spunk in, leaving little globules of hardening jizz coating Dean’s abdomen, and Michael growled a menace from behind him.

“Clean it up!” Michael commanded, and Will went pale.

“Me?”

“You’re the one who made the fucking mess! Lick it up!”

“I’ll do it,” Aaron volunteered, easing his way out from beneath Dean.

“Sit up, Dean,” Michael told him. “Scoot toward the foot a bit and lean back on your hands. Stretch out your torso.”

Aaron went to work licking Dean’s belly clean, and Michael shoved Will’s head down to help. Raphael took up a position near Dean’s feet, standing at the foot of the bed, holding each of Dean’s feet out wide and watching with hooded eyes, blinking every now and then dolefully. Dean couldn’t look away from those deep, dark brown eyes. Tongues lapped at him. Balthazar took up the job of continually tweaking Dean’s nipples, and Dean began to whimper again. His ass hurt. His skin was beginning to feel scorched from all the attention. His lips were swollen from the kissing.

He was still so hard, he ached.

“Who’s touching you, alpha?” Michael asked again rhetorically. “Feel good? Everyone can see you, baby. They know what you are, and they’re hungry for it. Did you ever think it would feel this good to be this vulnerable? You’re mine, Dean Winchester. No one’s ever made you feel like this before. Have they?”
Dean shook his head drunkenly. He’d never felt like this before, alight from everywhere at once, gaping and swollen from serial fuckings, used and pinched and spanked and fondled, licked and stroked and kissed. He’d done this kind of thing before maybe, but never without his mask firmly in place. For the first time, Dean was naked before a slew of takers, and he felt alive. He felt electric.

“Get him on his feet,” Michael said. Hands obeyed. They reached for him, heisting him, holding him up. “Bend him over the bed. I want to watch him take an alpha’s hand to his thighs, down where it hurts like fire. Raphael?” Dean found his face pressed into the bedding. He was breathing in the stink of spent wolf, his nose pressed into the spot where his ass had leaked and smeared. He took a deep breath.

Raphael struck him with a flat palm. All pretense that he was a mere showpiece at a cocktail party had long since been abandoned. That had been a gentle way to start it off, easing Dean into the idea that his presence here was for their use, not for his pleasure, but it didn’t hold. He was far more than a ceremonial centerpiece. Raphe hit him again. He was swinging hard, the way Cas did, much harder than anyone hit Omegas. Dean’s legs shook.

“Dean, hold!” Michael demanded.

Adam flattened himself on the bed and lay out on his belly with his knees crooked up against the headboard and his face directly in front of Dean’s. Tentatively, he slid closer and kissed the tip of Dean’s nose to encourage him to look up. Dean was sobbing, lost to the overstimulation and the pain. He turned his head upward, and Adam surged forward into a kiss. Dean followed the motion of the lips and the tongue, and the harsh beating against his legs continued. He didn’t know up from down anymore, completely overwhelmed and tumbling through space.

His mind didn’t register Raphael breaching him, but his wolf did. The pain to his thighs eased, and an alpha cock rammed home. Dean’s wolf rolled and went limp. It flailed like a ragdoll with the demands of the alpha-Dom. Dean hurt everywhere, but it was sublime, and his eyes rolled up in his head, utterly out of his control.

Nothing at all remained of Dean’s control.

Somewhere outside of himself, he heard Michael say, “Don’t knot him,” and Dean had no idea what that meant.

Sweet, sweet softness at his mouth vanished, and he chased it again. In its place, Dean found a half-hard cock nudging against his lips, and he opened on instinct, taking it in and suckling on it for comfort. Salty, slick drops coated his tongue, and Dean tightened his lips into the work. He heard a high whine from above him. He heard the wet sounds of kissing over his head, but he was too stoned on endorphins to find out whose tongue was wrapping around whose.

Raphael crowded up tight, right up against Dean’s legs both to hold him upright and to keep his thighs stinging. He didn’t use the same brute force that Will had employed. He pressed into the channel of Dean’s ass and ground in tight, rotating his hips and reveling in the feel of the gaping stretch and the viscous fluids left there by his colleagues. He struck Dean’s prostate, sending wave after wave of electricity up Dean’s spine.

Raphe was a master at control. He used his years of experience to watch Dean’s shoulder tension, the tendons in his neck, the bunching of the muscles in his aching thighs to give him a read on the man’s condition. Dean was at the very tip top of his potential. He wouldn’t hold out much longer, but Raphael felt him digging his stubborn claws in to wait until he had Michael inside him. Dean wasn’t about to lose it to Raphael.
Damn those stubborn Winchesters.

Raphe pumped his hips, grinding, working the sweet spot. Balthazar, Will, and Adam had gone kind of sleepy, sprawled out all over the bed and each other, lazily watching the master make his statement. Aaron kissed Raphael sluggishly over Dean’s head while Dean sucked him off. The Omega didn’t need another round, but Dean needed the stimulus, and Aaron was a professional after all.

When Raphael came, he came with a loud grunt. White streams dripped out onto the floor around his feet, and his knot hadn’t tried to surge forward to fill the void. Aaron came shortly after, right down Dean’s throat, and Dean languidly licked him clean.

Dean sagged against the bed, his knees bent, the weight of his chest holding him upright. His cock dangled freely, heavy and dark.

Erect.

Wanting.

Ignored.

“Had enough, Dean?” Michael asked him as Raphael pulled out with a tender pat to his ass and let Dean sag.

“Nosir,” Dean rasped. “I want you.”

“Do you now?” Michael chuckled. “You just took four solid poundings, sucked off two, had your ass and your thighs beat black and blue. You look pretty wasted to me, Dean.”

“Nosir.”

Michael took stock. Dean was a mess. He shouldn’t.

He dug into Dean’s head, into his body, he searched for a spark. He chuckled at what he found, a deep, dirty sound. The brat was holding out, and it had an ember glowing, waiting. For Michael.

“You’re amazing, Winchester. Crawl up on the bed if you can. No one touch him. Let him do it himself.” Dean grunted ugly and harsh as he worked his knees up to crawl inelegantly up the ruined sheet. He could feel his hole gape and drip, but it didn’t sting. No one had torn him. It ached, but he was still whole.

“Adam, doll, come help me undress. The rest of you, get out of the way. Jack off if you want. No one touches my mate from here but me.”

Dean lay absolutely still on his belly, his head turned to watch Michael undress. Michael kissed Adam sweetly when the Ozzie began to unbutton his shirt, and Adam blushed, evidently finding that kissing men was a pastime he might grow accustomed to.

Dean’s eyelids fluttered. His cock twitched. His mate was coming. Michael was coming to fuck him good and hard. Michael would put him over the top and let him come. He’d been so good.

“Get up on your knees, Dean,” Michael told him, and Dean somehow managed to obey, shaky as he was. His chest and face were still in the bedding, but Michael didn’t need those, just his ass. Dean presented. He bowed his back and showed off the gape of his hole, showed off how good he’d been in taking everything Michael doled out, let the dribbles of come drip down his sore thighs.
“Good boy, Dean Michael,” his mate said, a voice filled with adoration and wonder, with pride. Michael leaned down and dragged his tongue through the mess at Dean’s hole, and Dean’s thighs tightened. He made a soft “oh” sound, the strongest noise he had left. It felt charged. Michael kneed up behind him and reached around his hip to grasp Dean’s cock, wrapping a hand around it.

Dean panted in sudden alarm, his hips thrusting into Michael’s hand on their own, and his groin lighting up with pent up sensation. Michael chuckled again. Everyone in the room seemed to disappear but the two of them, although a part of Dean’s mind wanted to have his model behavior broadcast to the whole world. Dean’s thoughts snapped back to the present when Michael pressed into him, slow and stuttered, just the way Dean liked it, despite the gaping. Michael’s hand never left Dean’s cock, and Dean’s floating took on a definite power soar at the feeling.

Michael fucked him, fucked the come out of him, fucked the memory of other men out of him, Claimed his body and his heart for all the witnesses to see, the Claim slamming into place, and Dean and Michael came at the same time, shouting hoarsely, echoing one another in mind, body, spirit, and voice. Michael held Dean and stroked him through to the last. Come dribbled off Michael’s fist and out of Dean’s ass. Then they collapsed in a heap, utterly exhausted. Michael kissed Dean’s swollen lips, and Dean mumbled unintelligibly.

In the observation booth, April leaned bonelessly against Castiel’s chest, snuggled naked in his lap facing the window. His knot held her fast in place, and his eyelids drooped in fulfillment. Her palm-prints on the glass left two smeared inverted snow angels that would require cleaning before the next use. Dean said he wanted Cas to enjoy himself, not rile up with worry. He needn’t have been concerned. Cas had found it just as riveting as he’d always hoped it would be. April hadn’t had an issue finding her stride in an exclusively masculine environment, and that too, was a part of the test. Castiel watched sleepily as the Contract team checked on one another, collected their personal items, bade the couple goodnight, and slipped out, leaving Dean and Michael naked on the soggy bed, kissing each other to sleep. An alpha-monitor from the far booth clicked the ‘Active’ light off then slid in silently to tuck a warm blanket over the pair and leave bottles of water on the side table.

“That was fun,” April told him softly, needlessly.

“I’m glad you enjoyed the show, kitten.” He held a chunk of cantaloupe to her lips, and she bit into it, taking the bite from his fingers with practiced lips. “I want you to think about how it might feel to you to be in the middle of a scene like that, the only woman present, surrounded by men who are not entirely focused on you, but are also playing with one another. You don’t have to answer right away.”

“Would I be Subbing?”

“Naturally,” he answered, feeding her a piece of watermelon.

“Is this how our foursome will go?”

“Sometimes. Not always. I want to begin to delineate the boundaries though. If you struggle to feel comfortable in the presence of gay men, or if Dean cannot feel at ease when you are present and
active, we will need to redefine the idea of the foursome.”

She thought about it. “I don’t see how it would be an issue, Cas, unless you added another girl, and you wanted me or Dean to…whatever. I like men. Watching them fuck each other is hot. I’m good with that, especially if it’s you and Dean and Michael we’re talking about.”

He could feel her sincerity, and she could feel the wry touch in his head when she mentioned Michael. He didn’t say anything about it though. He continued feeding her melon and watching the window in front of him.

“That was a big step for Dean, wasn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes, it was.”

“Do you think he did it all without putting on his public face? I couldn’t tell. I’ve seen him show off in videos so many times. He struts around and stuff, and parts of this had the same feel, but this time seemed less like a show.”

“Hm,” Cas responded. “I need to go see what’s on the internet, it seems. I thought there were limits to the degree of lewdness allowed on public platforms.”

She giggled. “Most of what’s out there is a tease. Dean does what he does at the main panels onstage without ever showing anything he’s not supposed to or touching anyone. It just seems like he’s giving them more than he really is. He knows whatever he does is going to end up on YouTube. I think he tailors it to that. But, yes, you should watch the videos. You’re going to want to know what you’re buying before you marry him.”

Cas pinched her ass hard, but he touched her mind with his amusement, and she snickered.

“Tell me what you did today,” he said, changing the subject.

“I spent a lot of time working with Portia,” she told him. “It’s going well. Andrea taught me some tricks to get her to pay attention. But she’s a puppy, and there’s only so much attention she has to give. We played too. She’s a little brat. But I’m giving her lots of attention.”

“Mm, good.” He nibbled the tip of her ear softly and whispered, “What else?”

“I spent some time with Rowena. She’s very pushy. She wants to help me, but she doesn’t truly understand my plan yet. Mark had to run interference for me, and that got kind of uncomfortable. I dunno, Cas, she made me feel like I have no idea what I’m doing, but her plan…it’s too much, too soon. There’s no room for starting a family. There’s no room for me to get comfortable in the arena. There’s no room for me to develop my sound, either in writing or performing. Maybe we should have put off hiring an agent.”

“Maybe,” he said thoughtfully. “Or perhaps we simply need to fill her in on your plan better. You won me over. You have Matt and Mark both on your side. Maybe it’s a matter of educating the newcomer about the rules of the house.” He nibbled again, and she giggled. “Show her who’s boss,” he whispered.

“That’s easy, Alpha. You are,” April answered, cuddling in.

“No, kitten, for this, you are. Think of the agent the same way you do Portia. Train her to your expectations, and keep at it until she’s got it. Don’t accept anything but compliance, even if it takes months of patient work.”
“Cas,” she protested. “I’m not built for that. I feel stupid trying to act like a dominant.”

He laughed, and the ripple through his knot caused her to tighten up around him. Ah, the simple pleasures. “It’s not acting like a dominant to stand your ground, April. Don’t think the only way to do this is to force it down someone’s throat and make them say ‘Yes, ma’am’. If I know you, you’re going to get your way anyway. You’ll work around her, playing your subtle games until she thinks the whole idea is hers.”

“Would that be so bad?” April asked, hiding her face in the crook of his arm.

“Manipulating people is unkind at the very least,” he told her. “I want you to be straight with her. You did well today. You needed help, and that’s fine, but you spoke to her out front, not through manipulative tactics. Keep doing that. Consistency is the key, April. Matt and Mark will back you up. Maybe call a business meeting where the three of you all work to explain it to her together. She may be pushy, but you’re more stubborn, and you don’t owe her your submission. Don’t give in to her. It’s not her career. It’s yours. In your relationship with her, you are not an Omega. You are not a Submissive. You are the boss. You are her boss. Don’t tell me you can’t lead a team, kitten. I’ve seen you do it. This team is your orchestra, and you are the conductor. Do you hear me?”

She smiled into the reflection in the window before her. She could see his face. That was his Alpha face. She nodded. “Yes, Sir. I understand.” Her focus shifted from the closeup view of the reflection to the interior of the room, and she watched the two men gently touching, talking quietly, slipping away bit by bit.

“They look happy together,” she observed.

“Mm,” he agreed.

They could see Michael’s face, soft in sleepy satisfaction. April watched him take care of his mate. Her head relaxed back onto Castiel’s shoulder, and he cinched her in tightly, dropping random kisses along her throat.

“Cas, I’m sorry…” she said.

“Please don’t say it again,” he whispered uncomfortably. “I don’t need to hear it again. We both made mistakes, April, but Michael is not one of yours. Love isn’t something you need to apologize for.” He caressed a single string inside her emotional tangle that was pure Michael. She brushed him gently away from it, and he let it go, unsure if she meant to guard it possessively or simply couldn’t look at it yet.

They sat still, cool in the empty room, connected by more than their bodies, and they let the matter drift away. In the room before them, Michael’s eyes slipped closed and his fingertips fell still mid-caress in Dean’s hair.

April giggled softly. “How, Cas?” she asked him vaguely. “How is that about you?” She gestured toward the sleeping men.

“What are you talking about?” he asked her back, distracted by the silkiness of her hair suddenly.

“Just now, that’s what you were thinking wasn’t it? About how much you love being the Top to those two? This wasn’t your scene, it was Michael’s.” She maintained an amused touch to her voice.

“I don’t know what you’re referring to…”

“Possession and satisfaction, Castiel. Pride of ownership. I can feel what you’re feeling, and I can tell
it wasn’t about me.”

“Well, they are mine,” he said defensively. “I’m allowed to feel pride when there’s something to be proud of.”

She laughed at him, and he blushed. He bent his head and bit her shoulder. She squealed and kicked out, thumping the window.

“Shhh!” he laughed, capturing her leg and tucking it up close. “You’ll wake my sleeping pack. They need their sleep after my big scene.”

“Yours,” she teased. “Michael might take exception to you taking credit for his scene.” She was laughing with him, cuddling close, enjoying the sensation of his knot and his playfulness, of his adoration.

“It’s good to be the king,” he whispered into her ear, and then he turned her chin and kissed her. Castiel ate up the amused adoration she fed him. It wasn’t what he’d been feeding from for the last six months; this was far more grounded and unstaged. It was something rich and real, and he shifted into the kiss to let her feel how grateful he was, how blessed. The condom caught in the wiry curls of his pubic hair and tugged painfully, and he winced, grunting out a sound of disfavor, of privileged distaste. Condoms were of the devil, he was sure of it.

April’s hand eased over his pubis and freed him from the pull even as she deepened the kiss. “You could trim,” she suggested softly, drawing back and resting her jaw against his face. He kissed it lightly and shrugged.

“There’s a power statement in having a mane of hair framing my knot. Trimming would diminish that. Besides, once your mid-season Heat hits, we won’t have need of these foul contraptions any longer, not for years…” He kissed her throat. “…And years.”

Already thinking alike, along the lines of planting fertile seeds in fertile gardens, they watched together as Dean’s hand slipped beneath the blanket and moved slowly across Michael’s padded lower belly, stroking him while both men slept. A spike of anguish echoed through April’s belly in synchronicity with Castiel’s, and she gasped as he cupped her face to his, his brow wrinkling in a sudden quiver of unexpected pain. He held her to him, trying like hell to breathe through it with furrows marring his forehead and his lips a thin, tight line. He tried sending her comfort as he realized she was experiencing the same sensation for herself, not merely as an echo of his.

“You feel it too?” April whispered, and he clenched his eyes and nodded, keeping her face pressed into his.

“Breathe,” he whispered back, pulsing his hips on the off chance that there was any mitigation to be gained through pleasure. “Breathe, baby. It’ll pass.”

“Cas…Hurts.”

“I know. I’ve got you. Breathe with me.”

She panted lightly, clenching down on him, and he rubbed a hand into her belly. The condom caught them both as they writhed against the painful waves, and Castiel’s knot gave way to a slick collapse of the bulk of his girth. He slipped free, and he turned his mate to straddle his lap, kneading her lower back and tightening his jaw.

A few more pained breaths passed, and the spasm released them both, leaving them wheezing into one another’s hair.
“I need…” Cas panted. “I need to do something about that soon.” April huffed, catching her breath. “I don’t know how you put up with it for so long.”

He sniffed loudly and laughed a short simple breath out. “I’m amazing like that. Haven’t you heard?” “You’re a conceited dork,” she parried back at him with a gentle nibble to his chin. The tension in her thighs eased.

Castiel almost went dizzy with relief. He hadn’t realized how badly he ached for a mate comfortable enough with him to call him names, to tease him over his weaknesses, to trust him enough to drop all the facades. Carried over an emotional threshold by their shared pain and her simple insult, so real in the moment, Cas sobbed into her shoulder. He hugged her tightly, burying his face in her throat, and she wrapped both arms and both legs around him as well.

“I love you,” he snuffled out eventually, getting himself back into his own grip.

“Love you, too, Alpha,” she rasped back. “I would have called you a dork much sooner if I’d known it would make you this happy.”

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“Dean?” Cas whispered with a touch to his hip. “Baby wake up for a few minutes. Let me look you over.”

“Cas?” Dean rolled onto his back with a sleepy groan. “Michael broke my ass. Wanna see?” He began kicking the blanket off.

“Yes, I do,” the Alpha answered. “That’s why I’m here. Roll over onto your belly. Spread your legs. Just lay still for me, all right?”

Dean nudged Michael on his way over onto his tummy, and set the Omega stirring. “You’re in big trouble now, buddy,” Dean warned. “Alpha’s here. He’s gonna see what you did.” Dean’s green eyes twinkled as Michael’s opened groggily. Dean spread out, kicking Michael as he went for a full spread eagle.

Michael groaned. He hadn’t expected to fall asleep. He hadn’t played half as hard as his mate did. “Watch it, Dean,” he grumbled blearily. “I’m not above lighting you right back up, Alpha or no Alpha.”

Castiel ignored the bickering. He had his penlight in his mouth and was inspecting Dean’s backdoor with his fingers. The fingers of one hand splayed out to hold his cheeks apart.

“Clench down,” he instructed, and Dean tightened up with a groan.

“Good. And now push out.” Cas ignored the white dribbles that cascaded over his fingers. He padded them around Dean’s rim, wiping fluids out of his line of sight, and pressing in just to the first knuckle. His eyes drifted into the distance as he focused tightly to what he was feeling in spaces he couldn’t see.

“What do you sense from him, Michael?” he asked as he pulled his finger free and ran a gentle hand
down Dean’s thigh, looking at the blossoming bruises there.

“He’s fine, Cas. He’s not in all that much pain considering what they did to him. I expected worse.”

“Cchh!” Dean protested, giving Michael the stink eye. “Not my first rodeo! You’re looking at a professional here, baby!” Michael smirked at him, lying on his side with his torso propped up on an elbow.

April slipped in behind her mate and stretched out beside Dean, stretching languorously like a cat. Castiel finished with Dean’s thighs and moved his inspection upward to take in the roundness of his butt, heavily bruised in wicked stripes, swollen, red and angry. Cas took a good long look, kneading the muscle and searching for skin breaks. His hands roamed upward to work the muscles of Dean’s back, and the alpha moaned in pleasure.

“You did very nice work for a first effort, Michael,” Cas praised, swatting Dean’s ass abruptly and making him jump. “Let’s talk it over when I get back and figure out some ways to improve the experience for both of you.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Michael answered with a very Omega blush.

“He’s undamaged for the most part. I’m extremely pleased. Well done, both of you.” Cas pushed up from where he’d been leaning in on one knee and slipped into the restroom to wash his hands. Michael beamed at Dean who rolled his eyes, and the two of them scuffled playfully for the driest spot on the bed. Cas came out drying his hands on a towel. “But you didn’t come anywhere close to pushing his limits. For a first try, that’s a good thing. Today wasn’t about stretching his abilities. It was about testing the waters. Now that you know both of you have it in you to succeed in an environment like this, I’ll expect you to begin exploring ways to make it meaningful and fulfilling. Dean, write it up. I want it in my email inbox before I return from New York. This one is important. No stalling.”

“Aw, man!” Dean covered his eyes with the crook of his elbow. Cas cleared his throat, making Dean peek out from under his arm to see the full weight of Castiel’s failure to find him cute in that moment.

“yessir,” he muttered.

“Good boy,” Cas purred.

He leaned over the side of the bed, stretching to drop a kiss first to Michael, a rare one on his lips that made Michael blush, then to Dean, leaving his mark by way of a pair of swollen, spit-slick lips, and finally to April, seeing as she was lined up with the others and why not?

“Ready to go?” he asked her, and he helped her up when she nodded. “I’ve ordered you two a meal from the kitchen.” Cas told them. “That’s something your planning failed to consider, Michael. Next time, I will expect you to consider aftercare better than you did this evening. I don’t believe you took into account just how much leading a scene like this would take out of you, the Dominant. So, scoot on back to Dean’s suite, both of you. Eat well. Get a painkiller into Dean. Drink nothing but water. And I want both of you in bed early. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“I love you both. I’ll see you on Monday. You both know the house rules. I expect you to follow them, and I’ll be keeping tabs.”
Michael made it to his feet to give April a goodbye hug, but Dean settled for blowing her a kiss from the bed.

He slept very well that night, curled up with his mate, a warm throb in his ass and a belly full of steak. He slept so well that he was up and typing out his report before the alarm even went off. His backside hurt to sit on, and Dean loved it.

And to think, the majority of the heat of pain that lingered into the morning had been from Adam, the straight little Ozzie who swung a strap like a Roman charioteer. Dean snickered to himself, still flush with endorphins, still floating just a bit, still thrilled with the circumstances of Universist Balance that put him right here after starving him for so long.

Right here, where everything aligned in seamless perfection. The battles at their doorstep would wait just a breath longer. Dean was under no illusions that they would be easy, but lined up four abreast and feeling the depth of the growing pack fan out behind him, he felt stronger as he braced to face the hordes at their gates than he had ever felt before.

They were gonna win this fucking war! He could feel it.

Chapter End Notes

I sometimes blank out when I put up a new chapter and forget what I had meant to say to y'all in the notes. I think this is one of those times. I feel like there was something important, but I'm drawing a blank.

Hmm.

Oh well. Whatevs. Love to you all.
Chapter 106

Chapter Summary

April and Cas recalibrate a bit. Dean's tuxedo fits just fine. And it's time for Sarah to hear from the peanut gallery.

Chapter Notes

Hi folks. It's been longer than usual, yes? Yes. So, my last work break was a love-fest of epic proportions. All I can say is that if I'm gonna take a writing break, THAT's what I wanna do instead. All of it. Thanks for all the awesome hugs.

Second, it wouldn't be a post-apocalyptic post without a nod to the sad, sad news our fandom received too recently. I for one, am certain that the words shoved into John Winchester's mouth on the 300th episode, were for us in our time of grief. So I, for one, intend to take those words to heart and to enjoy what we have while we have it.

Third, to get the most out of this THEN section, I recommend spending some time watching Misha's portrayal of Castiel on your television screen for a bit so that his incredible voice work will be fresh in your head. That voice is critical to this scene.

Warnings for mentions of graphic violence and regret. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 106 – Thursday, August 24, 2017

THEN:

Viscous red dribbled stickily down the far wall, pooling along the baseboard, melding with puddles to the left and right. The man panted heavily, leaning against his own thighs, arms braced and trembling. His chest heaved with exertion and fury. Adrenalin, fast waning now that they all lay motionless in heaps upon the cold concrete floor, set his limbs shaking. His lip twitched. His cheek spasmed. The flesh along the bridge of his nose crinkled as his face continued to convulse in uncontrollable rage. Red eyes flicked from one bundled heap to the next, watching for movement. He took stock. The two in the corner had had their throats crushed. The big one on the other side of the room was leaking greyish pink brain matter onto the floor – clearly, that was where all the blood had come from. And the three scattered evenly between the door and where Castiel stood panting had all been dispatched with one pistol shot each, aimed surgically to destroy the musculature of their hearts – one shot each to the chest.

Six men dead. By his hand.
It had taken less than ten minutes.

And forever on, from this point, his life would be split between a then and a now, between a time when he’d been able to affirm positively that he stood with the angels in all their purity and their innocence and their steadfast condemnation of the grisly violence of death. Of murder. And now.

Castiel wretched and vomited on the floor between his feet, and then stumbled hastily back to avoid the spreading muck.

He’d never be able to pretend innocence again. He’d just murdered six men in cold blood. With his bare hands. If one applied the term men loosely enough to cover the monsters they’d been at heart.

And the only thought that ran through his head on repeat was that he hadn’t managed to corner all of them. It hadn’t yet been a large syndicate, but there were eight men on the upper council, and he’d only neutralized six. Sure, there were foot soldiers by the scores out doing the dirty work: collecting ‘capital’, Omegas harvested in the prime of their lives, put to work in the darkness, enslaved and tortured, raking in profits for the upper echelon by the tens of thousands every week. Cas knew the foot soldiers were powerless without their commanders, ready to scatter back to their petty crime origins without the organization and resources of the syndicate at their backs. But the task wasn’t complete yet. No, there were still two more leaders out breathing air somewhere. Cas had meant to corner all eight of them tonight.

Were the remaining two out working the inventory? Checking over their living, breathing stock?

Almost, that had been Gabriel. Almost, but for Gabe’s quick thinking and defensive brutality that allowed Castiel’s brother to level the men with gunny sacks and truncheons. Gabe got away, but Marina was dead. And while it had been the foot soldiers in the ramming truck that knocked their car skidding into a light pole, it was really these six, these eight, behind the grim work orders that had killed Castiel’s darling sister-in-law and devastated his brother.

Cas pushed himself to standing and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, leaving a coppery smear of blood. Not his own. He didn’t remember being sprayed in the face with his enemy’s blood. When had that happened? When he’d bashed number three’s head against the cinder block wall repeatedly, no doubt. His face continued to spasm into a furious grimace. His eye twitched.

He surveyed. He debated cleaning up versus leaving them where they lay. He had no idea if he’d left traces of himself in the mess. He had scant knowledge of the advances of modern forensics. He’d not taken a scratch. None of that was Castiel’s blood. Would investigators be able to trace the carnage back to him? The gun weighed heavy in his waistband. Father’s pistol would have to go missing somewhere it wouldn’t be found.

It didn’t matter to Cas if he was caught. He couldn’t bring Marina back. He couldn’t help Gabriel. Gabe had fallen down a well of grief and trauma. His eyes stared glassy whenever Cas spoke to him. He’d snapped emotionally, and they all knew what that meant for an untethered Omega. Without a claim from a strong life line, Gabe would succumb to insanity. And Marina was gone. Father was gone. There was no one who could help him.

Cas felt his eyes well up, overflow, and leave tracks through the minute red spots on his cheeks, down through the smears across his mouth. He clenched his eyes closed, willing them to transition back to blue. He needed to think.

Cas smelled Bobby behind him before he heard a sound, and somehow, he wasn’t surprised by the man’s presence. Somehow, it seemed an inevitability. Bobby had always turned up when Cas found himself in an ugly mess, always, ever since Father died. He didn’t turn, even when a solid hand came
down upon his shoulder and squeezed. He couldn’t look at the man. Not yet. How had Bobby found him here?

“Alpha,” the old man said in a voice strange to Castiel’s ear. It was careful, neutral, soft. Cas sighed, sniffled, and wiped at his eyes again, smearing more blood and turning his face into a grotesque mask of dead men’s blood.

“Castiel, we can’t stay here. Come with me. We need to move now.”

“I did this, Bobby,” Castiel confessed needlessly. “I need to turn myself in.”

Bobby scoffed loudly. His grip tightened on Castiel’s shoulder, and he spun the younger man to face him.

“Don’t be stupid. That won’t help your brother.”

“You listen to me, boy, and you listen good,” Bobby snapped with authority. “You’re coming with me. We’re going to clean you up, scrub you clean until you sparkle, and you’re going to get right back to your studies. You’re not going to breathe a goddamn word of this to anyone, not anyone, Cas, except to let Gabriel know he doesn’t need to watch his six anymore. It’s done, and we need to get out of here. We need to leave it behind us and walk on from here.”

Cas sobbed, clutched at Bobby, and stared at the door. It couldn’t be that easy, not after what he’d asked of his wolf and his alpha, not after what they’d begged him to allow them to do.

“Son,” Bobby beseeched softly, trying to capture Cas’ eyes. “Castiel, you did what you had to do. We’re in a war, make no mistake. It’s not a war that the sun shines down on, with rows of proud soldiers marching in formation before crowds of waving banners, taking kisses on our cheeks from a grateful nation. Castiel, this is a war in the shadows. But it’s a necessary war. And we have to fight it. And we HAVE to win it. Do you hear me?”

“No, Bobby, I can’t…”

“Damnit, boy, wake the fuck up and look around you!” Bobby’s tone flipped to pissed, and Cas startled in his grip, eyes flying wide. “It’s time to grow up, Alpha. Don’t you dare wallow. We ain’t got time for that. You pick your damn self up off the goddamn floor and get to being the man you’re supposed to be. Are you listen’in’ to me, boy? Stop sniveling that you got dealt a shitty hand. You know who got a shitty hand? Your brother, that’s who. Now come with me, get a damn shower, pull yourself together, and go take care of Gabriel!”

Bobby was furious, and Cas could only stare at him.

Bobby rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath. He looked around at the carnage, counting.

“All six…” he mumbled to himself, and Cas lowered his eyes in shame. “That’s all of the upper council, Alpha. We leveled the lot of ‘em in one sweep. That’s one syndicate down, countless more to go. You with me?”

Castiel’s mind skittered. No. He’d killed six, but the council was a table of eight. Two of them were missing. Had Bobby said ‘We’?

“I…? You…?” he eloquently sputtered.

“Seems like the council was less cohesive than they thought,” Bobby added. “Joachim and Colin had
a private mini-council session a mile from here. ‘HAD’ being the operative word.” Bobby’s tongue traced a line across his bottom lip, and his eyes danced.

“You killed them?”

“I didn’t invite them to sign my dance card,” Bobby answered caustically.

“How did you know I was here?” Castiel asked, beginning to come back to himself and beginning to realize how deep a pile of shit he was in.

“I keep an eye on my alphas, Cas,” the mentor reminded him evenly.

Castiel nodded. How Bobby knew what he always knew had baffled him for years, but he wouldn’t get any answers from the man that he hadn’t already heard. Cas turned slowly and regarded the room. Bobby was right. They needed to move. He surveyed the damage with an analytical eye, and his mind traced along the lines of probability from this moment forward, running complex models out to their ultimate conclusions. If he was careful, several of those models yielded outcomes that meant good things for Gabriel…and that’s really all that mattered.

When he turned back, Bobby had a white handkerchief extended in offering. It was a white flag in the physical sense only. Bobby would never surrender. Cas took it and scrubbed his face. He stiffened his spine. He set his jaw.

“There you go,” said Bobby in the same voice he’d once used to coach Cas through vertebrate anatomy lab when Cas had struggled to distinguish the myriad nerves in a cat’s eye.

“It may be a just war, alpha,” Cas said in a stronger voice. “But we need to fight it in the open. Not like this. We can’t ever do this again.”

Bobby tugged at Cas’ shoulder, and the two men began walking away. Neither of them looked back.

“We fight on every front at once, Castiel,” said Bobby firmly. “We can’t afford only to walk the high ground. If we do that, we lose.”

“No.” It was a starkly implacable response, typical of Castiel.

“Cas…”

“NO, Bobby. This was a mistake…”

“It wasn’t a mistake, Castiel,” Bobby growled, stepping out into the pitch black darkness outside the bunker. Castiel followed more slowly. The syndicate chose its council room well, a boon to the pair who’d used its hidden properties to their advantage. The two were alone in the night. “It was a necessary mission, and you implemented it with perfect clarity of purpose. Don’t let your soft side play Monday morning quarterback now that the deed is done. You HAD to kill those men, Castiel. Someone had to. You can write all the legislation you want, but no jail cell is going to stop the syndicates.”

“We’re no better than they are if we become vigilantes!”

“BULLSHIT!”

“Damnit, Bobby…!” Cas spun to a stop and yanked his shoulder clear of his mentor’s grip. His eyes flashed red, but Bobby didn’t flinch. He stepped right up into Castiel’s face, a red hue suffusing his own eyes and a finger planted in Castiel’s chest.
“Stop it! We don’t live in that world yet, boy, and no one’s going to wave a magic wand and give it to us. We gotta build it ourselves, brick by fucking brick. We have to tear out the rotten with our goddamn teeth and plant a new garden in its place. That’s going to mean spilled blood and lots of it. And you…you are the only one with all the parts in the right places to do it right. You’re the only one strong enough, smart enough, rich enough, and canny enough to pull this off. Don’t you dare go squeamish on me now, boy.”

“I’ve had enough of being your puppet,” Cas snarled back.

“Good! ’Bout fuckin’ time, too! I’m pretty damn tired of pulling your strings! Now get in the fucking car!”

Bobby spun away from him with surprising agility, skipped around to the driver’s side, and slammed himself in without another word.

Cas swallowed. He glanced about him. He slipped into Bobby’s car, still clutching the bloodied handkerchief that would need to be burned. He realized that in his rage, he’d never made an exit plan. If Bobby hadn’t found him, he’d have had to trudge back through the streetlights with blood caking his face.

“What do I tell Gabriel?”

“Tell him you eighty-sixed the fuckers who killed his mate and tried to bag him for resale. What kind of stupid question is that?”

Bobby pulled the car easily from the curb, driving carefully so as not to attract unwanted attention. “You won’t be a suspect, Alpha. You can let Gabe in on it enough to ease his fears, put him at peace in that spaghetti bowl he calls a brain. You can trust your brother.”

Castiel fidgeted, and Bobby couldn’t suppress his eyeroll.

“You’ve been grooming me this whole time,” accused Cas in a flat, gravel-strewn voice.

“That’s what mentors do,” Bobby reminded him.

“I’m a murderer. I don’t understand any of what I did, even if I was the one who did it. And you. You guided me straight to it the whole way.” Cas studied his hands. Blood caked his fingernails. Tiny speckles of it spattered his forearms.

“Lemme ask you a question, Alpha,” Bobby posed. “If you thought this plan through but rejected it on moral grounds, what then? Try to illuminate the syndicate to the public? Get the cops involved? Work tirelessly for years to dismantle their operation one dirtbag at a time? Don’t answer. Just think. Are you your father’s son, or are you a wolf? Who the fuck are you in the deepest part of your soul, boy? If you try to repress it, it’s gonna kill you as surely as it killed your Pop.”

“My Father,” Cas corrected. “And he was a wolf, Goddamnit.” The man was dead, the least Bobby could do was not disparage his dignity.

“Don’t toy with me, pup,” Bobby countered.

“I think we’re past the stage where you can cow me with that tone,” Cas snapped. “Let’s get one thing straight right now. This? Tonight? This was a mistake. A terrible, mistake. And I’m going to clean the brain tissue out of my hair and think it though until I can make heads or tails out of it all, and I’m not ever going to be your weapon again. If you need a dagger, you do it your own damn self!”

“Hey, don’t lash out at me,” Bobby snapped. “I didn’t make you do a damn thing.”
“You knew where I was heading, and you paved the way.”

“I couldn’t have stopped you if I’d wanted to. Don’t go revisionist on me, Castiel. Don’t pretend you didn’t know your choices. You did what you HAD to do, and nothing on earth would’ve stopped you before you’d finished it. It’s done now, and you have the luxury of waffling around in your own head about moral choices and where your lines are. Dammit, Cas, that’s a luxury we can’t afford if we’ve got the slimmest chance of winning this war. None of this is pretty, but we don’t decide reality. This is a WAR! Don’t you get that?”

Cas stared out the window, ignoring the reflection in the darkened pane. His reflection. He couldn’t make anything mean anything. He’d been so committed on his way in, stubborn as a bull, no doubt whatsoever about right and wrong and who deserved to die bloody. Now, the whole world was spinning in freefall. He wasn’t sure of anything except that he didn’t ever want to feel this way again.

Finally, he took a deep breath and spoke to his lap. “We have to pinch it off from the demand side, Bobby. We need to realign people’s thinking, build a new morality. We attack the problem from the source. If there’s no demand for Omega fuck-houses, there won’t be a black market.”

Bobby glanced across at him. The Alpha looked too young and too spooked. His heart went out to the boy.

“Yeah, we need to do that. And we’re gonna work on it. That’s the public face of the war. That’s what you can take into the lights and in front of TV cameras. You go out there and drive the bus on that offensive. Shame them, Castiel. Make it so easy for them to get their wolves stroked in the light of day, and publicize the horrors of the black market, that they can’t stomach it anymore. But, son, that’s not going to convince everyone. You know better. Don’t bury your head in the sand.”

“I killed six men, Bobby, three of them with my bare hands. What am I supposed to do? How do I go back to class and pretend I have any business studying medicine? What could the Hippocratic oath ever mean to me now?”

“It means the same thing it’s always meant, you idjit,” Bobby insisted. “It means you struggle and fight on the side of righteousness. Ya protect the vulnerable. Ya don’t lose sight of the goal. You stand and fight wherever someone can’t do it for themselves. And you do whatever you have to, ‘cause the damned enemy don’t give a fuck about your moral conundrums, Alpha. They aren’t gonna play nice so you can keep your conscience clean. They cheat and steal and rape and kill. They make their own rules.”

“As do you, obviously,” Cas mumbled. He didn’t appreciate being set up to play Batman.

“As do you,” Bobby shot back. “As you should. You’re Alpha, Castiel, or have you forgotten the responsibility that comes with that title?” Cas glanced at him, unfamiliar enough with the details to know if he was poised to be Batman or Spiderman, but knowledgeable enough to have caught the reference, wherever it stemmed from. He humphed.

Bobby pulled the car over on a dark stretch of two-laned highway between the streetlights, and he killed his own headlights. He put the car in park and shifted to look Cas dead in the face.

“We’re not gonna keep having this discussion again and again. You get your head straight right now. Pick a side, Castiel. Play it dirty or play it clean, but don’t waffle back and forth and then blame me for pulling your keister outta the flames you get yourself into. Which is it gonna be? Choose.”

Cas stared into the old doctor’s eyes and licked his lips, regretting the action immediately when the copper tang of dead man’s blood sparked on his taste buds. He couldn’t find the words. His head
spun. His eyes beseeched Bobby’s for an alternate choice, but they found only hardness and resolve. “I’m no vigilante,” he tried. “All evidence to the contrary,” Bobby countered. “It was for Gabriel,” Cas said, hoping without hope to make Bobby understand the agony of what watching Gabriel flounder had done to Castiel. But it was clear that Bobby not only understood, he concurred. It had all been for Gabriel. “There are how many Gabriels in the world?” Bobby responded, not giving an inch. “They may not be your brother, but they’re someone’s. Do they matter less? Are you so selfish that only your own kin deserves this kind of rage?” Cas stared at him. Thinking. Those algorithms ran models in his head at dizzying speeds. Who was he in the depths of his soul? Who was Bobby? What did the future hold for any of them? For Gabriel? Who am I? His Alpha had no trouble with that question. He was ALPHA, goddamnit. His wolf, too, took the question, chewed it up into soggy, slobby shreds, and spit it out at Castiel’s feet in disdain. But Cas had never doubted where those two stood. They didn’t get a vote. Civility, if it was worth claiming, was worth fighting for as surely as was the bodily safety of thousands of unnamed Omegas, still stuck in miserable servitude. Righteousness was a slippery slope, and Cas was not as naïve as he seemed. How many despots had begun their campaigns with the best of intentions? Bobby was wrong. “Fight beside me, Bobby,” Cas said at last. “I will chart us a course, and we’ll win this damn war someday. But we do it the right way, not like this.” Bobby shook his head sadly, but Cas cut him off. He’d found a resolution of purpose within those depths. “It’s not all going to be pretty. I know that. I’m not stupid. But we’re going to put this whole sordid mess behind us, and we’re going to draw new lines. This can’t ever happen again, Bobby. Not like this. Now, drive. Take us somewhere we can clean up without being seen. I can’t let Gabriel see me like this.” Bobby nodded somberly and put the car in drive. He clicked his headlights back on. “And another thing,” Cas said as they pulled onto the pavement. “From now on, you answer to me. If that’s not something you can stomach, we can’t work together. I mean it.” Bobby’s face flashed a strangely satisfied flicker before he tamped it down again. Cas found it notable, but didn’t comment. He watched Bobby’s eyes from the side as the man who’d led him by the hand through the awful uncertainty of adolescence and into a strident adulthood, considered the flipping of their roles. How would he answer? Castiel didn’t know himself whether or not he was bluffing. A bluff of this magnitude would destroy his credibility, making him a mockery of an Alpha, with all the muscle of a great leader, but with no standing to command anyone or anything. Cas didn’t know it, but Bobby had weighed him through the whole conversation and judged him ready, forged in fire and pain and infinitely impossible choices and emerging from the kiln a whole new being — a hunkered silhouette in the shadows, coated in muck and sin, that slowly unfolds, still in pain, but determined now in a way that would be tested again and again through the long years to
come – a shadowy figure that stands slowly to its full height, lit from behind by the fires of virtue, shoulders back, fists clenched, jaw immovable, angel wings spread aggressively skyward, daring to wield the strength granted to it by an unjust universe, and stubbornly resolved to hold itself within sight of true righteousness and to go no further into the shadows.

Bobby watched Castiel draw his line. He would go no further.

Could Bobby kneel to a man like that?

Oh, yes. He’d been waiting all his life for Castiel.

“Whatever you say, Alpha,” he demurred, choosing to downplay the moment to avoid spooking the Alpha back into reticence. Cas’ quick flicker of a side-eye told Bobby he didn’t appreciate the flippancy, but he only nodded and turned away to stare into the night.

Who was he in the depths of his soul?

He was a wolf.

He was a creature of the light and the darkness both, and that razor’s edge would prove a balance he doubted he’d ever master. But he had to traverse it anyway. He had no choice. Robert Singer had said there was no one else, and he’d been right.

There was no one else.

There may never be anyone else, not with the wherewithal that Castiel Novak had at his disposal.

And it had to be stopped. For all of them. For Gabriel. For Marina. For Cas’ Uncle James whom he’d never met. For Bobby’s mate, long gone years before Bobby ever came to Lawrence. For all of them.

It had to stop.

Castiel would stop it. But a glance at Bobby reminded him he couldn’t do it alone. And that was all for the better. It wasn’t any one man’s war. It would take an army. Castiel needed to build an army. He ran through the acquaintances he had who had an axe or two to grind, and he realized it was no small number.

Bobby snickered, and Cas shot him an offended glare from beneath blood-streaked locks that spiked over his forehead.

“You’re muttering tactics under your breath,” Bobby explained. “Who’s Maureen?”

“She’s an ally,” Cas responded petulantly. “If we’re doing this, we need more allies.”

The light of humor disappeared from Bobby’s eyes as if it had never been. “Yes, we do.”

“Can I rely on you, Bobby? Do we understand each other? Are you mine? I’ll make a clearer statement if I have to, but you understand why I’d prefer not to do that. I owe you a great deal.”

A threat couched in careful words didn’t fly over Bobby’s head. He was as wolf as Castiel, and he knew what Cas meant.

“I’m with you, Alpha,” Bobby told him seriously, a mercy to them both. Would that his simple affirmation would hold when the chips were down and Cas took a higher path than Bobby thought was necessary. But those were conflicts for another day. For now, it was enough.
Bobby’s little two-seater disappeared into the night, and the man who made his way back home with the sunrise without a pistol on his person, back to his wounded brother, was not the man who had left the day before.

Gabriel noticed.

Only Gabriel noticed.

NOW:

Cas stood in the doorway watching his mate disappear into her father’s embrace, a solid balance finding resolution inside her psyche that Cas felt snap into place. She hadn’t seen her folks for six long months, and Cas kicked himself internally, vowing not to let it go so long again. April released her father reluctantly only to dive headlong into a hug with her mother that melded the two Ozzies together into one swaying mass of blonde hair and tears. Castiel stepped forward from the doorway of the Anderson’s tidy middle-class suburban home with his right hand extended.

“Reggie. It’s good to see you again.”

“Castiel.”

The greeting between alphas stuck on formality again, as it had done the last time Cas met the couple for a quick impromptu dinner in Oklahoma City on the night after his grilling with the FBI over the mysterious explosion of a Lupin resources facility that was in direct competition with Castiel’s. Formal and stilted their handshake was, but at least Castiel was invited in. Reggie shook his hand firmly and even clapped a hand to his bicep in greeting, but the man turned back toward his daughter, dismissing the Alpha promptly. This wasn’t really a visit about Cas. He had eyes only for April.

Castiel wasn’t offended.

Kathleen Anderson hugged her daughter as if she’d feared never to see her again, and April clung on just as tightly to her mom. Cas studied his shoes. He had nearly cancelled this part of their weekend trip, utterly out of the way as it was, and a mere stopover in the middle of the night that meant none of them were likely to sleep more than an hour or two before April and Cas had to leave again for the airport at four a.m. He’d thought it might prove too selfish a plan to be reasonable. Surely, he’d argued, April’s parents would rather wait one more week when they were scheduled to arrive into Lawrence early to help with the wedding preparations. Surely, asking them to sit up all night for a squeaked-in visit of only a few hours when they should be sleeping was a bad idea, an inconvenience. But April insisted. And here they were, and by the looks of it, none too soon at that. Kathleen was weeping, and April was more than a little misty.

The two pulled apart at last, and Kathleen turned her radiant smile on Castiel. She, at least, didn’t cling to formality, pulling the man into a tight embrace and thanking him for bringing her daughter home. Castiel hugged her carefully, mindful of the alpha at his back, scentsing the air for signs of discomfort. But Reggie seemed copacetic with the handling of his mate, and Kathleen soon had Castiel and April both tucked in at the kitchen table with drinks before them: a beer for Cas and a hot cup of tea for April. She rummaged through the refrigerator and began pulling food out to work it into a late meal of epic proportions.
“Please don’t go to any trouble, Omega Anderson,” Cas fretted. “We’ve eaten, I promise.”

“It’s no trouble,” she insisted. “And won’t you please call me Kathleen? Would you rather have dessert? I can whip up a batch of cookies or a cake in no time. Pineapple upside-down is my specialty. It won’t take me twenty minutes.” Her hands never stopped moving, and April giggled into her tea, shooting Cas a look.

Reginald stood his ground in the doorway, frowning. Castiel turned his eyes from his mate to her father with a frown of his own. Something was eating the man, and he wouldn’t settle until he’d said it. Cas was moments away from breaking the ice, but Reggie did it for him.

“She’s not pregnant,” he said stiffly. “Kat said you two were stopping by to give us the news in person, but she’s not pregnant.”

“I never said that,” Kathleen defended. “I only said that it might be news that brought them down in person.”

Castiel straightened. “No, alpha. Not yet. Soon, we hope. Next cycle, maybe.” He reached for April’s hand. “We hope, anyway. We’re ready to try.”

Reggie’s eyes narrowed as Cas attempted to breathe through the painful tightening in his gut without showing anything on his face. He took another drink and looked to his mate.

“You’re feeling the grip of the clock counting down,” April’s father told him confidently. “It’s way past time you got serious about it, and instead, you fooled around, putting everything else first, and putting my daughter through pain she don’t need.”

Castiel growled softly. “When we choose to have children is no one’s concern but ours, alpha. That’s not why we’re here.”

“Why are you here?”

“April misses you both. She’s bonded to you, Reginald, that much is clear. She needed to see you. It’s been much too long.”

“I never bonded my daughter…” Reggie stated loudly, defensively.

“You never Claimed her,” Cas disagreed. “Although you probably should’ve. But you two are closely bonded, and she needs both of you. I apologize for imposing on you so late at night, but it was either this or put it off until next week when we’re swamped with well-wishers from all over hell and gone. I don’t know how much time we’ll have to spend with you both before the wedding. And April insisted…”

“It’s fine!” Kathleen put in, an attempt to break the tension between two alphas who both felt ownership over the young lady sipping her tea. “We understand you’re both busy. You just drop on in whenever you can. Right, Reg?”

“Hmm,” Reggie responded, still looking at Castiel.

“Alpha,” Kathleen pleaded. “You’ll scare them off, and they won’t come back to visit.” There was anguish in her voice. Reggie shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

“Don’t be silly, Mama,” April told her. “Daddy’s just worried, and Cas is being a stereotypical mate. Let them be alphas for a minute. They’ll work it out. God, it’s good to be back home. Everything is just the same!”
Cas huffed a laugh, and Reggie grunted, but he finally joined them at the table. Kathleen set a mug of tea in front of him. “So? Dessert? What’ll it be?”

“It’s not a restaurant, Kathleen,” Reggie grumbled. “It’s one in the morning. They don’t want cake.”

“I’m dying for one of your pineapple cakes, Mama,” April dissented. “I wanna sit up all night and eat cake and talk. I miss you so much!”

Kathleen patted her hand. “Coming right up, baby girl.”

“Thanks, Mama.”

The affection was palpable, and it broke the tension between the posturing alphas. Cas scooted his chair over a little and tossed an arm around April’s shoulders. She let her head fall softly to his shoulder, and she breathed in the mingled scent of birth pack and mate, and she sighed happily.

“It’s good to have you home, punkin,” Reggie noted. “Even if it means you have to put up with your ol’ man being an alpha brute for a bit. I’m concerned is all. You smell ready, and I’ve seen what it does to folks who try to postpone things when they get ripe like that. I don’t want you hurting.” His face was austere as he spoke. “I don’t ever want you hurting.”

“I’m fine, Daddy. We know. We’re not putting it off. Maybe, next time we visit we’ll have good news to share. We just had to get all the ducks in a row. There’s a lot to think about what with Cas’ career and mine.”

“Your career?” Reggie asked, perplexed, sitting forward. “What career?”

“I told you, Hon,” Kathleen said airily from the kitchen. “She’s working with a composer in New York. She’s going to be a star one day.”

“Nonsense,” the alpha muttered. “She needs to focus on raising a family.” He shot a firm look toward Castiel, but didn’t get the support he expected from the man. Cas sat sanguine, sipping his beer, a reflective expression on his face. “Is that true? You’re letting her waste her time with musicians?”

Cas glanced at Kathleen and smirked. “No, I’m not.”

April giggled.

“I told you, Hon,” Kathleen said airily from the kitchen. “She’s working with a composer in New York. She’s going to be a star one day.”

“Nonsense,” the alpha muttered. “She needs to focus on raising a family.” He shot a firm look toward Castiel, but didn’t get the support he expected from the man. Cas sat sanguine, sipping his beer, a reflective expression on his face. “Is that true? You’re letting her waste her time with musicians?”

Cas glanced at Kathleen and smirked. “No, I’m not.”

April giggled.

“I’m missing something,” Reggie grumped.

“I’m not letting her waste her time,” Cas clarified. “I’m permitting my Ozzie mate to develop her career however she decides is appropriate. She’s a brilliant musician in her own right, which I’m sure you’re aware, and she wants to engage herself in a career in the music industry. It’s what April wants.” April could feel Cas nudging her from the inside to speak up for herself, but she snuggled down to rest against his chest and remained silent. He tightened his arm around her, and let her be. He could run this gauntlet for her this time. It’s what alpha mates were for.

“What she wants? What about what she needs? She’s Ozzie! She can’t…”

“I’ll stop you right there, Reginald,” Cas interrupted. “You’re in no position to decide what she can or can’t accomplish. I must insist that we set some clear boundaries where April is concerned, you and I. Her life choices were once yours to manage, and I commend you for a fine job. But the circumstances have changed. She is not yours any longer, not as she once was. She’s mine, and I defend what’s mine. Pray, stay clear of my territory, and I’ll offer you the same consideration. Stray
too far across that line, and I’ll be compelled to respond forcefully.” The red in Castiel’s eyes spoke more than his words did, and the weaker alpha pulled back. His breath shallowed, and his pupils tightened. In less clear circumstances, Castiel’s words could have sparked a confrontation, but Reginald was a man of instinct, and he knew where the lines of ownership were. He bowed his head slowly.

“Oh, NO!” cried Kathleen from the pantry. All three heads whipped around. “We’re out of baking powder! Completely out. I can’t make a cake without it…”

“I’ll go,” Castiel said at once, standing up. “Is there a 24-hour grocery store close?”

April stood too. “It’s not far. Daddy, can we take your car? It’ll be quicker if I show him.”

“Mm,” Reggie answered without much commitment behind it. “You know where the keys are.”

They were halfway to the store before either of them spoke, April sending Cas directions through their bond rather than break the tense silence, no more than a sensation of a tap to his right arm for a right turn or his left arm for a left turn. He followed her guidance silently, his mouth set in a stiff line.

“Was that really necessary?” she asked him as they approached the store, it’s parking lot all but empty and lit up from above.

“You should already understand that it was,” he told her tersely. “I know he’s your father, but he needs to back off. You don’t deserve to be put between the two of us, but you’re mine now, not his. I won’t apologize.”

“He means well,” she said.

“He’s wrong,” Castiel countered.

“Did you bring me here so you could plant your flag in my chest and chant a victory song over my conquered body?” she asked him pointedly.

He turned to gape at her for a moment in shock. “What? No! Of course not.”

“Then why are we here? We’re going to see them both in a week anyway. It’s the middle of the night. Where’s your worry that I won’t get enough sleep? Where’s your decisive Alpha protectiveness? Why did you leave it up to me whether we drop in or not?”

Cas pulled into the brightly lit lot and parked in a space near the door. He put the car in park. “I wanted a chance to explain my marriage to Dean face-to-face. I owe them that.”

April blinked in surprise. “How do you figure? How is that any of their business?”

“It just is,” he told her stubbornly.

“You drew a line in the sand just now over my career; told him to keep his damn nose in his own business. Your marriage doesn’t concern my Dad any more than my career does.”

“April…”

“You don’t owe them an explanation, Cas.”

He sighed. “Let’s just get the baking soda and get back. Can we do that?”

“Powder,” she corrected. “Baking soda and baking powder aren’t the same thing.”
He met her as she rounded the car, and he kissed her knuckles when she slipped her hand into his.
“What would I do without you?”

Castiel rummaged along the shelves for baking goods, inspecting the boxes and cans, looking to see if there were any differences between brands to account for the differences in price. Chemically, they should all be the same, right? Maybe the higher end brand was more pure? He squinted at the label as he searched for evidence of a benefit of one over the other. Behind him, he felt April go stiff, and he sensed her shock through their Mating-bond. Castiel’s head popped up. He dropped the red can to the floor and shoved her behind him without a thought, searching the end of the row for a threat to match her shock.

A young man blinked back at him, a slight frown tying his brows together.

“April?”

“Nate,” said April from over Castiel’s shoulder, and he spun back around.

“Nate?” asked Cas. He looked around again, taking in the youth, barely more than a teenager, a grocery-store apron tied over his clothes, a cart of prepackaged cheeses before him at the end of the aisle. Cas looked the boy over, evaluating his mettle and his strength. He couldn’t scent him from here – there were twenty feet of space between them – but he didn’t need the scent to get the measure of the young alpha. “That’s your Nate?” he asked his mate. She met his eye and nodded. She looked spooked.

“Jesus, what next?” he muttered, uncharacteristically pessimistic. Gathering himself, Cas spun on his heel and approached the man, his hand out in greeting.

“Nate, is it? I’m Castiel. It’s good to meet a friend of April’s.”

“Kitten, what are you doing here?” Nate asked her, ignoring the Alpha. He was pale.

“Kitten?” asked Cas in surprise, looking back to April with his hand still awkwardly before him.

She sputtered, her eyes flicking rapidly between the two men, trying to answer them both at once. Nate saved her. “Oh, shit, I’m sorry, Alpha. I shouldn’t have said that. It slipped out. Jesus Christ, what on earth are you doing here?”

“We’re in town visiting April’s parents,” Cas told him smoothly, dropping his hand.

“Right,” said the youth, eyeing the can of powder that had rolled to a stop against the baseboard, as if a middle-of-the-night excursion for baking powder was a part of every familial gathering.

“Nate, why are you still in town?” April asked him, taking in his apron. “What happened to college?”

“I leave tomorrow,” he told her. “This is my last shift, actually. Had to earn a few bucks this summer to make up the difference in tuition. I got a good scholarship, did I tell you? It covers most of the bill, but there’s a gap, and I wanna pay for what I can in cash. Student loans are killer. I don’t want…” He stopped, flushed, and took a half step backward. “I’m sorry. I should get back to work.”

“Where are you going? For school, I mean,” April asked, stepping clear of her mate and approaching Nate. He blushed hard.
“I’m moving to College Station, down in Texas? I got in to study engineering, just like I wanted. Like I planned.”

April beamed. “I knew you would! I’m so proud of you!”

“Yeah, thanks. It’s a little different now that I’m not planning for two. Easier.” Nate’s discomfort leaked from his body and his eyes. He looked to Castiel, standing stoic by the endcap of the aisle, measuring him. There was an awkward few moments. April seemed at a loss for words, and then she pulled her eyes from her ex and pulled Cas closer by his arm.

“Nate, this is Cas.”

“Um, yeah. Yes. I know. It’s…it’s an honor to meet you, Sir.”

“And you, Nathaniel,” Castiel said pompously with a nod. He didn’t offer his hand again. Instead, he placed his palm over April’s hand on his arm. “My mate has told me bits and pieces of her life here in Oklahoma before we met. She speaks fondly of you. I didn’t know you had a nickname for her. That’s a bit of a surprise.”

“Cas…” April chided quietly.

Nate’s eyes danced between them, looking for meaning. It wasn’t hard to suss it out. He took another small step back and lowered his eyes. “I apologize,” he repeated. “It was a surprise to see her here. That’s all.”

“I quite understand,” said the Alpha stiffly. “I would appreciate your restraint in the future. I’m certain you understand.”

“Yes, Sir. Of course.”

“Oh, good grief!” sputtered April. She lunged forward and pulled Nate into a tight hug that he didn’t return. His terrified eyes never left Castiel’s. Cas didn’t thaw. He glared.

Nate pulled away as quickly as he could, and he put a quick three yards distance between them. “It was really good to meet you, Sir. I’m glad April’s happy. That’s all that really matters anyway, right? Right. April, I’ll, uh, see you around.”

“Nate, wait. Maybe we can…”

But he was gone. He’d left the cheese cart blocking most of the aisle, and disappeared into the back.

April rounded on Cas. “Don’t tell me it was necessary that time,” she shot. “Would you like to mount me right here to make sure he got the message?”

“He called you ‘Kitten’.”

She shook her head at him. “It wasn’t the same meaning at all, Cas. I can’t believe you’re jealous. Can we please go?”

“Watch your tone,” he told her sternly. “I am not pleased with you at all right now. I suggest you don’t make things worse.”

“Not pleased…? What’d I do?”

He advanced on her until he was hulking over her bodily. He whispered furiously. “You never told me that your ex-boyfriend, whom you nearly Mated, used the same affectionate nickname! How do
you suppose that makes me feel, Omega? I’ll tell you. It’s humiliating. Do you expect me ever to use that name again?”

“You’re making a big deal about nothing,” she protested weakly.

“On your knees, Omega.”

“Here?”

“Right fucking now.”

She slipped gracefully downward until she was kneeling before him. “Sir, please. It was an honest oversight. I never meant for you to feel humiliated. You chose the perfect name for me, and I adore it. It doesn’t mean to you and me what it meant to Nate.”

“Don’t say his name,” Cas snarled at her.

“Alpha, please…”

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said. “We’re going to buy the baking powder your mother needs. We’re going to drive your father’s car back to your parents’ house. You’re going to go straight to your bedroom and stay there until I join you. I’m going to spank you until I feel that I’ve expressed myself suitably, and then we’re going to enjoy the cake your mother is making for us. Do you have any questions?”

“You’re going to spank me where my parents can hear?” she asked softly.

“Would you rather I did it in the living room where they would be compelled to watch?”

“Alpha, please!”

“Sir, is there a problem?”

Cas turned stoically to face the woman who appeared to be a store manager with one brow lifted. “The young stock boy who just left his cheeses here,” Cas posed to her. “His name is Nate, I believe?”

“Yes, Alpha,” said the aging woman carefully. “Has he offended you or your mate?” The woman eyed April. She knew her. That meant she knew who Castiel was. Small towns had that in their favor. Everyone knew everyone.

