Into Your Hideaway
by thepinupchemist

Summary

Driving down a deserted road in the Rocky Mountains, Castiel finds something unexpected: An omega. Not only an omega, but a naked, injured, pregnant omega.

Dean doesn't talk much at first, but that doesn't change the brightness of his soul.

It also doesn't stop Castiel from falling in love with him.

Notes

Title of the fic comes from Fuel to Fire by Agnes Obel.

General warning for A LOT OF TERRIBLE SHIT has happened to Dean. The story will
follow Dean as well as Castiel, so expect graphic recollections of aforementioned terrible shit.

Other things to keep in mind:
- the bio alpha of Dean's baby *does not matter* and will not make an appearance in the fic
- no harm will come to Dean's baby at any point in the story

If you've never read A/B/O before and are not quite sure what it is, you can find some more info [here](#).
The grocery store lies several miles down the mountain, a forty-five minute drive in ideal weather, which the weather is currently not. It’s raining, the scent of wet earth and electricity moistening the air outside of Castiel’s Prius. He loves this smell, and loves the purity of it that comes with living in a secluded home in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

He liked his life in Denver when he lived it, but since being disgraced and having his medical license revoked, this is the lifestyle that suits him: Quiet, solitude, and spending his days reading, teaching himself to cook, and living off of the money he poured into his savings account when he had his illustrious career as a surgeon in the city.

Now he’s unemployed and alone, and he likes it better this way. The nearest town is Buena Vista, a town of only just over twenty five hundred. His own house lies beyond roping dirt roads and rolling hills of aspen trees, conifers and wildflowers. This is a better home. Here, he can smell the rain. There are no exhaust fumes or dumpsters too full of garbage, or alleyways scent-marked by dozens of alphas.

There’s just…rain.

*Jesus Christ.*

No there isn’t – there’s something else out there tonight, something strong. Castiel almost slams his foot down on the brakes before he realizes how unwise it would be to do so on the muddy, sopping-wet length of road, and instead eases down on the pedal and lets the Prius slow to a crawl.

He scents the air, just to make sure he isn’t crazy.

The bouquet of smells that hits him is the strongest thing he’s smelled in years. The most poignant
of the aromas is *distress*. Not just any distress, either. It’s omega distress. Pregnant omega distress.

Pregnant *in heat* omega distress.

That shouldn’t be possible. He has, of course, heard of the rare case in which such a thing has occurred, but simultaneous heats and pregnancy are medical anomalies.

That’s when Castiel sees the source of the heady scent, only a few paces in front of his car, stumbling along the side of the road. A naked omega, soaked in rain, arms wrapped around its body. He pulls up just a little, alpha kicking in, his brain throbbing with protect, protect, protect. Logically following, he wonders what a naked, pregnant, in-heat omega is doing out in The Middle of Nowhere, Colorado. There’s nothing out here. Neighbors live miles apart and the world is dead quiet. His own mailbox is seven miles from his home.

As Castiel eases to a stop, he sees furious red marks slashing across the omega’s slender back. It’s horrifying, and the alpha in his gut has him burning with fury. Castiel halts his vehicle beside the omega and rolls down the window of his Prius.

“Hello!” he calls over the sound of the rain beating down against the earth, “Get in the car!”

Gaunt eyes stare back at him in a pretty male omega face, wet with rain.

“Please get in the car,” Castiel says.

The omega swallows slowly, and after a long moment of consideration, obeys. He opens the passenger’s side door and slides onto the seat. Despite the outward curve to his belly, he’s too skinny, malnourished and trembling from cold and wet and terror. And even with the scent of fear rolling off of him in droves, he still reaches over and tiredly places his hands between Castiel’s legs, rubbing at his cock through the fabric of his jeans. It’s a practiced movement, an automatic drive for a traumatized omega trying to survive.

“No, no,” Castiel says, and plucks the omega’s hand away by the wrist, placing it back into his own lap. He knows that most alphas would say yes – the skinniness aside, this omega is irrefutably attractive, and underneath all the layers of scents of fear and pain and heat, the one that belongs just to this man is divine. The confused expression that crosses the omega’s face prompts him to add, “I don’t want that from you, okay? I’m just going to take you home and get you warm. All right?”

The omega doesn’t answer.

“What’s your name?”

He doesn’t reply to this either, instead wrapping his arms around himself and sinking lower into the seat.

“Okay,” Castiel says, “I’m Castiel. I live about a half-hour up the mountain.”

Again, the omega doesn't respond to Castiel, but he does shiver. Castiel puts the Prius in park and sheds his coat. It’s springtime, so he doesn’t need anything too thick, just a windbreaker, but it’s dry on the inside and warm with Castiel’s body heat. He drapes it over the man’s shoulders and gives him a gentle nod.

As Castiel drives, he sees the omega pull the coat more tightly around himself out of the corner of his eye. He can feel the man watching him as he drives and tries not to glance back. He’s skittish, and though the scent of distress so sharp that it made him stop his car in the middle of the dirt road
through the hills has eased, the aromas of caution and instinctual fright remain. Castiel doesn’t
know what happened here, but it’s clear that it cannot have been good. He has marks on his thighs
like the ones on his back: angry, red welts and thin white scars.

“My home is just around this bend,” Castiel says after several minutes to fill the silence. He gnaws
on his lower lip and tries to think of what this man might need first. Food. Clothing. A bath. Toys
to push himself through his heat. There is nothing that this omega does not need.

He pulls his Prius into the garage and ushers the Omega inside his home, into the warmth. He
stops behind Castiel in the entryway, still shivering and shaking underneath Castiel’s windbreaker.

“Are you hungry?” asks Castiel.

The man nods.

“Let me fix you something to eat,” Castiel replies. He guides the omega into the kitchen and
motions for him to sit at the kitchen table. Most of his supplies are still in the car, so he ducks back
out to collect the groceries and prepare something simple and quick. In a pan on the stove he
throws together a grilled cheese and places the sandwich on a plate in front of the man.

“Here,” Castiel says.

The man watches him for a moment, looking almost as if he thinks that the food is a trick, and then
seems to give up. He grabs the grilled cheese with both hands, biting in like he hasn’t tasted food in
years.

“I’ll find you some clothes,” he murmurs to him.

But by the time that Castiel has a set of pajama pants and a t-shirt in his hands, the omega has
finished his meal and is bunched up into a ball on the kitchen chair. He’s filthy, reeking of dirt and
grime and covered from foot to knee in mud from the road.

The soles of his feet are cut up. The sharp scent of blood beats off of him in wispy tendrils, acrid to
the nose.

The omega needs medical attention, without a doubt.

“Hello,” Castiel says awkwardly, to announce his presence, “You…follow me.”

And the omega obeys his command, just like that. He leads him into the guest room and places the
clothes on the foot of the neatly-made queen bed against the back wall. It’s a simple room but
comfortable, stocked with everything a person could need. A wood-burning fireplace sits across
from the bed, adjacent to the door, and on the other side of the room is the guest bathroom, modest
but supplied with unscented soaps nonspecific to gender, shampoo and toothpaste, soft towels and
disposable razors still in the package.

Castiel gestures to the shower there and says gently, “Why don’t you bathe? There’s soap and
shampoo in the cabinet and, um, I may be able to find you a. Ah. A toy. If you need it? For the
heat?”

The omega nods, and so Castiel leaves to rummage through his closet. It’s been years since he’s
been romantically involved with an omega and several months since he’s tended to omegas in a
medical setting, but one never knows when a fake knot could come in handy. He used to keep
more, especially before all of the legal nonsense went down, but now he doesn't have as much use
for omega toys, excepting the occasional slip into curiosity when he's used one on himself.
The idea of the idea of the omega in the other room fucking himself on a fake knot in the shower just across the hall makes Castiel itch underneath his skin. He isn’t used to that. He prides himself on his control and neutrality. Omega heats weren’t uncommon within the walls of the hospital, or in his apartment, and after a while he learned to cope through varying methods – drinking good scotch, intense after-work exercise – and he could pull through just fine.

This omega makes him *need*.

He finds the toy – a fake purple knot that sits in a shoebox beneath Castiel’s running shoes – just after that realization and makes himself stomp it all down, down, down. To hell with biology and instinct. He is a rational human being and he will not abruptly turn into some knothead idiot because of *one* omega in heat in his home. Naked. All slick and –

*Stop.* He inhales a long breath to steel himself and crosses into the bathroom, wielding the toy.

“Here,” he says, “That will help. Please find me if you need anything. I’ll just be in my bedroom across the hall.”

He wipes his sweating palms on his jeans and removes himself from the situation before it can get out of hand. He didn’t know that an omega’s scent could be like this, an embodiment of pure temptation, chemistry so deep that he can feel it in the marrow of his bones. Castiel covers his own scent, letting alpha sink into place and wash out some of the omega clinging to the insides of his nostrils. It helps, but not by much, so he hustles out to the kitchen to prepare more food despite his lack of hunger – something fragrant with onions or garlic that’ll edge out the alpha need that rattles his entire body.

He doesn’t hear the omega get out of his shower, doesn’t realize how long he’s been focused on his broccoli stir-fry dish with soy sauce and garlic until he hears a small cough from his left. The omega stands in Castiel’s clothes and smells freshly fucked. It’s erotic and has Castiel itchy all over again, cock half-hard in his pants in an instant. The omega awkwardly cradles the plastic knot his hands, and holds it out when Castiel glances at him.

Oh, *Jesus*.

“Um. Keep…that. For the heat,” Castiel says, and catches the omega’s eyes flitting to the sizzle of food over the stove. He ventures, “You’re still hungry?”

A nod.

“Please put the toy back and I’ll serve you a bowl,” he says, and tries to make his words as polite as possible. They come out tight and frustrated instead, in a growl that alarms the omega into immediate action and has him scrambling from the room. The absence he leaves doesn’t help much, or at all, rather – as the omega darts away an indescribable urge to *chase* pinpricks Castiel’s skin like needles. *Chase* is soon followed by a loud string of *fuckmatebreed*, which shouldn’t be allowed, as the omega already has another alpha’s pup inside him.

And beyond that, the poor man’s in no shape to fucked or mated or any of that. Castiel runs his fingers through his hair and blows all of the air out of his lungs. He can do this. He will control himself.

The omega returns and sits meekly at the kitchen table. He lifts his fork to eat but pauses and glances over at Castiel, a tilt to his head.

“Is something wrong?” Castiel asks.
The omega drops his silverware in his bowl and steps toward Castiel. His eyes are glued to Castiel’s crotch, where his cock is now fully hard and very much in danger of sprouting a knot. That has never happened since puberty unless he’s been inside someone (though rare those occasions have been), but with as delicious as this omega smells to him, Castiel is surprised it hasn’t happened sooner. The omega reaches for his crotch and grabs through the denim, closing his hand around Castiel’s erection.

Castiel gasps, and shoves the omega back. No no no no. He will not hurt this omega. He’s scarred up and hungry and still scared out of his wits – Castiel can smell bitter fear everywhere, especially as the omega stumbles from his push away.

“Sorry,” Castiel pants, “Sorry, sorry. I don’t…I don’t need that from you, okay? You’re safe here, and I have control over myself.”

The omega cocks a brow at that, as if to say Oh, really? It’s the very first sign of anything but obedience that Castiel has seen out of him.

“I – just eat your meal,” Castiel says, “I’ll be back.” He escapes to his bedroom and fumbles in the master bath for anything that might help him stave off his stupid alpha desire, going through bars of plain, practical soap and bottles of shampoo underneath his sink before his hand brushes against a glass bottle – of course, he should have thought of that earlier – the overpriced alpha cologne that Michael gave him a few Christmases ago. He never wears it. It’s used to seduce pretty omegas and was Michael’s less-than-subtle way of telling Castiel that it was high time that he find his mate and settle down. It smells vile, and it’s the perfect anti-omega scent to keep him at bay.

Castiel douses a wash cloth with the stuff and holds it over his face before he dares to go back out to the omega, who’s sitting at his kitchen table over an empty bowl, knees drawn back up his chin in effort to make himself smaller. He doesn’t hear Castiel right away, and so Castiel watches him without speaking, just for a moment.

Were he not thin as a switch, he’d be big for an omega, big even for a beta. He might be taller than Castiel on his feet, though it’s difficult to tell when the man is trying to make himself smaller in every way possible, holding his head down and keeping his eyes trained on the floor. His skin doesn’t look like it has seen sun in ages, though the sun reigns in the Rockies. He’s pale and sallow, sickly looking underneath the wealth of scars that litter his body.

“Let me take a look at you,” Castiel finally says.

The omega looks at him like he’s crazy and reaches for the hem of his shirt. He starts to pull it up and Castiel says, “No, no. Not like that. I used to be a doctor. You’re hurt. I wanted to ensure that you’re okay. Then perhaps we could call your family? You may use my phone.”

The omega shakes his head.

“You don’t want to contact your family?”

The omega shakes his head again.

“Do you have a family?”

Again, a shake of the head.

“Oh,” Castiel says. His stomach twists at this news. He didn’t quite think it through when he smelled distress and let a strange omega into his car and then his house. This man has no place to go, no one to go to.
Castiel values his solitude, and doesn’t know what to make of the idea that he may indefinitely house this odd, pregnant omega that hasn’t spoken a word to him and looks sickly enough to be on the brink of death, that eats like a starving man and is in heat at the same time as being ill with a pup in his belly.

Naked, freezing, injured, alone and pregnant in the middle of nowhere.

It would be cruel to turn him out. Solitude be damned.

“You can stay here as long as you need,” Castiel says with finality, “Sit here.”

He leaves and retrieves a few of the remnants of his medical past. He paid for his own kit and felt it a waste to throw it away. The hospital provided the majority of his in-house supplies, but he always did keep a few different medications and immunization shots on his person. It’s so easy to get hurt in such a violent world, one run by instinct. In Denver, he had omegas filtering through his apartment on a regular basis that needed pain medications or stitches or any number of things. Castiel never did like the idea of helplessness.

And so his medical supplies sit in the back of his closet in the bag that he used to take every day to his job in the city.

In the kitchen, he places the bag on the table and lets the omega look inside it before he goes through the motions – takes his pulse, checks his eyes and ears. He figures it invasive to do the standard examination of the omega’s genitals, especially considering how even now the omega’s fear permeates the air.

“Let me bandage your feet,” Castiel finally says, “Your heart rate is a little quick, but everything else seems to be in order.”

Castiel makes sure that the omega’s feet are clean before he applies Neosporin to the cuts and wraps them up neatly.

That’s when he sees it: a barely noticeable disfiguration near the omega’s left ankle. He frowns and touches it with his fingers, only to illicit a whine from the man above him. Castiel glances up and sees pain at the same time he smells arousal and omega slick. He coughs and reaches for his cologne-washcloth, breathing deep before going back to check the omega’s ankle.

The lump is small, about half an inch wide across and three quarters of an inch down.

He’s seen this before.

Only once, but Castiel has seen it.

It’s a hormone implant. The chips were outlawed decades ago, but they appear sometimes in omegas subject to sex trafficking: omegas that have been kidnapped or that have run away from their families, found by powerful pimps and kept drugged and in heat so that they’re pliant for alpha clients. It’s barbaric though not uncommon: seeing news stories of omegas found half-dead and drugged, with cigarette burns scarring the soles of their feet and bodies ravaged.

Castiel slowly lifts his eyes and asks quietly, “Omega, are you on the run?”

The man tenses under his hand.

“It’s okay,” Castiel rushes to say, “It’s just that I’ve seen one of these once before. It’s a hormone implant. I used to work in Denver, in a hospital, and we had a young omega woman with an
implant like this in her wrist. It kept her in heat for her pimp.” They never did convict that man. It makes Castiel’s blood boil.

He will not fail this omega as he failed that one.

The omega’s brow crinkles. He bends to look at his ankle, reaches down to skim his fingertips over the lump, and looks horrified when he meets Castiel’s eyes again.

“I can remove it,” Castiel says, “I have the supplies that I would need.”

Relief flushes the omega’s face, and he nods.

“Okay,” Castiel draws up to his feet and fishes through his bag. He pulls out packaged syringe of anesthetic –

Only to have the omega launch from the kitchen chair and across the room. He presses his back against the wall and looks at the syringe with wide, horrified eyes, new, fresh fear rolling off of him. The distress is so strong it’s like a punch to the gut, sending Castiel reeling back. The omega shakes his head. His eyes search the room. He’s looking for an escape, Castiel realizes, and immediate guilt swings into him.

Castiel sets the package down on the table.

“It’s anesthesia,” he says, “for the pain. It will hurt to have the implant removed.”

The omega shakes his head again, violently.

“Okay,” Castiel says, “It will not be pleasant to have the procedure without the anesthesia. I could offer you a drink instead? It won’t do much, but it would be better than nothing. And you would have to go easy on it, for the pup.” He’s careful not to get too close to the omega as he reaches for his liquor cabinet, pulling out a bottle of fine bourbon. Expensive bourbon. He holds it out, and the omega hesitates before he takes it. When his hand brushes Castiel’s fingers as he clutches the neck of the bottle, Castiel has to retrieve his washcloth and breathe in the scent of alpha to put the aroma of slick out of his mind.

He’s good at this, he has to remind himself. It’s how he attained his hospital job in spite of not being a neutral beta, because he’s cool-headed. He isn’t affected the way that other alphas are. Except now. Now he is.

The omega tips bourbon down his throat before he relaxes enough to return back to his kitchen chair. He takes two more swallows before places the bottle on the table, exhales, and levels a nod at Castiel. Castiel rummages in his bag and offers a rubber bit – “To bite down on,” he explains.

The omega makes a grab for the bourbon downs more liquor before he accepts the rubber bit and shoves it in his mouth.

The procedure is simple: make the incision, remove the implant, and sew the wound closed. Castiel is careful, removing his tools and laying the packaged scalpel, forceps, and suture needle in a line on the kitchen table so that the omega can see each step that will need to occur. Ideally, he should really take the omega back to the guest room to lie down, but he’s inclined to think that this would be another offer not taken well. He doesn’t know what this omega has faced, but syringes frighten him and he’s attempted to sexually satisfy Castiel twice already.

When Castiel unwraps the scalpel and wipes it down, the omega begins to shake.
“I’ll be efficient,” Castiel promises, and presses the blade of the scalpel into the omega’s skin. He moans around the bit and curls his hands around the back of the kitchen chair, knuckles whitening. The incision doesn’t need to be long, and as soon as the cut is made the implant is visible. It is a tiny rectangle of white plastic, unassuming to anyone unaware of its purpose. With the forceps, Castiel grips the implant and pulls it out, calculating and cautious. It slides out with ease and a sticky sound. The omega still makes a noise of pain in his throat. His toes curl where they peek out of the bandages on his feet.

“Shh,” Castiel soothes, “You’re doing well. I just need to stitch the wound closed. Your system will take a few hours to flush the hormones out, but as soon as it does, the heat will be over, and you shouldn’t have another until after you birth your pup. Do you understand?”

The omega nods. It is as much as he is going to get.

Making the sutures is a simple process. As soon as Castiel finishes he stares up at the omega and says, “You’re finished,” and pushes the hormone implant across the kitchen table, “Do you remember getting that in your ankle?”

The omega shrugs. He reaches for the implant and holds it in his palm.

For a stretch of silence, he stares at it before anger distorts his face and he hurls it across the room. The soft noise of the plastic implant hitting furniture sounds, though Castiel cannot pinpoint where it landed.

“Good riddance to that,” Castiel murmurs, and the omega huffs in agreement before Castiel goes on, “You must be exhausted. Let me help you to the guest room.”

Reluctance crosses the omega’s face, but in the end he allows Castiel to aid him to his feet. He has to lean against him and use Castiel as his support…and Castiel is going to have to take the longest shower of his life to get this scent off of him. He hauls the omega into the guest room and supports him with one arm while moving the comforter down with the other. The omega makes a noise of protest when he’s scooped up and placed on the mattress, but Castiel hushes him and pulls the blankets over his quivering, skinny body.

“If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask,” Castiel says, an awkward goodbye.

But when he turns to exit, the omega’s hand closes over his wrist. He blinks back at the man, confused.

“Cast-Casti-Cas,” he stammers out, settling with, “Cas.”

His voice is hoarse and unused, scraped raw.

“Cas is good,” agrees Castiel.

“Cas,” repeats the omega, and then puts his hand against his chest, “I’m Dean.”

“Hello, Dean.”
Dean’s head hasn’t felt this clear for too long.

For several minutes, he lets himself luxuriate in his big, comfortable bed, holding the down comforter around his shoulders and curling into a ball. At first he’s certain that he is either dreaming or dead, but when he wiggles his toes his feet scream out in pain, cut up from all the ground he ran over, and his ankle complains at being stretched, he remembers what happened.

They put an implant in him. Of course they had. He’d spent so much time out of his mind on drugs and pathetic omega need that it hadn’t occurred to him that there was something wrong. He’d thought that the problem was all his, omega weakness, except worse, because his heat never went away. After long enough, after the need never leaving, he’d figured that it was his own body betraying him. He thought he was broken.

Well, he’s still that. Broken. At least he can tell himself that the heats weren’t all his fault.

But now his heat is gone, and the relief he feels is so much that he feels wet tears on his face, and wipes them away with Castiel’s nice, white blanket before he realizes what he’s done. Dean makes himself sit up and look around – from the window, he can see that the rain is gone, leaving nothing but soft ground and blue sky outside. Emptiness stretches forever out there. The shadows of clouds move along the roll of the land, the green hills, until the nothingness crawls up into woods, withering aspen trees and crooked pines. There’s no way to tell where he is. He only knows that he’s someplace in the mountains.

Dean turns away from the window. His stomach growls, and a moment later, the pup kicks him.

The pup.

He rests his hand on the swell of his stomach and bites down on his lip. He didn’t think that he would ever leave that hellhole. Only months ago, Dean was resigned to his world of cages and restraints and torture and fear. He’d been that way for years. He cracked under it all, wasn’t strong enough to hold on, was too weak to make it out. He started wishing just to die, not caring if that death came fast or slow, just that it happened and happened soon.

And then the pup came.

It started with vomiting, retching that made his body so weak no alpha wanted him at all. He was too thin, too sick. Even though he smelled like slick omega heat, he was ugly and unwanted. Then a doctor came, a grizzly man with crooked yellow teeth that prodded inside Dean and poked at him
until he concluded one thing: pregnant.

Why Alastair didn’t immediately stomp down on Dean’s gut and kill the pup is beyond him, or was. Some alphas liked their omega whores pregnant. That’s what Dean discovered. They liked pretending the pup was theirs (and who knew, maybe it did belong to one of them), liked whispering in his ear with their knots inside him that they’d bred him up good and that he’d get fat just for them.

But when he started getting rounder, started needing, Alastair said it was time. They would cut the pup out of Dean and throw it away like trash.

He wouldn’t let it happen. Not to his family, not his pup. His.

Dean made it out of that prison, and he’ll have his pup and he’ll start his own family. He smooths his palm over his stomach and silently promises to his child, no matter how you present, I will take care of you. No matter what, he’ll do better than his crappy family did for him.

As though the pup could hear him, it kicks, and a strange little smile rises to Dean’s lips. He needs to feed the kid if not himself, and so he slides out from under the warmth of the covers and pads across the soft carpet of Castiel’s guest room.

This whole house smells like alpha, but it’s not an ugly scent. Dean has smelled gritty, disgusting alpha before, and this scent isn’t it. It still reeks of testosterone, but something about it eases the tension in his shoulders instead of encouraging it. He doesn’t know what to make of that.

He hears movement from the direction of Castiel’s kitchen and considers running back to the guest room. It isn’t much, but it feels safer than out here, where the alpha is in charge, and Dean will be asked to obey.

Then again, Castiel – what kind of a name is Castiel, anyway? – didn’t force much on him last night, just fed him and took that stupid fucking implant out of his ankle. Cautiously, Dean toes toward the kitchen. Breakfast sizzles on the stove in a pan, eggs being nudged at by a spatula. Wielding the spatula is Castiel, already dressed for the day in sturdy jeans and a blue button-down, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

When he hears Dean, he looks up.

“Good morning, Dean,” he says.

Right. Dean told Castiel his name.

Should he have done that?

He isn’t sure.

“I’m making omelets for breakfast. Does that suit your tastes?”

Does that suit his – what? This alpha talks funny, and Dean doesn’t understand what he’s playing at, asking him if he wants an omelet like he’s got some kind of choice. Not that Dean doesn’t like a good omelet, because he does.

So he nods, because that seems like the best course of action.

“Good,” Castiel says, and flips the omelet from the pan and onto a plate. He sets it at the table, and Dean watches as he pours a tall glass of orange juice and sets this and a squat pill bottle alongside
the plate.

“There,” Castiel says, “I hope you don’t mind…I woke up early this morning and drove to purchase some prenatal vitamins for you. I got male omega specific. The saleswoman seemed to believe that those would be better for you than the generic vitamins.”

Dean crosses the room to the table. The soles of his feet sting, so he sits, even though he’s not sure that he wants to. He picks up the little brown bottle. Sure enough, the label reads *Prenatal One-A-Day: Omega Male* and has a graphic of a stork carrying a baby in its mouth at the top.

Yeah, Dean wishes that’s how the pup happened. A fucking bird.

It could be a trick. Castiel could be drugging him so that he could fuck him. Nobody would blink an eye if he did. Castiel is an unmated alpha and Dean is an unmated omega, and they’re in a house together in God-Only-Knows-Where. Dean doesn’t even know if he’s still in Colorado. If Castiel wanted to chain him up and make him up into some kinky fantasy, it wouldn’t surprise him in the least.

But if that’s what this alpha wanted, then why hasn’t he done it already?

Dean turns and eyes Castiel, suspicious.

“I highly suggest that you take one,” Castiel says, all authority, “You’re terribly malnourished and your pup needs the nutrition.”

Dean peels the plastic off of the lid and pops off the cap. There’s a safety seal across the top of the vitamin bottle. Is it possible to drug pills that still have the safety seal on? He jabs at it before he peels it off, and grudgingly knocks one capsule into his palm. At the cock of Castiel’s brow, he downs it with a swallow of orange juice.

Oh, *God.*

He’d forgotten that orange juice tastes so damn good. Before he can even think, Dean chugs back the entire glass. That could have been dosed with something too, he belatedly realizes, but when the juice is gone he doesn’t feel any differently. So he holds it out toward Cas.

“More?” Castiel says.

Dean nods.

Castiel smiles and obliges, and Dean drinks the second glass down nearly as fast as he did the first.

And then he glances down at the omelet, in all its delicious, cheesy-eggy glory.

There are leaves in it.

What the hell? He pokes at one with his fork and casts a look back at Castiel.

“It’s spinach,” Castiel says, and frowns, “Don’t look at me like that. Your pup needs leafy greens to be healthy, so eat up.”

Dean supposes that the man is probably right. He’s a doctor, after all. Or was. He said was, didn’t he?

When Dean eats, he eats to his fill. He hasn’t felt anything but hungry for years until last night, when Castiel made him a grilled cheese sandwich and let him have some of whatever that weird
broccoli stuff was. The spinach doesn’t seem to affect the taste of the omelet too much, and when he
finishes, the pup is kicking again, more lively than it’s seemed in quite some time.

After breakfast, Castiel breaks out his doctor bag or whatever the hell it is and checks Dean’s eyes
and heart rate and ears again. He changes the bandages on his feet and then shines his light over
the stitches on Dean’s ankle. It’s all very impartial, doctor-like. Beta-like, really. He’s nothing like
Castiel last night, the Castiel that had to hold some nasty alpha crap over his nose and still popped
a boner like a teenager at the smell of Dean’s slick.

That thought makes Dean smirk just a little.

“What’s on your mind?” Castiel asks.

Dean just shakes his head.

“Well…if you’re bored, I have a small collection of books. And a television. I don’t watch it much,
but it worked just fine last time that I used it. I have a computer as well if you’d like to use the
internet, though I should warn you as we’re so far into the mountains, the connection is slow,”
Castiel says.

Books? TV? Internet?

What is this guy playing at?

“Did I say something wrong?” Castiel asks. Holy hell, his voice is actually tentative. That’s
surprisingly un-alpha of an alpha to do. Alphas are always sure. They make the decisions. That’s
what everyone’s taught, and it’s why Dean was sure that he’d present as alpha when he reached
maturity.

That obviously went well.

Dean says, “No.”

Castiel looks surprised to hear his voice, about as surprised as Dean is to use it. He didn’t speak at
Alastair’s. Not after what happened to that hopped-up omega Gordon, anyway.

Maybe that isn’t one hundred percent accurate. Dean did use his voice, but only to scream. And
even then, he tried to limit that. It was weakness, and Dean did not and does not like to feel weak.
He feels weak now, here, being babied by some fucking alpha that’s making him take vitamins
and eat his goddamn leafy greens. What the fuck is going on here, exactly?

“I can take you to my study if you’d like to take a look at the books,” Castiel hedges.

Yeah, he’ll just stick with doing whatever this guy wants out of him. If it means that Dean and the
pup live to see another day, then he’ll do it. So he nods, and he follows Castiel out of his kitchen
and up the stairs at the end of the hallway.

Whoa.

“Small collection of books” could win understatement of the year, here.

Shelves line the walls of Castiel’s study, each of them filled with books upon books upon books in
all different sizes and shapes and colors. Some look brand new and never once opened, while
others have lined spines from being cracked open over and over again. So many scents infuse the
space. There’s the scent of printer toner and the fainter aroma of wood stain. And then there’s the
smell of pages. New pages, crisp and with freshly printed words. And old pages, sappy and musty and filled with history. Dean hasn’t seen this many books all in one place anywhere except for in libraries, and he hasn’t seen a library in years. His body moves of its own accord, and he dives forward to run his fingertips along the spines of the lines of tomes surrounding him. The first few that he touches look like medical texts that Dean would probably never understand, but soon there are others that he wants to pull out and hold against his chest and never let go.

Dean glances back at Castiel where he hovers several feet away in the study’s doorway, smiling. He catches Dean’s eye and says, “You can borrow anything that you’d like. I just ask that you be kind to them, and that you don’t dogear my pages.”

The first book that Dean makes a grab for is something that says Star Wars on the spine. Then he takes what looks like the first book in the Harry Potter series, because Sam was reading one of those when everything went to hell and Dean left.

Dean’s hand hesitates on the book at the thought of Sam, and he slides it back into place on the shelf.

“You can take more than one,” Castiel says behind him.

At this, Dean gnaws on his lower lip and shakes his head, happy to take the Star Wars book and leave it at that. He isn’t a fast reader anyway. Not like Sam. Sammy read like lightning. He was so smart.

Ha, was. Sammy probably still is smart, living his life as some rich-ass alpha businessman or something. He probably mated to a level-headed beta and lives in a nice house with a white picket fence, a dog, and two and half kids. That was always what he said he wanted.

Castiel’s staring at him. It’s unnerving being looked at like that – the alpha isn’t looking at Dean like he’s hungry or like he wants to stick his knot in him. Instead he’s looking at Dean like he is trying to puzzle him out, work out what’s going on in his mind instead of scenting him or scraping his eyes over Dean’s body. It makes him uncomfortable.

Dean opens his mouth to say thank you, but the words don’t come out. So he tries a smile, knowing it’s weak and cracked, but hoping that it’ll suffice in conveying his gratefulness.

“You’re welcome, Dean,” Castiel says.

Castiel leaves after that. He tells Dean that he’s going to clean up the breakfast dishes, which Dean almost offers to do in his place but isn’t quick enough to the draw. Before he can sort out getting the words from his brain to his mouth, Cas is gone, and he’s left standing alone in the middle of the study upstairs with a book in his hands.

Dean could go back downstairs to the guest room, to his little pocket of safety in this strange place, but instead he finds himself curling up in the armchair in the corner of the study. It’s an ugly chair, the upholstery like 1970s wallpaper, but it’s well-stuffed and comfy to sit on. With careful hands he opens the book, remembering that Cas asked him to be gentle with it, and begins to read.

X

He knows when they jab a tranquilizer in his leg that they’re taking him to The Chair. Dean hates The Chair, hates it more than anything. At first when they took him here, he fought them when they tried to restrain him into it. He hurt one of Alastair’s boys and paid for it. Didn’t get fed that night. He tries to push that night out of his mind but they kept him drug-free long enough for him
to be alert. Alastair wanted Dean to know what they were doing to him. He thought he knew humiliation before but that night taught him otherwise.

He learned how many knots he could take in a night before he started to bleed. He learned how long he could bleed before he started to cry. He learned that crying makes some alphas want more, makes them fuck harder, and that begging them to stop makes it worse still.

Dean didn’t fight back after that night.

But he still gets the alphas that love a big omega, love shoving him down against The Chair and fucking him until sticky blood coats the insides of his thighs and he’s a blubbery mess of tears and snot.

The cuffs are cold, terrifying as always. They drag him into position and lock the metal restraints over his wrists and ankles. The worst part is when they lock the metal cuff around his neck, the one that forces his head down and makes the least painful position to arrange himself him the position of presentation.

Dean closes his eyes.

“Wet for me already,” he hears.

He’s slick, he knows that, but it’s not for the alpha. It’s just because his body broke. It’s wet all the time now.

When the alpha shoves inside him, he screams.

“No, no, they don’t know his name here. That’s his. The alpha can’t know his name because he’s never told it to anybody, never wanted them to know that somebody gave him a name and that he had a family someplace. A family that didn’t give half a flying fuck about him, sure, but he’d come from somewhere. And they weren’t allowed to have that.

“Dean.”

All at once, The Chair bursts away and Dean is elsewhere, in a spacious room that smells like old books and paint and alpha, but not bad alpha. It’s alpha like his mom was, the kind of alpha that abates the terror in his gut and smells like safety and comfort.

Concerned blue eyes blink at him.

Castiel.

He doesn’t even know this alpha. How can he smell safe?

“Are you okay?”

Dean swallows the lump in his throat. He isn’t okay. Far from it, in fact, but he doesn’t want this strange alpha to know that. He’ll keep his weaknesses to himself and maybe he’ll live long enough to birth his pup, give it a home someplace. He nods that yes, he is okay.

Though Castiel looks skeptical, he exhales and closes his eyes. He seems relieved, which is stupid. Castiel has no reason to be relieved.

Castiel cards his fingers back through his dark hair and tells Dean, “I have supper ready. I wasn’t
going to wake you, but you appeared to be having night terrors.”

Food. Okay, food is good. And if Castiel dosed it with something, maybe he can sleep without going back to Alastair. If that means getting fucked while he’s unconscious, then okay, he can deal with that.

Dean follows a few steps behind Castiel, downstairs and to the kitchen, where two plates are set out with glasses of water, food steaming in the center of the table. He breathes in deep and his stomach rumbles at the aroma – meat.

“I made lemon chicken,” Castiel says, “and some buttered vegetables. I expect you to eat those as well to keep your pup in good health.”

Dean rolls his eyes but serves himself some of each dish. He waits for Castiel to bite into his meal before he digs into his own. It tastes amazing, salty and juicy, rolling over his tongue with tastes he hasn't touched in ages.

When he finishes, he holds his hands in his lap and stares down, until Castiel clears his throat and says, “You may have more than one helping if you’re still hungry.”

Dean doesn’t have to be told twice. He forks another chicken breast onto his plate and even adds a scoop of the vegetables, pleased when Castiel smiles at this decision. He shoves as much of the food in his mouth as he can handle, and through all of it feels cognizant. There aren’t drugs in the food. Castiel made him delicious food just because, but surely that can’t be it? There’s always something else, always another motive behind doing nice things for Dean.

As soon as his second serving of dinner is clear from his plate, he decides that he will do something nice for Castiel back, because even if he doesn’t say so, he’d probably like to fuck Dean like all the other alphas wanted to. And he’ll let Cas do that, because Cas is nice. Cas is nice, and if Dean is nice back, maybe he’ll let Dean and the pup stick around just a little longer.