“No, of course not,” Castiel answered. “I wonder if you are familiar enough with his circumstances to be aware of how short he currently falls in his tuition? How much does he need to cover the difference between his scholarship and his full bill?”

“Cas…” April tried again, but her mate didn’t respond.

“I, um, I could find out,” the manager said. “His mother – the younger one – and I are friends.”

“Good. Do that, please. Here is my card. It would please me to fund the remainder of his tuition bill. If you will send the details to me, I’ll see to it. You may discuss the gift with his parents, but I would prefer to remain anonymous to the young man himself. Please inform his mothers that this isn’t an act of charity. It is a gift.”

“It’s a buy-out,” grumbled April to herself, her head bowed. Castiel heard her, but he didn’t think the manager had, so he didn’t respond. He would respond soon enough. The manager took the card and
nodded. She cast one more look at April, whose cheeks were bright with anger, and she left the pair to one another.

“On your feet. Pick up the can, and let’s go.”

“Yessir.”

They were silent on the drive home, each thinking about the ridiculous circumstance that put April’s only ex inside the only building in Lawrence other than her home that they would enter on their brief stay here. What were the odds?

He had looked thinner to April. He looked pale. That could be his state of health, but it could be the lighting or the condition of having Castiel laser beaming a glare directly into his brain. They weren’t even friends anymore. She hadn’t contacted him once since their grand falling out with all its shouting and ferocity and words that neither could ever take back. He’d tried pathetically to resume a friendship after the fact, but only once, and without much heart to it. He had to have known she wouldn’t answer. And he was going out of state for school. That’s something he had flat refused to consider while they were a couple. It was too expensive and too far from their parents, too far from support they expected to need as a young Mated couple.

April sighed heavily. She looked out the window. Her mate was angry in a way that he would use to foster a strengthening of their bond. She could feel him gathering himself to throw down fiercely. She could feel him even from without, merely from the tension in the car. April found the tension erotic. She felt her wolf respond and take her body with it. But April was mad, too. How dare he call her down for keeping a part of her prior life private? He owned who she was now, but he didn’t own her past.

April slammed the car door closed once it halted in the carport. She slammed the garage door before he even made it out of the car. She left the baking powder on the seat and disappeared into the house in a huff. Castiel followed more slowly.

“What the…?” asked Reggie from the kitchen. “What’s eating her?”

“Excuse us for a few moments, alpha,” Cas said, handing him the little red can they’d purchased from the grocery store without stopping to look at him. “I need to see to something. We won’t be long.” Cas inhaled deeply and stalked down the short hall to the room at the back where April had grown up and come of age.

He closed the door behind him with a click. He moved slowly. April eyed him warily. She wasn’t on her knees as she should’ve been. She sat upright on her bed, leaning against the wooden headboard, her ankles crossed, her arms crossed over her chest, her breath heaving. His face was flat, emotionless if you didn’t know what to look for. He crossed his own arms over his chest and leaned back against the door he’d just closed, silently watching her pout. For she was pouting, damnit. She realized too late that her face had taken her Tertiary, not Secondary, and altering that now would only draw attention to it. She looked away.

“No, you don’t,” he corrected. “Look at me.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” she insisted. “This isn’t fair.”

“Is that so?”

She sniffled miserably and tucked her feet beneath her, sitting up and leaning forward. “I didn’t keep
that name from you on purpose. I had no way of knowing you and Nate would ever meet each other, and I damn sure couldn’t have predicted he would call me that.”

“So I was never supposed to find out that every time I call you Kitten, you hear two of us…”

“That’s not true!”

“Do NOT interrupt me!” he thundered, stepping closer.

She buried her face in her hands. “You hear two of us,” he went on reasonably. “Overlapping each other; his voice forever beneath mine. All it would have taken would have been a word in my ear, and I would have found an alternate nickname, one that doesn’t evoke a pimple-faced child.”

“Alpha, I like my nickname. I don’t want a different one. I don’t hear him when you talk to me. I only hear you. Since we first met, it’s only been you.”

“That’s not quite true, but I don’t intend to go there this evening.”

“I want to be your Kitten. Alpha, please don’t change it. It was never sexual with him. It was something he called me out of friendship. It’s not the same.”

He studied her. Something about this encounter was off, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. April wanted, needed his firm hand. She’d been subtly pushing for it since they arrived, and it wasn’t simply lack of sleep. She seemed genuinely alarmed that she might lose something of value. Was it the nickname, or was it the innocence of her childhood home?

She misread his stillness, taking it for a patience in waiting for her to fulfill her responsibility to him. Slowly, as he studied her from the inside, she slipped off the bed, drew her dress over her head and knelt naked upon the floor. Her blue eyes held his.

“We were destined to do this here tonight, weren’t we, Alpha? From the very beginning?”

“Yes, it seems that way. Kitten.”

She gasped in a relieved breath and her eyes overflowed. He caressed the reassurance his use of her name sent through her bond, holding it with care, holding her with care. “Present over the bed for me.”

She didn’t answer, but she scrambled to comply. His anger had been real, but it wasn’t about Nate at all. It wasn’t about a name. Her outrage, too, had been real, but it was gone now. They had found the settling place in their heads, and they moved as a single unit. His face wrinkled itself into a tight, livid frown as he landed blow after blow onto her supple upturned backside. He let all the tension flow downward through his arm, and he turned her flesh bright red.

April didn’t cry out, but the sounds of her punishment were loud enough to echo down the hall and into the kitchen. There weren’t any sound-proof rooms in this modest house. She clutched at the bedspread, the same one she’d used most of her life, a simple floral design that had seen her through from childhood into adolescence, a thick, comfortable span of warmth and comfort that she’d tucked Nate beneath as she and he explored each other’s bodies, making out, feeling out one base after another without ever striving for home plate.

Castiel drove him out, scoring the bedspread with new memories and vanquishing the ghosts of the past. Vanquished too, were the medial, insufficient, half-hearted efforts of her father over the years, not nearly powerful enough to balance an Ozzie like April. Castiel’s hand crashed down again and again in a pattern they both knew well by now, but one that had April’s parents both stiff and silent
in the hall entrance. Neither brave enough to interrupt, but both alarmed at the sound.

Castiel braced her with his left hand on her back, and he showed her no mercy – not from the unfairness of life that meant she paid for his upsets, not from the quite justifiable inequity that she shouldn’t owe him an explanation for her past, not from the embarrassment of having her ass whacked like a child in full hearing of both of her parents. If Cas could have dragged Nate here and made him sit front and center to witness, he would’ve done so. Castiel drove it all out with brute force, paving the way for a new path, one that he marked in hot, red skin from right now to forever. This room wasn’t April’s childhood bedroom anymore. It was the room she kicked and writhed in while he held her in place and walloped the tar out of her – because he could, because he had all the power, and he chose to prove it. To April. To Reggie. To Kathleen. Even to Nate. Mostly, to himself.

His mate.

Not theirs.

God in heaven it felt good and right and proper and powerful.

She would bruise again.

He spent himself upon her flesh, spent his passion and his ire. He panted as he pulled to a stop, falling to sit beside her, sweating.

She’d gone lax and still, her muscles slack, her eyes dry. She turned to look at him. Blinking peacefully. He blew out a long breath and looked her in the eye. He tumbled back to lay beside her. He reached a hand out and tucked her hair behind her ear.

“No tears,” he observed, caressing the space below her eye, and she smiled softly.

“No.”

“My good girl,” he whispered.

“Yours, Alpha.”

His eyelids fluttered in very real, tangible pleasure, like a mini-orgasm that had nothing to do with his genitals at all. In fact, he hadn’t so much as thickened through the ordeal, a very new experience for the Alpha whose wolf found a sexual thrill in every expression of power.

“Looks like we both needed that.”

She nodded. Her ass throbbed. Her heartbeat slowed back down slowly, and she could feel it in the curve of her butt.

“Is he gone now?” Cas asked her vaguely. But April knew whom he meant. Nate. Somehow, he’d been lurking back there all these months, looking for a way out, for closure. She nodded again.

“I think so.”

“You think so?” he asked with an amused twinkle, lifting his head in surprise and fixing her with a look that offered more where that had come from. April chuckled gently.

“Yes, Alpha. I think so. I know what to watch for now. I’ll let you know if I see it again.”

He hauled himself up. “No need, Kitten. I’ll be watching as well. Come on. Up you go. Let’s go
back out and let your folks know you’re not dead.”

She laughed and then groaned as he helped her turn over. She stumbled a little, but he caught her. He dressed her, smoothing out her dress and getting it situated on her shoulders. He stopped her at the doorway, halting her hand on the knob and looming up close behind her. His mouth warmed the air at her ear, and she shivered.

“I love you desperately, little Kitten,” he whispered. “Come help me explain that to your parents. They don’t understand.”

She leaned backward into him. “They will. Just be yourself, and they will.”

No one slept that night. The hall was empty when the mates emerged. In the kitchen, two fresh hot cups of tea sat ready for them, and the cake was already in the oven. The tension between the alphas, so palpable before, was completely gone as Castiel helped his mate into her chair with a kiss to her temple. They chatted amiably. All of them. There was laughter, the kind of laughter that spoke of home, and Castiel’s fit in with the others as if he’d been there all along. In a way, he always had been.

Cas talked about his fiancé and about how his marriage to Dean was an addition to his Mating with April, not a detraction, about how desperately he needed them both, about how desperately April and Dean needed each other, about how seamless they were growing in their ties to one another. He confessed that Michael had been an unexpected rival for April’s affections, and that they were committed to honesty and fairness among the four of them. Kathleen tutted judgmentally at April, whether in disapproval that her daughter had allowed her eyes to stray from her mate or in dislike of hearing about it first from Castiel himself, Cas didn’t know, but he covered April’s hand and stood up for her. It wasn’t about right or wrong, he explained. It was only ever about love, and where there was love, they could make it work.

April flipped her hand over beneath his and laced their fingers.

Reginald nodded to himself, his eyes on the table before him, his plate down to nothing but crumbs of moist cake. He hadn’t done a lot of talking. Mostly, he listened. Whatever he’d been listening for, it seemed he found it somewhere along the way.

He only nodded again as Castiel explained to him that if April was to keep her connection to her father, one that they both valued immensely, that one day in the not-too-distant future, Reggie would need to place a Claim on his daughter. The alpha greyed a bit, but he didn’t protest the assertion, and Castiel chose to leave it there, to let it percolate. It was a difficult message to absorb for a man who worshipped his daughter for what she represented more than for who she was.

Cas knew she would never be permitted to visit home without her mate until that Claim solidified, and he knew he wouldn’t always be free to come with her. The great pendulum of the world was swinging back again, and everything was changing – changing for the better, but not always changing in a way that was comfortable. Some people would find the changes supremely hard to swallow.

All too soon, they gathered their luggage from the entrance hall and loaded it into the car. Reggie
drove them to the airport, to the same terminal a cab had picked them up from only hours earlier. Hugs all around, and a sniffling mother hiding her eyes as she bade her daughter goodbye again, a firm handshake on the curb, and then they were gone.

Cas took April by the hand and led her into the airport. Castiel always flew coach. And yet, he and his mate were soon bundled into a private car and zipping out onto the tarmac where a jet sat waiting for the two of them. Their luggage disappeared into the belly, and Cas handed his mate up the gangway steps and into the tiny jet ahead of him.

He caught her amusement, and he pinched her ass in retaliation, but she only yiped, dodged, and laughed harder before looking around and marveling at the luxury.

“Don’t waste your time trying to see it all,” he told her. “None of this matters because you, young lady, are going to stretch out and go straight to sleep. Right here. Right now. Shoes off. I’ve got a blanket and a pillow, and the seat lays out flat.”

“Aw, Alpha,” she moaned, peeking into a cupboard and flipping a couple of switches to see what they did. One brought a screen down at the front of the cabin and the other covered the window by her head.

“Sleep, April. Now. I will lay down with you. Come here.”

“Can’t I wait until we take off?”

“We’re taking off right now. Get your seatbelt on.”

“Yes, Alpha.” April beamed at him and patted the seat beside her. He kissed her lips and then disappeared into the cockpit, returning with a satisfied expression and settling in next to his mate. The powerful engines boosted them forward. Cas and April watched the earth fall away beneath them, Cas helped her flatten the seat until she could lie down, and then he joined her. Soon, they were both asleep as the jet winged swiftly toward New York.

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Dean’s tuxedo still fit him perfectly, much to Michael’s pleasure and envy. Michael’s needed nearly catastrophic altering. It very nearly didn’t work without scrapping it and getting him a maternity suit. Michael ogled his mate as Dean stood before the mirror and let Kali look him over. She kept flinching toward one spot or another as if to pin or mark it, then pausing, tugging, and stepping back with a tilt to her head. In the end, she left it alone. Michael flushed with pleasure at the form Dean cut.

“Knock it off,” Kali told him sternly, cutting his view of his mate off. Michael jumped.

“What?”

“You’re not fucking until the clothes are packed away. I’m not going to have them cleaned and repaired this close to the event. It’s too much of a risk that something might go wrong.”

Dean snickered. “You tell him, beta.”

“Go change, Dean. Yours is fine. Leave it with me and get out of here and let me work.”
“Leave it here? Why am I not taking it home with me?”

She looked at him as if he’d forgotten PEMDAS, and hers was the only brain left in the room. “Because wedding parties *always* forget shit and guess who gets to go dashing out to find a last minute replacement? You’re not in charge of bringing *anything* with you to the wedding, alpha, except your own ass and your mate’s; not the clothes, not the rings, not the vows, nothing.”

“Don’t you trust me?” he teased, easing his vest off his shoulders and into her waiting hands.

“Not an inch,” she replied calmly.

“What about my plug?” he persisted. “Are you taking custody of that too?”

She paused, her hand out for his pants but not taking them when he held them out. “You’re wearing a plug?” she asked.

“Uh, seemed like a good idea,” he answered awkwardly. “Why? Bad idea?”

“You’re not supposed to enter a Shareer ka Daava ceremony pre-prepped.” Kali took his pants and hung them with care. Michael watched them both, interested. Dean scratched his face and glanced at Michael.

“Well, yeah, I know. I mean, ordinarily, yeah. But I’m not Omega, and if we tried it without any prep, it could get real messy real fast. I planned to have a plug worked in and some lube already in place when I walk in.”

Kali stared at him, her eyes narrowed. “You’re going to walk down the aisle at your own wedding with lube dripping out of your ass? You’re going to stand there in front of the Universe and everybody and say your vows while you’re wearing a butt plug?”

Dean blushed a little. “I mean, you got any other suggestions? I could take the plug out before I walk, but that leaves the lube leaking all over the red runners on the floor. That’s not a pretty picture to me. Unless you think I should wash the lube out too, you know, just before the wedding starts. Course, that means that Cas needs to have a tube of it in his pocket.”

Michael snickered, tried to stifle it, then snorted into his hand. Kali laughed too.

“God, Dean. You and your crazy ideas. This ceremony is going to be a laughingstock. My career is over.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” he told her, setting his backbone back into place. “It’s gonna be epic. And I can’t think of better way to get hitched than with a size eight shoved up my rectum.”

Michael burst out laughing, doubling over his own knees where he sat on the viewing couch in Kali’s workshop. Kali eyed him askance, a look of frustration on her face. “You two are morons,” she decided.

“Just the two of us?” Dean teased, standing in his socks and garters and his silk boxers. “What about Cas? It’s his shindig too.”

“Give me everything you’re wearing,” she reminded him. “Socks, underwear, garters, all of it. You’re not going to ruin the biggest day of my career by forgetting your underwear.”

Dean stripped naked and hopped down off the pedestal, going for his street clothes. “Be sure and wash those silks,” he said. “I think Michael’s flatulence is contagious.”
“That’s disgusting, Dean.” Kali held the pair of boxers he’d tossed to her on the end of a pencil and dropped them with distaste into a basket at her feet along with the socks that he’d worn for no more than fifteen minutes.

“We’ll go over this in detail at the rehearsal,” she said. “But I want you at the venue, ready to dress at ten a.m. Your robe will be waiting for you in the dressing room before the ceremony, and your tux will be ready for you to change into after the wedding. Eat lightly before you come, but EAT. You hear me? I’ll not have you pass out at the altar in something I created. People are watching, important people.”

“Yeah, like Cas,” said Dean happily. “And Michael.” He stooped to kiss Michael’s lips, still naked.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Relax, Kali. We still have two weeks. You’re going to say all of this again and again between now and then. I get it. This is a big day for your career. I won’t let you down, I swear.” Dean swept up his street clothes from the pile on the counter and shook them out to find his boxer-briefs.

Kali made a face. “Dean, look. It’s your wedding. I know that. I’m not trying to eclipse you. It’s just that…the wedding industry…it’s an industry, you see, and that means that even though it’s your big day, and it’s all about you, in the background of all that, it means a great deal to me in a totally different way. This is my livelihood at stake. I can’t afford to be blasé about it when people who can make or break my reputation are honed in on this event like it’s the biggest job interview of my life.”

Dean, dressed now in underwear and a t-shirt, walked slowly across the room to take her face in his hands and kiss her on the tip of her nose. “I hear you, Kali. I won’t let you down.” He winked playfully, but his eyes said he meant it. She nodded, touched by his sincerity, and she hugged him impulsively.


“I have no need of an alpha, Michael,” she said as she let Dean go to finish dressing. “I have everything I need waiting for me at home.”

Michael sat forward on the couch, moving up to the edge and fixing her with a canny eye. “About that,” he said, pinning her in place with his gaze. “You know I do all the ordering for the household, right? Consumables and stuff, all that boring shit?”

“And?” she asked, breaking his eye and needlessly straightening Dean’s tuxedo again.

“Your husband has been on birth control most of his life. Orders it through the family account at the pharmacy we all use. You know his prescription is overdue? By three weeks? I only know because it goes across my desk, and when the auto-renewal was cancelled, the pharmacy called the number on the account, not the patient. They called me, Kali. Something you wanna tell us?”

“It’s none of your business,” she stated firmly. “It’s between Gabriel, his doctor, and his wife. Most likely, he simply forgot. He’s been busy.”

Michael shook his head. “Try again. It automatically renews. If it needs a doctor’s approval, they go through Castiel. Someone stopped it on purpose three weeks ago.”

“Still none of your business.”

Dean, standing close to Kali as he dressed, took one step closer and buried his nose in her throat. “Damn, kiddo. You’re fertile too.” A huge grin broke out on his face, and he lifted her up with both
arms around her lower back, spinning her happily. “This is gonna be so great! Puppies as far as the eye can see!”

“Put me down, you imbecile! Dean, stop it! Put me down!” She beat at him with her hands until he slowed and lowered her back down.

“Tell me it’s true. You two are making puppy plans?”

Kali sighed. “Not plans, exactly. We’re considering our options. Gabriel still has a long way to go before he’s truly ready for a step this big. We need to be clear of the drugs before we can be tested for viability. That’s all this first step is about. It doesn’t mean we’re going there, just that we’re checking to see if we can. He’s pretty scarred, fellas, both physically and emotionally. Please don’t make a big deal about it. Please? Dean? Michael? Promise me.”

Michael stood up and faced her. His face had lost its teasing tilt. He looked her in the eyes. “Anything you need from us, Kali. Anything at all. Always.”

“You’re gonna make me cry, you big prick! Knock it off and get outta here.” She turned rapidly, seeking escape in her work. Michael nudged his mate somberly to finish dressing, and Dean followed his hint.

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Sarah had most of her belongings packed already. She had time left on her lease, but it seemed advisable to run to ground sooner rather than later. Dr. Meyer had been arrested, arrested, and charged with three counts of felony bribery and abuse of office. As a sitting professor for a public institution, his job fell under the Kansas penal code for public servants, a detail that had escaped Sarah, but not Castiel.

Dr. Winchester had assured her that she would receive sanctuary at his home just as soon as she felt ready to claim it, despite the way that might look from the outside. He’d boldly told her that he had no fear whatsoever of appearing to have played a role in the ouster of his nemesis, for he hadn’t done anything illegal. In fact, he told her that he’d already applied to the Douglas County Sheriff’s office to have her and her colleagues protected from acts of reprisal, volunteering to serve as a warden over her safety should she choose to hunker down on his property and seek asylum there.

Everything was in place. All she had to do was show up on his doorstep with her suitcase in her hand and step over the threshold. And she wanted to. Badly. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that it had all fallen together too seamlessly. It was too perfect.

Sarah sat in the middle of her bare apartment on top of her suitcase, turning her plane ticket over and over in her hand. It had taken a lot of thinking to determine whom she should approach. She didn’t want to destroy his trust in her altogether, but she couldn’t simply take him at face value either. His callous hamstringing of Karl Meyer spoke of a cold, brutal, surgical, possibly psychopathic ability to ruthlessly cut down anyone in his way. If he could do that to Karl Meyer, what else was he capable of? What else would he do if he felt something important to him was threatened? His Pack? His work? Where did the man draw his lines?

Did she dare throw in her lot with a man like that? Just for a research paper?

Did she dare sit on the sidelines when the movement was ready to explode all around her?
She needed the council of someone above it all, someone who knew him. *Really* knew him. But would anyone in his inner circle tell her the truth?

In the end, she went with her gut. She’d been assigned to Jim Murphy as her faculty advisor. Dr. Murphy had a pristine – a hallowed – reputation, and he was known the world over. Search as she might, Sarah couldn’t find anyone who had anything negative to say about him. A quick trip out to Massachusetts wouldn’t be odd. He was her advisor, after all. What’s more, the man had known Castiel since they were both boys. That didn’t bode well for digging up dirt if dirt there was to dig, but it might help her to get underneath her reticence to trust the man whose home she was supposed to be moving into. Surely, if Pastor Jim trusted Castiel, there was a reason. Surely. But she just couldn’t let it go without digging.

He had a dark side. Sarah could feel it.

She needed to look into those shadows and see for herself what drove him. She had to know.

Sarah stood up, collected her suitcase, tucked her ticket into an outer pocket, and headed toward the door. Just as she reached for the doorknob, there was a loud knock. Sarah jumped. She opened it immediately without thinking, cursing herself for a fool as soon as she felt her hand turn. What good was it to seek asylum from reprisals if she didn’t even check the peephole on her own door?

But it was Gabriel Novak, not a stooge of Dr. Meyer’s.

He stood leaning against the doorjamb with a lollipop in his mouth. He smirked at her. “Kinda jumpy there, are you?” he asked rhetorically, taking the lollipop into a casually flirty hand. “Come on. Let’s go for a drive. There are some things you need to understand about the Alpha.” His cocky head jerk and his utter lack of evident concern piqued her curiosity. Omegas didn’t behave like this.

“I need to get to the airport,” she told him, bemused.

“No, ya don’t. I had your ticket cancelled about an hour ago. It’s useless paper now. So? Looks like you’re free after all.”

“You…? How did you know to…? Why did you do that?” She was gobsmacked.

“Sweetheart, it’s not Jim Murphy you need. It’s me. So, here I am. Grab your purse or your sweater or whatever girls ride in cars in and come on. I’ll even let you drive. It’s Michael’s car. She’s a beauty.”

“Gabriel, I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“You are if you want the real story on my baby bro and his penchant for wiping folks right off the gameboard.” He tucked his lollipop back into his mouth and smirked happily again.

“You’re insane,” she muttered.

His eyes lost their humor. “I’m aware,” he said. “But that doesn’t stop me knowing what’s what. In fact, it helps. Truth is, Cas played you badly. He’s gotten so good at pulling people’s puppet strings he forgot the golden rule: never let them see the strings. The trick is to throw in some ‘Oopsies’ here and there, so it doesn’t come off clean every time. Life never works that way for real, now does it? It’s messy. Things get fucked up. The cable guy *never* shows between the hours of seven and one. The movie theater’s A/C goes out just as the film’s starting. Shit happens. People fret. That’s life. Cas forgot to throw any banana peels in your path. That’s all. It’s a rookie mistake, but he’s learning. Now come on. I’ll even buy the burgers – or, well, Castiel is buying them, but he doesn’t know that.”
She stared at him.

“Burgers? Seriously, your tickets are jacked. Your furniture is gone. You have nowhere to go but with me.”

“This is the part of the movie where everyone watching is screaming at the girl not to get in the psychopath’s car,” she told him. “Do I look that stupid?”

“You actually don’t, but that’s kinda beside the point. And I’m not the psychopath. That would be my brother. Me, I’m just your garden variety PTSD, long-term chronic depression, and suicidal tendencies sort of crazy. Way less interesting than a real life psychopath.”

“Why would I believe anything you have to say?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. “You’re his brother. You’re loyal to him. This is just another ploy to get me in his camp.”

“Well, yeah. Duh,” he put in, taking the sucker back out of his mouth and looking very earnest. “Only, he doesn’t know I’m here. He kinda missed the memo about how you’re squeamish of joining his team seeing as how all his enemies go down in flames. How you think maybe he’s got a dark side the size of the Chrysler building, and how you don’t know if you can afford to tangle yourself up in that.”

She stared at him some more.

“I haven’t spoken to anyone…” she said. “Not anyone.”

“You bought tickets to Massachusetts. Only thing in Mass is a guy with a halo so bright we can see it from here.”

“You watched my credit cards?”

“Yup.”

“You’ve been watching me?”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “You know, all this would be great to discuss over a burger. I’m hungry. I swear I won’t kill you until after we eat. I mean, that’s why we’re still talking in the doorway, right? You’re worried I’m going to fit you for cement shoes if you blink wrong?”

“Why is all this necessary?” she asked him as if he hadn’t spoken. “Why do you sneak around like a Mob operative? Why can’t I find anything on you other than your existence and some totally useless party photos? Who are YOU, Gabriel?”

He stepped backward, raised his brows, and dangled a set of car keys from his index finger. “Gonna have to share that burger with me to find out,” he coaxed.

“Oh, for the love of… Gimme the damn keys!” She lunged for them. Gabe cackled as he let her swipe them. He followed merrily as she stalked down the hall.

He really hoped Sarah stuck around. Gabe planned to tell her nearly everything, no matter what his brother would have to say about that. Gabe was no fool. They needed Sarah, and she was seconds away from turning tail and never looking back. She couldn’t go into this mess thinking it was the
good guys against the bad guys. Or, rather, that’s exactly how she needed to see it, but she needed to have her ‘good guys / bad guys’ viewfinder recalibrated.

Calibrations were a specialty of Gabriel’s. Castiel’s, not so much.

Sometimes you had to take the bull by the horns and rip the band-aid right off.

Sarah was one of the good guys, regardless of which metaphors Gabe had to slaughter to get from here to there, and they needed her on their side. She wasn’t a child though. It was time she saw what they were up against for herself. It was time for an ape to see why the ends sometimes justified the means, even when you really, really wished they didn’t. It was time to show her what Castiel needed from her, and why.

And it was time to introduce the young researcher to his little brother, the Alpha Doctor Castiel James Novak Winchester.

There’s no way she would ever believe it from someone else.

She would believe Gabriel. People always believed Gabriel – possibly because Gabe nearly always told the truth.

How psychopathic was that?

Chapter End Notes

I promised someone more movement than I squeezed into this chapter. I'm still thinking maybe three more chapters to go. Something like that? Don't quote me. I suck at guesstimating my own verbosity. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed.

For anyone who might not have guessed before now whether Castiel ever really went there when we went dark side...yeah. He totally did. But what's an angel without a bit of devil in him? He's not that guy anymore, but he's still 'That-guy-adjacent', so make of that what you will.

Finally, no, Sarah isn't a self-insert. That would be Maureen. Sarah is way cooler than I am.

Love and hugs! Chins up, stiff upper lips, Winchesters don't cry, damnit.
Chapter 107

Chapter Summary

April, Michael, and Sarah all make strides toward the careers they want. Cas and Dean have tough choices to make.

Chapter Notes

I got super lazy at some point about noting trigger warnings. That was rude of me. Apologies.

There's a D.F. in this one, but that's the only warning I have today.

Carry on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

NOW:

Cas and April went separate ways early Friday morning. April waited patiently while Castiel signed her custody temporarily over to Nicholas’ alpha. The two alphas held a brief consultation in private, and then Castiel left her with a knee-buckling kiss and a reminder to behave as if he were with her at all times. Nick smirked, but he also assured his friend that no harm would come to April while she
was on their home turf.

“She’s fine, Alpha,” he promised. “This is my home. You think I’d let anything happen to her here?”

Cas smiled grimly. “Call me if you need anything, Kitten. I’ll drop everything and come for you. Jenn has permission to spank if it comes to that, so don’t test her. But, baby, have fun and accomplish whatever you can while you’re here. Get in there and start building yourself a network. That’s what you’re here for. This is a workday for you, not a vacation, not yet. Enjoy yourself. I’ve lifted the restrictions on what you may eat and drink. Please don’t allow yourself to become inebriated. You need your wits and your dexterity. I’ll meet you later tonight.”

April grinned and took his forearm near the elbow, cutting him off in a polite way. “I know what you expect of me,” she said conspiratorially. “I’ll be good. I’ll make you proud. See you late tonight, Alpha mine.” She leaned in for another kiss, and his lips didn’t want to let the moment go.

Castiel spent the day in meetings. He had fundraising to do. He had lobbying to accomplish, despite being in the wrong city. There were people here whose ears ran direct connections to the voting buttons in Washington D.C. Castiel had work to do and insufficient time to accomplish it all. Billie’s presence was sorely missed, but he managed without her. By the end of the day, nearly all of his goals were met except for keeping himself fed. He was starving, having worked straight through lunch. He trudged down the hall to his hotel room exhausted and ready to call it a day.

Cas showered and changed into a smart dress blazer and pressed navy slacks. Checking up on his mate found her precisely where she’d promised to be, at an exclusive party organized by Nicholas and filled with music industry insiders. Cas suppressed another frisson of fear knowing that she wasn’t where he could protect her and might at this moment be encircled by sharks. He’d been fighting those clenches all day, and it was wearing on him. He breathed through it, working his shoulders. He couldn’t protect her every second of every day, not if she was doing this. His bond told him she was fine, a little tired, a little overwhelmed, but not alarmed or threatened. His phone held a short string of check-ins, none of them disturbing. She was fine.

Still, he wasted no time in hailing a cab and making his way straight to the penthouse Nick called home. Cas wended his way through the throng, catching snippets of music emanating from several rooms at once. It was a party in appearance, but it was business; a place where offers were made and new connections were formed, where demos sought an invested ear, where ‘up-and-comers’ attempted to transition to ‘arrived’. Castiel suppressed his need to rush straight to her side. He plucked a glass of white wine off a passing tray and sauntered lazily among the ambitious and the talented. He heard his name fall quietly from strangers’ lips as he passed them without engaging, both his old name and his new, but he didn’t turn.

Let them talk. This evening was about April, not Castiel.

His Mating-bond flared warmly when she sensed his proximity, and he chuckled to himself. He’d sneaked up on her it seemed, but it was a pleasant surprise. Cas rounded the open glass doorway onto the rooftop garden, and he spotted her. She was beautiful and glowing as her eyes searched out his. Nick had her by the hand, and the two of them were in the middle of telling a story or joke to several others, men and women, apes and wolves. April’s eyes shone with vibrant life and amusement, and she fairly glistened in the moonlight. She appeared to be holding court alongside Nicholas Maraby, the darling of Broadway. Pride and ownership erupted in Castiel’s breast, and he smiled softly. April’s eyes flicked across the rooftop, and she grinned back at him, but she didn’t stop her story.

Cas found Jenn leaning placidly against an enormous topiary planter, out of the way and mostly ignored – a bodyguard more than a participant.
“How’d it go today, alpha?” he asked, coming alongside and taking a place beside her. He selected another glass of wine from a passing waiter and handed it to her. She took it with a simple nod.

“It’s a good thing that girl’s already Mated, Castiel. Nicholas thinks he’s in love with her.”

“Is that so?” asked Cas unperturbed, puffing his chest out a little, preening in the knowledge that he owned the most desired of Omegas.

“Truth be told, everyone’s in love with her,” the alpha told him. She caught his eye and rolled hers. “You can deflate now, Alpha. You’ll pop a button. Aren’t you supposed to be mad with jealousy?”

He grinned at her and glanced back toward his mate. “I have nothing to fear, Jenn. She knows who she belongs to.”

“Well, to answer your question, she was a perfectly angelic Omega all day: sweet, polite, charming. I might fall smitten myself if I wasn’t immune to that kind of thing.” Jenn downed her glass in three big gulps.

Cas was lost in watching his mate, watching her entourage.

“Is that the alpha Nick picked out for her?” he asked, eyeing a blue-eyed man with a veritable mane of lustrous silver hair. The man was handsome and tall, charismatic.

“Yes. That’s Darius Cain. He’s had his hand in three quarters of all the Grammy winners for the past two decades in one way or another. Real insider. Knows everyone and everyone owes him a favor. Never known him to consider cutting ties with top performers to focus on only one act before, especially not someone completely unknown and untested, but he hasn’t been more than five feet from April’s side all night. He’s campaigning hard. He wants this gig, Castiel. Wants it bad.”

“Can he help her?”

“Probably better than anyone else living.”

“Will he be good for her?”

“Oh, well, that’s a different question,” Jenn replied airily. Cas turned abruptly, seeking explanation. “Depends on what you mean by ‘good for her’. He’s going to push her, Castiel. He’s not easy to sway from his own ideas. He’s stubborn. I get the sense that April and Nick have butted heads in the creative arena, and she’s won some of those rounds. If that’s the case, your mate may be able to hold her own with Cain, but I warn you, she won’t ever be able to give him an inch, or he’ll take the reins and run with them.”

“Can he serve as a suitable chaperone?” Cas asked impatiently. Whatever creative disputes they got into weren’t Cas’ concern. He wanted her safe. “I know what my research shows. I want your opinion. I’m not hiring just a business manager for my mate, Jennifer, I need a bodyguard and an alpha chaperone. Is this Cain the right alpha for the job?”

Jenn scoffed. “Not to put too fine a point on it here, Alpha, but if he fucks up, are your henchmen going to show up at my door at three in the morning and take the failure out of my ass? This really isn’t any of my business.”

“I don’t have henchmen,” he insisted. “I’m not the Mob.” He ignored her snort and went on. “You know I trust your opinion, but I would never hold you responsible for what comes of this decision. It’s mine, and it’s April’s. All I need is your input, if you’re willing to give it.”
Jenn sighed and looked back out across the rooftop. People were dancing. There was a weird little drumming circle in the corner. Someone played lightly on Nick’s grand piano. Her voice when she continued took on a tone that was characteristically alpha. His eyes narrowed as he listened. A breeze brought the scent of pot wafting across the roof.

“He’s good, Cas. He’s Submissive, so he’s not about to challenge your Claim even in the slightest, although you already know that. What you want to know is will he see it through whether she hits the big time or not, or will he scurry off to the next protégé. Does he have the grit and the judgment to keep her balanced when she’s hundreds of miles from you and having a meltdown? Can he keep her safe from dangers external and internal both?”

“And?”

“I don’t know him well personally, mind you, but all of my instincts say he’s the right man for your mate. Of course, what you really need is for him to fall under her spell. You need him to feel honored to swear her his life and to be ready to throw his body in front of a train to save hers. And you need him to hold firm in the face of her tantrums and deal her the severity she needs to get back on her own feet. Nothing less than that will ever be enough for you, Castiel, but to get that, you have to make him Pack and let him love her like family. Can you do that? This guy’s loyalty, if he gives it, will be total. Can you live with that? She’ll have her own personal Galahad; a Galahad with a paddle in his pocket and a knot on his cock.”

Cas inhaled stiffly through his nose. That was the real question. Could he stomach what he really needed from April’s new ‘Business Manager’? He would be so much more than that. But April couldn’t begin to have a successful career if she was tied hand and foot to Castiel’s side, and she couldn’t go winging across the world without alpha support. Cas wanted as few people playing roadie for her as he could manage. Cain was well-positioned to play several roles at once.

Dean was going to throw a fit. Bringing another alpha-Sub under the roof was a risky plan. In truth, it was a business arrangement. Castiel didn’t have to bring him into the fold. No one had so much as suggested doing that with Rowena, the new agent. But this was different. Cas needed him to be Pack, or the Alpha’s stalwart wolf would never be able to abide knowing that the substitute might have to knot April if her Heat hit unexpectedly or if her wolf needed a D.F. that Castiel couldn’t provide while she was too far away for him to reach her quickly enough. He needed to let the man guide his mate in all manner of ways, and he needed to stay out of the way.

Castiel felt himself pause upon the uncertain choices of a forked road. From here, their future together balanced upon the pinnacle of choice. From here, he proved to himself and his mate if he truly meant to allow her a path of her own, or if he was all talk. She couldn’t do it without an alpha chaperone. It would fall apart before she ever began. But was he deluding himself about how far he could stretch without breaking? Cas thought of Michael and his determination in the face of Castiel’s spittle-slathering fury. Michael had trusted him further than he’d trusted himself.

Cas ran a metaphysical hand down the flank of his shuddering wolf. (Easy there, my friend), he soothed. (We can do this. If we love her, we have no choice.)

April shot him another glance across the space, and smiled a private smile. Castiel nodded and lifted his glass. Her head tilted in impatient sufferance, and she beckoned him with her hand. He chuckled and pushed off the planter.

“Excuse me, Jenn. I’m being summoned.”

“Good luck, Alpha,” his colleague called softly. “Don’t eat him.”
Saturday passed in a whirlwind of carefully prepared meetings and work sessions. April spent the morning with Nick’s creative team. She was thrilled to reunite with Damon, Jackson, and even Keira, whom April still felt guilty about using to incite Michael to finally make a move on her weeks ago, a lifetime ago. The young alpha violinist didn’t hold a grudge. She’d been playing the same game from the opposite side in effort to get a tumble from Jackson, notoriously hard to tumble.

It was thrilling to watch professionals putting honest effort to turning April’s notes into music. Men and women in the prime of their careers rehearsed her piece, listening attentively to her when Nick forced her to take the podium to talk through her intentions, through her mindset when she’d put it all together. They nodded in understanding, and some of them scribbled notes on their sheet music in response to what she told them. It was intoxicating. Behind her, Nick gloated.

After she’d relinquished the podium back to the conductor, and the starched woman had swirled her baton, and music swirled into life, April covered her mouth with both hands, overcome.

People kept dropping by: producers, record label representatives, talented artists, people who knew people, and people who knew Nicholas. Everyone shook her hand. Everyone slipped her their business cards. Several of them coaxed her into joining them in tickling out a song while the rest of the team disappeared for a break. April was spinning, mind and body, and she let go and went wherever Nick took her. She sang in brief moments when someone encouraged her. She played the piano in the great orchestral rehearsal space when they asked her for a quick once-through. She felt herself tumbling with the rapid-fire tumult, and she let herself flip and turn in the deluge. She trusted. Someone would ground her if she began to drift away. Someone would tether her to the floor before she disappeared into the sky.

Castiel was not present, and her wolf began to panic. He’d left her with Nick and a promise to return to take her to lunch. Surely, she needed his strength. Should she call for him? Was he busy? She couldn’t remember when he’d vanished if he’d told her where he was going.

“Whoa, there, baby cakes,” Nick said, catching her elbow. “Come with me. Let’s get you somewhere quiet for a minute. Damn, kiddo, you fall fast.” He led her down a narrow hallway and they slipped into a tiny practice room, just an upright piano, a few plastic chairs, and some folded music stands in the corner. He set her into one of the chairs and knelt down in front of her, checking her eyes. He snapped his fingers in her face.

She startled. She scrabbled a bit in her chair, feeling suddenly as if the ground had dropped out from beneath her.

“April. Baby, can you see me? Are your ears ringing? Focus, sweetheart. Focus and breathe. I’m going to call Cas. Hold on for me.”

“Alpha,” she murmured.

“Don’t go passing out on me, kiddo. My ass hasn’t healed from the last time I got a good blistering. I’m in for it if you lose consciousness.” Nick pulled out his phone and hit speed dial.

“Hey, Alpha,” Nick said cheerfully into his phone. “No, nothing’s wrong. Why do you ask? … No she’s okay. It’s just…Are you nearby? Could you maybe drop by? We’re breaking early for lunch,
Nick bit his lip and held his phone out with a shaky hand. “He wants to speak to you.”

April dove for the phone.

“Cas? Alpha?” she whimpered. “Can you come get me? I need you.” She began to sniffle without warning, and she blinked back tears that hadn’t been there the moment before.

Cas found the room they’d tucked into with no problem. He wrenched the door open with a curt, “Nicholas, get out. Wait in the hall.” And then he closed himself in with his mate. Chamber rooms in Nick’s rented work space were high-tech and completely sound proof, so Nick couldn’t hear what they were doing in there, but his feet registered the concussion from her Release when it hit. When they came out, April looked weary, splotchy, and a bit on the tender side, but her eyes had cleared, and her step was lighter. Cas guided her out by the hand. He whispered into her ear, and she nodded and scurried down the hall to the restroom.

Cas turned to face Nick.

“Where’s Jenn?” the Alpha asked straight off.

“She’s working. She doesn’t babysit me when I’m at the studio.”

Castiel didn’t respond. He waited. Nick fidgeted, leaning casually against the wall but feeling less casual as the clock ticked the seconds away.

“She’s fine, Alpha,” Nick protested. “Everything happened exactly the way it’s supposed to. April got to try an independent hand at things for a few hours. You got to practice leaving her to it. We noticed a fall before it got out of hand, and we called out for assistance. This is a win, Cas. Full win all the way around.”

“No one told me the two of you would be unchaperoned this morning.”

“You didn’t ask.”

“I’m in no mood to be played with this morning, Omega. April and I are leaving. I hope you got what you need from her, because she’s done for the day.” Cas pivoted and began stalking down the hall.

“Cas, wait! Listen to me. This wasn’t a failure, man. I’m telling you. It’s a resounding success. She did it, and she was brilliant. She’s got this. It was too much at once, maybe.” At that admission, Nick huffed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I probably shouldn’t have brought in as many contacts as I did, but we only had about 24 hours to pack it all in, and there are so many people who need to see and hear her, get to know her and not just take it from me. I’m telling you, she’s won folks over already. That pup’s train is pulling out of the station just from this one visit. I’m already hearing collaboration ideas whispered in my ear. She’s gonna get proposals from this, Alpha. She’s on the gameboard. That takes presence. She needed to be here in person.”
“Nicholas, building the career she wants is not a one-weekend, overnight, instantaneous explosion. It’s going to take time, and at this point, her welfare takes precedence over squeezing in one more meeting. You were reckless. We talked about easing her into finding her feet, not drowning her in clamoring faces. You told me that this morning was a workshop for your show. If you had kept your word, this wouldn’t have happened. You can expect me to be much slower to trust you with her wellbeing again any time soon.”

Nick looked away. He scratched his arm. He scuffed a foot at the carpet. He looked back at Castiel. “She’s gonna be big, Castiel. It might take time, you’re right. But it might not. If the show hits the critics the way I expect it to, she’ll be the next big thing. You can’t be poised waiting in the wings to come sweeping in to save her every time she feels woozy. You have work of your own.”

“I understand that,” Cas gritted between his teeth. “That’s why I intend to see that she has appropriate support whenever I can’t be with her, not just leave her alone and hope she doesn’t falter. If I had known that you invited throngs of people to your practice session to ogle her like a Van Gogh exhibition, I wouldn’t have left her with you. Nicholas, let me be perfectly clear. April does no work of any kind in public or outside of our home without a responsible alpha onsite and devoted to her welfare. None.”

April emerged freshly scrubbed from the restroom. The pink splotches on her face were fading fast. Cas held a hand out to her without looking round, and she slid her small hand into his large one.

“You have an alpha in mind, then,” Nick asked, unperturbed by the Alpha’s anger.

Cas glanced at April, and she nodded slightly back. “Yes, we’re leaning toward offering the job to Darius Cain. April feels he’s well-suited. She likes him. He strikes me as competent in all the areas we need him to be. His background checks out. And my conversation with him this morning confirmed that he’s a good fit.”


“And you have our gratitude,” Cas told him shortly. “I would like to remind you that in future, kindly make no promises to a potential employee of mine that I haven’t signed off on. Alpha Cain had some odd ideas about what I would be offering him by way of contractual benefits. He’s been disabused of those ideas. Watch it, Nicholas. You overstep.”

“Jesus, you’re cranky these days,” Nick grumbled.

“And you haven’t changed at all,” Cas shot back. He turned to April. “Have you got everything? Ready to go?”

“Yes, Alpha,” she told him placidly. “Bye, Nick. Thanks for everything. I hope Jenn takes it easy on you.”

“Don’t count on it,” Nick told her with a twinkle in his eye and a wink. He watched them walk away and then called, “Oh, hey. Kiddo. I need that revision by the fourth. Got another session coming up, and we can’t rehearse if we’ve got no piece.”

She raised her hand in acknowledgment without turning.
Instead of returning to their hotel room, Cas took her to Central Park, and they walked hand in hand in the sunshine, still hot and a bit muggy.

“How did your meetings go yesterday?” April asked awkwardly. Why did she feel awkward? Where was this shyness coming from?

“They went well,” he answered just as stiffly, leading her onto a turn in the path, wandering aimlessly it seemed, and yet still directing their way. “I accomplished what I came for. We’ve got funding to expand in Dallas to meet the projected growth there, although I’m looking forward to the day we stop relying on donations so heavily for capital projects. It’s not sustainable, and it’s not the business model we want to follow.”

She nodded, unsure how to respond and feeling out of her depth.

“And, as a bonus to the day’s success,” he continued, squeezing her hand. “We managed to flip three votes on the bill we need passed on Monday. They aren’t the representatives we’d counted on initially, but a vote is a vote, and it looks like we may be making inroads to cement some new alliances in Washington. That’s never a bad thing.”

“I’m glad,” she told him succinctly, smiling up at him. He turned his blue eyes to her, and he huffed softly and kissed her knuckles.

“Don’t worry, Kitten. You’ll learn it just as I did. Don’t be intimidated. Politics and business are pools I swim in out of necessity. I don’t enjoy them any more than you do. My real work is at The Facility. But, if it’s all right with you, I’d like to share some of my observations and frustrations with you. I’d like to be free to talk about what I’ve got on my plate. If you don’t want that, I can keep it to myself. Or talk to Dean instead, I suppose. Not that he’s a substitute… Jesus, I didn’t mean it like that…”

April laughed. “It’s fine, Cas. Talk to Dean or talk to me. I don’t mind listening as long as you don’t expect me to have an M.B.A. or anything. You’re good at making it simpler than it probably really is. I like it when you lean into me at the end of the day. I like it a lot. It’s just that I feel young and ignorant. I don’t like being so unprepared, so naïve. But you’re patient with me, and you’ve never made me feel stupid.”

“That’s because you’re anything but stupid,” he confirmed staunchly. “And what you do with music…Kitten, I’m completely lost most of the time. I watch you working, and I’m in awe. You disappear inside the notes, and the sense I get through our bond is breathtaking. I could watch you for hours. I’ve loved music all my life, but it’s never felt like this before you played that piano in our house. You bring emotions out of me that I never knew were there. You let it sweep you up and take you far away, and I have the privilege of riding along with you, totally out of my element and totally immersed in something I could never reach on my own.”

They walked in silence for a while. Cas chose the route at random, and April followed easily.

“Thanks for coming for me this morning,” April said, her eyes on the ducks crossing the path in front of them. She received another squeeze to her hand and a soft caress within her bond.

“I will always come when you need me,” he said softly, almost shyly. “I shouldn’t have left you in the first place.”

“I needed to experience that today,” she told him. “It won’t always be that crazy. Nick got carried
away. He wants me to know so many people, Cas, and I need to be capable of handling it.” She thought for a moment. “It was terrifying, but also exciting. People are taking my music seriously, Alpha. The orchestra, they listened to me. Here I am, only eighteen years old, and people in their sixties were listening to me. People from the record labels have my music demos now. I didn’t even know Nick was compiling them from what I sent him, but he’s been distributing my music all over the place, and some of the people I met today have already heard my songs.”

Cas felt the sudden spike of anxiety run down her spine, and he pulled her closer and wrapped an arm around her. He leaned in to kiss her temple. “I’ve got you, love,” he reassured. “You’re going to be just fine. You can do this.”

She leaned her head to the side and rested it against his shoulder for a few steps. “Alpha, I’m sorry about Michael, about the position I’ve put you in over him.”

It came out of the blue, and he sucked in a deep breath and pulled himself up to his full height, dislodging her closeness. “April, you don’t owe me an apology. I told you that.”

“Please, Cas. I need to say this. Can we sit?”

Cas slowed to a stop and closed his eyes for a moment, reminding himself that this was precisely the point of their trip. His lips tightened briefly into a straight line, and his hand gripped hers, then he nodded and opened his eyes, exhaling hard. “All right.” He led her to a nearby bench in the shade and they sat side-by-side. April winced a little, but once she was seated, it didn’t hurt much.

“The thing is,” she started, focusing on her hands in her lap. “I went after him first. No matter how you look at it, I was wrong to do that, and it was an affront to my bond with you. I hurt you. I hurt Michael. I hurt Dean. I had my reasons, but I didn’t have the right to play games with people the way I did, least of all you. Even if I wasn’t Omega, I wouldn’t have that right. I’m your mate. I feel so awful, and there’s no fixing it now. I can’t make this right, Alpha. I’m so sorry.”

April risked a look up at her mate. He was staring across the park toward the water in the distance, pain etched at the corners of his eyes. His hands sat still on his knees. His body was a broken series of stiff lines. Every time he blinked, the red ring around his irises advanced a little to subsume the blue.

Finally, he sighed. “April, I can’t pretend I’m not hurt. I can’t fix this for you any more than I can for myself. I really don’t want to discuss it. But I know that ignoring it isn’t going to make it go away. I’m angry, and I’m hurt, and I feel like an enormous fool not to have seen it for what it is. In retrospect, everything looks so clear. I can’t imagine how I missed it. You stepped way out of bounds to deliberately pursue a man you have no rights to when your bond and his are already spoken for. You had no right to manipulate his feelings. You couldn’t possibly have controlled every eventuality well enough to protect everyone involved and insure that no one was hurt. You were utterly reckless with your own Pack. And you betrayed me. Me. Your mate. When I would die to keep you safe. Am I hurt? Yes, Kitten. I was devastated.”

“Cas…” she sighed fruitlessly, and he took her hand.

“But I’m as much at fault as you are, and I need to take accountability too. No, listen to me, Omega.” She’d pulled up and away, but he held her hand firmly. “Everything you said about me is true. I’m presumptive. I’m conceited. I discounted you and your depth out of a sense of superiority that I don’t deserve to hold. I steamrollered you into my own image of what I wanted you to be without ever bothering to look closely at who you really are. After meeting you father, I believe that’s probably something you’ve been experiencing your entire life, and I’m so sorry.”
She frowned and looked away. His pain and hers crested within the two of them, and it hurt physically. She fought to hold back tears. The last thing she wanted this time was to manipulate him, and tears were an unfair advantage.

“You blessed me with the most gracious, generous gift that anyone’s ever given me in my life. You willingly moved aside to make room for Dean in our lives. April, I can’t put words to what that sacrifice says about you, and what it says about me that I snatched at the chance the second it was uttered. Maybe it was a betrayal of our bond for you to go after Michael, but it was no less a betrayal that I dropped you off on Jo’s doorstep and went after Dean the first chance I got. The difference, clearly, the only real difference, is that I’m Alpha, and you’re not. Kitten, that breaks every moral code I have. It’s not who I want to be. It’s not how I define myself, and I’m ashamed of myself for ever thinking I had the right to a partner outside of my bond with you, and you don’t. Please, can you ever forgive me?”

“Your secondary and tertiaries aren’t trifles, Alpha,” she said. “We can’t pretend everyone is the same. You’re struggling with them right now. I can feel it. You fight so hard. Every day. I don’t ever want to be something that causes you that kind of struggle. I want to be your place of peace, Cas, not another…”

“April,” he cut her off. “There are times when the struggle is necessary. When my wolf and my alpha are wrong, they need to corrected, just like everyone else. Avoiding that only makes it worse. Yes, I’m working on two fronts right now, but that’s my job. They are mine to manage, not yours.”

She nodded sadly, reaching up to his face to caress his jawline, to lend him her unique type of strength. It was different than his, and she wanted him to have all the armament he could use. He leaned into her touch, and his eyes slipped closed again. “You’re so strong,” she whispered. “I’m proud to be yours, Alpha.”

He smiled and kissed her palm. “I’m proud to be yours as well.”

“Will we be okay?” April asked.

His eyes opened slowly. He looked right into her eyes. “April Renée, if you’ll forgive my transgression, I have an enormous favor to ask you. I mean to marry another. I mean to make him my husband and to affix his name just below mine in Pack rank, and I don’t ever mean to discuss with you again the relative right or wrong of that decision. I need you to tell me right now if that’s going to eat away at our bond. I need to be sure. Please don’t lie. I need to be sure.”

April held his gaze bravely. “Castiel James,” she bit her lip as she worked out how to say it. “I adore your fiancé. I can’t imagine life without him. I’d be honored to welcome him into our Pack and to make room beside us…” She narrowed her eyes in an attempt to convey the depth of her commitment. “…Between us sometimes. You have my blessing to marry. Let’s stop wringing our hands and just make ourselves happy, can’t we? Please?”

His eyes held hers. He dug down inside her, and he wasn’t subtle about it. His nostrils flared. She didn’t hide or dodge. Her eyes blazed gold, and his reddened. “Michael will make you happy?” he asked.

“I’m in love with him,” she said.

“Will he make you happy?” Castiel insisted.

“I can’t answer that unless we try exploring what we feel and how to make space for it. I don’t know. I think so.” Her face flickered with doubt and hope and worry. Cas lifted his chin and pulled
her in to rest her head against his chest.

“You’re amazing, Kitten.” He rested his chin on her head. “I love you.”

She answered him internally rather than out loud, but her affection flowed unencumbered, and he let it warm him.

“Cas?”

“Hm?”

“Is it weird that I still want you to play a…a…parental kind of role for me? Am I sick to get off on that?”

He laughed at the sweetness of the question, and the heavy tension popped like a bubble.

“There’s a reason you and I are True-mates, April,” he said. “That role fulfills me just as it does you. I find it erotic and powerful. I love it.”

“But, it’s…unhealthy…isn’t it? It’s like I’m a child inside my head. Doesn’t that mean something’s wrong with me?”

“Not at all,” he assured her. “We all respond to what we respond to. There’s no right or wrong to it unless we act on it outside of the strictures of ‘competent, consensual, adult’ decisions. It would be wrong of me to force you to play a role that made you uncomfortable, but if you and I align in our desires, nothing we do together to fulfill ourselves is wrong.”

She mulled that over a little. “Have you ever stepped over that line, Alpha?”

Cas sat her back up. “Yes,” he confessed with a sigh and a deliberate look into her eyes, back to their usual blue as his were. “Not where minors were involved,” he clarified rapidly. “But I was terrible at understanding consent when I was young and inexperienced. My wolf took more from my partners than he was granted license to take. I owed apologies an embarrassing number of times to people who were extremely patient with me. I have not always had the level of control I have now.”

“Did you ever sleep with Nick?” April asked spontaneously.

Cas blushed deeply. “Um…yes. We were roommates for three years. We tried several variations of sexual relationships. None of them worked for us, and we eventually concluded we’re incompatible, shook hands, and agreed to seek fulfillment elsewhere.”

April gaped at him, and Cas blushed deeper. “I’m a man like any other, April. Once I finally allowed myself to experience mutuality in sex, I struggled to set limits. Mostly, I turned to my friend Marie and to my roommate, but I admit that I was rather insatiable for a time.”

“Benny?”

“No. Benny has never been more than a friend and colleague. Unless you count D.F.s, which I don’t.”

“You’ve dominated Benny?”

Cas nodded seriously, this time unembarrassed. “We had to settle our hierarchy or there’s no way we could’ve worked together. It still comes up every couple of years. I expect it probably always will.”

“What would happen if he Topped you?”
“He won’t.” Cas broke their gaze and looked back out over the lake.

“Then why keep trying?”

“Because it’s our nature to solidify our relative status when it becomes uncertain. We are creatures of instinct, April. We are slaves to our nature, and that’s not a bad thing. It suits us.”

She watched him for a moment. His eyes seemed ancient. The lines on his face spoke of experiences she would never comprehend. She realized she really didn’t know him at all. Not really. Not the way Benny and Nick did. Not like Dean. Or Gabe.

“Cas, have you ever done something that you’re really ashamed of?”

He snorted without looking at her. “Many things,” he admitted.

“Are you really a Mob boss in secret?”

“No,” he said simply. “But it may be a matter of semantics. I have a network of people who accomplish things for me without publicizing themselves. At the end of the day, I don’t suppose there’s really much of a difference except that nothing that I accomplish that way is for personal gain. Maybe I’m fooling myself that the distinction matters.”

April crossed her ankles and settled her hands in her lap primly. “It makes a difference to me,” she told him. “Mob bosses harm people for power and wealth. You don’t.”

He humphed.

“That brings up another question I’ve been wondering about,” she said.

“Shoot. I’ll answer anything.”

“Where does your wealth come from?”

That earned her a chuckle. “Inheritance, mostly. And good business decisions. My paternal line had quite the talent for amassing wealth going back about five generations – ever since wolves first joined modern society. The Novaks were geniuses at business, and it grew from there. We lost quite a bit to inheritance taxes once they were enacted, but there’s always enough remaining to build on, and a good business mind at the helm did the rest. Of course, that lineage broke with me. I’m terrible at business. I take advice from Gabriel, and I leave what I can in the hands of my Board of Directors. I try to stay out of their way as long as things are going relatively well.”

“You have a whole other business besides the ACRI?” April asked in dismay, and he looked at her with a brow lifted.

“We have an empire, April. You’re part owner in Novak Industries now, as are Dean and Michael.” He seemed astonished that she hadn’t known that. They stared at each other.

“Does Dean know?”

“Of course.”

“And Michael?”

“Michael has met with the Board twice to settle up the alignment of the Pack with the direction of the business ventures.”
She stared at her mate.

“Jesus Christ, April, I’m sorry. I keep fucking up. I didn’t even realize it had never come up. I wasn’t keeping it from you. I don’t think you’re…incapable of participating. It’s just that I have an almost grotesque dislike of the business ventures, and I pay them as little attention as I can get away with. Shit. I’ll introduce you to the Board as soon as we get home.”

“What kind of business is it?” she asked, totally shocked.

“Logistics and transport, mostly. Our biggest single role is in overland trucking of goods.”

She didn’t know what to say. “You’re a shipping magnate?”

He chuckled at the absurdity. “As are you, if you want to be specific.”

April shook her head in dismay. “What else don’t I know about you?” She let her eyes wander across the blue sky, speckled with late summer clouds. “Have you ever murdered anyone?” she asked as a means of throwing out the most outlandish query she could come up with. The silence that followed had her head whipping around. “Cas?”

“Yes,” he told her, pale lines marking the tension in his face. His eyes skittered between hers, from one to the other and back again. “Yes,” he repeated, stronger. “I’m not proud of myself, but I can’t take it back, and I can’t pretend I wouldn’t do the same thing all over again.”

“With your own hands?” she pressed daringly. He held, and he nodded.

She frowned, working him apart in her head. “You did it for Gabriel,” she guessed astutely, and he only nodded in reply. Fierce anger left an echo in his eyes. His brow twitched, but he stayed mute. He let her rifle inside his head. He opened his mind to her, scared out of his wits, fully aware that he’d let her past the point of no return, and she a mere teenager from Oklahoma with no frame of reference to digest something like murder in the wider scheme of things.

Her eyes narrowed, and her face hardened. Out of nowhere, she slapped him hard across the cheek with her full arm behind it. His head flew to the side and reddened. He snarled, nostrils flaring, and he whipped back around and caught her wrist, his eyes blazing hot. She glared right back, letting him hold her without acknowledgment.

“Don’t ever keep secrets like that from me,” she insisted furiously. “We’re in this together, or we’re nothing.”

He panted harshly through his nose, processing everything, glaring at her, hating himself as he’d not done in years, hating her for bringing him back to that place. They’d fallen wildly out of balance in their heads in the sparest of instants, and that couldn’t stand. It stung that she had a point, and it stung that her handprint blossomed on his cheek.

No one struck the Alpha.

No one.

Castiel released his wolf.

He was an instinctive creature, bound to obey his nature, and his nature was livid.

The wolf used his hold on her wrist to flatten her body out along the bench facedown. He clambered over her, growling harshly in her ear and slobbering along her throat. Her pants disappeared with a
body-heaving tug that took her shoes along. All of it ended up tossed carelessly into the dirt. April squawked and scrabbled for balance and footing. He pressed his chest and hips into her back to hold her still.

“Don’t ever do that again,” he hissed. “Not for any reason.”

Without waiting for a reply, he hitched his own clothing aggressively downward and he pressed into her, all the way in, all the way past his knot, all in one violent thrust. April panted and struggled for balance. One of her legs caught in the tight space between the bench seat and its back. The other fell unsupported off the front. Castiel had a foot planted firmly on the ground and his other knee on the bench between her legs. He fucked into her hard, angry, vicious, and she cried out in pain. His hand tangled in her hair and pulled her head back, lengthening her throat. His other hand pulling against her shoulder gave him leverage to take her brutally, and he did so, his wolf fully engaged with no hold whatsoever.

Castiel pummeled her painfully, losing himself to the message, letting his alter ego express itself for once. It didn’t take long for the tension to build and to crest, for the Claim to echo beneath the tree and his knot to lock itself inside her channel. Her roared in victory, and he bit down on her Mating-scar, breaking it open, and pulling a scream from his mate. Castiel spilled his seed inside his mate, and he overflowed his fury into her head.

When the pulsing ended, he lay braced on top of her, one foot on the ground, his fingers knotted in her hair, panting desperately, blood tracing his lips. He stilled and then let his head fall to rest between her shoulder blades. April lay still, her own breathlessness mirroring his.

On the pathway before them, park-goers walked on without pausing. No one in Manhattan cared what wolves did.

They didn’t try to sit up for several minutes. They didn’t speak out loud. Inside their heads was a different story. Within the bond, the Ozzie Submitted wholly. The Dominant wolf’s glare softened to that of an appeased nobleman, possibly a Kraken who had accepted the virgin sacrifice and relinquished his hold over the village. For now. The wolf sauntered back into the shade and flopped back down. They found peace. They found balance.

What a fucked up world it was.

Cas untangled his fingers from her hair and attempted to smooth it back into its silky sheets. He kissed her back. He eased her upright carefully, settling them into a seated position with his mate in his lap, bare from the waist down. He rubbed surreptitiously at his cheek. The sting was brighter than he would’ve credited her with if he hadn’t felt it for himself. He felt sympathy for Michael knowing she’d landed more than one of those slaps across Michael’s cheek as well. Of course, Michael wasn’t alpha, and that made a difference.

“Perhaps in future,” he said quietly into her ear. “You can find an alternative method to communicate your displeasure. Slapping your Dominant is never going to be acceptable. I will respond with a forceful reminder of our respective positions every time, so it will behoove you to learn the lesson this time.”

She chuckled and dropped her head back to rest against his shoulder.

“Yes, Alpha.”

He kissed her temple again, longer this time, lingering with his lips pressed into her messy hair.
“Whoever you killed,” she said very quietly. “Is the world a better place without him?”

He took a deep breath and wrapped her up in his arms, putting his forehead into the sore mess at her shoulder and ignoring the smear of blood on his face. “Them,” he clarified. “And yes, but that’s no excuse.”

“Is the Pack safer?”

“April, I’ve had this fight with Dean already. I’m not surprised that you’re of the same camp. The two of you put more faith in my leadership than I deserve. We don’t live in a vigilant society where might makes right, and we are free to do as we see fit in defense of our families. What I’ve done – I cannot ever make that right. It was wrong, even in the knowledge that I would make the same choices again. There is no easy answer. What I can do is play an offensive game and avert any need ever to have to make choices like that again. I protect my Pack proactively, do you understand? I watch out for dangers before they arise, and I divert them.”

“I understand,” she said. “That’s why you need the network that isn’t a Mob. You’re running interference out front of us.”

“Precisely.”

“So,” she said abruptly after several silent minutes, changing the pace. He lifted his head. “We both finished everything we needed to do for work. The rest of the weekend is ours?”

“It is.”

“And we’re together in New York City.”

“Just the two of us,” he agreed.

“And except for the fact that we’re stuck on this bench until your knot deflates, we have all that time to ourselves.”

“We have show tickets tonight for eight o’clock and tomorrow’s matinee at two,” he reminded her. “Everything else is ours to choose. What would you like to do?”

“Lunch,” she said assertively. “D.F.s make me hungry.”

“Me too,” he laughed.

“Then, maybe The Met? You can show me what it is about art that you love so much. I’ve spent my whole life so focused on music, I don’t know what else there is out there in the world. Would you share your love of paintings with me? I’ll try not to scoff and say that I could’ve painted that when I was five.”

He laughed again. “Some of it deserves that,” he admitted. “Not everything that’s mounted to a wall is a masterpiece. I’d love to take you to The Met with me though. It’s a date. We can start to expand your myopic artistic experience. After lunch of course. And we’ll keep it short. You can’t possibly digest a museum like that in one visit.”

She snuggled into his lap, tugging at his knot and loving the feeling of solidified placement. The apes strolling by could never understand how perfectly safe and cherished she felt when her Alpha wolf flattened her and set her straight. What was a little pain when the end result was an immersion in adoration this deep?
“I have no idea what myopic means. It sounded like an insult. But I forgive you. I love you, Castiel.”

“I love you, too,” he confirmed tightening his hold but resisting the impulse to expand her vocabulary. Several more minutes of inwardly turned thoughts passed like the breeze that ruffled the dark green leaves above them.

“Cas, I think I’m ready to talk to Michael, if you’re okay with it.”

“To talk to him?” Cas teased, hinting that it wasn’t the talking that he worried about. He flattened his tongue and licked a broad stroke across her shoulder, cleaning the blood away. It had already clotted and stopped oozing red smudges.

“You know what I mean.”

“You want my blessing,” he clarified, more a statement than a question.

“I need to know that you’re really okay with it.”

Locked on his knot and incapable of going anywhere as she was, it was easier to say he was okay with it. Cas knew he wouldn’t be okay with it for years. The only thing that would help was to drive his discomfort out with saturation. Once it was a settled affair, in every sense of the word, the ubiquity of it all would do more than careful discussions ever could.

“I’m not that much of a hypocrite, Kitten. I can’t insist that you attend me naked and display yourself at my wedding to someone else and tell you not to follow your own heart. I understand how Michael fills a very different need for you than I do. I ask that you be careful, that you step lightly and keep us both informed about what you’re feeling. I ask that you…that you don’t allow him to…”

“He won’t father my pups, Alpha. I promised you that already, and I meant it. You and Dean won’t ever have children together. I’ll honor that prohibition. Michael and I won’t either, no matter what turn our relationship takes.”

“Fuck,” breathed Cas on a sudden realization. “We’re not using a condom right now.”

April laughed. “It’s a little late to be worried about that now.”

“It’s dangerous,” Cas insisted petulantly.

“It’s only slightly risky,” April insisted. “I looked it up. And there’s no sense worrying about it now.”

“We should find a pharmacy for a Plan B dose…”

“No,” April told him adamantly. “If I get pregnant from today, so be it.”

Castiel’s gut unclenched immediately, the pain disappearing as if it had never been. He released a breath. He nodded against the side of her head. “All right, my Omega. As you wish.”

“What do you truly think of Cain?” April asked, changing the subject again.

“You like him,” he answered.

“He’s offering to drop everything and move to Kansas, to leave New York for me,” April replied. “We can’t let him do that unless we’re sure.”

“Nonsense,” Cas snorted. “He can always come back here and pick up right where he left off.”
She shook her head adamantly. “No, he can’t. He’s taking a massive risk, and if it falls apart on him, his reputation will be shot. Everyone he knows already thinks he’s flipped his wig. This is a crazy move for a guy who’s spent his whole career positioning himself to be a spider at the center of a complex interconnected web…”

“Is it?” Cas asked her. “Have you met us? Besides, he hasn’t spent his entire career in entertainment. He was Special Ops as a young man, and he’s got an impressive resume with some skills you might not expect.”

“Is that so?” she asked. “You dug into his background?”

“Naturally. Please don’t insult me. There’s not a snowball’s chance in hell that anyone is going to get close to you without a thorough investigation.”

She nodded. “Right. And Gabe signed off on him too?”

Cas hemmed a little at the unexpected question.

“Please don’t insult me, Alpha,” she teased back. “I know the two of you, probably Michael as well, have your eyes peeled for any threats to my safety and happiness. I know for a fact Gabriel was looking into his background. You wouldn’t have allowed us to meet if any red flags came up.”

Cas licked his lips. Full disclosure was a new and uncomfortable habit, and it would take some time to settle. “I don’t have Michael’s research yet,” he admitted. “But Gabe says he’s clean, if a little on the morose side. Morose, I can deal with, as long as he has your best interest at heart. I need a bulldog, April, not an employee. I need someone who will lock onto you as if your breath is primary to his, as if your happiness is superior to his. I need someone who will devote the rest of his life to your well-being.”

“You don’t ask much,” she commented sourly. “Who died and made you boss? We don’t have the right to demand that of an employee – not for me.”

“My father died and made me boss,” he retorted. “And I don’t give a fuck whether we have the right or not. I won’t settle for anything less. This is your safety that’s at stake. He’s either all in, or he’s out. He’s Pack, or he’s not.”

“Alpha, I just need a manager. Why the secret handshake and cloth-covered altar? What’s going on?”

Castiel cleared his throat. “He’s not just your manager and bodyguard, April Renée. He’s to be your on-the-road alpha. Do you understand? He’s my proxy when I can’t be with you. It will be his responsibility to guide your career and to open doors for you. It will also be his job to bring you home to me as safe and stable as you left. To me and to Michael.”

“I don’t want a proxy,” April said with alarm. “I want you.”

“I can’t always be where your career is going to take you.” Castiel’s knot slipped loose, and he wasted no time in spinning her on his lap. He caught her knee and lifted her leg across his belly to get her facing him. “This is the only way, Kitten. If Michael could do it in my stead, I could live with that, but he can’t. He’s Omega, and his career lies in a different direction. He’s not qualified to protect you. Cain is. He’s fully trained as a bodyguard. But he’s also a Sub, like you. I watched the two of you together. You fit. The rest of it will take time, but it will work if we approach it carefully.”

She shook her head. “My wolf will never kneel to him.”
Cas caught her chin and forced her to look at him. “She will if I state my instruction very clearly. Your wolf will do as I say. April, this is the only way to give you what you want. It’s the only way. That doesn’t mean it has to be him. But if not him, then we keep searching.”

April studied his face and ran her thumb across the livid red handprint that still marred his cheek. “I’m scared.”

“I’m not going to leave you to get acclimated by yourself. Everything you and he do together, I’ll be right there until we’re all three certain it’s time…shit, goddamn it, all fucking four of us, I mean… Michael included, if that’s what you need.”

“Does Dean get a say?”

“Not really, no. But he can register his opinion and his advice as always. He’s my right hand. I will always listen to him, especially where your safety is concerned. At the end of the day though, Kitten, it’s my decision and yours. Even Michael doesn’t get a say yet. So, if you understand what I plan to ask of him, and you understand what I expect of you, then I’m asking you, is this the guy?”

She sighed. “I believe so, Alpha. I trust him. If you trust him. More importantly, if Gabe trusts him, then I think he’s the guy.”

Cas made an aggrieved face. “Why does Gabe have more clout than I do?”

“Just the way it is, Alpha,” she smirked. Then she dropped the smirk, replacing it with a dark look of dawning horror. “He’s going to have to set a Claim on me.”

“Yes.”

April’s head hit Castiel’s chest with a hollow ‘Thunk’. “Maybe I could be a house Omega and play the piano in my spare time. Raising pups is a full time job.”

Cas lifted her chin again. “Do you mean that?”

“Well, it is.”

“I’m not arguing that. I’m asking if that’s what you want.”

“No,” she whispered. “It’s not.”

Castiel nodded firmly. “That’s what I thought. Do you need another spanking? We could go back up to our room and get you settled; eat in the hotel dining room.”

April shook her head. “I need my pants back, but I’m good. I wanna explore New York with you before Dean takes you away from me.”

He lifted her up and set her on her feet before letting her haul him up too. “He’s not taking me away from you. Nothing much changes after the wedding, Kitten. We’re already married for all intents and purposes. The wedding has already happened through countless midnight conversations, scuffles and arguments, promises and commitments, fuck ups, fixes, accusations, admissions, apologies, and acquiescences. The only thing left to do is to ease Dean’s fears that I might ever let him fall. That’s going to be quite enjoyable for me, but it doesn’t appreciably change anything. Come on. Get dressed, and let’s get some lunch.”

Talk of Dean brought to mind that Cas still needed to stay mindful of whatever the alpha might be plotting as vengeance for Castiel’s scuttling eastward without him. On short notice. With his mate in
tow. Cas didn’t know what it would be yet, but he knew there would be…something. He half expected Dean to show up at the show this evening. A purchase of seats right next to Cas’ and April’s would have been classic Dean. But if he was planning that, he’d left his cell phone at home. A check of Dean’s GPS locator placed his fiancé dead center in Lawrence, Kansas, right where he was supposed to be.

That’s where his phone was. Was Dean with it?

Someone whistled at April’s bruised, red ass as she bent over to get her pants on, and Cas reached across the pathway to plant a fist in the perpetrator’s jaw without so much as looking him full in the face. He took April’s hand and continued in the opposite direction as if nothing had happened at all, leaving the asshole to collect himself and to consider his life choices. April grinned at her mate, swinging their hands cheerfully.

“Buy me some New York style pizza, and I’ll tell you about my day,” she promised. “I met Yo-Yo Ma.”

Cas dropped her hand and froze in place, his face plastered in shock as his mate continued playfully on without him. “You met… Really? Can you introduce me?”

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Dean spent Saturday morning stretched out on the oldest, squishiest couch in the house, a brown leather monstrosity in the downstairs game room. He still had an ache deep in his ass when he clenched into it, but his first foray into a Submission scene with multiple players, more witnesses to Dean’s very personal vulnerabilities was over and done with. He felt like a freshly deflowered ex-virgin, still a little befuddled in the aftermath, still not quite sure how he felt about it.

He’d already hammered out his report for Cas, and that had helped him organize his emotions, if not his emotions about his emotions. He had managed to hold on to his front brain submissive the whole way through, even with Raphael, so the experiment was a success, as far at that went. Mostly, he felt languid and chill. That was good, right?

Dean paged through the Saturday edition of the paper, enjoying the tactile reality of real paper in his hands, and he sipped coffee heavily diluted with cream. He scratched at the top of one foot with the big toe of the other, his t-shirt and sweats shifting easily as he moved, and he rolled a little to resituate.

“You turn feline when you’re satisfied and comfortable,” Michael told him from the doorway. “Anyone ever tell you that?”

Dean chuckled without looking up. “Yeah, I seem to recall hearing that before. Once or twice.”

The speed at which Dean accepted the observation gave away the source, and Michael narrowed his eyes. “Cas told you that,” he guessed sourly. Dean still didn’t look up. He was feeling soft and lazy—too much so to respond. He flipped the page to the editorials and found on a skim-through that more articles than usual were geared toward the debates on Omega rights and agency.

“Am I ever going to stop trailing after him?” Michael asked sadly, stepping in and flopping onto the floor by Dean’s shoulders. “Every time I discover something new about you, he’s already been there.” Dean put fingers in his hair and scratched his scalp lightly, still reading.
“We’ll find something, babe. We’ve got all the time in the world to search.”

Michael leaned into the weight of Dean’s hand. “I sound like a whiner.”

“Only a little,” his mate soothed. “Besides, Cas never convinced me to take my primary sub into a group scene like you did. That was a first, man, and that was all you.” Michael hummed in satisfaction, pulling a section of the paper off Dean’s legs and perusing the text. They read in silence for a while. Dean’s nails stayed in motion over Michael’s scalp, only abandoning him long enough to take another sip of coffee every now and again.

“Damnit,” mumbled Dean. “The battle lines are really settling in. The rhetoric is getting worse. Way worse. We need to brace for impact, Michael. It’s gonna get wild and hairy real fast.”

“What’s up? With Naomi cratering in the polls, I thought we had momentum?” Michael turned to look over Dean’s shoulder. Dean pointed to the article he’d been reading.

“We do. But that’s just the problem. When the movement was small and seemed like it only affected Lupins, the apes wrote us off; assumed we were simply squabbling amongst ourselves. Now, it’s spilling out and taking up the general population. Now every dick with a mouth and a platform has a fucking opinion about what’s best for Omegas, no matter if they know diddly-squat about anything. I’m telling you, it’s gonna get buttloads worse before it gets better, and you, my love, are sitting dead center of the firestorm. We need to increase security for the wedding and get Billie’s take.”

Michael could feel Dean’s hackles rise as he envisioned the dangers that awaited his mate. He stood and pulled the paper off Dean’s lap, shifted Dean by his hips to lie flat on his back on the couch, and climbed up to straddle his thighs. Taking Dean’s hands, he laced their fingers together.

“I’m ready to face them, alpha,” Michael told him quietly. “They’re not going to hurt me. I’ve got you and Cas. Gabe. Sam. I’m safe. You’re going to see to that. I trust you. Right? You feel it?”

Dean sighed. “I know you trust me. I feel it, man. I do. And I trust you, too.” His eyes slipped closed, and his grip tightened in Michael’s grasp. “I know I need to stop blocking your way. Michael…I get it. I don’t think you get what’s holding me back.” Dean went silent. Michael leaned forward and settled against him in the tight space between Dean’s body and the cool back of the sofa. Dean released his hands and wrapped an arm around him, pulling him in close.

When he started talking again, it was softly.

“When my mom died, I thought it was all my fault. Thought I was being punished for breaking the code of the alpha, for all the times I secretly wished to have a hand on my neck and a strap on my ass. Thought I was the worst kind of sinner because I’d Presented as an alpha, and that’s what everyone wants to be, and here I was tossing it out like it was worthless. I’d rather be on my knees with a cock in my mouth and a hard hand holding my hair than be alpha and take care of my family. Thought Mom’s death was something sent down on me like a preview of Hell, where I was headed someday – like an Ebenezer Scrooge ghost visit warning kinda thing. ‘Straighten up, Winchester! There’s time to fix this nonsense before it’s too late if you’ll get your shit together’. Like the fucking Universe burned my mother to ash just to get its message across to me that I was being selfish, and that was the only way to get my attention. That every time I jacked off to a fantasy of getting my ass whipped, I was breaking some sacred code and tearing off a corner of my soul.”

“Jesus, Dean.”

“I still feel that way sometimes, Michael. It doesn’t make any difference that it’s illogical and a load of crap. I can’t shake the feeling that I’m damned for the way I am. I don’t want to be this way. I
want to be strong and bold. I want to harness my alpha side and swagger and be confident, protect and take charge and mean business…”

“Baby, shit, you are that alpha. Don’t you know that?”

“Not if I can’t protect you, I’m not.” Dean’s eyes squeezed shut, and he wrapped his arm across his face, hiding his pain behind his own elbow. “Alphas take charge, damnit! They stand their ground even when it pisses people off because alphas are born to command, not to fucking compromise. I’m going to Hell, Michael. I can’t stop that. It’s already done. But maybe I can save you and Cas and the rest of my family. If I can keep you from the same damnation, it’ll all be worth it. I have to keep you safe, Michael. I have to.”

Michael was in shock. He’d had no idea Dean even held a belief in the concept of Hell, much less felt condemned to be imprisoned there.

“That’s absurd,” he told his mate firmly. “You’re not going to Hell. I forbid it. Dean Michael, you listen to me. There’s no such place, and even if there was, it’s not for the likes of you.”

Dean’s voice was weary. “Michael, leave it alone. I don’t know why I even…”

“No. You listen to me, alpha. You picked up a crap message when you were a pup. You thought that alphas only have one acceptable presentation, and you swallowed that message down into your soul. You tried to be something you’re not, and it ate you up from the inside. It felt like you were being punished because it hurt every time you squashed your own impulses, and it hurt every time you didn’t. You tried to live up to someone else’s image. But, baby, their image is bullshit compared to what you really are.”

“You don’t understand,” Dean whimpered.

“I don’t? I don’t? Really Dean? What do you think I was up against as I grew up? You don’t think I experienced the same damn thing every damn day after I Presented? I couldn’t be what they tried to turn me into, and it hurt so fucking bad.”

“You’re not weak the way I am…”

Michael pushed himself up and took a biting hard hold of Dean’s chin with his hand, shaking with a sudden rush of anger. “You’re not WEAK, Goddamnit! You’re amazing! You wouldn’t put up with that kind of talk from me for a second. What the fuck makes you think it’s acceptable from you? You know better, Dean Michael. Fuck it all, you KNOW better!”

Michael was furious. He couldn’t lay still. He shoved himself to his feet and then knelt beside his mate, taking Dean’s hand in both of his own. He entreated Dean to understand with green eyes that blazed with streaks of gold. “You’re not WEAK, Goddamnit! You’re amazing! You wouldn’t put up with that kind of talk from me for a second. What the fuck makes you think it’s acceptable from you? You know better, Dean Michael. Fuck it all, you KNOW better!”

Michael was furious. He couldn’t lay still. He shoved himself to his feet and then knelt beside his mate, taking Dean’s hand in both of his own. He entreated Dean to understand with green eyes that blazed with streaks of gold. “They were wrong, all those years ago. Don’t you see? Whoever put that on you was dead wrong! If a Sub or an Omega came through your classroom spouting this drivel, you would instantly know better. You wouldn’t doubt for a moment that someone in their past had put a mind-fuck on them, and you’d do everything in your power to straighten them out. You’d fucking bend over backward to get them thinking right. Dammit!”

“You don’t understand,” Dean shot back, sitting up stiffly. “You know that without question? What do you know? You’re not the one who wakes up drenched in his own sweat with flames licking all over his body twice a week. You’re not the one who hears the screaming of the damned ringing in his ears over and over again! Don’t presume to tell me what I know or don’t know! If the Universe is seeking balance, then there’s a hell of a correction coming someday, Michael. It’s gonna drag me under when it hits. But I’ll be damned if it takes you too.”
Michael sat back on his heels as if Dean had slapped him. He blinked, feeling his eyes transition fully to a golden halo. He shook his head slowly.

“You’ve got it all wrong, alpha. But until you grasp that for yourself, you’re never going to be able to see me as anything but your responsibility because you’re too busy standing guard over me. You’re never going to be comfortable letting me share your crusade with you. You’re locked into a protective stance, expecting to sacrifice yourself for the greater good, expecting that it’s your only choice. But you know what? That strips me of my own say in what role I take. I may be an Omega, and I may be yours, but I don’t need you to sacrifice yourself to a horde of demons to keep me whole. I kind of thought maybe we could fight together, Dean.” Michael’s eyes filled with tears with his vehemence. “I kind of thought you were human more than alpha, and you would have enough respect for me that we could stand back-to-back and fight as a team, not lock me in a cupboard and plant yourself in front of the door expecting to take a mortal wound in my defense. My fucking hero.”

Michael clambered to his feet and stalked to the door. He wasn’t being fair, and he knew it. Dean’s fears and his insecurities wouldn’t crumble from an angry response, but Michael was sick of the inequity inherent in their dynamic. Adding a mountain-sized chip on Dean’s shoulder to what they already had to traverse merely in navigating their secondary/tertiary splits was more than Michael could stomach.

“And another thing,” he said in the doorway. “If you think that either of us, Castiel or I, would leave you burning in Hell for five minutes without busting in to yank you out, you’ve got another think coming, you asshole. That shit wouldn’t stand, Dean. Think about it. Can you envision any version of the Universe where that man or this one would let it end up like that? So get the fuck off your golden steed and stop trying to save the rest of us by throwing yourself onto every grenade.” The Omega spun on his heel and took one step…

“Michael, wait.”

To his great surprise, Michael stopped. He stood silent and twitching just outside the door, facing away from Dean.

“Please don’t go. Running away every time you get mad isn’t helpful.”

Michael turned slowly to face him and leaned against the wall just inside the door. A perfectly taxidermized elk head mounted above his head served as his back-up, lending him gravity. “I’m sorry about your nightmares, Dean. I didn’t know. I wish you’d told me sooner. I think I know what they look like from inside our bonds, but you never seemed out of sorts after one of the orange-toned dreams, so I didn’t know what they were. You cover for them very well.”

“Thanks, I think,” Dean muttered. He sat forward on the couch, leaning his elbows on his spread knees, looking intently at the floor. “It’s kind of a habit. I had to learn to hide it from Sammy when we were kids. I got to where I barely think about it in the morning, even the ones that are really dark.” Dean fell silent.

“I’m always here for you, Dean. Please don’t hide nightmares from me. If you wake up sweating, you wake me up. Promise me. You’re not supposed to have to go through that alone anymore. The Universe made that correction you keep expecting. It left you alone long enough, and then it righted itself and brought you and me together. Now neither of us has to battle alone ever again. Promise me.”

Dean didn’t want to make that promise. He knew that in the dead of the night, while Michael slept peacefully in tones of green and blue, as he waited for his heart rate to slow, and he scrabbled for
reality versus the horror of the dreamscape, the last thing he would want to do would be to awaken his mate. Michael watched him chew on it.

“Does Castiel know?”

“He knows I sometimes have nightmares.”

“Does he know how frequent they are?”

Dean looked away, leaning way back on the couch, staring up at the ceiling.

“And Tessa? Have you told the therapist?”

“Yes. We’ve talked about it some. She’s not pushing me though, and I haven’t been ready to go there.”

Michael studied his mate’s face. Dean’s bond held nothing but raw sincerity. He was eating himself up on the inside, trying to consume himself to protect his mate.

“The quickest way to overcome a phobia is to barrel straight through it, Dean,” Michael told him firmly.

Dean didn’t answer. He kept his eyes on the ceiling. Michael could feel him processing though.

“I want a spot in your battle plan, alpha. I want to do the same work you do. I want in. I swore I wouldn’t push you, but you need to be pushed right now or you’re going to stay hunkered in that defensive posture forever. Everything out there is set to blow into a firestorm any second, and my gut tells me the way we meet that is head on. We go out strong, shredding every damn one of those op/ed pieces from people who don’t know an Omega from an ostrich. We have to show them, Dean. No one alive can do that better than I can. But you gotta LET me.”

“They’re going to tear you to pieces…”

“They’re going to write awful, nasty, false shit about me.”

“They know where you live.”

Michael scoffed. “Yeah, and I dare them to take a crack at this place trying to get at me. I fucking dare them.”

Dean stared morosely at the ceiling.

“You’re not a broken alpha, Dean Michael. You’re the best possible mix of all of us. You’re strong and vulnerable at the same time. You’re powerful and charming and you know how to drop all the walls in your head and let it all flow into someone else’s hands for a while. You’re smart and you’re instinctive all at once. That sense you have going on in there, the one that compels you to show no weakness, it’s losing its grip because we’re proving it wrong every day. And now it’s getting desperate the same way a cornered dog does, and it’s throwing everything it has at you just the way it’s hitting the fan outside our doors. You gotta weather the last throes of a dying instinct. We’re going to fight this war out there and in here all at once, but no one does it alone. Stand firm just a little while longer. Do something radical right in its face, and silence it for good. Put me onstage. Stand beside me and be there to watch over me, but let me do this, alpha. Please. For both of us. For all of us.”

Dean blew out a long breath through his mouth.
“Sometimes I don’t know what the hell I’m talking about, man,” Michael continued. “But sometimes my instinct is so strong, I’m certain. This is one of those times, and I’m asking you to trust me here. I know it’s the right choice, alpha. I can feel it. Go ahead and poke at me all you want to with your probes and ask me whatever questions you can trying to untangle how I know. Dean, I know.”

Dean scrubbed his hands over his face without lifting his head. He’d lost, and he knew it. But had he really lost, or was it just the insecurities that were losing? Wasn’t that the goal? To overcome the objections his insecurities kept throwing at him.

“I won’t push your buttons while we’re in public, man. I know how hard this is for you. But we have to find the balance point. We have to balance our way into it and figure out how a Dominant Omega confronts the public without turning himself on his heels. Help me do that, Dean. Help me discover who I am.”

“All right,” Dean sighed. “You win. We’ll get with Charlie and Ellen and work you in. I want you to start in the seminars first though, not the conventions. And you don’t go anywhere without me or Cas right beside you. And Michael? Man, I mean stitched hip to hip. You can answer questions about your own experiences, but you’re to follow every damn one of our instructions throughout. Anyone gets outta line, and you can expect their ass to be tossed out onto the street without a fucking refund. Don’t go trying to be an expert on shit you don’t know. No grandstanding. No showing off. Act up even a little, and it all stops, and I mean on a dime. I will haul you bodily from the stage if I don’t get the obedience from you that I need.”

“I understand, alpha.”

“Michael, man…damnit…”

“Thank you, Dean. I won’t let you down.”

“I think I’m gonna pass out.” Dean rolled his body and lay back out on the sofa longways. Michael approached him cautiously, slowly, and he wordlessly curled his fingertips under the band of Dean’s sweats, tugging them smoothly down his hips and tucking the elastic behinds his balls.

“I can help with that,” Michael whispered seductively, adding a filthy rasp to his tone. “Let me show you some gratitude, Dean.”

Dean lifted his hips a little and shoved at the fabric of his pants beneath his ass, kicking his legs to get them down his thighs. Michael’s distraction seemed like the best idea ever. His mate’s hot mouth closed over the head of his dick and worked its way slowly downward. Michael wrapped a hand around Dean’s bulge, where his knot lay inert beneath silky skin, and Dean rolled his hips into it. Deft fingers massaged his balls. Dean groaned in pleasure.


“I’m right here, Dean. I’ve got you.” Michael dove back in to sink his mouth onto Dean’s cock as deeply as he could without gagging, and he stripped out of his jeans without taking his lips off of his mate’s swiftly hardening erection.

Michael released Dean’s cock and stood to swing a knee over his hips and straddle him again, this time lining his puffy hole up and sinking all the way down to impale himself. Michael’s knees bracketed Dean’s ribs, and Dean’s hands came up to hold Michael’s hips and guide the subtle rocking motion of the Omega’s torso above him. They both closed their eyes, delving deep into a place that wasn’t visible from the outside. Dean craned his head back sharply, lengthening his throat,
breathing hard through his nose, Submitting from within even though the moment didn’t require his submission.

Michael’s scent thickened, and they both rolled their hips, Michael sitting hard and fast on Dean’s pelvis. He sat upright, using his thighs and his knees to rock into it, his hands clutching at Dean’s forearms.

“You give me so much, alpha,” Michael told him in a gruff, lust-filled voice. “You give me everything. Everything. I owe you more than I could ever repay. Every time I think I’ve seen the deepest part of your generosity, you surprise me with more. You have no idea how magnificent you are, Dean.”

“Michael…” Dean whimpered, overwhelmed at the praise, and finding it painful to process while he was feeling such pleasure physically. Michael’s channel was hot, tight, and wet. It clenched around his length, embracing and massaging, so welcoming, so warm. Dean’s sweats bunched below his knees. He lifted his knees and set his feet flat against the leather, pulling his hips down to begin a rhythmic thrusting. Michael groaned, leaning forward and transferring his hands to Dean’s chest and shoulders, holding on. Dean began to pummel his mate’s ass with powerful, meaningful thrusts. His head was still torqued back on the arm of the couch, out of sync with the forcefulness of his thrusting, a contradiction in presentations that Michael found irresistible.

No one else on earth was lucky enough to have this. Not this. There were other alpha-Subs in the world, but they didn’t have Omega-Dom mates who knew how to leverage this kind of presentation and make good on everything Dean’s body was seeking. Michael lifted up a little on his knees to give Dean space to slam into him hard and fast, and he leaned in to suck a bruise into Dean’s adam’s apple, mirroring his complicated dual presentation. Dean whined hard, re-set his hands on Michael’s hips and pulled him into every pummeling thrust.

“Feels so good,” Michael muttered, shifting to suck a bruise into the scar on Dean’s shoulder. “Fuck me, alpha.”

“I need you, Omega,” Dean whimpered. “Can’t live without you. Don’t wanna think about losing you.” Dean’s hips didn’t slow. They shifted into frantic. He was dropping into a panic, and Michael pressed down onto Dean’s pelvis.

“I’m not in danger, alpha. I’m right here. Fuck me hard, baby. Knot me. Take ownership. Fill me up. Keep me safe.” It was a barrage of words whispered into Dean’s ear, and the alpha’s face crumpled. He wrapped both arms around Michael, crushing their chests together, and he fucked fast and hard, drowning the voices in his head, replacing them with his mate’s soft crooning.

“You’re sex on legs, Winchester,” Michael told him through clenched teeth. “You make me come in my sleep just from having your scent beside me.” Somehow, Michael was holding onto himself even as Dean lost it. The alpha’s head strained back as far as he could get it. His thighs burned with the forcefulness of his driving heat. Dean’s knot strained to enter his mate and lock them together.

“Michael, don’t… I’m not… I can’t… It’s too much. That’s not me.”

“Fuck me, Dean. Knot me. Take me with you when you come. I’m close.”

Dean growled at the instruction, at the promise. He rolled into the back of the couch, turning Michael onto his back, getting his knees and hips lined up to drive right back in and send them both over the edge. Dean pressed his knot into place and rocked against Michael’s ass. The Omega lifted his legs high into air, hooking one foot over the back of the couch and catching the back of his other knee in his hand to hold it wide and clear, opening himself up as wide as he could. Dean tucked his head
down and rested it at Michael’s breastbone, curling up tight and letting his sweat mingle with Michael’s as he found a hard, fast rhythm.

“Come for me, Omega,” Dean gritted out. “Come on my knot.”

“Harder, alpha,” Michael responded. “Fuck me harder.”

“NNNnnngghh!” Dean growled, every nerve alight, his sense of himself merging with the sensations he could feel from his mate. His knot locked, but Dean risked tugging at it to keep thrusting, giving Michael what he needed to come without a hand on his cock. The burning pull of a knot against the inner musculature of his rim sent the Omega pulsing white streaks between them, smearing it against both of their bellies, and Dean’s eyes rolled up in his head as the clenching of Michael’s channel tumbled him too. They toppled together, near enough, going sloppy in their rhythm, going inside their bonds until all they could see were colors, all they could feel was where they connected. They caught each other. Yin and Yang. Alpha and Omega. Now and always.

Dean didn’t try to stop the tears of relief and release. He held Michael to him, and he wept silently, burying his nose behind Michael’s ear, right up in his neck, right against his scent glands.

“I don’t deserve you,” he whispered.


***************

Sarah’s arrival at the manor on Sunday morning turned out to be an understated affair. Gabe helped her carry her luggage upstairs and down the hall to a guest room directly above the kitchen. She had everything she could want here, including an en suite bathroom, a fireplace, and a back stairway that led directly to the rear of the kitchen by the garage entrance. She could come and go with little fanfare and make midnight kitchen runs in peace. No one else was home. Dean and Michael were at church. Kali was working out of her shop. Sam had taken his family back home. Cas and April would be in New York until Monday. The LaFitte Pack had moved out, each to his own new home to begin the exciting process of settling in. The staff had Sundays off.

The silence felt oddly oppressive as if the house forgot to breathe without its occupants to bring it to life. Sarah thanked Gabriel and made a joke about offering him a bellman’s tip, which he took with a cheery thank you, and no sign he recognized it as a joke. Well, that was a quick lesson learned on Sarah’s part. Don’t joke with Gabriel about money.

Left alone in the spacious room, Sarah left her baggage packed for the moment, instead pulling out her journal and trying to summarize what she could of what Gabriel had told her. He had to have been truthful. It was all too tragic to be manufactured. Too many points along the way were matters of the public record for it all to be a lie. But was it truth? He’d left things out. There were places in his telling where his face had clouded over, and he’d demurred with an, “I can’t tell you the details, but it wasn’t pretty,” or some such.

Gabriel idolized Castiel, that much was obvious. He saw everything from a certain perspective, not necessarily the barest form of truth, but not exactly glorified either. Where Castiel had scars, Gabriel called them out for what they were, and where he’d faced hard decisions, Gabriel didn’t hide the fact that some of his choices would not have withstanded public scrutiny after the fact. But Gabriel didn’t
mince words when it came to the trials they faced as a species. He painted it gritty and complicated
for Sarah in a way no textbook or group forum could ever do. He painted it harsh but hopeful, tragic
but encouraging. He painted it human.

They really were human, even with all the violence and the vulgarity. Sarah wrote notes for as long
as she could think, and then her pen stopped, and her eyes glazed over, switching in her head into a
frame of mind that wasn’t scientific at all.

In the widest sense, Castiel was far from perfect, but in that context, he was striving day by hard-
fought day to build a safe place to raise his family, and wasn’t that what everyone did? He had a
wider span of resources to call on than most people did, but he’d been using those resources not to
wall himself and his kin into a fortress that he meant to defend. He’d been building up the people
themselves. All of them. His charitable works included funding for primate hospice and literary
centers in towns without a single Lupin inhabitant. And he’d done that his whole life. He gave
resources to underfunded inner city works programs that assisted young adults making the transition
to permanent jobs for the first time in their lives. He opened battered women’s shelters all over the
country. He funded partnerships with private businesses to quietly lend support to Lupins caught
travelling at the start of their cycles.

It was in that vein, what he was doing for his own species that made Sarah’s head spin. She knew he
was wealthy, powerful, well-connected. She didn’t know he personally oversaw an Omega rescue
program and offered succor to those traumatized by trafficking. She hadn’t imagined he facilitated
foster and adoption programs for orphaned Lupin pups or that he maintained a strictly regimented
network of alpha mentors and Omega support nationwide, that he personally developed methods to
Release Omegas with disabilities who couldn’t be struck corporally without inflicting harm – all of it
on his own initiative. None of this had been in existence twenty years ago. The research, the training,
and the contracting was just the beginning. And here Sarah had insisted upon arguing semantics over
his playful use of masculine pronouns just to tweak her. She felt like an idiot.

What she now knew dovetailed seamlessly with what she’d seen of him as she watched him remove
Dr. Meyer with a scalpel and military precision. He was indeed ruthless where his enemies were
concerned. He was cold, unforgiving, decisive – Gabe hadn’t even shied away from the label
psychotic – but to become one of Castiel Winchester’s enemies took deliberate work. It wasn’t
accidental. It was only with a history of weighted works at one’s back, weighted to cause harm, to
destroy people, to undermine what was being tirelessly built, that drew his ire and his action. Castiel
removed these people like carving mold out of a wedge of cheese. He kept the good and cut out the
bad. And he continued always to build. It happened everywhere at once.

And people who might otherwise suffer, thrived instead. And Castiel went home daily to his Pack,
where he ate and slept and loved and fought and tried. Every day, he tried.

Gabriel’s telling was slanted. Sarah knew that. But stripping away the pride of an older brother
describing how the sun shines on his little brother, even pretending half of it was exaggerated, Sarah
couldn’t come to any conclusion but what she was left with.

Castiel had once asked her if she was a researcher or a crusader, and she thought she’d known what
he meant. She hadn’t. She didn’t. But she wanted to.

She looked up and out the window before her. The back lawn stretched rolling and green. Below
her, a little black puppy dug a series of holes inside a fenced enclosure. Sarah thought she could
relate to the peace that comes with joining a cult, with ‘drinking the Kool-Aid’, and maybe she was
no less naïve than they rest of the world when it came to falling for a sales pitch. But she didn’t think
so. The hallmark of a cult was it’s isolationism. It never stood up to scrutiny in the wider world.
Castiel’s world was the wider world, in every sense, and everywhere she looked, she found more confirmation that he had a vision that was real, and noble, and attainable, and it was exciting. And she wanted in.

And she WAS in. She was at ground zero, ready to line up with them shoulder to shoulder and carry a lance of her own into battle, and she felt dizzy with the possibility and the fear.

Below her, the puppy spotted a squirrel outside her enclosure her began flinging herself at the fence, barking her little furry head off at the squirrel who didn’t so much as flinch, and Sarah laughed.

She unpacked.

Chapter End Notes

It's all coming together. Finally. I thought about giving Cain some speaking lines, but then decided to leave him a little mysterious.

Love to everyone. Thanks especially to my friend in Greece. You're a delight, and I look forward to some playful collaborations.
Chapter 108

Chapter Summary

Loose ends? What loose ends? Let's see how many loose ends we can close in one chapter. It's chaos, folks, and a massive steam blow-off at the end.

Chapter Notes

I couldn't get through this chapter without constantly hearing Chuck in my head commenting that endings are hard.

A quick note about Jess. My version isn't even close to canon-compliant, and it's easy to see her as horrible. She's possibly the least likable of all the non-villains. But the point here is that she's right for Sam, even if that's uncomfortable and even if he doesn't show that side of himself to anyone else.

And a quick note about word count. I think we've just...ahem...moved, totally by accident, into the lead for SPN fics on this platform for word count. For those of you who have read every single fucking word. God bless you. And holy fuck.

That is all. Enjoy the chaos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter (Uriel) Uriel Formosa
ALPHA-Dominant [A/β/O: 17], [D/N/e: 17], [Z-Scale: 18], Pack Rank: 1
 cis-Male, Pansexual, b. 1969
 Mated to: Joyce Dianne
 Wolf Avatar: Melanistic Gray Wolf - full

Chapter 108 – Thursday, August 30, 2017

THEN:
“Shh,” Sam said, putting a hand across her mouth. “Someone just came home.”

She bit him.

He grunted and snatched his hand back with a look that he hoped warned her that he was not pleased. Curled naked in his own rumpled twin bed, he examined the meat of his palm in the dim light. Jess used his distraction to climb out of bed and reach for his robe. She nearly made it to the door of his bedroom before his eyes widened in alarm, and he bolted out of bed to cut her off.

“You can’t go out there. Are you crazy? Someone just came home,” he hissed. He pressed her back by her shoulders with his back against the door. His eyes pleaded with her.

“I need a shower,” she told him in a voice that would easily carry down the hall even with the door closed. Sam had never wished so hard for a lock on the door before.

“Shh! They’ll hear you. If we get caught, I’ll be grounded for a month, and I won’t be able to see you outside of school for who knows how long. Jess, please.”

She scoffed rudely. “You think they don’t know?” she asked him. “Your whole room reeks, and need I remind you it’s Dean’s room too? He knows, Sam. They both do. You’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“Maybe,” Sam countered. “But there’s knowing and then there’s knowing. As long as we keep it low key and don’t shove it Dad’s face…”

“Right,” she said skeptically. “Your dad strikes me as an openminded man with an easygoing constitution. Maybe he’s happy for us, Sam. You could ask him next time he’s home and conscious.”

He snarled and pressed her forcefully against the wall by the door. “You don’t know dick about my dad, so watch your mouth,” he growled, grinding his hips into hers in punctuation.

“You’ve said worse yourself,” she reminded him much too loudly. “You don’t care if he knows we’re fucking. You just don’t want an ass-whipping from a drunk, and you don’t have the weight to stand up to him yet, not without your brother there to run interference for you.”

Sam’s eyes dilated, and he panted against her body, poised for violence, snarling. Without warning, he bent and lifted her up bodily, threw her onto his bed, and covered her with his bulk, still scrawny enough that he didn’t have much to work with.

Jess didn’t fight. She grinned and shimmied low into the bed, spreading her legs eagerly and pulling him in by the back of his neck to a bruising kiss that was all hunger and teeth. Sam didn’t enjoy being goaded, but if she was going to go there, he’d respond. Already mussed and fouled, his bed creaked as he found his mark and thrust into her swollen softness. The headboard thumped into the wall, but Sam was too far gone to hear it.

In the kitchen, Dean rubbed his nose, grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, left the sacked groceries on the counter, and fled to the front porch to wait his kid brother out.

Teenagers. Jesus.
Sam flipped through the remaining forms on the desk in front of him and double-checked that every line had a response penciled in. He would file it all digitally, but he systematically compiled everything by hand first to be certain it was all complete before logging on to KU’s registration platform. He took a bracing breath and opened his University account on his laptop. Sam had never imagined going back to school for a Master’s, much less setting his sights on a PhD – not really. He’d planned to be a cop, a beat cop, a grunt. Somewhere along the way his worldview had grown larger. Much larger.

He’d discussed it at length with Jess, of course. With the Pack behind them, the two new parents could make it work. Benny swore to give Sam room in his schedule for school work. Cas promised they could lean in for babysitting or a quick meal and a bed any time they needed it. Jess kissed his throat, told him she was proud of him, and committed to taking on more of the household tasks while he crunched through the hardest sections to come.

Sam had also talked it over with Sarah. The ape was ahead of him along a similar track – a mirror image of his track, actually. They were after similar goals from opposite sides, and Sarah told him she’d help him with laying the groundwork for his thesis. Sam had read her notes. He thought he could possibly team up with her and go at it from different directions but in concert, much as Cas and Benny had done nearly a decade before. Sam worked easily with Sarah. Comfortably.

Too comfortably, maybe.

He pressed his lips together tightly and began to type.

Sam was no idiot, and he knew there was idle talk out on the floor. He also knew there was a chemistry that made his hours spent in her presence totally frictionless. They got each other far better than most people Sam had worked with. There was a synergy that made his supportive explanations spur her observations to a deeper clarity, and her keen third-person view solidified concepts for Sam that he’d taken for granted all his life.

That he found her sexy wasn’t relevant. She was a colleague.

And Sam was neither stupid nor naïve.

He was also happily Mated and adult enough to see the dangers for what they were. He was mature enough to know his own mind, his own desires, his own weaknesses. It wouldn’t matter if Sarah jumped the shark and threw herself naked into his lap, Sam wasn’t going to go there, no matter how beautiful and intriguing she was.

She wasn’t Jess.

And Jess was his whole world.

What did a pair of intense liquid brown eyes have in comparison?

She didn’t set him on fire the way Jess did, the way Jess always had. She didn’t sit up with him in the middle of the night and talk through the hardest choices of his life. She didn’t let him see her sweaty and out of sorts, covered in baby puke. She didn’t stand toe to toe with him and let passion override good sense. She didn’t lean into his chest in exhausted tears, too tired to stand on her own anymore, and trusting him to hold her. She didn’t harbor a wealth of scurrilous inside jokes that there could be no explaining. She didn’t pull from him a need long suppressed and give it a platform in a
way literally no one else had ever done. Perhaps she got him intellectually, interpersonally even… but…

She wasn’t Jess.

That didn’t keep him from befriending the woman though. It didn’t keep him from seriously considering where to draw his lines. Joking around with her was fine, but the casual flirting had to stop. It had begun innocently, before either of them realized that their personalities aligned so well, before there was danger that it could really sink in and catch. The last thing Sam wanted was for her to think he was offering something he wasn’t.

It was easier with wolves. A Lupin could tell by scent that Sam wasn’t open to opportunities. With a primate, he didn’t know if she could read him or not. Part of him wanted to just throw it all on the table and ask, but that might horrify her, and he didn’t want that either.

Sam’s monitor blinked with a prompt warning him his session would soon time out from sitting idle.

He huffed at his own idiocy, checked his form, and began to type. Down the hall, he heard Jess slam the door to the garage on her way back home from the grocery store, and Sam smiled to himself as Hank began to fuss in the bassinet beside him.

**************

April worked diligently all week. Rowena had been offered a small space behind Michael’s office with a tiny desk and a computer. The agent had an office of her own in the city, but she’d shifted to working straight out of the manor for the moment as she tried to pull out all the stops for her new client, who seemed on the verge of being the most lucrative Rowena had ever had.

Matt stayed right by April’s side, helping mold the tunes she was planning to record for demos, organizing them into genres, and fixing them into a logical order. Mark ran back and forth between the musician and her agent, fielding questions, offering suggestions, taking notes. It was turning into an incredibly productive week, and they all felt the momentum shift into high gear and meant to make the most of it while they were still together in one place. And while no one was yet pregnant.

The only dangling participle was Cain. Cas sent out the job offer, carefully worded and legally reviewed, but the alpha had yet to respond. It was as if the air above the house stopped moving as it waited. All the scurrying the team did was for naught without an alpha. Nicholas called at least once an hour to check in, but he tiptoed delicately around asking after the status of the job offer.

April hit her fed up mark with Nick by eleven-thirty on Tuesday, reminding him rudely that she had no chance of meeting his revision deadline if he didn’t leave her the fuck alone to work on it, and after that, he switched to texting Mark.

April had little more than a week left before the honeymoon when she could expect to be unreachable by the team. Before that happened, they hoped to have at least four distinct demo ‘albums’ ready to distribute, get Nick squared away with all the revisions April expected to be a part of, and make a plan for how to hit the ground running when she returned in a month. Everyone had marching orders while she was gone, but it all depended upon getting through the workload on the table before she left, depended upon getting a business manager situated at the head of the train, and the pressure was high.
Fresh from a Release, a renewed Claim to her bond and her Mating-scar, and a full D.F. from her mate – something he’d never offered her before – April was firing on all cylinders. She was calm and assertive, decisive, energetic. She felt a powerful creative wave sweep over her, and she rode it effortlessly under Matt’s steady hand. Complex rhythms and harmonies spilled from beneath her fingertips, caught in digital form as the recording equipment Mark installed captured every note she played, even during breaks and idle moments.

There weren’t many of those.

Matt called periodic halts to the driving pace, reminding her to tend to her puppy, to let her brain switch tracks for a while. She fought him every time he spoke up and had to be overruled unanimously by everyone in attendance, even Gabriel, before she conceded. If they didn’t gang up on her, she refused to stop, so they learned rapidly to present a united front, even phoning Nick for a voice of support when April’s spine stiffened stubbornly, and she tried to railroad straight past them.

“Your wee doggie was a concession by your Alpha, if I heard correctly,” Rowena trilled, collecting a hot cup of tea in the kitchen. “‘Twould be a pity if the Alpha learned that you’re neglecting the purring thing.”

April spun to confront her. “You wouldn’t!”

“Oh, I most certainly would.” Rowena stirred honey into her tea in an uninvested way, casually ticking the spoon against the side of the china cup. She spoke without a care in the world. “I’m new here, it’s true, lassie, but I learn fast. Word’s got around that you plan to…plant a bairn in the barn soon, shall we say? What would the Alpha say about that if he knew you couldn’t find a few moments out of your day to tend to the dog? How much time would he think you have to give to a baby?”

“Mind your own business,” April told her sharply. “It’s not the same thing at all.”

“No,” Rowena agreed. “It’s much harder with a wee infant or two than one little puppy.”

April looked down at Portia, playing happily with shredded scraps of fabric. Without a word, she unhooked the puppy’s leash from the wall by the back door, affixed it to her collar, and led her out into the run for a quick training and play session. She couldn’t afford to put Cas in the position where he doubted her ability to balance her work with motherhood. She didn’t want to know which way he would choose. Losing either would be a devastating blow.

“That a girl,” Rowena smiled, blowing across her cup and heading back to her tiny office. Passing Mark in the archway, she winked. The worry lines tracing his eyes didn’t ease. He stood vigil, silently watching the young woman through the window.

That was three of them now who had thrown their whole lives out the window to latch on to this young prodigy. Soon it would be four. Keeping her healthy and stable wasn’t a matter of being generous. It was the livelihood of all four of them at stake. Whether April ever forgave him or not, Mark expected a conversation with Castiel was at hand. She couldn’t be allowed to run herself into the ground like that. She wouldn’t last two years that way, and Mark meant for her to last far longer.

***************

More evenings than not, as they approached the last weekend before the wedding, their work hours
ran straight on past five o’clock, and work spaces spilled over into their home. There was a constant stream of people through the front door – attorneys, couriers, business people, wedding contractors, Facility staff, deliveries.

Michael had never imagined such a hum of activity infringing upon his home like this, but there was nothing for it. Dean halted any attempt to make progress on his book, disappearing into Castiel’s office with a serious expression and a stack of papers every evening. Michael’s past weekend together with Dean was a soft, blissful memory, from the hard-driving gangbang on Thursday, through the stark honesty that scraped scar tissue off both of their wounds on Saturday morning, and through an entire Sunday spent in each other’s company, building on what they’d started months ago. Building…always building. Michael would have panicked at the organized chaos all around him had it not been for the new layers of mortar in his bonds with his mate. Instead of losing it, Michael hummed to himself, strolling amid the pandemonium, turning up where he’d yet to be summoned with whatever they were just about to realize they needed already in his hands.

“I’m gonna start calling you Radar,” Dean told him affectionately the fourth time it happened, and Michael gloated softly. “Thanks, man.”

“It’s what I’m here for, alpha,” Michael responded. “Just keep in mind that a pregnant man needs his sleep, and I’m horny all the time. You can pay me back by fucking me to sleep before ten o’clock tonight.”

Dean laughed, catching Cas’ amused eye. “Deal. Go get a long bath, and I’ll meet you upstairs.”

“Finish what you’re doing first, Dean. I can amuse myself for a while.” Michael slipped out, and Dean’s eyes followed him. The alpha’s body nearly did as well, but Cas put a hand on his arm.

“Dean. We need to focus.”

“Amuse himself, he said,” Dean commented more to himself than to Cas. “What do you think he meant by that?”

Cas snapped his fingers. “Dean. Focus. Work now. Fuck later.”

They had far too much on their plates to get to all of it, but they had no choice but to keep plugging away at it until they’d made a dent in each item. Dean’s attentiveness to his mate as he sent Michael off to sleep with a muscle-relaxing orgasm was well intentioned but hardly up to his usual standard of care. He was too tired to do it right.

Michael didn’t seem to be holding any grudges though. He slipped into a deep slumber before his belly was wiped down with a warm cloth and a soft kiss.

The week flew by all in that vein, never getting quite enough accomplished to scratch an item completely off the ‘To Do’ list, but doggedly pressing forward. Media interviews were conducted on the hoof by cell phone, covering everything from Castiel’s epic new power rating, to the status of the merger, to the stalling of the FBI’s investigation in Oklahoma, to the rise of an angry wave of dissension over the ACRI’s stance on Omega rights, to the upcoming nuptials. Everyone was buzzing. Everything was at stake.

The contractors were all put on overtime to work the staff through the ramping stress. Client appointments were rescheduled for the week, and everyone on site was mandated, by order of the Alpha, to attend a minimum of one Scene session, whether at home or at work. Some of the staff were given daily appointments. They couldn’t afford for anyone to shift out of balance. Every hand, every mind, every body was needed, working at its highest capacity, and they all stepped up to meet
the need.

Sam’s right arm ached deep in the muscle tissue. He hadn’t had a week like this since training.

Michael sat in Dominant class feeling useless discussing proper and effective aftercare when his mate’s bond fairly vibrated with strain. Dean was on his game, but the man never stayed that way for long under tension this powerful without someone holding onto him. Michael’s knee bobbed under his desk in anxiety, wishing he could ditch class and go stand beside his mate. Or, alternatively, he wanted to go back to his office at home and dig through his wedding planner for anything he might’ve missed. Lists of countdown preparation tasks ran on repeat through his head. Most of it he could take care of from his phone – from his phone as he stood in his office at home, beside his mate, watching over him, going over his lists.

He sighed impatiently and checked the wall clock again.

“Winchester, am I boring you?” asked alpha Uriel.

“Sir, an honest answer to that question will wind up with both of us out of sorts,” Michael told him. “I apologize, but please don’t ask me questions if you don’t want to know the truth.”

The seasoned Dominant nodded. “Very well. I’ll ask a different question. Can you control yourself in my classroom, or do you require assistance?”

Michael slumped in his chair, all the smartass disappearing the instant Uriel’s alpha touched the man’s tone. “I can control myself,” he muttered.

“What was that?” Uriel asked him loudly. “Dominants do not mumble, Winchester.”

Michael sat up straight, blushing. “I said, no sir. I do not require assistance. I can control myself.”

“Glad to hear it. If it turned out that you couldn’t, we might need to assess if you are in the right classroom.”

Michael growled softly at him, and the instructor cocked his head. “You don’t like that?” Uriel goaded. “Good. You’ll need that fire to set the right tone when you work a scene, but I don’t care if you scored a 45 on your Keller test, Omega. This is my classroom, not yours, and you’re a long way from your full strength, boy. I’m not Raphael, and I don’t roll for the likes of you. Not now, not ever. Test me anytime you think you’ve got the weight to pull it off.” Uriel’s eyes sparked red, and his lip curled.

Michael’s wolf threw its shoulder against the gate in Michael’s head, and the Omega cracked the lock for him. He didn’t need the wolf for this, but he saw no reason to deny the beast a voice either. His eyes flattened instantly, and a cold, haughty expression took the place of the disingenuous sycophant he’d tried to pass off as an invested student.

“Understood,” he said without emotion. “I apologize for the disruption, sir. Please continue.”

Uriel held his eyes for a few more moments, then evidently decided not to press the issue. He turned back to the front of the room and picked up where he’d left off. Michael could feel eyes on him. Beta eyes. Alpha eyes. No one else was Omega here. No one but Michael. It meant he had to travel two miles for every one of theirs, just to arrive at the same place. The embarrassed blush was gone, an angry flush taking its place. This guy with his, ‘This is my fucking classroom’ could eat dicks for all Michael cared. There would be a reckoning someday between the two of them, and Michael wouldn’t need a 45 rating to roll the fat bastard onto his back to show his fat belly.
In the meantime, the alpha knew things that Michael needed to know, so it would keep. Michael let the slave continue, even if Uriel didn’t yet realize he was Michael’s slave.

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Dean fiddled with his pen as the meeting began to wrap up on Thursday afternoon. Crowley’s Scottish brogue over the phone line had become a bagpipe drone that never paused for breath. Dean didn’t think he’d ever known anyone so in love with his own voice. The man had been soundly and thoroughly corrected, as close to a woodshed strapping as Castiel could do from here, and the beta had changed his tune right in the middle of his monologue after the briefest but staunchest of smackdowns. But it hadn’t shut him up. It would’ve been funny if Dean didn’t have so much to accomplish waiting for him back in his office. He glanced up at the clock and then at Cas with a look.

Cas raised one finger. Wait.

Dean rolled his eyes.

Crowley droned on about branding and leverage, something about coalescing algorithms and cohesive trajectories, and Dean sort of wanted to be Michael long enough to say something snide. He began a new doodle on his notepad. It was a hangman image with a stick figure in a kilt dangling by its neck over a pit of fire. Cas tapped Dean’s notepad with a stiff finger and sent him a stern look when Dean glanced up. He dropped his pen and let his head fall backward to stare upward.

“Thank you, Fergus,” Castiel said at last. “I’m sure I speak for everyone when I say I appreciate your support. Please be mindful of our time allowances. Your report is due no later than four o’clock central time, just like everyone else’s. I’m sure we all need to get back to it. If there’s nothing else?”

No one said anything.

“All right,” Cas sighed. “That’s it for now. Those of you packing up for Portland, finish your reports before you leave. No excuses. If you can’t keep up with your daily grind with a convention on your plate, it’s the convention that gets dropped, am I clear? We need to tighten up the rigging. Ask for help if you need it but stay focused on the core mission. The Facility comes first, before sing-a-ongs.”

A chorus of “Yes, Alpha” echoed back at him, and he nodded.

“Dismissed.”

“Jesus Christ,” grumbled Dean, pacing the Alpha as they headed back downstairs toward their offices. “We’re not gonna survive that guy, Cas. He’s killing morale.”

“Patience, Dean. I’ll break him. Give me some time.”

“Wish I could’ve seen his face when you cut him off,” Dean murmured wistfully. “I’ll bet it was epic. Maybe Jonathon snapped a pic. I’d call that a real dick pic. Get it? Cause it’s a picture of a dick?”

“Try to remember that you are part owner of this institution and a responsible adult, my love,” Cas chided calmly with his eyes on the opened manila folder he carried. There was no heat in his voice at
all. “Act the part for me, please. Fake it if you have to.”

Dean snickered, leaned in and kissed Castiel’s lips. “Yes, Alpha,” he promised. “Oh, if you need me, come on in. I’m set to DND on my phone and computer. Someone assigned reports due in an ungodly two hours. I’m swamped. And I may not be going to Portland, but that doesn’t mean I get out of signing off on the schedule for it. Probably need to stay late tonight. You wanna take Michael home for me? Swing back by later and pick me up?”

Cas frowned. “Can’t you finish up at home? It doesn’t make any sense to make two trips.”

Dean shook his head. “Can’t think at home. Too much going on. Too many people.”

Cas regarded him for a moment, watching Dean’s eyes. “Is it Sarah?” he asked carefully. “Dean, if it’s not going to work having her in the house, I’ll move her to the Guest house and limit her access.”

“It’s not Sarah, man. It’s the workload and the wedding details and all the crazy last-minute shit. It’s Portland, and extra security on the house, and the merger, and trying to get specs on expanding Dallas, and running a training department short-handed, and Michael’s pregnancy. You know me, Alpha. I don’t handle overload well. It’s too much. I need to shut myself into one of the H/R rooms and scream myself hoarse, if you really wanna know. This will be the first convention I’ve ever missed. You get that, right? I’m always there. I understand why you benched me, dude, but…”

Cas chuckled affectionately. He carded a hand through Dean’s hair. “It’s Thursday, Dean. Get through today and tomorrow, and I’ll reward you when you get home, no matter how many visitors might still be in the house. You can do it, alpha,” he said. “Do it for me.”

Dean smiled absentmindedly, enjoying the hand in his hair. “Wait. Reward?” he opened his eyes and looked at Castiel. “You said we were on a moratorium.”

“I never said that,” Cas told him. “We agreed to a one-week moratorium. Last I looked, tomorrow is a week and a day from our wedding. It’s also a Friday. If you’ll remember, I stated my intention to begin opening the gates for a foursome on a Friday to make sure we have the capacity to rest or to heal as needed after what may turn into an intense experience. I believe you were the one who jumped to the conclusion that my trip to New York without you was a declaration that our hiatus had begun. I never made any such statement. What’s more, I’m declaring Saturday a day of rest. No one will do any work on Saturday whatsoever outside of basic necessity.”

Dean stared at him.

Cas lowered his chin. “Get through today, Dean. Tough it out and get through tomorrow, and I’ll reward you. Deal?”

“When you say, ‘get through it’, what d’you mean?”

Cas laughed. “Assuming you don’t die. Lord, please don’t die. All you have to do is tuck your head, stay focused, meet your deadlines like you always do, ask for help if you find you can’t meet a deadline, and meet me in the playroom at 6:30 on Friday evening. Can you do that?”

“I can do that,” Dean told him dreamily.

“Good. Get to work. You now have an hour and fifty minutes to get that report to my desk.”

“Fuck,” Dean exclaimed, checking the time on his phone.

Cas swatted him as he turned to leave. It wasn’t hard enough to hurt. It merely warmed Dean’s right
ass cheek and made him jump. “You’re adorable, and I’m in love with you, Winchester,” Cas called.

“You’re a sap,” Dean called back. “And you swing like a girl.”

Cas laughed. He’d show Dean. He knew some girls who could swing with intent. Cas considered it a compliment. His door latched behind him, and his lightness fell away. Like Dean, Cas had more to finish than he could possibly accomplish before the wedding. The two of them had some late nights ahead of them and precious little time to devote to last minute wedding details. Thank God for Michael and Kali.

Cas went rapidly through his messages, sorting them into business, political, personal, and confidential. He dialed the assisted care facility where his mother now lived and checked up on her, taking the full report down in his personal journal before phoning the woman herself.

“Hello, Mother. How are you feeling?” Feeling guilty about splitting his attention, Cas scrolled through his emails, hoping she couldn’t tell she only had one of her son’s ears.