This time after the meal, Dean nudges Castiel back when he reaches for the dirty dishes. He stacks them himself and rinses the grease and salt off at the kitchen sink before he slides them into place in Castiel’s dishwasher. To his dismay, however, Castiel has removed the rest of the dishes and is sliding leftovers into Tupperware containers on his own.

Dean frowns at Cas but doesn’t have it in him to try to argue or take the work away and do it himself. He slinks away and back up the stairs to the study instead, where he retrieves the Star Wars book that he fell asleep reading. He eyes the armchair in the corner, wondering if he’ll do it again and dream about The Chair. He doesn’t like the idea that that could happen, so instead he tucks himself in the narrow space between two bookcases. It’s uncomfortable enough that he won’t drift off, but not bad enough to distract him from the book.

The words consume him so wholly that he almost forgets his plan to let Castiel mount him and have his way, but as soon as he does remember he notes what page he’s on in the book – sixty two – and closes it, tucking it under his arm and quietly stepping downstairs, where he places the Star Wars book on the guest bed so that he can look at it later.

He tries hard not to quake as he tugs Castiel’s clothes off of his body. He’s good at making alphas want him. Jesus. It’s all he did for years, so hell yeah, he should be good.

Still…when Dean looks over himself in the bathroom mirror, he isn’t sure why anybody would
want him. Last night was the first time in years that he’d seen his own reflection, and it’s not a pretty one. He looks like a ghost, and how the pup is still alive and kicking in his gut is an actual fucking mystery to him. Dean used to look good. A long time ago, he had tan skin and broad shoulders and a well-cut jaw. Maybe it wasn’t omega-typical pretty, but it was something. Now he’s got months’ worth of pup making him chubby in one place while the rest of him is skin and bones. It’s actually fucking revolting.

Castiel likes his smell, though, and that’s a good sign. So Dean does what he can: he washes his face and brushes his teeth and combs his ratty, jaggedly-cut hair into some sort of decent position, steeling himself for what needs to be done. The improvement is marginal, but whatever. It’s not like he can wait to look better to do this, because by the time that rolls around, Cas could be tired of him already.

He will do whatever it takes to make sure that this pup is in good hands. No more Alastair. No more Chair. There’s just Cas, and he can tackle one measly alpha.

So Dean tries not to hunch too much as he crosses the hall and pokes his head into Castiel’s bedroom. He didn’t dare look in here before, but it’s pretty nice. The walls are a deep green color and on them hang pieces of art, framed posters of book covers and some other bits and bobs. Cas’ bed is bigger than the guest bed, a king size, if Dean had to pinpoint it.

And Cas is sitting in the middle of it, book in front of his face and a knit between his brows. His nose twitches when Dean sticks his head in the room and he glances up.

“Hello, Dean.”

Dean takes that as a cue. Before he can talk himself out of it, he strides butt-naked into Castiel’s bedroom and climbs onto the bed. He crawls across the mattress and pulls Cas’ book out of his hands, setting it kindly aside on the bedside table, because Cas said to be good to the books.

Then, he kisses him.

Castiel goes still as stone beneath him, so Dean keeps on. He wraps his arms around Castiel’s neck and draws him into it, pushing their hips together. This elicits a soft gasp from the alpha underneath him.

Big hands close around Dean’s arms and gently push him back.

“Dean,” Castiel says lowly.

Dean ducks in to try again, but with the same result. He’s pushed away like garbage. And okay, fine, he knows that he doesn’t exactly look fantastic right now, but the rejection still stings and sets his teeth on edge.

“Dean, I told you,” says Castiel, “I don’t need that from you. I don’t need to knot you. Okay?”

Frustration fills him up. It’s too much, so much that his mouth actually opens and he hoarsely demands, “Is it the pup?” Some alphas don’t like other alphas’ pups in the omega they’re about to knot, after all.

Fucking A, he should have thought of that before he came up with this dumb plan. Maybe Cas wants him but doesn’t want the pup.

“No, no, no,” Castiel rushes to assure him, and has the actual gall to look upset, “I told you that you’re safe here. I meant it, Dean. You said you don’t have any place to go to, so I said that you
could stay here. I don’t go back on my word and I wouldn’t throw you out. All right?”

Dean makes a face. This rejection has him petulant and tense, and he doesn’t understand. Castiel keeps saying weird crap that makes no sense.

He’s going to have to bring out the big guns, isn’t he? Dean tries not to sigh and balls his hands into fists. He eases off of Castiel’s lap, rolls his shoulders and turns. Then he bends, plants his face in the mattress, and presents, because even if Castiel can say no to kisses, there’s no way that he could say no to this.

“Dean!” Cas snaps.

There is so much fucking alpha in that voice that Dean freezes. He doesn’t realizes how badly he’s shaking until he feels Castiel’s weight lift from the mattress and then his warm palm on the small of his back.

“Please,” Dean says.

Castiel’s hand pulls away.

Hot tears roll down Dean’s cheeks. He’s fucking humiliated, so ashamed he’d beg for death was it not for the pup. He hears Castiel exhale and then he’s being manhandled, turned onto his back so that he has to fucking face the guy that wants nothing to do with him. It hurts to be brushed off like this.

Castiel sits beside Dean on the mattress a safe distance away and rests his palm on Dean’s bent knee. He says, calm again now with no trace of the earlier bite to his tone, “I’m beginning to gather that I am not making sense to you. I never did well in psychology, but I’m going to hazard a guess that this is because you don’t trust me. True?”

Dean stares, and then offers a small, tight nod.

“I see,” Castiel says, “If you can’t trust me, then trust logic. If I brought you here to knot you, would I not already have done that?”

Dean considers that.

Cas continues, “And if the pup was the issue, then why would I have brought you your vitamins and made sure that you’re eating right?”

Okay, that’s fair enough.

“No, I’m going to get up and bring you another set of clothes. Then I’m going to make you a cup of tea, which you will drink, and then I will help you to bed and we’ll put this entire incident behind us. Does that sound good?”

Yeah, it does sound good. It’s better than he deserves, stupid as he is. He’ll take whatever Cas gives him.

When Cas pulls clothing out of his chest of drawers, Dean pulls each piece on. The sweatpants are soft on the inside and warm and the sweatshirt smells wonderfully like Cas. He lets himself indulge in the scent while Cas’ back is turned and fantasizes that the scent was surrounding him inside and out, that it’s on his skin and not just the clothes that he’s wearing. It’s omega weakness, but fuck it. He doesn’t care.
Castiel brews him a cup of tea that smells strongly of herbs and spices. He says it doesn’t have caffeine and that Dean should limit his caffeine intake anyway since he’s pregnant. That shouldn’t be an issue. Dean used to love coffee before everything went to hell, but he hasn’t touched the stuff for years, wasn’t allowed the luxury. He doesn’t like tea that much, but whatever’s in the mug that Cas gave him settles the pup down and makes Dean’s eyes droop.

*Drugs?* He wonders, and looks up at Castiel.

“It’s just some Sleepytime,” Castiel assures him, “and you’re exhausted. You’re going to bed.”

“‘Kay,” he mumbles.

There’s something like fondness on Cas’ face at the word, or maybe Dean’s making shit up out of misplaced hope. He decides he doesn’t care, and because his feet still hurt like fuck, he leans on Cas as they walk and doesn’t even bother getting annoyed when he’s tucked in like some helpless puppy.

Chapter End Notes

Also, my SPN tumblr is scarlettofletters.tumblr, and I post about my writing process and where I am with my fics there.
Many omegas walk through life fearing it. The world isn’t kind to omegas – they are the birthers, the homemakers, the housekeepers of the world. Omegas are built for obedience. That’s what they’re told in high school sexual education classes, what they preach at church pulpits and what’s reiterated by conservative politicians. Omegas are made to obey their alphas and care for children.

Castiel puts very, very little stock into these ideals. Being a surgeon in a hospital trauma center will teach anyone otherwise: omegas may, in fact, be the strongest of anyone. Omegas landed in his care with years’ worth of injuries. There were broken bones, bloodied and torn omega channels, burns, and worse than anything, broken spirits. But there were some unbroken even by the worst fates. Those omegas were like Dean, omegas willing to do anything and everything to claw their way out their circumstances kicking and screaming.

Sometimes he helped them. It was dangerous. Castiel knew what he did was dangerous and he didn’t care. He didn’t care, because he knew that if one person showed one omega a little kindness that the world could change.

Other times he couldn’t help, no matter how much he wanted. There were rules. The hospital had standards in place that were hard to circumvent. Each time he couldn’t help an omega he felt another little failure, another way that he hadn’t mended the broken world that he lives in.

He won’t allow himself to fail Dean as he has so many others.

So when on the third night of Dean’s stay Castiel is jarred from sleep by a helpless scream, he runs. He throws open the door to the guest room, expecting an infiltrator or Dean writhing in pain on the bed.

Instead, he finds Dean fast asleep, swaddled in blankets and whimpering. For a long while, all Castiel can manage to do is to stand and watch as Dean thrashes in his sleep and makes soft noises of pain. He smells like fear again, the aroma pungent and raw as it sticks in Castiel’s nose. The scent sharpens and Dean releases a second scream. The noise is so hurt, so profoundly awful that Castiel has to stuff his fists against his ears until it stops. And when it does at last cease, he strides into the guest room, takes Dean by the shoulders, and shakes him awake.

When Dean sees him, he throws his body across the room and backs into one corner of the room, chin pressed to his knees.

“Dean?” Castiel says, “You were having nightmares again.”

The need to soothe, to protect, bursts inside Castiel. He goes to Dean and kneels beside him, but before he can rest his hand on Dean’s shoulder, Dean snaps out, “Don’t touch me.” He bares his teeth and tries to push himself further back against the wall.

Castiel holds his hands up on either side of his head in surrender, though he flinches back at the halo unbridled rage and terror that surrounds Dean. He tries to reassure the omega, “I won’t touch you if you don’t want me to.”

Dean doesn’t unknot his body or stop shaking.
“How about this,” Castiel says, and has to force himself to remember to keep his hands to himself, away from Dean, even if all he wants to do is gather him up against his chest and shelter him, “I will make you some tea and show you how the television works. You could choose a show or movie to watch.”

Dean doesn’t say anything. He seldom does, and Castiel often finds himself wishing that Dean would say more, speak to how he feels and what he is feeling. He never knows, and he wants desperately to know. He’s not sure if it’s because of twisted nosiness that he desires this or perhaps his alpha desire to defend, to look after Dean and smash everything that dares to hurt him. Maybe it’s both.

But Dean is afraid of him, and that gets in the way. Castiel makes himself climb to his feet and says, “Okay, I’m going to walk out and put my kettle on the stove for tea. I’m going to switch the television on. If you would like to join me, you may. If you would rather go back to bed, that’s fine, too.” This way, he gives Dean a choice, isn’t pressuring him into an option either way. It’ll put less stress on Dean and therefore less stress on his baby, and in turn that means that Castiel is caring for the omega the way that he desires to care for him.

Yes, that’s good, he tells himself. Using logic to satisfy the alpha in him has always been one of his better points.

It’s still hard to walk out of the guest room. He closes the door but not all the way, leaving it open just a crack – an invitation.

What is he doing?

He doesn’t even know if Dean likes television, doesn’t know if he likes tea. Castiel doesn’t know much of anything about Dean at all. He knows that Dean chose a Star Wars book from his shelves and has since spent little time doing anything but reading it, and that he nearly selected the first book from the Harry Potter series to take, too, but that he hesitated and put it back. He knows that Dean didn’t think much of spinach in his omelet, and he knows that Dean gets frustrated when Castiel tries to do the dishes by himself.

But that’s all he knows, isn’t it? He doesn’t know what Dean enjoys for fun or what foods he likes. Perhaps Dean doesn’t even know those things about himself.

Wherever Dean has been, it was not a kind place. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist, or even a reclusive ex-surgeon, to do the math. The scars, the implant, the undernourished body, the pregnancy. Dean was in hell.

Castiel takes two mugs down from his cupboard just in case, and when he walks into the living room with the cups of tea in each hand, he sees Dean wedged into one corner of the couch, staring at the black TV screen. He flinches when Castiel appears, so Cas places Dean’s tea on the coffee table in front of him instead of handing it to him. Dean looks grateful at this, and takes the mug, holding it against his chest with two hands.

“You seem to be enjoying the Star Wars novel that you took,” Castiel says, “Perhaps you’d like to watch the Star Wars movies?”

Dean nods. Then, his brow hitches and he says, voice hesitant, “Starting with Episode IV, right?”

Castiel laughs a little, “I do own all of them, but I prefer the latter three as well. I think most people do. I only own the original episodes on VHS. I hope that’s okay?”
Dean nods his consent, and so Castiel opens his movie cabinet. It consists mostly of DVDs, though now he orders his movies on his television with Amazon so that he doesn’t have to go anywhere to purchase them. His tapes sit at the bottom, dusty relics of the nineties. He hasn’t watched Star Wars in too long, and has to blow the dust off of the box set before removing A New Hope and sliding it into the VCR.

He lets out a sigh of relief when he finds it already rewound. Castiel drifts between methodically rewinding every one of his tapes after he watches them, or being lazy and never bothering at all.

“Would it be all right if I watched it with you?” asks Castiel, “I’ll sit on the chair, so you could have the couch to yourself. But it’s okay if you’re uncomfortable. I just don’t think that I could sleep again if I tried.”

A long stretch of silence passes between them. Dean stares at him, raking him eyes over Castiel from his bare feet to the thin t-shirt he he wears, a white shirt with a logo on it from a blood drive that his hospital did one year. He feels naked under the scrape of Dean's eyes, but doesn't dare move. This is the longest that Dean has ever looked at him, the longest he's had enough chutzpah to break past whatever submissive behavior has been bred into him and meet an alpha's eyes.

“Okay,” says Dean at last.

Castiel smiles faintly and takes his tea to the armchair with him, settling down to enjoy the movie, even though it’s past three in the morning and both of them should be in bed. As the movie progresses, Castiel finds his gaze drifting to Dean more than once. Around fifteen minutes in, Dean starts to uncurl his body just a little. Soon after, he drains his mug of tea and insists upon walking back to the kitchen to put the empty mug in the dishwasher.

Dean never leaves a mess.

Not even in the guest room. His own room. He always makes his bed and folds the corners neatly, and he treats Castiel’s books with as much, if not more respect, than he was asked to. He cleans even when he isn't asked to, scrubbing the edges around the guest bathroom sink or running a duster over the top of cabinets in the kitchen. Not that Castiel ever sees the cleaning part of the process. He only ever sees the end result, the neatness that Dean leaves behind.

Sometimes it’s unnerving, like Castiel lives now with a ghost. His food disappears more quickly and he’ll have to drive to the grocery store sooner than planned, and sometimes he hears scuffling upstairs or in other rooms, and very, very occasionally he is spoken to.

But now, Dean seems present, engaged. He keeps his eyes trained on the television screen, a strange, twisted little smile making his face lighter, easing away the shadow that usually makes its home in the dips of his face. Castiel can’t focus at all on the movie when Dean gives him so much to look at. Each minute has him more relaxed.

Until, toward the end of the movie, Dean is sprawled across the entire couch, arms wrapped around one of the throw pillows, asleep and dead to the world. Castiel wonders what about the situation drained Dean of his apprehension long enough to ease him to sleep in a vulnerable position. He doesn’t want to wake him or startle him again, but he also doesn’t want to leave Dean in the cold. With that thought, he rustles up a spare blanket from the back of his bedroom closet, shakes out any of the dust, and brings it back to the living room.

“Goodnight, Dean,” he says, even though Dean can’t hear him, and drapes the blanket over his sleeping body.
Castiel turns the television off, ejects the Episode IV tape, and slides it back into the box set. He spares Dean's slack, now tranquil face one last glance before he toes off to his own bed. The sun has already started to rise over the mountaintops, the spill of orange light across Castiel's sheets peaceful instead of jarring. Blanket pulled up around his shoulders, he settles in to get some rest.

Dean warms to Castiel after that night. He makes breakfast for him and still wants to do the dishes, so Castiel lets him, content to sit and watch as Dean busies himself in the kitchen. Dean always smells so wonderful, a perfect, indescribable scent. The aromatic embodiment of Christmas morning or a hot drink on a cool day. It makes Castiel want to take Dean by the hands and if not knot him, just nuzzle into that scent so he never has to be without it. He finds, sometimes, that his legs will walk him to Dean’s room of their own accord, just so he can sit there and scent it.

Whether or not Dean notices this is unclear.

On one morning, Castiel wakes early and peers into Dean’s room to check up on him. He breathes deep and gathers up that smell before returning to his own room. Dean’s scent is going to drive him out of his mind, and he needs to remember his self-control.

A run will help, he thinks. He swaps out his pajamas for suitable exercise clothes, lacing sneakers over his feet and adjusting his headphones in his ears. It’s a clear spring morning outside, perfect for a short jog to start the day. Already insects buzz and birds twitter, while a soft breeze rolls through the trees surrounding the small pocket of land that belongs to Castiel. He only runs as far as his neighbor’s house, but considering his nearest neighbor lives a mile from him, it’s a fair exercise regimen.

The smells of mountain wildflowers, tree sap and animal scat clear his head, wiping it clean. Castiel feels refreshed by the time he walks through the front door of the house.

And sees Dean.

Dean, standing in his foyer, looking shaken and dismayed.

“Dean, what’s wrong?” he asks.

In seconds, Castiel is pelted by all the weight of pregnant omega. Dean sticks his nose in Castiel’s neck and scents him, arms snaking around his back and squeezing him as though he thought that he would never see him again.

“What?” Castiel says, but doesn’t push him away. He lets Dean sniff at him and touch him for as long as he needs.

“You left,” he says when he finally pulls away. He looks sheepish, likely smelling the evidence of Castiel’s exercise in the sweat on his skin and underneath his clothing.

Oh. Dean thought that he left. Left him behind. Permanently.

“I’ll leave a note next time,” he soothes, “I apologize. Do I smell breakfast?”

Eagerly, Dean looks up and nods. He ushers Cas into the kitchen, where two huge plates of pancakes and bacon are arranged on the table, laid out with dishes.

Castiel smiles, “It looks wonderful, Dean.”
Dean looks pleased.

They sit down and eat together, as Castiel has become accustomed to doing for every meal. He has to admit that it’s nice to have a companion, even if he’s a quiet one. He does like his privacy, and still treasures moments to himself in which he can read or drift off, but he appreciates the presence of another person. Even if that person smells like heaven and has a pup on the way. Dean’s quiet companionship feels steady, instead of the boat-rocking maelstrom that Castiel expected to ensue after the first night that he brought him here.

Dean stands to put the leftovers into the containers and arrange them in the refrigerator. As he does, Castiel looks him over, more doctor-like than checking him out, but perhaps a little bit of both. Castiel’s clothes don’t fit well on him, partially due to his skinniness, but also because of the pup, stretching t-shirts further than they should go.

“Dean,” Castiel says, and Dean turns, waiting for Castiel to go on, “I’m thinking about going into town today. You need some clothes of your own, and we could pick up some supplies for dinner.”

Dean hesitates.

“What’s wrong?” Castiel asks. Dean doesn’t answer him, and so he says, “Please don’t worry. I’ll be there the whole time. And we could make whatever you’d like for dinner. I have a few cookbooks upstairs in the study.”

This seems to pacify Dean, and so Castiel shows him where to find the cookbooks before he ducks into the shower. As Castiel steps under the fall of hot water, he smells something – and realizes that the scent is Dean. It smells like Dean in his shower. Before he has time to dwell on why that might be, his cock is hard and heavy between his legs.

He sighs.

Well, if Dean isn’t here to see it…

Castiel wraps his fingers around the girth of his erection and strokes himself, letting Dean’s scent settle into him. He tries to bat away thoughts of the way that Dean presented to him and instead gets stuck on the image, thinking of what might have happened if he took Dean in his hands and sank into him instead of holding back.

Castiel comes. His knot is swollen up at the base of his cock and he has to wait for it to settle down a little before he finishes washing and steps out of the shower. He tries not to feel guilty about getting off to thoughts of Dean, of reveling in his scent.

But when he returns to Dean (knot tucked carefully into his jeans so that it doesn’t show), the look on Dean’s face says that he knows. And of course Dean knows, because he can scent out the aroma of alpha come, no matter how artfully Castiel has arranged his cock underneath his pants.

For a moment, Castiel thinks that Dean is going to shy away and that he’ll feel disgusted at what he smells.

But no. No, Dean does something else entirely.

He looks Castiel up and down and smirks.

That tears it. “Dean, were you in my shower?” Castiel asks. He threads just a little bit of alpha authority into the voice, enough that Dean will know that he wants the truth, but not enough to wipe the self-satisfied smile off of his too.pretty omega face.
“Cleaned it,” Dean shrugs, still smiling.

Castiel closes his eye and pinches the bridge of his nose before he responds, “I can clean my own bathroom. Please refrain in the future.”

Something in the way that Castiel says this has Dean frowning and unhappy all over again. He wraps his arms around himself and stares at the floor as he answers, “’Kay. Won’t do it again.”

Castiel wants to apologize, wants to tell Dean not to feel badly because he just had an incredible orgasm because of him. But that would be weird to say, wouldn’t it? Another alpha would have postured, would have told Dean all about the things that he thought about doing to him. It wouldn’t be strange for Castiel to do the same thing.

But he won’t tell Dean how he thought about taking his offer, thought about spreading him out and thrusting into him, because that would be crude. Crude and cruel. Their relationship is tentative enough as it is. He decides not to say anything at all about the matter and says, “I think your feet are bigger than mine, but we can find you some shoes that’ll do for one trip, don’t you think?”

Dean ends up taking a pair of leather sandals despite his aversion to the shoes, because Castiel doesn’t want him to crunch his injured feet into too-small close-toed shoes. Dean takes one of the cookbooks with him, an older edition of *The Joy of Cooking*. A page is marked with a sticky note.

As soon as they climb into Castiel’s Prius, Dean’s hands are on the tuning knob, switching from station to station on the radio. He settles on something playing classic rock and Castiel smiles. Dean stares out the window as they drive, mouthing the words to the songs that play. When finally they break from the dirt roads that connect Castiel and his neighbors to the highway, he blinks over and says, “Cas?”

“Yes?”

“Where are we?”

“The middle of the Rockies,” Castiel says, “The nearest town is Buena Vista. That’s where we’re going to go for clothes and dinner.”

“Are we in Colorado?” Dean asks, and fidgets.

Castiel cocks his head and frowns. He says, “Yes. About two and a half hours out of Denver.” He wants to ask why Dean had to ask, why Dean doesn’t know where they are, but decides against it. Dean would discuss it if he wanted to, and Castiel hates to pry.

For the rest of the drive, they don’t speak, but Dean lights up like a Christmas tree when they pull into town. Castiel parks on a side street near the small shopping area and lets Dean guide them, though Dean does glance back at Cas every time that he starts walking toward a store. At the Trailhead, an outdoorsman-type store, they find a couple of the things that Dean needs: shirts large enough to accommodate his baby belly and shoes that can contain his large feet. They have to duck into a maternity boutique for jeans that will settle right. Dean seems pleased, likely tired of wearing Castiel’s pajamas and sweatpants around the house.

“Oh, goodness!” says the beta working the cash register in the boutique, “How far along?” She smiles at Dean, and Dean goes rigid.

He doesn’t know the answer to her question.

Castiel coughs and intervenes, “Just about four and a half months.”
Dean looks sharply over at him.

“How exciting,” the beta gushes, “What can I help you find?”

“Jeans,” Castiel says, “He’s tired of wearing my sweatpants.”

“I don’t blame him,” the beta laughs.

She turns out to be helpful in spite of not recognizing the uncomfortable air between all of them, fitting Dean with three pairs of jeans that’ll fit for the remainder of his pregnancy, as well as a few more shirts. When she rings them up, Dean’s eyes go wide at the price and he grabs Cas’ wrist, shaking his head.

Cas pulls his wrist from Dean’s grip and hands his debit card over to the beta, anyway. Dean looks sour, but it isn’t as though Castiel can’t afford it. He worked for several years as a doctor and only maintained a small apartment for himself with very few luxuries – he has the money to spare.

Though they’ve covered the basics, Castiel and Dean wander along the small shopping district just a little longer, ducking into antique stores and at last a store made up of a combination of souvenirs and wild west finery, from Stetsons to hand-embroidered cowboy boots. Dean runs his fingers along the items in every store like he’s afraid that he’ll never see them again, picking up novelty shot glasses with *Buena Vista, Colorado* on the sides and sniffing at packages of buffalo jerky.

Castiel catches Dean staring in the last store at a brown leather jacket, handmade. He reaches out and touches it. Just barely, he hears a happy sigh fall from Dean’s lips, and watches as he turns over the price tag.

Dean makes a face and backs away, quickly crossing to the other side of the store. Castiel takes the opportunity to snag the leather jacket from its hanger and push it across to the cashier, a gruff-looking man in plaid and a worn trucker hat.

“Could you bag this quickly?” Castiel asks, “I want to surprise him.” He jerks his head over at Dean.

“Helluva surprise,” murmurs the man, but he obliges. The coat costs almost four hundred dollars, but as the material is real and it’s handmade, Castiel lets the price slide. And it’ll make Dean smile.

The cashier barely has gotten the leather jacket folded and tucked into a paper sack when Dean approaches him, looking a dog that knows it has done something wrong. He glances at the paper bag but doesn’t comment, instead bringing from around his back a brown teddy bear with a t-shirt over its from that says *Colorful Colorado*!

“For the pup?” he says, voice weak.

“Of course, Dean,” Castiel smiles and says, “Let me take it.”

The bear is thirty dollars, which is rather a lot for a teddy bear, but Castiel decides again not to care.

“With you or in the bag?” the cashier asks.

“With me,” Dean interjects, and takes the bear.

As they leave the store, he looks over at Castiel and murmurs, “Thanks, Cas.”
“It’s hardly a problem,” Cas replies, “Though your pup will need more than a bear when it comes. If you plan on staying with me indefinitely, we could make up the storage room – the one next to yours – as a nursery.”

Dean gapes at him.

“It’s just an idea,” Castiel hurries to add, “Don’t feel pressured to make a decision. If you find that you want to leave, I can help you do that, too.” Though he’d hate having to do that. He would hate it a lot.

Dean doesn’t speak on the matter, and so Castiel lets it naturally fall away as they load their things into the back of his Prius and drive to the grocery store. There, he gathers up his reusable bags and sticks them in a shopping cart. Castiel gestures for Dean to hand him the cookbook. He opens it to the marked page and asks, “Which recipe are we making?”

Dean points.

“Red beans and rice,” Castiel reads, and smiles, “I’ve never made this recipe before, but it sounds delicious.”

Dean seems pleased.

The grocery trip is fun, more fun than any trip to the store that Castiel has taken alone. Dean insists upon driving the cart, but seems only to want to do this so he can climb on the back of it, rev up, and zoom down the cereal aisle.

Castiel laughs, and then something entirely unexpected happens.

Dean laughs, too. As soon as he does, he looks surprised at the sound that came from his own gut, then concerned. Then, at last, his face settles into a smile.

“Dean, what are these?” Castiel asks, and holds up a box of Hostess Cupcakes just after Dean puts them in the cart.

Dean eyes him and says, “Thought you could read.”

“I –” Castiel starts, and then stops, “You made a joke. That was a joke.”

Dean snorts and pats his belly, “Pup wants what the pup wants.”

And so Castiel resigns himself to a cart filled with food that Dean’s pup demands, as well as the list of ingredients printed above the recipe for red beans and rice. They buy so much food that Castiel doesn’t have enough reusable bags to cover it all, and they end up using plastic to carry the rest, much to his dismay.

Dean eats a packet of the Hostess Cupcakes in the car on the drive back to Castiel’s house. And then another between Castiel driving to his mailbox to check it, and their actual arrival back at the house. They work together to bring in all the bags, and Castiel shoos Dean and tells him to shower and change into his new clothes while he starts dinner.

Dean doesn’t argue, just gathers up the bags from their clothing extravaganza and the teddy bear, trots back to his room. Castiel waits until he hears the spray of water to make his move. He takes up the leather jacket and cuts off the price tag, casting it into the trashcan before he slips into Dean’s room and lays the jacket out in the center of his bed.
He sets to work on dinner, though he leaves all the junk food that Dean stuck in the cart (three
different kinds of potato chips, a box of frozen burritos, an entire cherry pie and the Hostess
monstrosities). He pauses his work, however, when he hears the guest shower shut off, and pads
over to peek through the crack in the door.

Dean doesn’t emerge from the bathroom for several minutes. When he does, he’s dressed himself
in a sturdy black t-shirt and one of the new pairs of jeans. When his eyes fall on the leather jacket,
he stops dead in his tracks.

“Cas?” he rasps, sounding bewildered, and then says, “I can smell you, you know.”

Cas pushes open the door with his fingertips and greets, “Surprise.”

“It’s too much,” Dean argues.

“Why don’t you try it on?” Cas urges.

Dean glances from Castiel to the jacket and back again, and then sighs. He takes the jacket
reverently into his hands and then shrugs it over his shoulders. It suits him, and moreover, it fits
perfectly. Dean runs his fingers over the leather. He doesn’t say anything, but he does look up at
Cas and nod.

And he doesn’t take it off. The jacket stays with Dean as Castiel walks back to the kitchen and he
follows. They work through the instructions, until Cas realizes that in the pup-fueled flurry of
grocery shopping, they forgot one of the ingredients.

“Dean?” he says, “I’m supposed to keep stirring this, but we forgot to get oregano. I think I have
some in the food storage downstairs. Would you mind checking for me?”

Dean nods and makes off to descend to the basement. Castiel hums to himself as he cooks. Today
was a nice day, a nicer day than he’s had in years. Going into town has always been more stressful
than amusing, but with Dean, it’s an entire different ballgame. He enjoyed himself, actually
enjoyed himself. He hasn’t done anything of the sort since leaving Denver to move here. Perhaps
even before Denver. Gabriel used to always tell him that he needed to have more fun, and he never
understood what his brother meant until now. He always said that he does have fun. Reading is fun.
Cooking is fun.

Gabriel would say, “Not that kind of fun.”

Castiel thinks that Dean is the kind of fun that Gabriel would be proud of.

His daydream takes him over so completely that he doesn’t realize that Dean has been downstairs
for almost ten minutes. In a panic, he sets the pot aside on a cool burner and calls, “Dean?”

Good lord, he could have injured himself.

“Dean?” he calls again, and pounds down the basement stairs.

Instead of finding Dean bent and bloodied at the bottom of the stairs as he fears, he finds Dean
kneeling beside Castiel’s record player, with several LP sleeves surrounding him. A vinyl plays
underneath the needle, and it doesn’t take long for Castiel to identify it. It’s one of his collector’s
pieces: an original Physical Graffiti vinyl, straight from the 1970s. Dean is grinning – grinning – as
it plays.

“Dean, what on earth are you doing?” Castiel asks.
Dean jumps, and his face flushes. He licks his lips and says, “I – um. I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right,” Castiel says, “You’re fond of music?”

Dean nods.

“You may keep listening while I finish dinner, if you’d like to,” Castiel says. He slides past Dean and into the other room, where sure enough, he has an unopened bottle of dried oregano. He holds it up when he comes back out and passes Dean.

As Castiel heads back up to the kitchen, he hears Dean call behind him, “I’m educating the pup!”

It occurs to Castiel over their dinner of red beans and rice, and dessert of store-bought cherry pie, that he knows more about Dean in a handful of days than he’s known about anybody, even though Dean doesn’t speak often and likes to keep out of the way.

Dean likes Star Wars. He likes classic rock, leather jackets, and junk food.

And Castiel likes Dean.
Some Shelter to Crawl in and Hide

Chapter Track: A Place Not So Unkind – Firewater

Some Shelter to Crawl in and Hide

The constant of water against the guest bathroom’s shower drowns out the sound of Dean’s voice as he talks to the pup. It helps, but he’s still self-conscious.

“S’it okay in there? Probably better since dad started eating the good shit, huh?” he says, scrubbing the unscented bar of soap over the swell of his stomach, “Cas says you’ve been in the oven for a little over four and a half months. I dunno if he’s on the money, but he says he used to be a doctor so maybe we should believe him. Means we’re about halfway through, and then you’ll be out and about, huh?”

At Alastair’s, he was too afraid to speak out loud to the pup. He’d get the shit beaten out of him for insubordination, for daring to speak when he wasn’t spoken to. But he thought all the good things that he could. He told the pup that they would get out together, and they did – though without the help that he got, he doesn’t think it would have been possible. Gordon wouldn’t help him. Guy was a dick, but after the shit that happened to him, Dean doesn’t blame him. Too much.

Kevin helped. Kevin was a good kid.

Dean shakes himself out of the thought. He pours shampoo into his palm and scrubs his hair. It looks better than it did when he first came here, when it was limp and tangled. He still has a shit haircut, but at least he doesn’t look homeless anymore.

He lingers under the water like he always does. The water pressure in this joint is amazing. He doesn’t know how long he’ll be able to enjoy it, but hell, while he’s here, he might as well. The hot water rolls down his back and his muscles relax, though the pup is restless in his belly, shifting.

“Hey, watch the bladder, kid,” Dean complains. He rinses out the shampoo out of his hair before he shuts off the water and steps out the shower. Ignoring Dean’s protests, the pup settles directly on top of his bladder and makes itself at home, so he jogs to take a piss before he dries himself off.

Towel slung low around his waist, beneath his belly, Dean treks into the bedroom to dress in some of the fancy-ass new duds that Cas got him in town. He murmurs, quieter now that he’s out of the noise of the shower, “Gonna be a better dad to you than mine was to me. Promise you that, pup. Even if you’re an omega just like your dad. Especially then.”

It kind of sucks that he has to wear jeans with a fucking elastic band for his belly, but when he’s dressed in the whole stinking getup he almost looks like he did before everything happened. Gray t-shirt, denim, leather jacket: these were staples in the young twenty-something Dean’s life. Now he’s an old twenty-something with a pregnant omega belly under his t-shirt and a past he wants to erase.

Not you, though, he thinks to the pup. He wouldn’t erase the pup, even if he could. He wouldn’t bet any money on his ability to be a dad – shit, look at where he came from – but he’ll at least try. And that says more about him than it does about John Winchester.

He hopes.

Dean finished the Star Wars book last night before he fell asleep, so he brings it up to Cas’ study
and slides it back into place. Before he can stop himself, Dean stands in front of the shelf that holds the Harry Potter books and thinks about picking one up, wonders what had Sammy loving them so much years ago. He thought about seeing the movies when they were all the hype, but he didn’t have anybody to go with and he didn’t want to have to ask his little brother because he was too much of a fucking coward to be an omega alone at the movies.

He decides to pass up Harry Potter and spends several minutes browsing the other books on the shelves. He finds a lot of things with scientific-sounding titles, and books he’s heard of but isn’t sure he could tackle reading himself, like *Freakonomics* and *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

Then Dean locates something called *The Hollow Chocolate Bunnies of the Apocalypse*, which sounds like something much more his speed.

He means to go downstairs and hole himself up his room to read it, but gets caught at the window along the stairs between the second and first floors. Castiel keeps a row of interesting-looking rocks on the sill, geodes and others with weird stripes of color. Beyond the glass, it’s sunny again. Dean finds himself pressing his forehead against the window. The glass is warm against his skin. Looks nice out there.

“You could go out, if you wanted.”

Dean whirls and finds Castiel behind him, dark hair a mess from running his fingers through it. He has slippers on his feet but is otherwise dressed for the day in a The Clash t-shirt and a deep green button-down, which Dean finds strange, but doesn’t say so.

“I have a hammock out back,” Castiel goes on, “I like to read there sometimes when the weather is warm. You’re as welcome to it as anything here.”

Dean licks his lips. That sounds…nice. Hammock, a book, some sunshine and a sweet breeze? Hell yeah, he could go for that. He dips his head toward the window, worrying at his lip with his teeth, and hopes that his message is received. He can talk to Cas sometimes, but sometimes he doesn’t want to.

Sometimes when he opens his mouth, he remembers the lick of leather against his skin, splitting it open after backtalk, or even after one single, stray word. Sometimes he remembers being fucked into silence.