“Abysmal, Castiel,” she replied sharply. “The way patients are treated in this place. It’s a disgrace. How did you select it, by throwing darts at the phone book?”

“You need to do the physical therapy, Mother,” Cas replied. “And you need to do the mental exercises as well. Your mind will stay sharp longer. We talked about this. You agreed to follow the therapists’ recommendations. I’m hearing that you’re combative and uncooperative. Those exercises aren’t for the staff’s health; they’re for yours. If we need to alter something, I’ll look into it, but if you’re putting up a fight because you simply don’t like them, I cannot help you.”

“Therapists! More like Dungeon masters. Those people are evil, Castiel.”

“Mother, no one can make you help yourself. You have to commit to it on your own. You have a degenerative condition. Every opportunity you have to slow its progression is an opportunity you won’t get back.”

The line went quiet, and Cas turned away from his monitor to make sure the connection was still intact.

“I’m tired, son. I’m not sure what the point is to all this work. You told me yourself that there’s no hope of reversing the direction of the disease. Why make me pretend I have any control? Who’s it for? Me? Is it for me, Castiel?”

Cas sighed. “Mother, with a little effort on your part, with a positive mental attitude, you can still live a relatively normal life for years. Years. If that doesn’t matter to you, I can’t change your mind, but you still have a life to live, and it’s not like you to give up before you’ve thrown everything you have at the issue.”

“…At the issue,” she repeated. “You think I’m not behaving like myself? Have you forgotten to whom you’re speaking? Perhaps it isn’t me who needs to readjust her expectations. Perhaps I’m not behaving like myself because I no longer AM myself. You cannot possibly imagine what the silence in my head feels like. It’s dreadful, Castiel. So, you’ll forgive me if I don’t jump up and down for joy that working with Attila the Hun every day and playing his patronizing games might allow me to enjoy even more of this.”

Cas licked his lips. His palms broke out in a sweat at the thought of what it must be like to try to carry on without his Secondary designation thinking thoughts in and around his own. The silence would be unbearable.
“Mother, please try. You’re going to have some bad days. We know that. We talked about that, remember? But there will be good ones as well. The silence won’t feel as oppressive with time. And I know you’ve always wanted to be a grandmother. If you can’t do it for yourself, can you possibly do it as a means to be present to get to know your grandchildren? Michael’s already carrying our first, and April and I plan to have pups just as soon as we can. This time next year, you could be holding your grandson, possibly more pups than one. Please. Please don’t give up. You’ve never given up on anything in your life. I don’t believe that was all your beta’s doing. I don’t believe it.”

“Michael’s son is not my grandchild,” she protested weakly.

“Oh, yes he is. He’s Michael’s and Dean’s, but he’s also April’s and mine. He will be your own grandson as surely as any child who comes from my seed.”

“Don’t speak crudely, Castiel. You may practically bathe in the stuff in private, but there’s no need to speak coarsely about it to your mother.”

He smiled grimly. “There you are. I knew you were in there somewhere. Listen, I’ll be by on Sunday. Gabriel is coming on Saturday with Kali to bring you dinner and to eat with you. I’ll speak to the therapy team about customizing your therapy so that you tolerate it better. It does no good to go through the motions if it’s not meeting the goal of helping improve your quality of life.”

“If I hear the phrase, ‘Quality of Life’ one more time, I’ll shriek,” she threatened, and Castiel couldn’t blame her. Hers was a grim trajectory. But he wasn’t ready to let her waste away to skin, bones, and nightmares yet.

“You have my word,” he said gently. “Mother, Kali has your dress for the wedding. She’ll do a fitting while she’s there. Please be kind to her. She’s your daughter-in-law, and she makes Gabriel happy. It gains you nothing by antagonizing your son through insults to the people he loves. Do you understand?” It come out with an unusual inflection, not the standard demand for acquiescence, but a query to check if she’d comprehended. He could no longer take that for granted.

“I will be the perfect hostess and a perfect mannequin as well. You have my word, too, son.”

“Thank you,” he told her, and he meant it. “By the way, your office has been in touch with Monday’s voting decisions. They asked me to pass them along, so I’m emailing you. If you disagree with any of the choices, there’s time for you to discuss it with them. I only ask that you go through me rather than contacting them directly. There are legal concerns to consider.”

Silence followed again.

“Mother?”

“I…don’t want to know, Castiel. That isn’t my responsibility any longer.”

“Legally, no, but they are still the team you assembled. They’ve made a commitment to seeing your mandate through to the election. They want your input.”

“No,” she said vehemently. “Not anymore.”

“All right,” he said sadly. “I’ll inform Anita. I’ll let her know that the torch is in her hands now. I’m sure she’ll be sad to hear that, but she’ll understand. They all will.”

“Castiel, I hate to cut you short, but my program is starting. Do call again, won’t you?”

“Goodbye, Mother. Be well. I love you.”
“Yes, of course. Goodbye, son.”

No sooner had he hung up than Becky transferred a call from the team of attorneys working feverishly toward the merger. Dates had been announced, and the clock was ticking. Castiel took the call and was swept away into a maelstrom of activity. He didn’t have time to fret over his mother’s condition.

Dean closed his door and leaned against it for a moment, closing his eyes, feeling the odd tingle where Castiel’s hand had just smacked him. Sometimes it felt like the two of them were truly bonded with the way their bodies reacted to each other. He didn’t linger though. That report wasn’t going to write itself, and he’d promised. Everyone had promised. Cas needed status reports, including full gap analyses on the condition of every department and sub-department, and he needed them right now so the planners and the legal team could get the final pins in place for the merger. Dean had most of the data, but he still needed to assemble it into something Cas could read and understand at a glance.

He slid into his chair and dialed Jonathon in Dayton.

“I know what you’re going to ask me,” Jonathon said as he answered without bothering with ‘Hello’. “And it’s already in your in-box. That’s everything from the Keller training side. Do you want to talk through it, or do you just wanna paste it and go?”

“Hello to you too,” Dean joked, navigating to the data file and scanning through it. “Nah, buddy, this is golden. Thanks a million. I’ll take it from here. Gonna mesh ‘em side by side, make it a cinch to see the differences. I’ve already got the tables set up and labeled. Oh, and by the way, you coming into town on Thursday or Friday? Michael wanted a final check on the hotel bookings and who might need reservations for dinner Thursday night.”

“I wish I could make it Thursday, Dean,” Jonathon replied. “But Crowley scheduled a staff meeting for Friday morning at ten. I can’t reschedule it, and I can’t miss it.”

“What a dick,” Dean responded. “He knows half the team is planning to be in K.C. that weekend. Jesus, I’m surprised he didn’t schedule it for 4:30 in the afternoon.”

Jonathon huffed a humorless laugh. “I’ll bet he considered it,” he said. “But he knew there are limits to what people will take. He’d’ve been in a conference room by himself. I take it Crowley isn’t attending the wedding?”

“We should be so lucky,” Dean told him. “He’s flying in by private jet on Saturday just before the ceremony and skipping right back out a couple of hours later. He made sure we knew that.”

Jonathon laughed. “Such a workaholic. He’s a role model for the rest of us. Talk to you later, Dean. See you on Friday if you’re not tied up with wedding crap.”

“Bye, man. Safe flight.”

The report he’d promised – bright and shiny, professional, thorough, and accurate – hit Castiel’s inbox with twenty minutes to spare and carried a very inappropriate, very suggestive subject line.
Castiel smirked as he read the title. Finding a way to motivate Dean had never been difficult. Cas mentally added, ‘Need to choreograph a foursome’ to his To Do list and began to review the report.

By Friday evening, their first Friday Pack dinner with Sarah, everyone’s nerves were frayed. Sam’s empty chair had a double-wide bouncy seat strapped onto it, and Jess fussed over her boys. Beside Dean, Michael rolled his shoulders and shifted in his chair, looking for a comfortable way to sit on reddened flesh. The day’s Dom class had not gone smoothly for Michael.

Dean had, on top of everything, sat with Cas through a video conference with Cain once he’d finally responded to the job offer. Grilling the man by video wasn’t remotely satisfying when his scent wasn’t detectable, and Dean still felt unresolved about it; unresolved about everything to do with Darius Cain, most especially the idea that he might be invited to join the pack if the connections fell well into place. Cas assured him that that decision was still some ways off, down the road.

April had begun to carry the energy of her work sessions around with her, a little wild-eyed and manic. Gabriel seemed to be riding her high-strung notes. His jokes were louder and coarser than usual, enough that even Kali found them irritating, and the newlyweds snapped at each other more than once.

“Everyone stop,” Castiel told them firmly after they’d begun to eat and the stress from each wolf ricocheted one to another. “Stop. Set down your utensils. Close your eyes. Breathe. We need a moment of peace. Shh.” He put his arms outward to the side corners, giving one hand to April and, with a forearm resting across his nephews, giving the other to Jess. Both women took his hands. With a clattering of cutlery, the rest of the table followed suit. Jess slid her hand into Sarah’s. Sarah hesitantly took Michael’s. Michael squeezed Dean’s hand with a solid grip. Dean smiled softly at him and then turned to take Gabriel’s hand on his other side. Gabe let his be captured, but his eyes were on his wife’s as he kissed her hand and winked. Kali rolled her eyes and then turned to cover April’s hand on the tablecloth.

“Eyes closed,” Cas reminded them. “Let’s calm down together. It has been a wearisome week, and we’ve all accomplished a great deal. I want each of us to spend a few moments in review, silently within ourselves. Think through everything you’ve done since last Sunday, and marvel at yourselves. I am exceedingly proud of each and every one of us. Right now, I want you examining why you deserve to be proud of yourselves.”

There was a snort from down the table, but it was soon stifled. Silence, but for their breathing, filled the dining room.

“Gabriel, close your eyes, please.”

“Psshh, you wouldn’t have known mine were open if you had yours closed.”

“Shh!”

“Heartbeats slowing.” The Alpha’s voice was hypnotic. “Breaths deepening. Slow down. Stop being for a moment, and float.”

He let them glide for a few more moments, conscious that dinner was cooling on their plates. With a squeeze to April’s hand, he opened his eyes and found her blinking at him with a soft sigh. Her eyes no longer looked tight. She nodded wordlessly, then turned to apply the same pressure to Kali to bring her out too. It went like that back around the table, even Gabriel blinking calmly as his eyes opened and his head lifted with a deep breath.
“Better?” Castiel asked his pack.

Sarah was bemused. “Is that a ritual you do often? Like saying grace in a way? It was lovely.”

Cas addressed his meal with knife and fork, answering with his head down. “No, we’ve never done that before. It was a spontaneous response to an unsettled energy level. A pack that is that keyed up is destined for conflict. I would rather enjoy our meal together than bicker.” He spared a glance into the seat at his left, Sam’s seat, and found both boys watching him with wide, interested eyes. “It had no religious significance. Rather, it was a meditative practice.”

“Many prayers are just that, Alpha,” she said with a portion of chicken on the end of her fork. “It’s a renewal of community and fellowship to pray together as much as it is a conversation with God. It’s very often a meditation within the self as well. Prayer has all kinds of positive effects.”

He nodded in understanding. “Well, in future, if we do that again, please feel free to use that time to offer a prayer as you would. You are welcome to make yourself a home in this house, Sarah. I consider you pack while you’re under my roof, and your needs will be met here. That includes spiritual ones that differ from ours.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” she said shyly, unaccustomed to such a direct expression of acceptance. Did that mean that if she began dating someone, that he would be welcome to share her bed here and show up at breakfast in a bathrobe? Not that she had any prospects for such a role at the moment or any time available in which to squeeze such a person. But she had no idea what the future held or how long she might call this place home.

“You’re welcome,” said Cas. “In every sense.”

Conversation began to break the formality of the moment, springing up around the table organically now that the pack had skipped back down several orbitals to its natural energy level, and laughter took the place of anxiety. Announcements were made as usual. Discussions varied from the personal to the global, and everyone but the twins took part. Dean told the Pack that he and Michael had agreed to a trial period with Michael taking a chair in panel discussions at the next seminar. Kali updated everyone about what remained incomplete going into the last week before the wedding, with Michael adding commentary to her list.

Cas announced new safety rules in light of the influx of hate mail the Pack was receiving following their newest social media posts. No one was to go anywhere off the estate alone without his personal approval. Betas and Omegas would be required to have a security guard with them at all times outside the gates. Jess got nowhere in arguing with him. Their personal bodyguards would move into her house as soon as Sam returned from Portland and took his family back home. He’d already been informed and agreed to it.

“It’s a temporary measure, Jess,” Cas said. “But I insist. Further protest is unwelcome. The matter is closed. You will comply with my command.” His eyes offered her no softness, and she mumbled her acquiescence with her head lowered.

“Thank you,” he told her. “Don’t test me on this, any of you. You will find I mean business.” He met everyone’s eye, one by one, and only moved on once he was certain he had their compliance. Kali would bear watching, but she seemed resigned to carting a bodyguard with her to work every day. Finally, he nodded and shifted onto the topic of April’s progress. He asked her to update the Pack on everything she had on her plate.

Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion about Cain. Even Sarah. But in the end, Castiel made it clear that how and when and to what degree the alpha-Sub took a place in the Pack was his decision, and
he would make it when he saw fit.

Dean’s green eyes weighed the statement for a moment, and then he nodded and turned back to his plate with a hearty complement to Tony’s use of a glossy citrus glaze. Cas knew he hadn’t heard the last of Dean’s input on the matter. It had become painfully clear during the video call that Dean didn’t like the man, predictable in that they were both alpha-Submissives. Dean would be watching him with unflappable persistence, and Cas expected to need to intervene more than once in the coming months.

Michael took the news with a surprising degree of acceptance, considering that Cas had clearly stated the full role he expected the man to fill, as it were. Thinking through how Michael might find it such a benign turn of events, Cas could only conclude that Michael welcomed anyone who pulled the spotlight off of his own plans for April. Someone else in the Pack with the authority to touch her so intimately, someone who had such clear and delicate lines of acceptable behavior to traverse, who would draw Castiel’s wolf’s attention away from Michael, such a person was no threat to Michael at all, he was a gift.

Dean had argued with Castiel after the video conference, worried for April’s safety more than Cain’s if Castiel’s wolf determined the man was overstepping his authority the first time he touched her. But Cas brushed him off. Cain might someday be Pack, but his role was institutional, not personal, and Castiel’s designations knew the difference. Hadn’t she successfully completed Ozzie training without his wolf raising a stink? It was the same thing, Castiel insisted. Cain was a proxy, not an intimate.

“Until he falls in love with her,” Dean countered in the privacy of Cas’ office.

“He’s gay, Dean. But even if that should come to pass in a platonic way,” said the Alpha. “Her bond is with me. Her heart is fully occupied between Michael and me. She has no reason to become emotionally enmeshed with her chaperone.”

“Reason? When have emotions ever followed the track of reason? Didn’t you see ‘The Bodyguard’, man? Whitney Houston, Kevin Costner? Big, vibrant song at the end?”

Cas huffed a laugh. “Yes, Dean. I saw that movie. And that song was Dolly Parton’s before it was Whitney Houston’s.”

“That’s right,” Dean agreed. “And Dolly’s movie was the same thing. The vulnerable girl falls for her big, brave protector man.”

“April isn’t vulnerable,” Cas insisted.

“Are you just gonna make the same mistakes all over again?” Dean asked bluntly.

“No!” Cas shot back vehemently. “Things have changed. I have the full scope of April’s emotions open before me now. No one’s going to sneak into her affections without me knowing about it. That’s not ever going to happen again, Dean.”

“So it doesn’t sneak up on you, and instead you get to watch it all unfold live and in stereo sound. It’s not gonna change anything, man. If she goes for this jackass, there’s nothing you can do about it. And you’re gonna have to stand there and know that his knot has been inside your mate’s ass, and there’s not a damn thing you can…”

Cas growled loud enough that Dean’s mouth snapped shut. “That’s NOT going to happen,” he insisted again. “I vetted this guy. He’s not her type at all. She’s certainly not his. There’s no chemistry between them, no spark, not even the frictional kind like she had from the start with
Michael. Dean, at some point, we have to let go and trust our mates. I may not fully trust Cain yet, but I trust April.”

Dean shook his head, but he didn’t argue.

“We can’t be worried every moment that someone in the world is going to turn our mate’s eye,” Cas went on. “At some point, we have to trust that our connections with them are strong enough to hold.”

Dean pressed his mouth into a tight line and then lost his battle to keep it shut. “Yeah, maybe so, Alpha, but this guy isn’t just anyone. He’s not just working with her. He’s gonna be paddling her bare ass and knotting her, and he’s gonna do it while you’re hundreds of miles away. Please don’t write it off as a business relationship. It’s gonna be so much more than that. And you might actually rip his head off his shoulders without ever realizing you’re at risk of doing that. Man, I need you to be sure. It’s too dangerous to take it lightly.”

Cas looked up at Dean from his desk chair and sighed. “I know.” He swallowed. “We’re all going to be very careful. But Dean, we don’t have a choice. If she’s going to make a go of it, there will need to be times she’s away from all of us. Unless you’re volunteering to quit your post and chaperone her, I don’t have a choice. It has to be an alpha, and he has to have full access. Nothing less will work.”

“You should’ve chosen a woman,” Dean said in resignation.

“I tried,” Cas conceded. “Believe me. I tried. And if I ever unearth a woman with the right qualifications, I will make the switch, for all our sakes. A homosexual man was the best I could do. In the meantime, April and I need your support to make this work. You don’t have to like him, Dean. But I need you to trust that she and I have put a great deal of effort and thought into this decision and give us the benefit of the doubt here.”

“And accept another alpha into the pack,” Dean pressed.

“Perhaps.”

Dean’s eyebrows met his hairline as he shrugged and lifted his palms outward. His eyes clearly said he thought his fiancé was digging his own grave but that Dean washed his hands of the responsibility for what might happen.

“Sam’s gonna love this,” he added sarcastically.

“Sam will cope,” Cas told him shortly.

“You really think your Alpha can handle another man fucking your mate?” Dean tried one last time, going for blunt. “Your wolf?”

“Yes, Dean. I believe that I can control myself if it means April has a chance of living fully to her vast potential. If I can temper myself to allow her an intimate connection with Michael, one that triggers my possessiveness far worse than a custodial alpha does, then I can manage this. We will see when the time comes for him to place a Claim. I intend to stand witness to that, and I will expect you to be there as well.”

“Yikes,” Dean said. “Have the whiskey handy. I’m gonna need eye bleach for this.”
As dessert was served, Castiel made another announcement.

“Dean, Michael, Kitten,” he introduced. “I believe the time has come. If the three of you are agreeable, I invite you to join me half an hour after dinner concludes. I will be in the Playroom. Your presence is voluntary. Your participation is likewise up to your own preference. I intend to take the evening to let my hair down a bit. Tomorrow, we rest. Tonight, if you’ll join me, we play.”

Michael had his head lowered tightly over his custard, spoon frozen in the process of scooping out a bite, eyes flicking between Cas, April, and Dean, waiting for someone else to speak first. He caught Dean smirking down the table at Cas. April met Michael’s eye with her lower lip caught in her teeth. Her cheeks held a beautiful blush, and her eyes a vivid light. A slow smile spread on Michael’s face, and he focused back into the shallow bowl before him, letting smooth custard slide down his throat.

“Can I kneel for you, Alpha?” asked Dean.

“We’ll see,” Cas answered cryptically. “I promised you a reward, and you met all of the requirements and then some. If you want to kneel, I’d like to give it a shot, but we will need to be cautious for this first attempt.”

Sarah’s ears had gone bright red. She didn’t need to be Lupin to feel the heat coming off of Michael’s body next to hers. She could feel the air pressure shift as the spark of the proposition turned him into a poised arrow, nocked and drawn, prepared to loose.

She cleared her throat uncomfortably, and Gabriel laughed. “Get used to it, kiddo. At least you’re not anyone’s brother. The time’s coming when you’re going to witness the full monty and not blink an eyelash. Hope you like backsides. You’re gonna see a lot of them, usually in an upright presentation, and usually a bright shade of pink.”

“That’s enough, Gabriel,” Cas chided.

“Right,” he retorted. “That was too much, but you four eye-fucking and talking D&S positions is fine. Apologies, Alpha.”

Jess and Kali both laughed. Soon, Sarah joined them, shaking her head, telling herself to get over it. Dinner was over, and Cas didn’t intend to wait around arguing with Gabe. He dismissed the table, and helped Jess unbuckle the twins’ seat as Tony appeared to begin clearing dishes with Fred.

“Thirty minutes,” Cas reminded Michael and April as he took Dean’s hand to lead him upstairs.

“Is that so you won’t get cramps?” Gabe wondered idly.

“See? That’s what I said,” Michael answered enthusiastically. The room began to empty. Michael remained in his seat, passively watching April who hadn’t stood up either. Soon, they were alone. Cautiously, she lifted her head and looked down the length of the table at him.

“Did you know he was going to propose this tonight?” Michael asked. “Did he tell you?” He shifted forward to put most of his weight on his lower thighs just above his knees.

She shook her head subtly, just a miniscule motion. Her gaze was guarded.

“Pete, if you don’t want me there…”

“I want you there,” she blurted.

“How there?”
She took a moment to consider the question. Then said, haltingly, “I…don’t want…to kneel…for you.”

He rolled his eyes impatiently and leaned forward onto his elbows with his hands clasped before him on the table. “I get that. I’m not asking you to. I’m not asking for anything but for you to tell me where we stand right now, you and me. Are you ready for this? Is it just sex? If it’s just sex, Pete, I can live with that. For now.”

Tony came back in to finish clearing on Michael’s last question, and then he backed quickly out again, reversing his steps. Michael turned his head slightly to watch him depart. When he turned back, her pale blue eyes caught his, and Michael felt his breath knocked out of him at their intensity. The moment lengthened into an unsustainable span. He couldn’t look away. He couldn’t breathe. Everything he’d been holding back for so many weeks was reflecting back at him in her eyes, and it was an offer. Not a demand. Not a question. Not a submission.

Just an offer.

His lips parted slightly. It wasn’t just sex.

“Can you give me that with him right there?” he asked quietly. “We don’t have to do it this way.”

“I want to do it this way,” she said, matching his volume. “I want everyone to see it, especially Castiel.”

“Pete.” He broke her gaze with a sharp intake of breath and a hand through his hair.

“Only if it’s what you want too, Michael. You’ve been so patient. You kept your word. You didn’t pressure me.”

“Jesus, I’m shaking,” he said into his lap.

“I don’t know what happens next, Michael. But I want you. I can’t pretend I can keep that separate from how much I love you. If you want to, I’d like for you to come with me, and I want to see what it’s like for you both to make love to me at the same time. I’m being selfish…” Her eyes fell back to her lap.

“You’re not,” he insisted.

She risked a look up at him. “Oh, yes, I am.”

His eyes softened, and his ears turned bright red. “Then we’re both being selfish. I’m so turned on right now I could dive right over this table and take you here, and still make it to the Playroom in half an hour.”

She smiled wickedly. “Wouldn’t that surprise them both? We would turn up already reeking of sex.” She laughed at the image of the alphas taken by surprise, and then she blushed and looked away again. “They’re kissing,” she said with her eyes tracing a path through the floor and several walls set opaque between the two couples.

“Mm-hm,” Michael agreed, following her line of sight. Slowly, he stood up and rounded the table, holding a hand out to help her to her feet. For a moment, she only stared at his hand as if unsure that it might not bite her. He waited motionless, and when she put her trembling hand in his at last, he stepped back and let her pull against him instead of the other way around. Once they were both standing, he turned slowly away, her hand still in his, and he guided her from the dining room and across the parlor, across the foyer, into the Omega sitting room near the massive front door. She
followed him wordlessly, pausing as he closed the door behind the two of them, standing still as he raised his eyes to hers, waiting motionless as he stepped deliberately closer at an impossibly measured pace. His hand came up to cradle her face with a touch that was so tender it was felt more in her soul than through her body. She shuddered, and he shushed her gently. Her eyes tracked his as he flickered his gaze down to her lips and then back up again. She could feel his body heat now. She could feel his breath, stuttered and shallow. She could smell coffee and custard.

Slowly, so slowly, he brought his face closer to hers. Their eyes jumped and danced, unsure where to settle, and then they slipped closed, first April’s and then Michael’s. The first tentative touch of lips sent a shiver through them both. It was barely a touch; a warm, delicate brushing of lips, and then he pulled back a little, opened his eyes to find hers, frowned in concerted intent, tilted his head a little, and moved back in to touch her lips again.

Her hands found his hips, and his both took places at the sides of her head, flexing his fingers through her hair. He pressed in closer with his body. She moaned softly and kissed him back, deepening the touch, setting her own intentions clearly before them both. His fingers tightened in her hair, and his kiss began to shift from careful to something that was anything but. Her lips parted the slightest bit, and he traced the shape of her mouth with his tongue along that part, not breaking the plane of her mouth, but exploring the very edge where their lips came together.

April’s fingers flexed. They gripped. She pulled. And Michael wrapped her up with both arms and dove into her mouth hungrily with a whine. Her back thumped against the door, and she kissed him back feverishly, starved. One of her arms traversed his upper back to cling to the opposite shoulder, and her other pulled hard at his lower back as she lost herself in the feel of his mouth, the taste of him, the texture of his tongue, and his teeth against hers.

That they could both still feel their mates’ passion tipping over within them wasn’t lost on either of them, and a part of each of them hoped their mates weren’t so enmeshed in each other that they couldn’t feel the echoes from the front Omega sitting room. Michael wanted Dean’s attention, and he wanted Castiel’s. Shifting the tilt of his head, Michael took hold of April’s jaw and he plunged into her mouth, investing himself in learning where his fantasies had strayed from reality, and where they were real. What she tasted like, felt like, smelled like. God, what she smelled like. A throaty growl slipped out of his mouth and into hers, and she swallowed the sound, utterly taken, utterly overwhelmed. Her hand slipped downward to take a firm hold of his ass, and he nearly lifted off the floor in his haste to get away from the painful grasp, huffing hard with his head thrown backward. His hand closed around her wrist and pulled her hand clear even as he blew hard breaths out through pursed lips.

“Fuck!” he moaned, closing his eyes again and dropping his head onto her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she said into his ear, her hand hovering over the seat of his pain, not touching, and he let go of her wrist and shook his head.

“Not your fault,” he huffed breathlessly. “Got forty today in class with the hole-punched paddle for mouthing off. Had that doubled for me when I got home. I’m a little tender right now.”

“Jesus, Michael. Are you…sure you wanna…”

“I’m sure,” he told her adamantly, lifting his head and letting her see it in his eyes, how very sure he was. “Just, maybe you could wait a few days before the ass-grabbing.”

She giggled sympathetically, shifting to holding his waist instead of his butt, and she leaned back into him with wide eyes. “Come here and let me kiss it better,” she whispered.
“If you’re kissing it better, it’s not my lips that hurt,” he pointed out, but he met her lips anyway, and they disappeared into the slick, hot slide of lips and tongues and the feel of each other’s hands.

He pulled away, breathless, aware that she could feel the hard line of his cock against her hip. He stood panting, staring into her eyes, and she mirrored him, an indescribable look on her face.

With effort, a world of effort, Michael stepped back slightly, pulling his body clear of hers. He blinked slowly, finding his breath. April’s arms let him put distance between them, settling back upon the softly padded hipbones that had once been sharp. His lips closed. He swallowed. He watched her follow suit. Fuck, she was beautiful. His head swam. What followed was a long moment of connection in silence. He caressed her nape and traced his hand along the curve of her jaw to catch her chin lightly between his thumb and knuckle. He smiled softly, and warm lines appeared at the corners of her eyes to match.

April leaned forward and placed her forehead against Michael’s. He let her rest that way for a breath or two, and then he tilted in to kiss the tip of her nose.

“I like who I am when I’m with you,” he whispered.

“Me too, Michael. You make me want to be my best self. Even Castiel doesn’t make me feel that way.”

“We need to stop now, or we won’t be able to stop,” he said, pulling back further, getting his legs beneath him. “I’m in real danger of not being able to stop when I’m this close to you. You smell so good to me.”

“Cas is going to let us have this, let us have each other,” she said, her pupils widening.

“One thing at a time,” he told her. “Let’s see how this evening goes. And then we’ll know more about what he means to allow.” Michael tapped her temple gently. “How is he responding to what we just did?”

She grinned easily. “I’m not sure he noticed.”

“Hm. Maybe we should try it again.” Michael stepped back up into her space and petted a long caress down the back of her head, letting her silky hair fall lightly through his fingers. “If he hasn’t noticed, I’m obviously not doing it right.”

Grin still in place, April lifted her face up to his and fell once again into his kisses. There was nothing chaste or tentative about the way he kissed her this time. He let go with his hands, pulling her in tight with his elbow crooking around the back of her neck, and his mouth opening wide against hers, all hungry noises and muscle. She went lax in his embrace, holding onto his shoulders, letting him take the kiss, letting him in.

One kiss melded into the next, one touch shifted into the next. Their lips swelled and reddened, their hungry mouths couldn’t quite get deep enough, wide enough, rough enough, and soon they were rutting helplessly into each other, both swept away by the sensations.

April broke away first, a gasp and a shocked look in her eyes. “That got his attention,” she panted, staring at Michael in dismay.

“Good,” he said, running his hand down her arm and catching up her hand to kiss her knuckles. “Is he angry?”

“No,” she shook her head. “He’s turned on. I don’t think he’s going to wait until the half hour mark.
He’s moving downstairs right now, and he seems to be in a hurry.” She giggled a little.

“Not coming in here,” Michael mused, catching Dean’s swift progress down the wide stairs just outside in the foyer and on down the back stairs toward the Playroom. “Fuck, this is weird.” He let his mind trace Dean’s, and then he looked back at April.

“Are you ready, Pete?” He squeezed her hand, and she nodded eagerly.

“More than,” she said.

“Come on. Let’s see what the Alpha has planned.”

Trotting eagerly across the marble foyer, the two Omegas hurried hand in hand to the narrow hallway and its half-flight of stairs, catching sight of the Playroom door just as it closed on spring hinges behind their mates, and the grinned as they followed the two men.

Pushing the door open and holding it for April, Michael caught Dean already stripping out of his clothes. His mate’s eyes were lust-blown and intense, Dean’s lips as swollen and red as Michael was certain his own were. April darted in and began to disrobe without a word.

Castiel stood near the door, watching Dean. At their entrance, he turned to Michael.

“That was a short thirty minutes, Alpha,” Michael observed.

“I rounded up,” Cas admitted. “The original plan was to review our progress from this week, Dean and me, and to set some preliminary goals for next week. That’s not what happened.”

“No, we noticed.”

“Kitten,” Castiel said in an assertive voice, turning away from the door. “Are you open to allow me to lead us this evening in a foursome? I don’t intend to layer any extra Dom / Sub activities on top of our natural proclivities. Tonight is purely for pleasure. Are you in?”

“I’m in, Alpha. All in,” she declared stoutly as she folded her clothing neatly on the countertop.

“My safeword is Celestial,” he reminded everyone. “Kitten, please state yours.”

“Beethoven,” she said clearly. Very clearly. As if it was the highest of importance that everyone in the room heard her. Castiel laughed right out, grinning like a fool, and shaking his head as he turned back to Michael.

“Michael? Same questions.”

“I’m as in as it’s possible to be, Alpha.”

“And your safeword?”

“Cavalier.”

“Yes, you are,” the Alpha noted agreeably. “Dean?”

Dean was already on his knees within the confines of his blue square, signaling his readiness, but he too answered clearly. “Full speed ahead, Alpha.”

Cas snickered at their enthusiasm. He took a couple steps closer to Dean, leaving Michael at his back. “And your safeword, Pet?”
“Irrelevant,” said Dean with his eyes twinkling into Castiel’s.

Cas came to a dead stop and stared at Dean. “Interesting. We are starting things off like that, are we? Fine. Remove yourself to my favorite spanking bench, Pet, and settle onto it.”

“Yessir!” said Dean, springing up and climbing into position. Cas held his hand out to his mate as he walked forward into Dean’s line of view. She met him, and went up onto her toes as Castiel pulled her immediately into a bruising kiss, bending her harshly over the support of his arm and then breaking away with a ‘POP’.

Setting April back upright, he beckoned Michael closer, and shocked both of their mates by doing precisely the same thing to him. Michael came back upright breathless and wide-eyed, panting hard and stumbling a bit. Castiel held his eye with a smolder that robbed Michael of whatever oxygen he had left, and then turned to face Dean. He bent low and captured Dean’s lips with his own, adding a bite to the tender flesh that made Dean cry out and flinch before he released him.

“Michael, my friend,” Cas called behind him teasingly. “The floor is yours while I correct my Submissive. My mate is yours to touch however you both like with the exception of any act that could impregnate her. Kindly, keep your semen out of her fertile orifices, and you will hear no objection from me.”

“Jesus Christ,” Michael whispered, turning his gaze from Cas to April. “Pete?”

Her eyes sparkled to match Dean’s, hungry and burning with desire. “Michael, please.” Her voice was broken, barely more than a breathy whisper. He scrambled out of his clothes.

At the bench, Castiel trailed a hand down Dean’s bare back from shoulder to divot, watching chill bumps erupt under his fingernails. “What is your safeword again, Pet?”

“Impala,” Dean answered right away.

“That’s not what you told me the first time, is it?”

“No, Sir!”

Michael made it to April in one big step, knelt with her down onto the padded floor, laid her out beneath him, and crashed his lips against hers. For her part, she kissed back, clutching back onto him, a continuation of what they’d started upstairs, but this time in full view of their mates, totally nude, and grinding into each other with their hips.

“If I ask you a question, and you give me a false answer, what sin have you committed?” Castiel asked conversationally.

“It’s a lie, Sir,” Dean stated with his head craned back to watch his Alpha.

“How do I feel about being lied to, Dean Michael?” Castiel asked with a hard swat to his ass. Dean groaned and clenched his eyes closed.

“You hate it, Sir!”

“What is your safeword, Dean?”

“IMPALA!” The spanking continued. No safeword would stop a punishment this clearly earned, not even as Castiel demanded he repeat it at volume five more times. Dean’s eyes fought to stay open as Michael found himself impossibly hornier having his own mate watching him rut shamelessly into
the Alpha’s mate. Dean shouted in pain, finding it an outlandishly difficult task to work through the burning sensations with Michael so present in his head, and the two Omegas so engrossed in each other before him. He could tell that Cas was watching them too. He could feel it in the way Cas funneled his lust into the swing of his arm, and Dean felt tears spring into his eyes. The room swam before him, and he panted hard.

In front of him on the floor, Michael turned his head, winked meanly, and shifted downward to suckle on April’s nipple. She threw her head back and moaned, holding onto his head. Michael’s hands went everywhere on her body, and her entire body flushed in response.

Cas hit Dean harder, breaking him into closing his eyes again, pulling another yell from his throat.

“You did tell me you needed to scream, Pet. Will this do?”

“AAAAaaaaarrrgggh! Yes…SIR!” Dean shouted, flush with heat of his own, hard cock bobbing below the edge of the bench, and getting no friction. Dean’s body was on fire. He wrested his eyes back open. Michael had shifted again and was teething gently at April’s labia with painless nibbles. Her hands were so tightly woven into his hair, it had to hurt, and her thighs trembled as she wrapped them over his shoulders. Michael’s inflamed backside glowed in presentation, a beacon for any alpha, but neglected for the time being. Castiel hit Dean again twice more, and then he appeared back in front of the prone alpha, kissing the daylights out of him, clutching at his hair.

“Are you sorry, Dean Michael?” he said breathlessly. Dean nodded, unable to get the words out. Castiel’s eyes flickered back and forth between his, too close to meet them both at once, and desperate not to miss anything. “Are you really?”

“Yes, Alpha,” Dean managed, still panting hard.

Cas shook his head in forbearance. Dean wasn’t sorry at all. But his ass was on fire, and that’s what they’d both wanted. Cas cocked his head toward the Omegas writhing on the floor. “Go on, then.”

Dean didn’t have to be told twice. He vaulted from the bench and buried his face in his mate’s upturned ass, red and swollen from the day’s correction, and Michael’s squawk, muffled by the depth of his tongue inside April, sent her convulsing against the floor.

Castiel sauntered toward the three of them, loosening his tie as he strolled. The cufflinks popped next, gathered up in his palm as he walked slowly around his lovers, his eyes feasting on them from above. Turning to the back, Castiel made quick work of his clothes, honed in tightly to the noises behind him. He could feel what Michael’s tongue and lips, his hands, were doing to April, and he could feel how much she was enjoying the man’s touch. Barely even started, April was close already.

Castiel walked back to the trio slowly, letting his Alpha feast its eyes on the fracas, dropping a small handful of foil packets on the floor at his feet. Dean’s hands had Michael’s thighs in such a tight grip that Michael’s legs bore white streaks where Dean’s fingers slipped in his sweat. Michael was keening a high, shrill note into April’s body as Dean ate him out, and the view from above was incredible. Castiel knelt down at April’s shoulder, then he laid down, stretching out beside her and catching her attention to look into his eyes. Castiel made certain he was touching each of them along the length of his body, and slowly, he closed the distance between April’s lips and his.

He tasted coffee on her tongue. April hadn’t had any coffee at dinner. But Michael had. Cas pulled back, feeling himself spin, staring hard into his mate’s eyes as she felt herself overstimulated. Michael’s tongue was relentless, and she whimpered. Cas kissed her again, rolling into her and taking her mouth hard with his own. Her went deep into her sensations, into the power that he’d
granted Michael to make her feel pleasure that drove her mad. Cas broke the kiss and pressed his mouth close to her ear.

“Come for Michael, Kitten,” he whispered.

“Oh! God!” she cried out, wrapping her legs around Michael’s head and pressing his face in as tightly as she could as her core pulsed a measured rhythm and slick issued from her channel.

“Atta girl,” Castiel crooned into her ear. He reached down along her side and stroked her body, damp with exertion until his fingers found Michael’s hair. Pulling, he brought Michael upward to loom over April, still alight with aftershocks, and he pushed himself up onto his elbow and kissed Michael hard, tasting April on his tongue. Michael rutted his cock into the crease of April’s hip, losing control completely as Castiel fucked into his mouth aggressively.

Dean followed Michael’s flattening body by crawling upward between April’s legs. He got his knees beneath him and pressed them outward to spread Michael’s legs, taking April’s along with them, and catching sight of Castiel’s hand slithering down beneath April’s thigh to press a finger into her channel. Dean used his hands to press Michael’s sore cheeks apart, and he dove in with his tongue, mimicking Castiel’s finger, and licking up the slick reward that gushed outward in spasms.

There was an intimacy between Dean and his fiancé that Dean hadn’t expected as the two of them shared their mates. It was a layer of closeness that pulled them tighter together instead of distancing them from each other.

Why the fuck had they waited so long to do this?

Dean whimpered when Michael clenched his channel tightly, catching the alpha’s tongue mid-thrust, and forcing him to work against the pressure to keep it in there, then Michael released his muscles, and his channel fairly sucked Dean inward, pulling at his tongue from within.

“Alpha!” April cried. She was inundated with sensation, bodies above her, beside her, at her calves and feet. Michael had broken away from Castiel’s kiss to apply a vicious suction to her left nipple, and Castiel mouthed hungrily at her bruised and broken Mating-scar even as he forced a second thick finger into her channel.

Michael whimpered at what Dean’s tongue was doing inside him, despite the agony of his mate’s grip on his sore ass, and he leaned hard on his left hand to run his right one down to circle his own erection. Three quick and flurried swipes, and he came with a groan, spilling over his own hand and April’s tummy. If there was punishment to come for that later, so be it.

April followed him, caught by Castiel’s clever lips and teeth upon the sensitive nerves on her shoulder. Dean lapped eagerly at the slick Michael’s body produced, and then he kneed up behind him and buried his cock to the hilt in his mate’s channel, snapping his hips powerfully forward, only to pull back out slowly and do it again. Castiel sat up and got to his feet. He pulled April out from under Michael with his hands beneath her shoulders, and he let Michael fall gracelessly to his elbows. Pressing April down into the same position facing Michael, Cas took to his knees too. He snatched up one of the foil packets near his foot and rolled the condom over his cock with a snarl of distaste. He shifted forward on his knees, swiped his hand gently through the slick at April’s inner thigh and coated himself in her moisture. He entered his mate from behind, mirroring the other couple.

Dean smirked. “I’ll race you, Alpha,” he goaded, thrusting harder into his mate, and feeling Michael shut his eyes tight at the pleasure. Dean rolled his hips deeply and nailed his prostate, then he did it again.
“You’ve got a head start,” Cas objected, but he wasted no time in catching up, and April collapsed beneath Michael’s chin and chest with a loud grunt. Michael followed her down and let her hair fill his vision. The alphas fucked furiously, forcing their mates to share the space before them, a mess of hair and shoulders and heads jouncing into each other. Castiel’s eyes burned with a fierce light as he gritted his teeth and raced to beat Dean over the edge. Dean threw everything he had into the effort, slamming into his mate’s slick channel and setting Michael’s gluteus muscles into a furious ache just the same as if he’d opened back up on him with the paddle.

Michael’s nostrils flared as he craned his neck upward, rutting his nose against April’s throat and scenting her in full view of her mate, rolling his cheek into the gland behind her ear. She clung to the hair at the back of his head, forcing him in tighter, letting his shoulder crush against her Mating-bite, sending her into orbits of sweet sensation.

Castiel heaved at her hips with both hands, grunted a loud roar over her back, and came hard as his knot locked into place. Dean was only moments behind. He fell forward over Michael’s back with a cry of ecstasy. The four of them lay heaving and sweating, piled up in a damp heap, mouths agape and eyes closed. Castiel wrapped an arm around April’s belly and fell sideways with his mouth sucking bruises into the side of her neck. Michael whined a protest and followed her as she tumbled sideways, pulling at his own mate until Dean caught the hint and eased to the side to join the others. All of them shuffled a bit to make an arrangement to satisfy everyone. Soon all four had their heads close together and their hands still sweetly caressing hot sweaty flesh.

April turned her face upward and gave her mate her swollen lips as she clenched her channel around his knot. He moaned into her mouth and then stretched his neck to leave warm kisses along Dean’s sweaty temple. Dean chuckled an exhausted laugh, causing Michael to groan at the way his ass burned beneath the bend of Dean’s hips. Dean caught Michael’s lips in a sweet apology before turning back to Cas for a kiss that was anything but sweet.

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“Not exactly a foursome, Alpha,” he muttered affectionately. “You’re knotted to yours, and I’m knotted to mine. This what you had in mind?” Dean’s smirk told Cas he wasn’t disappointed, just surprised. Cas was fast catching his breath.

He reached out and gently petted Michael’s arm, down his bicep to his elbow and back. “There’s not a plan, Dean. I set about making one, and then I threw it out. Did you have anything in mind?”

“Me? Babe, you know what I like. Surprise me.”

Cas chuckled darkly. Dean continued. “And Michael wants the opposite. Whatever you’re thinking for me, he wants the exact opposite. Right?”

“Mm,” hummed Michael with his lips tracing April’s ear. “Yes, please. Maybe a little less doggie-style for the Omega with the blistered ass.”

Dean laughed. “See? Exact opposite.”

“I understand,” Cas told him. He began to trace a determined line with his tongue along April’s neck, diverting when his tongue met Michael’s to jump the gap and set Michael’s toes curling with a searing kiss. April and Dean both fell still and sleepy, riding the endorphins into a light doze as they waited out the alpha’s knots.

Some time later, Dean awoke to a gentle shaking at his shoulder. He lifted his head and looked around. Cas was squatting naked before him, and Michael and April were sharing the shower. His
head thumped back down onto the floor. He smiled up at Castiel.

“Are you really okay with that?” he asked, nodding his head to the back of the room where the Omegas’ hands were cleaning one another in unclean ways. Cas smiled down at him then checked behind him to see what they were up to.

He made a facial shrug as he turned back around, and stood up, lowering his hand to pull Dean up.

“Seems that way. My wolf isn’t concerned as long as it feels secure that Michael and April are both Pack and Michael doesn’t actually fuck her. I’m as surprised as you are. I expected to spend the evening with one hand on the leash, but the big guy is fine.”

“And your Secondary?” Dean asked, leaning sleepily against Castiel’s chest.

Cas kissed his temple again and held him in a loose embrace. “The Alpha seems to believe Michael is mine as much as you and April are. That might change if Michael presents a Dominant aspect toward her, but he doesn’t seem prone to doing that. He seems very strongly oriented as an Omega, and that makes all the difference I believe. We couldn’t have known that until we tested it.”

“And what about you, Castiel. April had his face in her crotch, man. She came like that.” Cas took a deep breath and gave Dean a slightly sheepish look, blushing slightly and looking away.

“Oh, really?” Dean teased. “You liked it. You like it a lot?” He broke into real laughter as Cas rubbed the back of his own neck and blushed deeper.

“What can I say, Dean? They make an enticing picture together.”

“Wow,” said Dean, taking the Alpha by the hand and shooing the Omegas out of the shower. “You remember what my record is, yeah?” he asked, turning Castiel around beneath the spray.

“Your record is still four, Pet,” Cas told him seriously.

“Right. Let’s break it.”

Hours and three more rounds later, April sat astride Michael’s hips riding his cock at a steady pace, the condom stretched tight over his erection, and her hands braced on Michael’s ribs. Somewhere along the way, the idea that Michael shouldn’t actually enter her had been cast aside in a lustful haze, and replaced with the declaration that as long as they used protection, Castiel’s wolf would have no issue. More precisely, Cas wanted to watch them fuck and had answered with a vague, “Whatever!” when Dean pressed him.

At Michael’s head, Dean knelt astride him facing April with his knees by Michael’s ears. Michael suckled wetly on one testicle and then the other, alternating randomly and using his tongue to lave over the wrinkled flesh and strain his tongue to run it up Dean’s erection while Castiel drove into the alpha from behind. Dean lost the bracing of his arms and let his torso fall lower, holding himself upright only enough to give Michael’s chin and lips free movement. Behind him, Cas thrust hard, and Dean found himself pressing backward with his hands to keep from bowling April over with his head in her belly.

“Yeah, Alpha!” he cried out. “Yeah. Just like that. Jesus Christ!”
Without notice, Castiel pulled out and kneed backward, calling, “Celestial!”

“What!”? Dean pulled up fast, stepping away from Michael’s warm lips and standing all the way up in a flash, backing several steps away. “Cas, baby. Are you okay? What’s wrong?” Dean’s face paled in alarm. April scooted backward toward Michael’s shins, slipping free of his cock, and sitting supremely still. Michael froze too, looking up at the Alpha, clearly assuming that it was he who had triggered the safeword, but unsure how.

Dean stepped up to his fiancé, a hand extended to touch his arm with a grounding caress, and he stooped down to put his face near Castiel’s as Cas stood bent over and panting. “Cas, what is it? Talk to me, man.”

“It’s you, Dean. You were…so close to April. You said you…didn’t want to…and I forced you too close. I had you right up on top of her. I’m so sorry.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, man, is that all?” Dean asked in relief. “That was nothing. We weren’t touching. I didn’t even notice. Holy fuck, you scared me.”

“It’s not nothing, Dean,” Castiel insisted. “I promised all of you we would be careful, and you were practically face-planting right in her breasts! I had to check on you! I had to put a stop to it.”

“A check-in, Cas! That’s all we needed. Jesus, I ‘bout had a heart-attack thinking your wolf was busting through. Next time, call a check-in. Hey, Dean, how are you doing down there? I’m just fine, Alpha. Harder please! Like that.”

Cas shook his head and sat heavily on the floor. Dean collapsed into his lap with his head against Cas’ shoulder. “I needed to pull you all the way out, Dean. I couldn’t rely on either of your subs or your brat or any of your usual in-scene presentations. I had to know for sure. The only way to do that is to pull you top-side with a safeword.”

Dean looked over his shoulder at Michael. “Michael, Alpha needs to know I’m fine. Tell him I’m fine.”

Michael, relieved beyond measure that he would live to see the sun rise, held a hand out to April to bring her back up to take her place again, saddle mounted, and as she slid back into her position, he said, “Dean’s fine, Alpha.”

“See? I’m fine. April? Kid are you fine with a gay man head-butting your belly while you ride my mate?”

“Yes, Dean,” she said, rolling her hips and grinding down on him hard. “I’m fine, too.”

“We’re all fine, man. False alarm. Can we get back to it? I’ve got a record to break, and I’m already past three.”

“Dean, I don’t believe you’re taking this seriously.” Castiel lifted him upright by his shoulders, looking intently into his eyes.

“Ca-aa-aas! It’s NOT a big deal. Come on, Alpha. We’re all good here. April’s good. Michael’s good. Look, they’re already back at it. Come on back. Here, I’ll help you up. Next time, though, don’t stop the play with a safeword when a check-in will do. Seriously” Dean stumbled to his feet and tugged on Castiel’s hand. Cas stood slowly, his demeanor taking on a far less playful tone. He caught Dean’s chin in a steel grip, and he held the alpha’s face close to his.

“I’m not playing, Dean. I don’t play when it comes to your safety.”
Dean mulled it over, then nodded and dropped back into place over Michael’s head. He immediately lowered himself back into a presentation position with the top of his head at April’s abdomen and his ass canted upward.

“See?” he called upward. “All good.”

“You’re mocking me,” Castiel told him flatly. “I pulled up in an intense moment to make sure we’re not pushing you past your comfortable boundaries, and you’re mocking me.”

“I’m not,” Dean protested wiggling his ass a little. “Please fuck me, Alpha.”

“Get up, Dean. We’re changing positions. On your feet. Kitten, roll off, love. I need your steed for another plan.” April obeyed immediately, sprawling on the floor on her tummy, and stretching out on the floor, certain she’d have more opportunities to play soon. Dean was slower to rise, but he did eventually, and as soon as he was clear, Castiel pulled Michael to his feet too and then left him to select a paddle from the wall. He hurriedly wiped himself down with a cleansing wipe and then returned to his playmates, hiding a cheerful wink at his mate.

“Here you go, Michael. See if you can deliver the message that he doesn’t want to hear from me.”

Michael took the paddle and looked it over. “Is this the same one Dean used on me when we got home?” He smacked his hand with it. Dean whimpered. “I think it is,” he decided, slapping it against his thigh.

“On your hands and knees, Dean,” Cas ordered. “You’re going to deep throat me while Michael sets you straight.” Dean fell lightly to his hands and knees. His erection, which had begun to flag, came roaring back to life as he settled his mouth and throat around Castiel’s massive bulk with his eyes straining to hold the man’s eyes. Before he was fully settled, the paddle cracked down against his ass, and he grunted loudly and dropped his jaw further.

“Like you mean it, Omega,” Cas said calmly, watching Dean’s eyes. The paddle fell again, harder. “That’s it. Just like we practiced. Can you feel how much that stings?”

“Yes, Sir,” Michael told him. “Both bonds are singing right now. He’s hard as a rock.”

“Very good. All right, then. Let him have it. Get him yelping.” Cas caught April’s greedy look, and he smirked. “Kitten, your job is to see if you can get you and Michael both off at the same time. Use your mouth and hands, and watch his body for signs that he’s close. The better your timing, the more pleased I’ll be.”

April scrambled into place, happily sucking Michael into her mouth and beginning to work diligently. Michael set all his concentration into swinging the paddle without dislodging the girl and into keeping his head on straight. Below him, Dean rocked on his hands and knees. Cas began a shallow thrusting into Dean’s mouth with his eyes wide open.

It would be anyone’s guess who might come first.

After a few minutes, it was April, followed closely by Michael, who dropped his paddle and buried his hand in her hair to hold her in place as he spilled down her throat. As the pulsing came to an end, he sank down to his knees with one hand still in her hair and ran an awe-filled palm over the mess of bruises across his mate’s backside, then he bent down and sank his teeth into Dean’s raging hot cheek. Dean released Castiel, and he screamed and came hard at the sensation, gulping down air as he tried to regain control. A hand at the back of his head pulled his face right back into Castiel’s groin, and Cas stroked himself a handful of times before painting Dean’s face with white, sticky
streaks.

They collapsed again, breathing hard and spent.

“That’s four,” observed Dean. “One more to go to break the record.”

“I’m getting too old for breaking records,” Michael slurred.

“Speak for yourself, old man,” Dean countered. “I just need a short nap and some aloe.”

Cas lifted his head. “No, you don’t, Winchester. The rules state that application of medical intervention breaks the streak. You do it without aloe, or you tie the record.”

“Oh, yeah, baby. Talk dirty to me,” Dean crowed. Cas struggled to his hands and knees and crawled over to lean over Dean and kiss him far more tenderly than he’d done all night. Dean stared up at him with star-struck eyes.

“I’m so fucking in love with you, Dean Michael,” Cas told him, aware that their mates were both looking on. “You are my fantasies brought to life.”

“Ha ha, I knew you were playing a scene with that safeword.” Dean accused. “You just wanted me to brat out so you had an excuse to put a paddle in Michael’s hand.”

Cas shook his head. “No, the safeword was real, love. But I’ll admit I may have leveraged your reaction a bit to my own ends.” He winked.

“How very Crowley of you,” Dean told him.

Once they’d checked on April and tucked her in with a warm blanket and a warmer Omega, Cas helped Dean rinse off again before sliding into the far side of the bed with him and cuddling in close to whisper much of the rest of the night away before sliding between his hot cheeks for one last soft and lazy round beneath the covers. Dean came with a groan and a sigh on Castiel’s cock and the Alpha’s fist around his knot. He was asleep before Cas even let him go, exhausted but victorious with a shiny new record and a one-week moratorium.

Beside them in the bed, Michael held the little Ozzie close and let the rocking motions of his alphas’ coupling lull him back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

GAH! This chapter was a mess to write. But I had to get it all out. Some of that stuff had been percolating in my head long enough to start getting moldy.

One last note on Destiel in this story: In my mind, Destiel is the primary relationship. I know that it often seems that each of them spends more of their energy on their mates than they do on each other, but to me, even that is simmering in a broth of Destiel.
Everything they do has that core relationship at its base. This foursome scene could certainly have had more Cas/Dean action, and that might seem like a brush-off of their connection. But it's not. At least not to me.

Love all y'all. Always.
Chapter 109

Chapter Summary

It's campy goodness for the folks in Portland. Dean negotiates for some work time during the Honeymoon. Then...wait...are you serious? Really?! FINALLY?! It's time for a wedding.

Told you we'd get there.

Chapter Notes

Warning for sexual violence near the end of this chapter. Y'all are expecting it if you've been reading this long. It's par for the course.

So close to the end, this one ran really long. Not sorry.

You'll notice we added some artwork. Be advised, similar character tiles have been sprinkled all around back through previous chapters. If you want to see them, dig back and take a look. Huge, huge, ginormous thanks to Melodina for her amazing work and support. I'm so incredibly lucky you picked me to be your friend. I adore you forever. I couldn't have done this without you.

More artwork coming.

Happy Mother's Day to all the moms, step-moms, mom-types, and would-be moms. You don't have to give birth to be someone's mom, and I honor all of you no matter what your story is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Christian tapped the desk before him with a thumb. His hand was wrapped in a thick bandage, but the thumb was free to tap as he rested his throbbing palm before him. Krissy wouldn’t meet his eye, and he was rapidly losing patience.

“Not a chance, you hear me?” he tried once more. Her only reply was to roll her tongue along her upper teeth behind her lip and slip her gaze to his opposite shoulder. “She’s a victim, Kris. She doesn’t have the chops for this. I’m not about to victimize her a second time. We’ll find someone else.”

“She’s no victim, Chris.” Krissy told him, leaning forward in her chair and finally looking him in the eye. “She’s a warrior through and through, and she’s made for this. Everything that happened only served to set her instincts in place. She’d have wound up on your roster someday even if she’d been brought up in a golden cradle and fed milk and honey from a silver spoon. As it is…”

“As it is,” he interrupted, “She’s terribly compromised.”

“She wants a new last name,” said Krissy by way of an abrupt shift of topic.

“Why?” he asked, startled enough to bite.

“She said she’s not that person anymore.”

Christian sighed.

“Let me train her, Christian. She’s got a fire burning in her gut same as you do, same as me. It’s bullshit to tell her she’s off the list because of some fucking whorehouse she got nabbed into. It’s like she’s gonna keep getting fucked over and over again for the rest of her life. Damnit, she wants to do this. She needs it. She needs to get her feet beneath her and stand up straight again. She’s not going to do that as someone’s mate. That’s not Claire’s life, man. It was never Claire’s life, and it sure as hell isn’t now.”

“We’re not going to use her shitty experience to mold her into a campaign puppet, alpha,” he told her adamantly. “The answer is no.”

“Just talk to her, goddamnit. You go down to the dorms and watch her with the others for a while. Talk to her yourself. Give her an hour of your precious time, and see if you don’t agree with me. This one’s special, Christian. She’s not like any Omega I’ve ever met.”

“Dominance?” he asked, puzzled at Krissy’s passion.

“Nah, not Dominance. It’s something else. She’s a leader. She’s strong. She’s smart and tough, and she’s alive in a way the rest of them aren’t anymore – like most people never manage their whole lives. Talk to her. You’ll see it.”
“And the name she wants to change to?” Christian dodged committing himself, but he was intrigued enough to know he would follow his nose down the stairs to the Omega recovery dorm.

Krissy smirked. “She knows where the money comes from for what we do, and she’s been typing away on Google. Did you know that Castiel’s Pack name means, ‘New Man’?”

He chuckled. “She wants to be a new man?”

Krissy nodded, sobering. “She’sshrugging out of her old skin, Christian. She’s leaving it all behind her. She wants to honor Castiel for providing the resources that helped her out of a jam, and she says she likes the idea behind taking a name that shows she’s starting over.”

“Claire Novak,” he mused quietly. “That Alpha’s going to love that.”

“So you’ll talk to her?”

“I’m not promising you shit, Kristina. But yes, I’ll talk to her. It’s about time I introduced myself anyway.”

NOW:

“C’mon, Cas. It’ll be fun,” Dean wheedled. “Don’t you wanna shed some of that ‘stick-up-the-ass’ public image you’ve got going on? All anyone outside of Lawrence ever sees is your hot professor persona. Let’s shake that up a little.”

“I can’t sing, Dean. I’ll ruin it for everyone.”

Dean scoffed and cut off Castiel’s escape attempt by swinging quickly around the kitchen island and standing in the archway. His hands cupped around Cas’ hips, and his face hovered before Castiel’s mere inches away. “You can’t? Or you won’t? I’ve heard you sing, baby. You can carry a tune just fine. All you need to do is stand hard and fast in your Secondary, and it’ll be a snap. Your Alpha can do this. No one’s gonna make you do a solo. We’re all going to be there with you. You’re backup, man. Come on. Say yes. It’s gonna be epic.”

“Everything’s epic to you, Dean Michael,” Cas deadpanned. But then he sighed. “I don’t know the words.”

Dean’s face lit up instantly, and his fingers dug into his fiancé’s hips, rocking his body a little in his enthusiasm. “April will teach you. She’ll get you fixed up on the harmonies, teach you everything you need to do.”

“Dean. Please. I’ll make a fool of myself.”

“Everybody needs to make a fool of themselves every now and then,” Dean replied with a chaste kiss to his lips to communicate his undying appreciation. “Besides, that’s your Primary talking. Slip that uptight fucker under and get into the alpha. You’re gonna be great.”

Cas sighed and wilted visibly. “I’m going to regret this,” he mumbled. “But…talk me through it. What do you want to do?”

“Ha HA! YES! I knew you would come through. Okay, so, Sam had the crowd in Portland post a
video of the whole audience singing ‘Seven Bridges Road’ together. You know, that’s one of our standards. We always do that one on Saturday night. It wouldn’t be a Con without it.” Dean took Cas by the hand and led him out of the kitchen and through the house toward the conservatory. “But seeing as I’m not there, Sam gave my part to the audience and videoed the whole lot of them singing their hearts out. Then he posted it to Instagram as a love letter from the crowd about how much they miss me. It broke my heart, man. I gotta respond. So, what I wanna do…they’ll all be back in the main ballroom tonight for the evening Q&A session. I wanna livestream a response straight to the screen, direct to the audience, and I wanna pull everyone in the house together to sing something back – like a thank you and a reminder that I miss the hell outta being there too. I want to let them know I’m not gone for good. There are rumors that you’re benching me permanently, man. We need to squash those rumors. I need you for that. They need to hear it straight from you.”

“Why does that mean I have to sing?”

April was tinkering at the piano when they walked in, and she looked up and grinned. “Because we want people to see you for who you are, Cas,” she told him, having caught the end of their conversation. “We want them to see that you have a fun side and that you’re more than that stern smolder you take everywhere you go.”

“The smolder works for me,” he insisted, fully aware that he’d lost the battle.

“This will work too,” April told him confidently. “Did you see the video Sam posted? It was the sweetest thing ever. But Twitter is blowing up with suspicions that you’re going to lock Dean in the house from now on once you’re married.”

“Oh, good grief!” Cas cried. “That’s ridiculous.”

“They’re pointing out that Sam showed up in Phoenix just days after Hank’s and J.T.’s adoption even though he had newborn twins at home, but Dean wasn’t permitted to attend Portland while your wedding’s still a week away.” April sat with him on the couch under the window.

Cas looked from April to Dean in dismay. “They’re reading far too much into this. You’re only home because we have last minute details to arrange, and you’re overwhelmed with so much on your plate. It’s a simple Secondary decision based on the realities of the moment. It isn’t a new paradigm.”

“I know that, Alpha,” Dean assured him, kneeling between Castiel’s knees and smirking. “But they need some reassurance. They need to see that you don’t have me chained to the wall…for the moment, anyway.” Dean took up Cas’ hand and kissed his knuckles, peeking up again with an entreat ing smile and whispering. “Sing with me, man. It’ll be fun.”

Cas didn’t have a prayer against those green eyes, especially when Dean winked at him. He drew himself upright and snatched his hand back, buffeting the side of Dean’s head in a playful cuff. “All right. But only if we’re all doing it together, only if you put me in the back where no one can hear me go off-key.”

“Hot damn!” Dean gloated. He sprang to his feet and backed swiftly toward the door. “You stay here with April and learn your part. April, get him ready. I’m gonna go get Jess and Michael and figure out how we’re gonna set it up. We only have a few hours, and I want it to be awesome!” He muttered to himself as he kicked up to a jog and disappeared down the hall. “This is gonna be so great!”

April laughed happily as he vanished. She turned back to her mate with a proud look in her eye. “You make him very happy,” she commented needlessly.
Cas blushed and sighed. “I hope so. I try.” He spared one more glance at the doorway, but then steeled himself and turned his attention back to April. “All right, Maestra. I’m all yours. What do you need me to do?”

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Sam stepped up onto the stage, accepting his mic from the stage manager. The lights were bright enough to start him sweating before he’d opened his mouth, and the energy from the floor slammed into him almost physically. Sunday evenings were Dean’s thing, not Sam’s, but Dean was hundreds of miles away at the moment. Charlie joined him, grinning from ear to ear, carrying a small remote.

In short order, they had the crowd quieted. Charlie swore the link would work, but it wasn’t until the lights dimmed and Dean and Michael appeared side by side on the screen behind Sam, their faces enormous and glowing, that Sam relaxed.

The crowd erupted in joyful shouting and applause when Dean led off with a hearty, “Well, there y’all are! Hey folks!” He laughed at the crowd’s reaction, clearly enjoying the energy even across the distance. Michael sat beside his mate, bursting with pride, perfectly comfortable in front of the camera. Sam stepped as far to the side of the stage as he could so he could watch without hindering anyone’s view.

Larger than life, that was his brother Dean. The sizing seemed appropriate to Sam, and standing in the shadows while Dean fairly glowed in the spotlight felt just as right. Sam smiled softly, watching his brother. His hero.

Dean thanked the audience for their song of the day before. He told them how much it touched him. He told them that he missed them as much as they missed him. He clutched Michael’s hand and occasionally looked to his mate for a nod of encouragement and a smile.

“‘So, I gotta tell you,’” he continued. “‘I was a little hurt that you did my song without me.’ It was a tease and a lead-in, obviously, and the crowd snickered on cue. ‘I feel like that was a little cold, you know? Like I’ve been replaced already, and I’ve only missed one fucking show. But I forgive you. In fact, to show you all that I don’t hold any grudges, I’m gonna do the same from here. Y’all game?’” Dean was vibrating with excitement on the sofa in the living room of the manor house, downstairs at home with his mate beside him.

The audience responded as expected, and Dean grinned at them. “‘Thing is, while Sam’s away, it’s our job to look after his boys. I don’t mean to worry you, Sam, but we’re having a little trouble getting them to sleep tonight. We’ve each taken a turn rocking the pups, trying to put them down, but they’re not having it. They want their daddy.’”

“‘It’s way past their bedtime, Dean,’” Sam said into his microphone, stern and paternal.

“I know, man. Even Cas tried. Michael tried. They want you. But we had an idea. Maybe if we gang up on them, all of us, maybe we can overcome the two of them. You know, just whammy them from all directions. What d’you think?”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked, Dominant warning in his voice, playing it up for the setup.

“Hold on, we’ll show you,” Dean told the camera. “Ready Michael?”
“Let’s do it, alpha,” Michael confirmed, and the two men stood and left the living room. The camera followed them down the wide back hallway. Looking over his shoulder, Dean called back, clearly speaking to the camera operator, “Come on, Sarah. This way.”

Entering the enormous conservatory, the camera caught the expansive space and a tight cluster of people bent over April as she plinked away at the piano. Castiel was there. He had Hank tucked into the turn of his elbow with the pup’s head in his palm. He looked up as they came in and he smiled broadly, welcoming Dean with a soft kiss. Cas was as Alpha as he could get, a gentle overlord who suffered the ridiculous idiocies of his household with grace and amusement.

Jess was seated beside April, backward on the piano bench with J.T. in her arms. She looked embarrassed but game, and that was enough for Dean. Both pups were awake. Their wide eyes followed Dean and Michael with interest. Michael swooped down on them each in turn and left them a kiss each to their foreheads. Dean took Hank from Cas and turned back to the camera just as Gabriel called from the doorway:

“What the fuck is going on in here? You were gonna do a bit without me? This is a bit, right? We’re doin’ a bit?”

“Look, Li’l man,” Dean cooed. “Uncle Gabe is here. Gabe get your ass over here and kick us off. We need to get these two off to dreamland. If your voice doesn’t bore them to sleep, nothing will.”

“Oh, ha ha, you jerk,” Gabe countered. “We’ll see who has the magic touch, shall we? It’s not a boring voice that makes them feel safe enough to fall asleep, Dean-o. It’s an Omega voice. Stand aside. Lemme show you bigshots how it’s done.” Dean gave Hank back to Cas with a kiss to his Alpha’s cheek.

In Portland, Sam’s jaw dropped. Castiel had never allowed Gabriel this kind of publicity before. Something had shifted back at home, something momentous. But none of their expressions marked it as anything out of the ordinary. Cas took a seat next to April, on her other side from Jess, and he nodded to his mate, who began to play. Dean scooped a guitar up from the floor and joined in with a shit-eating grin which April mirrored. Gabriel picked up the lyric, smirking into the camera, turning his body to follow Sarah as she circled the group. April carried the banjo and fiddle parts under her fingertips, and Dean filled in the rest on his guitar. The music was warm and inviting, rich and deep.

Gabe twanged:

“Headin’ down south to the land of the pines,
I’m thumbing my way into North Carolina.
Starin’ up the road, and prayin’ to God I see headlights.”

Gabriel turned toward J.T.’s wide open expression, letting the camera go, and singing to the pup. His voice was sure and smooth, calm but strong, and he put a southern twang into some of the words, making Jess giggle. Gabe’s expression entranced the pup who reached up to him, trying to grasp him by the face. Gabe gave him a pinky to clutch and turned to Hank for the second half of his verse.

“Made it down the coast in seventeen hours,
Pickin’ me a bouquet o’ dogwood flow’rs
And I’m a-hopin for Raleigh, I can see my baby tonight.”

The camera pulled back, capturing the chorus as every voice joined in softly. Dean situated himself next to Cas, wanting to hear him sing, wanting to feel Castiel’s initiation into a part of Dean’s life where he never imagined Cas would fit. And Cas sang. He sang loud enough that his voice was
discernible, an easy-going baritone beneath the others, nothing showy, but a full contribution to the harmony of the song. If he hadn’t been there, the performance would have suffered, and Dean felt his heart swell at the realization.

Cas had clearly paid close attention to April’s teaching. He hit the harmonies as they split out, avoiding the rookie mistake of centering back toward the melody when his part diverged, and he sounded damn good to Dean. Cas looked up at the last line of the chorus, their voices blending like they’d done this for years, and he couldn’t repress a gummy grin as he beamed up at Dean.

Dean felt his heart rate pick up, and he blushed right down to his toes, but he pulled himself together and took the second verse himself, gentling his tone to bring it back to the oddly sweet lullaby they were trying to turn it into. Darius Rucker likely never expected his song of wistful longing to be used quite like this.

Hank’s eyes blinked slowly. The muscles in his face had fallen slack despite his best efforts, and he was mere moments from falling asleep in Castiel’s arms.

Dean watched the pup drift off. He turned back to Cas at his last line and sang:

"I ain’t turnin’ back to livin’ that old life no more,"

…just for Castiel, and Cas left him a wink as the chorus kicked in again.

Michael took the last stanza. His voice pitched higher and softer than the first two verses. Both pups were already fast asleep. Michael’s gentle voice secured them there. They slowed the tempo for the last refrain. Michael took the upper register as April lowered her pitch beneath his. The voices faded as they came to the end of the song, and Dean and April played one more round together. April backed out, laying her hands in her lap and letting Dean finish up with his guitar.

As he neared the end, Castiel put a finger to his lips with a meaningful look into the camera, reminding the audience that they had a live two-way connection open. He stood up and nodded to Dean then April and Jess. Michael helped Jess up with a hand at her elbow. Cas handed the pup carefully to Gabe. Hank didn’t move at all.

The audience watched with baited breath in complete silence, communally committed to keeping the pups fast asleep. It was a full Pack response in spontaneous mutual agreement, and it was breathtaking to witness.

Jess and Gabriel disappeared swiftly from the room, and after a moment, the sound of the audience’s appreciation filtered through the connection and into the conservatory in a crescendo of noise. Sarah put Dean back into full frame.

He couldn’t stop smiling.

It had all happened precisely as he’d envisioned it, and he was floating in euphoria. He felt Castiel’s arm slide around his waist, and he leaned into the warmth of the Alpha’s body.

“So, you see, Sammy,” he said happily. “We’ve got everything under control over here. You guys keep doing what you do, and knock one outta the park for me. We’ll keep the pups alive and fed for you while you’re gone. I’ll be back on the road just as soon as I can, right boss?” Dean tee’d the question up for Cas, and Cas answered resolutely in the affirmative.

“Right,” Dean nodded back into the camera. “And I know you guys miss me out there. I miss you too. The thing you gotta understand, I needed to be home for this weekend while we’re getting set for the big do next week, but I was set to barrel on through and keep running myself ragged anyway.
I didn’t wanna let you guys down, and the thought of skipping out on my annual visit to Oregon just about killed me. But if I’d gone, guys, it…it wouldn’t have been good. I woulda been set up for a major drop, probly right there in the middle of the show, maybe right when I had one of you in a place where I really needed to hold myself together. You Subs out there…you know. It’s not something we can always control, and I needed someone to put my brakes on for me and set some boundaries I couldn’t set for myself.”

Dean frowned a little into the camera, worried that he wasn’t making enough sense. He looked across at Michael, standing behind the camera and sending strength and comfort through their bonds. “We talk a lot about how to watch out for Submissives. Y’all remember. We spend hours at every convention pounding this shit into your heads. I need you to understand this. I’m a Sub, just like a lot of you are, and I’m not immune. Sometimes what’s best for me isn’t something I can see for myself. What you’re seeing play out right now, this is all those talks we’ve had, put into practice. This is what it looks like for real, guys. I didn’t want to stay home, but Alpha put his foot down, and he was right. He’s watching out for me, for you, for the Conventions we do, keeping the quality of what we try to bring you guys at the top of our game. I wasn’t gonna be the man you’ve all come to expect me to be while my head’s stuck at home worrying about the wedding and a million other things.”

Dean chuckled in a self-effacing way and shot a look at Castiel. “I’ll be back. And I’ll be everything you guys need me to be. Thanks for keeping it going without me, Sammy, Charlie. All you guys. Thanks for the song. It meant the world to me. Y’all know I was joking about being put out, I hope. Most of all, thanks for giving me the space to be real, to be human, to have days when I can’t quite cut it. Your support makes us Pack, folks. I know you’ve got my back. And you know I’ve got yours.” Dean let out a deep breath, feeling his tension ease, surprised to realize how very tense he’d been.

“Anything to add, Alpha?” Dean asked Cas.

Cas shook his head. “I think you covered it, Dean. I want to go on record as letting all of you know that Dean has my full support to keep bringing his unique brand of Pack vitality to the convention circuit. If you were worried that our marriage might mean the end of anything, put those worries to rest. You can’t get rid of him that easily.”

“That’s about it, Portland. Y’all give Sam your everything, same as you do for me, and I’ll catch you later.” Dean saluted the camera, and Sam took the program back over from his end. Sarah cut the feed and lowered the camera.

Dean turned in Castiel’s hold to face him. “Thanks, Alpha. Thanks for that.”

“Feel better?” Cas asked.

“Much,” Dean told him. “Wanna go have a taste of my gratitude?” he propositioned.


“That’s low, man, using that name to tell me no. That’s a dick move.”

Cas chuckled. “I never promised to make it an easy week,” he pointed out. “Get to bed, Dean. We’re both needed at work tomorrow, full speed. I’ll be along in a bit. We’re all in the Master tonight.” Cas handed Dean off to Michael in a move that screamed ‘Dominants in cahoots’. Dean didn’t fight the handling.

“Oh, Michael,” Cas called as the two made their way toward the hallway. “Spank Dean before you come down to breakfast tomorrow, would you please? He’ll need a tension release before he starts
another week at the pace we’re pulling right now. Nothing intense. He’ll need to be capable of sitting. Just get his attention.”

“Um, yes, Alpha,” Michael answered, uncertain in the wake of the odd request. “I’ll take care of it.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Dean mimicked rudely, proof that his brat was near the surface after all and that his compliance to his Tops’ decisions had a limit. Michael laughed and pinched his ass.

“Keep that up and I’ll be adding one before bed as well,” the Dom told him in his ear, tickling the minute hairs in Dean’s ear canal and sending chill bumps across his shoulders.

“Maybe…” Dean said hesitantly. “Maybe that would be best.”

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“We’re never getting a divorce, Cas,” Dean told his fiancé over lunch on Thursday. The two shared a booth at Maurice’s. They were alone for once, and their feet sidled up to each other, sock-clad, nuzzling. “I don’t care what happens, this marriage is gonna stick ‘cause I’m not going to have gone through all this planning for nothing. And I’m damn sure not ever gonna do it again.”

Cas smiled simply over his cheeseburger before taking a big bite. He chewed thoughtfully, then he swallowed and observed, “We may need to play a supportive role for our pups someday. We might have to do a great deal of the planning for them if they marry. You wouldn’t expect them to go it alone, would you, Dean?”

“Pssh! I’m leaving it to Michael. Tell me where to show and what to wear. That’s the extent of it for me. This is like the perfect preview of Hell, if you ask me.”

“Is that so?” asked Cas with a sharp expression.

“Damnit, Cas, you know what I mean. It’s not you. It’s the billions of details. All I want is a chance to stand up in front of everyone and say the big ‘YES’ to you. I don’t give a fuck whether the bunting is coral or salmon or bright fuchsia, for fuck’s sake. I don’t care if the coffee is pecan or hazelnut. All I want is to get married. Why did we agree to this fucking circus?”

“We could sneak down to the courthouse this afternoon if you like,” Cas teased him, knowing that the circus was more than just a show to Dean, knowing he needed the public statement.

“Shut up,” Dean grumbled. He focused on his lunch and ignored Cas’ gleeful expression.

“Then the circus is still a go?”

Dean looked up at him. He put an index finger up and leaned in. “I’ll do it once. Once. Never again.”

Cas smiled at him again, a soft thing, a gentle happiness rare for the Alpha who carried so much weight across his shoulders. “Just this once,” he agreed.


“What do you feel you won’t be capable of leaving behind for a month?” Cas countered. “I expect
you to spend most of your time relaxing, not working. But I admit neither of us can leave it all behind entirely.”

“I’ve got some momentum going on the book,” Dean told him as he swirled a fry through his pool of ketchup. "I don’t want to lose that if I can help it.”

“All right. I can allow you to take your book with you. But if you want the book, you leave something else behind.”

“Oh, come on!”

“You need to choose two topics of business to work on, Dean. If you decide to take your book, and you want to keep your hand in the merger, you need to let Jody and Jo handle the department without you. You’re not doing all of it.”

“Jo’s out with Jack,” Dean protested. “Jody’s too green to run it alone.”


“You want me to let the most important decisions of our lives, the future of our business go by without my input? Are you insane?” Dean stared across the table in shock.

“Choose two, Dean Michael.”

“What about you?” Dean asked. “Are you limited to two?”

“No. But I don’t require the amount of sleep you do, and I have a wider capacity to juggle multiple items without becoming overwhelmed. I plan to work for a few hours after you’re asleep most nights.” Castiel continued his lunch, Dean huffed at him and looked away, gritting his teeth.

He worked his jaw and then turned back. “How about if I promise only to work in two areas per day but I switch up which two? I can put in a couple of hours before breakfast on my book, and then play it by ear as to what needs my attention after that?”

Cas gave him a piercing look. “I would agree to that wholeheartedly if I believed you could stick to it.”

Dean sat back, offended. “What are you saying, man? I’m good for it. Swear to God.”

Cas licked his upper lip and considered how to respond. “You understand that if you make me this promise and break your word, I will be very displeased? Think about it, Dean. If a so-called emergency arises, and you’ve already consumed your allotted time for the day on another facet of your work, I will still hold you to your promise.”

“Nothing’s gonna happen,” Dean dismissed his worry. “And if it does, I’ll hand it off to you or Benny. I swear, Alpha. Only two work subjects per day.”

“No redefining the definition of a work subject or the concept of a day in order to weasel your way into a wider work scope, Dean. When I say one day, I mean a 24-hour period from midnight in Paris to midnight in Paris. When I say work subject, I mean you are to present your plan to me on a daily basis, and we will define the scope of each day’s work together. You are not to step one toe beyond that scope. If I feel you need a break, I will call a halt to all work altogether, and I expect compliance without whining, else everything stops.”
Dean didn’t answer for a few moments. His gaze fell to the tabletop, and he chewed through everything he was feeling. He ate another fry. He took a drink from his mug of root beer.

“Dean?”

“I’m probably going to whine a little, Cas,” he admitted. “But other than that…It feels really weird to be saying this, but I’m good. You have my word. I’ll be good. I’ll obey you, Alpha. I promise. Feels really solid to have boundaries. I like the way this feels. I don’t want to screw it up.”

Castiel reached a hand across the table, and Dean took it, squeezing a little. His eyes flicked up to meet his Alpha’s, letting Cas see the struggle in them. It wasn’t an easy capitulation, but it was battle Dean wanted to wage on himself, on his self-destructive tendencies. He wanted to team up with Cas to battle from the opposite side for once, and it felt good to make that choice. He saw gratitude and relief in Cas’ eyes. He saw adoration and pride. He squeezed Castiel’s hand again.

“Two more days, Winchester,” Cas told him. “I feel like I’ve been ready for this my entire life, and yet, I still can’t wrap my head around it being real.”

Dean leaned far across the table. “It’ll be real when you Claim me. No ape ceremony could ever get through to our seconds and thirds. It’s gonna take bringing out the big guns for the message to sink all the way in, man. Trust me on this. We’re doing the right thing.”

“We’ll have to wait and see,” Cas told him. “Either way, it’s going to be a grand adventure, and I’m so happy you’re going to be there with me. I’m so happy, Dean Michael.”

“You’re a sap, C.J. Tuck that shit under or you’ll turn weepy when it’s time to say your vows.”

Cas chuckled. “And if I do, you’ll live with it. I plan to pull the video out every year on our anniversary and make you watch me get weepy all over again. You’ll get a swat for every snide comment you can’t repress. I’m not ashamed of having overwhelming feelings for you.”

“It’ll be worth it,” Dean agreed. “You’re saying I have a year and two days to come up with some world class heckling.”

“No, that’s not what I said at all! I said don’t heckle. Not even a little.”

“That’s not what I heard, Alpha,” Dean retorted.

“You’re such a brat,” Cas declared, dropping the subject. He slipped his shoes back on. “Come on, we need to get back. Billie’s got a presentation ready on the changing tide of our adversaries. We need to try to map out a response before we leave.”

Dean hesitated in his booth, not following as Cas got up and dropped several bills on the table. Cas caught on to his wary state of mind and prompted him with a tilt of his head. Dean blinked a couple of times and set his jaw, but he found the words he needed.

“Can you keep Michael safe if I let him do this for us, Alpha? Do you swear it? My mind says there’s no better way to confront the arguments against us than to prove them wrong. But my hands sweat every time I think of him standing there with a spotlight on him – more like a target. You’ve seen the things they’re saying about him already; that he’s brainwashed, a puppet, a trained pup spouting what we’ve programmed him to say. They say he’s a stooge, that he’s on a road to disaster, that we’re setting him up for catastrophe – him and all the Omegas who follow us?”

“Shh,” Cas soothed, sliding into the booth beside him. “I know. I’ve heard. I can’t pretend to know the future, but I swear to you I’ll keep him from harm, at least the physical kind. You and I will
shield him as much as we need to. He’s got all the resources we can provide him at his back. He won’t ever need to be alone. But Dean, we have to let him live the life he’s called to live. When we finally add up all the research and their conclusions, all the suppositions from the last fifty years, this is what it leads up to. All of it. It’s a miracle he survived adolescence, Dean. He’s a miracle merely to be alive and whole. And the good he can do if he’s allowed a platform is immeasurable.”

“Save the sales pitch,” Dean told him somberly. “I know. I know it all. But I’m going to hold you to your promise. If one hair on his head…” Dean couldn’t make himself say anything more.

“The tide is turning, Dean,” Cas said firmly. “We’re seeing the last stand of a dying breed. The Alpha patriarchy enjoyed a brief moment in the sun, but it’s unsustainable, and it’s crumbling now. They’re losing their power, and no one ever gives up power willingly. We always knew it would be a fight.”

“You’re Alpha, too, Castiel. You’re giving it up willingly,” Dean grumbled petulantly.

Cas chuckled gently. “You’re alpha as well. That’s neither here nor there. It’s the institution itself that’s fighting for its hold. It’s run for three hundred years on a fable that Omegas can only thrive in repressive circumstances or else attempt to live like apes and die screaming. The false narrative that those are the only two options has never faced serious contention before now. If we show them a population of Omegas who are neither repressed nor insane, the institution will slap its collective hands over its eyes en masse for as long as it can and deny the evident truth of what it’s seeing so that it doesn’t have to compete fairly with Omegas for positions of power, of acclaim. That’s all this is, Dean. Alphas don’t like the idea of competing with Omegas on a level playing field when competition is still so fierce between the two species as well. What that does to Omegas is the real tragedy. We need to keep our eyes on the ultimate goal. Ultimately, if we’re going to compete in the real world with the apes for our fair share of the resources of this natural world, we must present an equitable front as one Pack, not a divided house that only thrives off the repression of the weakest. Dean, we need Michael and his story. I don’t like it. I wish there was another way. If there is, I’m all ears.”

“They’re gonna rip him to pieces, Alpha,” Dean said sadly.

Cas smiled and lowered his chin. “He can take it, alpha. He’s a narcissist. Nothing anyone says about him will pierce his armor. Michael has personal defenses that you don’t have. I’m not suggesting we abandon him to cope with it all by himself. I’m saying the opposite, in fact. But Michael is ideally suited for this war. And with his Pack at his back, he’ll be a formidable opponent to the establishment that insists he cannot exist.”

Dean nodded. “I’m still holding you to your promise, Castiel James.”

“I expect nothing less, Dean Michael.”

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“Are you certain the chain fastens inside the coat, not outside?” Castiel asked for the fourth time, fiddling with the thick filigree. Gabe batted his hand away.

“Leave it alone, Castiel. I fastened it the way Kali showed me. She made me do it seven times before she trusted me to do this without her. What the hell were you thinking signing on to wear this
medieval getup anyway? It’s got, like, eighty pieces to it. What’s wrong with your tux?” Gabriel stepped back and took in the overall effect. Cas’ hand twitched again, wanting to shift the chain so that it lay outside his lapel. As it was, only the lowest portion of the golden parabola was visible to catch the light. How could that be right?

“I will smack you if you touch it again,” Gabriel warned, turning to stand at Cas’ shoulder so they could both see the figure he made in the full length mirror in the bathroom of his Facility suite. Cas had barely slept last night, even with April tucked warmly into his side where she belonged. He wanted Dean more than April at the moment. He felt wrong-footed without Dean beside him. Somehow, they’d both agreed that a night apart made sense coming into the big day. Cas had left the house for the night.

The man reflecting back at him in the mirror looked regal. Cas reluctantly agreed that the minimal flash of gold at his sternum added just the right touch of decoration to the rigid lines of his formal attire. A red silk sash cut across his torso beneath his coat, a diagonal line from his right shoulder to his left hip. It was reminiscent of a nautical uniform without being a mockery, and it looked formal without seeming costume-like. He looked powerful – an otherworldly prince perhaps. A second circlet of delicate complex gold links sat across his collarbone, serving as a collar for both silk shirt and outer coat.

Gabriel had yet to don his tuxedo. He stood in dissonance beside his brother wearing boxer shorts and a white t-shirt. His legs and feet were bare. Cas touched his shoulder, meeting his eyes through the mirror.

“Thank you, Gabriel, for everything.”

Gabe reached up and patted his little brother’s hand with a solid expression, free of teasing lilt. “It’s been long enough in coming, kiddo,” he told Cas. “I thought I was gonna have to limp down the aisle with both of us pushing walkers before you took the plunge. Thanks for not embarrassing me with that.”

Cas huffed at him and tugged gently at his suit coat.

“Go sit down,” Gabe instructed. “I need to get dressed. Don’t wrinkle anything. Eat something if you can, but if you get any crumbs on yourself, Kali will kill me.”

“I can’t sit,” Cas said. “I’m too nervous. Where the fuck is Benny?”

“He’s coming, man. Chill out. He’s collecting everything from Kali you need to carry with you.”

Cas breathed out a deep breath and wiggled his toes into the carpet, gripping the fibers through his dark silk socks. “Benny’s bringing the ring?”

“I swear, Castiel, I’m going to thump you if you make me go through it all again.” Gabe pulled his pants on and tucked his shirt in before zipping them up. “Calm down. Between Kali and Michael, everything’s under control. All you have to do is put one foot in front of the other and follow instructions for once.”

“I’m not accustomed to this role, Gabe.” Cas’ eyes were huge, his pupils tight, his face pale. “I need something to do. Give me something to do.”

“I can spill some rice on the counter and make you count grains,” Gabe suggested. “Oh, wait. No I can’t. You don’t have any rice here. Guess you’re just gonna have to be a grownup and manage for a little bit.”
“Don’t be mean,” Cas grumbled.

The door cracked open and Benny’s head poked in. “Y’all decent in here? It’s just me.”

“Benny! Finally! Come in. Do you have the ring?” Cas advanced on him, and Benny slipped in laughing. He looked refined in his tuxedo, fully dressed and relaxed.

“Woo, brother, calm down a little. You breathing? Yeah, I got it. It’s right here.” Benny produced the tiny black velvet-covered box and handed it to Cas to check. “Give it back when you’ve checked it for scratches. Kali made me swear not to put it in your hands before Pastor Jim tells me to.”

“Scratches?” Cas asked in alarm, popping the box open and pulling the ring free. “It’s scratched?”

Benny looked at Gabe. “He’s in some state, huh? Have you given him any whiskey yet?”

“No, alpha,” Gabe replied. “I intend to stay married.”

“Well, I’m under no such restrictions.” Benny rummaged through the tiny pantry and emerged with a partially emptied bottle of the good stuff. He pulled down three juice glasses from the cupboard and poured a generous portion out for each of them. “Here,” he said, handing Castiel a glass. “Drink. No objections. Just drink.”

Cas didn’t hesitate. He took the glass and downed it, leaning his head way back and clenching his eyes tightly closed. He gritted his teeth after he swallowed and then slowly exhaled.

“How do I look?” he asked Benny.

“You look like an Alpha’s supposed to look, Cas. You look scary as fuck. Dean’s gonna pee himself.” He caught Castiel’s eye, and they both burst out laughing. “Man, you are gonna knock his socks off. He’s not gonna know what hit him.”

“He’s not wearing socks for the wedding,” Cas reminded Benny. “He’s barefoot so we can slide right into the intimate ceremony without pausing to redress.”

“Where’s your mate?” Benny asked.

“She’s with Meg across the hall. I think they’re painting toenails or something.”

“I’ll go check on them,” Gabe told them, setting his empty glass on the counter. “Countdown clock says we leave in fifteen minutes. Benny, you’re in charge of him ‘till I get back. Don’t let him mess anything up. And don’t let him go anywhere.”

“Where would I go?” Cas asked in dismay.

“Beats the fuck outta me how your mind works. I wouldn’t put it past you to decide to go to the lab and check on the research projects. Just…stay here. I’ll be right back. And eat something!” The door slammed behind him.

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Dean was about to worry a bloody divot into his bottom lip. He stood as still as he could manage, but he still vibrated in place before the mirror. Michael used a thumb to free Dean’s lower lip again, and
then he caressed the side of his mate’s face and whispered calm words into his ear.

Dean closed his eyes and blew out a long breath. The place was unfamiliar to Dean, and it was throwing him off. They’d taken up residence in a wide dressing room across the hall from the enormous ballroom that was carefully confected to host his wedding. Kali tugged a little here and there, and then she stepped back to examine the heft and hang of the robe. Nodding, she began threading the silken sash from where it attached at his left shoulder to run underneath the back of the robe, through a complex series of loops meant to cinch the robe into perfect alignment before finally emerging at his waist to tie in a complex knot over his left hip. It wasn’t visible from the back, but it played a key role in holding the robe in its proper position.

The robe fell down Dean’s front in a heavy ivory plane, unbroken by seams or folds, unpleated by the sash. It made a solid flat statement of elegance from the front, a heavy sheet of casement covered by a single sheer over-drape of the thinnest silk. All the interesting design was only evident from the back. At Dean’s hips, the robe split invisibly from each hip to the floor. While he stood still, it appeared to be a skirt of unbroken form. When he walked though, the slits on each side revealed an intricate layering of silk pleats that allowed the front and the back to move independently of each other, all of it supported from within by the red silk sash that passed in a complex series of loops beneath the casement, anchoring what needed not to move and freeing what needed to be allowed to shift.

At his back, two graceful panels crossed each other, each attached all the way across his shoulders but opening in opposite directions, crossing over a bit like a bathrobe put on backward but hanging freely from his shoulders instead of his waist. Standing and walking, the robe covered him to his calves. Once he bent over across the ceremonial alter, the pleats and the panels would separate, baring him from the waist down. A heavily embroidered square panel of red and gold brocade would hang before his groin, making a framed artwork of his genitals between widespread thighs. The interwoven silk sash would hold everything in place to fall open just right, making a presentation of his presentation, making him a perfectly presented morsel for his Alpha to Claim.

As long as he stayed on his feet, the robe was strikingly prudish. It covered him from his throat to his feet, even covering his hands down to his fingers. Only a part of each calf and the backs of his heels, his fingers, and his head and neck were visible at all. It was solidly ivory, unadorned except for the splash of red at his waist, and it was elegant as fuck. Dean was afraid to move lest he disturb the graceful line it cut down his body.

“Don’t hold your breath, Dean,” Kali reminded him for the tenth time. “You won’t look near as sexy sprawled out on the floor passed out.”

Michael held a glass of orange juice to his lips with a napkin poised at his chin beneath it. “Drink,” he instructed softly.

Dean drank.

Years of practice taking sustenance from the hand of another meant they didn’t spill a drop, even onto the napkin.

“When this is over,” Michael whispered to him. “I’m going to ask Castiel if we can get the robe out again. I’m dying to Claim you in it myself. You look stunning. Cas is going to lose his shit when he sees you.”

Dean’s green eyes flicked to Michael’s but he couldn’t answer. He seemed not to have words at the moment. He looked back into the mirror.
“Turn,” Kali told him. He turned around and checked the mirror over his shoulder. Everything about the way the robe hung was graceful. It was perfect.

“Walk upright,” Kali told him. “Don’t slouch. The robe will move with you, so you don’t have to take tiny steps or move too slowly. Your normal gait will work. For the procession, slow way down, but keep a normal step. There’s no need for any kind of weird pauses or anything. After the wedding itself, it’s just like we practiced. You and Cas will wait until the room is cleared and the formal curtain falls to make the chamber private. Everyone’s going to find a place to stand where they can see, and then it’s all you and him. You’ll know when the time is right. Step out and wait for Sam to come get you. Listen to your wolf. This is a lot like the Keller test, Dean. Just do what he feels like doing. Let Castiel do the rest. Don’t be nervous. You’ll be fine.”

“The plug?” Michael asked her. “Did we decide? Leave it in or take it out?”

She looked at Dean. “The one with the blue gemstone?”

He shook his head silently and reached behind himself but couldn’t find the opening with his hands encumbered by folds of heavy fabric.

“Let’s change them out,” Kali told Michael. To Dean, she said, “Be still. We’ll take care of it. Where did you put the pretty one?”

Dean pointed at his duffle in the corner. Michael filtered through it until he produced a small velvet bag with a beautiful glass plug in it. It was topped with a sapphire blue glass gem. “Bend down, Dean,” he said softly to his mate. “I’ve got you.”

Dean took another deep breath and folded at his waist, relishing the feel of the panels separating across his hips. He felt Michael’s reaction through both bonds, and the world froze for a moment. Then there was an efficient tug at the institutional silicone plug stretching him open. It was replaced swiftly with cool glass coated with a layer of Michael’s own slick. Dean could tell it wasn’t synthetic. The two didn’t feel or smell the same.

“Move around a little and get it settled,” Michael told him with a pat to his rump and a hand at his elbow to help him up. “Let me know if you feel anything wrong. I can still fix it.”

“Michael, I need you dressed,” Kali said, and Michael checked the clock with a curse. The photographer was due any minute for prenuptial shots. Getting dressed was easy for Michael. Already nude to prevent any elastic strap lines on his body, all he had to do was slip the tunic over his head and let Kali tie it at his waist.

“That’s it, fellas. I’ll go get Sam and Jo and the photographer, let them know we’re ready. Maybe one more sip of juice, but don’t spill.” Kali opened the door to find a cluster of people waiting impatiently outside. She pulled Jo and Charlie in and sent Becky to hunt down the photographer.

“Jimeny Christmas, Winchester!” Jo enthused. “You look like a wet dream. We’re all going to walk down the aisle with hard-ons. Bend over. I wanna see.”

Dean blanched but didn’t answer. His eyes remained locked on his reflection in the mirror.

“Hey, you all right?” she asked. “I was kidding, you know.” She sidled up close to him so they could admire the reflection together.

He nodded wordlessly and dropped his head onto her shoulder. “Oh, Dean,” she sighed. “Everything’s fine. You’ve got this, kid. Don’t worry.” Jo looked over Dean’s head at Michael who gave her a concerned look back. “You’re just nervous is all. You’re not dropping. You’re not gonna
mess anything up. Michael’s here. I’m here. We wouldn’t let anything happen to you. Look at me. Let’s see if we can find your voice.”

Dean swallowed and lifted his head to look his best friend in the eyes. He nodded again.

“Repeat after me,” said Jo with a light cheery voice. “Yes, Alpha.”

“Y…es, yes…Alpha.”

“Good. There you go. Don’t worry. You’ll have it when you need it. Your alpha isn’t going to miss his own wedding. He’ll show when it’s time. Don’t force it. Don’t freak. Keep your eyes on Cas. He’ll get down the aisle first, so you just look to him. Sam and I will be right behind you. Michael will be right in front of you. You’re not alone.”

“Here, sip,” Michael said, offering him juice again. Dean drank obediently.

The door slipped open again and Sam came in with a harried expression. “Sorry I’m late. It was harder to get the twins ready than I thought it would be. I’m here now. Reporting for duty,” he joked. “Where do you need me?”

Michael pointed. “The ring is in that case on the counter, Sam. You need to put it in your pocket right now and don’t take it out.”

“Holy fuck, Michael,” Sam said taking in the Omega. “You look incredible!” Sam dug the ring box out, opened it to check the ring, and then closed it again and slipped it into his pocket.

“You look good yourself,” Kali observed with satisfaction, secretly pleased that her showcase wedding had the most beautiful participants imaginable. The photos were going to be devastatingly gorgeous.

“Dean?” Sam asked, checking on his brother. “Are you all right?”

Dean’s face flinched but he ground his teeth and fought for it. “I’m good, Sammy. Little freaked is all. My wolf is a persistent fucker this morning. Having to hold on by my fingernails to keep myself topside.”

Sam clapped him on the shoulder. “It’ll be worth it, man. You can do this. Jesus, I’m so proud of you. Look at you! I need a tissue. Fuck.” True to his word, Sam’s eyes misted over a little as he looked into the mirror before his big brother and took him in. “You’re the bravest and strongest man I’ve ever known, Dean, and I’m so proud to be your little brother.”

A wilty laugh escaped Dean’s throat, and he slipped an arm over Sam’s shoulder, reaching up and letting his sleeve hang loose behind his brother. “You haven’t been my little brother since you were fourteen, man.”

“You’re amazing, Dean,” Sam said simply. “I know what a big step this is, and I know it’s going to change a lot of things for a lot of people. I want you to know you have my full support. Always.”

“I know,” Dean told him. “Thanks, Sam.”

Someone knocked on the door and the photographer arrived to usher them all down the hall for pictures in a stately chamber with heavy drapes and gleaming hardwood floors. Kali took her clipboard along and ticked off boxes as they walked. Dean breathed. Jo and Sam flanked him. Michael checked the time and texted Benny.
Flashbulbs popped. Jokes were made and laughed at. All of them posed in whatever position the miniscule woman from Belize who was costing Castiel a small fortune gestured for them to assume. Someone slipped a small rosebud into Dean’s hand with a note attached. It was from Cas. It simply said, “I will love you forever. That’s my promise.”

Dean couldn’t feel his fingertips, but Michael assured him again and again that he was fine, and Dean decided to trust Michael.

It was all happening too fast. Dean wanted to dig in his heels and slow everything down. He found himself alone with Michael in the room where all the photos had been taken, and he found Michael’s lips on his in a slow, sensuous kiss that brought Dean’s brain to a screeching halt. Michael’s hands cupped his chin and his jaw. Thumbs traced lightly up his cheekbones. A hand circled round to put a firm hold on the back of his neck.

“I love you, Dean Michael,” the Omega whispered. “I’m never letting you go. I’m carrying your child. You’re my mate. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Michael,” Dean whispered back with his eyes closed. Their breaths mingled between them smelling of breath mints. Michael’s lips traced Dean’s jaw to the soft flesh behind his ear. When he spoke next, it was right into Dean’s ear at an impossibly soft whisper.

“I release you today, Dean Michael, from the obligation of sole ownership. I will forever honor his Claim over you, and I will not infringe upon it, whatever comes. You have my blessing: to marry, to kneel, to bend for him, to obey him, to love him. I will share you with him without regret. Because I love you.”

“Michael,” Dean whispered back, clutching his arm, stunned. “You don’t have to…”

“I want to,” Michael told him pulling back so he could look Dean in the eye. “Come back to me, alpha. Go meet Castiel and bend for him. Vow to him. Then come back to me. I will always be here waiting for you. I don’t know what kind of magic brew you serve up in the cafeteria up there at the Facility, but that’s some fine Kool-Aid, Dean Michael. For better or worse, I’m all in. Everything Cas and April dreamed up together for this Pack makes sense to me now, and I’ll fight till my last breath to see it realized.”

“I love you, too, Michael.”

“Come on. Let’s get you two hitched. You’re going to love the reception.” Michael tugged Dean to the door. “If you can walk after the ceremony, that is,” he added as a teasing afterthought.

“You look wonderful, Michael,” Dean told him. “I meant to say that earlier, but my mouth wasn’t working.”

“I knew what you were thinking,” Michael told him with a wink.

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Ellen met Cas and his retinue at the venue door and held up a palm to them while she checked the hallway. Once Dean and his group slipped behind one door, Ellen beckoned them in and showed them to another. Cas rolled his eyes and handed her a small bud that he asked be delivered to Dean before the ceremony.
“Is all of this secrecy really necessary? We’ve been living together for months,” he groused.

“You wanted an ape wedding, Alpha,” Benny reminded him, straightening his sash. “They’ve got a whole bunch of rituals attached, and we’re following every damned one. Wouldn’t want to find later that the wedding didn’t take because we skipped something.”

“Didn’t take? Like a spell?”

Gabe laughed. “Oh, yeah. It’s a complicated potion, and you have to get it just right, or it won’t congeal. That’s what I heard, anyway. You got a penny in your shoe?”

“No. And I’m not doing that,” Castiel told him firmly.


“You look pretentious,” she commented lightly, but she returned his stiff hug. “And Gabriel,” she said turning to her elder son. “You, on the other hand, look quite dashing in a proper tuxedo. It’s too bad I missed your wedding. I’m certain you made a dignified groom.”

“You always know just what to say, Mom,” he observed, swamping her in a hug bigger than she was comfortable accepting. He didn’t apologize for not inviting her to his wedding. Neither did he apologize for reveling unclothed at his own reception. His mother didn’t need an explanation everything.

The party posed for pictures. Ellen and Bobby stood with Cas for a shot, infuriating Naomi who assumed the two of them had taken over the role of his parents. Everyone ignored her mutterings though, and Ellen and Bobby patiently escorted her out when the time came, leaving Castiel alone with April for a few moments while Benny and Gabriel waited just outside, guarding the door.

April smiled shyly at her mate, and he cocked his head and smiled back. “You’re the most beautiful woman in the world,” he told her. “You’re going to be stunning when you’re full of my pups.”

She giggled. “You’re incorrigible,” she told him. April’s naked body was dusted with a shimmery glitter that sparkled in the faintest of light. A delicate filigree chain that matched the much heavier one across his sternum sat at a jaunty angle across her hips. Other than that, she was nude. Her hair was delicately braided into an upsweep that released at her ear to tumble in curls nearly to her shoulder. Meg had done a magnificent job on her makeup. Her face looked almost bare, but somehow, every feature stood out in its best light. She was beautiful, and she looked happy.

Castiel strolled up to her and put a hand behind her neck, fearful of embracing her lest he cover his pretentious suit in glitter. “Is this truly okay with you?” he asked formally. “April, are you happy?”

She smiled and ducked her head. “I’m happy,” she said to the ground, leaving him to parse through her complex emotions without adding any unnecessary words.

“You won’t hide it from me if that changes?” he asked. He sent his concern to her as a bundle of alpha worry.

“I’m never going to hide from you again, Castiel,” she told him, looking up again. “I learned my lesson. Go get married. I’ll kneel at your feet, and I’ll be there when you’re done.”

“I love you, too,” he told her, and he kissed the tip of her nose. “Wish me luck.” He straightened his shoulders and caught her by the hand as he turned to the door.
“You don’t need luck, Alpha. You are your own luck.”

Benny’s head poked in. “You two ready? It’s showtime.”

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Castiel’s first impression of the room was that it felt enchanted. None of the fairy lights had been here the evening before when they’d rehearsed. None of the flowers or silken drapes had been in place. The crew must have installed everything after they left. The rows and rows of cushioned seats were filled on both sides. There were thousands of people here. Castiel saw faces he didn’t remember ever having met. But he also saw friends and family and colleagues. Warm faces turned to him as they rose from their seats in respect. A brass quintet began Holst’s Jupiter, Bringer of Joy, and April waited patiently for the right bars. They’d arranged it to skip the frilly entrance, leading right into its grandiose processional. Stepping off with a tiny arrangement of lilies at her side, April glided forward, looking like a vision. People watched her in awe. Castiel nearly forgot to step off himself, entranced by her beauty and her grace.

“Go on, Alpha. This is your moment.”

Cas nodded, swallowed, squared his shoulders again, and took the first step. Behind him, Gabriel and Benny followed side-by-side. Faces turned. People whispered. Castiel followed his mate. As she reached the alter, she turned and smiled radiantly at him. He reached out for her hand and kissed it when he reached her. Soundlessly, she glided to her knees, her hand still resting lightly in his. Cas had a moment of trouble finding his breath at how beautiful and perfect she was in the moment. Her eyes left his and looked back up the wide aisle. Benny and Gabe were both grinning as they flanked Castiel, amused at his obvious befuddlement in the presence of his own mate. Gabe patted him on the shoulder as he slipped past.

“You’re so fucked, man,” he whispered with a squeeze.

“Thanks, Gabe,” Cas whispered back. He looked outward and found his mother, Bobby, Ellen, Kali, Jess. The twins were decked out in navy blue sailor suits, starched crisp. Jess had Hank. Kali had J.T. Both pups were fast asleep. A couple of attendants stood to the side at the end of the row to whisk the twins away if they became noisy, but they looked comfortable enough to sleep for days. Cas smiled at his Pack. The music faded and a string quartet on the opposite side of the room began to play Pachelbel’s Canon in D Major. Cas felt his heart drop into his shoes. The door at the back opened to reveal Michael, stately and gorgeous in a soft tunic that left little to the imagination yet preserved a sense of dignity. He had a golden circlet woven with ivy resting on his brow. He too carried a small bouquet of lilies, in one hand. He began to step gracefully down the aisle toward Castiel, and for a moment, Cas worried that Michael would impede his view of Dean. He’d never needed so badly in his life to see Dean’s face. He licked his lips, felt April squeeze his hand, felt Gabriel rest a hand on his bicep. His heartrate kicked up. Michael was beautiful, but he wasn’t Dean. With a smirk that said Michael knew precisely what Cas was thinking, he turned and took his place to Castiel’s right, looking back up the way he’d come, and Castiel’s whole world tunneled down to the sight before him.

Dean was beautiful. His hands were empty, hanging nearly covered by his long ivory robe, and his pace was deliberate, as graceful as the Omegas, inexorable. Castiel didn’t care that there were thousands of witnesses. He was alone with Dean. And Dean was walking toward him, a vision in ivory silk. Green eyes and freckles popped into clarity as he closed the distance with a cello pulse at
his step.

Dean was pale, but as he neared the end of the aisle, he smiled, and Castiel melted. He shuddered a chuckle and held his free hand out to Dean just as Sam and Jo, both smiling broadly themselves took their places near Michael.

“You take my breath away,” Cas told him softly.

Dean ducked his head for a moment but then rallied and joined Michael who slipped down to his knees at Dean’s feet. Dean turned to face Cas, but he reached a hand back and felt Michael’s warm dry hand slide into his.

The four of them were joined in an unbroken line, each hand slotted into the others with a tiny bunch of lilies at either end.

“If you will turn and face me, please,” Pastor Jim reminded them gently. Dean chuckled. He didn’t want to. He wanted to face Castiel. The man cut an unbelievable figure in a custom suit that looked like it might have been designed for a Hollywood movie about alien royalty. Dean turned, but he didn’t let go of Castiel’s hand.

“My friends,” Pastor Jim intoned to the guests in a voice meant to carry. “I welcome you in the name of the Winchester Pack. Dean and Cas have asked me to tell you all how honored they are to have you here to witness this most joyous moment as they join their lives together, becoming one under the gaze of the Universe in its infinite power and wisdom.”

Jim turned his attention to the men before him.

“Dean and Castiel, for as long as I have known you both, it has been my great wish that you would one day come to your senses and marry. That that day has finally arrived is a blessing of great moment. And I believe that the winner of our betting pool is Christian Campbell, who may collect his winnings immediately following the service.” Jim paused to let the laughter die down.

Christian whooped from the gallery. “As Lupins, we don’t often marry,” he went on. “It is rather against our nature in many ways. We cannot pretend otherwise. But as we have seen, by the models standing before us, sometimes the Universe has another path for us than the one we might expect. So, it is my great honor to stand before this assemblage here today and to shout a great noise of joy up into the heavens above, that all creatures below might know our hearts are full to bursting with happiness.”

At that, Jim shocked the Primates in the room as he threw his head back and howled. All around, wolves joined him. It was loud and dissonant, and Dean busted out laughing at the look of horror on Naomi’s face. Cas chuckled as well, letting the sound of the Pack wash over him and center him.

As the howling died down, Jim slowed with a soft self-effacing laugh. “My howls have not improved with age,” he confessed. “And I promise that’s the only time I’ll accost you with them today. Let’s do something a bit more traditional, shall we? Castiel, Dean, your mates have requested an opportunity to sing for you.” He turned to Michael and nodded. Michael released Dean’s hand and stood. He helped April up and guided her to a place in the center of the dais where a single microphone stood alone.

“We’d like to go on record,” Michael said to the guests. “Pete and I, we talked it over, how to make it clear that what our mates are doing here today is something we support. This is what we came up with. This song is the first thing I ever heard Dean sing for Cas. I believe it was the first time the Alpha ever heard Dean sing at all. It seems appropriate to share it with them now as a reminder.” He
nodded toward the string quartet, and Journey’s ‘Open Arms’ began to drift over the seated guests.

April started the duet off, and Michael joined in for the refrain, taking over for the second verse. Dean’s eyes stayed dry, but he clutched Castiel’s hand. He could see peripherally that Cas’ jaw worked in an effort to keep his expression under control. Back when he Mated Michael, Dean determined to ram his marriage through over every objection Michael came up with, blindly resolved to force his mate into acceptance. He never dreamed Michael would come to embrace his mate’s marriage like this.

It wasn’t a long song, and it ended too soon. Michael winked at Dean. He escorted April back to her place and guided her down into kneeling. He leaned over and kissed her temple. He dropped to his knees right in front of Castiel for a brief moment, bowing his head for Cas to lay a hand upon his head. Then he stood and returned to Dean, slipping his hand back into Dean’s.

Pastor Jim took position again and paused to let the Scent-bonding settle into the wolves in the room. After a moment, he continued.

“Dean, Castiel,” he said. “We have no liturgy in the Universist Church for marriage. We will be exchanging rings in a bit, but I leave it to you to make your vows to one another as you see fit. I thank you for allowing us to stand witness to your commitment. For we in the gallery:” he spoke louder. “It is incumbent upon us to hold these two to their words, to be mindful guardians of their promises, to remind them as they may need, to stand vigil over them in their solemn oaths, even to rebuke should they falter. Such is the gravity of our purpose here today. We are not passive witnesses, but invested participants in their commitment. What one wolf promises to another is held sacred by all wolves, for we are Pack, and there is no greater charge than to stand guard over the Pack.

“Dean Michael, what promises would you make to this man?”

Dean swallowed. His mouth was dry. Too dry. Cas squeezed his hand and gave him a confident look. He exhaled and nodded.

“Castiel James, C.J.,” he began strongly. Somehow, his alpha had control of his voice. Michael, Jo, and Sam had all told him, but he hadn’t believed until now. The wedding was for his alpha. This was his moment, and he wasn’t about to miss it. The microphone situated subtly within a display of flowers carried his words.

“I fell in love with you over a beer and a big, unrealistic dream. You seemed far out of my league, totally unreachable, but I’m not one to give up easily. Some people call me stubborn. I knew I could never have you, not the way I longed for. So I settled for what I could get, and that was enough for a very long time. During those years, you mentored me, supported me, laughed and fought with me. You taught me that no dream is unrealistic if your vision is clear enough. You taught me that no man is a finished piece of work, but that everyone is a work of art. You are amazing to me. You always have been. You see beauty in everything, in everyone. You never give up on people. You never give up on yourself, even when you’re your own worst enemy.

“You were born into a kind of power that none of the rest of us can fathom, and yet you search for matching socks just like everyone. You took your birthright and you made it about choices, not authority. I am dazzled by you, my love. I’m so in love, it scares me. And you know that. And you cradle that in a way that gives me trust and security.

“Cas, I promise never to leave you, never to give up on us, never to throw in the towel. I promise you my Submission, my obedience, my heart, my body, and my mind. I am yours to do with as you wish, and I trust that what you do with me will always be for the best. I promise you my undying
trust, love, faithfulness, respect, and honor. I will love you forever, no matter what comes. I will stand beside you through every storm, and I will cheer you on to the summit of every mountain you need to climb. I cherish the sanctity of this moment, C.J. I will never forget today, or what it took to get here.”

Dean paused. It had all come tumbling out, much as he’d rehearsed it in private – strong and loud and certain. He looked into Castiel’s blue eyes, aware that his own had shifted to red, wondering idly why Cas’ hadn’t. It didn’t matter. He was still Cas.

“I will be your loyal brat for the rest of my life, my love. I promise you this before all of these witnesses. And I beg you...be my husband, Castiel – not my mate, not my partner. Be my Alpha, and my Dominant, and my husband from this day on. If you accept my promises, and you accept my plea, bring your mate and join me and mine. I ask that you honor me by saying so in front all of these wonderful people. Cas, will you be my husband?

Castiel laughed happily. “I will,” he said out loud. “Forever.”

“Very nice,” Pastor Jim effused. “Castiel? What promises have you to make to Dean?”

Castiel was still chuckling. “I’m not sure how you sneaked an answer out of me before I had my say, but that’s par for the course with us, is it not?” Cas quirked a brow at Dean, and Dean had the grace to blush, but he wasn’t sorry.

“Dean Michael, I could make you a million promises and mean every one of them. I’m certain that over the course of our lives together, I will make you more than I could begin to guess right now. I will try to keep this simple. The very first time I saw you, something inside me clicked over to a new position, and it’s never clicked back. It was love at first sight, from a romantic perspective. You were and have always been my soulmate, Dean Michael, and what happened to me that day was irrevocable, a profound bond of epic proportions that is bigger and more significant than either of the two of us as single entities. You were also, quite unfortunately, both a student of mine and a mite on the young side, both maladies healed by time.

“What I have always been drawn to in you, my love, is your effervescent vitality, your ebullient joy, your steadfast moral compass, your charisma, your dazzling cleverness that can unwind the stiffest conundrum but cannot play a game of chess to save your life. I love your complexity, the endless layers that I revel in peeling through one-by-one. I love your realness, your grit, your goddamned stubbornness, your nurturing, your resolute belief in the sanctity of family. I love you with every fiber of my being, Dean Michael Winchester. I vow to you, I always will.

“I promise you right here and now, before all of these people, I will make honorable the name you shared with me. I will never allow it to become sullied by ill deeds or words. I will protect the reputation of the name you trust me to carry, and I will strive to live up to that honor.”

Dean’s eyes were still crimson, and his nostrils flared as he listened. He was rapt, fully invested, and Cas smiled at him.

“Dean, I promise to love you, to respect you, to hold you sacred as my spouse for the rest of our lives. I will lead you, guide you, watch over you, protect you, care for you, and discipline you so that you can face every day as the amazing man you grew to be. I didn’t get to see your youth, but I watched your final steps into adulthood, and Dean, everything about you takes my breath away. I vow to be the supportive mooring you need to take that astoundingly bright light out into the world and make it better for all of us.

“I will never falter in my commitment to you. You have my solemn vow. I will never be unfaithful.
will never abuse my power over you. I will never forsake your council. I will be the Alpha you need me to be, and I will hold you to your word. Your trust is well-placed, my love.

“Come and be my husband, Dean Winchester. Raise a family with me and April. I welcome your mate into my home, into my Pack, into the sacred place where our pups will thrive and grow, and I ask that you say yes, before all of these witnesses. As I promised to be yours, will you promise to be my husband, my Submissive, my second-in-command?”

“I will, C.J. Always,” Dean answered, sounding a little stuffy.

Pastor Jim stepped forward and put a hand on each of their shoulders. “You make an old man cry,” he chuckled. “All right, let’s trade rings, and lock this thing up, shall we? Gabriel? Dean’s ring?”

“Yes, sir!” Gabe said, turning to take the box from Benny behind him. Gabe took the ring out and handed it to Cas. The two of them had surrendered their rings early in the week to have the engagement rings permanently affixed to the wedding bands that were designed to complement them. Cas took the ring and examined it. It was strong and masculine but quite elegant. It was beautiful.

“Castiel, please place the ring on the fourth finger of Dean’s left hand. Again, we Lupins have no traditions for this, but we’re going with secular western tradition. After today, the two of you may move your rings wherever the Alpha designates.” Jim made the statement with his usual irreverence. They’d discussed it at length already, and Cas had ruffled at the idea of following Christian strictures and had only capitulated when Jim pointed out that it was believed to have been the Romans who chose that finger in the first place. It had passed through Christian tradition, but it probably hadn’t originated there, and these days, secular Humanists usually used that finger as well. So in a way, it had also come out the other side. Castiel, as an avowed Heretic of every religion, balked at everything that smacked of doctrine. It had been pointed out by Dean that they both wore their engagement rings on the ring finger of their left hands without giving it a thought, and that fussing about it at the wedding was pedantic. Cas had agreed to a Universist pastor tying them together, he could suffer a few traditions.

All of that ran through Castiel’s mind as Dean presented his left hand and an inappropriate smirk from his brat. “Tempt me, and I’ll swat you right here, my Pet,” Cas threatened, and Dean grinned.

Jim was laughing too as he said, “Now then, you two already made your promises and all that, but this one is for the record. Castiel, repeat after me.”

Cas slipped the ring to Dean’s knuckle and looked at Jim, who continued once he saw that the Alpha was ready and no one seemed to be getting spanked at the moment.

“I, Castiel James, take you, Dean Michael,”

Cas repeated the words in a strong, clear voice that reverberated from the high ceiling.

“To be my lawful, wedded husband.”

“To have and to hold, from this day forward…”

“For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow…”

“I promise to be your steadfast guide, to govern you justly, to apply discipline fairly…”

“For as long as we both shall live.”
And Castiel repeated each line with his eyes locked on Dean’s, meaning every word with all of his heart. If he could have said these words to Dean a decade ago, he would have done. So many years were lost to them. They could never get that back. But Castiel felt the moment grow thick with meaning as his wolf cottoned on to what was happening. Dean was his. Really his.

Finally.

Dean saw the red take over the blue, and he giggled. He could feel the wolf standing up inside Castiel, its ears pricked forward, its powerful muscles bunching in anticipation.

“Down boy,” whispered Dean too softly for anyone but Cas to hear just as Cas pushed the ring the rest of the way into place.

Jim smirked. He could feel it too.

“Soon, big guy,” he whispered before turning to Dean.

“Got your Alpha’s ring?”

Dean turned to Sam behind him. Sam handed the box backward to Jo and the ring forward to Dean. He clapped an enormous hand onto Dean’s shoulder and gave him a tight bracing smile of support.

“Got it,” Dean breathed. He could feel thousands of eyes on him under the gaze of Castiel’s wolf. It was a new kind of role for him to play in front of near strangers. The friends and family he was cool with, but there were business associates and barely connected professional contacts out there watching Dean swear to take a subservient role to his Alpha husband. Dean took a moment before he looked up again to let the past few months roll through his mind, everything he wanted this wedding to say publicly about his relationship with Castiel, all of his talks with Kali. He nodded firmly to himself and he looked up into Castiel’s red eyes with a stubborn set to his jaw.

“You ready, Dean?” Jim asked him softly.

“Fuck yeah.”

“All right, put the ring onto the fourth finger of Castiel’s left hand and repeat after me.”

Dean took the hand Cas offered him and admired the thick dark metal bands, melded together into one, as he slid it into place. Castiel released a long slow exhale. Dean looked up at him in question. Had the Alpha not been certain that Dean would go through with it? Dean narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

Silly Alpha.

“I, Dean Michael, take you, Castiel James,”

Dean looked right into Castiel’s eyes and said, “I, Dean Michael, take you, Castiel James,”

“To be my lawful, wedded husband.” Dean’s voice was powerful in the enormous space.

“To have and to hold, from this day forward…”

“For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow…”

“I promise to be obedient to your will, to accept your guidance…”

“to follow your strictures in my heart as well as my head…”
“For as long as we both shall live.”

Dean had a grin on his face as he tried to slide the ring over Castiel’s knuckle. It stuck fast, and Cas had to finish the job himself.

“Very nice, boys. And all that’s left is the declaration. So, now, by the power vested in me by the state of Massachusetts and which the state of Missouri has promised to uphold, I pronounce the two of you husbands. If you’d like to share a kiss, now’s the time. Be my guest.”

Pastor Jim took a subtle step backward. Cas added a, “Don’t mind if I do,” before launching himself at Dean and attaching himself to Dean’s face. Dean’s hands came up to clutch Castiel’s wrists as the Alpha took hold of his face and backed him up powerfully enough that Michael had to dodge backward, tumbling clumsily from his knees over onto his ass as Castiel kissed the thunder out of his husband.

The wedding attendants cheered and the brass quintet struck up the classic wedding recessional. The wedding party was showered with flower petals from above, and the grooms broke apart, laughing. As the din died down, Pastor Jim came forward again with his hands up to request quiet.

“Never a dull moment with these two,” he declared. “All right, on to the festivities. It is my great honor, in the name of Castiel’s esteemed mother, the Congresswoman of Kansas District 3, beta Naomi Novak, to cordially invite you all to attend a reception in the grooms’ honor next door in the Blue Room. The wedding party will be joining you shortly. We have one more order of business to see to before we join in the festivities. If everyone will please follow Congresswoman Novak?”

Pastor Jim let the multitudes file out. The close associates, friends and family, who were invited to witness the Shareer ka Dhaava ceremony knew to stay put. They began to filter toward the front, ignoring curious looks from those who weren’t invited.

Michael had righted himself and straightened his tunic with the fastidiousness of a Regency valet guarding his position. He looked across at April and found her watching him in turn with a soft look on her face. Michael smiled back. Venue staff worked swiftly to reconfigure the space. The Universist alter was rolled back and a flat table, ornamented with a dark cloth and fixed with two thick leather hand straps, was rolled into place at the front of the dais.

Heavy curtains were untied and began to encircle the space the wedding party occupied as a thin canopy was arranged above the table. Dean and Castiel ignored the bustle. Their heads remained close together, their hands clasped up high by their throats. Kisses were exchanged. Soft words passed back and forth. People began to take places around the table. Billie took up a spot outside the curtained entrance making sure no one entered who wasn’t invited.

Benny and Bobby both circled the interior, scoping for infiltrators. One woman, a journalist Castiel had insisted on inviting to the wedding, was courteously escorted out. Each invitation for this portion had been sent with a special red card, but no one needed the cards. Bobby, Benny, and Billie knew every name on that list by sight. Outside, Rufus manned the back entrance and kept the curious moving toward the reception hall. It all happened very quickly.

When Michael looked away from April, everyone had found a place and fallen still.

The couple stood near the table, still captivated with each other, paying no mind to the intimate setting or the audience. Their lips kept finding each other in sweet, chaste kisses.

Pastor Jim eventually cleared his throat gently. “Your pardon, gentlemen. I believe everything is in readiness. We await your leisure.”
Castiel nodded at him and looked around. The dark red curtains cast the space in a cavernous darkness, dimly lit from high above by a few track lights that filtered through the canopy. The faces looking back at him patiently were all tinted with a red glow. Cas smiled at the people standing about him in a circle. He turned and looked down at April.