So sometimes, he’s quiet.

“I’ll show you, of course,” Cas says, and smiles in his odd little way, “Just let me change my shoes.”

Dean laces on his own shoes, the ones that Cas got him at that hiking store in town. They’re black hiking boots and they’re the first shoes he’s had in years. He loves them a little bit, even though he should probably feel guilty because he knows Cas spent so much money. Shoes this nice don’t come cheap, and neither did his jeans or his jacket or anything, really. And Castiel just bought it all – didn’t even blink an eye.

It smells like sap and earth and weeds. Wild sage grows around some paving stones that Castiel clearly put into the ground himself. They’re crooked and kind of ugly, and kilter off into a hair-thin dirt path that loops around Castiel’s house.

It occurs to Dean that, though he’s been here for two weeks now, he’s never been outside. He looks outside a lot, and wishes he was outside a lot, but he’s never acted on the whim. He treats
Castiel’s house like it’s another place like Alastair’s, and okay. On one level, this place is like Alastair’s place. It’s a household run by an alpha.

Other than that, though, this joint is like, off-the-charts weird. It’s the nicest place he’s ever stayed. Dean has never seen so many wide, open spaces in person. When he hitchhiked out of Kansas he saw places like this through the windows of a car of two road-tripping betas with colorful hair and then from the windows of an eighteen-wheeler driven by grizzly, bearded alpha that made Dean suck him off for the trip over. Dean hardly saw Colorado at all before he got locked away at that fucking brothel, just a few days in Colorado Springs before he got duped by that dick.

Nothing that he saw then looked quite like this, though. It’s greener than he expected. Green and golden, a great quilt of land dotted with stray trees and nothing else until it hits a purple-blue crust of mountains on the outside. And there are so many fucking flowers. He has to avoid crushing them under his boots, cylindrical scarlet ones and tiny yellow ones and these clumps of purple blooms.

Only a few paces past Castiel’s house, the hammock sits stretched between two firs. It’s a classic rope hammock, the kind Dean wishes he could enjoy with an umbrella drink of some kind but knows he can’t because there’s a pup in his belly and he could have already hurt it with that bourbon he had a run with that first night here.

They pass a fire pit before they reach the hammock. Castiel catches him staring and says, “I don’t use it much. We’re not supposed to, really, because it gets dry in the summers. But it’s been rainy lately, so if cooking over a fire is something you’re interested in, we could do that.”

Hell yeah, he’s interested in that.

“Great,” Castiel says, “I’ll see what supplies we’d need and check if I would have to run to town to get them, and we could have a dinner out here one night.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Dean finds himself saying, and out of habit stares at his feet as soon as the words are out.

Castiel smiles at this and says, “Right. I’m going back inside, but come find me if you need anything.”

Dean promises to do that. He watches Cas’ retreating back before he sits on the edge of the hammock with his book. The pages of it smell newer than the Star Wars book, and he buries his nose in the crease in the center before he can stop himself, breathing deep.

Smells like Cas.

Christ almighty. He needs to stop scenting shit all the time just because it smells like Castiel.

He never has believed all that bullshit about mates smelling best to each other, but Christ, something about the way that Cas smells just makes Dean want to roll around in the smell forever. It’s stupid and pathetic and all the things that his dad used to say that omegas are, but he doesn’t even care because Cas smells just that delicious. No alpha has ever smelled good to him. Only his mom ever did, and he can’t even remember that much anymore, just that he used to press himself into her when he sat on her lap because he knew he was safe there, and how she used to let him come sleep in bed with her and dad when he got scared at night. He remembers how secure he felt when he could smell his mom.

This is like that, but…different. Different, because he feels secure here, too, but also because he
had a fucking wet dream two nights ago that starred Castiel’s knot in his ass and woke up leaking come and slick. Dean was so embarrassed that he slipped out of bed before Cas could scent him out and did all the laundry.

He’s pretty sure Cas smelled it anyway. Dean can always smell alpha come after Cas has jerked off. Up until now, the scent of alpha spunk has been one that makes his stomach lurch with disgust. Presently, it makes Dean want to sink onto his knees and lick all that come off of Cas’ knot.

Jesus.

He’s gotta stop thinking like that.

This is only a temporary situation. Dean knows that Cas offers him lots of things and that Cas says he can stay as long as he needs, but he knows that will only be true until Cas wants to knot him and Dean says no. Dean will say no, because even if Cas’ smell makes him slick, he doesn’t know enough about the guy to want to commit to that cock. Furthermore, if he let Cas fuck him, it might ruin the tenuous but not-bad life that Dean has going here.

Cas talks more than Dean does, but mostly he doesn’t say much of anything at all. Castiel talks about dinner and books and television shows. When they talk about his vinyl collection Dean feels an inkling of something more, but Castiel tends to close off before they get too close. That’s okay, because that’s what Dean wants. It doesn’t mean he hasn’t noticed when it happens, though.

They don’t talk about their families. Dean thought about asking, once. Castiel doesn’t have any pictures of family hanging on walls or stuck in his mirror or framed on the desk in his study. He owns a lot of art, but no pictures of siblings or kids or weddings.

The guy seems kind of lonely.

Dean doesn’t actually get how that’s possible. Castiel is an attractive, well-to-do alpha. The guy was a doctor, for shit’s sake. How does that kind of person get lonely?

Then again, Dean should be grateful that Castiel is a lonely kind of guy. If he wasn’t, chances are that Dean wouldn’t have been picked up by the dude in the middle of the mountains. When they drove down to Buena Vista, Dean kept an eye out for landmarks and recognized nothing. Cas’ neighbors live super far from him. There are entire huge stretches of land between houses out here. Dean doesn’t know how long he might have walked before he found somebody.

So yeah, maybe it’s a good thing that Cas is lonely.

*The Hollow Chocolate Bunnies of the Apocalypse* is a pretty weird book, but he settles into it easily. So easily, in fact, that a few pages in, Dean starts to drift off to sleep as the hammock sways. The air out here smells so clean, so free of the grime and gunk that clogs up cities and suburbs. Out here, it’s just the scent of earth and plant life, and the aromas pine needles and animal fur on the wind when the breeze blows across his nose just right.

With the book on his chest he falls asleep. When he wakes again, the sun dangles low against the dark crown of mountains to his left, and he can smell something cooking through the open kitchen window. Dean notes what page he left off on and walks back up to the house.

Castiel greets him with a wave of a wooden spoon when Dean closes the front door behind himself.

“Did you enjoy your nap?” he asks.

Dean nods.
“I hope you like beef stew. It’s got a while to go, but it certainly looks like it’s going to taste delicious,” he says.

It is delicious when they eat it an hour later. Today they forgo the dinner table and eat with glasses of juice and bowls of stew on the couch, a safe distance away but closer than they’ve been while watching television before. Cas always lets Dean choose what they watch on TV, and he likes that a lot, ‘cause he hasn’t been able to lay his eyes on a television in God-only-knows-how-long.

“Hey Cas?” he says, swallowing a bite of stew.

“Yes?”

“What’s the date?”

“April twenty sixth,” Castiel answers.

Dean roughly knows he’s been out of the game for a while, but during his stay with Alastair he lost entire chunks of time. Sometimes he went so hungry a section of his memory went black and he’d wake up in a sketchy, dark room beside rows of other sick omegas, an IV of nutrients in his arm. Other times he bled so much the same happened. Sometimes the pain just made his body shut down. This leaves him unsure of when today even is. The last time he laid eyes on a calendar was in 2006, and he knows it's got to have been at least a couple of years since then. Probably more than that.

So he coughs and asks, “What…what year?”

A frown deepens on Castiel’s face, brows drawing up right together, “…Twenty thirteen,” and then, “Dean, it may not be my place to ask, but –”

“Then don’t,” Dean says, and returns to eating.

Twenty thirteen.

That means that he’s twenty eight. It means that he was stuck with Alastair for over seven years. It also means that Sammy is turning twenty four in less than a week. Jesus. He knew. He knew that he’d been in that hell for a long, long fucking time. He just stopped counting days, and stopped knowing just how long.

“My brother’s birthday is next week,” he says, but he doesn’t realize the words emerged aloud until Castiel cocks his head and makes a face.

“You said that you didn’t have a family,” he states.

A bitter smile curls the ends of Dean’s lips and he says, “Not one that wants me.”

“Oh,” Castiel says, “Oh, Dean. I’m sorry to hear that. If – if it helps, my family is not precisely fond of me, either.”

Dean takes real fucking offense to that. Who the fuck tosses aside somebody like Castiel? He’s everything that underwear and alpha cologne ads want you to be, everything you see on the movie screens, the kind of son that John would have been proud to call his own and the kind of sibling you’d brag about to everyone willing to listen. Self-controlled, respectable, handsome alpha. What isn’t there to be ‘fond’ of?

“You know what,” Dean snaps, “Fuck you. You don’t know the meaning of shitty families. You’re
Dean leaves his half-eaten bowl of stew on the coffee table and escapes from the room as fast as he can. He slams the guest bedroom door behind him and locks it. An unhappy laugh bubbles up from his lips.

He just yelled at an alpha.

Dean just yelled at an alpha, and he doesn’t regret a goddamn thing. Who the hell does Cas think he is, anyway? He doesn’t know the first fucking thing about Dean or the things that his dad and his brother said to him, the things that they did. Castiel will never hold blame on his shoulders for the crimes of others like omegas are forced to. Like Dean was forced to. Like he’d be forced to do again if his father or his brother knew anything about the past seven goddamn years. It would be his fault.

God, what is he talking about? Alastair was his fault, and he wouldn’t blame Sam or John for saying as much. They’d be right. Dean made the choice to go with the guy. Dean chose to get the hell outta dodge and fuck off to Colorado. That was all him, one hundred percent stupid omega.

Eventually, Dean crosses the room to the guest bed, where he curls into a tight ball and pulls his blanket up over his head. Everything smells like Cas and it’s driving him out of his fucking mind. He doesn’t know how much longer he can take being here, but then, if he left, would he be able to find anything better?

Probably not.

So you know what, if Cas wants to play games over whose family sucks more, if he wants to knot Dean later on, he’ll just let it happen. Dean’ll let it happen because this is the best he’s going to get and he doesn’t want to throw away a decent living situation for him and the pup just because of his own pride.

It still takes Dean several minutes to stomp down enough of the pride and anger whirling in his gut to unlock the bedroom door and make his way back out into the house. He sniffs around and finds that Cas put away the leftover beef stew and dishes. Instant guilt drapes over his shoulders. God, he’s a shitty omega. Should’ve been an alpha, but then, Dean’s never gotten what he wants, so why would he have gotten that?

Castiel isn’t in the bedroom or his study, so Dean treads down to the basement. He finds Castiel sitting on the floor with his back against his shelves of vinyl, listening to what sounds like Siouxsie & the Banshees. He looks up when he hears Dean come down the stairs, or maybe it was because he smelled him.

“I’m sorry,” Dean says, “Shouldn’t’ve yelled at you.”

He isn’t actually sorry, but he’ll do what he has to.

“You don’t need to apologize,” Castiel says, and that surprises Dean enough that he looks up and meets Castiel’s eyes. Cas goes on, “You’re right. I was out of line, and I was trying to figure out how to apologize to you…but I didn’t want to invade your space. I don’t know what happened between you and your family, and I don’t know what you’ve been through, but I doubt that my experiences compare.”

Dean doesn’t want to talk about it. He doesn’t know what Cas’ game here is, but the words that he says are nice and he kind of wants to grab at them and hold them forever. Hell, no one’s ever been
that nice to him in his whole life.

At that, Dean decides to sit next to Cas. He doesn’t touch him, but having that scent closer makes him feel a little bit better about being a dick.

“My family,” Castiel starts, and sighs, “My family is very wealthy. Many of my siblings are arrogant and traditional, and some of what I chose to do…unsettled them. I minored in omega studies during my undergraduate years in college, for example. They thought it was shameful for me to do so. Among other things. And when I lost my medical license, the siblings that were still speaking to me stopped, except for two, though they’re distant at best because they both like my family’s money and good name. You’re the first person I’ve had contact with for almost six months now.”

Dean isn’t sure what he’s supposed to say to this, so he put his hand on Cas’ shoulder and pats, awkwardly. He feels like he should at least vocalize something, so he shrugs, “My dad thought I was a worthless piece of shit. He was probably right.”

“Dean,” Castiel chastises, “We’ve known each other for very little time, that’s true, but you’re no place near worthless. You love so many things. I think it’s wonderful when people love things, even if it’s something as simple as a television show.”

Dean wants to laugh but instead he puts his hands in his lap and wills the burning back out of his eyes. He doesn’t want to tell Cas that the reason he’s so fucking overjoyed about everything is because he hasn’t had a single nice thing to himself for seven entire years, and now he has lots, because Castiel keeps giving him nice things.

“Yeah,” he says, because thanks would sound too much like he’s agreeing with Castiel about being no place near worthless.

Dean and Castiel sit there like that for a long time. They keep quiet and listen to Siouxsie croon from the record player. It’s simultaneously pleasant and uncomfortable, in an odd way that Dean can’t quite describe. They’re there for a while, at least until the needle on Castiel’s record player retracts and returns to the start of the album.

Cas stands when it does. He replaces the Siouxsie vinyl in its sleeve and slips it into place on his shelf (which is alphabetized, go figure).

They still don’t talk when they return to the main floor of the house, until Cas reaches his bedroom door. He glances over to Dean and says, “Goodnight.”

Dean lifts his hand instead of replying, because that seems easier.

X

Three and a half weeks.

That’s how long they’ve kept him locked up. From the coolness and the moisture in the air, Dean guesses that he’s underground. He has manacles on all of his limbs now, because when they kept his hands free, he jimmed the restraints on his ankles opened and tried to get out. His feet bled a lot and he only made it halfway down the block of omega cells before they reigned Dean in again.

That time, Alastair himself came to ‘teach Dean a lesson.’ Not that the lesson itself was handed out by the man. No, his lackeys whipped him to hell while Alastair smiled like the goddamned Grinch.

His back still hurts from his lesson. The wounds that criss-cross the skin there might be infected.
He doesn’t know. Can’t tell. It's all the same blur of pain now.

Dean shifts on the stained mattress beneath him and tries not to breathe in all the foul smells shift off of the fabric. It smells like piss and slick and blood. The stain nearest to his face is blood for sure. His, it smells like. Most of the stains don’t belong to him, though. It makes Dean wonder how many omega whores used the mattress before they brought him here.

He wonders what Sammy’s doing. He’s likely getting straight As, as expected. Maybe he has some nice beta girlfriend, a cheerleader or something. Whatever it is that his brother has his mitts into, Dean wants it to be good. Sure, Sam said some choice shit to him before he left, but…

All right, what Sam said is really starting to get to Dean.

Would he think that Alastair is Dean’s fault, too?

Probably. Their dad would tell Dean it was his fault for sure. His fault for running, his fault for being duped, his fault for smelling like a tasty snack for alpha shitheads.

Everything is his fault.

Dean puts his forehead on his knees. The movement makes the restraints on his wrists pull at his skin. He can feel the bruises already there complain, and tries to arrange himself further back on the mattress so that he can rest. It doesn’t work, and so he’s left to suffer tossing and turning.

In the morning, the man with food comes. He gives Dean a hunk of bread that he wolfs down as soon as it hits his cell floor. He feels hazy immediately after, dizzy and strange and like his stomach is doing somersaults underneath his skin. Somebody comes to unlock him from the restraints and drags him along, past the cellblock and up the stairs, where the beds are. He gets dumped on one with red sheets. It smells much better than his mattress, like the kind of strong detergent that hotels use for their bedding.

Then there’s alpha.

“This one is one of our finest omegas.”

That’s Alastair’s voice.

Somehow, he gets arranged into presenting. Strong alpha hands hold him there.

“He’s big,” a gruff voice says. His breath stinks like chewing tobacco and cola.

“Yes, but he is a pretty one, isn’t he?” Alastair says, “Feel free to use as much force as you want.”

A grunt and a thrust, and Dean’s filled up with alpha dick. It’s too big and he feels ill and dirty, but he takes it because he’s too weak to do otherwise, especially with the hands closed around his wrists. This alpha is relentless.

“Stop,” Dean whines.

That only makes him go faster. Dean tries to fight, tries to throw the guy off of his back with a shove upward. It makes the alpha’s dick sink deeper than it should, sending pain shooting up the base of Dean’s spine.

“No,” Dean says, “No, no, no.”

And he jolts awake in a different bed entirely. This bed doesn’t smell like piss and slick or industrial laundry detergent. It smells like fabric softener and Castiel, but the scent isn’t enough to keep his heart from beating so hard he can hear his blood in his ears. The pup shifts unhappily in his belly.

“Sorry,” he tells it, “I’ll make this better.”

Sleepily, Dean stumbles out of bed. He gropes at the wall to find his way through Castiel’s house in the dark. He’ll get a glass of milk and maybe watch some TV, and then he’ll go back to his bed and try for some more sleep. That’s what he needs. Rest. Castiel says so. He starts to walk, careful to be quiet.

That pungent alpha aroma hits Dean like a slap when he passes by Cas’ room. God, fuck, Christ – to hell with it. He doesn’t care anymore. He’s too tired to resist, and he wants this far more than a glass of milk and late night TV. Dean pushes the door to Castiel’s bedroom open and toes his way in, gut twisting with worry and sick as much as his heart and brain beat with the overwhelming need to curl up in that smell forever. He crawls into Castiel’s bed and edges up close to him.

Dean tries not to wake the alpha, but Cas’ eyes crack open and he murmurs sleepily, “Dean?”

“Sorry,” Dean says, and tries to back out. He’s fucked up now. He didn’t intend for Castiel to wake.

“Mmph, no,” Cas responds, and pulls Dean back. He nuzzles his face in Dean’s hair and rubs his back, scenting him. When he’s done, he tips Dean’s chin up so that their eyes meet and says, “You smell unhappy. What’s wrong?”

“Nightmare,” Dean says. He’s too tired and freaked out to bother lying.

“Mmmh, no,” Cas responds, and pulls Dean back. He nuzzles his face in Dean’s hair and rubs his back, scenting him. When he’s done, he tips Dean’s chin up so that their eyes meet and says, “You smell unhappy. What’s wrong?”

“Nightmare,” Dean says. He’s too tired and freaked out to bother lying.

“You can stay in here if you need,” Castiel says.

Dean makes a sound of agreement and lays his face right up against Castiel’s t-shirt. He breathes in as much of that alpha smell as he can. It’s probably stupid that he feels safer here with an alpha wrapped around him than he does in a bedroom with a lock on the door. It is, in fact, the stupidest thing that he has ever allowed himself to feel. But it’s not a feeling, exactly. It’s worse than that. It’s instinct.

He still can’t fall asleep.

Dean’s mind keeps reeling, keeps turning over his nightmare in his head. He thinks about his dad shouting at him, thinks about his first heat and how disgusted his father looked, barking out insults about pathetic omega need.

“Dean, you seem to have a lot on your mind,” Castiel’s gravelly voice says into Dean’s hair, “Perhaps you should talk about it so that we can both fall asleep.”

Well, when he puts it that way, it sounds like a great idea.

“What if I’m a shitty father?” Dean asks.

Castiel shifts away to stare at him, blue eyes intense even in the dark. Automatically, Dean starts to lower his gaze, but Castiel catches Dean’s chin in his palm and pushes his face back up. He says, “I have met many, many terrible parents. When I worked at my hospital I saw them all the time. As a
surgeon I…often became entangled with omega affairs, and you meet a great deal of terrible people that way. Not all of them. But a lot. There were bad omega parents, bad beta parents, bad alphas. I will tell you that I know an awful lot about what shitty fathers look like, and you are not one of them.”

“How do you know?” Dean demands.

“No shitty father speaks to his pup the way that you do yours,” Castiel says, “You love it. You don’t know whose it is, you don’t know how it will present, and you love it. It’s unconditional. And that is how I know you will not be a shitty father.”

Castiel gathers Dean back up against him. For the first time in recent memory, Dean sinks down into a pleasant, dreamless sleep.
Dean comes to Castiel every time that he has a nightmare and sleeps in his bed. He tucks himself up against Cas when he treads in each night, sometimes with his back to Cas’ chest, other times with the pup between them. Castiel, out of instinct, prefers having the pup between them. A twisted alpha sense of obligation has him treating the pup like his own and Dean as his mate. He fusses in ways he’s never bothered with before, hovering when Dean takes his vitamin in the morning and making sure that the both of them get their full bills of nutrients at each meal.

Maybe it isn’t right. He knows some friends from his past would say that he’s using Dean to fulfill alpha need. But if Dean comes to him, and it benefits both of them, then what harm is there in Castiel wrapping himself up in his alpha instinct and letting it be?

The first time that Cas feels the pup, it takes him by surprise.

The touch is feather-life against his midsection, but it’s enough to bring Castiel out of his half-sleep. Dean is awake and looking at him curiously.

“I felt the pup,” murmurs Castiel, and his eyes drift down to Dean’s swollen stomach. He clears his throat and asks, “May I?”

Dean nods, a slow smile spreading across his face. Cas shifts, careful not to move too far, and lowers his palm to where the pup rests. It offers another kick and then a second. At the third, Castiel chuckles and says, “Somebody’s quite active this morning.”

“Probably hungry,” Dean mumbles.

“I see,” Castiel replies, “Would the pup be interested bacon and waffles?”

Dean’s smile widens and with another kick from the pup at his belly, he quietly agrees, “I think that was an approval kick.”

It still takes them awhile to pull their bodies out of bed. Castiel likes to linger in bed with Dean, likes their warmth and scents combined and surrounding them. Dean seems more comfortable during their mornings together than anyplace else, and part of Castiel wants to believe that it is because he feels protected with Castiel, feels at home. He knows Dean is instinctually seeking him out the fear that follows his nightmares, but he doesn’t know if it’s because Cas is there for the taking, or because of Castiel himself.

He wants the reason to be because Dean wants him, and him alone, but he knows well that that may not be the case. And perhaps this want is derived from the attraction he feels to Dean. He craves Dean’s attention and preens under it like some mated sap, loves the rare moments when Dean back-talks and sasses him, adores when Dean stands at his full height and has an entire inch and a half on Castiel.

The past couple of weeks have given color to Dean’s cheeks. He often falls asleep outside on the hammock with a book in his hands, and the sunshine has brought gold to the tone of his skin. Faint brown freckles have manifested across the bridge of his nose and on his shoulders. He’s put on weight and looks much nearer to what a healthy pregnant omega should look like. He looks…
lovely. Lovelier every day, in fact.

Castiel reaches forward and strokes his hand over Dean’s hair and murmurs, “You could use a haircut, hm?”

Dean bats him away with a noise of complaint and shifts to the other side of the mattress. The morning lounge is over.

They sleepily trudge out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, where Castiel hums as he starts breakfast, and Dean switches on the television and watches the news. Dean has taken a recent interest in current events, a habit that Castiel attributes to a need for connection to the world. He understands. The mountains can be lonely this far out into the mountains, so distant from civilization. It is for this reason that Castiel chose to build a home here, but the lifestyle isn’t suited to everyone.

Over breakfast, Castiel announces intentions to head into town today, a prospect that has Dean’s eyes bright when he leaves Cas to take his shower. He hears Dean chatting under the flow of the water, talking to his pup as he showers. Sometimes Castiel can make out the words, other times he can’t. Often he hears Dean speak of his intentions to do a better job as a parent than his own father, a proclamation that makes Castiel itch under his skin to know more, to know where Dean came from and what his life was like.

As always, he wonders how such a colorful, vibrant omega ended up walking naked along the side of an empty road, marked all over with signs of abuse.

Dean finishes grooming and emerges long after Castiel has had his covert early-morning jerk-off and dressed himself. He wears his leather coat and his black hiking boots. Were it not for the evident swell of his belly underneath his t-shirt, he’d look every inch an alpha. It makes Castiel want to kiss him, but as Dean comes to his side he settles for subtly scenting Dean’s skin.

The radio, still set on the station that Dean selected during their last venture out, plays a familiar AC/DC riff. Dean doesn’t sing to the lyrics, but his lips move with the shapes of the words.

Once they dip into the town, Castiel parks his Prius close to where he did last trip, but guides Dean in the opposite direction, to the salon and barber shop aptly named Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow. It’s the place in town where everyone gets their hair done, a charming, retro-style shop fitted with vintage stylist’s chairs over a black and white tiled floor.

Dean glances over at Cas when they enter with a brow lifted and Castiel rubs his back with a simple, “Both of us need a trim.”

“Clarence!”

Castiel’s usual stylist, Meg, trots over to the front desk and smiles, “Who’s the babe?”

“This is Dean,” Castiel says, “we’d both like a trim.”

“Cool,” Meg says, “I’ve got a client but I’ll be wrapping it up in like, fifteen? Charlie’s open now if you wanna get Dean started.”

Castiel hasn’t interacted with Charlie much over the course of the months that he’s patronized Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow, but she’s difficult to miss. A chatty red-haired beta, she seems exactly the type of person that Dean would get along with – non-threatening and wearing a Star Wars t-shirt over her worn jeans.
Still, just in case, Castiel follows Dean to Charlie’s chair and loiters nearby.

Charlie grins at him when she sees him floating behind her and gives a brief pat to his shoulder. She says, “Don’t you worry, Mister Big Bad Alpha. Your boy is in good hands.”

He opts to continue to hover.

“Yeesh,” she says, running her fingers through Dean’s hair, “What’d you do, take a hacksaw to it?”

Dean snorts.

“All right, how do you want it?” she asks, “You wanna keep the length and just have me shape it up a little, or what?”

Dean glances over his shoulder at Cas for guidance, so Castiel instructs, “I think he likes it shorter. However you think is best is fine. You’re the professional, Ms. Bradbury.”

“Okie dokie,” she says cheerily, and sets to work. She takes Dean back to the sink and shampoos and conditions his hair first, wisely noting that he’s been using unscented soaps and not omega-typical shampoo. When she brings Dean back to the chair, she asks, “So, baby. How far along?”

He blinks down at his belly and replies, “Cas says twenty four weeks.”

“Know the gender yet?”

“Nah,” Dean says.

“What about names? I love names. Bet Mister Alpha over here has tons of ideas, doesn’t he?” she smiles as she snips, and Castiel prays that Dean isn’t offended by Charlie’s assumption.

Dean makes a face and replies, “Cas doesn’t get an opinion. But, yeah…I have some ideas.”

Castiel doesn’t know why this is surprising. Dean talks to his pup as though it’s already here and in his arms, so why shouldn’t he have names lined up for it?

Then Dean adds, “But I’m not telling.”

“Ooh,” Charlie says, “Secret names. I like it. Now, Dean, I have a question that I need to ask you. I ask all my clients, and I expect a good reason for your answer. You ready?”

“Uh. Sure.”

“Light side or dark side?” Charlie questions seriously.

“Light side,” Dean answers immediately, in a tone that suggests that he’s offended that Charlie even has to ask, “Han Solo, all the way. Harrison Ford is my dream man.”

“If I were into dudes, he’d be mine too,” sighs Charlie, “and good answer. I wouldn’t want to have to botch your haircut. Just ask me what I did to the lady that said she thought Jar Jar friggin’ Binks was ‘funny.’”

Dean laughs, and it’s enough that Castiel feels comfortable leaving him in Charlie’s hands when Meg comes to collect him. His own haircut is standard, just a snip or two to get rid of the out-of-hand length. He’s content to watch Charlie and Dean in the mirror. He’s never heard Dean speak so much in one sitting.
An unexpected tingle of jealousy sparks at the base of Castiel’s spine. He finds himself yearning for Dean’s attention the way that he amiably and easily gives it to Charlie. But why should Dean give him that attention? He’s an alpha. A threat. He’s just like the alphas that hurt Dean and star in his nightmares, just like the evil bastard that put a pup in Dean’s belly without his consent.

By the time that he and Dean have freshly-cut heads of hair and Castiel has paid for both, he’s worked himself into a foul mood, foul enough that Dean hangs back a step behind him and keeps his eyes down. It makes Castiel feel sick to his stomach to know that he’s pushed Dean into reverting to submission, but he’s so frustrated that he can’t find it in him to make it better.

But even with the fragrance of caution drifting off of him, Dean still stares at him and asks, “What’s up, Cas?” when they climb back into Castiel’s car.

“It’s nothing. Not important,” Castiel shakes his head, “Let’s drop by the store before we go home.”

That night, they cook their dinner in the fire pit. Dean brings kindling and lights the firewood, smiling but silent once again.

It’s a cool night. The temperature necessitates jacket wearing and thick socks, though the fire does the bulk of the work in keeping them warm. At the grocery store they picked up all the fixings for a tasty over-the-fire dinner spread – bratwurst and corn on the cob, and at Dean’s insistence, the materials for assembling s’mores.

On display is one of Castiel’s very favorite things about living outside the city: the night sky full of stars. The constellations coat the deep, blue-black sky like glitter, a shimmering cloth that fabricates the perfect backdrop for a cozy fireside supper. Castiel catches Dean staring more than once, his mouth open and jaw slack, awed at the sight.

“Sometimes living alone up here is hard,” Castiel says, and Dean shifts his attention in an instant, “but it all seems worth it with a sky like that, doesn’t it?”

Dean huffs and smiles.

The corn is perfect, buttered and salted with kernels caramelized from the lick of the flame. They dig into it while Castiel rotates the bratwurst on the metal grill fitted across the pit, watching as the skin splits open and sizzles, the aroma of cooking meat surrounding them as the firewood pops and crackles under the heat.

“Cas?” Dean says. Half of his third bratwurst sits on the grease-stained paper plate in his hand.

“Mm.”

“I thought a lot about what you said awhile back,” Dean says, and fidgets with his hands in his lap, one leg jostling, “The thing. About the nursery.”

“Look at me when you’re talking, Dean.”

Dean startles and obeys, shoulders tense. He coughs and goes on, “Does your offer stand?”

“Of course it does,” Castiel replies.

“Oh. Okay. Cool. Can we do that? Can me and the pup stay?”
“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Castiel agrees.

And because he’s an idiot, he pulls Dean closer and presses their mouths together. Dean tastes like home-cooked food and everything good, but he tenses under Castiel’s touch and doesn’t kiss back. As soon as fear hits Cas’ nose, he throws himself back and exclaims, “Damn it! I’m sorry. I don’t know why I did that. Please accept my apology.”

“It’s okay,” Dean says, but he looks spooked.

“I hope you know that the nursery and your stay here with the pup are not things that are contingent upon affection for me,” Castiel says, “You’re smart. You know that I’m attracted to you. But I won’t act on it if it is not a shared attraction.”

He wants desperately for Dean to correct him, to say yes, he wants kisses and knotting and mating and his lack of response to Castiel’s touch was due only to surprise.

Dean, naturally, says none of those things.

He just says, “Yeah,” and returns to eating the rest of his bratwurst.

By the time that they both finish eating their portions of the main course, the air between them has returned to normal, and goes without the taint of fear and sexual frustration. Dean doesn’t talk, but he crafts and eats his s’mores with a grin on his face, the bright kind of grin that Castiel so seldom sees on him.

And when they’ve eaten their fill and Dean’s eyes begin to droop, Castiel tells him to head back into the house and head to bed. He lingers to make sure that their mess is well and truly gone so that they don’t attract bears before he returns himself beleaguered by reusable grocery bags of their leftovers on either arm.

When he pokes his head into Dean’s bedroom to say goodnight, he’s absent. Castiel writes it off as Dean reading upstairs or making more musical discoveries in the basement and returns to his own room.

There, in the middle of his bed, Dean lies in his pajamas, t-shirt rucked up past the curve of his belly, mouth open, snoring and fast asleep.

Castiel smiles.

X

When Castiel stretches awake the following morning, Dean remains out like a light, so he slips out from under Dean’s grip and toes out of the room to start coffee for himself and breakfast for the both of them. Something smells off as he walks out and briefly he wonders as he goes through the motions of coffee-making if he forgot to put last night’s leftovers in the fridge.

But no, when he retrieves the creamer, the remaining corn cobs and bratwursts are tucked safely in their Tupperware containers beside the orange juice.

Castiel scents the air.

What the hell?

If he didn’t know better, he’d say that it smells like –
“Gabriel?”

Aghast, Castiel gapes open-mouthed at his older brother, who is sitting on the couch with a shit-eating smile on his stupid face.

“ Took you long enough to notice,” Gabriel says, and slides to his feet. He crosses the room and says, “Hey, when this shit’s done brewing, you mind if I snag a cup? Been driving all night. I knew you went off the grid, but I had no idea you lived in the goddamn BFE.” Gabriel dips past him and opens the refrigerator door. He grabs the half-full gallon of milk, screws open the lid, and chugs back a drink directly from the jug.

Castiel snatches it back and sets it on the counter.

“What are you doing here?” he demands.

“Man, it smells nice as hell in here,” Gabriel says, and sticks his nose against Castiel’s sleep shirt, breathing deep. He makes a face as he looks up at him and says, “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you smell mated.”

“Well, I’m not,” Castiel testily replies, and yanks the cap to the milk out of his hand, replacing it on the container and putting it back in its place. He grinds out, “What are you doing here? You haven’t answered my question.”

“All in due time,” Gabriel says, “Hey, do you have any ice cream – hell-o, handsome.”

Dean emerges sleepy-eyed from the bedroom, hair sticking up on end. He rubs at his face with one hand and scratches his belly with the other, but as soon as he notices that they’re not alone, he freezes in place, eyes darting from Gabriel to Castiel and back again. He looks ready to bolt, and Castiel’s immediate instinct is to shift out from behind his brother to stand between him and Dean.

“Cassie, are you sure you didn’t go and get yourself mated? Looks like you got busy,” Gabriel whistles and makes a crude gesture with his hand in front of his crotch. Castiel frowns.

“The pup isn’t his,” Dean says, though the words are quiet.

“Quoi?”

“The pup isn’t his,” Dean repeats, louder this time.

“Woo-woo,” Gabriel says, and eyes Castiel, “I always knew you were a progressive, bro, but I didn’t realize you were all-out into omega skanks. That is definitely new. Always pegged you for being into nerdy betas or something. But – he is pretty, so I suppose I can let this slide.”

“Gabriel,” Castiel warns.

“Hey, fuck you,” Dean says, bristling. If Gabriel were an alpha Castiel doubts that Dean would be so bold, but Gabriel’s a beta and therefore statistically more level-headed, less likely to lash out at a mouthy omega. Unfortunately for all parties, Gabriel is also a pain in the ass.

Gabriel licks his lips, “Feisty. I like it. Where did you find him?”

“I mean it, Gabe,” Castiel says, at last allowing that edge of alpha authority into his tone as he snaps out his words, “Leave Dean alone. He’s been through enough without dealing with you. Now what the fuck are you doing here? Tell me immediately.”
Gabriel cocks a brow and holds up his hands, “No need to go all posturing alpha on me, Cassie. Didn’t realize you were still in the biz of harboring wanted omegas, is all.”

“Goddamnit, Gabriel, you are two seconds away from being thrown out on your ass if you do not explain to me what you are doing in my home right now,” Castiel grabs his brother by the front of his shirt and starts hauling him toward the front door.

“Shit, shit, okay,” Gabriel says, and yanks himself from Castiel’s grip. He turns around and sighs, “Look. I’m here on official family-type business.”

The coffee maker beeps to alert that the coffee’s done, and Castiel retreats back to the kitchen to fix himself a mug with a splash of creamer. He pours coffee in a second mug for his brother and lets Gabriel dump as much creamer and sugar to make a suitably inedible concoction before he replaces the pot on its burner and pours a glass of juice for Dean. He retrieves Dean’s prenatal vitamins and taps one into his palm, handing both this and the juice before he turns his attention back to Gabriel.

Gabriel, in the short time that Cas has had his back turned, has found a (most likely expired) can of whipped cream and is spraying it in a spiral at the top of his sugary coffee abomination. He slurps at it and says, “You have no right to judge me.”

“I’m not. I’m wondering what the fuck you are doing in my house.”

“I told you. Official family-type business. Of the Michael sort.”

“Michael and I don’t speak anymore,” Castiel says pointedly, and nurses his coffee, “which you know.”

“Yeah, and that’s the dang problem, kiddo. He didn’t have an address to send his wedding invitation to,” Gabriel says.

“What?”

“His wedding,” Gabriel says, “Some arranged bullshit with this blond piece of omega ass named Lilith. Anyway, the whole family’s supposed to attend. We’re all to be groomsmen. Party of the year, or whatever the fuck they’re saying about it.”

“No,” Castiel says, “No. Absolutely not. I am not going.”

“For fuck’s sake, Cassie, do you even know what it took to get to this hellhole you call home?”

“Hey!” Dean snaps, “Put the dick away, cupcake.”

Gabriel affords this a lift of the brows but otherwise ignores Dean completely. He goes on, “You wouldn’t leave me alone with them, would you?”

“Oh, I would.”

“What if I told you that I already told Michael your new address and that your written invitation to the nuptials is on its way in the mail?” Gabriel says, “No getting out of the wedding, bro. I just came here as a courtesy to warn you that if you don’t show up on your own, mom’s gonna rain hellfire and drag you out to see the happy couple get hitched. Figured you’d rather see my face before you saw hers.”

“What the hell, Gabe?” growls Castiel. He slams his coffee mug down on the kitchen counter and glares, angry alpha from his head to the tips of his toes, “Why would you do that?”
Gabriel shrugs and chugs back more of his science experiment. He tosses the empty mug in the sink without bothering to rinse it and asks, “Dunno. Why do I do anything? By the way, you’re supposed to bring a plus one. Mom has this ginger omega from some new money family lined up for you, so I’d suggest finding somebody else, and stat.” His eyes drift and land pointedly on Dean, who’s been watching the entire exchange with a look of deep annoyance on his face.

His tense body and the catch between his brows make Castiel want to wrap his arms around him, protect him. Dean was never supposed to have to meet his family. Hell, only Gabriel and Anna know this address – well, perhaps not anymore, according to Gabe. Castiel cut ties on purpose, and for what? A welcome back into the clan? He is happy, totally content being the black sheep of the family. The troublemaker. The tabloid scandal. The infamous alpha that never acts like an alpha. He’s always been proud to be that, especially if it meant never having to indulge his insufferable blood relatives ever, ever again.

This is a disaster.

“Look,” Gabriel says, “All we have to do is look happy for the papers. What happens behind closed door is our business. Why not enjoy the free booze in the meantime?”

“I refuse,” Castiel says, “You cannot make me go.”

“I can’t,” Gabriel concedes, “But you know that our mother can. And will. We both know that, actually.”

“I don’t have a date.”

“Yeah, you do. Little ol’ Eyelashes over there,” Gabriel grins at Dean, and Dean lifts his middle finger back.

“I would not ask that of Dean,” Castiel says.

“Yeah, well. It’s either Cute-and-Knocked-Up or whatever wealthy asshole’s omega daughter mom tries to match you with.”

“My name is Dean,” Dean protests, and looks angrier and angrier by the minute. Out of habit Castiel steps toward him, shielding him from Gabriel. It’s ridiculous. Gabriel’s his brother and a beta. He isn’t even close to a threat. He and Gabriel both know that if he provoked Castiel, Castiel could easily take him down, shut him up for good. Gabriel also knows that Castiel wouldn’t hurt him. That he isn’t the kind of alpha that would.

Michael is the kind of alpha that would hurt. Lucifer, too.

Not Castiel. Never Castiel.

“Anyway, you probably want to go with Preggers,” Gabe concludes.

“I said, my name is Dean,” Dean emphasizes, and shoves in front of Castiel to confront Gabriel. He pushes at Gabriel’s chest and says, “If you both would shut your arrogant goddamn traps for two fuckin’ seconds put together, you’d know that, chuckles. And you –” he rounds on Cas, and his expression softens, “I’ll do it.”

“What?” Castiel manages.

“I’ll go with you to this wedding,” Dean mutters, “We can pretend to be mated or whatever.”
“You don’t have my bite,” Castiel says, “You don’t know my family. They’re dreadful. I’d never foist them upon an unsuspecting victim –”

“I’m not unsuspecting,” Dean defends, “I’m doing this willingly. And if they ask about the mating mark, we’ll just say that we have ours someplace less conventional. They’d believe that, right?”

They would. They’d almost certainly believe it.

Castiel finally clears his throat and asks, “Why? Why would you want to do this for me?”

“Because,” Dean says, and lifts his chin, “You helped me when I needed it, so I’ll help you because you need it.”

“That’s real sweet,” Gabriel says, “Touching, even. Does that mean you’re in, kiddo? Don’t have to send in the dragon to drag you down to witness Michael’s joyful union?”

“Yes. Fine,” Castiel agrees, “I’m…in.”

X

A week later, Castiel and Dean leave for the wedding.
Dean hates planes. He has had few opportunities to travel in them, for which he is grateful, but that
doesn’t stop the unbridled loathing and terror from filling him up as they swing around at Denver
International Airport. He thought that the long drive from Cas’ house in the Fuck-All Middle of
Nowhere to the airport would help him talk sense into himself. Instead, the nerves build on each
other like a goddamn runaway game of Tetris, and as Castiel parks his Prius in long term parking
and unloads their luggage (“I can get mine,” Dean complains, but Castiel tersely puts him off with,
“You are pregnant, and as a doctor I strongly recommend against heavy lifting.”), Dean feels sick.

“You could have told me that you’re afraid of flying,” Castiel murmurs.

Dean must reek of fear – that’s the only reason that would explain why he and Cas are getting
sidelong glances as they stand in line to check in their bags.

The United attendant smiles sympathetically when they make it up to the scales and says,
“Nervous flyer?”

“He hates it, as I’m certain you can smell,” Castiel says, “We’re going to California for my elder
brother’s wedding.” The attendant chuckles, and Dean has to hold back a snarl.

Cas notices, of course, and admonishes, “Dean, be polite,” in a low voice. Dean sulks.

He can’t decide, as they head toward security, whether he hates the prospect of being on a plane
more, or how everyone keeps treating him like a delicate flower because he’s a grumpy, fear-
stricken omega in the middle of a crowded airport. They don’t make him go under the full body
scanner like Cas has to, instead just sweeping a wand over him before he’s allowed to pass through
to the terminals.

Having Cas’ scent alongside him throughout the process does a lot to help, and Dean can’t help but
feel angry at that. He always hated omegas that couldn’t handle themselves, and now he’s one of
them, just about literally barefoot and pregnant, and clinging to Castiel like he might float away if
Dean lets go.

But then Cas rubs his back all the way to their seats in the waiting area and brings him a pastry and
to-go hot cocoa from one of the many Starbucks that pepper the inside of the airport.

Everything is fine and dandy until their plane pulls into place outside and the passengers from the
earlier flight clear out. Dean feels himself pale again and can’t stop bouncing his leg. The pup
squirms irritably inside him, like it can tell that its dad is stressed out and is barking back at him
chill out, dad. Dean glowers at his stomach and says, “No one asked you.”

“How?” Cas says.

“Talkin’ to the pup.”

“Ah. Pup being flippant?” Castiel asks.

“Already a back-talker and it can’t even friggin’ talk yet,” Dean mutters.
Cas chuckles. Dean continues to sulk. When he catches a bright-eyed beta smiling at them, he sulks even harder. When it’s time to board the plane, he holds onto Cas’ arm again, tense and feeling like he might vomit if anything shakes the wrong way. And they call him crazy for being uncomfortable inside a giant metal tube of death in the sky.

Castiel lets Dean grip his arm and keeps moving a hand over his back in circles. It probably has less to do with Dean and more to do with the fact that Dean’s anxiety is rolling off of him so much that he can almost smell it himself. The other boarders on the plane all stare at them, and it just amplifies everything by like, a thousand. He just wants to be back at Cas’ house wrapped up in a blanket and continuing the pup’s education in good music with the record player in the basement.

But no. Nope, he is on an airplane going to the arranged-marriage-bullshit-wedding of Castiel’s elder brother, because another one of Cas’ elder brothers spilled the beans about where Cas lives and threatened to sic their mother on him. Dean gathers that Castiel’s mother is something of a harridan. He also gathers that his brothers are total douchebags.

No wonder Cas hightailed it out to the middle of the Rockies.

Dean dearly wishes that he could have liquor. Alas, not only is he locked in a flying metal death tube, he is pregnant and locked in a flying metal death tube. That leaves him little to work with except to stick his face against Cas’ arm and scent the shit out of him so he feels a little less like throwing up his intestines.

A perky omega flight attendant gives them the safety instruction spiel, blah blah blah, seatbelts, blah blah blah, oxygen mask.

Oh, shit. The plane starts to roll down the runway.

“You’ll be fine, Dean. Airplanes are statistically far safer than cars,” Castiel says.

Dean balls his hands into fists and says, “Yeah, well, statistically fuck you.”

Castiel looks at him like he’s gone insane, and Dean can’t even find it in him to care as he grips the armrests on either side of him. He just said ‘fuck you’ to an alpha, the alpha he’s supposed to be pretending is his alpha, and he cannot locate a single shit to give.

They take off. Dean goes back to sticking his face against Cas just so he can smell him above the too-clean, recycled air aroma of the plane and the smells of the hundreds of other passengers seated all around them. It’s ridiculous to be this afraid. He’s seen so much more shit than this. But Dean’s dealt with horny, hulking, sweaty alphas all his life, and seldom is he subject to flying death tubes.

He spends the entire flight right up against Cas. He isn’t even embarrassed when Cas orders his complimentary drink for him from the flight attendant, a ginger ale to settle his stomach. When they land, it isn’t a moment too soon.

Now all Dean has to do is survive LAX, late Californian spring, and a wedding uniting two dysfunctional families.

X

Fortunately for all parties involved, Dean and Castiel manage to navigate the airport, collect their luggage, and locate a taxi without incident. Michael and Lilith’s wedding, in lieu of being held on the beach like Dean had assumed a wedding in California would be, is to be held at some fancy-ass joint overlooking the beach instead, a hotel called Malibu Beach Inn.
When they reach the joint Dean can’t help his intake of breath. He lets out a low whistle as the cabby pulls up and parks and says, “Jesus tap dancing Christ. This place is fancy as fuck.”

“Nothing but the best for Michael,” hums Castiel. He and the cabby collectively unload the luggage and Cas pays him with a generous wad of twenties from his wallet, which he replaces in the back pocket of his jeans before they make their way toward the hotel. The lobby confirms Dean’s assessment of “fancy as fuck” – it isn’t large or paved in gold, but the furniture looks like it’s all solid dark wood, and the beachy, sandy tones that it’s decorated it scream luxury and wealthy motherfuckers.

Dean starts to tune Cas out when they step up to the front desk to check into their room. He hopes it’s as nice as this lobby. Because hell yeah, if he has to be in hell for a week, then he’s gonna want to do this shit in style. As Dean sifts through a shelf of pamphlets, he feels Cas’ hand arranging Dean’s hair into a more acceptable position than “holy shit I’m on a flying metal death tube” hair. Then it occurs to him – Castiel is grooming him. He almost turns and snips at him, but realizes promptly that for this week, they’re supposed to be mates. And if they’re mates, then it would be one hundred percent okay for Castiel to groom Dean into oblivion.

He keeps plucking at pamphlets.

“Heh. Cas,” Dean says, and turns to display one of the activity pamphlets between his hands, “‘Discover exhilarating water sports’. Kinky.” He bounces his eyebrows and bites back a smirk.

Castiel gives him a look and says, “Dean, we’re –”

“Cassie!”

Both Castiel and Dean swing around, where on their right side a middle-aged, attractive blond beta dude comes at them with open arms. Instead of hugging Castiel, though, he claps him on his shoulder and then proceeds to wink at Dean.

“Good job, dear. Always knew you were especially virile.”

“Thank you, Balthazar. That’s charming,” Castiel says dryly. He places his palm on the small of Dean’s back and pushes him forward just a little as he introduces, “Balthazar, this is Dean, my mate. Dean, this is my delightful cousin Balthazar.” The way that Castiel says the word ‘delightful’ leads Dean to believe that the man may in fact not be delightful at all.

Still, he shakes Balthazar’s hand and smiles. He decides not to say anything, because Christ knows anything that comes out of Dean’s mouth is going to be exactly the wrong thing for him to say.

“Big for an omega, aren’t you?” Balthazar observes. It takes every ounce of Dean’s personal control not to roll his eyes as the dude keeps going, “But you’re a pretty thing. Funny how Cassie insisted upon being counterculture as a wayward youth and ends up just like the rest of his alpha clan, hm? Big, strong alpha mating and knocking up an omega with pretty eyelashes. So standard of you, Castiel.”

This time Dean does roll his eyes.

“Ooh, and he is a feisty one.”

“I’m tired of people saying that,” mutters Dean.

“I know,” Castiel replies, and threads his fingers through the hairs at the base of Dean’s neck, stroking. He places a chaste kiss on the top of Dean’s head. Dean knows it’s for show, but it still
makes him tense. He tries not to show it or let it get to the way that he smells, doesn’t want to already screw up the gag that he and Cas have going. Cas deserves to have Dean do this right.

Fortunately, the desk attendant clears his throat and hands Castiel their room keys. Apparently their room is on the highest level, the third. Balthazar bids them goodbye and says something about getting himself a massage, and they head toward the elevator.

The room is friggin’ sweet. And also a friggin’ suite. Dean chuckles to himself at that as they roll their belongings in. The setup has a couch and a coffee table, and a flat screen TV, mounted above a fucking fireplace. He can’t help the whistle of appreciation that comes out of his mouth at the sight.

Behind him, Castiel preens a little.

“I thought we could nap before the evening’s festivities,” Cas says.

Dean groans, “Festivities?”

“I know, I know,” Castiel says, “We’re having some sort of dinner downstairs. I think it’s a welcome of some kind. Either that, or they’re fattening us up to eat us.”

Dean thinks the second option may be more likely, and the prospect scares him.

“Don’t worry,” Castiel says, and starts to rub his back again, “Now let’s get some rest.”

When Dean wakes up, the sun already has started to set, and yellow-orange light bathes their suite in a soft glow. Cas isn’t in bed but instead beside it, topless, with a nice button-up slung over the ironing board in front of him. His brow knits in concentration as he presses the fabric. For a while, Dean just watches him focus on his clothing. Cas never does anything halfway, not even ironing his shirt for “festivities” that neither of them are particularly inclined to attend.

Castiel doesn’t notice that Dean is awake until he shifts under the covers. He hums, “Good, you’re up. We’re heading downstairs in about an hour.”

Dean groans.

Before they left Colorado, they dropped back by that overpriced maternity boutique in town to purchase Dean dress clothes. He hates his fucking omega-mommy bullshit button-downs, hates the way that they look on him, hates that his belly pulls at the buttons. He wishes he could just wear jeans and a t-shirt, but knows that would be embarrassing to Castiel.

He’s not going to embarrass Cas, no matter how many dress shirts he has to put up with.

Forty-five minutes later, Dean is dressed impeccably in a pregnant omega fit suit, charcoal gray with all the trimmings. He even has fancy, shiny shoes for his swollen preggo feet, which is impressive, considering how damn big his feet are in the first place.

And Castiel looks so good that Dean could just eat him up. Nothing says fine-ass alpha like a man in a suit. Like Dean’s, Castiel’s suit is a shade of gray, though his silk tie is royal blue and makes his eyes look ten times more striking than they already were.

“You look wonderful, Dean,” Castiel tells him.
Dean gnaws on his lip and lowers his eyes to the floor at that. He has started to look better since Cas found him, and even though his face and limbs are still too skinny, he’s put on a lot of much-needed weight. He looks fuller, though he might also look like he’s experimenting with some fad diet. Among Cas’ relatives, he’s not sure that that would be weird, even for a pregnant dude.

Dean coughs out, “Thanks. You too.”

On the elevator down to the main floor of the hotel, they’re joined by another one of Castiel’s brothers, one that makes Cas draw up and bristle like an animal on the defense.

“Who’s this, Castiel?” he draws out, looking entirely too pleased with himself. His eyes flick down to Dean’s belly and then back up to his face. He licks his lips. Dean tries not to snap at the guy to stop leering at him like he’s the dessert course, because he’s trying really, really hard not to humble either himself or Castiel.

Cas doesn’t answer right away, so Dean takes charge. He thrusts his hand out and says, “Dean Winchester.”

“Really?” this brother raises his eyebrows, “Winchester. That figures.”

“What do you mean?” Dean asks, and glances back at Cas.

“He’s referring to the fact that a well-known omega rights advocate and lawyer shares your surname,” Castiel says, “And neglected to tell you that he is named Lucifer.”

Lucifer is an alpha, all alpha. He smells like the kind of alpha that Dean is used to, not at all like Cas, who’s strong and gentle and comforting. Lucifer reeks of testosterone and barely-contained lust, a heavily-perfumed, unexploded bomb. He also seems just as frustrated as they both are to be corralled into this marital nightmare.

The elevator dings when it settles down on the lowest level. Lucifer gives them a grin that makes Dean shift uncomfortably and says, “Pleasure, boys,” before stepping away from them in quick, clicking paces.

“What did he mean?” Dean asks, “When he said that it figured that I was named Winchester.”

Cas shuffles and grabs at the back of his neck, frowning. He explains, “Well, as I said, there’s a well-known Winchester associated with omega rights. But my brother was referring to my own involvement in the omega rights movement. It’s part of why my family dislikes me so greatly, that I have regard for people that they consider lower than they believe I stand, traditionally speaking.”

Dean makes a face, “You’re into omega rights?”

Cas nods.

“Huh.”

He doesn’t know why that surprises him. He knows that there are plenty of alphas that worked hard decades ago to help get omegas the vote, knows that some alphas even work and volunteer with rape crisis centers and march in walks. That Castiel may be one of these alphas is strange news, even though Castiel has done nothing but treat Dean with respect since he picked him up off the side of the road.

Christ. Dean can’t help but feel like one lucky son of a bitch knowing that out of all the people that could have picked him up, all the places he could have ended up in, that it turned out to be with a
former-doctor alpha involved in omega rights. That is the luckiest goddamn shit he has ever heard.

Cas leads them into a wide, spacious dining room. The tables are covered in white cloths and expensive-looking plate settings, cutlery shining in the intentionally dim lights. They give their names to some dude in a snazzy waiter kind of getup and he escorts them past clumps of people and to the long table at the head of the room.

Oh, jeez.

Dean prays he doesn’t screw this up.

Castiel keeps his hand at the small of Dean’s back until they take their seats, and then drapes his arm around the back of the chair. No more than two seconds after they arrive, a middle-aged woman in pantsuit approaches them, crystal glass of chardonnay clutched in one manicured hand.

“Castiel,” she greets, and then actually freaking *air kisses* Cas’ cheeks.

“Mother,” Castiel says stiffly.

Oh shit.

Her attention shifts to Dean. From what he’s heard of this woman, he should probably be pants-shittingly scared right now. Instead, he keeps his chin up and levels his eyes at her. He can smell Castiel’s concern.

“So, you must be my son’s mystery mate,” she drawls.

“Yes, ma’am,” he says.

“Hmm, so polite,” she says, voice cloying and sickly sweet, “What is his name, Castiel?”

“Dean Winchester,” Dean says.

She lifts a well-plucked brow at him and says, “I don’t believe that I asked you. I asked my son.”

“Do not start, mother,” Castiel says, voice verging on a growl.

She brandishes her glass of wine at him and chides, “Don’t you growl at me. I am your mother. I deserve respect.”

“You will be treated with the same respect with which you treat Dean,” Castiel tells her, “and allow me to tell you that you’re already on thin ice.”

She sighs and takes a sip from her glass. With a disappointed shake of her head, she says, “I can see that you won’t be behaving this evening. All I ask is that you see that your omega *does* behave. You may be able to get away with your impertinence, Castiel, but I won’t tolerate being back-talked by your unfortunate-looking omega whore. Enjoy the evening, will you?” With that, she wanders to the other end of the table and takes a seat like she didn’t say a word out of line.

“I am so sorry,” Castiel says, “My mother. Naomi. She doesn’t look kindly on omegas. It’s embarrassing.”

Dean keeps his mouth shut. If he doesn’t, he’s going to break Cas’ mom’s rule about omegas behaving.

The dinner begins a handful of minutes later, when a dark-haired, suave alpha leads a blond waif of
an omega into the dining room. Castiel explains that the alpha is his eldest brother, Michael, which means that the omega hanging off of his arm must be his intended – Lilith. Both of them eye Dean when they’re introduced by Castiel. He doesn’t talk, because he’s picked up now on the fact that he isn’t expected to. He’s landed in some archaic, traditionalist hellhole. God help him.

Dean couldn’t feel less like he belongs when Michael says a few words of thanks about his and Lilith’s families gathering together, and asks them all to bow their heads in prayer. He shoots a panicked glance at Castiel, and Cas slips a hand into Dean’s. He murmurs, "Just play along," and so Dean closes his eyes obediently as Michael rattles off standard stuff about thanking God for their food and delving into gratitude for Christ. It’s all standard junk that he’s heard before, until Michael also starts praying about showing "lost omegas" the way back to the light, to their duties they were born into as Eve was an omega and sinned for all of them. It sets his teeth on edge to hear it, the same crap he’s heard all his life from politicians attempting to restrict omega rights and delegate decision-making to alphas.

Seldom has he felt such relief like the relief he feels when Michael says, "In your name we pray, amen," and the chorus of amen from the rest of the dining room. When he opens his eyes, Castiel shoots him an apologetic look.

But hey, if there's anyone that should be able to understand what it's like to want to have nothing to do with your roots, it's Dean. So he squeezes Cas’ hand before he breaks their fingers apart, and hopes that suffices as a show of support.

The food proves to be the best part of the entire fiasco. Dean orders the filet mignon and a metric fuckton of potatoes to go with it. Both he and the pup are dying by the time their plate is set steaming before them, and he digs in with abandon.

Castiel’s uncle-slash-stepdad (apparently the man swooped in after Cas’ biological dad kicked it) Zachariah eyes Dean from his place several seats down the table. Dean pretends not to hear him say, “Good gracious, what kind of omega did Castiel get pregnant?” and keeps eating, a little messier, because now he’s intent upon being a shit.

Castiel’s on his third glass of wine. Dean doesn’t notice until Cas sways in his seat and exhales just enough breath for Dean to smell the sour tang on his tongue. Glancing to check if anybody’s looking at them, he subtly props Cas up with his palm. He murmurs, “You’re kind of a lightweight, ain’t you?”

“Kind of,” Castiel says. He still orders another glass of wine to polish off the main course, and a fifth when they’re served dessert. Apparently, Dean is supposed to deny himself the luxury of dessert out of some weird-ass need to play along with omega diet theater. He refuses, and doesn’t give even half a shit when everyone stares at him cutting into his slice of fancy pie.

Besides, he needs to keep up his strength for the round of escorting-drunk-alpha that he’s going to be doing as soon as this crap is done with.

There’s mingling to be done after they finish eating, but only a few minutes into conversation with one of Lilith’s relatives – some kid named Del with thick glasses – the pup settles right into Dean’s bladder and he finds himself sprinting across the banquet hall to escape to the little omegas’ room.

“Couldn’t cut dad a break for a night, could you?” mutters Dean, and fumbles with the fly of his dress slacks. He lets out a long sigh of relief when at last he empties the contents of his bladder into one of the pristine urinals in the omega restroom. It’s a pretty upscale deal in here. There’s even some bespectacled dude with a basket of intricately folded hand towels who’s trying not to look Dean in the eye as he relieves himself.
The soap doesn’t come in plastic dispensers, but in some kind of seashell-encrusted ceramic pumps beside each sink. It’s strong stuff, lemony-sage junk that Dean’s hands will probably smell like for a week. He accepts a towel from the dude in the corner and dries his fingers.

Wait. You’re supposed to tip these guys, aren’t you? Shoot, he doesn’t have any money.

“I don’t have any cash on me,” Dean says stupidly, when he hands back the dirty towel, “Let me run out and grab some from my alpha.”

“Sure, kid,” the guy gruffly says.

But whatever. Dean’s not a liar, even if he’s lots of other shitty things. He finds Cas laughing into some kind of cocktail with his smarmy brother Gabriel. He coughs and tugs at the hem of Cas’ suit jacket.

“Yes, Dean?”

“There’s some towel dude in the bathroom,” Dean says, “I think you’re supposed to tip them but I don’t have anything.”

Cas hands off his cocktail to Gabriel, who takes a discreet sip off of the top while Castiel drunkenly fumbles with his pockets and pulls out his leather wallet. He scratches his head and says, “Here,” and hands a hundred bill to Dean.

“Um. This is a hundred,” Dean says lamely.

“Yes it is,” agrees Castiel, “Go…do the thing.”

“All right. If you’re sure,” Dean hesitates and looks to Gabriel, “You saw him just throw a hundred at me, right? You’ll back me up if he forgets about doing this, right?”

“Sure thing, Dean-o,” Gabe agrees. He winks and takes another sip from Cas’ drink.

The bathroom-towel-guy looks surprised to see Dean again, and even more shocked to see such a big bill passed to him.

“This is a lot, kid,” he says.

Dean shrugs, “That’s what I said to him.”

He eyes Dean and guesses, “Mated into money, hm?”

“Not on purpose,” Dean says. And fine, he can be insulted. But he doesn’t like it when people insult Cas, because Cas is good. Cas doesn’t deserve the shit that his relatives and random-ass towel guys in fancy hotel bathrooms give him. He can’t say he loves Cas, because he hardly even knows him. But certainly he at least gives a shit about him, and giving a shit about somebody is the first step toward caring about them.

He can’t decide if caring about Castiel is a can of worms that he’s willing to open.

When Dean walks out of the bathroom, he smacks into somebody – Lucifer.

“Um. Hi,” he says.

“Hey there, Dean,” Lucifer smiles, “You know, you look awfully familiar. I think we may have a mutual acquaintance.”
“Probably not,” Dean hedges, “I don’t have a lot of friends.” Or any at all, except for Castiel.

“Oh, I think we do,” Lucifer says, “Do you know a man by the name of Alastair?”

The blood drains from Dean’s face. All at once he sees cold, hard eyes and feels knot after knot inside him. He feels leather splitting the skin of his back and thighs, the weight of manacles around his wrists, the heat of shame through every inch of his body when he remembers everything he did, how many alphas he presented to…the person he let Alastair turn him into.

A smile stretches Lucifer’s mouth. He cocks his head and remarks, “Ah. That’s what I thought.”

Dean shoves past him and walks briskly back into the dining room, humiliation filling his face. His whole body feels heavy.

“Cas,” he says when he steps back up beside him, “Can we please go?” He feels himself slip back into submission, asking to go back to the room instead of telling Cas that that’s what they’re doing.

Even totally plastered, Cas must gather that something’s wrong, because he sways a little on his feet and says, “Dean, are you all right?”

Dean shakes his head.

Castiel stumbles and announces to Gabriel with a tip of his empty cocktail glass, “Dean,” – he belches – “Dean and I are going upstairs. Tell mother that the pup is bothering Dean, will you? We’re indisposed.”

“Got your back, little brother,” Gabriel says, and claps Castiel’s shoulders.

Getting to the room is a process. Anxiety tingles from the tips of his fingers to the corners of his mind and Castiel can’t walk straight. He babbles on all the way to the elevator and keeps asking if Dean is okay, asks what happened, asks if there’s anything that he can do. Dean hushes him and shoulders Cas’ weight the entire distance to the suite. He takes the key card and slides it in.

The suite is a welcome sight to Dean after the night’s events, though above this he’d prefer being back miles inside of the Rockies in Castiel's house, tucked up underneath the covers in Cas' bed, where it smells like them and he can garner comfort beyond hotel bleach, air fresheners, and the salt-scent of the air that comes through the windows. He closes the suite’s door behind them awkwardly, trying to keep Castiel up on his feet and navigate around his his portruding belly getting in the way of everything.

When Castiel breaks from Dean's grip, he promptly trips his way to the bathroom, hangs his head over the toilet bowl, and vomits.

“Much better,” he says to the watery mess, “Dean, what happened?”

“It’s nothing,” Dean mutters, “You can’t hold your liquor, can you, alpha?”

“I dislike my family,” Castiel moans, cheek pressed against the toilet bowl.

“Yeah, me too,” Dean mutters, “Maybe we should start a club.”

Cas looks up at him, and a dose of guilt fills Dean immediately. He shouldn’t keep the truth, his truth, from Cas. Not all of it, at least. He should tell him about where he came from, where he’s been. He exhales and lowers his body onto the bathroom tile beside Castiel, sitting with his legs criss-crossed. He loosens his tie and casts it onto the bathroom counter before he dares to speak.
“S’okay,” Dean says, “I come from a shitty family too. My brother wasn’t so bad, but...he was an alpha like the rest of you guys. Omega gets hurt, they must’ve done something to deserve it. I did something stupid years back, landed me with a pimp and a damn hormone chip in my leg. Figure my family would say that’s my fault.”

“It’s not,” Castiel says, eyes glassy with drink, but still serious.

“It is, though,” Dean says.

Castiel shakes his head, “No. No, don’t think that, Dean.”

“Cas.”

“Whoever hurt you – I will kill them,” Castiel says. He bares his teeth and says into the toilet bowl, “Kill ‘em. You are good. Righteous. Anyone that hurt you…I can’t understand them.”

Dean lifts his brows, and after a beat, he rests his hand on Castiel’s back. The pungent smell of vomit still fills the bathroom and Castiel’s breaths echo, labored and frustrated as he hugs the toilet. He runs his palm over Cas’ spine. He hasn’t tried to comfort anyone in a long time. He used to try, back at Alastair’s, used to try and soothe the newer omegas trapped there. After a while, he gave up, except maybe if you count Kevin. But Dean doesn’t know if Kevin’s even still alive.

Now, here he is, rubbing the back of an inebriated alpha in a hotel bathroom.

“You’re really something,” Dean says.

He exhales, and after a second, he lets his head drop to Cas’ shoulder.
Cheap Wrappings of Lies

Chapter Notes

Warning for mentions of past rape

Chapter Track: Israel – Siouxsie & the Banshees

Cheap Wrappings of Lies

Castiel’s head pounds and his stomach rolls around inside him like a marble when he wakes. The mélange of scents that greets him brings him comfort, though – sweet, pregnant omega…Dean, freshly laundered sheets…but mostly Dean. He rolls onto his side and gathers Dean into his arms without thinking, pulling him in close so that he can scent all along him, from his neck (Good God, how he’d love to bite that neck) to against his collarbone, down to his pregnancy-sensitive nipples and then to the pup. He snuffles in the sweet scent, intoxicated and satisfied, so happy that he doesn’t realize that this isn’t the typical interaction that he and Dean allow between one another.

“Mornin’ to you too,” Dean murmurs.

“Sorry,” Castiel grunts, and starts to pull away.

Dean, however, pulls Castiel back and presses into him. He’s scenting him back, pressing his nose against Cas’ skin and breathing it in. He rubs his back and asks, “You okay?” in that gruff, soft-spoken way that Castiel has become accustomed to hear from the omega.

Sometimes, he thinks that Dean once was loud.

He’d like to help Dean be loud again.

“Lightheaded,” he at last answers. He doesn’t add what else he’s thinking, which is your smell makes me feel better. That is a sentiment shared only between mates, and while Dean may be playing the role of his mate for this week, Castiel knows well enough not to blend reality and the show that he’s putting on for his family.

Lord, but the smell of pregnant omega is powerful. Having Dean’s scent all over him makes him feel strong. He didn’t know he could get drunk on the aroma of omega like other alphas always seem to. No one but Dean has made him feel that way, the need to roll around in the sheets and fuck somebody into oblivion merely because they smell so delightful.

“Let’s order up breakfast,” Castiel mumbles into Dean’s hair. They could use a little luxury in between the torture that is enduring wedding events with Castiel’s family. Lilith’s family seems no better than the Novak clan, which is hardly surprising. If she’s entering into an arranged marriage, never speaking unless spoke to, eyes always demurely lowered at the ground, she is, as his mother would say, "a trained omega," bred into wealth and good behavior. Castiel knows she likely has never had another option but obedience.

If Dean was truly his mate, he’d never want a mate like that. He wants a mate that is also his equal, quirks of their bodies aside.
At that dangerous train of thought, Castiel makes himself roll out of the bed, away from Dean and that stupid scent. His headache immediately pounds back into him, and Castiel tips back a couple aspirin from the bottle that he packed in his suitcase before he tosses Dean’s vitamin bottle at him and reaches for the phone to dial for room service.

A shower and a change of fresh clothes later, Castiel greets the room service attendant with a dose of cash and a generous tip. They could eat at the little table that their suite affords them, but he instead opts to bring the tray of food back to bed, where Dean sits against his pillows with Castiel’s laptop settled in his lap.

When Castiel peers around to see what’s on the computer monitor, he sees Dean focused on an intense game of online Tetris, and laughs a little. He places the tray on an undisturbed part of the bed and lifts the lids of the silver dishes it is laden with, revealing scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, bowls of fresh fruit, and slices of French toast complete with powdered sugar and a little pitcher of syrup on the side. Dean drowns his toast in syrup and eats heartily, with renewed vigor and sloppiness much more like himself than the show of neatness that he put on during last night’s dinner.

Last night.

Castiel doesn’t remember very much after about his third or fourth glasses of wine, but little flashes of the night flood his mind like sunspots, of handing Dean money for some reason, and then of Dean looking panicked…

Before he can help himself, a growl bubbles up from his throat.

“Whoa there,” Dean says.

Castiel coughs and scratches his hand through his shower-damp hair, “I apologize. Dean, what happened last night? I recall that you were upset.”

Dean frowns and swallows a bite of egg. He complains, “Can’t I eat my breakfast first?”

Castiel nods. A hint of discomfort rolls off of Dean via scent, but his tense body says the most. He doesn’t want to discuss what occurred, but likely will if Castiel asks him to explain. Castiel dislikes the idea of forcing Dean out of information that he is uncomfortable giving, so he instead opts to prompt an information exchange.

“You may have gathered I’m estranged from my family for the most part,” Castiel says, “I believe my invitation to this whole nonsense affair is due only to my mother’s effort to save face. I made quite a stir not very long ago and the social pages had a field day. My involvement in omega rights is what prompted the revocation of my medical license. Over the years I snuck domestic abuse victims, almost entirely omegas, out of the hospital and to my apartment until they could get on their feet. That’s why I have omega toys and medical supplies on hand. The hospital found out after a particularly aggressive alpha infiltrated the omega ward with a gun in search of his mate.”

“What happened?” Dean asks.

“Oh, his mate was long gone by then,” Castiel says, and reaches for the cup of coffee that he ordered for his own meal. He mixes in cream from the stainless steel pot on the tray and takes a sip. The coffee is very, very good. If nothing else can be said for the trip, he can give his compliments to the coffee. And perhaps be content in that Dean allowed Castiel to groom him yesterday. He rolls his shoulders back and explains, “I worked with omega advocates to relocate abused omegas in shelters and safe houses, and that particular alpha’s mate was three states over by
the time he had a shotgun in my face.”

Dean stares and doesn’t say anything, just keeps eating. Castiel swirls his coffee and drinks a little more before he continues, “Anyway, there was an internal investigation of the hospital staff after that, and I was unfortunately found out. They gave me the boot, I moved from Denver to Buena Vista, and it is as you see it now.”

Dean has finished his breakfast, but he still doesn’t speak right away. He watches Castiel with careful eyes and then says, “I think if my mom was alive, things might’ve been different.”

Castiel reaches over and starts to stroke his fingers through Dean’s bedhead before he realizes what he’s doing. Dean doesn’t bristle like he did in the hotel lobby, just leans into it. Small as the acceptance of Castiel’s grooming is, it makes him soar inside. Dean lets Castiel arrange his hair into something neater than the nest he woke with and continues, “My mom, she was alpha, dad was beta. She carried me, which I know is weird, but I guess after some fertility treatment she caught, you know? Part of the whole thing was that my dad had this huge alpha complex, like he was so pissed that he was a beta. Mated himself to a beautiful alpha, figured they’d have some strong alpha kids. Everything pointed to me being an alpha. I’ve always been tall, always loved food, always been loud…got my first heat at fourteen, and it was all over. After that, I was just an embarrassment.”