“Very nice,” his wolf praised, and she glowed up at him, thrilled. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, Sir,” she answered.

He turned to Michael. “And you? Are you all right for a bit longer?”

“Yes, Sir,” Michael answered. The carpeting was well padded beneath his knees. He’d seen to that personally when the configuration was designed. Castiel nodded, satisfied. He looked around at the gathered assemblage again. He took Dean by the hand and led him around the table.

“We thank all of you for coming,” Castiel said. “Over the last few weeks, Dean or I or both of us have spoken to each of you in person about what we’re doing here today. I believe everyone understands, but I would like to assure you, if any of you find the events disturbing, please feel free to slip out. The exits are marked clearly. For those of you who choose to stay, please be assured that the events that follow are entirely consensual. Dean?” Cas turned to his husband.

“Yes, Alpha. Entirely consensual.”

“Very good. If you have any misgivings, Dean, now is the time to voice them. Once we begin, your safeword will not be effective.”

“No, Sir. No misgivings. I’m ready.”

Castiel studied Dean’s face and then looked to Michael. When he went on, it was with the voice of his wolf, and Dean’s spine straightened noticeably.

“From this point, I must command you not to speak until the end of the ceremony. That goes for all of you as well. Your respectful silent attention is appreciated.” Castiel took a deep breath. He kissed Dean’s knuckle near his new ring and looked deeply into his eyes. Dean nodded, kissed Castiel’s knuckle back and left him to tuck out through the heavy curtain at the back. Castiel watched him go.

Kali and Gabriel stepped up on either side of Castiel and began wordlessly to undress him. He allowed the attention like a Pharaoh, moving as little as possible. Gabriel handed each piece of clothing off to Sam as they were removed. Sam folded or hung each item and arranged them on a bureau behind him. When he was nude, Castiel rolled his head on his neck, closed his eyes and breathed deeply, then opened them again and stood before the table, facing the back entrance.

When he was ready, he nodded to Kali. Kali pulled the curtain from one side, and Gabriel from the other. In the space that opened, Dean stood perfectly framed. His head was down, his hands clasped in front of him. Sam came regally forward, ducked through the curtain and stood before his brother. With a finger beneath Dean’s chin, he raised the man’s face.

“Are you sure?” Sam asked softly. Dean winced at the words. There weren’t supposed to be any words. His jaw clenched. He let fire show in his eyes. What kind of question was that to be asking now?

Sam obviously saw in his brother’s face what he needed to see, and he matched the set of Dean’s jaw and turned around. Reaching behind himself, he took Dean by the wrist and walked him forward and into the small space. It was beginning to grow warm and stuffy, but no one moved.
Sam presented himself to Castiel formally. He bowed just his head before stepping to the side and placing Dean’s hand in Castiel’s.

Castiel took hold of Dean’s hand and stood silently for a few moments, staring at his prize without blinking. At last, he dropped Dean’s hand and began a slow circuit around Dean, surveying him from every side. He ran a hand roughly through Dean’s hair, scraped nails over his throat, took him by the jaw and pulled him off-balance to glare into his eyes. Dean’s mouth dropped open. His eyes were impossibly wide.

Castiel released his jaw roughly and picked up both hands to inspect his fingernails.

“Open!” he commanded, and Dean widened his mouth for inspection. Cas ran his fingers along Dean’s teeth and over his tongue, over his hard and soft palates, narrowing his eyes at the gurgling noise Dean made.

Finally, Cas stepped back and pointed to the table.

“Present!”

Dean whined high in his throat but didn’t move. His fingers tightened into a fist. Most of the onlookers would have full view of his presentation once he mounted to table.

“Submissive, PRESENT!”

They’d changed the wording at that point. The ceremony called for the word, ‘Omega’ but Dean was no Omega. A Bottom who Presented at the first command was declaring an intention to be the ultimate obedient Omega. Many Ozzies went ass-up the first time they were commanded, but Dean wasn’t Ozzie. His wolf was miserable though. It wanted to take to the table. Dean dug his bare toes into the carpeting and fought to hold position upright.

Capitulating on the second command meant the Bottom could be expected to need a firm hand but would generally not be a handful. They just needed some structure.

Just a little longer.

Dean wanted more than a little structure. He wanted everything. There was a third call to Present coming, and then it would be taken out of his hands. Castiel watched him tremble.

“I’ve never asked you for anything three times, Winchester,” said Castiel’s wolf, totally scrubbing the script and earning a gasp from Kali. “I’m not about to start now.”

Dean had time to suck in a quick horrified breath before he found himself driven bodily forward, facedown onto the table, bent at the waist. His robe fell open and a hot body pressed up behind him, leaving the ceremony far behind. Gone was the display. There would be no posing.

Dean scrambled to get into position as Castiel’s teeth locked around the back of his neck. He got one knee lifted into its slot, but the other was pinned. The wolf rutted painfully at him from behind, missing the mark because of the plug that was still deep in Dean’s rectum.

Dean panted. He reached for the hand straps but couldn’t get them. Sam stepped up on the other side of the table and took him by the wrists, pulling him tight against the table’s edge with a determined, almost angry look on his face. Sam’s wolf seemed personally incensed by Dean’s reticence to obey.

Suddenly, Michael was next to Sam, a fiery look in his own gleaming golden eyes. He took Dean’s left wrist from Sam. The two of them nodded to each other and stepped a few feet apart, splaying
Dean’s arms out wide, and giving him no leverage at all.

Behind him, the Alpha’s wolf had found the plug and yanked it violently free. Dean cried out in pain. He heard glass shatter behind him as it landed hard.


Hard pummeling driving thrusts. Blinding pain. Teeth. Hands yanked at his hair. Drool or blood dribbled down his throat to his sternum. His arms were pulled impossibly tight. Castiel’s cock sank in past its knot and thrust hard and fast. Dean howled. He struggled. He fought his mate, his brother, and his husband with everything he had. He shoved backward with the knee that hadn’t found it’s perch, and he received a hard swat to his thigh in reply.

Castiel drove in hard. He practically climbed Dean’s lithe body in his zeal, getting one knee all the way onto the table and bracing himself on his arms against Dean’s back, forcing him flat.

“Not. About. To. Start. NOW!” Castiel huffed as he pummeled Dean’s hole. “You’re mine now! MINE!!”

“AAAAaarrggh!!” cried Dean with his head yanked back and his throat bare. Sam and Michael pulled him tight, and Castiel used the tension to force Dean all the way up onto the table to sprawl gracelessly across it. His legs splayed out straight behind him, spread-eagled. Castiel climbed up with him, getting his knees set between Dean’s thighs and forcing them wider than they were meant to go, stretching at the satin underlayer of the front of Dean’s robe until it strained, nearly ripping.

Dean felt the knot lock, and he screamed in pain. Then he felt Castiel’s teeth break the skin on his shoulder, and his scream cut off as if sliced with a knife. He went totally still, except for his panting. Castiel was breathing hard through his nose, growling at everything. His teeth held their grip even as blood dribbled over Dean’s clavicle.

Castiel continued to thrust painfully into Dean’s ruined body, and he moaned as he spilled, a shaky breath burbling past his lips. The hand gripping his hair pulled Dean’s head back just a bit more, stretching out the skin beneath Castiel’s tongue, and he lapped at the sore flesh without letting go.

Dean sobbed into the table top. First Sam and then Michael released his wrists. Dean tucked his arms in tightly beneath his body, beginning to shake with the rush of adrenalin. He was still panting hard. He’d never hardened beneath his husband. He didn’t come. He hadn’t experienced anything erotic at all, just the terrifying assault of the 25 staking its Claim for real.

Physically, it was Claiming sex. Emotionally, a D.F. was different. For Dean, this experience far outpaced anything he’d ever experienced. If he’d safeworded, the assault would have continued until Castiel was through anyway. It wasn’t a Claim despite the Claim that slammed over him. It was a Domination. It made no difference if Dean changed his mind or not. That was the difference.

It wasn’t play. It wasn’t about masochism. It wasn’t about stroking anyone’s wolf to ease the fire in its belly. It was about who owned whom, and it was about showing that to their friends. As their breathing began to slow, Dean’s trembling picked up. His breath skittered and shuddered uncontrollably. It was over so fast.

Castiel slowly let go with his teeth. He pushed himself to lean up using his grip in Dean’s hair, and then he let go and petted it back into place. Castiel looked about him. Sarah was gone, but everyone else was still there.

“Michael?” he asked breathlessly.
“Sir?”

“How is he?”

Michael knelt on the far side of the table and stroked Dean’s face tenderly, coaxing him to open his eyes. When he did, he blinked at Michael in confusion. “He’s scrambled right now, but he’ll be okay in a bit. Give him a few minutes. He’s in a lot of pain.”

“Dean?” Cas prompted. “Just relax. We’re going to take care of you. Close your eyes, baby. Lie still.”

“Yessir,” came a sleepy reply. Dean’s body lay limp, worn out.

Bobby and Benny began herding the witnesses out in single file, directing them toward the reception hall with assurances that Dean was fine. Soon the enclosure was nearly empty. April climbed up onto the table beside Dean and sprawled next to him, lending him her strength as he continued to work through the tremors. Michael stayed by his head, petting his hair and massaging the sore spot at the back of his head. Sam fetched him a small cup of water and helped him drink it. Gabriel and Kali packed away Castiel’s wedding suit and fetched April’s dress and tuxedos for all three men. Kali began to unfasten the robe from Dean’s body, letting it gape open up his back to help him cool down in the hot space. She eyed the bloodstains along the collar. Those would remain for the photo session tomorrow, the rusty stains a symbol of a successful union.

Kali made a point of telling Castiel off as Gabe collected her and Sam. She wasn’t pleased. That had not been the ceremony they’d asked her to support. That had been a travesty.

Cas chuckled, leaning back down to cover his husband’s back and kiss the back of his neck sweetly. “Perhaps we didn’t follow the script,” he told her. “But that’s what my wolf needed. I believe it was exactly what Dean needed as well.”

Kali left in a huff with Gabe and Sam trailing.

“Dean? Can you speak?”

“I can speak, Alpha,” he mumbled. At least that’s what it sounded like he said.

“Baby, where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere.”

“Was that what you had in mind?” Cas asked. “I could try it again if I missed the mark.”

“Tha’s not funny,” Dean told him.

Cas chuckled and kissed him again. He didn’t need the words from Dean. He could feel him well enough, he realized. Their weak double-bond had just widened significantly, and Cas could feel it for himself. He laid his cheek between Dean’s shoulder blades and closed his eyes. His right hand scratched idly at the back of April’s neck, and his left did the same to Dean’s.

“I love you, Alpha,” Dean mumbled. “Thanks for taking that seriously. Means everything.” His breathing was back to normal, and the trembling was beginning to slow.

“This is going to sound self-serving, Dean,” Cas answered without opening his eyes. “But that was at least as meaningful to me as it was to you. You were right, as usual. We needed that.”
“I can feel you more than before,” Dean said. “Bonds are wider.”

“Mm-hm. I feel it too. My D.F. on top of multiple Claims seems to have done the trick to open a broader channel. If we’re lucky, it’ll stay this wide.”

“Mm,” Dean hummed, slipping into a doze.

“Kitten,” Cas said softly. “Get dressed. Michael, you too. We’ll meet you in a little bit. The knot won’t take long to deflate. I’d like a few minutes alone with my husband.”

Alone at last, Castiel couldn’t stop kissing Dean’s bare skin. Dean’s sleeves were still in place holding the robe on, but his back had been freed all the way across, and each freckle needed a kiss of its own. When the knot slipped free, Cas helped Dean stand and get blood flowing through his legs. Cas slipped Dean’s robe off and rolled it into a ball. He stuffed it into the makeshift bureau off to the side of the dais. The space had gone very quiet and warm, and Dean seemed sleepy.

“Kali’s pissed at you, Alpha,” Dean observed.

“She’ll get over it. At least we didn’t turn it into a delicate roleplay like she feared. If anything, what we did was far harsher.

“Tell me about it,” grumbled Dean, massaging his asshole with one hand.

“Stop that. You’re going to feed me cake with that hand later,” chided Cas.

Dean subsided, but he grimaced when Cas bent him back down to examine the damage. “You look good, baby. No tearing. Minimal bruising. The pain will fade rapidly.”

“Why does it feel like this, then?” Dean asked sitting up on the tabletop and wincing.

“It’s mostly psychological,” the M.D. informed him. “Your body responds to assault very differently than it does to the kind of pain you crave. Now you know what other alphas experience when they feel pain. Not fun is it?”

“I’ll live,” Dean grumbled again. Then he laughed softly to himself.

“What?” Cas asked him, sliding naked between Dean’s knees.

“That was fucked up, Alpha. We are a couple of seriously fucked up dudes, and I’ve never been more in love with you.” Cas grinned as he leaned in to claim a kiss.

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, Winchester. Wait till I get you home tonight.”

“Oh, Jesus. Cas, I can’t!”

Castiel laughed and kissed him again. “I’m teasing Dean. I’ll let you heal first. Besides, serves you right for making my wolf wait a whole week to touch you. Come on, husband-mine, let’s get dressed and rescue folks from my mother.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope it hit the right notes. I hope it was worth the wait.
There's more artwork coming, thanks to Purryvet. Will make a master post to simplify checking all of it out once I figure that out. I learn slowly, but I learn...much like some of my beloved characters.
Chapter 110

Chapter Summary

It's a marathon wedding reception! Wolves don't do short parties.

Chapter Notes

First and most critically, Purrvet made us a beautiful piece of original art. It's at the heading of Chapter 28. Go. Go check it. Drool. He's gorgeous!

Second, y'all, I fully confess this mammoth chapter is nothing but a masturbatory self-indulgence. It's a fourteen-hour-long wedding reception, cause they don't do half measures, and it's so long. So, so long. But, ya know, whatever.

Warning in the THEN section for corporal punishment of a minor.

Warning in the present tense for an obscene attempt to embed music in a textual narrative. The playlist is posted at the end. Word from the author, assume that all music that isn't linked explicitly is all classic rock suitable to please Dean Winchester. What I tied in is just the purposeful songs, multiple though they are.

I do apologize for the unchewable length, but ... yeah.

Off you go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Cas..tee..yel No..vak!” beta Clement enunciated, and Cas jumped a foot off his chair. His face turned beet red, and his heart slammed into his chest.

“What was your instruction?” she asked in that carefully pronounced way of hers. Cas hated her with every fiber of his being, but he was stuck in her class for six more months. Maybe he would get alpha Stone next year. Maybe next year he could transfer.

“I finished the reading,” he explained.

“Was that what I asked you?” she persisted.

“Ma’am, I’m prepared for the class discussion. I’m just waiting for everyone else to finish reading. What does it hurt if I draw while I wait?”

She drew herself up and scowled at him. Slowly she advanced. She stopped with the side of her thigh at the top of his desk and hovered above him. She picked up the drawing he’d been working diligently to finish and inspected it with an air of distaste before folding it in half and tucking it behind her back.

“I see,” she said at last. “It must be quite an experience to be so much smarter than everyone else, Mr. Novak.”

“I’m not…” he bristled. “I wasn’t…! I just finished reading! Am I supposed to sit here and stare out the window with my hands folded on my desk?! Give me back my paper!!” Castiel was furious. He felt ready to burst with outrage. He found himself on his feet ready to lambaste the witch for humiliating him in front of people he already struggled to connect with. “It’s not my fault you assigned us forty minutes for a ten minute read! Maybe you should try teaching second grade! They read slower!”

He was in for it, and he knew it. The beta’s face took on a dead calm. She nodded once to herself and then took a measured pace backward. She pointed toward the front of the classroom. “You’ve been warned about disrespectful outbursts, Mr. Novak. I don’t care who your father is, you’re not exempt from proper behavior in my classroom. March!”

“Leave my father out of it,” he grumbled petulantly under his breath, but he wended his way to the front of the room. Every eye followed him. It wasn’t that his classmates didn’t like him, exactly, or he them. It was that they never spoke the same language when they talked to each other. He found his brow knit in befuddlement as he tried to understand their humor and their games, and he received the same puzzled frowns back whenever he attempted to break to logjam.

At first, it seemed that his constant run-ins with authority would earn him some credibility with his classmates, but they mostly seemed resigned to pity him now. Staying on the right side of the paddle wasn’t this hard for most of them, and it had become more a nuisance to witness his near daily punishments than a cause for respect. Only Brandon got swatted more often than Cas, and there was something really off about Brandon.
Castiel was beginning to agree with his mother on the question of schools. Cas didn’t belong here in a Lupin school with his kind. He didn’t fit. His father insisted on a one-year trial, stridently overruling his mother’s insistence on a Primate private education for her sons. Lupin public schools had improved, he insisted, and he didn’t want his sons raised separate from the pack that lived at their doorstep. He didn’t want privileged princelings in his house. Gabe took to it like a duck in water, but Castiel…

Mother had pursed her lips judgmentally, but she couldn’t change his mind. He was Alpha. It was his decision. Castiel trudged the well-worn path to the stool his belly knew so well. No matter how awful it was, he knew he was sentenced to this classroom for the whole year.

“Drop your pants, Mr. Novak. You know the position. If you have so much extra time on your hands, let’s see if we can fill it.”

Castiel fumed. She didn’t have to be a dick about it. He pushed his school slacks to his ankles along with his underwear. He faced the chalkboard at the front of the class, exposing himself to his classmates behind him, and he could feel each and every eye.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Castiel?” she asked him as she collected the heavy oak paddle from its hook on the wall by the door.

“I apologize for being disrespectful,” he chanted.

“And?” she prompted. She stationed herself to the side, just out of his periphery and not blocking him from anyone’s view.

He frowned. “And what?” He wasn’t sorry, and he couldn’t be forced to give her more than the required token words. She would be taking the rest out of his bottom in a moment anyway.

“And for misusing your time in my classroom when you were under instruction to make productive use of our limited hours?” she suggested with faux kindness. “We have only so many hours every day, young man. Wasting them by drawing wolves is a travesty.”

He sighed. Wasting them by putting on an authoritarian display was no better. Besides, it wasn’t a wolf this time. It was something else. If she couldn’t tell that, he clearly needed more practice. “I apologize for drawing pictures in class when I had over thirty minutes left after I finished reading. Next time I’ll stare straight ahead of me and daydream silently instead,” he told the blackboard. He knew that quip would earn him extra swats, but at this point, what did it matter?

He heard the paddle smack threateningly against her outer thigh.

“I see.”

Cas turned his head to look at her, curious about the delay. He could tell she was really mad. She regarded him coldly.

“Ma’am?” he asked.

“I can wait all day, Mr. Novak. Or if you’d rather, we can take the matter down the hall to the office.”

Castiel’s blood ran cold. A trip to the office would be far worse and would mandate a call to his father at work. “No ma’am. That won’t be necessary. Please.”

“Then do it correctly,” she insisted.
“I’m very sorry, Mrs. Clement, that I was disrespectful and that I drew pictures in your class. I will use my time better next time.”

“Bend over the stool, Castiel,” she told him, still cold.

He gritted his teeth and set his jaw. He waddled miserably forward two steps and leaned across the cold wooden seat, clutching onto the rungs on the far side and bracing himself. The first swat made him clench up hard, but he resisted letting her hear any sound from his throat. Father was going to be irate. He’d given Castiel a stern reprimand only two days ago about his inability to behave in class. Cas grunted involuntarily as the paddle swacked home again. He’d promised Alpha he would try. And now he’d landed right back in it all over again.

But he wasn’t sorry. She could make him say the words, but she couldn’t make him mean them. His eyes clenched hard as his backside took the blows. She always aimed right at the tenderest spots, and it fucking hurt.

It was bad enough to waste class time reading passages out of a textbook, but to waste over half an hour was ludicrous for a page and a half of reading. Cas could have read the passage eight times in the allotted time. As it was, he’d been through it start to finish twice. He failed to stifle another grunt, berating himself for letting her hear his pain. At least this time he’d busied himself quietly instead of impatiently drumming his pencil or pacing repeatedly to the pencil sharpener. Tears squeezed soundlessly from the corners of his eyes in his fury. The real clencher was that his impatience was borne not of inexcusable disdain for the class, but of frustration at the lost time. Castiel loved history. He craved more, not less, and he longed to truly engage in the subject that his textbook turned into lifeless drivel. He’d already read the whole book. Where it fell short, he’d researched the most fascinating sections on his own. He wanted to learn, damnit!

“OW!” he exclaimed as she struck the same spot for the fifth time in a row. It wasn’t fair. None of this was fair.

At last she released him to waddle in humiliation into the corner. He set his elbows against the wall and laced his fingers behind his head without being told. His butt burned with the sting of the paddle and the bite of eyes on him, drilling the pain in harder. His eyes stung with tears.

It wasn’t fair.

NOW:

Dean limped a bit getting his tuxedo on, but Cas had been right. The pain was fading rapidly. He felt lethargic, but he knew that a few minutes into the reception would perk him up again. The scent of Pack all about him – good will from people he loved and the scents that went with it – would snap him right out of it. He straightened his cummerbund and looked up for his cuff-links to find Castiel in his space, quite close enough that Dean could kiss him without straining.

So he did.

“May I help you, Alpha?” he asked lightly. “You gonna remind me to write my scene report?” The adrenalin was gone. The panic that sent him flailing in desperation had vanished, leaving behind a soggy sense of warm affection that was an odd aftertaste to such a violent affair. He was still bleeding a little from his shoulder, but Cas had bandaged him sufficiently to keep his crisp white shirt
clean.

“The ritual isn’t complete yet, Winchester,” Cas told him with an Alpha air. “We have one final step. Would you rather finalize it here in private or out in front of witnesses? I can call the Pack together if you want to make it Pack business.”

Dean swallowed and lowered his eyes. “It’s not my call, Sir.” He knew what Castiel meant. As things stood, Dean still belonged wholesale to Cas, legally, personally, and socially. Dean had no standing whatsoever at the moment. He’d surrendered it all as surely as the Alpha had ripped it from his hands.

“Eyes up, Submissive.”

Dean looked up. Castiel’s blue eyes were warm and open. Dean saw a peace in them that was unfamiliar. The Alpha had soft laugh lines radiating from the corners of his eyes, lines Dean longed to watch deepen over the years to come. Cas raised Dean’s left hand again and kissed his ring without breaking eye contact.

“Your trust in me is a gift, Dean. I won’t ever take that for granted. Listen to me right now.” Cas was close enough that their breath mingled. They could each feel heat radiating from the other. The enormous cavity of space around them intensified their solitude, the simple canopy above their heads cloaked them in secrecy.

Cas waited for Dean to nod minutely in acknowledgement, and then he went on.

“Our wedding is one thing,” he said. “What that says to the world is that we choose each other. Every day we’ll wake to face the day and choose all over again, you and I. Do you agree?”

“Yes, Alpha.” Dean’s tone was firm.

Cas chuckled at the formality. Dean needed a little more ritual yet. The Alpha cocked his head. “But that’s not all that we’ve promised here today, my love. That’s only a portion. I know you love me. I cherish that gift. I’ll make every effort to be a good husband to you. Let me say that first and foremost and then move on, yes?”

“Yes, Sir,” Dean told him, formal but a little meek. It was the moment of truth. Dean felt weightless. He felt in a very real sense that his physical body might no longer exist and wouldn’t unless Castiel granted him leave to reoccupy his vessel.

“You’re so beautiful,” Castiel praised. It seemed that his voice filtered through all three of his designations at once. Dean blinked slowly. He let his consciousness delve effortlessly into his husband’s mind, simply following the tracer lines that were more open to him now, feeling his way along them to where they split into separate strands. Everything he touched touched him back, and he felt it bolster him as if his bones were strung with Castiel’s strength.

“Dean, you belong to me,” Castiel told him firmly. “You belong to me. I own you. Nothing can ever change that now, and it is good and right and just, exactly as it is. I do not ask your leave to approve of my actions.” Dean swallowed visibly. “I do not ask your forgiveness for what I took from you.”

Dean nodded grimly and slipped down to his knees. Castiel kept hold of his hand. Their gaze remained locked.

“Don’t ever forget your place, Dean Michael Winchester. You are not my mate. You belong to me. You are, in every way, MINE.”
“Yes, Alpha,” he replied in a whisper.

“Do you understand?” Castiel asked. His voice carried a huskiness that told Dean the wolf had the reins in its teeth.

Did he?

Castiel’s eyes had a hard edge to them now, willing Dean to hear him in a way he wasn’t sure the man ever could without a Mating-bond. But Dean was already there. He was SO there. Tears sprang up in Dean’s eyes, and his hand turned in Castiel’s to clutch onto him like a lifeline. Words failed him, but he nodded vehemently. It didn’t matter if Cas never finalized the ritual they’d discussed. Dean didn’t need it. He could live the remainder of his life just like this, putting on an alpha front for the world, but belonging wholesale to the man before him.

Right now, Dean was no one. He had no identity but what Castiel might grant him. He floated.

Cas held his eyes with a hardness that belied the ring on his finger. His nostrils flared. It was all about trust right now.

“You are so beautiful, my love,” he said once more, still speaking through every voice at once. “I believe we understand each other. So now I say this to you: Without retracting a sliver of what I’ve Claimed, know that you are washed clean of your frailties, made whole where you were weak, set upright on your own feet to stand straight and proud. What I own, I care for, and I will always own you. Envision that however you like, my Pet. It doesn’t matter how broken you believe yourself to be. What I grant you leave to carry is beautiful and whole. You are righteous through me. You are strong. You are brilliant. You are charged henceforth with the care and custody of my property. Forsake it at your peril, Winchester, for I will grant you no mercy should you fail.”

Dean sobbed out loud. His face contorted into a grotesque mask of self-loathing and relief. He reached up with his right hand and took hold of Castiel’s wrist, hanging on for his life. Castiel didn’t flinch.

“When you rise,” Cas told him almost coldly. “You do so as alpha. You do so in the full weight of your designations and your Pack position. You stand up into your birthright, unadulterated by any ritual, but you do so through me — only through me, always through me, purely through me. I charge you, Dean Michael Winchester, to live through me.”

Castiel fell silent. Dean’s thumping sobs broke out of him, a dam that had burst at long last, a flood that he could no longer hold in check, and he cried hard and ugly as he clutched at his husband to stay upright on his knees.

Castiel let him cry his fill without comment. He pulled Dean’s head in to rest against his thigh, and he caressed his Sub’s hair while he waited out the grief. Someday he hoped Dean would come to realize that he wasn’t broken, and that what Cas had ownership of didn’t need polishing. Dean’s soul shone brighter than the most brilliant star without aid from anyone.

At last, Dean took a deep shuddering breath and set his jaw. It quivered a bit, but then it firmed. Dean’s tears stopped. His face was streaked with wetness, but his eyes were resolute. He used his grip on Castiel’s hand to leverage himself back to his feet, and Cas pulled him up.

“I won’t let you down, Sir,” he told his Alpha.

“You couldn’t if you tried, beloved.”

“Thanks, Alpha” Dean whispered simply.
“Come on, Dean. Let’s go wash your face and get to our party.”

“Wait.”

Cas stopped trying to herd his husband out of the enclosure. He stood with one arm wrapped around his shoulders. Dean exhaled slowly. “I didn’t think you really got it,” he said. “But you did. Thank you. Maybe it’s a fucked up way of getting there, but I needed this. Tessa’s already given me an earful about it though, so if it’s all the same to you, maybe we keep the details to ourselves.”

Castiel chuckled. “I just demanded you cleave to me as your god, Dean. I think we can keep this between you and me.”

“And where does Michael fit?” Dean asked him.

“Do you really need me to clarify?” Cas asked with a note of surprise.

“I mean, there’s nothing subtle about the new strata. I got what I wanted, Alpha, but that kind of leaves him dangling over a bottomless pit.” Dean settled his head onto Castiel’s shoulder. He couldn’t see Cas’ face. He could feel the touch of amusement though. They should have clarified this before right now.

“Michael’s position does not shift by a hair, Dean. He is precisely where he was. He is precisely where he deserves to be. What we’ve shifted here between us is for the two of us and no one else.” Castiel’s arm across Dean’s shoulder pulled a little, cinching him.

“Yeah, but…did I just agree to…I mean, if I belong to you, where does this leave me with him? Cas, I need him too.”

Castiel chuckled again and turned Dean to face him. “Nothing changes about that, love. He’s still your mate. This wasn’t about elbowing in between you, whatever it may have sounded like. You belong with Michael. You belong TO me. I need to know you understand. He still belongs to you first and to me second.”

“Nothing changes?” he asked tentatively.

Cas raised his chin with a gentle hand. “Everything changes, but not for you and Michael. He’s a part of you, Dean, but he’s not between you and me. Let’s spend the rest of our lives figuring out what that means.”

Dean laughed wetly. “It’s a deal. Thanks, Alpha.”

Castiel kissed him once more, looked deeply into his eyes and then nodded firmly. “It’s only 1:30, and we’ve got the Blue Room all night, Dean. When you need to rest, you rest. There’s no rush. Don’t push yourself.”

“Yessir.” Dean snagged his cuff-links and let himself be led out through the heavy curtain. He blinked in the suddenly too bright room. Workers were already busy lowering the soft crepe banners. They would leave the front display for photos later, but the back of the house was being packed up efficiently. A couple of workers watched the two of them make their way out a side entrance.

“Congratulations, alphas,” cheered a tall woman in work boots who had a long ladder perched on her shoulder. “Better get in there. They’re already serving luncheon.”
April hugged her mother tightly, letting the Omega gush over her soft autumn-orange organza dress. April was on cloud nine, echoing Castiel’s joy. She couldn’t stop grinning. Michael’s hand rested in hers as she bathed in the scents of her birth family. Michael looked stunning in his tuxedo, and he shook her father’s hand formally. They’d met officially early in the week, but they hadn’t had time to really talk yet, and Michael still felt intimidated by the alpha whose face was practically carved from *American Gothic*. April had tried to convince Michael that the man was a teddy bear, but Michael wasn’t going for it. He was relieved when his sister appeared from nowhere and buried him in her embrace.

“You were the most gorgeous wolf up there,” she insisted to Michael as she released him. He smiled wanly, trying to keep his bonds at the front of his mind so he could watch over Dean. Dean’s emotions were shaky at the moment, and Michael didn’t want to leave him alone with that. Michael’s alpha was happy. It wasn’t that. But Michael knew the newlyweds still had a bit of private business to lock down, and it felt like they were doing it right now.

“Thanks, Rache,” he mumbled. “You look very pretty, too.” Michael caught April’s eye. He nodded at him with confidence. She could feel her own mate as well, and she wasn’t perturbed. That was good. Michael smiled. “But surely Pete here was more glorious than me,” he insisted, raising April’s hand and bringing her to twirl for Rachel. Her delicate skirt whirled with her, and Rachel hugged her when she came to a stop.

“What’s this?” Michael’s sister asked, nodding to where the two Omegas’ hands were still linked together.


“And you didn’t tell me?” she shrieked, whapping Michael in the gut. He whoofed and folded.

“Ouch! Jesus, Rachel!”

“What does Castiel have to say about this?” she insisted.

Michael smirked and wrapped an arm over April’s shoulder possessively. He kissed the top of her head.

“No way! You’re lying!”

Michael grinned at her. “As long as I don’t get her pregnant,” he allowed with a rueful face. “And I’m not going to do that.” He was uncomfortably aware of April’s parents still listening in.

“I don’t believe you,” Rachel challenged. She looked around to see if the newlyweds had arrived yet and then turned back to April. “For real?” She leaned in close and whispered. “For real?”

April nodded and turned to look up at Michael. “For real. Of course, we don’t know where we’re going from here, but it feels good to have the chance to find out. I love your brother, Rachel. He’s a good man.”

Rachel tucked her knuckles under her chin and made a wide-eyed face. “Oh, my God! This is amazing! Holy fuck!!” She turned and searched the crowd behind her. “Mommy! Come quick!!”
Michael laughed and released April to shove at his sister’s shoulder. “Go get a drink, Rachel. Don’t be a pest.”

She wobbled on her feet but didn’t fall. “Stop it, Mike! High heels! I’ll break my ankle!” April grabbed hold of her arm and helped her stabilize. Rachel shook her head. “I’m gonna need proof, you know. I dare you to kiss her in front of her mate.”

“I’ll do better than that,” he leaned in close and winked. April laughed and stretched up to kiss him softly on his lips. The look that earned her from Michael was really all the proof Rachel needed. She threw her arms around her brother and then followed the hug with another for April.

“Please, please, please tell me we can be sisters,” gushed Rachel.

“We’re already sisters,” April told her warmly. “We may have to wade through multiple in-laws to get there, but you and I are family now. That’s forever.” April cut off the weepy puppy-eyes by reintroducing Rachel to her parents who had both been standing awkwardly with glasses of champagne in their hands watching.

“You’re all at the same table,” April told them. “I made sure of that. I want my family to know Michael’s family. We have so much in common. I think you’re really going to hit it off. Mom, you and Michael’s mother both do embroidery, and you’re both Ozzies! Michael’s Pack breeds horses and dogs. Maybe you can visit.”

“Yes!” blurted Rachel. “You have to!”

“That would be…” Reginald cut off as Michael’s parents arrived. The alphas shook hands warmly. The Omegas hugged. April beamed. Michael felt split. He could feel Dean from the distance, experiencing something intense and not entirely pleasant, and before him, people he cared about were busy admiring one another’s clothing and announcing that the weather couldn’t have been more perfect.

April rested a hand on his arm and looked up at him. “He’s crying,” he whispered to her. “He never cries like this. Not like this.”

“He’s all right, Michael,” she whispered back. “He needs to let it out. It’s a big day. He doesn’t do half measures, and this is what he wanted.”

He nodded, but the haunted look didn’t ease in his eyes until he felt Dean calm down. Lunch was announced, and people began to find their place cards, settling in to eat a late lunch. Unlike Primate celebrations, a wolf shindig lasted into the wee hours of the morning. Most of the apes would leave before dinner was served, but the wolves were here for the long haul. Inhibitions would begin to fall away as fewer and fewer apes remained to find the revelry unsettling.

For now though.

Even Gabriel was on his best behavior.

Michael held April’s chair for her as she slid into place at the head table. Gabriel squeezed her thigh under the table and she swatted the back of his head.

“Behave, you two,” Benny told them both, leaning down between their heads on his way to his own seat.

“He started it!” / “She started it!” they announced in unison.
Benny left them with a look of warning, but he let it go.

Sam handed Sarah a flute of champagne. Lunch plates were being wheeled out, but he wasn’t hungry yet. He’d just tucked his mate into a quiet room off the hallway to feed the twins and assess their ability to stay a little longer. Eunice was standing by to run them home and watch over them until late into the night.

“Want to talk it over?” he asked Sarah. She looked up from her reverie, startled.

“What’s to talk over?” she asked him, taking the glass and sipping. “You’re going to tell me that was all normal and natural, and it’s just how wolves are. Damnit, Sam, you held him down so his husband could rape him! I couldn’t stand by and watch that. I shouldn’t have been there in the first place.”

Sam chewed on her consternation for a moment. “I guess my wolf was tired of all the dancing they do between them. They skirted around for years and never got to the point.”

“THAT was the point?”

“Well…yes, actually,” he confirmed. “And no, I’m not going to tell you there’s anything normal about what just happened in there. It was weird as hell. You aren’t going to see that happen again, Sarah. Not like that. I understand why it upset you, but it’s not usually like that, not even a full Domination between alphas. That was harsher.”

She scoffed. “I’ve seen pictures. Charlie showed me pictures of an alpha with his jaw broken. How is this worse?”

Sam made a face. Without the scents behind it, he couldn’t quite explain. This was harsher. It just was. “You know, the guy in the picture with the broken jaw is sitting right over there. We could go talk to him. He’s a good guy.” Sam nodded toward Victor who had his head close to Christian’s just as the two men exploded in laughter and clashed their glasses together in a boisterous toast. “He was on the wrong path, and he needed a correction. It was a hard lesson to swallow, but now everything’s on track again. It’s better for everyone, even Victor. With Dean, it’s different. He doesn’t need a correction. He needs an owner. The truth is, that’s been me since before I was ready for it. Now it’s Cas, and that’s better for all of us.”

She shook her head and looked back at Sam, dismissing the man whose jaw seemed fine and who clearly held no grudges. “Castiel vowed to respect Dean not ten minutes prior, and then he violated him. I don’t care how you spin it, Sam. It’s vile! And you helped him do it.”

Sam blew out a long exhale. “Come on, Sarah. You’re so damn close. Click over with me. Make the connections. You get this. I know you do. I can see it in your eyes. You keep getting stuck on your own culture. Let it go. Let go and feel. Dean’s going to come limping through that door in a minute, and he’s not going to be broken. It’s not brainwashing. It’s not a violation. It’s Pack.” Sam’s head was down close to hers as he whispered furiously to her. “And yeah, it was harsh. It was harsher than normal, but this marriage thing goes against our nature, Sarah. It’s like pounding a square peg into a round hole. It takes some doing to make it fit. They aren’t going to get there without a little pounding.”
She scoffed harshly again. “Marriage is a partnership. If it requires a rape to make it stick, maybe it’s not really a marriage in the first place!”

“It may not be an ape marriage,” he growled back. “But it’s what my brother needed. You don’t know the first thing about what he’s been through, about what he needs. You judge Castiel for promising him respect? Well, what you aren’t seeing is that it’s the highest form of respect Cas can offer him by giving Dean exactly what he wanted. He needs an Alpha more than he needs a husband. Maybe that’s not the way an ape thinks, and maybe it wouldn’t work for 90% of wolves either, but it’s right for Dean and Cas. My brother can do anything. Anything. He’s amazing. But he’s convinced he’s broken. No amount of therapy is going to change that. You hear me? But if Cas ties him fast and takes all of the worry about being broken onto himself, Dean’s free of it. Free of it forever. Don’t lecture me about respect. I’ll bet you don’t know anyone else in the world who would make that sacrifice for someone they love. I know I don’t. And yeah, I helped. I would do it again. I’d sit on him if I had to.”

Sarah’s face had gone slack and pale. “It just can’t…”

“Yes, it can.” Sam breathed hard through his nose. “When Dean and Cas come through that door, watch them. See for yourself. Feel it, Sarah. Don’t think. Look around you. Are these people beaten? Are they brainwashed? Are they broken remnants trammeled into submission? Every wolf in this room has been padded and mounted at some point. Some of them experience it weekly. Some of them are sitting on tender butts right now. Some of them will be in pain before they leave here today, I’ll bet. Look at them. Tell me what you see.”

She looked about her. They looked like any people at any celebration. They laughed and smiled. Some were eating while others mingled about. Wolves and apes circulated without friction. No one was on their knees or bound with a collar and leash. There were no leather strap corsets or indiscreet leather thongs. It was a wedding, an elegant one. All the ways they balanced each other in spaces reserved only for wolves left them free of the trappings in places like this.

Sam leaned back in. “Some wolves aren’t built to house all of their own power,” he explained. “They need to give some of it away. Giving your power to someone else isn’t an easy exchange. It’s difficult, or it’s not real. If it’s easy, you’re not doing it right.”

“Why do you say this one wasn’t natural,” she asked, abandoning her argument. “How is it different?”

He snickered into his flute. “There’s no reason in a natural state that an alpha like Dean would ever challenge someone like Cas. I mean, he challenges all the time. That’s his brat. But Cas has about a billion other ways to handle it when Dean pushes him. It’s a very different kind of Dominance that Cas uses with Dean most of the time. This though, this was different. This was Castiel taking Dean’s very humanity out of his hands. Sarah, we don’t do that normally. I’ve seen apes do it to each other, but only the worst wolves ever do something like that, and it’s almost always abusive. What Cas did wasn’t a normal or natural move. It was a carefully orchestrated response to a problem they don’t have any other solution to.”

“What would happen if they didn’t do it this way?” she asked.

“I really don’t know,” he admitted. “I know Dean’s been balanced precariously on a ledge since he presented as an alpha. He’s a hell of an alpha, but he’s always had this warbly, unstable side to him. He can’t be his own grounding post. He can’t do it. I did my best while it was just the two of us, before Castiel. But now, god, what he’s got now, in Cas…Sarah, he’s invincible now. This wasn’t a rape. I need you to see that. This was Castiel taking Dean by the kite strings and tying them around his own waist. Dean never has to worry about losing his footing again. Not ever. Maybe that sounds
abusive to you, but to me…” Sam felt light-headed at the realization that his brother was really going to be okay.

“Sam, are you all right?”

He laughed. “You know what? I am. I just realized I don’t have to worry about him anymore.” He laughed again, lighter. “I’ve been worried about him my whole life. I don’t even know what to do with myself now.”

Up on the stage behind them, the band cut off. It had been quietly underpinning the murmur of voices with gentle instrumentals. Into the silence that followed, a snare drum rolled.

“Friends! Your attention, please!” called the band leader. “Your attention! It’s my privilege to present…Dr. and Dr., Alpha and alpha, husbands in their first appearance, the Winchesters! Dean and Castiel!”

The room erupted into applause and whoops as the couple strolled in hand in hand, glowing – both of them. Dean pointed to the front man on the stage in delighted surprise, grinning.

“What the fuck!?” he shouted. “You’re meant to be guests! What’re you doing on the stage?”

Jessie grinned back. “You think we would let some other douche band fuck up your wedding reception? Besides, your mates are planning to do more singing than we are. What other band would let them do that without getting their panties in a twist over sharing the limelight?” Dean fairly glowed with happiness. It was the whole convention band, set to play his reception and looking very much like they were honored to have the chance. It was a total surprise. Michael had hid this from him, and Dean hated surprises. Usually. This one though. Dean couldn’t stop smiling.

He looked around and saw Michael walking smugly toward him. “You’re an asshole,” Dean stated loudly.

“You love me anyway,” Michael retorted. Dean hugged him hard, thumping him on the back and then pulling back to scowl at him in warning.

“Are there any other surprises heading my way? If there are, tell me now.”

“You’ll have to wait and see, Dean. It’s a party. Lighten up.” Michael was still talking as he stepped in to give Castiel a hug too. April was right behind him with two glasses of champagne which she handed over with a little bow. Cas took his and kissed her softly. Dean did the same.

“Shall we?” Cas asked rhetorically. He took Dean’s hand and let April take his elbow. Michael fell in beside Dean, and the four of them entered the room like royalty. They were swamped immediately, and it was a delightfully welcome sensation. Dean spotted the new alpha leaning casually against a wall near the band. Cain lifted his tumbler in a silent toast, and Dean nodded. He nudged Castiel and then indicated the tall blue-eyed alpha in the corner. Cas excused himself from the melee and left Dean to go speak to the solitary man.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, Darius,” Castiel said with a hand extended for Cain to shake.

“Only my Aunt Patsy calls me ‘Darius’, Alpha. Please. Call me Cain. And it’s my pleasure. That was some wedding.” The handshake was firm and solid.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. You chose not to attend the Shareer ka Dhaava. I didn’t see you there.” Cas turned to stand beside the man so they could both review the room. People gave them a
wide birth, but they were being watched.

“I thought I better ease my way into the Pack a little more slowly than that,” Cain answered. “Things are going to be prickly enough between me and your number two without starting out with a full view of my lowest Submission as a first impression. I gather he wouldn’t appreciate that much.”

“Very generous of you,” Castiel commented. “You’re probably right. Dean can be sensitive to private matters. And you’re right, too, that he’s not going to jump right on your bandwagon straight away. You’re going to have to prove to him that you’re trustworthy. Cain, I’m not going to interfere between you two. You need to work it out for yourselves.”

Cain ran a hand through his hair and looked about the room. “Have you settled the question of my membership in the pack yet? You made quite the sales pitch, Winchester.”

“Alpha,” Castiel corrected with a firm growl in his voice, and Cain bowed slightly.

“Forgive me. Alpha.”

“Your status is probationary to start with, alpha,” Cas reminded him. “I made that clear in my proposal. Once you’ve cleared the first hurdles and proven yourself to the Pack, we’ll discuss membership. That is part of the deal, and I’m not reneging. However, you aren’t going to waltz into my family without showing us you deserve it. You’ll need to win Dean and April both over before that happens.”

“Then it’s merely a matter of time, Sir. Dean may not like me, but he’ll come to trust me eventually. I have nothing to hide. And as for April... Alpha, I can only try to express what I have planned for that young lady. She’s going to be however big she wants to be. The sky’s the limit. I won’t rest until she has everything she’s ever dreamed of.”

“You won’t rest even then,” Cas told him staunchly. “This job, if it works out for you, is not one that will ever allow you to rest on your laurels. The second you take your eye off her best interest, you’re out, and I don’t give a fuck how long you’ve been Pack by then.”

Cain paled. “Yes, Alpha,” he said, wide-eyed. Castiel tipped his head and touched his champagne flute to Cain’s whisky tumbler.

“Enjoy the party. Thanks again for coming.”

Castiel left him observing the stage band and smiled as he was surrounded from every side. Jo tugged at his arm. “Promise me a dance later, Alpha,” she demanded, and he agreed as he leaned down to let her grace him with a kiss.

“I’m not letting this chance to dance with you in a dress pass me by, Joanna Beth. It may never come again. And I would love a chance to sit with you and Jack a little bit later on. We need to get to know each other.”

“You got it!” she told him cheerfully. “I’ll come get you!”

Cas saluted formally as she dragged Jack away, oblivious to the lipstick smudge on his cheek.

“You’ve lost something, brother,” Benny told him, replacing the empty glass in Castiel’s hand with a full one and wiping at the Alpha’s lipstick stain with his handkerchief.

“My drink or my husband?” Cas asked. He couldn’t see Dean, but he could feel him. He was close-by and very amused.
“Both, but I only have a fix for one. You have to find Dean on your own.” Benny leaned into him, jostling the Alpha with a good natured nudge. “I’m proud of you, you know. You finally did it.”

“We did,” Cas agreed. “And the next thing you’re going to say is, it’s about damn time.”

“Well, it is. And I’m not the only one who’ll tell you that today either. Get ready to hear it all night.” Benny laughed at his own prediction, already feeling the open bar a little and happy as a lark at dawn.

Cas tried to keep a straight face, but he couldn’t, and he broke out into an enormous grin in the face of his best friend’s cheer. “What happened to us, Benny? Last thing I remember is you and me making crazy plans in your dorm room in the middle of the night. Look at us now.”

“We grew up, my friend. You and me both. It’s been a helluva ride so far. And just wait,” Benny pointed a finger at him. “We both got pups coming. You think this is nuts. Just you wait.”

Cas laughed again and conceded he had a point. He caught sight of Dean through a break in the crowd and the man took his breath away. “Jesus Christ. Gabe’s right, Benny. I’m so fucked.”

“Yes, you are.”

April tackled Cas from behind, clinging to him like a monkey and practically climbing him to get high enough to kiss his throat. He caught her with his free hand, leaned into the kiss and then lowered her to the ground, all without really acknowledging she was there. His arms wound around her, situating her in front of him, back to chest, and he rested his chin on her head. He tipped his glass for her to sip from.


“Yes, Mother,” Cas told him. He lifted April straight up with one arm, and she let herself be carried, dangling lightly across the floor.

“Don’t tempt me, cher,” Benny threatened. “I could mother the hell outta you if I had to.”

“Any time you think you can pull it off, I’d love to see you try,” Cas teased back. He set April on her feet at the head table. His plate appeared as he sat down. “Run and fetch Dean, would you, kitten? If I have to sit and eat, so does he.”

“Yes, Sir,” she saluted and dashed away.

From the raised platform upon which the head table sat, Castiel could see the whole room. He watched his guests from above, and he thought about what it had taken to make today happen. The air was thick with the hormones of emotion. It was his love for Dean and Dean’s return of that love that had brought a couple thousand people into the same place at the same time to celebrate. How very odd that seemed to Castiel. None of these people would be there for the day to day mundane choices and interactions that would bind their marriage. Why did they all look so enthusiastically happy? Why did it matter so much? Was it simply the open bar?

“That woman!” exclaimed Michael, throwing himself into the seat next to Castiel.

“Which woman?”

“The wedding coordinator! She took my checklist, and she won’t give it back! It has the schedule and all my contact numbers on it. I’m blind without it!”
Cas set a hand on the side of Michael’s face. “Perhaps it would be all right for you to enjoy the reception as a member of the wedding party at this point, Michael. Let her do her job, and let the schedule go.”

“Are you crazy?” Michael sat back as if burned. “I planned it down to the minute. I’m not about to put that into someone else’s hands. She’ll fuck it up before we get to the cake!”

Cas chuckled. “What would you like me to do about it, Omega? Do you need backup?”

“I…um…I dunno. I was just bitching, actually. But, I mean…”

Cas didn’t even try to stifle the laugh. He seemed to be laughing a lot today. He felt Dean settle gingerly into the chair at his elbow and smelled another plate being set down. “Michael, tell her the Pack Alpha instructs her to return your property to you. If she doesn’t, let me know. I’ll send her packing. It goes without saying that your satisfaction is far more important to me than hers. If you need to keep your eyes on the clock, you have my permission to do that, but with one stipulation.”

“Sir?”

“Enjoy yourself today. It’s a party. Don’t fret the small stuff. Have fun. Capisce?”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you.” He didn’t wait around.

“Hey, babe,” Dean leaned over, and they shared a kiss. Dean turned into it, letting the Alpha into his mouth to taste the lingering champagne. “What’s got Michael spinning?”

“He’s fighting with the wedding coordinator over whose wedding it is.”

“Oh. My money’s on Michael,” Dean responded with a proud look. He dove into his plate with gusto. “God, I’m starving. Aren’t you eating?”

“I’m eating. I’m going to sit here and enjoy watching you eat first. You’re a wonder to behold, Winchester.”

“Oh, crap! You’re going to be three times the sap now, aren’t you? Kill me now.”

“No, I was just fascinated at how much you can balance on a fork all at once, and I’m beginning to believe that the interior of your mouth is actually bigger than the outside, like the Tardis.”

“Or th’ Weasley’s campin’ tent,” agreed Dean with his mouth full.

“Charming,” Cas told him. He reached across with his napkin and daubed delicately at the corner of Dean’s mouth. Dean nearly spit his mouthful as he laughed and dodged.

A sudden clinking of glasses startled them both into looking outward. Bobby stood front and center with a spoon and a water goblet, tinking the edge of the glass with the spoon. Soon the music was taken up from all corners of the room as the guests demanded a response from the front table.

“On your knees, Pet,” Castiel told Dean with a twinkle in his eye. He reached for his champagne flute as Dean rolled his eyes and slipped gracefully off his chair. “Get your head above the edge of the table, Dean. No one can see you down there.”

Dean obeyed. His eyeroll was mostly internal, but Cas could still feel it. Taking a deep draft of champagne, Cas held it in his mouth and stood over his Sub, lining up by sight. Dean leaned his head back and opened his mouth just wide enough. Cas released the champagne in a trickle that
landed perfectly on Dean’s tongue. A consummate professional, Dean accepted the entire mouthful without gagging or choking. He waited until Cas nodded to him before closing his mouth and swallowing.

“They’re going to make us do that all day, aren’t they?” he asked as he stood back up to catcalls and cheers. Cas pulled him in and kissed him soundly, ending with a ticklish nibble to his earlobe.

“If I’m lucky, they will,” he whispered.

Bobby turned to the crowd and announced, “Very nice. But fair’s fair. If you want that Submissive to perform, it’s only fitting that the rest of you follow suit. Here’s the deal – set him on his knees as often as you like, within reason, but every time he goes under, so does every Bottom in this room. If you’re a Top, and you’re holding a glass when the glasses get tapping, you’re on the hook to water every Bottom within a five-foot radius. I don’t care if it’s yours or someone else’s. If you can reach ‘em, you water ‘em. Spill on ‘em, and you answer to Cas.”

“Don’t bring me into this,” Cas protested. “It’s your game!”

Bobby raised his hands for quiet. “And if it gets outta hand, we’ll stop the play, so use some discretion. Folks still need to eat and talk and dance. This ain’t a pogo party.”

Someone shouted over multiple heads, “Who decides who’s a Top and who’s a Bottom?”

“Boy, if you don’t know that by now, you’re at the wrong party,” Bobby answered back. He turned back and winked at Dean who saluted him back with a fork full of pasta. “And with that, let’s get this party started!” Bobby pointed toward Jessie on the stage, and the drums kicked them into a lively tune.

“You’re still not eating,” Dean pointed out.

“Sorry. I was distracted watching you.”

“C.J., you’re gonna get plenty of chances to watch me eat. Cut it out. Want me to feed you?”

“Try it, and you’ll draw back a bloody stub,” Cas warned with menace.

“Ooh, the scary voice. Say something else, Mufasa.”

Cas pulled Dean in by his lapel and growled, “I’m going to tear you to shreds next time I fuck you, Pet. Be ready for me.” Then he straightened his husband in his chair and smoothed his lapel back into place with a delicate smile. Dean gaped at him.

“And…” Dean looked around to see if anyone had overheard. “And when do you think that will be?” he asked nervously.

“When I decide it’s time,” Castiel replied, digging into his pasta with enthusiasm. “Don’t worry, I’ll give you time to heal.”

Dean swallowed hard and set his fork down. “I think I’m through for now. May I be excused?”

“How very polite you’ve become all of a sudden,” Cas praised. “Of course. Give me a kiss. Go and have fun.”

“Love you,” Dean whispered to him as he left.
The reception moved through the afternoon on a cloud of endorphins and classic rock covers. Meg and Charlie convinced Ketch and Jack to rearrange several tables near the band so they could start the dancing early, much to Michael’s annoyance. Jack gave him an apologetic shrug but continued shifting tables until they had a space wide enough to dance in. And dance, they did.

Charlie, April, Jo, and Meg had a four-way dance circle tightly interlaced in the center of the floor, and they were singing loudly to each other to a cover of Black Veil Brides, ‘In the End’.

"Cause it’s the end, and I’m not afraid, I’m not afraid to die!" they shouted, sweat beginning to bead on their throats and dance from the ends of their hair. Jack stood nearby with his arms crossed over his chest, leaning his butt against the back of the chair. He felt Ketch come up beside him.

“I’m starting to get the sense that we’re only here for the sperm,” Jack observed.

Ketch shrugged. “Jo’s got her own sperm, Jack. You’re not even that important. You’re just here for the heavy lifting.”

“Terrific,” said Jack mulishly. He looked across at Ketch. “So, how’s Mated life? I haven’t seen you in – nearly a week, I think it’s been.”

“I’m dead on my feet, if you want the truth, but what a way to go, eh?” He really did look wasted. Ketch had heavy bags under his eyes, and the tint of his skin was a sickly pale.

“Are you staying hydrated?” Jack asked him.

Ketch lifted his wine glass and drank deeply. Jack chuckled. Across the way, the four women had their arms around one another’s waists, and they were screeching along with an Avril Lavigne song at the top of their lungs. Meg’s scandalous black, barely-there left her shoulders and her thighs bare. She had bruises and welts covering nearly every empty space, and she looked much better rested than Ketch did.

“Where does Charlie fit in, do you suppose?” Jack asked. “She’s not planning to Mate is what Benny said.”

“Where does she fit? She’s ours, Jack.”

“What do you mean, ours?”

“She’s yours and mine and Jo’s and Benny’s. She’s ours. We take care of her, watch over her. She’s Pack.”

“And Lisa’s,” Jack pointed out. “I mean, I’m barely above Charlie in rank at all. But Lisa, she’s alpha. You’re not still steamed about her, are you? Benny made it pretty clear what he thinks.”

“Jack, do me a favor, and go choke on a dick,” Ketch told him gently before excusing himself. He strolled confidently onto the dance floor, bent and swooped Meg into his arms bridal-style before hefting her up over his shoulder with a possessive hand on her ass. She squawked and held on as he joined the group in a surprising degree of grace for a tall man with a Sub on his shoulder.
Michael gathered the wedding party for the cake cutting a couple hours after lunch. They had an elaborate flower-festooned tiered cake decked out in lilies and roses, the handmade ceramic cake topper that a faceless fan had sent them sat on top framed in flowers. The blooms hid most of the Omegas’ nudity in the sculpture, much to Michael’s displeasure. He made the announcement himself, herding guests toward the far wall where the cake stood ready to be eviscerated.

Another round of ‘Water the Subs’ kicked off just before they really got situated, and Dean found himself on his knees several yards away from Cas. Not one to be stymied, he knee-walked the distance and opened his mouth like a baby bird to Castiel’s laughing. Cas had to stifle his laugh so he could perform his portion of the ritual. He pulled it together, and then nearly choked as April slid from halfway across the room and jostled Dean in her enthusiasm to line up for him too.

Next thing he knew, Cas had a line of Subs to water, all of them eagerly awaiting their portion, all of them delectably on their knees. He sighed in a feigned put-upon way and held his glass out to be refilled. He gave Dean and April full portions. Meg received a generous amount. Jess got a solid mouthful. Becky received a smaller portion. Adam took the second half of what Cas had held back from Becky. Gabriel got little more than a trickle. Michael on his knees startled him, but he dutifully satisfied the Omega. Cas looked up and realized he was surrounded. He saw Jo taking to her knees with Charlie a few feet away. He sighed in a feigned put-upon way and held his glass out to be refilled.

“Now, this is ridiculous. Half of you aren’t Bottoms at all! And most of you weren’t standing anywhere close when the clamoring started. JoAnna Beth, get on your feet! I’m not watering you!”

Jo gave up, and she pulled Charlie to her feet as well. Looking down, Cas found Sarah kneeling at his feet with a speculative look on her face. He paused a moment in thought, and then he held her eye as he took a deep drink into his mouth. Slowly, he aimed a perfect but agonizingly slow dribble into her open mouth. It would have been masterful if she hadn’t begun laughing halfway through and spraying everyone in the vicinity with white wine. Cas stopped the flow immediately, swallowed what remained in his mouth, and pulled her laughing and coughing to her feet, whispering, “Be careful what you wish for around here, my dear. We may just oblige you.”

“I deserve that,” she told him playfully. He watched her disappear with Charlie into the crowd, their heads close together and Charlie patting her dress with napkins. Cas knew he and Sarah had things to talk over, but she’d let the champagne loosen her inhibitions and her resentments. It would keep.

“Come on, Alpha,” Dean goaded. “You just gonna stand there? It’s cake!”

“I’m here. I’m here. Where do I cut?”

The photographer posed them formally, snapped several shots as the guests oohed and aahed. Ellen sniffled and wiped her eyes as Jo wrapped an arm around her. The two men each took small pieces of the cake, held each other’s eyes, and spotlessly deposited the cake into their husband’s mouth. Castiel was impressed. Dean didn’t have the experience feeding that he had eating out of someone else’s hand, but he’d performed the job masterfully. Cas didn’t have a crumb on him. He leaned in and rewarded Dean with a simple kiss and another smile. It never ceased to amaze Castiel how many apes utterly destroyed this simplest of trust exercises, their oaths to cherish still hanging fresh in the air, and at the very first challenge, failing spectacularly by debasing their new spouse in public with an intentional face full of icing. And people thought wolves uncivilized.

And then the champagne – the men interlocked their arms and each drank from his own.

“This is a stupid ritual, man,” Dean grumbled after taking a sip. “The cake, I get, but what’s the yoga
position for? I’m all tangled up.”

“You look dashing anyway,” Cas told him.

“Can we eat now?” Dean asked, setting his engraved champagne flute back on the table for the wedding planner to collect or whatever. Someone was making a fortune from this wedding. Dean looked up at Cas, and realized he didn’t care. The man was stunning in his happiness. He held up two small plates with cake on them and nodded for Dean to head back to their table with a goofy grin on his face. They fought their way through the crowd, barely making it free unscathed.

“Fucking piranhas, man, I swear! Jesus, there’s enough cake! Chill out, people!”

“Dean, be polite.”

“Yes, Sir,” Dean said over his shoulder without a trace of brat. Cas frowned in alarm, only to relax again as Dean shot him a wicked grin in follow up. Cas shoved his plate at him and then reared back and snapped his hand forward to pop his husband’s ass with a perfectly aimed swat.

Dean snickered happily and buried his face in his cake as he walked, somehow consuming the whole piece before they made their way back to their seats.

“Check! Check! One, two, three! Can you hear me?” Dean looked around from Castiel’s death glare to the stage where Michael stood at the microphone. He raised his glass to acknowledge that the sound was still working.

“Good. Okay. Well, the band’s on a break, and we’re passing out the cake, so while we do that, I’d like everyone to take the next few minutes to get a glass of something in your hand. We’re going to be toasting the happy couple. That’s toasting, not roasting, Jo. You promised. Five minutes, folks. Grab a drink. Everyone toasts!” Michael slipped away, and the energy level in the room escalated as the crowd hustled about to do his bidding.

“God, man, look at him. He’s a fucking natural with a crowd.”

“About a third of these people are Submissives, Dean. Working a Lupin crowd is pretty easy for a Dominant.”

“Psshh. That sucks! Some of us have to work for it!”

“And some of you are charismatic enough to cut right through the D/S continuum and win compliance from a crowd out of sheer unadulterated lovability.”

“Now you’re just sucking up.”

“Is it working?”

“Am I wearing your ring?”

“Who’s the sap now, Pet?”

Jo took the first toast. She took to the microphone and lowered it more than a foot before she spoke. The crowd found that very amusing.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m short. Get it out of your systems, you jerks.” Once settled, she looked across the room to where Dean sat leaning into Castiel’s chest. She sniffed a little and took a moment. She pressed her lips together. Dean smirked a secret look at her, and she smiled back at him.
“Dean, I’ve known you forever. We met when we were…five?” He nodded in agreement. “Yeah, five. I’ve known you practically my whole life, and we’ve been best friends just about that whole time. You helped me scare off a couple of asshole fourth graders, helped me pick my shit up off the ground, walked me all the way home, and told me I draw the best bluebirds you’d ever seen. You remember that? That was how we met. I didn’t know it then, but I’d just met the guy who would set the standard for me for the rest of my life. Dean, no one else ever lived up to you – until now, of course. I love you, Jack, sweetie. No offense! I knew Dean first, and whether you really live up is still an unanswered question. We’ll see. You’ve got some mighty big shoes to fill.”