“What about your brother?” Castiel finds himself asking. This morning has been an interesting test of his ability to control his curiosities and desires, and thus far he seems to have failed preventing himself from stupidity in each of those categories.

“Sammy,” Dean sighs, “Dunno. He was just a kid. Sometimes he said shit…I mean, I guess if you worked with omegas, you’ve heard the stories. The first time it happened was on my seventeenth birthday. I knew my heat was comin’ in a couple of days but I went out anyway. Guess the guy could smell it on me, ‘cause he knotted me in alley and – and you know, the usual shit. Called me his little bitch. Told me to stop struggling, stop pretending I didn’t want his knot. As soon as he was finished up I grabbed a morning after pill from the pharmacy, took the first half and went home. Sammy laughed when he smelled alpha on me and grumbled about how much I slept around. I couldn’t tell him what happened. Doubt he’d believe me anyway.”

Sam Winchester.

Dean’s brother is named Sam Winchester? That means –

The young prodigy lawyer that’s been making such a brouhaha all across the nation is Dean’s brother. Sam Winchester already has won a landmark case in California for omega rights, one that likely will escalate to the Supreme Court. He established that in California it is not lawful for an omega’s rapist to sue for custody of any pup born of what they did.

Castiel had had a celebratory drink when he read the article that the case had been won in favor of the omega. Omega rights activists worldwide celebrated. It meant a step closer to equality, and even the smallest step makes him giddy.

Perhaps he shouldn’t tell Dean just yet.

“He was only thirteen,” Dean says, “It’s hard to be angry at him. I dunno. I’m not angry as much as I’m scared shitless that if he found out about all the crap I’ve been through now he’d just laugh and say the same shit, talk about how many alphas I had and what a slut I am. Or whatever.”

A crushing feeling of sadness snaps over Castiel’s heart like a bear trap and wrecks him underneath.
his ribs. He keeps his hand in Dean’s hair, keeps grooming, because it’s the only way he knows how to show that he’s so sorry, so sad for the demons in Dean’s head. The demons that he wishes he could pull away but can’t.

“I doubt…anything feels okay right now,” Castiel slowly says, “But I believe you, and whatever happened, know that none of it was your fault.”

“Cas, I appreciate that, but the crap that I did –”

“You did what you had to do to survive, Dean,” Castiel cuts in, “and that is all you could do.”

Silence falls between them, thick and uncomfortable in the wake of Dean’s confessions. Feeling grooming between them no longer appropriate, Castiel removes his hand from Dean’s hair and lets it fall back to his coffee cup. When he drinks, the liquid is lukewarm and difficult to swallow. He sets it back onto the tray and stands with the empty plates, placing them on their coffee table for easy access for the maid service.

“Hey, Cas?” he hears.

Dean’s voice is timid again, rough with emotion.

Castiel pokes his head around the partition between the living room and the suite’s bedroom.

“Um,” Dean starts, “About why I was freaked. Last night.”

He pauses and lets those few words fester between them, until Castiel urges, “Yes?”

“Your…Lucifer,” Dean fidgets with his hands in his lap, refusing to look Castiel in the eye. All over again he’s that timid, terrified omega that Castiel found walking along the side of the road in the rain. He swallows and quietly says to his knees, “he was talking to me after dinner. He, um. He knew the guy. That kept me…locked up. My pimp. I guess. I don’t know. Lucifer knew me.”

Anger, thick and white hot, splashes over Castiel and burns his skin, bringing blood and boils to the surface. A low, furious growl rumbles in the back of his throat and his fists clench. Lucifer. Lucifer threatened Dean.

He is going to rip his throat out. On impulse, Castiel reaches for his coffee mug and hurls it across the suite, where it smashes against a generic panting and shatters into a million pieces, splashing coffee over the artwork and the beach-toned wall.

“I’m sorry,” Dean says automatically, and starts inching back away from Castiel.

“Don’t be,” Castiel says, “I’m going to fucking kill him.”

“What?”

You’re my mate, he thinks. Nobody threatens my mate.

*Protectprotectprotectprotect.*

His mate *and* his pup. Ties of brotherhood be damned, Castiel will split Lucifer’s skull in half and drink wine from it. Furiously, he stalks toward the suite door. Dean is hot on his trail, follows him out the door and toward the back stairs, which will be much more efficient in getting Castiel down to the bar, where Lucifer is undoubtedly enjoying a cocktail.

It will be his last cocktail.
“Cas!” Dean exclaims.

The sounds and scent of his omega in distress is enough to rip him from his rage. He glances behind him and sees Dean padding behind him in his pajamas and bare feet, stomach stretching the front of his t-shirt. Castiel pops a kink out of his neck and explains, “Dean. It’s my job to protect you –”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Dean demands in a whisper, “We’re not mates, not for real. You don’t have to protect anybody. I just thought you should know that your brother is a grade-A douchebag.”

They’re causing a scene.

Like a bird shot out of the sky, Dean sends Castiel crashing back into reality with a bang. A sweat breaks on his forehead and he feels sick to his stomach. It’s the rejection, he knows it is. Because despite Castiel’s brain knowing better than to call Dean and Dean’s pup his own, his body thinks that they are his. They inhabit a space together, sleep in the same bed, share the same food. Castiel provides for Dean and cares for him and his idiot alpha head thinks that means that he’s claimed ownership over him. He acted on instinct alone, something that he didn’t know he was capable of doing. He’s always been able to think things through.

“Shit,” Castiel says, and sways on his feet. Swiftly, he makes his way past Dean and back toward the suite, whose door is ajar. He scrambles to the bathroom and vomits up his coffee and breakfast into the toilet, groaning.

He smells Dean before he sees him, and the scent has him hurling again. His omega rejected him. Shit, shit, shit.

“So sorry,” Castiel moans.

“Dude, what the hell just happened?” Dean asks.

Has Dean honestly not once seen this? Castiel groans and runs a hand back through his hair. He smells like sweat and sick, and he can tell it’s making Dean’s stomach turn just like his.

“Sorry,” Castiel repeats.

“Look, I get the alpha posturing shit. Been there, done that,” Dean says, “Is this ‘cause you’re hungover?”

“No,” Castiel answers. On shaking legs he stands. He reaches for a hand towel and wets it under the sink, running the cool terrycloth over his face to wipe away sweat and the film of bile on his chin. He fumbles with the tiny mouthwash sample bottle and swishes back the entire thing, spitting an aqua-colored combination of mint and vomit into the sink. He watches it swirl down the drain when he runs the faucet, and sighs.

“It is unfortunately a condition,” Castiel says. He’d rather not own up to his humiliating fate, but it would be unfair to Dean to be dishonest. So he continues, “I assume you’ve heard of false pregnancy? It is a condition some omegas suffer.”

Dean nods.

“This is – related,” Castiel says, “It’s. A false mating.”

“A what now?”
“A false mating,” Castiel says, and braces himself against the mirror. He watches Dean’s reflection react to that. Instead of the immediate disgust he expects, Dean’s brows sweep together and his face forms into something much more like confusion.

“Wait,” Dean says, “Let me get this straight. Your body thinks we’re mated?”

“Yes,” Castiel replies, “Unfortunately. I apologize.”

“Oh,” is about all that Dean can manage, “And you’re all fucked up like you’re my actual alpha and I just sent you packing.”

“Yes.”

“Shit, dude,” Dean says, “I’m sorry.”

“I’ll work past it,” Castiel says, and tries to crack a reassuring smile at Dean. He’s never attempted to work past a false mating before, and as he’s told Dean, psychology was never his forte – he was never the doctor that helped people get through a case of _pseudoamoris_.

“Whoa, whoa,” Dean catches Castiel when he sways a little and says, “No. It’s cool. I can go along.”

“That is so unhealthy, Dean, I cannot begin to tell you what a terrible idea that is,” Castiel replies.

“Look, buddy, we don’t have time to find you a therapist in fucking Malibu for whatever the shit your body’s decided to do, so we’re just gonna have to make do,” Dean says, and steps forward. His fingers twitch in midair for a half-second before he drops them to Castiel’s hair and runs them through.

_Ah, God._ Grooming.

Castiel lets out a whimper before he can cut the noise off, and Dean chuckles.

“Yeah, you totally want my nuts,” Dean says, a smirk plastered across his face, “S’okay. I can play along for a while.”

Castiel watches as Dean licks his lips to wet them. His heart pumps blood faster than it ever has before outside of exercise as his omega swings just a little closer. Just another inch and…

Dean kisses him.

God, it’s the sweetest thing that he has ever had the pleasure of tasting. Castiel cups Dean’s face in his hands and kisses him back stroking along the inside of his delicious mouth with tongue, wanting to feel this mouth all over his body, licking a mating mark, or stretched wide by a knot as he comes down Dean’s pretty throat.

Shit shit shit.

Ah well, too late now. He has an erection the size of a skyscraper inside his pants, and he can’t be damned to care.

When the perfect, wonderful aroma omega slick fills the air around them, Castiel lets out a groan and tears their bodies apart. He holds Dean away from him at an arm’s length and says, “Good God, Dean. I. Thank you. That was lovely. We should not take this any further. I am very much losing control over myself at the moment.”
“If you say so,” Dean says, and cocks his head, “You kiss like a pro, though. Good work, dude.” He slaps Cas on the shoulder and laughs, and Cas manages to get out a soft chuckle at that. The toll the rejection took on his body starts to retreat, replaced gradually by the comfort of mate.

“So, um,” Dean coughs, “What does this deal mean for the pup?”

“Just that my body is convinced it’s mine,” Castiel sighs.

Dean whistles, “No wonder you went so alpha-fucked so fast. Your instincts are whacked out thinking your brother threatened your family? That sucks. Hey, if it helps, go ahead and yell at him or something. Just…don’t kill him. It’s probably taboo to kill somebody at your brother’s wedding. But uh, that’s just a guess there.”

Castiel genuinely laughs then, alpha in him comforted by the thought of getting in his brother’s face and defending what’s his.

Minemineminemineminemine.

Castiel huffs out a long, tired exhale, and he rests one hand on the back of Dean’s neck, pulling him forward just enough to press a gentle kiss to the center of his forehead.

“When to get ready.”

“Super,” Dean bites out, “I’m sure today will be a hoot.”

It will, if nothing else, be a story to tell.

X

The afternoon’s festivities include two exciting but separate events: Michael’s bachelor party, and Lilith’s bachelorette party. Castiel is to attend that bachelor function downstairs in the same room that last night’s dinner was held in, while Dean is to accompany Lilith’s bridesmaid entourage and the other omegas out on the town.

Both of them are miserable at the prospect.

“Cas, no offense, but that Lilith broad is fucking terrifying and I wanna come back from this shindig alive, thank you very much,” Dean says, and frowns at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Both events are casual dress, and so Dean’s opted for clothes that bring him comfort – his sturdy jeans, a t-shirt, and the leather jacket.

“You look good,” Castiel says.

Dean huffs and shakes his head. He replies, “You think you’re mated to me. That means you’re supposed to think I look good.”

“I thought you looked good before this problem arose.”

Dean eyes Castiel crotch and then jokes, “Well, something arose, that’s for sure.”

“Dean,” Castiel warns.

Dean just laughs to himself. His eyes crinkle at the corners when he does that, and it makes Castiel turn to butter on the inside. He wants to kiss the lines at the corners of Dean’s eyes, kiss each freckle that the days out on the hammock have granted Dean’s face, and finish at his lips, tasting him until –
“Careful there, alpha,” Dean says, and pats his arm, “Might be weird if you show up to a thing with a bunch of other alphas with a huge, honkin’ knot all up in your undies.”

“A fair point,” Castiel agrees, and ducks out of the bathroom to scent the upholstery and rid himself of the Dean scent that’s all over his skin.

Reluctantly they part ways in the lobby, where sweet-faced, well-bred omegas loop around Lilith in a quiet, unassuming circle, all decked out in mostly pastels and floral prints. Dean shoots a look of terror back at Castiel, and Castiel returns this with an awkward thumbs up. Dean does look out of place among the other omegas – mostly women, though two men in sweater vests loiter among them – but Castiel wouldn’t have it any other way. If his omega (not his omega, another part of his brain echoes) fit in with Michael’s bride, he would feel intensely uncomfortable.

Michael, his soon-to-be-mate, and her friends represent a part of Castiel's past that he thought he left behind long ago. He doesn't delude himself into believing that the airs the omegas put on are their true personalities. They're trained into being mating material for wealthy alphas. Archaic, but a practice of the rich and of his family nonetheless. Logically, Castiel knows that each of these omegas has something different under their pressed-and-pretty wrappings, but he doesn't know that Dean knows that.

Despite the close proximity that he and Dean coexist within, Castiel knows little of him and even littler of Dean's past. The impression remains that Dean never grew up being taught what Lilith was taught, or what her wedding party was taught.

Castiel doesn’t turn his back until the tour bus meant to carry the omegas arrives at the front of the Inn, and he sees Dean climb on after the parade of pastels. He doesn't know if he feels more sorry for Dean or for the other omegas.

When he enters the room, it is much changed from the previous night. Only a few tables are set out in the center of the hall, and the prevalent scents in the air are alpha (a mere undertone of beta following that), Cuban cigars, and well-aged scotch. At least the scotch will agree with him. As he walks in, he picks Gabriel and Balthazar sticking together against the posh, elite set of friends that Michael has invited to his wedding party. Castiel makes his way to them, but is intercepted by Michael.

“Hello, Castiel,” he says.

“Hello,” Castiel replies.

Michael smiles, “It’s wonderful to see you after all this time.”

“Is it?” Castiel asks.

“Of course,” Michael replies, though there’s something off in the toothy grin of his as he leans forward and pulls Castiel into what must be the world’s least relaxed embrace. Castiel clears his throat and gives a ginger, stilted pat to Michael’s shoulder before Michael releases him. His brother continues speaking as Castiel tries to edge away to his least disagreeable relatives, “Your omega is...quite the interesting choice.”

“My mate is, indeed, interesting,” Castiel mumbles. He would like to avoid an altercation with Michael at all costs.

“I hope you didn’t pick up some other alpha’s stray,” Michael remarks, “You certainly smell mated, but knowing your history...”
“If you insult my mate or my pup again, I will hit you,” Castiel says.

Michael chuckles, “Of course. Just – see that your toy behaves for the rest of the party, hm?”

“Of course,” Castiel says, and only because he hopes it will get his overbearing elder brother out of his hair.

“Good man,” Michael says, and claps Castiel’s shoulder before he crosses the room to speak to some other alpha that Castiel vaguely recognizes as a college acquaintance.

Castiel breathes a sigh of relief and joins Gabriel and Balthazar, where he requests two fingers of scotch from one of the beta wait staff. He just needs something to tide him over, to get him through this hell of an evening.

“What’d Michael want?” asks Gabriel.

“Oh, the typical,” Castiel says, and accepts his alcohol a moment later, tipping back enough expensive scotch for warmth to bloom in his chest, “He was making judgments on my mate, just like the rest of you.”

Gabriel cocks a brow and Balthazar barks out a laugh. Balthazar says, “Oh, Cassie. Your mate is the talk of the entire wedding. Michael and Lilith are likely just upset that you’ve stolen their thunder with a giant, leather-jacket-wearing, pup-carrying omega under your arm. I was certainly diverted. Anyhow, gentlemen, I see some canapés in the corner calling my name. Wish me luck in that I will not be trapped in conversation with any of Michael’s buffoons, hm?”

“A safe journey to you, soldier,” Gabriel says, and salutes. Castiel rolls his eyes.

As soon as Balthazar is out of earshot, Gabriel asks under his breath, “Dude, kid, you really do smell mated. What’s the deal? You and Dean actually tie the knot? If you know I mean.”

“Gabriel,” Castiel says, “Could you be appropriate for the space of five minutes? Would that kill you?”

“I’m not sure,” Gabriel answers, “But I don’t want to take the chance, you know? Knot knot knot knot knot.”

Charming.

Gabe stretches his arms above his head and then says, “I’m for real here, though. You smell like mate city.”

“I’m suffering from pseudoamoris,” Castiel mutters.

Gabriel clears his throat and says, “I’m afraid you’re gonna have to explain that to me without the doc-talk.”

“False mating.”

“Oh, you sorry son of a bitch,” Gabriel says, and then laughs. He doubles over and slaps his knee, letting out a long guffaw before he rolls back up to his full height and pats Castiel’s shoulder. He says, “Man, that’s rough, buddy. Good fuckin’ luck with that.”

“I appreciate your sarcastic tone, Gabriel. It fills me with joy.”

“Pot, meet kettle,” Gabriel replies, “Ah, shit. Luci’s coming this way. Gotta piss, and you’re on
your own.”

Castiel discreetly brandishes his middle finger as Gabriel skips away toward the restrooms and he’s cornered by Lucifer.

“Castiel,” Lucifer says, and holds his arms open for a hug.

Castiel downs the rest of his scotch and says, “Lucifer, do you truly expect me to embrace an alpha that threatened my mate and my pup?”

Lucifer’s arms drop down slowly. He folds them over his chest and hums, “Interesting.”

“Interesting, what?”

“You are aware of your little mate’s history, or aren’t you?” Lucifer asks, “You know he’s a whore. How many alphas have bent over your omega whore and fucked him. How much seed they’ve pumped into his slutty little body. I don’t doubt he’s at it as we speak. You think he’s the kind of pervert that fucks other omegas?”

Castiel sets the crystal scotch glass aside on the nearest table. He won’t punch Lucifer and nor will he kill him, no matter how strong the temptation to do so, because Dean asked him not to. Instead, he creeps as close as he can to his brother and pulls him up by the collar of his t-shirt. He snarls into Lucifer’s face and says, “You listen to me, Lucifer, and you listen well. If I ever hear you speak of my mate like that again and I will bring you to my home. I will release you into the woods just to hunt you down and shoot you, and after I clean your bones and cook your meat in my kitchen, I will turn you into taxidermy just so I can set fire to your skin. Do you understand me?”

Lucifer doesn’t so much as blink, but the scent of caution and anger leaks out of him. Even if Lucifer is in full control of his body, his aroma betrays him.

“That is dark, Castiel,” Lucifer just says.

Castiel growls into Lucifer’s ear, “That is not what I asked you.”

“Yes, yes. I understand you,” Lucifer says, “Will you put me down? Your scent is killing me here.”

“Good,” Castiel snaps, but releases Lucifer anyway.

He prays that Dean’s night fares better than his.

X

Dean returns sullen and exhausted. He reports that he spent most of Lilith’s bachelorette party with his mouth shut, but only for Castiel’s sake. If Dean was his real mate, he’d take him to bed to show him just how grateful that show of generous self-control made him, preferably with both of them naked and tangled together.

Instead, Castiel draws Dean in with a hand on the back of his neck again, and kisses his temple. They order in dessert from the hotel kitchen – blueberry pie – and watch trash television until the end of the night, huddled close with scents mingling. Dean falls asleep on the suite’s couch and when it comes time for bed, Castiel ends up heaving Dean into his arms and tucking him under the covers. After he brushes his teeth and washes his face, he joins Dean, cuddled up as close to his omega as he feels he has consent to be.
They rest well that night, Dean going nightmare-free and Castiel roping his arms around Dean at some point during their sleep. When they wake they scent each other and curl up like the day before, though this time they make an appearance at the breakfast area downstairs, well-groomed and looking nice to save a little face for Castiel’s sake.

The rest proves needed later that evening, when they’re subject to the rehearsal dinner, and Dean can’t sit next to Castiel, because as Michael’s brother he’s an automatic part of the wedding party. He knows it puts Dean on edge and tries to send him looks of reassurance between Naomi maneuvering them all from place to place, barking out orders like a drill sergeant.

If Castiel needed convincing to avoid a formal wedding ceremony (he didn’t), this would have been it.

Again, were Dean his mate, he’d have fucked him into the mattress after they return from the dinner. Instead, they decide to do as they did the night previous, ordering in pie and relaxing in front of the flat screen television. But before they go to bed that night, Dean lets Castiel hold his hands against his belly to feel the pup kick.

He goes to sleep content.

To their relief, the wedding schedule allows for a day of rest between the rehearsal dinner and the ceremony itself. Castiel and Dean take the opportunity to explore the town on their own. Castiel insists upon some shopping, since Malibu contains a far more extensive selection of shopping venues than tiny Buena Vista, and Dean’s wardrobe begs some beefing up.

Despite his initial resistance, Dean appears to enjoy himself. He finds t-shirts emblazoned with the logos of his favorite bands in some alternative store and brings out at least a dozen, all of which Castiel purchases, because he seldom sees Dean so happy and the man deserves a damn reprieve from the bullshit that is Castiel’s family. At the same store Dean holds out a tiny piece of clothing at Castiel with a please on his lips.

It is a newborn-size onesie with the Batman logo across the front.

And how in heaven’s name is Castiel supposed to say no to that?

They break for lunch at a sandwich place, where Dean eats to his fill before they visit the beach, since the wedding won’t take place there.

“I’ve never seen the ocean ‘til now,” Dean says, when they step through the sand. Dean refuses to remove his hiking boots even when Castiel said he would get sand in them. Castiel, meanwhile, has his sandals in one hand and the cuffs of his jeans rolled up so that he can step in the water without getting the denim wet.

“Really?” Castiel says.

“Grew up in Kansas,” Dean shrugs, “Never enough money for a vacation, you know? Wait, I guess you wouldn’t know what that’s like.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“How you ever turned out to be such a non-shithead when everyone is in your family is a bag of dicks, I do not understand,” Dean says.

Castiel chuckles, “There are a lot of us. Somebody had to be the black sheep.”
“Guess so,” Dean says, “I mean, hey. There’s only me and Sammy, and I’m a black sheep too.”

“Birds of a feather, I suppose.”

“Sheep of a wool?” suggests Dean.

Castiel laughs again.

When they return to the Malibu Beach Inn, the sun has disappeared over the horizon. They dodge family members from both sides of the wedding party, opting to be recluses, and hole themselves up in the suite. They order in room service and watch a movie on demand on the TV. It’s one of the loveliest nights that Castiel has ever had with his family involved.

The morning of the wedding is chaos. Dean and Castiel wisely choose to slip away for breakfast in town while everyone else is up in arms about where this goes or where that person is, and where did the centerpieces go? Castiel wants no part of that, thank you very much. So they enjoy pastries together before they brave the maelstrom of the nuptials.

Once returned to the Malibu Beach Inn, Castiel is whisked off and shucked into his suit while Dean retreats to the suite to iron his things and dress for the ceremony on his own. It makes Castiel antsy, for which Gabriel teases him mercilessly, but he trusts Dean will be fine. Dean has been through much worse than this wedding, he tells himself. Much, much worse.

The air that surrounds Michael and the rest of them as groomsmen is almost grim, teetering on a stifling precipice of duty that already makes Castiel wish for the pre-reception cocktails, so he doesn’t have to think about how stupid all of this is. Still, he pastes on his best smile for his family’s behalf, and also because he doesn’t want to suffer any sort of angry interaction with his dragon of a mother.

When at last the ceremony begins, Castiel is starving and freezing his ass off in the air conditioned space outside of the hall, where the wedding is taking place.

Castiel is paired with one of the male omegas in Lilith’s bridesmaid entourage. He looks disappointed to be paired with one of the groomsmen that smells mated, and Castiel feels a little sorry for him, if only because he’s disillusioned. They enter the hall as practiced, to the soft roll of a vaguely familiar piano tune in place of a wedding march.

Michael stands at the alter beside a nervous-looking pastor, hair handsomely combed back on his head, but no smile on his face as any other groom might have. At the front, the groomsmen and bridesmaids split and stand on either side.

Lilith is admittedly a vision. She, like Michael, has the look of duty written on her face, but she does look everything that an alpha would want their omega to be. Petite and blonde and big-eyed, she carries a bouquet of gently colored flowers. When she reaches the alter, the pastor begins to speak.

Oh, Christ.

The man has no idea how to speak. Castiel knew the ceremony would be heavily Christian, as both his and Lilith’s families have strong roots in the religion. The least they could have done would be to find a pastor with any speaking ability whatsoever, but no. No, they chose a man that drones on and on about God and the role of a wedded and mated omega and alpha and blah, blah, blah.
Castiel finds himself searching the crowd for Dean, and eventually locates him near the back, squished between old beta biddies that he thinks may be distant aunts of his, but is not certain.

Dean catches his eye and makes an ugly face, sticking his tongue out at Castiel and pushing up his nose so it looks like a snout.

Castiel snorts. He almost makes a face back, but Lucifer elbows him, and he clears his throat, straightens his back, and tries to listen to the pastor and the vows.

Instead, he just watches Dean make more faces from his seat.
The reception was either the best part of the wedding or the worst part, and Dean still can’t decide. Cas got table dancing drunk again, although thankfully sans table dancing. Not that Dean would have minded a little of that in any other situation, but it seems ill-advised to do so at the arranged marriage of your older brother with your socially conservative, estranged family on the loose. On the other hand, he did get to meet Castiel’s hot beta sister and the only other sibling aside from Gabriel that remained in contact with Cas after all the shit when down at his hospital – Anna.

He strove diligently not to flirt with her, since he was supposed to play mate for Cas, and he thinks that he managed that. Hopefully he just came off as the feisty omega everybody keeps saying that he is.

But Dean is glad that it’s over, even if it means that he’s on another airplane, attached to Cas’ arm like a barnacle. Cas seems content that way, but of course he is. He’s under the influence of pseudoamoris or false mating or whatever the hell he’s calling it, and he smells satisfied as fuck with Dean hanging off of him.

Son of a bitch, he hates flying.

Again, Castiel orders a ginger ale for Dean from their flight attendant and Dean nervously sips at it, only garnering comfort from the mate pheromones curling off of Castiel’s skin. He can’t tell if that smell is because Cas thinks Dean is his mate, or because Dean’s starting to think the same.

Either way, he doesn’t deserve it.

When they land, he could kiss the ground. He doesn’t stop clingding, but he doesn’t care. He wants Cas right now and that’s just how it’s going to be until Dean is safe at home, away from flying metal death tubes and Cas’ traditionalist family that thinks of him as “Castiel’s omega whore.”

He’s home now.

Dean didn’t realize he thinks of Colorado, but more specifically Castiel’s house, as home until just now, in front of the baggage claim surrounded by the thousands of smells of mates and pups and travel exhausted business betas and college kids that haven’t had showers and preteens doused in cheap body spray. Castiel immediately senses Dean’s discomfort – he scents Dean’s neck and asks, “What’s wrong?”

Dean shakes his head, because he doesn’t want to talk about it. He knows that’ll grate on Cas, since Cas is in mate mode, but he doesn’t want to tell Cas that he thinks of this place as home when it might not be home later. It’s best to keep it all down just for safety’s sake. Not just for his own
safety, but for the safety of the pup as well. He could probably deal with having a home and having it snatched from him, but he wouldn’t do that to his own kid. He wants to believe Cas when he says that Dean can stay as long as he needs, but the only time he’s been allowed to stay someplace for a long time and know he was wanted there…was with Alastair.

He’d been beaten, kept in chains, drugged, assaulted, and raped – but Alastair wanted him. That’s more than Dean can say for his family. To them, he was a liability and a waste of space.

He doesn’t know what he is to Castiel.

Dean falls asleep during the drive back to Cas’ place. They stop once for gas and for a pee break, and even then Dean still needs to rush to the bathroom as soon as Castiel pulls his dumb Prius up to the house, because the pup can’t ease up on his organs.

It irritates him that he can’t help but walk into Cas’ house and smell home. Dean smells his own scent mingling with Castiel’s in every room, more keenly now that he’s been gone from that happy smell for a week.

And shit, God help him, he shouldn’t think of their combined aroma as a happy smell, but he does. Hell, Dean is happy here, period. Part of it is out of instinct, because there’s security here that Dean has never experienced before – he’s free to roam outside at his leisure, has reign of whatever in the house, and has a strong, tender-hearted alpha to crawl into bed with at the end of the night and scent and nestle against to his heart’s content. And don’t get him wrong, all of that shit is nice.

But it isn’t just that. If those things were all that are keeping him in this place, then he could push past it, tell biology to screw itself and that he’s not going to play the weak and needy omega. Of course that’s not the case. Thing is, Dean’s brain likes Cas as much as his instinct and his body. Cas is sexy, sure, but he’s other shit, too. Cas makes a great dinner, has this offbeat, dry sense of humor, and likes Star Wars and good music.

He’s also the polar opposite of every alpha dickhead that Dean’s ever come across, and if ever he dreamed up a mate in his youth, those qualities all were on the list of necessities.

“Dean?” Castiel says, and knocks on the bathroom door.

Dean snaps out of it, staring at his travel-worn expression in the mirror.

“Coming,” he says. He returns to the bedroom, only to retrieve his pajamas and return to the solitude of the bathroom to change. When he slips back into Cas’ room, Cas is already tucked up under the covers, eyes half-lidded.

“That was exhausting,” he murmurs when Dean wiggles under the blanket beside him. Cas’ scent and body heat flood his senses and he sighs happily, wanting to breathe it in more but feeling guilty at the desire.

“Mm,” he settles upon saying.

Cas buries his nose in Dean’s hair and mumbles, “I missed our bed.”

Our.

Our bed.

Dean should say something, but no words come out.
It turns out, however, that he doesn’t have to. His tenseness says enough for Castiel to ease up. His arms slide away and he says, “I apologize, Dean. I keep forgetting. I’ll make an appointment to see a therapist about the *pseudoamoris* tomorrow morning –”

“S’okay, Cas,” Dean rumbles, “Just sleep.”

Castiel looks like he might say something, but instead his sleepy alpha fits himself back up against Dean, snuffles along the skin on Dean’s throat, and settles there to rest for the night.

X

Dean does not deserve this alpha.

He wakes again to Castiel scenting him as he’s become accustomed to, the little bit of affection and comfort every morning that he craves all of and deserves none of. Besides, if Cas had a choice in the matter, Dean doubts he would choose *him* as a mate. It’s the false mating that makes him this way, not because he’d actually like an omega like Dean.

He’s damaged goods.

He knows that.

Dean has done terrible things, has had so many alphas knot him that he can’t count. Now he’s pregnant and doesn’t know what alpha is the father of his pup. He isn’t pliant or submissive like an omega should be, isn’t small or sweet-natured. He’s angry and tall and broad-shouldered and knocked up, every embarrassing thing for an omega to be. If Cas wasn’t sick, he’d be running as fast and far away from Dean as he could get.

Dean is an alpha’s nightmare.

The revelation sends him into a depressive funk, and Dean eats through his junk food way faster than anybody should be able to. He avoids Cas when he can, but still crawls into bed at the end of the day because it wouldn’t be fair to Cas to neglect him just because Dean feels like total and complete shit. He just has to remind himself that when he snuggles up to Cas it’s for Castiel’s sake and not his own, not because he’s seeking warmth and the sense of shelter that comes from settling in the arms of his alpha. It’s because Cas' condition won't be aggravated as long as he has Dean to scent and dote on. Dean tries not to enjoy the scenting and doting so much.

It hurts his brain and the space underneath his ribcage to remind himself that Castiel is not his alpha, he’s an alpha subject to Dean out of chance and misfortune and that’s entirely different than an alpha that actually wants him.

And since when has Dean needed an alpha anyway?

He hasn’t, it’s just that this time, he actually wants this one. Wants him, and doesn’t deserve him one single bit. Fuck it, he’s ashamed that he likes it so much that Cas pays attention to him. The only person that ever thought Dean was worth something was Alastair, and that’s because Dean has a nice ass and could earn a pretty penny if he presented it. Seems like Dean will do anything for a little show of attention, and that makes the guilt and shame burn low in his belly.

Meanwhile, Castiel appears to believe that Dean is worth something, or at least Cas’ false mating mindset has him believing that Dean’s worth it.

To Dean’s annoyance, withdrawing from the situation seems to encourage Castiel’s onslaught of affection even further. He grooms Dean whenever they cross paths, running his fingers through
Dean’s hair, arranging and rearranging it. He fusses and hovers. He makes certain that Dean takes his prenatal vitamin every morning with breakfast, and when Castiel cooks, he cooks an entire spread of food and makes Dean eat at least a bite of every dish.

“You have to keep the pup healthy,” insists Cas.

“We’re fine,” Dean says back, and curls his arms over his belly.

“Dean,” Castiel says, all exasperated alpha.

“Cas,” Dean imitates the authoritative alpha tone of voice.

This is how they end up where they are now: Dean watching on the sidelines while Castiel cleans out the storage room beside the guest bedroom, clearing it out to make way for the nursery, he says. He spends an entire afternoon bringing boxes downstairs and stacking them on top of one another around the edges of the basement where they’re out of the way.

And when Dean tries to help with the task, Castiel growls at him.

“Hey!” Dean snaps, “Don’t you growl at me, chuckles.”

“Sorry,” Castiel says, looking sheepish, “but no heavy lifting. I will not hear otherwise.”

When the room is clear it’s evident that the carpet needs vacuuming – but it’s perfect. Dean’s heart beats harder in his chest as he looks at the small space. He steps inside ahead of Castiel and imagines what it would be like with a crib across from the little rectangular window, a crib like the one that both he and Sammy slept in when they were just little pups themselves. Dean thinks about color on the walls, a shelf or two, where he’ll put the teddy bear Cas bought in town.

I will give you everything, pup, he tells it, and rubs over his pregnant stomach.

“It could use some paint,” observes Castiel behind him, “Perhaps when we purchase furniture you could pick out a color.”

“No pastels,” says Dean. He never did like the idea of having a typical, pastel-colored nursery in baby pinks and blues and soft, butter yellows. None of that appealed to him. He turns back to Castiel and swallows the bundle of nerves in his throat before he says, “Hey, um, Cas.”

“Yes?”

“How come – I just, this is so much,” he says, and tries to think of a way to explain the sick feeling he gets when Cas goes out of his way to take care of Dean, a sick feeling that has nothing to do with the pup wriggling in his belly, without sending Cas’ stupid pseudoamoris flaring. He exhales and says, “I don’t get it, man. Why – why you’re doing this.” Castiel has made a point of informing Dean that he has zero interest in knotting him, so it just doesn’t make any fucking sense.

Castiel just stares and answers calmly, “You and your pup need a home.”

“Yeah, no, I know that,” Dean says, “I just. I don’t get it.”

“I know you don’t,” Castiel says, and steps forward to place a kiss at the center of Dean’s forehead, “I care.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Dean insists. No one gives a flying fuck about omegas, let alone him. His mom had cared about him, and he’d thought that Sam had given a shit, though he’d made it
clear the night that Dean took off that no, Dean didn’t mean a goddamn thing to him. He was just Sam’s omega whose brother, knot-hungry and certified waste of space. The fact that Cas cares without any reason to baffles him. Dean shouldn't be anything to him. He should be a fucktoy that Cas found on the side of the road. But instead Cas does things like make space for a nursery for Dean's pup, a pup that doesn't belong to Cas at all, and says shit like I care.

Cas rubs one of Dean’s shoulders with the heel of his palm and says, “I know it doesn’t make sense right now. I hope that it might eventually.”

X

They don’t strap Dean into The Chair as much anymore, not since he broke.

He feels Alastair’s eyes on him when they bring in a line of omegas for a trucker looking for a warm bed. Dean can be a hard sell – not classically pretty, and he costs more than some of the other omegas – but if he works his charm, uses the smell of his never-ending heat, his long eyelashes and his knot-sucking lips to make money for the night. The other omegas don’t understand why he does it.

Dean doesn’t tell them that he does it all for Alastair.

He didn’t, at first. He held out, kept strong. Dean took every beating, every tranq to his bloodstream, every night strapped into The Chair, and he didn’t cave. He said no, for years, he thinks. He isn’t sure. Time is a haze here, but he knows that it took him years to crack under the pressure.

Now Dean doesn’t bleed as much, isn’t kept locked up or fastened into The Chair with the same frequency. Now he’s good. He’s Alastair’s favorite pet, the nameless green-eyed omega that could hustle money out of any alpha. All he had to do was present his sweet little ass, leaking with slick as always, keeping him hot and out of his mind with lust.

The knots don’t feel as bad as they used to. Sometimes Dean feels so filthy that he throws up, but most times a knot is good, keeps his head clear and ready, and if they let him come, puts his heat at bay. Thing is, he hates that, hates when his brain works. That’s when he gets to thinking about what he’s doing, gets to thinking about how he’s become the perfect omega bitch for Alastair and that sometimes he even likes it.

When new alphas are here, it’s easy to tempt them into his arms. Dean makes himself smaller, hunching down, and looks up at the trucker through his lashes, chewing on his lip, widening his stance just a little that the smell of slick will flow out into the air.

“This one,” the trucker says, “How much do it cost if I wanna hurt him?”

“That will be more of an investment,” Alastair replies. He moves the trucker aside to confer with him, and the panic rises inside Dean. He hates the ones that like to hurt him. Sometimes he’s hurt so bad from not being allowed to come, from being roughed up and thrown around that he can’t stand, can’t lift his arms to eat. Those times the other omegas have to feed him. Most won’t. They don’t like Dean. He’s one of Alastair’s prize bitches and that makes him the enemy.

Kevin likes him, though. Kevin is one of the kind omegas, quietly strong in a way that Dean thinks Sam might have appreciated. Dean doesn't know why Kevin likes him, or even why he likes Kevin, but he'll protect that kid with his life.

The trucker pays the extra, and they take Dean to one of the playrooms.
It’s the worst one.

The room where Dean has to run.

It’s more of a hallway – a hallway that ends with a room for fucking. The hall is for the chase, the fantasy of alphas everywhere, and they love making Dean run in particular. He’s big and strong, and catching him and pinning him before they knot him fulfills one of the most primitive alpha fantasies out there, not only of domination, but of ownership.

Dean shakes his head and Alastair backhands him. He tells Dean that he will run, or he’ll pawn him off on one of his men again, and Dean will relearn just how badly he can be hurt without a single mark rising to the surface of his skin.

Dean cries before he starts to run.

He always does.

X

“Dean, please wake up. I need you to wake up.”

His alpha needs him.

Dean’s eyes fly open. He gasps, realizing all at once that he’s not with Alastair, not in the chasing playroom or The Chair. He’s at home in bed with Cas, good alpha Cas. The overwhelming change in smell in his brain sends a shockwave through him, and the all-encompassing sense of fear forces a dry sob out of him before he can stop it.

Castiel gathers Dean up in his arms and hushes him with soft noises and even softer kisses to his face, gentle touches of his lips between declarations of, “Shh,” and, “It’s okay, Dean. You’re safe. It’s okay.” He rocks Dean like a child, and Dean should hate this, should tear himself out of Cas’ grip and run, but he doesn’t. Instead, he curls into the touch, wants more of it.

“I’m dirty,” he cries, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m broken.”

No good for his alpha.

“You’re not broken,” Castiel says, and nuzzles the patch of skin just below Dean’s ear. Cas’ hands wander a little more than Dean should let them, massaging his shoulders and back while his lips press sweetly in places Dean didn’t know needed to be kissed. Castiel lifts his eyes back to meet Dean’s to say, “You’ve been hurt, but you’re not broken.”

“I am, I am,” Dean says back, “I’m just trash.” Just leftovers. Thrown away. No one cares.

“I care,” Castiel says, voice firm. Dean didn’t realize that he’d said those last words aloud.

Dean wants to snatch the words I care straight from Castiel’s lips and trap them under his ribcage so that they can never escape, where he’ll have them forever and nobody can take that from him. He wants to say that once somebody cared about him, cared enough to groom and nuzzle and kiss, cared enough to make Dean take his vitamin and cared enough not to let Dean do heavy lifting with the pup still in the oven.

“I don’t deserve any of this,” Dean says. His tears have dried up but his voice is hoarse, “I don’t deserve you or your home at all.”
“It is your home too, Dean,” Castiel replies. He moves his hand over Dean’s spine and runs the other through Dean’s hair, making soothing noises before he goes on, “This house belongs as much to you and the pup as it does to me. It always felt empty before, and now it doesn’t anymore. That’s because of you.”

You’re full of shit, Dean wants to tell him. His heart beats wildly and he can’t breathe.

“Shit,” Cas says, and pulls Dean up out of bed and onto his feet. He instructs, “Focus on breathing. In through your nose and out through your mouth.”

Dean feels like he’s out of his own body, watching his life happen like a slideshow of somebody’s vacation photos as Castiel guides him into the kitchen and has him sit at the table. A cup of spicy-smelling tea is pressed between his palms, steam curling over the rim of the mug. Then Dean isn’t in the kitchen anymore, he’s on the couch, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders.

It feels like days before the crushing weight lifts off of Dean’s chest. He glances over at Cas and whispers, “I don’t know what happened.”

“It was a panic attack,” Castiel says, “Brought on by your nightmare, most likely. But I suspect you’ve had some of the thoughts you expressed in bed on your mind for a while.”

Dean nods.

“Do you want to be here, Dean?” asks Cas.

Dean shoots him a wild-eyed look and desperately asks, “Are you making me leave? Fuck, don’t do that, please, Cas. I’ll do anything to stay. You can still knot me. I know I’m not omega-pretty really, but you could close your eyes and –”

“Dean,” Cas’ lips turn down in a frown, “I only asked you a question. Do you want to be here?”

“Yes,” Dean says, “Christ, yes.”

“But you don’t think you deserve it,” Castiel continues.

“I don’t. I know I don’t. I’ve done awful things Cas, shit you wouldn’t believe. I don’t deserve you or your home or anything –”

“You do,” Cas interjects, “You absolutely deserve it. I know you don’t believe me, but trust me. Everything I give you, you deserve.”

Castiel kisses Dean, then, square on the mouth. He’s thorough, holding Dean’s face in his hands and lapping along the inside of his mouth, attentive. Dean knows he doesn’t deserve this even if Cas says that he does, but he leans in anyway and lets it happen.

“I invited Charlie over for dinner tomorrow night,” Castiel announces the afternoon following.

Dean gives him a look, “The hair lady?”

“Yes, you seemed to like her,” Castiel replies, “I thought we could use the company.”

Dean did like her. Not in a sexy kind of way, ‘cause she didn’t really seem to swing his way anyhow. He just likes a beta that can talk Star Wars and goodbyes him with the Star Trek live long and prosper sign. She was cool, and one of the first people he’s met since his escape from Alastair
that smelled and acted like utterly neutral ground.

“Okay,” Dean says.

A ghost of a smile touches Castiel’s mouth, but he looks back down at his book before Dean can confirm it.

X

Charlie arrives with some kind of cheesy potato casserole in hand. Dean doesn’t know what it is, but it smells fucking awesome, and he tells her as much when he takes the pan from Charlie as she steps into the house. She whistles and says, “Whew, nice digs.”

“Thanks,” Dean says awkwardly. He wants to tell her that the ‘digs’ don’t belong to him, that this is all Castiel’s, but he lets Cas’ voice take over for once and maintain that they share this place.

Dean leads Charlie into the kitchen, where Cas is making finishing touches on the dessert (pie, because Dean always requests pie). He offers Charlie a beer, which she accepts, and takes one of his own before he pours a glass of juice for Dean.

“So,” Charlie asks, “How’s the pup doing? Looks like it’s grown since I saw it last.” She chuckles at her own joke, and Dean can’t help but let out a tiny smile.

He smooths his hand over his swollen stomach and says, “Good, I think. Likes to sit right on my bladder like twenty four friggin’ seven, but good.”

“They do that, I hear,” Charlie says.

“We’re putting together a nursery,” Castiel pipes up conversationally, “Dean wants to paint the walls dark green.”

“Cool,” Charlie says, “You doing like a modern thing, then? It’s a boy, right?”

“I don’t know,” Dean says, “I wanna be surprised. Anyway, green’s good no matter what. Plus it matches with this bed set I saw on the internet with –”

Dean stops.

“What did you see, Dean?” Castiel asks, and lifts down the good dishes from the cabinet beside the sink, “I’m curious, you know.”

“Oh, um. It’s stupid,” he says quietly.

“Come on,” Charlie says, and nudges him a little, “I’m sure it’s not stupid. I wanna know! Give me the deets.”

“It was – it was just bedding for a crib,” he says, “the sheets had little electric guitars printed on them and there was a matching quilt. I dunno. I just. I thought it was nice.” He’d had images of putting down a little sleepy pup on those sheets when he saw them, imagining his belly flat again and a soft-haired infant in his arms. It was just a fantasy, though. Christ knows he shouldn’t indulge in those.

“Are you gonna throw a puppy shower and everything?” Charlie asks, “Wait, am I invited?”

“I don’t – I don’t have anybody to invite to a puppy shower,” Dean says, feeling stupid.
“Whaat! No way, dude. Cas, can I throw him a puppy shower?” Charlie asks.

Castiel sets the last of the dishware on the kitchen table and shrugs, “I’m not the one carrying the pup. Ask Dean if he’s okay with it.”

Charlie gives Cas a look of what Dean thinks is approval before she clasps her hands together and says, “What do you say, Dean? Come on, please? I’ve never gotten to throw one before and they look fun and I can invite the girls from the salon. It’ll be a blast for sure.”

“Um,” Dean says. At Charlie’s pleading look, he feels something inside him give, and his shoulders slump, “Okay. But no pastel crap.”

“Roger that,” says Charlie, “No pastel crap it is. Oh God, this is gonna be great.”

They sit down together as Charlie chatters about potential dates for the shower, asks Dean if he would like it here or perhaps to celebrate in town, and entire lists of questions that she bolts through so fast that he doesn’t have time to answer them all. The food is delicious, especially Charlie’s casserole, which she admits to having help making from her sort-of girlfriend named Jo.

When dinner finishes up, Dean tries to get the dishes, only to have Cas and Charlie both tell him to sit back down and relax. He tries not to sulk – he likes being useful around the house, likes to be able to prove the worth of keeping him around. No matter how many times Cas says he doesn’t have to worry, he's gonna.

In between their meal and dessert they whip out some old board games from one of the boxes in Cas’ basement, settling on some card game called Munchkin that Charlie knows all about and actually turns out to be pretty fun. Dean even wins a round, which he celebrates with a whoop and a guffaw of laughter before enthusiastically dipping into the strawberry rhubarb pie that Castiel assembled for them.

By the end of the night, Charlie and Dean joke together like they’ve known each other for years. It’s a welcome change from the ugliness that typically makes up Dean’s life, and he feels lighter when they say their goodbyes, promising to return Charlie’s casserole tray when they finish eating her generous gift of the delicious leftovers.

Only when Dean watches Charlie’s taillights disappear down the dirt road does he turn to Cas, a goofy grin on his face and a feeling like soda pop bubbles in his stomach.

“Thanks, Cas.”

He kisses him full on the mouth and grins into it.
Castiel jerks out of sleep to find Dean’s half of the bed empty. He feels along the rumpled sheets and finds no body heat, though Dean’s scent comforts him as he steps out of bed and fits his feet into slippers. He checks the clock at his bedside – the glowing green numbers read that the time is just after three in the morning – and pads out to search for Dean.

He is not difficult to find. As Castiel treks along through the hallway, he hears the soft sound of the television’s volume turned to low, and sees the blue-green glow of the TV’s light as one scene flicks to another on the screen. Dean sits curled into the corner of the couch with a still-steaming mug clutched in between his hand. His whole body shakes, and the scents of fear and discomfort roll off of him, filling the room with bitter aromas and making Cas shift uncomfortably in his slippers.

Dean has had another nightmare.

The idea that Dean left the room and came out here for comfort irks the alpha in Castiel. Why should his omega use warm beverages and television to soothe himself when he has a perfectly good alpha sleeping right beside him to satisfy that need?

But he forgets – Castiel is not truly Dean’s alpha, and Dean is not truly Castiel’s omega. The pup in his belly does not belong to Castiel, even though he feels very much as though it does.

Castiel should call a psychologist and wrangle an appointment regarding the *pseudoamoris*, but he doesn’t want to. He wants to instead gather Dean into his arms and hold their bodies together until he feels better, to let Dean bask in the presence of the alpha that protects him, keeps him warm and fed and clothed and happy.

Such silly wants, and yet he desires them greatly.

“Dean?” he says, voice rough from sleep.

Dean starts, but his shoulders relax a fraction when he sees that the intruder upon his privacy is Castiel. Cas takes it as an invitation to step forward, and when Dean does not cow from him at that, he takes a seat at the other end of the couch. On the television plays one of the episodes from the animated Star Trek series. Castiel can’t help but smile a little at the fact that this is the show that Dean has turned to for comfort.

“Is there anything you need?” Cas asks.

“Wish I could stop dreamin’ ‘bout that shithole,” Dean mutters and takes a sip of tea, “Wish I could drink somethin’ stronger than tea since I’m feeling like crap. But I won’t, and I can’t.”

Castiel licks his lips and hesitates. He doesn’t want to impose on Dean, even though the instinctual half of his brain continues to insist that his omega needs nothing more than him. Selecting his words with careful control, Castiel says, “You could tell me about your nightmares, if you think that would help. But I would not want to pressure you.”

Dean stares into his tea like it will tell him what to do. When he looks back up at Cas, a haunted
expression covers his face, looking so profoundly preyed upon that it would set Castiel’s teeth on edge even without the addition of Dean’s uncomfortable scent.

Dean exhales, and faces the television instead of Castiel as he says, “Sometimes when I dream, I don’t even know what I’m dreaming about, really. Kept us all fucked up, you know. When we got fed, it was dosed. Stuck needles in us so we’d behave. So sometimes, the things I dream are – blurry. Like they’re not really my memories. Like I’m watching everything that happened to me from someplace else. Sometimes those are the worst.”

Dean lifts his mug of tea up to his lips and sips some back. It doesn’t feel right to speak yet, so Castiel sits in silence, letting Dean drink and settle his nerves. Subconsciously, Dean reaches down and holds an arm around his protruding belly, a classic position of protection. He keeps the arm there as he continues to speak, “I wake up thinking I’m still there sometimes, too. I mean. I know you know that. That’s one of the worst parts, too. We all slept in these…in these cells, behind bars, like kept animals. For a long time they kept me roped up to the wall so I wouldn’t try to get out. All I had to sleep on – all any of us had to sleep on – were these tiny mattresses. They all smelled so awful, like piss and slick and blood.”

With those words, Dean’s body quakes harder, and Castiel moves before the logical part of his brain can beat his biology. Dean doesn’t seem to mind, though, when Castiel curls an arm around his shoulder. Instead of shying away, Dean leans back into Cas and sniffs at the collar of his t-shirt, where sweat collected as he slept and now dries, cooling the skin underneath the cotton.

“I was there for so fucking long,” Dean says, “that I gave up. I just wanted to die. Then the pup came and I just – I dunno, everything changed. Soon as I knew I was knocked up I just. I guess. I needed to fix it. Pup didn’t do anything, and I guess I always wanted a family, always thought about doing better than my family did. Even before that place I thought about it.”

A whine sounds from Cas’ throat at the idea of Dean dying. He coughs and says, “I apologize,” and tries to beat down the distress he feels at the mere concept of Dean not being alive, but finds that this only aggravates it more.

Dean’s face changes a little, shifting from haunted to wry, and he pets his hands over Castiel’s hair in soft, soothing strokes.

“Shh, little alpha,” he says, “I’m fine now, see? I can’t imagine death now, which is weird. But now I think of setting up the nursery and singin’ to my pup and raising it up good…it probably sounds pretty dumb, huh?”

“It doesn’t sound dumb,” Castiel assures him.

“Thing is, that’s what my dad wanted too, raise his boys up the right way, teach us to be good alphas, strong alphas, the kind that anyone would be happy to take home to their parents. I fucked that to hell when I presented,” Dean lets out an unhappy noise and drinks his tea to quell it back before he goes on more softly, “Least my dad has Sammy. Guess Sam always was a lot more growly than me as a pup.”

“You’re not your father,” Castiel says, “You are yourself.”

“What if that’s not good enough? Never was good enough for my dad or Sam,” Dean shakes his head, “Never was the son or brother anybody wanted. Hell, I’m a burden to you enough as it is.”

“You aren’t a burden, Dean,” Castiel says firmly, alpha threading into the tone of his voice.
“You’re just sayin’ that ‘cause of your mating thingamajig,” Dean mutters.

“I am not,” Castiel insists, “I would be lying if I told you that what we have is an average situation, but you are nothing near to a burden, Dean Winchester,” he reaches up and pinches his nostrils shut just to add, “See, even when I can’t smell how delicious your scent is, I still think it.”

Dean chuckles a little and says, “Okay, you can stop making that face at me, Cas.”

Castiel makes an even uglier face.

Dean laughs harder.

When Castiel lowers his hand from his face, the fear and apprehension have faded from Dean’s aroma, leaving contentment and the sweet, enticing smell of the pregnancy behind. He can’t help but press his face forward into Dean’s skin, sniffing and reaching up to run the pads of his fingers up and down the tense muscles of Dean’s back. He pushes little kisses along Dean’s neck and up to his jaw, nuzzling.

“You are a fascinating man,” Castiel says, and taps one finger against Dean’s temple, “One day I would love to know each thought that runs through this head.”

“Ain’t a lot of those,” Dean says.

Castiel’s gut twists at the bit of self-deprecation and he hushes Dean, brushing lips against his forehead. He says, “I wish you wouldn’t speak of yourself like that. You are so many good things.”

“Man, I wish I saw what you did,” Dean says, “C’mon, let’s get back to bed.”

Castiel flicks off the television after Dean makes a note of which episode he will need to resume watching when next he indulges in the show, and they walk back to the bedroom together. There, Castiel toes of his slippers at the side of the bed before he climbs in. Under the covers, he gathers Dean up into his chest, indulges in the feel of the pup against him. He’s too tired to fight the pseudoamoris that grows like ivy in his brain, and spoils himself with the rush of affection that fills his veins, that makes his mind chant mineminemine in a litany like a lullaby.

As Castiel drifts, however, he thinks of the famed Sam Winchester. He wonders if Sam Winchester is the Sam that belongs to Dean, and wonders further if he should enlighten Dean of his suspicions regarding his alpha younger brother.

He resolves to research the possibility soon.

X

Castiel forgets about the famed Sam Winchester.

Instead, his mind becomes occupied with the decoration of the pup’s nursery. He and Dean make a day of going to Denver, where they visit stores that have never once crossed Castiel’s radar before now, purchasing a beautiful, dark wood crib and a matching rocking chair that Castiel catches Dean eying lovingly in Pottery Barn. They purchase Dean’s coveted dark green paint, a matte shade that reminds Castiel of a deciduous forest.

When they return home, both of them are exhausted, but not too tired to assemble furniture. Dean does most of the legwork, being better with his hands than Castiel is. Cas is designated to the position of handing Dean tools when he asks for them. He wants to be irritated, but it all seems worth it when the completed crib sits against the wall and Dean looks down at it with a strange
Dean runs his palm over the smooth wood and glances back at Cas with the softest smile that he’s ever seen grace Dean’s lips.

“‘It’s awesome,’” he says, “‘Thanks, Cas. I – I owe you.’

“You do not owe me anything,” Castiel says.

Dean shakes his head and replies, “I owe you a helluva lot, actually. This is just the tip of the ‘shit Dean owes Cas’ iceberg. But, uh. Seriously. Thank you,” he pats his belly with an open, affectionate palm and murmurs, “Pup says thanks too.”

“Tell the pup it was my pleasure,” Castiel says back.

After a long, silent moment, Dean says, “You could tell the pup yourself.”

Castiel licks his lips and asks, “Could I?”

“Yeah,” Dean nods, “C’mere.”

Castiel does so, taking small steps to close the space between himself and Dean. He bites down on his lower lip before he reaches down and places his palm against Dean’s swollen stomach, stroking across. He clears his throat before he says, “Hello, pup. Your father built a crib for you tonight, but I purchased it, so he keeps saying ‘thank you.’ Maybe if I say ‘you’re welcome’ enough, he’ll stop it.”

“Never,” Dean says. The pup kicks against Cas’ hand.

“Oh,” Cas says.

“Yeah, pup’s a Cas fan,” Dean says, smiling down at where Castiel’s hand rests against him. As if agreeing, another kick taps out against Castiel’s palm.

Castiel gently answers, “I am a fan of the pup as well.”

Dean stares at him at that, open surprise on his face. He rubs the back of his neck and lowers his eyes to the ground before he mutters, “Thanks, Cas. That, um. That means a lot.”

And so Castiel continues to forget about Sam Winchester.

He forgets until the morning of Charlie’s scheduled shower at the house for Dean and their pup. Dean’s pup. Whatever. He likes to affectionately think of the pup as his, and as long as he never expresses this out loud, he figures the sentiment harmless. He wonders if a psychologist would agree, but shakes off the thought almost as soon as it arrives.

When Dean insists again upon doing the breakfast dishes, Castiel allows it and slips away to his study to collect his laptop and do a little hunting regarding Sam Winchester, omega rights advocate. When he opens the computer, the screen is still set to a google search of “baby mobiles” – a search that landed Dean several pages back on Google and without a single mobile mentioned to Cas, like he quietly mentions toys and colors and types of furniture that he thinks would make good additions to the nursery.

Castiel huffs at the discovery and opens a new tab to type Sam Winchester into the search bar. The first result takes him to exactly what he needs – an official webpage. The page is expertly designed,
depicting pictures of happy omegas in place of having Sam’s face plastered all over. There are a few photos with Sam in them, dressed in a well-cut suit in most.

There’s a picture of Sam speaking to classroom full of children, each of them staring up at him with wide, impressed eyes.

There’s a photo of Sam sans suit, instead in a plaid button-down and jeans, marching at a rally in his town of residence, Palo Alto, California.

There is a photo of Sam walking from a courthouse, fist in the air, an omega in tears beside him. A case won.

Castiel finds himself entranced by looking through the lists of accomplishments, from the descriptions of Sam’s education, how he skipped two entire grades in high school and proceeded to be accepted into Stanford, working through the summers and taking on extra classes so that he could take the bar in the shortest amount of time possible.

On the FAQ page, Castiel finds something that he is looking for – What prompted Sam Winchester to dive into the world of omega rights?

“In his own words: ‘I grew up looking up to my older brother. I, like many pups, grew up believing the stereotype of the powerful alpha, and believed that my brother would present as alpha as my father expected. When instead he went into heat at fourteen, I was confused. I think back and I know that I treated him in ways that I never should have treated him. In my late teens, I accused my brother Dean of having slept around and told him that perhaps he should have stayed inside as our father instructed.

‘That same night, my brother disappeared forever. My attempts to contact him failed, and after years of not seeing Dean, I can only think the worst. My brother may have been angry, but I know he would have come home. We’ve all heard statistics about lost and kidnapped omegas – at this juncture, Dean has been declared dead, and I know I may never see him again.

‘It occurred to me then that not only had what I said to my brother been terribly mistaken, but prejudiced. We live in a world in which the system works against omegas. When I tell my brother’s story, I hear over and over that he should have been more careful, that he shouldn’t have gone out by himself, should not have been out after dark. But why? Why is my brother’s death his fault?

‘The answer is that it is not his fault. It is the fault of a system that tells alphas that they are entitled to omegas' spaces and omegas' bodies. I choose now to fight against those beliefs, and hope that what little I can do as a lawyer and activist will help prevent another case like Dean’s from occurring.’”

Castiel feels his throat clog up with feeling. Sam Winchester deserves to know that his beloved brother is not dead. Dean has been through a great deal, but he is alive and well, and only a couple short weeks from giving birth to a healthy pup. He stands and sets his laptop aside to rummage through his drawers, extracting a pad of sticky notes.

At the bottom of the webpage is a ‘Contact Us’ link, and Castiel clicks on it. The contact information lists Sam’s e-mail and the phone number of his law office. This warrants more than a short message in text, so Cas makes a note of the number, scribbling ‘SW’ over the numerals so that he doesn’t forget.

Perhaps he should do that now.
But when Castiel makes a reach for his phone, Dean pokes his head into the study and says, “Hey Cas, Charlie’s here. She brought food and everything.”

Castiel jerks his hand away from the phone and quickly clicks out of the tab with Sam Winchester’s webpage on it. He clears his throat and says, “I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Cool,” Dean says, “She brought these mini pie things, dude. They look awesome.”

“Sounds delicious,” Castiel answers absently, and Dean disappears with a salute to Cas.

Castiel stands, but before he leaves he double checks the phone number to make sure that he has it correct. He then peels the sticky note with the number off of the pad, folds it in half, and stuffs it into the pocket of his jeans. He closes out of Sam’s page and, for good measure, deletes his browser history just in case. He doesn’t want to get Dean’s hopes up – this is something that Castiel has to accomplish by himself.

Downstairs, Charlie has a veritable buffet of finger foods spread out on both Castiel’s kitchen table and coffee table. She greets Cas with a smile and a wave, but Dean is too occupied with the miniature pie halfway in his mouth to acknowledge Castiel’s presence.

Castiel makes a last minute cleanliness check of the house, tucking a few stray DVDs back onto their shelves just as a knock sounds at the front door. When he answers the call, Meg is there with a gift in her hand, unwrapped, but topped with a pastel blue bow. She claps Castiel on the shoulder and says, “Heya, Clarence. So where’s daddy?”

Castiel vaguely sticks his thumb back at the kitchen and says, “Eating all of the finger food, last I saw.”

In quick succession, Charlie’s other guests arrive – it isn’t a huge affair. She has Jo, her “kind of girlfriend” over, as well as Jo’s mother Ellen and her stepfather Bobby, the latter of whom Castiel recognizes as the man that ran the gift shop in town and from whom he purchased Dean’s leather jacket. The latest and final guest is another stylist from the salon, a tall, slender omega with a wide smile named Garth.

For the most part, the shower is spent eating and mingling. Dean offers up answers to every interrogation about his pup, though he cleverly circumnavigates anything having to do with its origins and whether or not Castiel played a part in the pup’s culmination. Charlie organizes them into some game playing antics that involve clothespins and avoiding uttering the word “pup,” for a prize at the end of the party.

The game goes on throughout food and conversation. Dean’s clothespins are snagged almost instantly, but he doesn’t seem to mind, as he’s hit off with Bobby – discussing classic cars, it seems. Castiel notes another love of Dean’s uncovered.

They all gather in the living room for gifts. Dean turns pink when Charlie mentions presents and says, “No one had to get me anything.”

To which Charlie responds, “Uh, duh they did. That’s like, the whole reason you throw a puppy shower. Free swag.”

Dean still looks perturbed, but submits and sits in the middle of the couch surrounded by the guests. He opens the largest gift first, a package from Bobby and Ellen. It also turns out to be the most practical – an enormous box of diapers. Dean thanks them profusely, and Ellen reassures him, “Trust me, honey, you’re gonna need more than that.”
Meg’s present is also practical – a baby monitor set. Jo’s is more fun – it’s a kind of bouncy chair contraption with toys all around it, which lights up and sings. It’s expensive enough that Dean turns even redder and tells her that she shouldn’t have. But of all the presents, Dean loves Charlie’s the best. She gets him a onesie decked with the Wonder Woman symbol, a board book entitled *Star Wars ABCs*, and a second onesie that reads ‘Level One Human’ and has a chart of gaming stats.

Castiel waits until then to pass to Dean his own gift, a little something he found online a couple weeks back.

Dean looks up when Castiel hands it to him and says, “Cas, you’ve already gotten the pup so much crap already.”

“No, but none of those things are this,” he says.

Dean peels back the paper and pulls out the surprise underneath – a CD of Led Zeppelin songs reworked as lullabies. A goofy, lopsided grin appears on Dean’s face and he says, “Thanks, Cas,” in that way he always does, that suggests he doesn’t think that he is worth the consideration, but that he is grateful regardless. Dean stands up, then, and crosses the room to wrap his arms around Castiel’s neck.

Dean kisses him square on the mouth and kisses him hard, to a chorus of noise from the guests behind them – chuckles and ‘aww’ and a grossed-out noise from Meg, which earns her a poke of derision from Charlie.

The festivities wind down after that. Meg emerges triumphant from the pup-clothespin game, and gets to return home with a pan of Charlie’s brownies as her trophy. The guests make their excuses for returning home and say their goodbyes, and Dean thanks each of them over and over like he can’t believe that anybody would do something so nice for him, let alone a group of mostly strangers.

Charlie remains behind to help them clean up and animatedly chats about how much fun she had putting together the party. When she asks, “Did you like it?”, Dean smiles.

“It was fuckin’ awesome,” he says.

Charlie grins, and so does Castiel. He’s pleased that Dean has a friend to seek comfort in, a non-threatening beta to hold his puppy shower and talk to him about all the movies and TV shows that he enjoys. Charlie makes Dean light up like a Christmas tree, and while Castiel is envious and wishes he had the same ability, he’s just glad that Dean is happy.

By the time that Charlie leaves, they’re both exhausted.

“You wanna take a nap with me?” Dean asks. He yawns and stretches, remarking, “Son of a bitch, I am beat.”

Castiel opens his mouth to say yes, but finds his hand sinking into the pocket of his jeans, where the sticky note with Sam Winchester’s office number burns against his fingertips. He lies, “Why don’t you go ahead? Anna e-mailed me this morning and I should answer her.”

“‘Kay,” Dean agrees and wanders back to the bedroom. Castiel still follows to pull the comforter over Dean’s shoulders and bid both Dean and the pup a good naptime. On his way out, he closes the door behind himself, letting it click closed before he toes away and up the stairs to his study.

Castiel closes and locks the study door behind him just to be safe, and sits in the chair behind his
desk. He pulls the sticky note and smooths it back out over the wood. He stares at the phone number for a long, long moment before he picks up his telephone and punches in the numbers, each touch of his finger to a button deliberate and nervous.

The line rings twice before a voice answers, “Sam Winchester’s office, Ava Wilson speaking.”

“Um, hello. I was wondering if Mr. Winchester is available to speak to this afternoon?” Castiel asks.

Ava Wilson replies in turn, “Do you have an appointment, sir? Or would you like to set one up?”

“I think this is important,” Castiel responds, “It’s regarding his brother, Dean Winchester.”

A long silence greets that declaration. After too long, Castiel almost asks if Ava is still on the line, but just as his lips part to ask the question, she says, “Will you please hold, Mr. –?”

“Novak,” Castiel answers, “Dr. Castiel Novak.” Not that he’s a doctor anymore.

“Dr. Novak, would you mind holding?”

“Not at all.”

The click of the phone in the receiver sounds and calm piano music fizzes into Castiel’s ear, punctuated every so often with a cool female voice thanking him for his patience and to please remain on the line. A mere two and a half minutes later, the phone picks up again.

“Sam Winchester speaking,” a voice says.

“Mr. Winchester –”

“I’m curious what Castiel Novak has to say about my brother,” Sam says, “but I swear, Dr. Novak, if you’re jerking me around, there will be hell to pay.”

“You know who I am?” Castiel says dumbly.

“Just as I assume you know who I am,” Sam says back, “Famous alphas into omega rights aren’t exactly common. Or maybe I should say infamous alphas, in your case.”

“Maybe,” Castiel agrees.

“You said this call is about my brother,” Sam says, then, voice now clipped, “Has his body been found? Is that what this is about?”

“No, no,” Castiel says. He stands up and paces to the window behind him, looking down at the stretch of hills and where the hammock sways with the rock of the afternoon wind, “Your brother – Dean Winchester – is living with me, currently.”

Silence.

“Bullshit,” Sam at last says, “Dean is dead.”

“No…no he is not,” Castiel says, and considers his next words carefully, “I found Dean Winchester walking along the side of the road near Buena Vista, Colorado in April. He has been living with me for the past two and a half months. It was only recently that he mentioned he had a brother named Sam, and that his surname is Winchester. I made the connection, and I truly do think that the man I have with me is also the man that is your brother.”
Another pause lingers over the line.

Then Sam says, voice more hushed, “I have no cause to believe that what you’re telling me is legitimate.”

Castiel rubs his brow and returns, “Tell me if any of this sounds familiar. Dean is a man that enjoys leather jackets, classic cars, and classic rock to the extent that when he found my vinyl collection in my basement, he was gone so long that I thought he’d injured himself but instead was sitting on the floor listening to Zeppelin.”

More silence.

“He also really, really likes pie.”

The Sam that answers this sounds nothing like the authoritative alpha and instead like a desperate younger brother, “That – that sounds a lot like Dean.”

“He is remarkably tall for an omega,” Castiel goes on, “Light brown hair, green eyes, freckles?”

“Shit,” Sam says, voice hoarse and now near to crying, “Shit. That’s Dean. That’s my brother.”

“Would you like my address?” Castiel says, “I am around a three hour drive from Denver International Airport.”

“I can’t take vacation without notice,” Sam weakly says, “Fuck. Fuck me. Hang on.”

The phone clatters against Sam’s desk, and from someplace nearby there’s a loud conversation, words rushed and tense. A few minutes later, the phone is lifted once again and Sam’s voice fills the receiver. He says, “Okay. I pulled some strings, and I can be out to Colorado in a week. Will you still be in the same place?”

“Yes, of course,” Castiel says, and relays his address to Sam.

To this, Sam’s wrecked voice says, “Thank you so much for this, Dr. Novak. My brother – crap. He means everything to me.”

“Please, call me Castiel,” he replies, and then adds, “Sam…I should warn you. Dean has been through a great, great deal since you saw him last. He only ever speaks to me about what’s happened to him in bits and pieces, and what he tells me, it’s – it is not good, we’ll leave it at that. He’s tense around most alphas and sometimes he likes to be quiet, especially if he’s afraid.”

Again, Sam quiets.

“That, um. That makes sense, I suppose,” Sam at last answers.

“I just ask that you keep in mind that you should tread lightly around him,” Castiel says, “At least at first.”

“Yeah. Of course. Yeah, I can do that,” Sam says, “Here, let’s exchange cells. When I’ve got my flight information, I’ll text you.”

They trade information, and Sam thanks Castiel at least a dozen more times before they hang up the phone. It is only in the aftermath of the phone call, in the quiet of the study, that Castiel realizes that he never told Sam of his elder brother’s pregnancy.
Too Cold to Start a Fire

Chapter Notes

Warnings for Alastair and Dean's recollections of rape

Chapter Track: Rusty Cage – Johnny Cash

Too Cold to Start a Fire

Dean likes to sit in the nursery sometimes.

Vacuumed and smelling of the fresh green paint that he and Cas have rolled onto the walls, it’s become something of a safe haven, a little pocket of dream-world for Dean to go to when he wants to pretend that maybe he isn’t some washed-up, skanky omega fresh from the griddle of a brothel. Maybe he’s an average dude with a smart alecky alpha and a pup on the way to make them a trio.

Here, he can kick back in his brand-spankin’-new rocking chair, stick his face in one of the parenting books he asked Cas for, and pretend that life is good for him. Dean doesn’t have a shady past in this little room that smells like paint and new furniture. He has a good home with a good family, the kind he dreamed of in the weaker moments of his youth.

Is sitting in the rocking chair in the nursery a weak moment? Dean holds his palms against his stomach, over the pup, and considers this. His dad would think this weak. Barefoot and pregnant omega, willing to follow Castiel around like a bitch if it means safety. But then, John Winchester never did understand the concept of safety for his children. Being a beta started his instincts on neutral ground, but with the proverbial bun in the oven, Dean can’t understand not wanting to protect his own. He will do anything for his pup, anything in the world.

Dean’s own comfort be damned, it’s the tiny little creature he’s growing inside him that’s important now.