Jack shrugged gamely as Jo blew him a kiss.

“I don’t know what I would’ve done without you, Dean, without you and your family. You adopted me right in, and you shared everything with me. You are the most incredible friend a girl could ever have. I’m not ashamed to say I totally fell for you right off the bat. I defy anyone but your own brother to say they didn’t.”

“I didn’t!” shouted Meg. “Ouch! Damn!”

“But you weren’t meant to be mine, were you, Dean? You’re not built for me.” She chuckled at her crappy luck and then took a deep breath. “So, as it turns out, if I can’t have you, there’s not one guy in a billion who could. No one was ever gonna be good enough for you Dean, no one but a pair of unbelievably rare chart busters. You guys get this? You understand? It took two of them to tame him, and both of them busted the charts. That’s because you deserve the best, Dean Winchester. And I have to tell you, if it couldn’t be me, it wasn’t going to be anyone less than the very best. I have ways of making people disappear. You know I do. So, the fact that they’re still here and breathing means I’m not pissed. I’m happy for you. I couldn’t be more happy for you. And Cas? Alpha? You stay on top of him for me. He’s a handful.”

“I’ll do that,” Cas agreed, shooting Dean a menacing look. Dean chuckled and shoved at his face jovially.

“To my best friend, Dean Winchester and his husband, Castiel. Long life, lots of pups, and I hope he straps the stuffing out of you. I love it when you limp!”

The crowd cheered and raised their glasses in toast as Jo sipped hers.

“I love you, too!” Dean called. She flipped him off as she left the stage.

Benny followed her, squeezing her shoulder as he passed. He mounted the steps to shrill whistles and calls from his own Pack. He waved genially and took the microphone off the stand. He waited for the noise to die down.

“Cas, brother, if you’re waiting for me to confess a crush on you, you’ll be waiting a long damn time.” Benny and Castiel grinned at each other.

“I’m heartbroken, Ben,” Cas shouted. “I had such plans for us!”

“The hell you did,” Benny retorted. “You were waiting for this little slip of a girl right here.” Benny pointed to April near the stairs and she curtsied politely. “And she’s fixing to run you around in circles until you don’t know your ass from your fingertips, and we’re all gonna love watching that. I’m happy you found your mate, man. But that’s not what today’s about. Cas, today’s about you and Dean. I know you already know everything I might say up here about you. I can see you crinkle your brow worrying about all the stories I could throw out. All the things we did when we were undergrads, some of them legal. All the asinine plans we made that are best left on the scrap heap
right where they are. Brother, I have stories about you… You remember when we stayed up all night long drinking your mother’s liquor cabinet and trying to outdo each other’s kinky fantasies? I don’t think it’ll surprise anyone that you won that contest hands down, but what you told me…Man, I’ll take those confessions to the grave with me.”

“Thank you,” Cas mouthed clearly. Dean looked up at him but didn’t press.

“You and I, we grew to be men together. You watched me fall head-first down the ravine of a True-Mate Trigger, and you toasted me and took Andrea right into your life like she was a part of me, like she had always been there. I watched you tumble the same way. Twice. The second one was a thing of beauty and a relief and a blessing. The first one though, man, I thought it was gonna kill you. I have to ask the question everyone who knew you both asked a million times: What the fuck? Right, folks? How the hell can two brilliant men, smarter by far than your average amoeba be blinder than a cave newt? Cher, your head was so far up your ass, you could still brush your teeth from up top.”

Benny laughed along with the guests, but then he sobered. “But then you came to your senses, and everything has been harder for all of you than you could’ve guessed it would be. Nothing came easy. You had to fight for it. But you stuck it out and worked through every puzzle, around every roadblock, over every damned mountain. Brother, I hope today feels good, because you earned it. You deserve this, Castiel, you and Dean, April, Michael…you deserve this. We’re building a Pack just down the road from you, Alpha, and we’re using yours as our model. Castiel, now that you’ve got your family together, you’re the prototype the rest of us will follow. So, I lift my hopes and my glass to you, Alpha, just as I’ve always done. To the Winchesters!”

“To the Winchesters!”

Michael jogged up the stairs to take the microphone from Benny. Nicholas followed him onto the stage with April on his arm. He whispered to her and then settled her at the piano. Looking around, Michael found Nick strapping a guitar over his shoulder and April adjusting her skirt on her bench.

“We do have two more toasts coming up later, but we’ve got something special right now. Alphas, we’d like to invite you both down to the dance floor. Pete and I have a song we’d love to share with you as you dance for the first time as husbands.” April began to play a delicate melody as Cas pulled Dean to his feet. His muscles had locked up a little but he nodded at Cas anyway. He’d loosen up with a little movement. The guests backed up to clear the dance floor as Becky and Adam scattered soft fabric autumnal leaves, red and orange, across the gleaming black floor.

“Oh, brother, really? Are there going to be bubbles too?” whined Dean.

“Shh! Be nice,” Cas chastised. “You can disappear into one of the lounge rooms for a nap in a little while.”

“I’m not a toddler,” Dean shot back.

“Then stop whining like one,” Cas hissed. They silenced their quiet bickering as they drew close enough to be overheard. Pausing at the edge of the crowd, Cas waited for Michael’s signal. The Alpha had a flare for the dramatic as well, it seemed.

The piano started a pulse, and Cas stepped out onto the floor. April hadn’t let the two in on the song, but she’d given them the tempo and the style. Cas knew approximately what to expect. He turned at the center and looked obliquely to his left, to the floor, seeking Dean peripherally, not meeting his eye, but commanding his attention anyway. Cas’ gaze lingered on the floor about three feet to his left with his sharp nose in sharp silhouette. Slowly, he held his left hand out, and Dean felt chills run down his spine. He reacted in the only way he was ever going to react.
He went to his husband, took his hand, felt Cas’ strength and confidence as Castiel’s hand curled around his and pulled him firmly around to stand before his Alpha. The strength and control stole Dean’s breath. Everyone else disappeared.

April began breathily to sing:

"I'm not looking for perfection…anymore."

Her voice was gentle and sweet. Castiel looked right into Dean’s eyes as he stepped off.

"If I bought into their perception, I'd be headed for the door."

Dean frowned slightly, listening to the lyrics, wondering where she was going with it.

Following Cas was easy. Following Cas had always been easy. Dean watched his husband’s blue eyes take on a red glow, and he smiled softly.

"You build yourself a fortress. You’re cloaked inside confusion."

Ah, thought Dean. That’s where she’s taking it.

"A million eyes are watching you, but nobody can see past the illusion."

Dean saw Castiel’s eyes crinkle up as he spun Dean, and Dean laughed into the turn. Yeah. Yeah, she’d pegged him perfectly.

Michael’s tenor joined April in a harmonic chorus:

"Don’t hide yourself safe behind those walls. Just show it all to me. I wanna have it all."

“Don’t hide from me, Dean,” whispered Cas with moisture collecting at the corners of his eyes.

“Never, Alpha,” he whispered back.

The song slipped into a new verse, and Michael’s voice followed the couple around the dance floor, falling over them like a bridal veil. Of all the things April could have chosen to write about, she’d gone with insecurities laid bare and having the strength and the trust to take the masks off. She’d gone with having the guts to ask for that.

Faces flew past Dean’s eyes. He saw Rachel standing near the front with a tall, muscular alpha at her back. Glancing down, Dean saw that her fingers were intertwined with his, and he giggled.

“Don’t tell Michael,” Dean said softly, “But his little sister caught herself a fly.”

“Yes, I saw. I believe that’s one of the new alpha guards we brought in with the last wave. I forget his name.”

April’s parents caught his eye next. They were standing close together near the stage, and they weren’t watching the dancing. They had eyes only for April. Strangely, Michael’s parents stood right beside them, and the four of them seemed to be together in a clump.

“Uh-oh. I hope those four aren’t taking wedding notes. You don’t think…?”

“Shh. Don’t worry about anything at all, Pet. Just dance with me.”

“Your mother is watching.”
“Of course she is. Who could possibly take their eyes off you. You’re perfect, Dean.”

“Smooth-talking son of a bitch,” Dean groused softly.

“Come here. I want another kiss.”

“You’re gonna wear my lips clean off, man.”

“Dean, shut up and kiss me,” Cas insisted.

As the song ended, the glass clinking started up again, and Cas helped Dean to his knees right where they’d finished the dance. Dean looked up at him as Cas waited for someone to provide him a drink. He got red wine this time, and he smirked as he sipped. He kept sipping, and Dean’s eyes widened as he realized how much burgundy liquid was about to come his way. Finally, Castiel handed the glass off, pursed his lips and looked down with his cheeks bulging. He sent Dean a query silently, and Dean swallowed but nodded. He licked his lips. He opened his mouth.

Warm red wine struck his palette, and this time, he swallowed it carefully as it flowed across his tongue instead of letting it accumulate. It went on and on, and the onlookers began to notice. Dean cycled a breath out through his nose, clasped a hand around his wrist behind his back and steadied himself. He swallowed rhythmically. Two swallows, then hold and breath out. Two swallows, then hold and breath in. At last, the dribble slowed and stopped. A great cheer went up around them. Dean nearly lost the end of it as a laugh burst out of him, but he closed his mouth on it and only burbled to himself instead.

Castiel pulled him up and practically dove into his mouth. “You are so fucking perfect, Winchester,” he growled as he shifted his mouth clear.

“I’ll remind you you said that next time you blister me for being a brat.”

A tap to the microphone brought them around, and they found Michael and April standing side by side. Castiel called his gratitude up to them.

“And as the band will be on break for a bit longer,” Michael said. “It’s up to us to keep the music going. Dean? You had something you wanted to sing?”

“Oh, yeah! Right now?”

“Come on up, Dean. It’s your turn.”

Dean scrambled up the stairs and took the mic. “Okay. It’s cheesy, but it’s Metallica, and Metallica always gets a pass. Nick? Hit it.”

Nick and April kicked it off, and Dean produced a gritty version of, ”Nothing Else Matters.” He pointed at Cas as he sang, ”Trust I seek, and I find in you. Every day for us something new.” Cas blew him a kiss.

Soon after, as the band returned and the dancing renewed on schedule as it was meant to. Cas sent Dean to a private room to rest. “We’ll be here when you get back. A lot of the crowd will die down. I want you to take an Ibuprofen and try to sleep for an hour.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“What, no argument?”
“Not today,” Dean said with a blush. “Don’t break out the pie without me.”

“We’re not having pie for hours, Dean. Go rest.”

While he was gone, Cas settled at one of the large round tables on the floor with Jack and Ketch. They chatted comfortably as they watched the dancing, others stopped and stayed for a bit off and on. Every now and then someone would pull one of them up and onto the floor. Cas danced “The Tennessee Waltz” with Jo. She looked happier than he’d ever seen her. He kissed her cheek and told her so. After the third round away from his seat, he returned to find the table empty, so he forced himself to make a slow stroll around the room, greeting people who’d stood back from the first push.

The wine made him a little lighter, but he drank too slowly to feel much of an effect. He made warm small talk with his business associates, with some of the donors who’d made his enterprise possible. Chuck Shurley glad-handed politely and then nervously asked about Dean’s progress on his book. Cas chuckled and patted his sternum in a way he hoped came across as soothing before he excused himself to speak with the guests seated at the next table. Making the rounds took a couple of hours. Cas wasn’t in any hurry. He answered questions about the honeymoon and the Pack. He explained that he’d agreed to testify on Monday before he flew to France with his Pack; to testify against three alphas who believed they could murder a young pregnant man on the street with impunity. Cas didn’t mention that Michael still had nightmares occasionally. He saw Dean slip back in with Michael at his side. Dean looked rested and less crabby.

Cas danced with his mother. He danced with Gabe, with Kali, with Jess, with Mark. With Ellen. He applauded with everyone else when the band saluted Jo and Meg and their new mates with a rousing rendition of “Chandelier” with April on vocals, followed shortly by a full house round of, “A Little Help from my Friends” in honor of Benny’s forming Pack. Cas laughed with the rest of them when Gabe convinced the band to play “Jungle Love” for him to seduce his wife onto the floor with, and he wept with laughter when she took him up on it with no qualms about his lewd dance moves and took him in hand fit for a contract Dominatrix.

Cas danced with the rest of the wolves were under strict instructions to keep their conduct ape and family friendly for the first several hours, through the more traditional rituals. Children of both species, of all ages, flitted about among the adult guests. The grooms had both agreed that a Pack function meant the entire Pack was welcome, and that meant pups too. There were several rooms across the hall reserved and outfitted for private use. But Gabe had attended ape weddings before, and he argued that once the troop tied one on, they could be almost as raunchy as the wolves, only with more clothes on. Thrusting lustily at his wife’s crotch wasn’t out of bounds given the limit he’d been given, and Cas didn’t care enough to stop him as long as Kali was having fun too.

By and by, as the afternoon waned into evening and the crowd began to thin a bit, Dean found himself with a fresh drink in his hand but nowhere to settle. Cas had a solid groove going on the dance floor, sandwiched between Michael and April and with Facility Pack all around them. The band was rocking Billie Eilish, and Cas seemed to be channeling his, “Bad Guy” persona. Gabe wasn’t the only one pushing limits, it seemed. But most of the apes were leaving, and those that remained…eh…let ‘em see. Cas still had his pants on.

Dean almost limped past but then spotted Naomi alone at a large empty table, and he diverted and stood at her elbow looking down.

“May I?” he asked. “I should offer you a drink, but it looks like you have one?”
Naomi startled and looked up. “Yes, I have one. It’s not too early for sherry.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t,” he agreed. “I can’t imagine anyone here cares what time it is.”

“Please, join me,” she gestured.

“You sure?”

“Dean, I admit, I don’t understand why he lives the way he does.” Her eyes tracked him as he sat carefully down in the cushioned chair. She saw him wince and grit his teeth. “I don’t understand the sheer arrogance of taking a mate and a spouse both. Everything about my son baffles me. But he is my son, and I love him.”

“Do you?”

“Of course I do.”

“See, forgive me. It’s not my place, but the thing is, I’m not certain he knows that. I’m not 100% certain it’s true. He may not seem to, but he needs you, Naomi.”

She scoffed through her nose and clunked her glass back onto the table. “Castiel hasn’t needed anyone but himself since he was three. He doesn’t need me. He never has.”

Dean made a face and looked away, but then he pursed his lips and went right back into it with a stubborn set to his jaw. “One thing I know, and this goes for everyone…there’s a man out there who ever stopped needing his mother. He may have learned to survive without you, but that doesn’t mean he wouldn’t be thrilled to welcome you with both arms open if he thought you gave two shits about him.”

“That’s absurd,” she told him coldly. “He knows where I am.”

Dean crossed his arms over his chest. This was pointless. They were too alike, Castiel and his mother. Just like Sam and Dad. Neither of them would thaw until the other did first, and just like his own family, time was running out.

“Is it because he’s a hedonist?” Dean asked. “I mean, I know why you don’t like me. I get it, and it’s fine. I’m a grunge-scraper from the bottom of the barrel, and he should’ve done so much better. But what the fuck is it you don’t like about him? Look at him for Christ’s sake!” Dean gestured outward and then paused when he caught sight of Cas with Michael in front of him on his knees and a hand at the back of Michael’s head to hold him in place while Cas ground his pelvis against Michael’s open mouth.

“Okay, maybe don’t use right now as an example.”

“Dean, I know you and I haven’t ever gotten along. And I misled you about how well I knew your father. That was my beta desperate for one last connection with the man, and I’m ashamed of calling you the way I did. The truth is we only knew one another tangentially. We had one date together, and it was really accidental. But I had quite the crush on John Winchester. All the girls did. Your father was a spectacularly well-put-together man. He was a kind man as well. Those two don’t often go together. I want you to understand. What I’m trying to tell you is that I don’t dislike you. I’ve never disliked you.”

“You just didn’t think I was good enough for Cas.” Dean flicked his eyes back to the dance floor. “Any more than my dad was good enough for you.” Michael was back on his feet and grinding against April from behind as Cas fucked her mouth with his tongue. Naomi followed his eyes. “You
may have had the hots for John, but he never had Mating potential, did he? And then Cas ignored all the rules you insisted on following because he doesn’t care about social standing.”

“I had a much different life envisioned for my sons, Dean. What would you like me to say? The world changed underneath me, and they changed with it. I couldn’t.”

“You didn’t try,” he accused angrily. “You witnessed everything Cas did, and he watched it and learned from it, while you…”

“Shut myself away and pretended it wasn’t happening. Don’t feel you need to throw it at me, young man. I’m aware.”

“You’re aware, but you still aren’t doing anything. It’s not too late, Naomi. It’s not too late for you to get to know who your sons are for real…not the ghosts of who you wanted them to be! Ah, this is a waste of time!” He pushed his chair backward to prepare to stand, but he stayed curled over with his elbows jutting out and his fingers digging painfully into his knees. “Look,” he said without looking up. “I’m glad you came. It was important to me. It was important to Cas. We needed you to see what we are to each other, that it’s more than a school yard crush. I’m not my father, and Cas isn’t you, despite the fact he has a hell of a lot of your mannerisms. What we are to each other is as real and as permanent as it can get without a Mating-scar. We’re not asking you to understand it. Hell, we’re not even asking for your blessing. I know this wedding makes your skin crawl. You don’t have to deny it. I can see it. All I’m asking for is for you to crack the door open a little for him. Try to remember that he was your son before he was anything else. He’s not ever going to quit reaching out to you. You have to know that.”

“That was quite the impassioned speech, Dean. I’m impressed.”

“Yeah, well, grunge-scrapers got feelings just like everyone else, I suppose.”

“No, you misunderstand. I’m not mocking you. I may not understand what my son’s vision for his family is or how it fits together, but I’m not blind. I see that he loves you dearly, and I admire the nerve it took for you to come and lay all of that at my feet. He tells me that your mate’s pup will be parented by the four of you? Although, how anyone as young as April could think of parenting anyone is beyond me. She still needs parenting herself.” Naomi shot another look out to the dance floor. “Oh, Lord!” she exclaimed, averting her eyes, and Dean huffed a short laugh.

“That’s the plan,” Dean confirmed. “I mean, about the pup-sharing, not about April needing parents. That’s a whole other debate.”

“I’ll bet,” Naomi scoffed.

“So? Michael’s pup. When it’s born, you’ll have a grandson, Naomi. You have to know we’re going to put firm rules in place if you want to be a part of your grandson’s life. Cas and I will both see to it. Michael, too, come to that. You have some choices to make, and you and I don’t have a lot of groundwork to build on. I’ll make you a deal.”

“I’m listening.”

“I won’t bullshit you. I won’t play nice for the sake of appearances, and I won’t blow sunshine up your ass. But I won’t sabotage you either. I don’t like you. You don’t like me, however you wanna shade it. But we don’t have to be enemies. And as long as you toe the line, I’ll make sure you know your grandchildren. I’ll warn you before you edge too close to stepping over that line. I’m calling a truce. Don’t give me anymore bullshit weepy apologies. Just play it straight from here on. If you can do that, then we can share some spaces now and then. If you can’t, then you won’t see hide nor hair
of anyone but Castiel. Ever. So d’ya say? Truce?”

Dean looked up at her. She had a baldly open expression on her face. She weighed his offer.
“Michael is due in February,” she commented. “I may not make it to February.”

“What?” he asked. “What kinda talk is that? Of course you’ll make it to February. You’re not dying, Naomi. Don’t play victim with me. We don’t know how you’re going to handle the effects of losing touch with your beta, but we do know that it’s going to take a long time – a long time of hard, gritty work on your part – before it gets its teeth into you. And in a few months, who knows? I don’t read tea leaves, but I’m half expecting April to produce a litter when her turn rolls around. I know Cas wants a big family. You can be there for that. You missed out on your sons. Don’t miss the grandkids, too.”

“I resent the implication that I neglected my own sons, Dean Winchester!”

“Wasn’t an implication, Congresswoman Novak. And I’m waiting. Truce?”

“Truce,” she said stoutly, having run out of alternative ideas.

“Is everything okay over here?” Castiel asked with a wary expression. He rested a hand on Dean’s shoulder.

“We’re peachy, Alpha. I was just telling your mom here how we like to use the nipple clamps when you edge me.”

“Oh, my heavens!”

“Dean!”

“Oh, sure, face-fucking on the dance floor is fine, but a little erogenous male nipple action is taboo. Hypocrite much, Cas?”

“They’re ready to ask our brothers up for their toasts, Dean. I’m supposed to fetch you back to the table,” Cas said.

“Are you blushing? You are. You’re beet red.”

“Are you coming?” Castiel’s face still looked mortified, but his mother laughed.

From the stage, Michael was taking the microphone again, but rather than begin an introduction, he cued the band to play an old Willie Nelson song, and his Texan accent twanged sharply. “For y’all who may not know, I’m a Texas boy, and I figure what this evening needs is a little bit of Texas in the mix. Let’s see who remembers when country music had a heart to it. Sing it with me if you know it.”

Dean recognized the song and shot a glance at Cas. The Alpha had his eyes shut and an expression of deliberate acceptance in the hard lines around his mouth. Michael sang right to April, and it couldn’t have been more obviously a courtship than if he’d pinned her with a Homecoming mum and walked her into the high school dance.

“In the twilight glow, I see her – blue eyes crying in the rain.”

Michael sang to her. His voice was gruff and engaging, flirtatious.

“When we kissed goodbye and parted, I knew we’d never meet again.”
Her face, as she stood on the floor below the stage and gazed up at him, was rapt.

“Come on, Naomi,” said Dean, holding his hand out to her. “Dance with me. I dare you.”

“All right,” she said with a bracing calm. She took his hand, and Dean led her away, leaving Castiel gaping with his mouth open and his eyes stunned. Naomi, well-bred and raised to be a mate of standing, was an excellent dancer. Dean led her easily, gracefully, and they made a full turn around the floor before the song ended on a smile and a polite bow. He even kissed her hand. He let Gabriel escort Naomi away, and he parked himself next to April, looking up to regard Michael.

“What?” asked Michael, leaning away from the microphone.

“Today, Michael? Really?”

“It’s just a country song, Dean. You forget where I came from.”

“I haven’t forgotten anything, and you’re not as innocent as you look.”

Michael smirked. “Maybe not, but it’s still a good song.” He hopped straight off the stage and leaned forward to kiss April lightly on the lips. “You two have time for one dance before I get Sam and Gabe up here to embarrass you. Go dance with April, Dean.”

Dean took April’s hand. She followed willingly. He led her closer to the center of the dance floor, calling back over his shoulder, “Don’t come crying to me if her mate decides to give you a lesson in timing, my friend.”

Dean took the Ozzie into his arms as the band struck up Coldplay’s, ”Something Just Like This,” and Dean melted into the feel of her. She had been little more than a centerpiece all day, a prop to be shuffled about from one vignette to another, but as he danced with her, he realized she was fully engaged and having a wonderful time in her own right.

“You’re up to something,” he teased.

“Always,” she admitted lightly.

“Is it Michael?”

“Mostly,” she told him. “But it’s Cas as well.”

“I see. Getting him acclimated? Ripping off the band-aid?”

She chuckled and followed his lead as her spun her out and then back in again. “When we’re on the honeymoon, Dean, and he’s laser focused on you, I don’t want him worried about what’s happening between Michael and me.”

“Oh, and hitting on each other tonight is going to help that?”

“Yes,” she said simply. “No secrets. If we were more circumspect about it tonight, everything would still feel cloaked, and that would bug him every time his door’s closed in Paris. This way…If there aren’t any secrets, and no one’s tiptoeing around…”

“Like I said,” Dean concluded. “Rip the band-aid right off.”

“Besides, Michael’s only taking his fair share from me tonight. I did the same to him while you two were in Dayton. I put a playlist together that was designed to pull him under the waves. He’s much sweeter about his song choices than I was.”
As the song ended, Dean leaned in and kissed her just behind her ear. “Just be careful, all right? This is Castiel’s night. Please don’t ruin it for him.”

“I’m keeping an eye on Cas,” she promised. “He’s doing really well. All he truly cares about tonight is you.”

The band started another song, and Michael took the mic again. Dean shook his head as the intro played, patted April lightly on the cheek, and left her to be wooed.

"Beauty queen of only eighteen, she...had some trouble with herself. He was always there to. Help. Her. She...always belonged to someone else. I drove for miles and miles and wound up at your door. I’ve had you so many times but somehow I want more.

I don’t mind standing every day...out on your corner in the pouring rain. Look for the girl with the broken smile. Ask her if she wants to stay awhile, And she will...be loved. And she will...be loved...”

Dean made his way back to the head table with an expression of deep bemusement. Fate was throwing frameworks up faster than he could climb them. Fate or April Renée.

“You looked wonderful on the dance floor, my love,” Cas praised as Dean joined him.

“Is that all you have to say?” Dean asked carefully.

Cas shrugged. “We already made this decision,” he said. “Stressing about it again and again isn’t going to make it any easier. Besides, look at him. He’s radiant.”

“Yeah. He really is,” Dean agreed. Michael’s voice was flexible enough to hit the high register the song required. From Willie Nelson to Adam Levine was a stretch, but Michael was alive and beaming, reflecting the adoration April cast toward him from below. “If you’re good, man, I’m good.”

Rachel swept by their table and stopped abruptly, pointing at her brother with an air of a sibling preparing to tattle. She froze with her brows up in accusation, waiting for Dean to react. Dean laughed. “We know, Rachel. It’s a good thing. He’s happy. We’re happy. April’s happy. Let him be.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Are you serious? How does he hit the fuckin’ jackpot like this? Jesus, every damn time! What the fuck?”

“Pulled a Ferris Bueller on you, little sister?” Dean teased, and her face matched Jennifer Grey’s for deadpan resentment.

“He’s had his share of shitty, Rachel,” Castiel added with a glance back up toward the stage. “And he’ll face more challenges yet to come than you’ll ever have to experience. He’s going to need your support. Are you sure you want to begrudge him a little happiness?”

“Ergh! Crap! You put it like that… Fine!”

“Besides,” Dean added. “It seems to me like you’ve got some of that same magic. What’s this one’s name?” Dean kicked his chin toward the alpha near the speaker who was trying to look like he wasn’t waiting impatiently for her to return. She followed his gaze and chuckled.

“That’s Josh. He’s a good dancer.”
“Uh-huh,” Dean commented. “Make sure you use protection when you dance. He may be on the good stuff we prescribe employees, but that’s not gonna keep either of you safe from STDs.”

“Yes, alpha,” she said sarcastically. “Not my first rodeo, you know.”

Dean turned to Cas. “What is it with kids these days?” Cas only shrugged.

Finally, the overtly blatant song ended, and Michael brought April up beside him. He was sweaty, but she settled into his side without hesitation. Dean had to admit they looked good together. Their voices melded beautifully when they sang. They played effortlessly off one another as the introduced Sam together. April looked very right standing there with Michael’s arm tossed casually around her waist.

Dean bit his lip. He could feel a slight clench of jealousy, but he shoved it down. Michael wasn’t leaving him, and he wasn’t cheating on Dean. The irony of the situation planted itself in front of Dean and refused to be ignored.

Sam took the mic from April with a wink.

Dean leaned backward and asked over his shoulder, “Cas, tonight when we get wherever you’re taking me…where are Michael and April going to be?”

“Sam’s taking them home,” Cas replied, pulling Dean’s chair out for him before taking his own. “They’ll have the night to themselves.”

“No restrictions?”

“None from my side except that they both know how I feel about managing her fertility. I’m ready to trust them to work it out for themselves. Are you?” Cas flicked concerned blue eyes at Dean, prepared to call an intervention on them if Dean wasn’t ready yet.

But Dean nodded slowly. “I’m never going to be ready, man. He’s my mate. But we don’t have a choice.”

“We do have a choice, Dean. And we’re making it. And it’s the right one. It’s hard, but it’s the right one.”

“Yeah,” sighed Dean turning back to face the stage. “Yeah.”

“Good evening everyone,” Sam said into the microphone before flinching back at the feedback wail he caused. “Jesus! Sorry. Hold on.” He adjusted his position and tried again. Dean slipped his hand into his husband’s, and Cas took Dean’s hand onto his knee and squeezed.

Sam got himself reoriented, and the feedback faded. “Better?” he asked, tapping the mic. “Better. All right. Everyone has a drink? We’re toasting again. All set?”

“Get on with it, Winchester!” Dean hollered.

“Pipe down over there, I’m getting to it.”

Sam took the microphone off the stand and set the stand behind him. He looked out at the guests gathered about, some standing before him on the dance floor, most back in their seats. He waited for them to settle, for Michael and April to join their mates at the head table, for the rustle of movement to die down. Michael leaned backward into Dean’s chest, and Dean wrapped his free arm around him without letting go of Cas’ hand.
“My big brother, Dean, is…” Sam began. “He’s my hero. He’s a nerd, and a child, and he leaves his dirty laundry in the bathroom while simultaneously bitching about a glass I may or may not be finished with that’s still on the coffee table in the living room. He has terrible table manners. He hasn’t voluntarily listened to a song recorded after 1982 in his life. He has the sense of humor of a twelve-year-old. He deliberately causes mayhem at important functions just to see what’ll happen. He’s also the smartest, bravest, kindest, most intentional man I’ve ever known.

“See, Dean and I, we lost our mom at a critical point in our lives. Neither of us was grown yet, but we were both old enough to know what was what. Everything went to shit fast, and I mean full-on, it’s-really-hit-the-fan-and-spattered kind of shit. Our dad couldn’t cope with what we’d lost, and he fell hard. We know more about that kind of crash now than we did then, and it wasn’t my dad’s fault. But the truth was, we were alone in the world, just the two of us, before we were ready.

“And me, I was a mouthy, rebellious, resentful teenager who felt the world owed me compensation for what the Universe took away, and I turned that on my brother. But Dean…” Sam took a deep breath and looked across the space as he searched for the right words. “Dean stuck fast, and he didn’t flinch no matter what Dad and I threw at him. He held us together. He took care of our home, our lives, he did the shopping and the cleaning and the scheduling. He made doctor’s appointments and then he dragged me to them kicking and screaming. He let me scream my fury right into his face, and he never once let on what it was taking out of him to stand there and take it. All he said was, ‘I know, Sammy. I know.’

“That’s what Dean does, you see.”

Sam licked his lips. “I’m supposed to come up here today and make fun of my brother, embarrass him, give him shit, tell stories about him, and I could do that. Man, the shit he’s pulled… It’s a wonder he’s still got both butt cheeks what with the flayings he’s earned in his life. But I won’t do that, because Dean deserves better. He’s been through enough, and he’s soldiered through it like a Winchester when the rest of us broke around him.

“So, I’m gonna embarrass him far worse with a full ‘chick-flick’ speech, and he’s going to have to sit there and let me turn the sap all the way up. And I need him to know…man, I’m sorry for what I put you through back then. I’m grateful to you for every single second of what you gave me, every second that you didn’t have the strength to keep going, but you did anyway. You deserve today, Dean. You deserve a lifetime of loving Pack around you. I can’t wait to meet my nephew. I hope he’s just like you.”

Sam smiled a watery smile. Dean felt warm to his fingertips. His breathing shuddered a bit. “Dean, what you’re doing today is bigger than a wedding. I think you know that, but I’m not really certain it’s hit you just how big this is, so let me explain how I see it: We’re rebuilding the global Pack brick by brick, and we’ve got a long way to go. We’re about to start having to fend off our own kind trying to rip those bricks down as fast as we place them. We all know that’s coming. It’s scary for everyone. And right in the middle of that, here you are, doing the same thing you’ve always done. You’re standing firm in your place, in your family, and you’re shouting a defiant, ‘Bring it!’ to the Universe.

“You’re scared as hell to reveal the side of you that seems dissonant from what the world expects, but you also know there are thousands of people out there with the same fears and the same needs, and they may not have the support structures you have. I watched you swallow your pride, your fear, your dread, and step out naked into the light in front of the whole world with your middle finger raised high, and I watched you stand up to every shitty assumption. You’re my hero, Dean Winchester. And I couldn’t have been raised by a better man. Today, I gave you away, and that hurt. I never got around to making it all up to you. But I know that you’re in good hands. You’re in the
best hands. That’s a good thing, because just like Jo said, nothing less than the best would ever have been good enough for you.”

“Castiel,” Sam said. “Take care of my brother. Don’t let him get away with shit. Don’t let him hurt if you can stop it. He’s hurt enough already. Make him carry his Submissive sides with pride and that iconic swagger of his. Most of all, love him. Love him hard. Love each other. Watch the world change as the two of you...the four of you...show the whole world how to do this.”

Sam lifted his wine glass. “To Dean and Cas! To years and years of laughs and love and Dean’s unique style of bratting and Castiel’s signature eyebrow. You make me proud to be a Winchester, both of you. To Dean and to Cas!”

The applause was deafening, and Dean couldn’t keep his lip from trembling. He righted Michael in his seat and jogged across the space to catch his brother at the bottom of the stairs in a tight hug that neither wanted to release.

“Thanks, Sammy.”

“It’s Sam, you jerk.”

“Bitch,” Dean whispered back with a hand ruffling Sam’s hair. Sam batted at him. Jessie and the band swung straight into a rendition of, “Brother,” and Dean’s heart nearly burst with an overwhelming sense of destiny.

Cas saw Cain nodding to himself and turning to listen to Sarah beside him with a frown of concentration. The two alphas would bear watching, but Cas had a good feeling about Cain in the long term. It was the short term that worried him.

As the song ended, Sam put the mic back up to his mouth. “Oh, right. I forgot. I’m to hand off the stage to Gabriel. Gabe?”

“Coming!!” Gabe slipped in from the side door leading to the lounge rooms with his shirttail untucked and his hair a mess. Kali appeared in the doorway behind him, touching up her lipstick but looking otherwise entirely put together. The scent of a satisfying sexual release followed him as he dodged between the tables and made his way to the stage.

“Gabe, tuck your shirt in. There are going to be photos.” Sam held the mic in reserve until the Omega tidied himself a little. Dean licked his own fingers and attempted to flatten Gabe’s hair, but Gabriel dodged in disgust.

“Eww! Save it for the pups, Dean-o!”

“You love me,” Dean chirped.

Gabe snatched the microphone, grumbling, “It was bad enough having ONE little brother. Now I’ve got two!”

“YOU LOVE ME!,” Dean declared emphatically as he made his way back to his seat. He diverted suddenly to crash into Anna with a hug when he spotted her for the first time that day. He mouthed, ‘later’ at her and then returned to the head table where Cas welcomed him warmly.

“God help me, I do,” Gabe conceded into the mic as he climbed the stair. “In fact, that’s pretty much the point of my toast, so I guess I’m done here.”

“Hey, hey, hey!” objected Castiel. “Not so fast! You promised me.”
"I did. And a Novak keeps his promises," Gabe said seriously, fitting the mic onto the stand. "Even when he tosses the family name aside and becomes a Winchester. You'll always be a Novak to me, little brother."

Cas nodded in satisfaction.

"I do love Dean, it’s true," Gabriel began. "He was the first ray of sunshine our house saw after the death of my mate, may she rest in the comfortable bosom of the Universe. Dean brought humor and vitality and…just…fucking LIFE back into our house. Dean, I don’t know if you realize how big a role you played in my recovery. But enough of that. Let’s talk Castiel. My kid brother, Castiel, was a total loser as a kid. You may not know this, but it’s true. And he’ll be the first to admit it. Right, Cas?"

Cas shrugged noncommittally. It wasn’t something he was prepared to argue, but that didn’t mean he had to agree.

Gabe just chuckled. "He was skinny and awkward. Short. He played chess. He read Jane Austin for God’s sake. He thought the K.C. Symphony Orchestra was a hot night on the town. At school, he couldn’t quite keep out of trouble; not that he was a troublemaker, but because none of the teachers knew what to make of him, and he couldn’t help that he was smarter than they were.

"At home though, my brother was the angelic ideal of a perfect son. I wanted so badly to resent him for that, but goddamnit if I just couldn’t. You see, Cas has this thing he does with his blue eyes and his chin quiver. Maybe he doesn’t do that much anymore, but that combo used to be deadly. We grew up allies against what was a less than ideal world. Maybe we fucked up a lot or maybe it was the world that was fucked up, but my brother and me found out we needed each other. And the asshole was always there, even when I wished he wasn’t, even when he saw things I wished he never had to see.

"And then he Presented, and all of us about shit our pants. Mom, you remember? We were like, ‘Holy Fuck! What just moved into our house?’ Cas stopped wetting the bed right about then. Guess it’s hard to house an alpha and a wolf like he’s got and still pee yourself at night. I dunno. If I had what he does inside me, I think I’d pee the bed every night for the rest of my life!"

"Really, Gabriel?"

"Don’t worry Mom. He knows it’s true. He told me I could say whatever I want as long as it’s true."

"Try to show some decorum," she chastised from her seat.

"It’s relevant," he objected. "Talk about helping people shake off their shame. Learning that the greatest alpha in the world suffered from nighttime bladder-control issues until he was eleven is gonna make them feel so much better about themselves!"

He gave his mother an opening, but she settled back in her chair and waved him on. "So, anyway," continued Gabriel. "I’m not going to go into everything that happened next. There are articles in the public record you can all look up if you want the full story. The short version is that where Cas and me thought we had it rough as kids didn’t hold a candle to what hit us as youth, as young men. It was the shittiest roller coaster ever built. We went from the deepest lows to the highest highs and back down again, repeatedly.

"Through all that, my brother had to learn from scratch how to slip a collar over the head of a feral beast and tame it to his will. He had to manage me and everything I had dragging at me and learn himself at the same time. His worry over me set him to thinking…about us as a species, about how
we got to this broken place, about how we’re ever gonna get out of it to stand as a Pack in the sunshine again, to stop the dying and the screaming and the raping and the killing and the loss.

“He focused in on me in a way that…” Gabe’s voice broke a little, and Castiel’s breath caught. He began to stand, but Dean put a hand on his chest and stilled him. “…in a way that saved my sanity and my life. You saved my life, little brother, and I was so mad at you for so long over that. I didn’t want to be saved. You know that. You know how hard it was. You were there for every awful moment, and you never looked away. You never left me alone. I haven’t really thanked you for that. So…here’s me, your asshole brother, saying thanks. For staying and bearing witness. For holding me up when I all I wanted was to fall.”

Cas was speechless. Gabriel loved to be naked, but not like this.

“I watched for a chance to return the favor someday, and man, the Universe gift wrapped that fucker for you with a green satin bow tied around his dick. I thought for sure you’d take the bait and gobble it straight down in one bite and that would be all there was to the story of how you two morons met and married. But I’ll be damned if you didn’t pull up and play the gentleman. For ten years! Ten fucking years I watched you burn for him. I’m gonna unequivocally state, Castiel, I paid you back for watching me suffer and then some. It was like watching a train fall over a cliff in slow motion, only the train never fucking ended. It was a ten-year-long train wreck, and it went on, and on, and on, and on, and on… You get the picture. And you had no frikken clue, did you? That whole time, even after you started scening together, and you were like a perfectly cobbled pair of boots for each other. You still had no idea. God, the endless whining, late-night floor walking, the hand wringing! That nearly did me in where even losing my mate hadn’t!”

“We get it, Gabe,” Cas told him. “I was oblivious.”

“Yeah, and so was Dean. Until that little firedrake moved in and shook everything loose.” Gabe pointed to April, and she beamed. “And she’s been leading you around by the prick ever since. That’s my girl!” he gushed. “So, I’m gonna sum up like this. Cas, I know your faith took a massive blow when you were still young enough to question things like faith, but I want you to close your eyes and take a deep breath in through your nose. Smell this room. Smell it all. Let it fill you. Dean, you too. Michael? April. Scent us. All of us. You smell that? That’s Pack, folks. And if you don’t wanna pin it on Universist Balancing, fine. Then you did that, all four of you. But I’m gonna go out on a limb here and take the status that I get as that man’s older brother, and say, Castiel, YOU did that. You gave us back to us. You gave us pride again. You gave me…fucking everything. And I love you, little brother.

“Raise your glasses, folks. Raise a toast to my kid brother and his brat. I hope you breed a houseful of brats who swing from the rafters and make you pull your hair out. To Alpha Castiel and alpha Dean and premature grey hair and all their many years together!”

Another loud chorus of cheers and applause arose, thumping of tables and stomping of feet, and a raucous cry of, ‘To Cas and Dean!’ The band thumped back in, playing Pharrell Williams’ “Happy.” Castiel excused himself to go thank Gabriel with a hug tight enough to hurt a little.

“Don’t get used to it,” Gabe warned him. “April bribed me to be nice.”

Castiel laughed happily. “Noted,” he added. “Now fix your shirt correctly. We need to go get the rest of the pictures done next door in the auditorium.”

Soon they settled in for a formal dinner, mostly abandoning the place cards and shifting to fill the
empty places that tired apes had left as they filtered out. Cas graced them with a short speech of thanks between dinner and pie. Dean sang with the band through several of their favorite standards. He sat for over an hour with Anna and her mate, with others who had been at The Facility when Anna was there, reminiscing, telling her mate stories that he hadn’t heard before.

Dean and Castiel both took long moments with Claire and Krissy. They’d intentionally brought Alex into the reception with centerpieces built of flowers and small pebbles that each framed a carefully worded story about anonymous Omegas she’d rescued. The stories kept the details appropriately vague, the disturbing particulars shrouded in ambiguity, focused on the positive side of giving the hope to the hopeless. Claire dove into Castiel’s arms in tears, and he rocked her gently for several moments. Alex’s smiling face looked on from the center of the table. Gabriel hovered nearby waiting on a chance to hug Claire with Krissy draped bonelessly over his back with a soft smile on her face.

Dean went fully horizontal on the ground for a watering demanded by the remaining wolves as Cas teetered on his tiptoes to get maximum height above his Submissive. They didn’t spill a drop, and each pointed with pride to the other’s skill. They danced together until their feet hurt. They danced with the Pack and by themselves. They pointedly ignored the brazen coupling here and there as the night wore on. They laughed and teased and drank and sang until staff workers began to appear here and there, cleaning up around the edges.

As the night came to a close, Dean closed his eyes with his head resting on Castiel’s shoulder. They danced slowly to a duet between Michael and April: “I Can’t Help Falling in Love.” The floor was mostly empty. Meg danced with Ketch, her face buried against his chest. Charlie danced with Billie. Benny sat in his chair with his arms around Andrea’s belly and his lips against her scent-gland at the curve of her shoulder. An intimate stillness fell over the space.

“Alpha?” Dean said softly.

“Mm?” Cas responded.

“I love you a lot.”

“Good thing, Dean. You’re stuck with me now.”

Dean snickered a little. He tried really hard not to acknowledge the wave of emotion washing over him. But it slammed into him anyway, and he felt the lump rise in his throat as his eyes filled with tears.

“Hey, hey, shh,” Cas said, lifting Dean’s face up to his and kissing the tear tracks that broke free. “Don’t tell me you regret marrying me already. You have to give me a running start at least.”

Dean laughed a watery huff, and clung to his husband. “We did it, Cas. I didn’t really believe we would, but we did. I love you so much. I’m gonna be so good to you.”

“I know, love. I know. I love you too. And I think it’s time for us to bid these crazy all-nighters goodnight. I want to get you naked, so I can make you feel good and send you off to sleep knowing to your bones how much I love you.”

“I thought we were waiting until I heal.” Dean felt a spasm of pain pass through his core. He clenched against it.

“I don’t need to fuck you to make you feel good, Pet. You know better than that.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” asked Dean.
“Let’s go say goodnight,” Cas agreed, slipping his hand down Dean’s arm to his hand and leading him off the dance floor. Dean followed where he led. He would follow the man anywhere.

Anywhere.

Chapter End Notes

Playlist:

- *We are Young* – Fun.
- *In the End* – Black Veil Brides
- *All to Me* – Shoshana Bean & Scott Hoying
- *Nothing Else Matters* - Metallica
- *Tennessee Waltz* - Standard
- *Chandelier* - Sia
- *Wagon Wheel* – Jason Manns
- *This is Me* – Shoshana Bean & Travis Wall
- *A Little Help from my Friends* – Louden Swain
- *Jungle Love* – The Time
- *Bad Guy* – Billie Eilish
Complicated – Avril Lavigne

Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain – Willie Nelson

Something Just Like This – ColdPlay & The Chainsmokers

She Will be Loved – Maroon 5

Brother – Jensen Ackles

Happy – Pharrell Williams

Can’t Help Falling in Love With You - IM
Chapter 111

Chapter Summary

Wrapping it all up. And, you know, as Chuck said,

"Endings are hard. Any chapped-ass monkey with a keyboard can poop out a beginning, but endings are impossible. You try to tie up every loose end, but you never can. The fans are always gonna bitch. There's always gonna be holes. And since it's the ending, it's all supposed to add up to something. I'm telling you, they're a raging pain in the ass."

**No, not in my experience.**

Chapter Notes

Warning for a bit of orgasm denial that wasn’t strictly expected at the time. The other warnings are at the end to prevent spoilers, but read them.

As I post the last chapter, know this. It’s not the last chapter. Caniformes is shifting to a series, and new additions will still be a somewhat regular thing. I’ll start with timestamps, and once I gather myself, I’ll launch the next story. It won’t be this long. Rookie mistakes were made. I learn. I adapt. I move on.

If you would like more of this AU, this pack, subscribe to the series or the author. Please note: the artwork that we added so late in the game is posted as the next work in the series, making it easier for you to scroll through all the character renderings in logical order. Dean’s full wolf and the tile for Ash are my personal favorites. Not that I have favorites.

Finally, gah! Where to start? Y’all, you don’t know what this project has meant to me. Three years these idjits had been in my head before I started writing. And then more than two years to parse all the babble in my head into a chronological story that held together at all. Two years of constant, constant, unbelievable support, generosity, love from people all over the world who read the tags for a spanky a/b/o and jumped in headfirst. There literally aren’t words to tell you how much it’s meant to me. I second guessed everything enough to qualify me as a full-on neurotic, and I never overcame my overuse of hyphens.

And I made lifelong friends. And I’m speechless about that. And I love all of you so much, it hurts physically. In a good way. Please enjoy the final chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Chapter 111 – Monday, September 11, 2017

NOW:

Only a few people remained to stumble sleepily – or drunkenly – between the round tables still festooned with flowers and soiled tableware. Lisa put her son to work collecting centerpieces and packing them into crates. She’d volunteered to drop them off at an assisted living facility on her way home, minus the story cards and photos of Alex. Ben set to the task with a purpose, earning him approving nods from the adult wolves he passed.

He’d finally begun to come out of his shell, and Lisa couldn’t take credit for his evident new lease on life. That was on Benny. The Alpha gave her son attention he wasn’t accustomed to, made time for Ben, made sure he felt he mattered. The lump in Lisa’s throat caught her off guard, and she cleared it and turned back to collecting up the photos. Ben’s Presentation was imminent. She could smell a new scent on him sometimes, nothing definitive yet, but distinctly more mature than his puppy scent. Having a man in Ben’s life right now was a gift she hadn’t dared hope for before she interviewed for a spot in the big league show. She’d been bracing to help walk him through adolescence by herself.

Now, she didn’t have to.

“Ben! Catch!”
Ben whipped around at Jack’s voice and just barely caught the fluffy bouquet by its glass base before it shattered on the floor. “SHIT! JACK!” he protested. Jack just laughed and ruffled his hair as he sauntered past.

“Good catch.”

Lisa scented Benny behind her. They watched her son for a moment together, neither of them voicing the emotion beneath the pause. Benny set a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. She sniffled and turned to face him.

He said, “All that’s left is to portion out the leftovers to the kitchen staff to take home and to make sure they all get their tips. You guys go on home. Tell Ben he did a fine job watching over the little ones tonight. I appreciate his help. He’s a fine young man, Lise."

“Thank you, Benny,” she told him, saying more with her eyes and the way her mouth seemed to want to form more words before closing firmly. She nodded.

Benny leaned down into her space and left an easy kiss on her cheek. “He’s gonna be fine, cher. We’ve got this. You did a fantastic job with him on your own, but you’re not alone anymore, and we want to help. Raising pups isn’t meant to be a solitary job.”

“I know,” she admitted. “I can’t tell you how much better he is already, just from the last few weeks. I wasn’t sure about your offer at first. I didn’t know how Ben would take it. But…look at him, Benny.”

“Resilient little bugger, isn’t he?"

She smiled. Ben gestured that he and Jack were going to start loading the car, and Lisa waved him out. “No one here even questioned that he doesn’t have a dad,” she mused. “Everywhere else we’ve been, that’s all that seems to matter, even among the wolves.” She turned back to face the Alpha, and her crinkled forehead spoke of her bafflement. “Why is it different here? You haven’t even asked me.”

Benny chuckled. “Don’t need to,” he admitted. “You’ll tell me the story if there is one when you’re ready. Thing is, Lisa, family isn’t about whose name’s on someone’s papers. It’s about who sticks around through the long haul. What I see is you and your son sticking around for each other, and that’s all I need to know. If you’ll let us, we’d like to stick around too.”

She sighed, willing herself not to get overly emotional. Being female and alpha was hard enough without struggling against the constant stereotype that she was more female than alpha. Benny cocked an eye at her, reminding her that he didn’t hold to any of the biased views that she’d fought against for years. She let out a wet laugh, half sob. She bit her lip and nodded. “I’d like that.”

“Good. I’ll get yours and Ben’s names on the application, and hand it in on Monday. Welcome home, alpha.”

“Thank you, Benny. For everything.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said looking around. “You and Ketch still have to hammer out a truce. I’ve made my position clear on the matter. You’re ranked above him, and that’s final. But he’s likely to look for ways to undermine you for a while. I’m gonna need you to plant your feet and not give an inch. I want you to keep me informed about how that’s going. I don’t want to be blindsided by a coup attempt in my Pack.”

“Yes, Alpha. I understand.”
“Good. Now, git.”

Dean woke up in the little lake cabin just outside of town draped over Castiel’s torso with his head pillowed on his Alpha’s…his husband’s…shoulder. Light streamed in through the bedroom window, and it danced across the still waters of the lake down the sloping path outside. Cas was already awake. He watched the sun just clearing the horizon, his hand idly caressing Dean’s arm where it wrapped across the Alpha’s belly. Dean blinked awake in the silence and felt the stillness of the morning embrace him in a contentment that was entirely new.

Dean could feel Michael. He wasn’t too far away to feel present in Dean’s head. He was awake and irritated. Dean smiled to himself as he kissed Castiel’s bare shoulder.

“Morning,” the Alpha said gruffly.

“Mornin’,” Dean answered softly, unwilling to break the spell. “We got anything we need to do today? Wouldn’t break my heart to spend the whole day in bed. With you.”

Cas didn’t look away from the window. “I need to meet with the attorney prosecuting the murder trial to go over my testimony, but that’s not until early evening.”

“Want me to come with?”

“I’d like that, Dean, but only if you want to.”

“I want to,” he replied. “Would it be all right if I bring Michael along tomorrow to court? Seeing those fuckers face up to what they did will help him let it go, I think.”

Cas thought for a moment. He rolled a bit to face Dean. “We aren’t going to be around for the end of the trial,” he said. “We’ll be in Paris when the verdict comes in.”

“True, but it’s not about the verdict for Michael. It’s about witnessing that it’s more than just Omegas taking this shit seriously. I want him to see the full courtroom and all the people lined up behind the Omega to see those assholes prosecuted to the full extent of the law. I want him to see that it’s not only Lupins fighting. It’s all of us together. And I want him to get the chance to put human faces to the nightmare figures in his head. Seeing those guys for real is gonna suck, but it’ll also demystify them in his dreams. They aren’t monsters for real, Cas. They’re just people. Shitty people, but…just people. There’s a limit to their reach, and he needs to see that.”

Cas nodded. “All right. If Michael wants to come, bring him. Don’t leave his side for a moment, and if you see any sign of a threat to his safety, you get him out of there. I don’t think we have a feel for how far beyond the internet these people are ready to take things. It’s not worth risking his safety. Or yours.”

“I’ll watch out for him.”

“Mm,” hummed Cas. “Good. And he’ll watch out for you, too. But, you know, this isn’t what I wanted to talk about straight off while I was waiting for you to wake up.”

Dean smiled softly. “No? If I guess right, you weren’t planning on talking at all.”
Cas shot him a look, and Dean could see the switch take place in his blue eyes. Castiel’s gaze took on a predatory gleam that found answer in Dean’s green eyes.

“Roll over, Pet. Up on your other hip. Give me a little space between your thighs.”

Dean didn’t blink at the swift change of topic. He hummed his own agreement at the developing plan. He turned his back to Castiel and lifted his top leg to let Cas slot his morning wood tight between his thighs.

Castiel pressed Dean’s left leg back down to make a tight grip on him, and he pressed his body in close behind Dean. Up near Dean’s ear, he breathed out a soft moan and rolled his hips. “Lay still, Pet,” Cas instructed. “Press your knees together. Make it good for me. Grip me tight and let me use your body. Yeah, just like…like that.” He rolled his hips again, thrusting into the tight space between Dean’s thighs, just below his balls. Dean’s own need went ignored.

Cas held Dean across the chest with his lower arm. His other hand he held out beneath Dean’s mouth.

“Spit,” he instructed. “Give me enough to keep us both from chafing.”

Dean worked a bit to accumulate some saliva, and he let it dribble into Castiel’s palm. The hand disappeared beneath the warm blankets. Dean felt moisture ease the friction between his thighs, and he clenched his thigh muscles tighter.

“Good boy,” whispered his Dom. Soon he was thrusting into Dean’s back with enough power to plow Dean over onto his belly. Cas rolled over with him, taking position on top of his husband with a grimace of effort and his arms braced against the bed. For several moments, the stillness of the morning was taken over by the slap of skin and the masculine grunts of both men, huffs of breath, moans of pleasure.

Sir!

“Dean!”

“Nnngh!”


“ALPHA!!”

“DON’T COME! MINE!”

Friction built as the wetness they’d applied wore off, and the heat it left tore into Dean’s skin enough to make his breath ragged. He reached upward, but the bed had no rails to grab. He flattened his palms on the headboard and pressed hard. He tucked his head. He needed to come. His body pummeled brutally into the soft bedding, and it was too much. He crossed his ankles and squeezed his knees. Every muscle strained.

Cas could feel his knot swell. Every downward thrust brought it to shove against the back of Dean’s thighs, and the pressure was blindingly sweet. His beloved Pet fought the need in his own body, fought the friction, fought to be good.

He was so good.

Cas could feel the fight within him, and the beauty of that view sent him spilling hard between
Dean’s thighs and into the sheets. Dean lay tensed and still below him, his shoulders a delicious sequence of curves that trembled with the effort to hold. Dean held his breath, afraid to inhale, afraid any motion at all would break his hold over himself.

Castiel’s breath heaved. He rested his forehead between Dean’s shoulder blades. They lay motionless as the sun cleared the trees and climbed into the sky. Outside, a bass boat trawled by in the reeds near the bank.

“Alpha,” Dean groaned, shifting a bit. “I can’t.”

“Shh. Yes, you can. Give it a minute.”

“Please!”

“No, Pet, not this morning.”

“I was good, Alpha! Please!”

“It’s not a punishment, Dean. It’s about control. I want your submission this morning. It pleases me to take my pleasure from your body and leave you wanting.” Cas lifted up and extricated himself from between Dean’s legs. He shifted his weight until he lay beside his husband’s trembling form, leaning against him from knees to shoulders. He whispered, “You’re exquisite, Dean Michael. You handed me everything you have to give, and I’m not ever going to let you forget that.”

Dean whimpered into the pillow. He felt oddly poised, ready to tumble over the edge without a hand on him. He shivered as he felt his husband’s breath in his hair.

“What’s rule number one?” Cas asked.

“Cling to you,” Dean answered without turning his head.

“That’s right. That’s all you have to do.”

Dean turned just his head to face Cas. He puffed a few tight, gritty breaths and then swallowed and clenched his jaw. His nostrils flared. “Yeah,” he managed. “Easy for you to say. Jesus Christ! I’m still close.”

“Would you like a little help?” Cas offered.

Dean groaned and rolled to get the pressure off his dick. He sat up on the edge of the bed, bent over and breathing hard. “Somehow, I think you and I have different ideas about what would help. I don’t need any ice, thanks.”

“Suit yourself,” Cas said airily. “Let’s get a shower. Then breakfast.”

“Yeah. Cold shower.”

Cas chuckled. He climbed out of bed and stripped the sheets when Dean stumbled forward toward the bathroom. He tossed the soiled bedding in a wad by the shower to deal with later and he started the spigots flowing.

“Is that gonna be a regular thing now, Alpha?” Dean asked as he limped to the toilet. “You never played me that way much before – not for very long, anyway.”

Cas waited to answer him until Dean emerged again from trying and failing to relieve the pressure in his groin. He wouldn’t be able to pee until the erection flagged, and that might take a while. Dean
looked up as he found Cas waiting for him outside the shower. Castiel’s face took on a thoughtful expression.

“If we try it for a few weeks, and discover that it’s not working for us, we can try something else,” he explained carefully. “But, Dean, I need you to fully realize the shift we made together. I’m going to uphold my side of that, even in the face of everything your brat might throw at us. You can trust me not to back down. I’m going to be consistent in a way I believe you crave from me. I’m not putting you in a cage, love. I’m not going to make you suffer for long periods. You don’t need long denial sessions. But you do need a chance to butt your own will up against mine. And I’ll let you in on a secret, Winchester. Come here.” Cas pulled Dean in and whispered gruffly in his ear. “My will is stronger.”

Dean laughed in spite of himself. “Uh, yeah. I got that memo years ago, man. Maybe we can skip the Sub torture, I get it. No argument from me. We good? I’m good. You’re good. Help me out with this…” He looked down and indicated his unflagging erection. It shouldn’t be this difficult to stifle a morning stiffy, but Dean couldn’t get out of the daze Cas had thrown him into, and his body loved it.

“Get in the shower, Dean. If you don’t want an ice pack, I’m afraid you need to wait it out the hard way.”

“Hard way. Ha. Thanks.”

“You’re beautiful when you struggle for me, baby,” Cas told him as he followed the man into the shower.

“So, if I can do it ugly, you won’t be as interested?” Dean posed hopefully.

“Nice try.”

***************

Their absence for the month left a strain that no one could assuage, and there were several conference calls to the villa outside Paris where they’d tucked in privately to celebrate, just the four of them. With a stunning view of the city and a hidden entrance, the rented villa gave them everything they needed except total isolation. Neither of the alphas expected to be able to get away entirely anyway, and the place was wired for modern technology that let them touch base whenever they needed to.

Dean made grand strides on his book. The immense satisfaction of a growing file folder settled into his skin. It was a welcome reminder of the strength of his secondary, and it drove him to arise every morning before the sun to sip a hot cup of coffee and clack away at his keyboard out on the balcony of the room he shared with Cas.

Michael and April spent their days sightseeing in the city and out in the countryside. The stolid alpha bodyguards kept a careful distance, but they were never far away when the Omegas left the sanctuary of the villa. Inside its walls, in its garden, in the myriad beautiful rooms they had to themselves, the two of them explored each other’s stories, hopes and dreams, fears and worries, explored each other’s bodies.

Castiel took a sanguine approach to their blossoming attachment. His mate was happy. Michael was happy. Dean was happy. Occasionally, he dressed them all to the nines and took them out on the
town. He took them to the theater, to swanky restaurants, out dancing and to the burlesque shows. He took them out for a memorable night at a sex club he knew well, and he let them play. They all dragged in the next morning utterly spent, chafed and slaked, to sleep in a heap in the rising sunshine that fell across the wide canopied bed.

Cas took his husband alone to visit his favorite galleries, letting Dean select a couple of pieces for their home, and paying exorbitant shipping fees to get them back to Kansas unscathed. He left Dean with Michael for an afternoon and walked with April along the Seine and to the Eiffel Tower.

Cas stayed up late into the night every night keeping abreast of developments at home and putting together a path forward with Dean’s input and the Omegas’ advice. He missed a great deal, not being there, but he had enough of a handle on it all to pick up where he’d left off when he got home with his family.

Autumn flew by. They surprised Michael with a birthday party in the second week of November that he’d not seen coming. The house overflowed with revelers enough to make Michael gape at the outpouring. Dean even flew Michael’s family in for the weekend.

April went into Heat the week after, and the house went silent in anticipation. Michael paced at the top of the stairs. He arranged and rearranged plans for a Thanksgiving Day open house that he hoped would spill out every doorway and onto the lawn if the weather held. Being up on his feet was becoming more and more difficult, but he couldn’t make himself rest while the door to the Heat/Rut room stayed stubbornly closed. And locked.

Dean limped in from the parlor with a sandwich on a plate. He grunted gamely as he sat on the bench in the foyer and patted to cushion beside him. “Come and eat something. I don’t want you passing out, and little Felix needs the sustenance.”

“What have I said about that name?” Michael complained as he took his mate up on the offer. He took the plate and the spot beside Dean.

“It’s just a fetus name, Michael. You get to pick his name when he’s born. I get to decide what we call him before that. Relax. They’ve been in there for less than two days…”

“Thirty-nine hours, if you want to be precise,” Michael said with a full mouth.

“Right. They’ll invite us in soon. Save your strength.”

“They’ve had time to plant seven or eight pups,” Michael protested. “If it hasn’t caught by now…”

“Don’t you dare knock on that door, Omega. We’re giving them the time they need. It’s the least we can do considering they did the same for us. Show some respect.”

“Easy for you to say!” Michael groused. “I’m coming out of my skin. My Heat’s hitting, Dean. I can feel it. And on top of being miserable and big as a truck…GOD! What’s taking so long?” He dropped the empty plate beside him on the bench and began pacing again. Dean scented the air subtly. Michael might be right. His scent seemed deeper, muskier. Richer. Michael being pregnant meant it was anyone’s guess whether he would even have a Heat at all this round. Sometimes they hit right on schedule and just as intense as usual, and sometimes pregnancy eclipsed the whole thing, drowning the usual flush of hormones behind those that were working to build a tiny new person within him.

“Come here, Omega.”

Michael huffed at his mate, but he stalked up and straddled Dean’s lap anyway. His belly forced an
awkward distance between them, and they both had to hold onto the other’s shoulders to maintain the position. Michael rested his forehead against Dean’s. Dean wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and then slid the other down over the meat of his ass the massage into his crack and gave him something to press against. Michael groaned.

“I’m game for another round, sweetheart,” Dean told him. “I’ll take top or bottom bunk, whatever you want. You don’t have to suffer. You just can’t go busting in on the H/R room yet. We have to wait for them to be ready.”

“Dean, please.”

“Whatever you need, beautiful.”

“Will you fuck me right here in the entryway?”

“You know I will. Get on your knees on the bench. Let me know if it hurts to kneel like that. Rest your chest on the back support.” Dean tapped Michael’s leg to get him up on his feet, then he set the plate on the floor to the side. Dean held Michael’s hand and his elbow to help him jostle into place. He eased Michael’s elastic down below the curve of his belly in the front and lower in the back to bare his round backside to the prised sunshine coming through the glass on the front door.

Michael whimpered when Dean ran two fingers in a circle at his rim, sliding in the wetness that was ever present these days. His hole was swollen and puffy, slightly irritated most of the time, and often a little itchy. Dean didn’t tease him. He stroked him firmly and buried his middle finger right to the webbing, bending it to stroke Michael’s prostate. Dean let his mate press backward into the touch for a few thrusts, and then he pulled his finger out and sucked it clean noisily before bending down onto one knee and burying his face into his favorite flavor.

Michael cried out and slipped one hand into his pants. “Dean, let me touch. Please, alpha?”

“Go ahead, sugar,” Dean’s alpha told him, thoroughly pleased that Michael had paused to ask. The Omega lived right up front these days, and Dean loved it. He gave Michael’s hole a few more broad-stroked swipes before he unzipped his jeans and shoved them just below his straining cock, shifted the softness of his boxer briefs to protect his tender parts from his zipper, and coated himself in Michael’s slick.

Michael looked over his shoulder with a desperate expression. “Any time you feel like mounting up, Dean. Not getting any less pregnant over here.”

“Bossy fucker, ain’cha?” Dean grumbled, but he wasted no time in shoving all the way in. The doorbell rang, and Dean held mid-thrust. He sighed heavily and dropped his head, still buried inside his mate with his hands gripping Michael’s hips. He canted his head to peek under his own arm. The glass in the door was beveled at the edges, but the panes were large enough that the beveling didn’t obstruct the view. A stranger stood in the doorway, his eyes wide at the view inside. He looked away swiftly.

“Dean! Come on!” Michael goaded, and Dean punched forward hard with his hips.

Fred hurried in from the library to answer the door. “It’s the new swimming pool service contractor, alpha,” he said over his shoulder. “Please don’t interrupt your activities. I’ll show him around back.”

“Bring him through!” called Michael with his head buried in his crossed arms. “Shortest path to the pool is through the house. Come on, Dean! Like you mean it!”

“Jesus, Michael.”
Fred waited for Dean’s shrug and nod before he answered the door and escorted the wide-eyed ape past the pair on the bench. They were both mostly covered, but Michael’s rapid stroking of his own cock and boisterous moans made the scene far more lewd than it had to be. Dean took his discomfort out on his mate’s backside, fucking him hard. He wrapped a hand around Michael’s belly and pulled the man into him as he thrust. He buried his knot in his mate and angled his hips to drive into his prostate over and over again, setting Michael to press back into it.

They heard the backdoor slam closed just as Dean froze up and came with a shout. Michael followed him a handful of strokes later. Sticky white semen pulsed over his fist and onto the red cushion at his knees. In the miasma of hormones that surrounded them, Dean caught it clearly now. That was Heat scent. His cock twitched inside Michael’s body and he grunted as another wave of come pulsed into his mate’s channel. He’d come embarrassingly fast, but he wasn’t sure if it was the scent or the unexpected audience. Or both.

“Yeah, you’re in Heat,” Dean panted heavily above him. “Bout time. I was about to give up on you this round.”

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Inside the H/R room, Castiel lay drenched in sweat. Sidled up behind his sleeping mate, he tried to catch his breath. His knot hadn’t spent more than thirty minutes unlocked from her in nearly two days, all told, and he needed to rest. Mid-season Heats were usually milder and shorter than the semi-annual full-throttle of a standard Heat. But April’s body had synced with Castiel’s, and both were determined to see results this time.

Castiel exhaled into the back of her neck and considered the sheer folly of thinking he could have held himself clear for another four or five years while his mate put her resume together and gained a few more years. He didn’t have that kind of strength, and these last two days proved it. The only thing…the singularly only thing…that allowed him a modicum of control over his wolf this time was a repeated assurance to the beast that it wouldn’t hear the words, “Not yet,” again for a very long time.

Castiel’s wolf set about with intent, and he brooked no restraints, giving credence to Cas’ observations from the past that his wolf only bore its leash out of a respect for Castiel’s stubborn Primary resolve. If it wanted to, his wolf could slip the leash and create mayhem. Keeping it satisfied had always been key to winning its complicity, but this time, there would be no satisfaction without breeding.

And so, over the past two days, Castiel had fucked her raw, taking the bit in his teeth and running away with it. His stamina verged on pubescent, but his refractory period adjusted likewise, and that meant copious quantities of his seed filled her every orifice. April bore it with aplomb, with unwavering agreement. She urged him on, even when he tired, and she never complained about having her limbs forced into unseemly positions that meant he could pound his intentions into her all that much harder.

Castiel reeked. His hair lay plastered to his head. His sweat stank as it dried on his body. He drifted in and out of consciousness until he felt his knot slip free at last. Without conscious thought, he batted away the covers over his hips and shuffled down to clean her hole with his tongue like a mongrel dog, grinning in feral satisfaction when his Omega moaned and pressed her backside into his nose in pleasure.
He didn’t know when they’d eaten last. A handful of empty water bottles sat discarded on the side table. Castiel was beginning to come back to himself as he finished licking his kitten clean and straightened to pull her in to rest against his chest and taste her lips again. He knew he was disgusting, both in personal hygiene and in personal preference, but the sense of fulfillment that fell over him overrode every hateful impulse. April snuggled into him in her sleep, turning her head toward his throat, seeking his scent, and Cas felt owned and cherished.

He couldn’t smell it yet, but he knew a successful breeding the way animals know, and he glided slowly back to earth. He nosed her hair out of her face and peppered her temple with gentle kisses. Biological fulfillment was a new sensation for Castiel, and he would need to pay close attention to his own impressions so he could write it up in his file.

Not yet though.

Not yet.

“If that round didn’t do it, Alpha…” April trailed off.

“We’ll have to wait and see, kitten.” Cas wasn’t ready to try to explain how he knew they wouldn’t have to wait and see.

“I’m hungry.”

“And we need a shower,” he agreed. The surreal sense of discordant reality that viewing the world through his wolf left him with was fading rapidly, and he felt his own belly clamor for something filling. Cas called the kitchen and asked for cheeseburgers and whole milk before carrying April into the bathroom and washing every inch of her clean. By the time they returned, the bedding had been changed and the room aired. Fred left them a note that food was coming presently, and he’d scurried before they emerged freshly washed.

Cas pulled April onto his lap at the tiny table in the corner. She played idly with his hair. “They’ll be five months behind Michael’s pup,” she told him. He pressed his face into her shoulder and rubbed firmly into her soft belly.

“Mm-hm.”

“Alpha, talk to me,” she entreated, lifting his chin. “Are you back? It feels like you’re back, but you’re communicating in hums and grunts.”

“I’m back, kitten. I’m just a little disoriented. And you smell so good.”

She smiled into his eyes. “You went deeper than I’ve ever seen you, Cas. I liked it.”

He chuckled. “I noticed.”

“You have a breeding kink,” she observed carefully. “I liked that too.”

“Do you now? I’ll remember that.”

“Might be tough to mimic what this felt like if we’re not actually breeding though.” She shifted to straddle his lap and leaned in to claim his lips in a kiss that grew steamy but not demanding.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that kitten,” Cas told her abashedly as he broke the kiss. “I believe I’ve got the roleplay down any time you wanna go there.” He blushed.
She chuckled and shared the laughter with her mate. He was embarrassed, and it was the cutest thing she’d ever seen. April answered the door when Tony knocked and pulled it wide for him to wheel in a loaded cart. Still nude and unashamed, April nodded happily at him as he scuttled back out. His ears had gone bright red, but he was doing better about that kind of thing with more exposure. Cas set the food out before him on the table, and he took April back onto his bare lap to feed them both.

In the morning he would know for sure. His nose would tell him, and assuming he was right, and he’d planted fertile seeds into waiting soil, he and April planned to celebrate by unlocking the door, and bringing in the other two – all of them chomping at the bit for that.

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April, it turned out, had not only caught, she was carrying the litter that Cas so desperately craved. Eight weeks after her Heat, as the misery of her first trimester began to fade into the discomfort of the second, she squeezed Castiel’s hand as Dr. Mosely’s technician moved an ultrasound emitter over her slick belly. Michael stood at her head. He wasn’t supposed to be on his feet much, but he had leave for this. It was a big day. Dean sat on a tall stool near her feet, his eyes glued to the screen. They already knew there were multiples, but they’d hesitated to try to number them without a visual.

The tech took measurements and snapped photos with practiced efficiency, grabbing the statistics he needed before slowing down and talking April through what he was seeing. Cas watched silently. His mouth set in a hard line, and his foot jiggling against the rung of his stool. Dean put a bracing hand on Cas’ arm, and the Alpha covered it with his free hand.

“All right, it’s like this,” said the tech. “I’m going to highlight the beating hearts for you. Right up front here, toward the bottom, is number one. This one’s in the prime position right now, so it may grow the best. We’ll see. Sometimes they do a little shifting around in there. I can’t be sure of the sex yet. And up here to the left is number two. See it? It’s a little fuzzier because someone’s legs are in the way.”

“Cas…” said April with emotion, and he bent down over her to kiss her lips and soothe her.

“I see them, kitten. I know.”

“And way in the back of the anterior uterus, kinda squashed by its siblings at the moment, is number three. We’re looking at its heart through its spine. You see the orientation? It’s butt up, back toward the camera, upside-down and backward.” The tech drew a third circle and snapped another still shot.

“Three?” asked Dean. “Three in front? And there’s a backdoor pup too?”

“Yep. Those three are all together in the anterior womb. One in the posterior. Lemme get a shot of that one.” The tech shifted the wand around and pressed in hard near April’s kidney. She huffed a pained breath and clutched Castiel’s hand. He felt an Alpha response flush his hands and feet with adrenalin, but Dean stood up and put an arm across his chest, breathing calmly at his back. Cas nodded his gratitude, and controlled himself. On the screen, another beating heart moved rhythmically in black and white. “There it is. Looks great, folks. They’re all four within the normal growth range. They all show good movement and good development. Congratulations. You’ve got quadruplets.”

“Four,” breathed Michael. “Four pups all at once, and this one’s only going to be five months old
when they’re born. We’re insane. Alpha, you’re insane!”

Cas exhaled hard, kissed April, turned round and kissed Dean, and then sat upright. “Sue me,” he teased.

They held off on announcing the count publicly, but they went home and celebrated privately. Stuck on bedrest, Michael had made a nest of his bed where he was surrounded with study materials to keep him from falling irrevocably behind the rest of the class in his major. Dean and Cas both tutored him from home to keep him moving toward his degree in Lupin Development even while restricted to his bed. His pregnancy was a healthy one, but his body struggled to keep itself functioning with a foreign body the size of a football crammed between his spine and his guts. Everything hurt, and laying on his side in bed all day made it worse.

Celebrating the news of four viable pups growing inside April’s little body meant the four of them crowded onto Michael’s bed with glasses of sparkling grape juice and Dean’s guitar.

And then the bottom fell out.

Michael missed the next appointment for April, his butt rooted firmly to the bed he was beginning to loathe with his whole being, and Dean stayed behind with him. He was due in a week, and he decided any amount of pain was worth it just to get this damned pregnancy over with.

“I swear, Dean Michael, if you remind me one more time that apes have two more months of this than we do, I’m going to stab you in your sleep. I don’t need you anymore. I’ve got Cas and Pete. Maybe praying mantises have the right idea. The mother eats the dad after mating.”

“Baby, you haven’t slept more than two hours at a time in a week. Stretch out. I’ll rub your back…”

“Get away from me!” Michael objected. “It’s your fault I’m this miserable in the first place!”

Dean didn’t defend himself. He brought Michael a cup of juice with a straw and calmly massaged his legs to get the blood flowing. He reminded Michael to pump his ankles, and he watched until the Omega grumbled into compliance.

Neither of them expected Cas to carry a weeping April through the door half an hour later. The Alpha’s face was grey, lifeless.

“Cas? What?” Dean sprang from the chair he had pulled up beside the bed and helped Cas lay his mate out beside Dean’s. April immediately turned to Michael and clung to him sobbing uncontrollably. Michael wrapped her up and looked over her head in puzzlement. Cas met his eye.

“There are only three heartbeats,” he said flatly. “We lost one.”

“Oh, God,” whispered Michael. “No.” He clutched right back at April. His head ducked down into her space, and his shoulders shook as he cried with her.

Cas swallowed and didn’t object when Dean led him to the chair and sat him down.

“I would’ve come to get you, Cas. Why didn’t you call? You shouldn’t be driving like that. Like
this.”

Castiel looked up at his husband with a look so lost, Dean struggled to hold his eye. “I had to get her out of there, Dean. I had to… I don’t know what to do. Had to do something.”

“Jesus, Cas.” Dean knelt on the floor between his knees and pulled him into an embrace.

“The others,” sniffled the Alpha. “The others are all sound. Still growing. All viable. It’s the, uh, the one in the middle of the front womb… There’s no sign of a body. It must have d… Must have died shortly after that first ultrasound. Reabsorbed. Already gone.”


April didn’t leave Michael’s bed for days. Michael rubbed her shoulders, massaged her legs, pressed warm hands into the tightness of her growing belly. He cajoled her into eating. He stayed up late into the night whispering nonsense with her. Castiel tried to stay too, but he couldn’t sit still long enough. Too long in one place brought the grief down as a crushing weight, and he stormed back to his feet, breathless, only to stalk out of the room and out of the house.

Working helped. There was always work to do. The newly merged joint venture was always facing one near catastrophe or another, and Castiel didn’t need to search for meaningful distractions. He spent every night tossing and turning beside his mate until she pushed him away and demanded he sleep elsewhere.

Dean stood watch helplessly. They still had two pregnancies to manage, and they would be bringing one to completion any day now. He needed his Alpha back, but he didn’t know how to reach him.

For her part, April used the week to find herself a new footing. Gabriel was a constant presence, and he guided her grief from a perspective no one else had. He talked her through the worst of the waves, holding her hand while Michael surrounded her from behind, and letting his voice find a monotone that didn’t threaten her delicate state of mind. Leaning against Michael was an unwieldy experience. His belly was taut and convex, and she had nowhere to comfortably rest her weight, but they each shuffled about a little until they found a position that worked.

And while Castiel didn’t abandon her, he couldn’t give her what Michael could, lost in his own grief as the Alpha was. Michael was graced with that one little step of distance, and that allowed him to keep hold of himself while supporting April in the dark moments when she questioned her own fitness to be a mother if she couldn’t find the courage to feel blessed at still carrying three pups where some people would never get even one.

Downstairs, Dean found the strength to do the same for Castiel, and by the end of the week, shuddering breaths exhaled on a new sense of acceptance, and hands braced against a supportive heave that brought them each back to their feet. There were more tears at odd and unexpected times, but they dug their heels in, and they looked forward. Castiel rallied late in the week, willing color back into his cheeks, and holding his mate in a tight embrace, swearing his presence and promising never to leave her no matter what. He had never left, but he’d given her the space she needed, space that Michael filled with a kind of solace Castiel wasn’t capable of providing.
For the Omegas, the experience cinched a connection that was unbreakable, would prove untouchable, would stand the test of time over the course of a lifetime of moments, simple and complex, ecstatic and horrifying. The idea that the Alpha had any authority over that connection whatsoever became laughable once it blossomed into the full weight of maturity.

Michael went into labor on the afternoon of February 6, 2018. His wasn’t a particularly cumbersome labor, but male Omega labor is rarely easy, and he struggled.

Missouri came to the house while Michael was walking with stuttered steps out on the back porch, naked and hunched over. Dean held him by the hand and the upper arm to support his steps.

“We need to go in, man. It’s too cold to be out here naked. We can walk the hallways all you want.”

“I’m burning up, alpha,” Michael objected. “I’m not cold. Let me stay a few more minutes. Here, let’s go this way.” Michael turned on his heel, and Dean jogged to keep up with him. He caught sight of Missouri watching from the doorway.


“Leave him be, Winchester,” she disagreed. “His body knows what it needs.”

Dean’s protest died on his lips as Michael doubled over in pain, clutching his belly and bending his knees. Missouri watched his face with a practiced eye. Dean braced him the best he could, but Michael sat all the way down on the flagstone and rolled into a ball of agony.

“Breathe through it, sweetheart. Breathe.”

“I’m breathing, damnit! Fuck!”

Dean let Michael squeeze his hand until Dean was sure the bones cracked, and he kept his other hand in motion kneading the small of his mate’s back. Their bonds helped Dean zero in on where Michael’s pain was most intense, and Dean shifted his massage and his pressure accordingly.

“Help me up?” Michael asked once the contraction passed. Dean hoisted him to his feet and followed helplessly as Michael began another lap of the porch. Portia bounded out ahead of April and tried to entice Michael and Dean to play with her, but she dutifully kept all four feet on the ground, a skill newly mastered.

“Cas wants an update,” April said softly to Dean. Dean looked to Michael and then shook his head a little. “Don’t think we’re making much progress.”

“Oh. OH!” Michael exclaimed reaching for April’s and Dean’s shoulders at the same time. A splattering of liquid hit the stone at Michael’s feet, and he bent double again.

“I’d call that progress,” Missouri observed. “April, tell Cas that Michael’s water broke.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” she answered. “Any idea how much longer?”

“Nope. Pups appear when they’re ready. Your Alpha knows that.”
April waited for Michael’s nod before she left him with Dean.

“See?” Michael said stiffly. “It’s a good thing we stayed outside.”

“Michael, babe, I don’t give a fuck about the carpets. You’re shivering.”

“I’m shaking from the pain, Dean, not the cold. It hurts like a motherfucker.”

“Look,” Dean tried a different tack. “Dr. Mosely’s here. Let’s get you in so she can check you over.”

“I’m not a horse, alpha! Quit pulling me!”

“You’re being as stubborn as a mule,” Dean replied, irritated, and struggling with his alpha’s insistence on hiding his mate somewhere enclosed and private and curling around him protectively. The open space around them was beginning to get to Dean.

“If you wanna go in, go in,” insisted Michael rubbing the undercurve of his belly with a hard touch.

“I’m not leaving you,” Dean growled.

“Good, then shut up and let me…Oh, fuck!!” Michael crumpled to the ground, curled up on his side, and rolled in pain with a sob.

“That’s it!” Dean scooped him up and carried him past a slightly amused Missouri, through the hall outside Gabriel’s room, down the steps to the right, and into the H/R room. Cas stood up abruptly from tucking a fitted sheet into place. Dean put Michael on the bed and climbed in after him.

Michael stayed curled on his side. He reached for Dean’s hand, and he held on through the agonizing clench that traversed his lower back and rounded to the front, feeling like his body was trying to suffocate his son.

April appeared behind them with a cup full of crushed ice. She clambered onto the bed next to Michael and eased a few chips of ice into his mouth.

“You folks don’t need me here,” Missouri said from the doorway.

Cas looked up, startled. “You’re not leaving…” He made it a strangled question.

“Alpha, you’ve delivered pups before,” she reminded him. “But no, I’m here for the long haul. Get comfortable though. It’s not going to be quick. And it’s not going to be easy.”

“I want his pain controlled as much as we can, Missouri,” Cas told her.

“Right,” said the beta. “I brought some options. Michael? Omega, are you listening? Dean, listen up. If we administer something now, it’ll slow the progression, and he will be stuck flat on his back until he gives birth. If he can tough it out for another hour or so, maybe move around a little, he’ll…”

“It’s not a matter of toughing it out, beta!” Dean growled at her. “He’s in pain! Help him!”

“Dean,” said Cas softly. But Dean wasn’t having it.

“Give him something!” he insisted.

Missouri waited for a nod from Cas, and she began to set items from her bag out on the counter. Michael groaned.

“Omega,” cooed Missouri. “Sugar, I need to take a look at you before we do anything else. You just
relax for me, all right? Let me in, love. That’s right.” Missouri eased his thighs apart, and Dean helped him onto his back. Michael huffed miserable shallow breaths which turned into a screech as the doctor’s probing fingers touched his sensitive cervix. He kicked backward, trying to climb his mate’s chest.

“Shh! Hold still, Michael. I need to know how far you are.”

“Hurts!” Michael wailed.

“I know it does. Breathe with Dean, now. Just focus on breathing. It’ll be over soon.”

Cas huffed aggressively through his nose, and April curled tightly against Michael’s side, urging him to follow Dean’s breathing and to hold her by the hand.

Missouri slipped her hand out and took off her glove. She sighed. “Got a long way to go, guys. He’s getting there, but he’s only at three centimeters.”

April fed Michael another mouthful of ice chips. She smiled softly for him. He bit his lip and tried to smile back. “I’m being a baby,” he confessed. “You have to go through far worse. Don’t look at me, Pete. I don’t want to scare you. Maybe you should…”

“Don’t you dare send me away, Michael Quentin. I’m not leaving you!”

Gabriel appeared at his brother’s shoulder. “Anything I can do, Cas?”

Castiel licked his lips. “You can let Ellen know we’re in labor, I guess. She’ll send out the proper notifications.”

"We’re in labor, are we?” Gabe asked pointedly, his eyes going to the quivering man in the middle of the bed, shamelessly open to all viewers. “Michael might disagree that now’s a time for inclusivity, big bro.”

“I thought you wanted to help!” Cas snapped.

The afternoon wore into night, into the wee hours, into a beautiful dawn. No one saw it. There were no windows in the basement H/R room. Michael’s sweaty body writhed as his body worked to expel his offspring.

“Thought Lupin births were s’posed to be easier than apes,” Gabe observed sleepily from his chair in the corner.

Missouri removed her stethoscope and stripped the blood pressure cuff from Michael’s trembling arm. Her face was drawn and tired. “Men have a tougher time, Gabe,” she told him. “Generally. Nothing about the male uterus and birthing complex fits with a man’s internal anatomy. It’s like it was cobbled together as an afterthought.”

Cas took another deep breath and stood up from his chair to stretch. “No sign of intestinal entanglement?”

“He’s clear, Alpha. We’re just waiting on the cervix now. Need another two centimeters to get to eight.”
“Still?!” asked Michael, outraged at his body’s reticence to cooperate.

Missouri patted his calf. “Try to rest between contractions, sweetheart. “You’ll be pushing in another hour.”

“Oh, thank God,” he said quietly, falling back into Dean’s embrace. Dean massaged his shoulders, his biceps. He reached down and dug his knuckles into Michael’s thighs. Dean’s hands were killing him, but he couldn’t stop. Michael had it far worse.

“Everything’s still okay, doc?” Dean asked. “It doesn’t usually take this long, even for men.”

“He’s doing great, alpha,” she assured him. “There’s no hurrying a pup that enjoys mama’s warm belly.”

“Mama’s warm belly is about to drop kick him outta there,” Michael groused. April snickered and leaned in to kiss his sweaty face.

“How are you feeling, kiddo?” Missouri redirected with a squeeze to April’s ankle.

She looked around without leaving Michael. “I’m better,” she said solemnly. “Did you know we’ve given them all fetus names?”

“You don’t say,” Missouri prompted. “Let’s hear them.”

“Michael’s is Felix,” April told her proudly. “We don’t know his real name yet. Michael’s not saying…”

They were interrupted as a harsh contraction put bands of barbed wire around Michael’s belly, and he clutched Dean’s hands and looked into his mate’s face for direction and assurance. Dean counted him through it then talked him into a relaxed state. Michael’s eyes were glassy with fatigue and pain. His painkillers were about to need renewing. Michael shook April’s hand weakly to remind her to pick her story back up.

“Cas named my pups. Just fetus names, of course. He said there was an old English children’s show his mother used to try to distract him with, him and Gabriel. What’s it called, Alpha?”

”The Magic Roundabout,” Cas told her in a distracted voice. He stepped around and set the backs of his fingers against Michael’s cheek, frowning as he assessed the man’s temperature.

“Right. All the names come from there. So, the back one is Zebedee. In front, we have Dougal, Ermintrude, and…and Dylan.”

Missouri touched her with a compassionate gaze. “Dylan is the one we lost?”

April looked away and nodded.

“Hey, April, look at me, baby.” April frowned but looked around at Missouri. She reached over her shoulder for Castiel’s hand, and he gave it.

“It’s okay, love. It’s okay to mourn him. It’s okay to remember his name and to remember that you’re still his mother.”

April nodded mutely and hid her face in Castiel’s wide palm. He turned his fingers to caress her cheek. “Would you like to hear about him? I know a few things, if you’re ready to hear them.”

April looked up at Cas. He nodded. He squeezed her hand. April looked back to Missouri.
“You remember authorizing a test early on?” Missouri began. “It’s a genetic test. The results stay locked unless there’s ever a need for them. Only my tech, Justin, and I look at the results. If we find something you need to know about, we talk. Otherwise, we seal it up and store it for good.”

Michael sucked in a surprised breath and mumbled a groaning complaint into the side of Dean’s arm. “Hey,” Dean prompted. “Eyes up here, Omega. Look at me. Ten…Nine…breathe…eight…Shhh…” Dean counted him down, calm and comforting. When the contraction released him from its grip, Dean mopped his brow with a damp cloth that Gabe handed him, and both men set back to massaging the Omega’s muscles.

“We have Dylan’s genetic results, April,” Missouri continued, pulling on a pair of gloves. She sat on a stool at the foot of the bed and began calmly to probe Michael’s cervix again with her fingers.

“I’d like to know,” April told her.

“Dylan was a boy, sweetheart. And an alpha. He was … I believe if I’ve got them in the right order, he was Ermintrude’s identical twin and a fraternal twin to Dougal.”

“Ermintrude’s a boy?” she asked, puzzled for the moment. They’d asked for the details to be left discreet. Cas knew, but the rest of them didn’t want to.

“Oops, I guess that was quite the spoiler,” Missouri smiled. It could have been a painful bit of useless information, but to April it felt like a little bit of the baby she would never meet would live on in his twin. “Michael, love, you’ve got one more centimeter to go. Hang in there, boy. We’ll be saying hello to your son very soon.”

Michael’s breath exploded from his body. He sobbed in exhaustion, and Dean wrapped tired arms around him.

“Dean, are your legs falling asleep?” Missouri asked him.

“I’m not moving from this spot, Missouri, even if they fall off.”

The morning aged into lunchtime, and Michael wearied but took each contraction as it came, summoning the strength from somewhere to face each one head on. Dean lost count of the number of times he told his mate he was proud of him. It didn’t matter. He was ready at each sweaty clench to say it again.

Finally, the timbre of the contractions shifted. Michael began to grunt into them and squeeze intentionally. He held his breath at the climax, and he pushed, panting hard at the end.

“There you go,” Missouri said with a comforting touch to his leg to help him get it pulled far out to the side, out of his way. “On the next one, we’re going to crown this little one. Michael, grab your shins and pull upward. Remember what we said about pushing…your body knows. Go with it. The best pushes center around your core. Try to focus your energy there, not in your legs. You ready? Yell all you want, baby. Cas, you get this leg. Gabriel, hold this one. Dean, brace his shoulders and give him something to push against if he wants to. You’re counting, Dad. Michael’s gonna follow your count. Here we go. Michael, PUSH!”
Michael bore down hard, gritting his teeth and pulling his knees out wide and up. His groan became a shout. Dean counted slowly in his ear, and when he reached one, he reminded Michael to take a breath and rest.

The door stood wide open, and Kali guarded the entrance, but she didn’t impede anyone. Most of them began to gather in the hallway, listening to the progress. Sam was holding down the fort at work until he could cut out at five o’clock, but everyone who could slip away vanished one by one from the hallways shortly after lunch. It was Sam’s name listed for both Dean and Cas as an alternative contact in their absence, and that tied him fast to his work phone.

At the manor, the hallway outside and the parlor began to fill. Fred and Tony kept snacks and drinks fresh. Occasional progress news filtered up the stairs.

Sarah stepped into the kitchen and hung her satchel on a hook by the garage door. “Any news yet?” she asked a harried Tony. He shook his head and carried a tea service into the parlor. Sarah followed. Naomi was holding court with ACRI natives and local neighbors in the parlor, so Sarah slipped through and around the door down to the H/R room. The stairs were filled with seated people, all chatting nervously or silently listening. She slowed at the top of the stairs. From the doorway, Kali beckoned her, so she picked her way lightly through the bulk of Benny’s Pack. Rounding the corner, she stopped and watched over Kali’s shoulder.

“Jesus.”

“You’re just in time,” Kali whispered. “Go on in if you want. Cas wants you there. Just, stay out of the way, all right?”

“Michael and Dean won’t mind?” Sarah asked tentatively. Kali shook her head and gave Sarah a gentle shove. She eased her way in just as Dean was easing his own way out from under Michael. He stepped off the bed and winced, hopping irritably on his sleeping foot to wake it up.

“Wash your hands thoroughly, Dean, and then come right over here with me,” Missouri instructed. Dean hobbled into the bathroom with a quick touch to Sarah’s arm on his way by.

Sarah looked around and found that Jess had chosen to stand by the table in the corner where she had a view of the room but wouldn’t be in the way. Sarah joined her. At the bed, Michael looked decimated, but bravely resolved to keep going. In Dean’s absence, April slipped behind Michael and let him rest his back against her slightly bulging tummy and her chest. She mopped him with a cool damp cloth and then handed it off to Gabe. Gabe had one knee on the bed and the other on the floor, and he was feverishly massaging Michael’s cramping thighs. On the other side, Cas knelt on the bed in what appeared to be an uncomfortable splayed position, his hands in motion too over Michael’s sore body.

Dean returned, pale and nervous. Missouri handed him a pair of gloves. Michael cried out and clenched down.

“Keep your wrists close together,” she instructed. “You’re not going to drop him. He’s coming now, folks. Michael, love, it’s all you. You push when you’re ready.”

“I was…” he huffed breathlessly. “Ready…four fucking…hours ago!”

“That’s the spirit,” Cas praised. “You’re doing so well, Omega.”
“AAAAAAARRRRGGGGHHHHH!!!”

“Oh, God! MICHAEL!! HIS HEAD’s OUT!!” Dean was breathless. He wanted to hold his mate and his son at the same time, but he couldn’t exactly do either yet.

Missouri stepped aside to let Castiel tend to the pup’s airways and assist Dean with easing the tiny creature the final short distance. Michael began to sob as the pup slipped free into his father’s waiting grasp. He reached for April and tried to kiss her, but he shook too badly, and he wound up pressing his face to hers instead as he wept.

Gabe pressed a hand into Michael’s shoulder, giving him Pack touch, the best gift he could offer at the moment, and Kali appeared at Gabe’s side to add hers, too. Jess slipped around to the other side of the bed and sat down by April’s thigh to help surround him on all sides. She pulled Sarah with her, but the Primate didn’t know what to do, and she stood awkwardly beside the bed watching the Pack bond. Dean’s sobs as he held the pup for Castiel to tend were the painful wracking kind. Cas cleared the baby’s airways and jolted the pup into sucking in a startled breath which resolved into a determined wail. He clamped the umbilical cord in two places and then helped Dean lay the pup on the bed between its mother’s thighs to cut between the clamps with shaking hands. Dean carried the pup to Michael. Together, they laid the little one directly on Michael’s chest, and all four parents put a hand on him at once. Dean sat on the side of the bed at Michael’s hip, not trusting his own legs to hold him. Cas stood next to him with a hand on his back. In short order, the pup stopped wailing and explored the world about him with wide eyes.

Michael looked on his son in awe, his thumb tracing the soft fur at his cheek, and marveling at how clear his eyes were already. At his inner thigh, Missouri tucked back in to see about the placenta as it slipped out almost unnoticed on a contraction buried under endorphins and bliss. With a little repositioning, Michael managed to offer his nipple to the baby, who latched on eagerly and began an ineffective suckling that melted his mother’s heart.

The baby had jet black hair and dark eyes, but both could shift as he grew. He mewled loudly, working air into his lungs. Michael chuckled and looked up to find Dean biting his lip as he met Michael’s eye. Castiel kissed the top of Dean’s head and sniffled loudly before leaving them to speak with Missouri.

“Go see to your family, Alpha,” she told him firmly. “Michael’s fine. We’ll give the little one a few minutes with his mama, and then we’ll check him over and make sure he’s fine, too.”

Cas’ face crumpled in relief as he gave Missouri a quick hug. He laughed softly at his own emotions, rejoining the others near Michael’s head.

“Alpha?” said Michael. “Would you like to do the honors? Need to count fingers and toes.”

Cas nodded, not trusting himself to speak yet. The pup had lost interest in nursing. Cas took him into his arms, and he laid him gently on his back on an empty portion of the bed at Michael’s knee. April and Dean helped Michael sit up to watch, and Castiel, the M.D., gave the pup his first exam, applying an antibiotic to his eyes and rubbing his skin vigorously with towels to invigorate the pup and help slough of the vernix coating.

“APGAR score, Alpha?” Missouri asked over her shoulder. She was scribbling in a notebook at the counter. Cas ran through the categories swiftly in his head, checking the pup over.

“ Eight,” he replied, and he heard Dean sob again in relief. Cas swaddled the pup into a tight cocoon and handed him to Dean. Dean took him mutely, overwhelmed. “He’s got ten fingers,” Cas told him. “Ten toes. He’s all boy, biologically at least. And he’s healthy and strong. You did it, Michael.”
The noise from the hallway had been growing in volume, but it wasn’t until Alpha pronounced the pup hale that the noise of celebration registered.

“Hand him to Gabriel, Dean,” Michael told his mate sleepily. “I want him to be in his uncle’s arms when he hears his name. We need Bobby, if he’s here.”

Dean nodded and handed the pup off to Gabriel, who took him with a confused expression. His face cleared right up once he had the little guy in his arms though. Gabe’s face transformed to wonder, and a tear slipped free. Bobby appeared cautiously at the door and had to be tugged into the room by Ellen.

Seeing that they were both present, Bobby peeking over Gabe’s shoulder with a gentle look of his own, Michael cleared his throat. He held Dean’s hand. He reached for April’s. He smiled at Ellen before turning back to the men

“Gentlemen and Pack,” he announced softly, his raspy voice shredded. “May I present, Alexander Castiel.”

Gabe sucked in a startled breath. Behind him, Bobby reached around and stroked the pup’s cheek, whispering, “Alex.”

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20 years later

The full ceremony in Stockholm had been a whirlwind of flashing cameras and glittering dinners. Dean, Cas, Michael, and Benny made it home on the redeye, but they hardly slept for the media clamoring and the colleagues calling to congratulate them. Cas hated that April had missed Sweden, but she was a slave to the schedule far worse than he. She would be in attendance tonight though, flying from Baltimore to Kansas City with Cain and Jimmy.

“No, not in the parlor, man. In the conservatory with Pete’s Grammys.”

“Dean, for the last time, you’re not to call her that. That’s Michael’s pet name. I’m beginning to think you’re pushing me on purpose.” Cas flipped the box in his hand open again and looked at his Nobel medal. He still couldn’t grasp it. The three of them and Bobby posthumously had all been named joint award winners in the ‘Medicine or Physiology’ category, and they would split the cash prize. No one needed to mention that the entire monetary award was going right back into research.

Dean snickered to himself, the lines around his eyes deepening in his humor. “Maybe,” he chuckled. “Gonna do anything about it?”

Cas raised his brow and snatched the case that held Dean’s medal out of his Sub’s hands. “You’re not in charge, Pet,” he reminded his husband. “I am. Go change clothes. We leave in an hour.”

From the foyer, a familiar voice screeched piercingly, “KAT!! Quentin pinched me! KAAAAT!”

Dean caught Castiel’s eye. “It appears they don’t know we’re home,” Cas observed. The little ones never behaved this way in the Alpha’s presence. Despite his greying temples and a rather sleepy
tertiary, the Alpha still had bearing.

He stacked the two thin boxes in his hands and handed them both to Dean. Dean followed him into the foyer where Renée came to an abrupt halt on the marble tile. Spotting them both, she burst into tears. Cas scooped her up and kissed her cheek.

“Shush, now. You’re all right. Where did he pinch you?” Cas examined her bicep when she pointed, and sure enough, there was a reddened area that looked fresh to Cas. Kat stormed out of the library, looking very much like she was about to take Quentin’s head clean off his shoulders, but she too pulled up short. Her face softened straight off, and her dark curls jounced as she dove into Dean’s arms.

“I thought you’d be home hours ago,” she grumbled, sounding very much like Michael. “It’s been chaos around here. He’s on a tear again.”

“We had some work to do at the office,” Dean told her.

“And interviews,” she said proudly.

Dean chucked her under the chin, earning him a scowl and a dodge. For someone not biologically related to Michael, it was a mystery how she inherited all of his mannerisms, right down to his peevishness about being jostled.

“Where’s Quentin now?” Cas asked his daughters.

“Pool house,” the little one replied.

Cas handed her off to her sister. “Get some ice on that for about ten minutes and then see about getting her dressed, please. I’ll find Quent.”

“Papa, he’s been real bad,” Renée announced.

“Thank you, kiddo. I’ll take care of it.”

Dean stood awkwardly in the foyer as they all left him going different directions. He looked down at the boxes in his hands and polled himself.

“Conservatory? Yep, conservatory,” he agreed. He set off down the hall, setting about to make a display of the awards that even Michael wouldn’t find fault with.

Cas slid the glass door to the pool house open and scented the air. He could smell his son’s irritation and upset without even trying. He stepped in and closed the door.

“Quentin? Son, I need you to come out here.”

“Papa!!” Quentin poked his head out of the tiny bedroom in the back and launched himself into Castiel. “Kat said you would be home in the morning! It’s almost night time!”

“I’m sorry, Quent. It was a miscommunication. We didn’t mean to confuse you. Were you waiting for us?”

“All day!” the eleven-year-old told him adamantly, frustration in his voice. Cas set him down in a
squashy chair and squatted in front of him.

“We’re home now. We all need to get dressed for the dinner tonight. Everyone’s going to be there, and they’ll want to see all of us on the stage for pictures. Son, I need you to promise me that you’ll stay right with Kat or Jimmy, and that you’ll talk to them using your inside voice if you need to tell them something. You remember how we practiced using our words to get someone’s attention, not our bodies?”

“I remember, Papa.” The pup dodged Castiel’s eye, and that told Cas that he’d not pinched his sister in a fit beyond his control. He knew what he’d done, and he knew it was wrong. As challenging as raising Quentin was, his inability to hide his emotions from his parents was a Godsend that helped them traverse the labyrinth of his needs.

“Quentin Gabriel, look at me.” It took him a moment, and his chin quivered before he was successful, but he got there. “Son, I’m not angry with you. But I expect you to apologize to your sister for pinching her arm, and I expect you to use words next time you have something you need to express.”

The pup’s eyes welled up with tears and he sobbed an apology. Cas chuckled warmly and pulled him in to rock him.

“You don’t owe the apology to me, kiddo. I’m not the one whose arm is red and blotchy. Here, sit up and explain it to me. Why was it necessary to hurt your little sister?”

Quentin lowered his eyes as his Papa sat him upright again. “It wasn’t.”

“That’s right. It wasn’t. It’s never necessary for a puppy to hurt someone’s body. We’ve talked about this numerous times. Were you angry with her?”

The boy nodded miserably, but Cas didn’t let him look away. “Eyes up, Quentin. If you’re going to do it, you can face up to me afterward.”

“Alex left!” he tattled. “He was sposed to stay, but he left! Kat said he was gonna get a spankin when you and Daddy came home.”

“What does that have to do with Renée?” Even under the child’s usual convoluted logic, Cas could normally follow him, but he was lost this time.

“Is he?”

“Is he going to get spanked?”

He nodded vigorously. “Is he?”

“I don’t know the story yet, Quentin. I don’t know why he left, where he went, who he notified. He’s Mated now, champ. His alpha has a say over his whereabouts. Perhaps she needed him. Surely you don’t expect me to start whipping your brother without getting to the bottom of it. And I still don’t understand what it has to do with your little sister. You hurt her, Quent. Tell me why.”

“Renée said that you spank everyone in the Pack who matters. She said that’s how you show you care about them.”

The light blinked on, and Cas nodded his understanding with his lips pressed together. It didn’t come as a surprise that his daughter needed a talk as well. That was usually the case with these two. “And you took that to mean that you don’t matter to me because I don’t spank you.”
The boy looked away again, blushing. He was no more than two years out from Presenting, and he was still so ensconced inside the mind of a child. Cas blew a slow breath out. Pinching his sister was a classic brat provocation, but…no, not this kid. Spanking him had never been an option. He was too sensitive. They’d always found other ways to ease his rising hormone spikes. Also, they had tools now that no one had had ten years ago thanks to Michael and his willingness to offer himself up as a research subject.

“Maybe it would surprise you if I told you that your sister isn’t completely wrong;” he explained carefully, turning the boy’s head with a hand at his chin. His green eyes took on a worried tilt as they danced back and forth between each of Castiel’s, searching for meaning. “But she got it just a little bit wrong, so I need to clarify for you. Think of it like this instead. I give each person in my Pack precisely what they need from me, Quentin, and everyone in my Pack matters. Does it make more sense like that? Sweetheart, Alex is Omega. And he’s not wired the same way you are. Kat’s an alpha. Sean’s a beta. All of you are different. All of you have differences that mean you need something different from me, from O-Pop, from Mom, and from Dad. Even between the four of us, we don’t all give you the same thing. Everyone has their own way of giving to each other. Do you understand?”

“She meant that you don’t love me;” the pup insisted with his bottom lip out in perfect brat mimicry of his father.

“Perhaps, but she’s wrong, champ. I love you with my whole heart. You know that. Why would you let anything someone said about us come between you and me? Didn’t we always say it’s you and me to the ends of the world?”

“Made me mad. She shouldn’t say that.” He dove into Castiel’s arms again, and Cas stroked his hair and rocked him.

“No, son. She shouldn’t have said that. That was wrong. It was hurtful and untrue. Besides, you’re not the only one that would apply to, are you? I don’t spank Kat anymore. Does that mean she doesn’t matter to me?”

He sniffled and rubbed his face against his Papa’s shoulder. Cas ignored it. He was changing soon anyway, and Michael wasn’t here to protest. “Look up, kiddo. Go wash your face. Apologize to Renée. I’ll stand beside you if you need me to. Then put your church suit on and attach yourself to Kathleen or James like you’ve got superglue on you. Tomorrow, you’re cleaning the pool as punishment.”

“Paaa-pa!”

“No complaining. You’re not getting out of it. Complaining will only earn you more of your least favorite chores, and believe me when I say I know what those are. O-Pop keeps a list.”

The pout was back. Jesus, this kid. Green eyes, freckles, and a lower lip that was built for pouting. Cas tried not to smile, but he was hopeless. He chuckled again and hugged his son, cutting off what might well have turned into a test of wills over how many chores Cas could assign before the boy learned to zip it.

“I love you, Quentin. I love Renée too, so don’t go after her with an attempt to one-up her. Now scoot. Get washed up. I’ll meet you upstairs outside her bedroom.”

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The dinner was blessedly formal only in dress, really. Everyone in attendance was someone important to the mission, someone who’d been a part of the journey. Everyone here was Pack. Bobby’s medal sat displayed in a place of honor near the podium, on view for those who hadn’t been in Stockholm for the award. The Winchester Pack took up three tables to one side near the front, and the LaFitte Pack had another three on the opposite side. The place between Cas and Michael stayed empty through the salad and soup. She hurried in just as the entrees were served, ruffled and cranky, ditching Cain at the door. He followed her in at a more reserved pace, pausing in the doorway for Jimmy.

All the men rose to greet her, and April took Michael’s proferred hand and let him hand her into the chair Cas pulled out for her.

“I’m so sorry. The plane was delayed, and traffic was a nightmare.”

“It’s all right, Pete. We know. Cain kept us up to date.”

“Mommy!”

“Hey, sugar snap. My, what a lovely dress. What happened to you arm, my goodness!” April took her daughter into her lap and examined the deepening bruise on the back of her arm.

“Quentin pinched me!”

“I see,” said April, looking to Cas. He nodded subtly. April redirected. “Tell me what you’ve been up to while I was away. You practiced our duet?”

“I can play it by heart!” Renée enthused.

“That’s my girl. We’ll play it together when we get home. Then you’re going to tell me everything I missed.”

She had a two-week break, and she needed it desperately. Weeks away from her Pack stretched her like taffy, and she was near to breaking. Her mate let her pepper the pups with questions, but he placed a firm hand on her neck and squeezed. And under the table, on the other side, her husband’s hand rested lightly on her thigh. It was good to be home, despite the bitter disappointment of missing the award ceremony in Sweden.

Castiel had calmed her sternly over the phone, breaking her near devastating drop mid-sentence with a promise to take her absence out of her backside when she returned home. They had penciled in a full scene first thing in the morning. She knew mentally that it wasn’t her fault, that programs involving so many people whose livelihoods depended upon her showing up couldn’t be rescheduled. There could be no substitute performer for a gala like that one, not without it failing spectacularly, but she still felt queasy about missing out on Cas and Dean’s biggest night.

“Stop that,” he said leaning close and fixing her with somber blue eyes. “You’re home now, just like you promised.”

“Besides,” added Dean from Castiel’s far side. “We get tired of you always upstaging us everywhere we go. It was nice to have the limelight on us for a change.”

Cas shot him an irritated look. “Not helping,” he chastised. “You really are pushing, aren’t you?”

After dessert, the speeches began. Three-year-old B.J. squirmed off of Emma’s lap and dove into his
mother’s outstretched arms. She wiped his chin and scented his puppy smell. Sitting still through the speeches was going to be a challenge for the three youngest. Michael had Quentin right beside him, par for the course in public. Quentin was always assigned to one of his parents and one of the triplets, all alphas, the two working in tandem to keep an eye on his emotional state. Dean had Renée on his lap, and he was playing Cat’s Cradle with her silently, using both of his shoe strings tied together.

Castiel nudged him with a warning about trying to walk like that, and Dean replied, “I’m a Nobel Laureate, Alpha. I think I can figure out how to walk to the stage.”

“When we get home tonight, Nobel Laureate,” Cas whispered back. “I’m going to strap you for pure cheek.” He patted his husband on the shoulder and turned back to the stage to listen attentively to the rest of Ellen’s speech. Dean shared a faux worried wide-eyed look with his daughter, then put a string-wrapped finger to his lips and continued their game.

When his turn to approach the stage rolled round, Dean wadded the string up and handed it to Renée before walking so very carefully in shoes that were meant to be laced across the top. He didn’t stumble at all, thank the Universe. Dean used his speech to highlight the advancements in Lupin health and societal strength over the past thirty years. From where they were now, back to where they’d started, had been a journey that covered such distance it was tough to remember what they’d once faced. There were still challenges, to be sure, but they knew who they were now in a way they hadn’t even conceived when Dean was a young graduate sharing a beer in a pub with a man he barely knew.

He thanked his family, especially Sam. He thanked the Keller colleagues he’d worked with for so long. He thanked those in attendance who’d been with them through the foundational ACRI years when they had no idea what they were doing beyond trudging toward a lantern on a mountaintop that only Cas could see.

Before he introduced Cas and turned the lectern over to his husband of twenty-one years, Dean insisted the pups join him onstage. He wanted Cas to speak to their colleagues with his family at his back, for they had been right there at his back every step of the way, and they belonged there. Dean got them all around him. Alex stood at his father’s elbow, tall for an Omega, like his O-Pop. Alex’s new mate, Heather, an alpha who’d chosen to join her mate’s Pack even though Castiel had fully expected to sign his son’s papers over to her, stood beside him, looking uncomfortable in the bright lights. The triplets stood scattered about, behind Dean. Kat, the alpha-Dom who seemed to channel the harshest sides of Castiel and Michael at once stood near the back. Jimmy Dean, the studious musician who had a propensity for bringing home Primate boyfriends on the regular and then breaking up with them explosively, had custody of Quentin. Emma, who was easily the most easygoing of the lot stood back of Dean’s left side with B.J. in her arms and her soon-to-be-mate George beside her. If Dean had a doppelgänger in personality among them, it was Emma. The triplets couldn’t have been more different from each other, and yet, each of them favored their parents in obvious ways and subtle.

Then came the twins, Sean and Mary Ellen, M.E. to the Pack, despite the intrinsic confusion that having an Emma and an Emmy in the same family engendered. Where the triplets all seemed to by 19 going on 30, the twins, both betas nearing 16, still clung to the security of their childhoods. Dean suspected he might have to give them each a shove at some point to get them to fledge at all, but it wasn’t time yet. Not just yet. The twins stood right in front on either side of the lectern.

Michael took a comfortable place at Dean’s back, nestled between Quentin and Jimmy. He put an arm over Dean’s shoulder and cinched him in close. Dean made the introductions more for the record than because anyone really needed them. He thanked Michael by name, and he went into detail
about how pivotal Michael’s contributions had been, both his intentional works, and his unique capacities that had proven, in the end, to be key to linking their past to their future. Dean’s eyes welled when he thanked Michael for his tireless work: with children, with the community, with the lost and disenfranchised. What the medal before them signified was the search for the whys and hows. Michael, Dean declared, was the embodiment of what to do with the answers they found. Dean was gratified that their children cheered the loudest when Dean kissed Michael’s lips and handed him Dean’s own medal.

Michael took it with a look of shock on his face. He frowned, looking the medal over and then broke into a grin. “I mean, if you’re sharing, there’s a quarter of a million dollars on the table,” he told Dean with a laugh. Dean rolled his eyes and pulled his mate in to stand at his side.

“Last, but not least, I want to bring up the man who started it all. There’s nothing I can say about him that you don’t already know,” Dean said into the bright lights. “Nothing that won’t get me in trouble, anyway. Cas. Come on up, man. There’s a roomful of folks here who wanna kiss your ass.” Dean stepped back and joined in the applause as Cas stood and straightened his tuxedo, ignoring Dean’s profanity completely. He took a few minutes to stroll around the tables and the wide stage and personally thank all of his children, his spouse, his mate-in-law, his Pack. Cas turned and beckoned to his mate, and she rose gracefully to join him to thunderous applause. B.J. shimmied free of Emma’s grip and stood clutching his mother’s leg through her delicate evening gown. She lifted him to her hip, careful that her sequined front panels didn’t pull or tear. She grinned and shrugged at Cas, and he grinned happily back.

Castiel, the Alpha of great acclaim, needed a moment before he could turn and face the crowd. His breath hitched when Dean took him by the upper arm and mouthed, “You okay?” Cas nodded. His whole Pack was here, even Sarah, back from her stint in Iceland living with a Pack of aboriginals. Sam’s twins bracketed their father. Hank’s firstborn, Luke, sat wide-eyed in his grandmother’s lap, reaching for Castiel up on the stage. Kali sat back in her chair with Gabe sprawling practically on top of her. He looked drunk, but Cas suspected it was jetlag.

Cas looked at Dean and nodded again. “I don’t have words to express this, Dean. How can I begin to tell them all what they mean to me?”

“Don’t worry, Alpha,” Dean told him, raising his voice above the din. “It’s mutual. They know. Just say thanks, man. They know.”

They were still applauding when he turned to the lectern, but as usual, he couldn’t be sure if the cheering was for him or his mate. He grinned into the crowd, struggling to see faces in the darkness. He scented instead. Everyone but Bobby.

“I, um, I need to make sure everyone understands how much the man who isn’t with us any longer did for this species long before any of the rest of us truly knew an alpha from an alpaca. Robert Singer fought in the trenches of this war before I was born. He knew every heartache that any of us face from personal experience, and he chose to make a difference in every way he could. Every. Way.” Cas paused to remember. He licked his lips. He looked at the medal spotlighted on a stand by itself.

“Bobby was a father to me, a mentor, a colleague, a subordinate. He and I shared a vision of a world where being a wolf is secondary to being a human. We didn’t always agree on how to get there, but we never disagreed about where we were going. He was a gruff, no nonsense, straight-talker. He was a brat, if you can believe it, if you follow the clinical definition. He was a brilliant physician. He was impulsive and instinctive. He could cut through bullshit faster than a rattlesnake bites. He didn’t suffer fools. He didn’t roll for Submissives. He was a contradiction, and an asshole, and a saint.”
Cas put a hand up to shield his eyes. “I need the house lights up, please. House lights.” It took a moment, but the stage lights dimmed and the ballroom lights came on. Cas took a deep breath. So many people. “I could stand up here and say all kinds of things, but I want you to see it for yourself. To the room, to all of you I say, Bobby Singer personally touched my life and gave me wings I wouldn’t have had without him. Those of you in the audience who can say the same, please stand.” Cas took Dean’s hand as his husband stepped up beside him. In the ballroom, slowly, a few at a time to polite applause, people began to stand. At first, it was only a few, but as they thought it over, more and more realized that they too could say that they owed their wings to Bobby. He’d been sneaky about it oftentimes, but he’d been everywhere, and he knew everyone, and no one left his presence unchanged.


“What it comes to,” he went on when the applause died down, and he let them take their seats again. “Is that our war is unfinished. Every one of us has the power to be Bobby Singer to someone. Every one of us needs that assistance at some point. I believe that in the next two decades, we will have obliterated Omesol poisoning as a Lupin malady. That is my vision. What Bobby saved my brother and countless others from, no Omega will ever need experience again. But that doesn’t absolve us from fighting the war. We shift fronts. Bobby told me again and again, you concentrate your energy on the battle in front of you. Each of us fights the battle that confronts them, and we spread the fight to every front at once, just as Bobby Singer did. What he did alone, we do as a Pack. We are wolves. We don’t ever give up. We never stop fighting.”

It was a good evening. A culmination, and a reboot. Cas thought of his mother. She and Bobby had led similar lives in their youth, but they’d diverged in their choices, and that study of opposites was really all the evidence his kind needed to decide on a direction.

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Dean rubbed his burning backside sleepily as he snuggled in beside his mate in the big bed.

“Keep rubbing it, and I’ll start over,” Castiel told him.

“Yessir,” Dean mumbled pulling his hand out from under the blanket.

“It’s good to be home,” April said stretching. “I missed you guys.”

“Where are we sleeping, Alpha? It’s your call,” asked Michael. Dean and April shared a mutual eyeroll. Once a sycophant, always a sycophant. Michael caught Dean’s side of that and slapped his bare ass hard over the white bedspread, earning a stout, “HEY! She did it too!”

“Behave, Winchester,” Cas admonished again. “Michael, would you please do a circle and make sure everyone’s in bed where they belong and no one’s bleeding or crying unexpectedly?”

“Yeah, sure. Be right back. Oh, I almost forgot. Benjamin’s sleeping downhill with Alex and Heather tonight. He was good at the dinner, and I promised him a reward.” Michael crawled backward to get out from between his mate and his wife.
“Good,” said Cas tiredly. “He can pee all over them at three in the morning and wake them up.”

“Yeah, Ben’s reward, but what’d Alex do to earn that kind of punishment?” Dean agreed.

“You two are terrible!” April protested. “That’s our baby boy you’re disparaging. Our very last.”

“Good!” Dean muttered. He watched Cas strip out of his underwear and ditch his socks. His Alpha wasn’t the sleek, toned runner with the physique of a God that he’d once been, but he still cut a delectable figure in the nude. Maybe a little more provocation was called for? Dean looked over at April, gorgeous and winsome as ever, and not yet forty. He winked at her, and she answered him with a flat expression.

“You know,” he said thoughtfully. “B.J. looks more and more like Michael every day. Have you seen the way his eyes glint green when the light hits them from the side? I think they’re shifting.” April’s lip twitched an amused not-smile before she schooled it to serious and sighed heavily.

“Cas, I think you missed a spot on his left thigh.”

“What was that, Dean?” Cas said at the same time. “What about Ben?”

“Oh, nothing…I was just saying he mmmmMPH!…” April tackled him with a pillow, and Dean fell backward on the bed with her straddling his chest and holding the pillow tight over his face. Cas frowned and watched her for a moment.

“Something I should step into?” he asked.

“No, Sir. We’re fine,” she singsonged. Cas rolled his eyes and disappeared into the bathroom to put his cufflinks back in their box.

Dean beat the pillow back and emerged red-faced. He got his hands beneath her thighs and flipped her onto her back. He pinned her, sat heavily on her belly, and began to let a slow, controlled dollop of spit hover over her face while she squealed and fought to get free.

“Dean Michael! That’s disgusting!” Cas reprimanded from the doorway. “Are you seven?”

April sat up laughing, and Dean quickly sucked his spit back into his mouth.

“I’m still telling,” he mouthed to her over Cas’ shoulder on his way to the bathroom. She shook her head patiently.

Cas raised a brow at her, and she giggled. It was an old joke. April had nothing to fear from Cas, even if Ben’s eyes were turning green. Her pregnancy four years ago came as a surprise to everyone, and in the aftermath, both men realized that through one mechanism or another, the pup could be either of theirs. Castiel’s abhorrence of condoms had made him eschew them even at a transitional moment after he gave up tutoring Omegas and weaned himself off the heavy doses of hormonal birth control. Michael was still nursing Renée, and he wasn’t taking any birth control at all. They’d both become complacent. In the hush that followed, they discussed paternity testing, if for no other reason than to be sure which name belonged on the pup’s birth certificate. Their son deserved to know. But they decided to wait. At some point, Benjamin would be old enough to decide for himself whether to request testing. In the interim, Castiel’s name resided on his birth certificate as Pack Alpha and father. It wasn’t wrong. It just might not be entirely right.

Picking at it like a brat was one of Dean’s surest ways to get a response from Castiel. Cas worried that Dean might prick a sensitive scab that the other two didn’t even realize they were vulnerable to. He didn’t want Michael or April to fret over something that didn’t matter one whit to him. Dean
knew better. It wasn’t a sore point for any of them. Michael had birthed them three children of his own. Whether B.J. was his or Castiel’s seemed irrelevant all these years later, but the Alpha’s protective guard-keeping was an easy route to stoking him. For a brat.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on, or do you want me to find a creative way to get to the bottom of it?” Cas asked. His belt lay coiled on the dresser where he’d left it after turning Dean’s ass a brilliant shade of pink just after they got home.

“I owe you anyway, Sir. I’ll pay you in full,” she told him. “I’m not snitch.”

“Is that right?” he asked, stalking toward her with that predatory glint in his eye. Dean emerged again and deliberately cut in front of Cas to slide into the bed, right in the middle.

“If you wanted me to spank you harder, you could’ve simply asked, Pet.” Cas stayed where he stopped, studying them both. Dean stretched his arms over his head and rolled onto his back, flashing his belly at his Dom, and smirking at April.

“I see. All right. On your backs, both of you. Side by side. Hands in the headboard grate. I want the ankles on your inside legs touching. I want the heels of your outside legs tucked over the edge of the bed. Don’t you dare close your legs. You don’t want to talk to me? Fine. You’ve both lost the right to your own voices until the sun comes up. Dean, get your arm out of April’s face. Shuffle over half a foot and stay there.”

Michael came back in, took one look at the scene unfolding before him and noped backward, heading for his own bedroom and a sound eight hours of sleep. The overnight flight, sitting beside a terrified Dean, had left him so drained, the edges of his consciousness were frayed beyond repair without a good night’s rest. He closed the door on his way out.

“All set?” Cas asked conversationally, but neither Sub answered him. They tracked him with their eyes. “I’m going to do, oh, all sorts of diabolical things to you two, and before I’m through, you’re going to be desperate to tell me what you wouldn’t say before you provoked me to action.” He plucked idly at the skin of April’s belly, then the coarse hair at Dean’s groin. They both sucked a hard breath through their noses. “But you can’t, can you? Your voices are in my custody, and I’m locking them up and putting them in a safe to which only I have the key. Shhh.” He put his finger to his lips and dragged a fingernail up the bottom of Dean’s foot and then April’s. Both Subs flinched and grimaced. Cas looked upward from their feet to their faces. He put a finger to his lips again. He turned and collected his belt from the bureau.

“No noise, now. You don’t want to displease me. Let’s begin.”

Chapter End Notes

Warning for fetal death in-utero.
Warning for detailed description of mpreg childbirth.

I wanna go on record as saying that while the length definitely got away from me, the story, just as it is, came out pretty much how I pictured it, give or take minor scene changes. April’s loss was meant to happen way earlier than it did, and it was meant to be the driving motivation that cements her attachment to Michael. I fucked up the timeline on an accidental whim, and had to traumatize Michael instead to make up the difference. Sorry, Omega. Wrong time and place. Other than that…yup. That’s what I
wanted to say. For everyone who commented and everyone who just thought sweet thoughts at me. Thanks. So. Fucking. Much.

End Notes

Kudos and Comments are VERY welcome.

Works inspired by this one: Keller Score Graph for "Caniformes" by Melodina, Caniformes (Übersetzung) by Melodina

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!