His eyes flick over the edges of the room. It isn’t finished yet, though Dean assembled the crib and the chair and the changing table, underneath which are stored the jumbo pack of diapers that Bobby and Ellen gave him at the puppy shower – his puppy shower. It still feels weird to Dean that all those people, most of which he hadn’t even laid eyes on before that day, showed up to a party just for him. For him, and for his pup. Even though it doesn’t technically have an alpha, even though Dean is an unattached, single omega parent.

What Dean likes most about the room is more than the new furniture and attractive slap of green paint, even more than the framed LPs that Castiel purchased online – Zep II, Pink Floyd’s “Animals,” Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band – it’s the promise of the place. Maybe that sounds stupid. Most things Dean thinks are stupid. But he can picture rocking his pup to sleep in this place, sleepily stumbling in when his pup cries out for him at some ungodly hour of the night, reading board books and playing with dumb, colorful pieces of plastic that don’t make sense but sure as hell amuse the fuck out of infants.

“Hey, Dean?”
Dean looks up from his belly – he didn’t even realize he’d been staring – and sees Cas in the nursery doorway. The usual easy confidence that sets his shoulders is missing, replaced with a kind of nervousness. Dean frowns, “What’s up?”

“I wanted to discuss something with you,” Castiel says.

That sounds bad.

Really, really bad.

When people want to discuss things with Dean, they’re getting rid of him. They’re throwing him out on his ass, pawning him off on some other person, banishing him to rape-factory homeless shelters filled with other empty-eyed, hopeless omegas.

“I thought,” Dean starts, “I thought you said I could stay.”

Alarm flashes across Cas’ face and he rushes to amend, “No, no, I’m not making you leave at all.”

“Oh,” Dean says, now confused. He frowns and tries to scrape his memory for something that he’s done wrong. He’s been pretty fastidious about cleaning up after himself, scrubbing off his dishes and taking care of the bathrooms and making sure he doesn’t leave anything out of place.

Sharply, he looks back up at Cas and asks, “Is it – did you change your mind about wanting to knot me? ‘Cause we can still do that. I’m real good at it.”

Castiel rubs a hand back through his hair and hoarsely says, “No, Dean. I told you that I’m not going to force you to sleep with me.”

“It’s not forcing,” Dean insists, “I can take it, promise.”

“Dean,” Cas says, “I am not going to knot you. It’s something else I need to talk to you about.”

Now Dean’s at a loss. He knows Cas is good. Cas gave him a home and things to eat and books to read and even set up a nursery for the pup – or rather, paid for the nursery and got irritated when Dean insisted upon setting up everything by himself. If Cas wanted to knot Dean in exchange for those things, he wouldn’t mind. And he doesn’t think it would make Cas a dick, just a regular alpha. So maybe it’s that he doesn’t find Dean attractive. That stings to know, but there’s nothing that he can do about it. Dean thinks he’s gotten better looking over the course of his time here, body filling back out to normal.

“It’s about your brother. Sam?” Castiel says, looking ill at ease.

Instant fury, red hot and sizzling like lightning in his veins, snaps through Dean. He stands and says, “I don’t want to talk about my family. I don’t make you talk about yours.”

“Dean, this is important,” Castiel says, and the amount of calm that he sounds actually pisses Dean off.

“I don’t wanna talk about Sammy,” Dean says, “Don’t make me do it, Cas.”

“We’re going to talk about it,” Castiel states. Alpha authority climbs over his voice, infusing it in that same, terrifying way that the alphas at the brothel did, like Alastair did, like John Winchester did.

It takes a moment for Dean to bring himself down to reality and consider that Castiel has never
indicated that he would hurt him.

But he is being a bag of dicks.

“You know what?” Dean says, and jabs a finger into Cas’ chest, “Fuck you. Don’t talk to me like everyone else does, like I’m some dumb, pliant omega bitch that’ll do whatever you want just ‘cause your stupid alpha ass asked for it. I sure as hell don’t wanna talk about my brother, so I’m not gonna. Just fuck off.”

Dean shoves past Cas and out of his little safe corner of the world. Anxiety fills him from yelling at Cas and from the idea that Cas wanted to talk to him about Sammy, of all the people. It’s not Castiel’s business to know about Dean’s baby brother, or his past, or any of the shit that he’s been through. He tells Cas things sometimes because he has these stupid moments of trust, moments when Cas’ scent curls into his nose and settles into his body with the soft feel of comfort.

For a long second, Dean doesn’t know where he should go from here. He stares down the hallway at the door to the room where he sleeps now – the room he’s come to know as ours.

That seals it. Dean shifts to his left instead of his right, turning into the guest bedroom. He locks the door behind him and crawls into the plainly dressed bed. It doesn’t smell nearly as good as the bed in Castiel’s bedroom smells, but it’s better here. Safer. Away from alphas. There’s the lock on the door, and no reason for Castiel to demand to be let in.

Yeah, it’s better here.

X

Things are tense between them.

Dean doesn’t leave the guest bedroom for the remainder of the night, though he does open the door briefly when Cas knocks and tells him that he’s leaving a plate of food outside the door for him and to “please eat it.” He does, and even though it’s some curry concoction that he knows Cas cooked because Dean’s been getting cravings for spicy food, he barely tastes it at all.

When Dean emerges the morning following, Castiel looks as though he wants to say something, but doesn’t. He asks Dean how he slept, and Dean answers honestly that he couldn’t sleep for shit. Both he and the pup have become used to having the heat and contentment that comes with sleeping beside an alpha, their alpha. But Castiel is not Dean’s alpha, and nor would he want to be was it not for his stupid brain thing.

Frustratingly enough, Dean can’t take another night of sleeping alone. He tries, but in vain, and ends up back in bed with Castiel halfway through the night. He’s embarrassed, red-faced as he slips into Cas’ bedroom.

“Dean?”

Damn it. He didn’t want to wake Cas.

But son of a bitch, how can he resist that sleepy-eyed alpha on the bed? He whines before he can help it and crawls under the covers, seeking Cas’ warm and scenting along him. Cas coils his arms around Dean, splaying his palms over Dean’s back and cradling their bodies together.

It should make Dean sick how much he needs this, how much he craves being held against a soft body with strong arms. He tells himself that it’s the pregnancy, that it makes him need alpha shelter more than he would if he was on his own.
But that isn’t it, and he knows it isn’t. He’s in bed with Cas because he wants to be in bed with Cas, and he would whether or not he had a pup in his belly. Castiel’s scent is something incredible to him. He can’t pinpoint it to another aroma like some people can with their alphas, declaring their scent citrus or cloves or something equally out of the reach of Dean’s brain. All Dean knows is that the smell of Cas is masculine. It means comfort and warmth.

On that guilty note, Dean nips at the skin of Cas’ jaw and settles in to sleep.

X

Though small pieces revert back to normal, Castiel is unusually quiet during the next few days. It unnerves Dean into spending more time outside on the hammock, reading with a glass of juice on the ground beside him or napping the summer afternoon away. Castiel makes him wear sunscreen before he goes out, blabbering on in doctor-speak about the altitude and how close they are to the sun and “Don’t you know what ultraviolet rays can do to your skin, Dean?”

So Dean endures it all and loiters outside reeking of the coconut-scented SPF 30 slathered over his skin. The breeze and the smells of the outdoors – plant life and animal fur and tree bark and the minerals in the dirt – always eventually blot it out, anyway.

On one afternoon, Castiel leaves Dean at the house to check the mailbox seven miles out, and Dean enjoys the solitude. He indulges in a long shower, scrubbing soap over the swell of his belly and over his arms, where his strength progressively returns. When he steps out, he rubs an oval of space in the condensation on the mirror and dries his body in front of it. He has stretch marks like tiger stripes on his sides, marks he can’t help but run his fingers over to feel.

He dresses in a gray Skynyrd t-shirt with a graphic of two electric guitars crossed in an X and the words Florida Straight Rock & Roll and a pair of jeans, forgoing his jacket or socks because it’s too damn hot. On his way into the living room, he flicks on one of Castiel’s standing fans and lets it cool what remains of his hot shower on his skin, before he rolls back toward the kitchen in search of something junky to eat.

The door opens just as he bites into a Poptart at the table, and Cas lifts a hand in greeting. He looks a little green around the gills, enough so that Dean asks, “Hey, you all right?”

“Fine,” Cas replies, “Package for you. We didn’t happen to get a visitor while I was gone, did we?” He sets a big, cardboard box down the table, and Dean stares.

“No,” he says, and stands to grab a knife to slice through the packing tape, “Were we supposed to get somebody?”

“Well,” Cas says, and licks his lips. He shuffles in place with a catch between his brows before he looks back up at Dean and shakes his head, “Nevermind. Ellen said she might drop by with some old pup clothes.”

“Oh,” Dean says, “Nah. Nada.” He runs his knife through the tape and opens up the box.

He pulls out a little crib bedding set.

The one with guitars.

And the matching quilt.

“Cas,” Dean says, and looks up, “You didn’t – you don’t have to keep doing this shit for me, man.”
“I want to,” Castiel replies.

“I don’t get you,” Dean mutters, but claps his hand over Cas’ arm and says, “But thanks, you weirdo.”

Dean gathers the bedding into his arms. It’s just one more thing to add to the perfection of the nursery. He pads back and dumps the things on the floor. He has to reach over the lip of the crib but struggles to get to the mattress with his giant preggo belly bumping in the way. He laughs and then grunts a little by his third attempt before he mutters, “Jesus Christ, pup. Give ol’ dad some room, will you?”

By the time Dean finally maneuvers the tiny little crib mattress up into his grip, he hears Ellen’s sharp knock at the front door and hears Cas answer the call, letting her in. He hopes she didn’t bring any ugly shit – he saw some doozies at some of the hoity-toity pup clothing outlets, the kind of shit that gets you made fun of at school. Not that his newborn is gonna be going to school.

Whatever.

Dean plucks the itty-bitty guitar fitted sheet from the carpet and starts to wrangle it on.

“Cas gave us the coolest friggin’ joint, didn’t he?” Dean narrates at his stomach, “Perfect room for my little pup. You got your music, got your awesome crash pad, got toys and all that good shit. Even got us some Zeppelin lullabies. You’re gonna love it when you get out here. Lots a’ folks to love on you. Especially your dad.”

That’s when he smells it.

It’s old, familiar, and it’s alpha.

Dean freezes in place. He releases his grip on the guitar sheet but clenches his fists before he turns around. It can’t be what he thinks it is. It isn’t what he thinks it is. But it is. Oh, fuck, it’s exactly what Dean thinks he is.

All at once, he’s catapulted back into childhood, back to Sam climbing into bed with him when he got scared, both of them smelling the other and feeling better being in the presence of one another, being held together by each other.

“Hey,” Sam says, a crinkle in his brow, “Dean?”

He’s much taller and far more filled out than the teenager that Dean left behind seven years ago, but there is no doubt that this alpha decked out in a well-cut suit is the pup he used to call Sammy. His hair is longer now, neatly combed, and over the other smells that stain his suit, of travel and the coffee spill on his blue button-up underneath his suit coat, there’s cologne. It’s all power and dominance, and at it, an anxious lump clogs Dean’s throat.

Dean curls one arm over his belly and treads backward. He hits the crib and stumbles into the wall, a trip that has Sam swooping forward with his arms outstretched. Immediately, Dean crouches down and covers his head and shouts, “What do you want?” because that’s what you ask an alpha that’s after you, even one with a scent you knew as a kid.

“You’re pregnant,” Sam says, dumbfounded, “What are you doing? Why are you –”

But Sam scents the air and doesn’t have to ask. Dean’s afraid.

He backs off just a little, enough to give Dean space to breathe. He says, “You’re scared of me.
"Why are you scared of me? Why are you pregnant?"

Dean snarls out into his arms, “Think that would be pretty fucking obvious, Mr. Smarty Alpha.”

“Was it him?” Sam growls, “Was it Novak? He do this to you?”

“No!”

And that’s when Cas comes in. Dean doesn’t see him, but he can smell him, anger and say-so just like any other old alpha, but there's something else, the something that makes Dean want to leap up and bury his face against Castiel’s chest.

“I thought I told you to tread lightly,” Castiel says, the grit and fury of alpha all over his tone of voice.

“You told him what?” Dean demands, and at this revelation he stands, surging to his full height. He may be an omega, but that doesn’t mean he’s about to let himself be jerked around, let his fate be decided by a couple of fucking self-involved alphas. He narrows his eyes at Cas and says, “You got together with Sam and decided you’d do away with me? That it?”

“No, no,” Castiel says, and holds his hands up in defense, “I’d never do that. I thought you would want to see him. The way you spoke of Sam –”

“The way I – are you kidding me?” Dean bites out, “You motherfucker. I trusted you, and this is the shit you do? I believed you. I believed you when you said it was okay for me to be here. I believed all of that. And you just – shit all over that. Do you have any fucking idea what this asshole said to me right before I left? He told me I should’ve stayed home like our dad said. ‘Maybe you should’ve stayed home, Dean.’ Yeah, you stupid omega. Maybe you should’ve stayed home and then you wouldn’t have gotten fucking assaulted by a gang of sweaty alphas and had your family blame your dumb omega ass.”

“What?” Sam says.

“Dean –” Cas starts. He takes a step toward Dean.

Dean lashes out, shoving him back away. His brain kicks into protectprotectprotect. Protect my pup. He shouts, “Leave me alone! I don’t wanna – I can’t – you people will hurt my pup.”

With a burst of adrenaline, Dean breaks past his brother and Castiel, rushing barefoot into the living room. He doesn’t have time to shove his feet on his shoes, not the way that Cas and Sam are calling for him. He throws open the front door and runs down Cas’ walk.

It’s the night of his escape again, the escape from Alastair’s. Kevin had just been with an alpha. He was limping and weak and they were bringing him back in as they were coming for Dean to replace him. Kevin made a fuss, put up just enough of a fight that Dean could run for his life. He’s never run so hard as he did away from Alastair, running until his feet bled everywhere, until his lungs screamed for air, until his legs threatened to buckle beneath him.

Until an alpha in a shitty little Prius pulled up beside him and told him to get in.

Dean doesn’t know how long he runs this time, just that by the time he stops, he’s cloaked with trees all around him. Sweat pools between his shoulder blades, under his arms and at the collar of his t-shirt. He trips into a clearing, falling to his knees and catching himself on his palms so that the pup doesn’t get hurt. He crawls forward and, breathing heavily, and sits back against a fallen tree snapped at the stump.
At least for now, he’s alone. The scents of animal shit and soil will shield him for a little.

He thinks back to the night that he left and his heart clenches.

It was the end of his heat – earlier that day it had subsided, but the pheromones still floated off of his skin with that smell so pretty that some bottled and sold it, tried to duplicate synthetic versions in laboratories and factories. It was a shit heat, wouldn’t go away no matter what kind of knot that he fucked himself on, no matter how much porn that he watched. He’d been holed up in his room for a week.

All Dean wanted was to get out.

He just wanted a drink, some laughs, maybe to hustle up some extra cash with a couple of games of pool and blow it on something nice for himself.

His father shouted at him.

“"You stupid fucking omega slut! You can’t go out. You smell like a fucking bitch in heat – you’ll have alphas crawling all over you."

Dean yelled back. He yelled about how John didn’t run his life, didn’t dictate where he went, and what would mom say if she heard John calling Dean an omega slut and a bitch?

*Your mother would agree with me* – that’s what John Winchester said back.

Dean flipped his father the bird, threw a jacket over his shoulders and took off. He slid into the nearest bar with a grin on his face and the scent of his heat on his skin and threw back whiskey on the rocks for a couple of hours before he tired of the bullshit, thought he should go back home, if only to apologize to Sam for being loud while he was trying to do his homework.

One drunken tumble out the door, and they were on him. Reeking of cheap liquor and dirty alpha sweat, they dragged Dean behind the bar.

He fought and clawed but it was four against one and Dean didn’t stand a chance.

By the time that the second one had had his way with Dean and his knot had gone down, he gave up. He let them pound into him, let them tear up his body. Let bruises bloom to the surface of his skin and blood to pool in with the natural slick of his body. He didn’t even cry or shout, just took it.

And when Dean came home, John called him names, told him how ashamed he was that he had a son like Dean, a stupid, silly, no-brain omega that couldn’t do something like follow a simple set of orders. All Dean needed to do was listen to direction. That was what an omega did. What he was supposed to do. He was supposed to obey. He didn’t, and he returned home with a torn up ass and a deep and abiding sense of disgust with himself.

In him, the pup aims a kick.

“Promise you,” Dean says, like he’s been saying since he knew about the pup, “Promise you I’ll do right by you.”

Then, after a long, noiseless moment, he adds, “I love you, pup.”
Dean smells them just after the sun sets.

He hears them right after, the crunch of shoes through the trees snapping through the quiet of the mountains like firecrackers. Beyond them, all Dean can hear is crickets and other bugs, serenading mates with chirps and clicks and soft songs. Sometimes, it still amazes him the nothingness that is here. Only him. Only the crickets.

And Cas.

And now Sam.

“Back off,” he shouts to the woods.

Castiel’s voice emerges back with one word, “Dean.”

It’s not spoken with force or with disdain, just with worry and want.

Then Cas goes on, “May we come sit with you?”

Dean swallows and hesitates. He closes his arms around his belly and says, “Okay.”

From the trees, Sam and Castiel both appear and tread toward him, crunching through the weeds and wildflowers. Sam hangs back a few paces, while Castiel walks all the way to Dean. He gathers Dean up into his arms and Dean can’t help but relax, sticking his nose against Castiel’s neck and wrapping his arms around Cas’ neck.

“You scared the shit out of me,” Cas grumbles.

“Sorry,” Dean says.

Sam makes an indignant noise behind them, and Castiel shifts back and growls.

“Hey,” Dean snaps, “Don’t either of you pull that posturing shit with me.”

“Sorry,” Sam mutters, at the same time that Castiel murmurs, “I apologize.”

Dean takes in a breath of Cas’ scent to solidify his nerves, and then stands on wobbly legs. This time around, in the dim dusk light, he takes the time necessary to take in the full sight of his brother. He’s out of his suit now, changed into a t-shirt and button down. His face looks haggard, weary and ill. Like any alpha would be for their omega brother, he’s sick with worry. There’s more than that, Dean can tell, but he won’t question it quite yet.

Instead, he squeezes Cas’ hand and takes several tentative steps toward his little brother.

First, Dean touches Sam’s shoulder. Then, he leans in and scents the same place. He breathes in so many smells – of Sam, that element that makes him Dean’s brother and that he’ll always recognize and think family when it hits him. There are new places and new people surrounding that scent, friends and people that Dean has never met. There’s something soft, something sweet in that smell.

When Dean pulls back, he blinks at his brother and asks, “Sammy, are you mated?”

Sam licks his lips and shifts his gaze down to the ground.

“I was.”

“Oh,” Dean says.
“Last year she – she passed. With our pup. Childbirth,” he slowly says, “Both of them were just. They were just gone.”

“I – shit,” Dean says, and only then does he gather Sam into his arms. It sends his brain into overdrive, into fear and longing and memories all at once. Sam hugs back and buries his nose in Dean’s hair, sniffing, but not too much, not enough to send Dean back to the comfort of Cas.

“You smell mated too,” Sam mentions softly, “Have you and Castiel...?”

“Nah,” Dean says, and pulls back, “I mean. I dunno. We sleep in the same bed and stuff. But Cas has got this thing, this false mating –”

Sam looks back at Cas and says, “You should see somebody about that, doctor.”

“I know,” Castiel replies, voice oddly stilted. Dean can hear in it some things that he can’t recognize, but mostly the tone of voice that says that Castiel very much does not like being told what to do by another alpha.

Dean shifts over to run a soothing hand over Cas’ arm, for which Castiel shoots him a grateful look.

“We should go back,” he suggests, “You haven’t had dinner.”

Dean agrees, and after a several minutes of walking on his bare feet in the sharp growth, he finally caves in and lets Cas carry him, with a heave of effort and not without a string of complaints from Dean as he clings to Cas' neck, back the rest of the way to the house. There, Castiel sets him down on the same kitchen chair that Dean sat in the night they met, where Cas took out his implant and stitched him up. For the second time in that chair, Castiel washes and bandages Dean’s feet. Only this time, Sam is there, looking on at the scene without speaking.

It’s only over a quick dinner of quesadillas that Sam finally says something –

“Dean?”

“Mmph,” he replies, through tortilla and melted cheese.

“What…what happened to you?” he asks.

Every fear that Dean has had since the day Alastair locked him up below the brothel surfaces in an instant. He stares at Sam’s face, tries to find something in it that will reassure him that Sam wouldn’t blame him for the years of hell that he endured. Maybe – maybe Sam could have let it slide, could have forgiven Dean’s stupidity, if Dean had been entirely innocent in it all. But Dean isn’t innocent. He cracked like an egg in Alastair’s grip, presented himself to any alpha that wanted him at all.

Alastair’s favorite.

That was Dean, at least until the pup.

Dean swallows his bite of quesadilla and holds an arm over his belly. He shakes his head, and though he has only eaten half of his supper, stands and says, “I’m going to go to bed.”

“It’s not even nine –”

“Goodnight,” Dean says, and walks past his brother and Castiel, closing Cas’ bedroom door firmly
behind him.
The bedroom door slams with a note of finality, and with it Castiel and Sam are left in taut, embarrassed silence. For an instant longer than necessary, they stare at each other. It doesn’t feel usual, seems more like a test of alpha wills. Although the aromas of exhaustion and sorrow are potent on Sam Winchester, he doesn’t bend.

In the end, Castiel cracks first. He does not lower his eyes, but shift them to Dean’s half eaten dinner. He stands and collects the plate, scraping the leftover half of the quesadilla into the trashcan before he reaches for his and Sam’s dishes, rinsing them without speaking and filing them into the stainless steel dishwasher.

When he turns back, Sam still stares at him, serious-eyed, and says evenly, “I need to know what happened to him.”

“I hardly know myself, Sam,” Castiel replies.

“Then tell what you do know,” Sam says in clipped words.

The tone of voice, commanding and so self-assured, makes Castiel bristle. Biologically speaking, it pisses him off to be ordered around in his own home, his territory, by an unfamiliar alpha. The only thing that holds him back, in truth, is knowing that Sam is not competition for Dean. With pseudoamoris clamped firmly into his brain, the imminent threat to his mate and Dean’s discomfort already has his teeth on edge.

“It is not my place to tell you,” Castiel at last answers.

He knows that upsets Sam. In his chair, Sam shifts, clenching his fists on the kitchen table.

“Damn it,” Sam mutters, “He won’t tell me. I screwed up. I just didn’t realize how badly it was until now. I want to fix it, but God, I don’t even know where to start. Last time I saw him, I was seventeen. I thought he was an idiot, but it was me. I was so stupid.”

“You were a teenager,” Castiel reasons, “I think Dean realizes that, even if he is angry with you as it now stands.”

“How am I supposed to fix this, Castiel?” Sam asks. Again, as it happened during Castiel’s first conversation with Sam, the alpha in Dean’s younger brother seems to vanish, leaking away until the empty vessel that remains is nothing but a frightened sibling, no more than a child. And Sam is hardly out of the cradle of childhood as it is – he is twenty-four. It is perhaps not a number to snort
at, especially considering what he’s accomplished within that space of time. Scientifically, however, Castiel knows that the brains of male alphas aren’t considered fully developed until twenty-five, at least. Sometimes later.

Sam rubs his big hands over his face and says into his palms, “Christ, I need something to drink.”

Castiel turns to his liquor cabinet and procures the same bottle of well-aged bourbon that Dean drank from on his first night here. He asks, “Will this do?”

Sam gives a terse nod, and Castiel pours them each a glass on rocks. He slides Sam’s drink to him and sits a couple chairs closer to him than he had at dinner. It’ll help if Sam gets used to Castiel’s scent, recognizes it as a non-threat in regards to his brother.

With a flick of his wrist, Sam tips back almost everything in his glass. When he places it back on the table, he lets out a long sigh, and says, “He came home smelling like alpha and – fuck, I was so dumb. I thought – maybe I don’t know what I thought. But I just assumed our dad was right. Dean had gone out and slept around and maybe got mugged for his cash. Maybe that’s why he was all bruised up. But that wasn’t…it wasn’t what happened, was it?”

Castiel cannot imagine what must have gone through Dean’s head on that night. The sexual assault of omegas is commonplace, he knows, but to think that Dean has been through it in such a way makes his gut twist inside him and his fingernails bite into the table top. Like many others, Dean was blamed for what happened to him. Castiel knows better – no omega deserves that, though most report having been a victim at one time or another.

What little bourbon remains in Sam’s glass is tilted back down his throat. Castiel retreats back to the counter and fetches the bottle. He passes it to Sam. With a grateful expression, Sam pours another dose over the ice in his glass. He sighs, thumbing at the rim, and says, “I smelled four of them. Fucking four alphas, and I – I told Dean that he should have listened to dad and if he got beat up that it was his own stupid fault. The way that he looked at me. I’ve spent years thinking about that look. It was the last time that I saw him.”

The words make Castiel want to throw open the door to his bedroom and crawl under the covers with Dean, to hold him tight and keep the demons at bay. But he knows that sometimes Dean needs space, and that this is one of those times.

Sam goes on, “I spent day after day knowing I was the one that did that, that made him look the way that he did. And I just. It was my fault that he ran away. I thought it was my fault he was dead, and I can’t decide if this is worse. You saw how damn scared he was of me. He thought I was gonna hurt him, hurt his pup.” Sam’s voice cracks. He holds his fists against his eyes and smears back tears before he reaches down and sips more bourbon.

Castiel carefully selects his words to Sam Winchester and replies, “We can’t help the way that we were raised. What matters is that we realize the wrongness in what our parents taught us, and we use that to make change for the better.”

With a snort and a wry smile into his whiskey, Sam remarks, “You’re speaking from experience.”

“You know I am,” says Castiel, “Dean had the unfortunate honor of meeting them all.”

“What?”

“My brother Michael’s wedding,” explains Castiel, “Dean braved them on my behalf. He’s remarkable, your brother.”
“I know,” Sam rasps into his drink, “I think I always knew that. I wish that I had told him. Now I may never, because he’s fucking afraid of me.”

“I think that an apology would at least be a start,” Castiel says, “It sounds as though you owe Dean that at least.”

“And what the hell is that going to do?” asks Sam, “Nothing I say is going to take back that night, take back all the shit I did before that.”

“No, it won’t,” agrees Castiel, “but it’s something, and I do think that Dean would appreciate it.”

“Yeah, okay,” Sam concedes, and then, “Maybe I should get some sleep.”

“Probably,” Castiel says, “Let me show you to the guest room.”

Sam collects his compact, practical rolling suitcase from beside the front door and carries it over the carpet to the guest bedroom. Castiel opens the door for him, and Sam treads in quietly, drinking it in with far more caution than Dean did on the night that he arrived. He half-turns to Castiel and says, “It smells like Dean, a little.”

“He first stayed here,” Castiel replies, “I can’t remember when he started sleeping in my room. I imagine it was after one of his nightmares. Sam, if you don’t mind my asking, for how long do you intend to stay here?”

Sam blows the air out of his lungs and works a hand back through his long hair. He answers, “I think…if it doesn’t bother you, I really wanna stay ‘til he has his pup. How – do you know how long it will be?”

“If the pup comes as expected, a little more than two months,” Castiel tells him.

Sam nods, “Okay. Then that’s how long I’m staying. Maybe longer, if that’s something Dean wants.”

“All right,” Castiel agrees, “If you need anything, please ask. Sleep well, Sam.”

“Thanks,” Sam says, and with that, he closes the door.

Castiel lingers for a moment, staring at the closed door. It occurs to him how much his home has changed since Dean arrived – beyond seeing omega vitamins and junk food in his kitchen or seeing classic science fiction movies on his television day in and day out. Now he has companionship, scents beyond his own wafting through the house. The strongest scent is Dean’s – pregnant, enticing, omega – a million ingredients that make a full-bodied stew of wonderful things potent enough to bring Castiel to his knees.

On that note, he returns to his own room, slipping inside to the dark and smelling mate.

When Castiel changes into sleep clothes and slides into bed, Dean shifts onto his other side and faces him, eyes open, a crinkle at his brow. He hesitates to press into Castiel and instead of bringing their bodies closer, he asks, “Why’d you do it?”

“Invite Sam?” asks Cas.

Dean nods, frown deep.

“I thought…at Michael’s wedding, when you mentioned your surname is Winchester, I started to
"wonder," explains Castiel, "Sam has done incredible things in the world of omega rights, Dean. I looked at his website and he – he did it because of you. Perhaps you should speak to him."

Dean looks unconvinced, and lowers his eyes.

Castiel gathers Dean up into his arms and presses kisses into his hair, over his forehead and eyelids and nose. Dean kisses back when their lips touch, and that at least is a sign that Dean isn’t entirely out of sorts. Dean loops his arms around Castiel’s neck and draws him in for better access.

They break for breath, and when Cas leans down to nuzzle and run his lips over the hollow of Dean’s throat, Dean’s hands find his hair. He mutters, “Weird-ass alpha,” and Castiel smiles against him.

“Why don’t you get some sleep? We can address this all tomorrow,” Castiel suggests.

Dean nods and wriggles in closer. He nuzzles his face against Castiel’s t-shirt, stubble scraping against the cotton. They fall asleep like that – Dean’s face pressed into Castiel’s chest, and Cas’ hand gently coaxing his fingers along Dean’s scalp.

X

The pup, per its usual morning routine, wakes both Dean and Castiel when Dean shuffles out of bed to use the bathroom. He returns to the warm bed when Castiel holds out his sleepy arms and crawls into them, letting Cas snuffle and love on him for several idyllic seconds. For just that small space of time, Castiel can fantasize that the omega space built into his biology is filled, filled with a man named Dean that smells fantastic and is carrying Cas’ pup in his belly.

“Ahem.”

Above Cas, Dean looks over his shoulder, and he shifts off when they see Sam in the open bedroom doorway, hair sleep-mussed and arms crossed over his chest.

“Mornin’, Sammy,” Dean roughly says.

The spell of Castiel’s mate fantasy broken, they move their party to the kitchen, where Castiel tosses Dean his bottle of prenatal vitamins and Dean catches it mid-arc, with one hand. He pops open the cap and downs a capsule with a swallow of juice.

“What are those?” Sam asks, as Castiel pulls a skillet down from the pot rack to put together some simple bacon and eggs.

Dean pats his belly and says, “Puppy pills.”

“Vitamins,” Castiel supplies at the same time.

“Am I…gonna have a niece or a nephew?” Sam asks, hesitation in his voice.

It’s such a small question, but it makes a world of difference. Dean looks over at his brother with brows raised, and then glances back to the swell of his pregnancy. He smooths a palm over the curve and a tiny smile plays at his lips. The smile is so simple, so small, but makes Castiel pause his breakfast-making just to stare at it, just to feel his insides swell with affection at the curve of Dean’s lips.

Then Dean looks back up and shrugs, “Dunno. I wanna be surprised.”
“The nursery’s nice. I looked at it this morning,” Sam says. The tone is casual, but Cas knows it makes a difference to Dean. The easy acceptance of his pup from his brother is something that he not only craves, but needs – family, Castiel is discovering, is something deeply important to his omega.

Castiel mentions from the stove, “Dean put together the furniture and did the decorating.”

Dean rolls his eyes and says, “Yeah, but Cas paid for the damn thing. I’m thinkin’ I’ll make a little mobile thing myself. I looked online and I could only find fruity shit. And what’s the deal with saying crap is for “girls” or “boys,” anyway? If my pup’s a little lady and she’s into robots and crap, then good. Little dude likes bunny rabbits? What the fuck ever, am I right?”

Sam laughs a little. He says, “We had a ceramic angel in our nursery, remember?”

“Yeah,” Dean says. A note of sadness hits his voice, but vanishes in the next instant when he glances back down to the pup. He clears his throat and asks, “You – um. You gonna stay? You know, for the big shebang.”

Sam nods, and takes advantage of the plate of breakfast that Castiel slides in front of him so he can delay his response. He scratches the back of his neck and says, “Yeah. Took a leave of absence just in case. I just, I mean. I guess I’m nervous about it. Because of the whole thing with Jess and my…yeah.”

Dean doesn’t seem to know whether or not to comfort his brother or not. He stands still in the same place for several seconds before he shifts a little and says, “Sucks, Sammy,” and then raises his brows at Castiel, “but I’m in good hands. Cas is real fuckin’ good at what he does.”

“Yeah? He lost his medical license,” Sam says, “So how can you be so sure?”

“That’s politics,” Dean says, “‘Sides, when he found me, I was…uh, I was in pretty rough shape. I was heated and um. He had to get this hormone-crap thing outta my leg. Anyway, he kept his cool the whole time. It was pretty awesome, actually.”

“You had a hormone implant in your leg?” Sam’s mouth unhinges, and all at once the aroma in the air shifts from the seasoned easiness of bacon and reconciliation to raw, potent alpha anger. Sam stands and sends his chair clattering back onto the floor with a loud smack of hardwood on granite.

Dean flinches back and withdraws to Cas’ side. Cas places a hand on Dean’s back and rubs over his spine in soothing circles. At his brother’s fear, Sam backs down. He takes his seat again and stares down at his half-eaten breakfast, breathes in controlled inhales and exhales, and then looks back up. His expression is calmer, but his eyes are fierce.

“I didn’t mean to get pissed,” Sam says, “I mean, I’m really pissed. But I’m not pissed off at you, Dean. Please, just. Understand that. I can’t believe that you had a hormone implant in your leg. Those are like, twenty kinds of illegal and you – you couldn’t have been anywhere good to have one. It just makes me mad.”

Dean doesn’t pull back from Castiel’s comfort, but he does speak to the floor, “It wasn’t good, no.”

Cas squeezes Dean’s shoulder, and Dean shoots him a miserable half-smile, something that’s supposed to be reassuring, Castiel imagines, but turns out to be exactly the opposite. To stave off the tension and crackle of anger in the air, Castiel powers through the emotion and completes breakfast, making up a particularly greasy plate for Dean, because he knows that it will be appreciated.
They eat without speaking, only the clatter of silverware on Castiel’s everyday dishes breaking up the noiselessness. Sam and Castiel both watch Dean throughout the meal. Sam stares with furious, searching eyes. Castiel can tell that a demand to know where Dean has been sits poised on the tip of his tongue, but he keeps himself carefully in check until the plates are clear and Dean hunches forward in his seat.

“Hey,” Sam says.

Dean slides his gaze over.

Sam goes on, “Um. You don’t have to, you know. Tell me about any of the stuff that happened to you. I mean. I wanna know, Dean, I really do. But I get that we’re not – we don’t really trust each other enough yet for that, okay? I just wanted to say that I’m so fucking sorry, man. I know there’s no excuse…I mean, I treated you like crap, and I don’t know. I’ve never felt worse about doing something than I feel about the shit I said to you the night you took off.”

“Yeah,” Dean says, and looks over at Castiel, as if he’ll have the answers as to what to say in response to his younger brother’s apology. Castiel just lifts his brows, and Dean scowls at him before he turns to Sam again and clears his throat to say, “Yeah, okay. Thanks for saying you’re sorry, I guess.”

“Good,” Sam says.

“Good, yeah,” Dean agrees. He stands up and collects the dishes, and though Sam protests when Dean tries to take his, he stops Sam with a lift of his hand and says, “Shut up, Sam. Gotta do something to say thanks to Cas for being such a team player.”

Sam turns his attention to Castiel, and Cas explains, “He insists upon it.”

“Damn straight I insist upon it,” Dean says, “I mean, you saw the friggin’ nursery. Me n’ the pup are living in the lap of luxury here. Cas takes good care of us.”

Those words do incredible things to Castiel. He meets Dean’s eyes and feels a smile leak onto his face, wide and delighted at being told he’s doing a good job sheltering and caring for his Dean. Well, not his Dean, but sometimes it feels that way, as now it does. Dean smiles back, and winks.

Ah, Lord, but that makes Castiel want so many things that he can’t have. All at once he thinks of having Dean in his bed, naked and needy for his alpha, pinning him down and thrusting into him until both of their voices are raw from crying out.

It becomes clear that his little daydream has gotten out of hand when Castiel shakes himself out of it and sees both Dean and Sam giving him a look – damn it all to hell, they can smell the arousal coming off of him. Castiel coughs and says, “Excuse me. I think I…yes,” and removes himself from sight before he can make things even more awkward than they already are.

His feet take him to the master bath, where he runs cold water from the faucet and splashes it onto his face. Castiel knows Dean gets a kick out of smelling alpha arousal or seeing him try to discreetly tuck an erection into a pair of jeans so that it doesn’t show, but Sam is an entirely separate can of worms. He’s alpha, he’s Dean’s family, and already volatile from his emotion being rubbed so raw in less than twenty-four hours.

Castiel must be on his best behavior, and best behavior does not leave room for indulging in intricate sexual fantasies about knotting Dean while Dean’s brother sits a mere few feet away.

When Castiel at last feels fortified enough to return, the dishwasher is running and neither
Winchester brother is anywhere to be seen. His stomach swoops with concern, and he pokes around in the nursery and spare room and study before he finally spots them – he sees them through the front window, sitting outside on the edge of his porch. Sam and Dean are a safe two feet from one another, space enough not to feel crowded, but to still be able to scent the other on the air.

For some time, Cas watches them talk. He considers eavesdropping, because despite his hard-earned self-confidence, he finds himself afraid that Dean will leave here with Sam and the space that Castiel has carved out for Dean in his life will be empty, too empty.

But he doesn’t eavesdrop. Instead, Castiel wipes down the kitchen. He blesses his past self for thinking to build the house with an open floor plan and keeps an eye on the porch at all times, just in case. Dean and Sam don’t move from their places for another twenty minutes, when Dean reaches over, claps Sam on the shoulder, and stands.

They reenter the house together, Sam still attentive in that he keeps a safe distance behind Dean.

Dean stretches his arms over his head and offers a lazy smile to Castiel, who would rather like to kiss that smile off of his unshaven, handsome face.

“Thinkin’ we could watch a movie,” Dean says, “Saw The Fifth Element way in the back of your DVD case. Up for it, Cas?”

So they end up in front of the television with drinks – Sam and Castiel with mugs of coffee, Dean with a glass of juice – as the movie begins to play. Sam sits in the armchair, and doesn’t look pleased with the fact that not only has Dean chosen to sit on the couch with Castiel, but that he’s side by side with him, and looming ever closer.

Out of habit more than anything, Cas lets an arm settle around Dean’s shoulders, and Dean’s head flops over to rest on him. It’s how they watch most things now in the evening, pressed up against one another where each of them feels warmest and safest. When they’re like this, a distinct sense of family wraps around Castiel like a well-loved quilt on a cold day. He never felt something quite like it before, even within the family that he grew up with.

He still loves his family – even his insufferable mother and even worse stepfather-slash-uncle. And yes, if it came down to it, he would protect that family. He’s had to before, at least in incidents involving Gabriel, too much alcohol, and a few pissed off alphas.

But Dean is different. Castiel would defy his family, slay his brothers, would give his own life for Dean. Logically, he knows that the element of pseudoamoris plays into this, and he doesn’t even care. As Dean is happy, healthy, and protected, so is Castiel.

Toward the end of the movie, in spite of the action onscreen, Dean starts to slip. His head falls into Castiel’s lap, and his body sprawls out across the rest of the couch, bandaged feet propped on the armrest. Castiel pushes a hand back through Dean’s hair to confirm that he is asleep, and so he is, so deep into it that he doesn’t even stir as Cas strokes over his scalp.

As the credits roll, Castiel blinks to Sam, and finds Sam staring right back, moving his eyes over Dean and Castiel with a hard, lawyerly gaze.

“Castiel,” Sam says slowly, “I know that your pseudoamoris is at play here, but what is the nature of your relationship with Dean? He’s very…affectionate with you.”

“I don’t know,” he answers truthfully, “Dean…there is so much that he has been through, Sam. I pride myself on an exemplary record of not hurting omegas, and I don’t intend to ruin that now.
But you know it would be dishonest to say that I don’t care for him. Beyond *pseudoamoris* and the extraordinary circumstances surrounding this all, Dean is...he is good. And I think were it not for everything that pushed us both here – if Dean and I had met on a dating site or bumped into each other on the street, for example, like a regular alpha and omega – that things would be different.”

“What different in what way?”

“You know the answer to that question,” Castiel says lowly.

A soft growl rumbles in Sam’s throat, and he says, “If you fucking do anything – anything – to hurt him, I won’t hesitate to fucking kill you. Do you understand, Doctor Novak?”

Castiel, instead of responding like the rational human being that he is, growls right back. He snaps out, “As long as you understand that the same is expected of you. I do not give a simmering shit that you are his brother. If you step out of line –”

From Castiel’s lap, Dean’s irritated voice says, “You fellas gossip about a guy, and then you’re all growly over him? Gee whiz, I sure I am popular. Will you two cut it the fuck out? I get it. You both got big, fancy knots. Now shut up.”

Sam and Castiel both mutter apologies, but when their eyes meet again, it is clear that each one’s threat toward the other still stands.
While We're Tasting Time

Chapter Notes

Drum roll please...the moment you've all been waiting for!

Chapter Track: We Are Golden – Black Light Dinner Party

While We’re Tasting Time

Dean hasn’t been on the inside of a craft store maybe ever, but now that he has to make things for his pup that don’t suck or are wide-eyed cutesy bullshit, he thinks he may frequent this joint more often. It’s huge, a few towns down the mountain and a long-ass drive, but worth it as far as the merch goes. The lighting is cheap and fluorescent and the entire place smells like somebody’s grandma’s bathroom, but there’s so much fun crap that it’s hard to be irritated.

Plus he’s got Sam and Cas trailing him with a shopping cart with looks of intense, tortured boredom on their faces, and Dean may or may not get a kick out of taking far longer than necessary to inspect the box of ’62 Corvette Roadster model kit.

If the pup’s gonna be looking up at a car, after all, Dean should make sure that it is a damn fine vehicle.

That’s when he sees it. Dean almost drops the Corvette Roadster on the floor in his enthusiasm, but manages to shove it back on a shelf. He pulls out another box and grins widely as he displays it at Sam. He says, “’64 Chevy Impala. Not quite as nice as the ’67, if you ask me, but still a helluva vehicle. Whatever happened to my baby, anyway?”

Sam shrugs, “I assume dad has it.”

“Assume?” Dean says, and lifts a brow as he lowers the model box into the cart, moving on to the bead aisle toward a display of promising-looking charms.

“Dad stopped talking to me, like, forever ago,” Sam says, “I mean, he was pretty pissed about the whole omega rights stuff, but it was when I mated with Jess that sealed it.”

“What? How come? Thought he was all into the idea of gettin’ you mated to some pretty omega and being a ‘real alpha’ or whatever the fuck,” Dean says. He takes down a package of little charms intentionally stylized to look industrial and kind of badass, and dumps that in the cart.

“Um,” Sam says, and scratches a hand through his hair, “Jess, she. Um. She was an alpha.”

Dean turns to his brother, brows drawn together, “Oh. That’s cool. Unexpected, I guess. But cool.”

“Yeah, I mean,” Sam exhales, “that’s why we knew the birth was gonna be rough. ‘Cause it’s possible and all, but with two alphas it’s just – hard. And we should’ve listened when our doctor told us it wasn’t a good idea. Should’ve adopted. But I can’t go back now.” He hunches in on himself, and looks nothing like a confident, successful alpha. The grief is all over him, and though Dean has become used to the scent of an alpha who has lost his mate, it was never as sharp as this.
Dean stares at his brother for a long, long time.

“That’s rough, Sammy,” he says, because what else is there to say? He coughs and adds, “Shit, dude, you know I’m crap at this. But I got your back, okay?”

Sam huffs and a trace of a smile touches his lips at the declaration. He nods, meets Dean’s eyes, and says, “Thanks. That’s pretty cool of you to say. After all the crap that’s happened.”

Dean shrugs. The conversation is edging on uncomfortable now, and he’d rather not talk about the brutalizing life that he led in Alastair’s brothel, especially in the middle of a craft store. This trip is supposed to be about building stuff for his pup, not about breaking into Dean and ripping out information about the past seven years.

“I’m still your brother,” he mutters, and starts walking off again. Out of place, tossed aside by some kid, Dean finds another model kit – this one of a zeppelin. He lifts it and holds it out to Sam and Cas and says, “Hey, how awesome is that? That’s definitely goin’ in the cart.”

Only after Dean feels that they’ve scoured the entire store for the coolest things they can find (he even finds a purple skull covered in glitter on sale for fifty cents) do they roll up to the counter. The mostly-omega staff of the place have been smiling amusedly at them the entire time, chuckling at Sam and Castiel’s long, bored faces as Dean pulled them around from aisle to aisle.

A curly-haired, plump omega behind the checkout counter starts in on their pile of merchandise, bagging in the reusable bags that Castiel insists upon using. She picks up a thing of yarn, which Dean does not recall putting in the cart, and mentions while she smiles broadly at Dean, “This is such a pretty shade of green. What are you going to make with it?”

Dean starts, “That’s not –”

“Oh, that’s mine,” Castiel says, emerging from the trance of tedium.

“What the hell are you doing with yarn?” Dean asks.

“I knit,” Castiel replies, as though this should be obvious.

Dean raises his brows and incredulously gets out, “You knit?”

“Yes,” Castiel responds with a careless shrug, “I wanted to make the pup a hat.”

The statement leaves Dean feeling unnervingly warm, inside and out. He feels like a scoop of ice cream melting over a slice of hot apple pie deep in his guts, gooey and sticky and perfect. He doesn’t even realize that he’s making doe-eyes at Cas and grinning like a moron until Cas cocks his head, squints, and asks, “Why are you staring at me like that?”

Dean shakes his head and smiles at the floor.

“Nothin’, dude,” he says, “That’s just really cool of you, is all.”

In the parking lot, Dean insists upon helping load their purchases into the back of the Prius, despite both Sam and Castiel telling him to sit down and rest.

“I’m pregnant, not an invalid,” Dean snips back, and very much does not listen to either of them.

Castiel lets Dean pick the radio station as per usual, and he settles on classic rock, also as per usual. He kicks his feet up on the dash and Castiel reaches over to push his legs back down. Dean rolls
his eyes, but the whole thing feels kind of – domestic. Is this what it would be like is Cas really was his alpha? Would they jerk each other around and laugh at each other? At the end of the night, would they crawl in bed together and fuck?

The thought of fucking Castiel makes his mouth dry. What kind of alpha would he be in bed? Probably pretty versatile. The way Cas makes room in his life for Dean leads Dean to believe that Cas would make room for him in between the sheets, too. They could try all kinds of things – the slow stuff, fucking long and thorough until they come so hard they gasp for air, or maybe Dean would stick his ass in the air and present and Cas would fuck him ‘til his legs turn to jelly.

“Gross, Dean!” Sam protests from the back of the Prius.

Only then does Dean realize that the smell of omega slick and the half-hard cock trapped in his preggo jeans are a dead giveaway for his train of thought.

“Don’t be such a prude, Sammy,” Dean says, and smirks back at his little brother. The scowl that Sam returns to this makes him look like his teenage self again, fed up with Dean’s bullshit. The eye-rolling irritation at him actually makes Dean smile, letting out a soft chuckle before he reaches to crank up the volume on the radio.

Still, this shit has to make Dean wonder.

He licks his lips and drifts back to the suggestion that Sam made when they hashed it all out on Cas’ front porch – “Maybe it isn’t false mating, Dean. Maybe it’s real.”

Dean had denied it. Because, come on. Really? There’s no way a dude like Cas would be into an omega like Dean. He’s mouthy and ugly and pregnant, and that’s just the beginning of the list of reasons why no one should want to mate with Dean. He’s an inconvenience, not an asset. There are so many freaking omegas out there that would throw down to be with Cas. He’s handsome and has great taste in music and is a doctor and _knits_, for fuck’s sake. The man is this awesome combo of everything an alpha should be and then nothing that alpha should be and for whatever reason, that combination as Dean leaking slick into his underwear.

By the time that they make it back to Cas’ place, Dean has never been more relieved to get out of a car. Part of it is because he needs to take a piss like a motherfucker – but the other part is ten times worse than that. It’s how he let himself think of Cas and him as mated. They’re not. It’s just Castiel’s brain thing that’s making him think that Dean is somehow desirable.

Dean pours his frustration into the creation of the mobile. He takes the bags from the craft store and piles them up in the garage. He’ll probably only get as far as assembling the models tonight, but that’s okay. He has some time before his pup needs the thing anyway.

He starts on the ’64 Impala model first, and again wonders how his baby is doing. He doesn’t want to talk to his dad – at all – but he’d like his car back. It would be a vast improvement upon Cas’ dinky little Prius. The Impala is a real fucking car. He misses the smell of leather interior and the feeling of a steering wheel in his hands. Nothing compares to that feeling, driving his baby with the windows down, breeze in his hair and good music blaring, guitar riffs rolling over the snap of the wind.

Dean would like the pup to know that feeling. He looks down at his stomach, so much bigger than it was even when Cas brought him here a couple of months ago, and runs his palm over the swell.

“Hey, pup,” he says softly, “I’m not sayin’ you need to get into cars like your dad, but you should at least know which cars are the awesome ones. And Cas’ car? So not awesome. Just for the
Only as Dean has set out the pieces for the zeppelin model – setting aside the ’64 Impala model to dry in a safe place – is he interrupted. Cas steps into the garage with a knock on the wall and says, “Sorry to disturb you.”

“S’all right,” says Dean, and ignores the rise of happiness he gets at smelling Cas nearby, “What’s up?”

“Dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes,” Cas says, “And I brought you this. You've been here for a while.” He sets a glass of juice beside Dean’s work area.

“Thanks,” Dean says. He didn’t even notice the sun going down, but then, the idea of world’s most awesome friggin’ mobile hanging above his pup’s rocking crib has taken precedence in the last couple of hours. Nonetheless, he should probably eat. He adds, “What’s on the menu for the night?”

“Mac n’ cheese,” Castiel answers, “Homemade.”

“Sweet,” Dean replies.

To this, Cas nods and makes his way to the door back inside. Dean stops him before he leaves, though, with a soft, “Hey.”

“Yes, Dean?”

“Thanks,” he says, “I mean, not just for dinner. For everything. Don’t ever change, okay?”

“Okay, Dean,” Cas hums his agreement, and the door closes behind him.

When Dean tromps into the house for dinner, the three of them gather around the television with bowls of hot mac n’ cheese in their laps to watch episodes of the animated Star Trek series. This devolves into an argument of Star Trek versus Star Wars, a debate that Dean actually thinks is stupid, because he loves both of them. However, Sam favors Trek and Castiel leans toward Wars – Dean listens to them bicker, but then tunes it out as he focuses on the television.

It’s odd how an argument can make him feel so at home, but it does. This is the good shit right here, eating cheesy pasta on the couch with your two favorite alphas in the world, listening to them growl at each other over Star Trek and Star Wars.

You’re going to like it here, Dean thinks to the pup, and spears another bite of mac n’ cheese into his mouth.

X

Three days following finds Dean in the nursery, on a sturdy ladder found wedged in the corner of Castiel’s garage. It’s a little dusty and he’ll need to vacuum the carpet again after this adventure, but the ladder is the perfect height to climb up and hammer the hook into the ceiling to hang his newly minted crib mobile.

The mobile counts among the nicest things that Dean has ever crafted. Castiel, for reasons unexplained, owns a lathe. Dean used it to make the top piece, an X in wood that conceals the wiring. He sanded it all down, and after drilling holes to hang the features of the mobile, stained and polished it. Completed, it’s a masterpiece – ’64 Impala, zeppelin, sparkly purple skull, clock springs and gears, the antlers from a stag skull he found on a walk with Cas and Sam, a plastic
alien, an X-Wing and an Enterprise.

It is a work of art fit for the finest museums.

And when you spin it, it plays a music box rendition of *Ramble On*.

“Dad made you the most friggin’ awesome mobile, pup,” Dean says, “Maybe I’ll make you some other cool shit, too. We don’t have a high chair yet for you. I know you could use one of those. Maybe I could make a new coffee table for Cas or something. The one he’s got is fucking ugly. And, um. Don’t use that language. At least yet. You can say fuck when you’re older.”

Dean adjusts the position of the mobile several times before he at last steps from the ladder and admires his handiwork. The first notes of *Ramble On* tinkle as the mobile turns with the little last bit of movement.

“Looks pretty cool.”

Dean jumps about a foot in the air at the sound of his brother’s voice behind him. He feels bad for making Sammy feel like shit, but other alphas just set his teeth on edge, even Sammy.

“Jesus. Scared me, Sammy,” Dean says, and tries to make it sound more like a joke than the truth. It doesn’t work.

“It’s okay,” Sam says. He hangs back in the doorway and holds up his palm in surrender, “I mean, it kind of sucks. But I get that it’s not about me. So if you need me to back off, just…you know, let me know. I just wanted to see how it turned out, was all.”

Dean’s shoulders relax a little and he steps back so that Sam can have a better look at his handiwork, “It’s all good. Looks bitchin’ doesn’t it?”

“Bitchin’?” Sam says, and cocks a brow.

“Yeah, let’s forget I ever said that,” Dean says, and rubs the back of his neck. The pup kicks at him and before he can help it, he lets out a soft, “Ooh.”

“What?” Sam says, “What is it? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Dean says, and waves Sam off, “Pup’s just kicking me.”

Sam’s eyes shift down to Dean’s stomach for a moment before he looks back up and says, “Oh.”

“You, um. You wanna feel?” asks Dean.

“Can I?” Sam asks. The excitement is so palpable in his voice that there’s no way that Dean could deny him.

Dean jerks his head and says, “Yeah, get over here, dumbass.”

Sam stumbles toward him, and Dean takes him by the wrist, laying his palm over his stomach. A few beats later, the pup kicks away. A smile stretches over his mouth and he blinks up at Dean to breathe out one word: “Wow.”

“You can talk to it if you want,” Dean says slowly, “I do it all the time.”

Sam says, “I know. I hear you sometimes,” he licks his lips, peeling back skin with his teeth while he considers Dean’s offer. After a while, Sam clears his throat and stumbles over awkward words,
“Um. H-Hey, puppy. I’m your uncle Sam. If your dad’s ever being a jerk, just come to me. I’m like, ten times cooler anyway.”

“Hey,” Dean says, and elbows at Sam. He laughs, and then Sam laughs, too.

Sam looks surprised to laugh as loudly as he did. He clutches the back of his neck and coughs, and when his gaze reconnects with Dean’s, the look in his eyes is bittersweet. He says, “Thanks. For letting me do that. I can’t wait to meet it.”

“Me neither,” says Dean, and with that, he reaches over and squeezes his brother’s shoulder. It’s a small gesture, barely there, but enough to tease another smile to Sam’s lips, and to lift a weight from Dean’s shoulders that he didn’t even know was there. The atmosphere in the nursery lightens, dark cloud between himself and Sam seeping away, if only for a minute.

And then, the pup kicks again. Dean chuckles, “Think somebody’s telling me it’s lunchtime. There’s a pizza in the freezer I can throw in the oven. You want?”

“Sounds great, dude,” Sam says, and follows Dean out to the kitchen.

X

The movement of the mattress jostling sends Dean out of sleep. He sits up and rubs his eyes – the sun is up, but only enough to let dim morning light into the bedroom. The birds outside are making a goddamn racket, the house is quiet, the comforter is warm…

And Castiel is humping the mattress.

“Um, Cas,” Dean says, and shakes his shoulder.

All at once a potent scent hits Dean, lightning quick and delicious. It’s Cas’ scent, but amplified by a billion, gorgeous and wonderful. It’s Christmas morning and his birthday and world’s most tasty pie all in one incredible smell. Dean fists the sheet with one hand and with the other, he shakes Cas even harder.

“Cas, buddy, you gotta get up,” Dean says, “I’m freaking serious here.”

He has to wake up, because Cas is in a rut.

Castiel’s eyes open, deep blue and feverishly wild. He glances down at the erection tenting his sleep pants and then back to Dean before he flies back across the mattress, as far as he can get without actually getting out of bed. He says, “You have to get out of here, Dean.”

That’s probably true. Cas is in Fuck City right now, and if there’s anything that the man needs, it’s space. Space, and probably a silicone omega channel and a glass of water or something. But he finds himself unable to move, glued to the spot and staring at Cas’ desperate, lust-filled face.

“I can help,” Dean offers.

“No,” Cas says, “Get out, Dean. I’m serious. Get out and tell you brother to bring me a toy from the storage room. I barely have control as it is, and I am not forcing myself on you.”

“It’s not forcing,” Dean says.

“We have been over this,” Castiel replies, exasperated. Sweat breaks out on his forehead, shining in the early morning light.
“Yeah, okay, we have,” Dean agrees, “But I’m serious. You’re not forcing me. I’m offering.”

“But. You –”

“Cas,” Dean says. He eases his t-shirt up over his head and tosses it onto the bedroom carpet, “If the whole issue is that you think I would say no, I’m gonna clear that up for you. I wouldn’t say no, and not just ’cause I want me and the pup to stay here with you. You’re awesome. And you know. I like you. So will you just let me freaking help you out? You know no toy is gonna compare. I’m just saying.”

“Dean…”

“And okay,” he goes on as he slides off of the mattress to divest himself of his pajamas and his boxer briefs, “I know I’m not like, ideal. And you probably want a smaller omega, or maybe an omega that isn’t pregnant, or God, one that hasn’t been with about six million alphas, but I’m what you’ve got and I’m pretty damn okay as far as options go, I’d say.”

“You’re so much more than okay,” Castiel squeezes out. He wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and pants, “Dean. I need to know right now. Are you absolutely positive that you are okay with this?”

“Super, dude,” Dean says. He wets his lips with his tongue and then sloughs off his nerves with a wink and a smirk.

“Get over here,” Castiel says, and holds out his arms. It isn’t a command; it’s a request. That makes all the difference.

Immediately, Dean crawls into Cas’ open embrace, kisses him right on the mouth, and loops his arms around his neck, pressing their bodies together. For a while, he hovers with his naked ass over Cas’ erection, knowing that when he presses down he’s made a decision. He just kisses Cas at first, cradles his face between his palms before he moves down and licks along his skin. God, fuck. He smells so damn good. It should be illegal to smell this nice.

Dean lowers his body down, and rubs up against Cas’ cock through the soft cotton of his sleep pants. Damn, that feels nice.

“Fuck,” Cas hisses, and it’s on.

Cas lifts Dean up off of him and manhandles him onto his back. His clothing flies off of his body and Cas is gloriously naked in front of him, tanned skin, intense stare, lithely muscled runner’s body, cock huge and heavy between his legs. God, he’s a dream. A feral, possessive look gleams in his eye as he crawls over Dean and kisses him hard, tongue pressing into his mouth, hands tangling into his hair to push them both further into it.

“Just go,” Dean mutters, “I know you need it, little alpha. So take it.”

Cas growls, low and rumbling in his chest, and pries Dean’s legs apart. He nuzzles at the curve of his belly before sucking Dean’s cock into his mouth, bobbing his head. Dean makes a noise of surprise and groans, throwing his head back against the pillows. Slick fills him, spilling out onto his thighs.

Cas licks his lips and murmurs, “Big cock for an omega.” He mouths at the head and Dean whines.

“I know,” he says, “I’m sorry.”
“I love it,” Cas fiercely replies, and swallows Dean up again. Dean doesn’t get why Cas is doing this, giving him pleasure when this is for Cas, not Dean. Alpha, not omega. He can see Cas helplessly rut in the air, squirming as he licks and sucks and hums along Dean’s erection.

Oh shit.

“Hey, Cas, I’m gonna –”

Dean comes, and instead of backing off, Cas does something remarkably weird. He swallows down every drop of Dean’s come, licks up what he doesn’t finish, and pulls off of Dean’s cock with a magnificent grin.

“Mine,” Cas says.

Dean whimpers and nods, “Yours.”

Cas places his palms on the inside of Dean’s legs and parts them. He dips his head at the juncture between Dean’s thighs and then goes lower, stubble rubbing up against Dean’s sac, fingers pushing apart the cheeks of his ass.

“What the fuck,” Dean manages.

That is a tongue.

Son of a bitch. Cas is eating him out. No one has done that for Dean since high school.

“Love how you taste,” moans Cas, “Shit. Love how you smell. Everything about you, Dean. Your face and your arms and your freckles and your pup. All of it. Gorgeous. My perfect omega. Look at you open up for me, how slick you are for me.”

“Yeah,” Dean agrees. He bites down on his lip, “Just for you, baby.” His eyes sting, he realizes. Shit.

The scent of tears makes Cas pull back from Dean’s hole, a confused look on his face as he cocks his head.

“Dean?” he says, “Are you okay?”

Dean gives a watery laugh and says, “Fine, Cas. You’re just saying all this nice shit and I just – nobody’s ever said anything like that to me before.”

Cas stares for a second and says, “That’s ridiculous.”

“Wha –” Dean dissolves into a moan.

There’s alpha tongue eating him out again, lapping up slick and licking along his hole. Then Cas moves, pressing sloppy kisses to the insides of Dean’s thighs, and to the stretch marks underneath his belly, over the pup and to his sensitive nipples. Cas says, “You are so beautiful. Every part of you,” he kisses the juncture of Dean’s neck and shoulders, “Your broad shoulders,” he kisses Dean’s stubble, “Your jaw,” he kisses the center of Dean's forehead, “Everything in here.”

“Jesus, Cas,” Dean says. There’s nothing else he can say to that, expect maybe: “You’re something else, too.”

Castiel grins and heaves Dean up, opening his legs up and holding his cock against Dean’s slick entrance. With a push, he’s inside. Dean expects Cas to start drilling him, but Cas keeps still for a
second and strokes his thumb over the crest of Dean’s cheekbone. He says, “I’ll take care of you.”

“I know that,” Dean says, and is surprised to find it true.

Cas starts out slow, gripping Dean’s hips and working inside him in a steady, thorough rhythm. It’s nothing like any sort of sex that Dean has ever had before. It’s intense – fucking mind-blowing, actually. He smiles up at Cas as noises start to spill from his throat. Cas’ hips stutter at one loud groan of Dean’s and he answers with a rough noise of need.

“So perfect under me,” Cas says, “Gorgeous omega. Smell so good. Need you so bad.”

“Need you too,” Dean rasps.

Cas perks up at that, and Dean grins.

“Yeah, Cas,” he says, “I need you. Fuck me good, okay?”

Of course his alpha would obey. Cas speeds up the thrust of his hips and plows into Dean, fucking him back so hard into the mattress that the headboard of the bed smacks against the wall with each thrust. He plays with Dean’s nipples and Dean whines, keens, writhes underneath him. Cas’ cock is thick and just right inside Dean, slamming up into him and hitting all the sweet spots.

“Jesus,” Dean groans, and starts fucking his hips back to take it harder.

This is the best sex that he has ever had.

And fuck, maybe it’s because he’s not just some fucktoy here. He’s not just a channel to be knotted, a sweet smell to be taken in. Here, he’s Dean, and for reasons unknown, Cas wants that. Cas wants Dean. Wants him. Cas peppers kisses over Dean’s hair and head and shoulders and collarbone, tongues over the softness of his chest and belly, smooths his big, long fingered hands over Dean’s arms as he drives in and out of him.

A string of swears rips out of Cas’ throat, and his movement starts to stammer. His thrusts are faster, erratic. He’s on the brink, and Dean wants to pull him over. So he pushes back, clenches down, and rides up into Cas’ movements.

“Dean,” Cas says, as his knot starts to swell, “Dean, may I knot you? Tell me now.”

“That’s the point, stupid,” Dean says. He braces his hands on Cas’ shoulders and yanks him down into a thorough kiss. He shifts his legs from being in the air to clamping around Cas’ waist, holding him in place as his knot fills with blood and anchors him inside Dean.

All it takes is one last shift of Dean’s body for Castiel to lose it.

Not only does he come, and come hard, but Cas buries his face against Dean’s neck. His mouth opens around the sweat-damp skin there, and with a helpless whine of pleasure, Cas sinks his teeth down. A note of surprise pushes past Dean’s lips as the claim is made, as Cas pulls off and licks at the blood rising to the surface.

That’s when he stills. He looks at Dean, horrified, and says, “I mated you.”

“Oh God, I’m so sorry,” Castiel says, “Dean, I didn’t mean to. You just smell so perfect and I felt so good and the rut –”
“All right, shut up,” Dean says, “Look, it’s fine.”

“Fine?”

“I mean, I’m not the ideal mate, but it’s cool, right?” Dean says, “If I make you feel good.”

“You are my ideal mate,” Cas says, “You’re everything I want. I just – I didn’t ask –”

“Hey, dummy,” Dean says, “Did it ever occur to you that maybe you smell like my mate, too?”

“What?”

“Right up there since the beginning,” Dean confirms, “Shit, little alpha, I was so damn scared. You smelled so good and I didn’t…but you – you –” he swallows his worry back, but can’t stop from shaking, “but you want me, right?”

“Of course I want you,” Cas says, “I’ve never wanted anything more.”

“Then get over here and let me mark up that neck,” Dean says.

A wobbling smile covers Castiel’s face right before he lowers his head and offers his throat to Dean, a stretch of pristine, tan skin, all for him. Dean noses along it, scenting and breathing before he finds just the right place, licks his lips, and breaks the skin with his teeth. Cas whimpers above him, and Dean rubs his back, running his fingers up and down Cas’ spine before he laps up the spotting blood and says, “Shh, little alpha.”

It’s unreal. Dean can’t believe that any of this is happening, that they’re tied together by Cas’ knot or that holy hell, somebody wants him. Cas doesn’t just want to knot him, doesn’t just want to use his body when it’s convenient and fuck off when it’s not – he wants Dean.

“My Dean,” Cas rumbles from above him, and palms over Dean’s stomach, “My mate. My pup.”

And shit, if that easy acceptance of Dean’s pup isn’t just the cherry on top of it all.

Dean kisses Cas’ face everywhere. His chest hurts and he just wants Cas to know in every way how fucking happy he is, how much this all means. His Cas. His alpha. His home. Their family. It’s hard to believe that none of this is a dream, that Dean didn’t die someplace and make this entire house up as his afterlife, dream up the pregnancy and his Cas and his brother, all together under one roof.

Around forty minutes later, Cas’ knot finally goes down enough that they can ease apart. They kiss and nip and scent as they do, though they reluctantly part when nature calls and Dean has pee. When he returns, Cas offers him a fresh set of pajamas – with his rut going on, it’ll only be another forty five to an hour or so before they’re at it again, so better not to bother with a huge amount of effort.

When they shuffle outside, Sam sits at the kitchen table, headphones wedged in his ears and laptop open in front of them. His nose wrinkles before he looks up, and he pulls one headphone out to ask, “So, you guys have a good time?”

“Sure did,” Dean grins, and trots up to the counter to take his vitamin, while Cas pulls out cereal and milk instead of grabbing stuff to cook – probably better to be practical until the rut tides over. Dean swallows his pill with juice and leans over to Sam, jabbing a finger at his fancy-ass mating mark.
“Check it out,” Dean says, “Me n’ Cas tied the knot, if you know what I mean.”

“Gross,” Sam says, and pushes Dean away, “I mean, mazel tov, but fuck you. You both smell.”

“Smell fantastic,” Dean says, and sidles up behind Cas to hug him from behind while he pours himself a bowl of Cocoa Pebbles. Dean noses at the bite on Cas’ neck and exhales.

Mazel tov, indeed.
As soon as Sam scents *alpha rut* and not mere *vigorous sex*, he gives Dean a pat of encouragement on the shoulder before packing his laptop into its case, throwing a sweatshirt over his shoulders, shoes on his feet, and giving them a half-hearted, “Don’t…do anything stupid,” before taking his rental car into town.

Sam’s absence leaves behind nothing but the sweet, *perfect* scent of his mate curling in the air, and with it, the satisfaction of knowing that this is no tragic case of false mating, but that it is real. Dean is indeed sitting across from him with a mouthful of cereal and Castiel’s mating mark on his neck, reeking of satisfied, cheerful omega. It’s a pungent, pretty odor. Castiel would like nothing more than to launch himself across the kitchen table and breathe it in, to tear Dean’s clothing from his body and lick his slick out at the source.

“Jesus, Cas, can we at least finish breakfast?” Dean asks, making a face at him.

Castiel sighs. As much as he’d like to fuck Dean into the floor right this very minute, they do need to nourish and hydrate throughout this fiasco.

Pleasurable fiasco, but fiasco nonetheless.

Out of necessity, Castiel finishes his bowl of cereal and stands to run water from the tap into a glass, chugging it back to empty before he sets it aside in the sink and gives Dean a leering grin. Dean swallows his last bite of his breakfast and mutters, “Insatiable little alpha.” And damn, if Castiel had not already been turned on, that would have done it. He leaps across the room and yanks Dean into an enthusiastic kiss, pressing his tongue into Dean’s mouth to taste him.

“Perfect,” Cas murmurs against Dean’s lips, and rids his omega of his clothing, letting it pool on the kitchen floor while he scrabbles with his own.

“What now, genius?” Dean asks, “We’re naked in the kitchen, in case that slipped your notice.”

“Honestly?” Castiel asks, and eyes the furniture to his right, “I would really enjoy fucking you on the kitchen table.” A growl rumbles in his chest before Castiel can stop it, and Dean gives him an amused expression, eyes vaguely mischievous.

“Yeah?” Dean smirks, “That would annoy the living shit outta Sammy…” a pause, “Let’s do it.”

A satisfied noise tears from Castiel’s lips, and he pulls Dean up against him. Dean is the most wonderful thing that Castiel has ever had in his arms. Granted, Castiel never made much of a habit of casual sex – he went through ruts like any alpha but satisfied his needs with plastic toys and channel of his own hand. From time to time he attempted relationships, but no one ever smelled
quite right, no matter how kind or interesting that he found them.

Dean is so different. He smells perfect, like nothing Castiel has had the honor of scenting before. The swell of his pregnant belly brushing against his abdomen makes alpha pride buzz in Castiel’s veins like an electric current. He loves how brash Dean is, never succumbing to the societal pressure on omegas to embrace weakness and docility. He loves the quirks of Dean’s body that make him look almost alpha in appearance – his thick cock, wide shoulders, strong limbs, set jaw.

It’s all so fucking wonderful.

He watches, transfixed, as Dean pulls back from their kiss and wets his perfect, kiss-swollen mouth with the tip of his tongue. Dean cocks one brow at him and says, “Kitchen table, huh?”

Castiel nods.

Something self-satisfied appears on Dean’s face, and Castiel doesn’t know whether that should concern or please him. He pecks a kiss to Castiel’s cheek, winks, climbs up onto the kitchen table – and belly down, Dean presents.

Castiel swears that he can hear a hallelujah chorus sung by angels with the sweetest of voices…or maybe that’s just the blood rushing so fast from his brain to his dick that his ears deceive him. He practically tackles Dean, running lips and tongue over the curve of his spine, over his back and his ass and ah, God, yes, that lovely leaking hole. Dean still smells like Castiel there, and he can’t help but run his tongue against that pink ring of muscle, watching Dean’s legs quiver as he does.

It occurs to Castiel, though, just as he reaches to press his cock inside Dean, that the position of presentation is exploited by human traffickers and pimps, that omegas are strapped down, ass in air, and forced to present to any alpha, and the occasional beta, that pays enough for the pleasure.

Absently, Cas kneads Dean’s lower back. The expanse of skin is covered in scars, white and pink, thin and thick, crisscrossing old and new, each with a story of being beaten again and again and again. It makes him hurt to look at them, makes him angry that anybody ever dared hurt his mate like this.

Dean looks over his shoulder and says, “Um, Cas? Get on with it. I’m kind of fucking horny here.”

“I was just thinking,” he says, voice strained, because in actuality it is incredibly difficult to think when in one’s rut, even if you are a man typically imbued with abnormal amounts of self-control. He coughs, “You like this position?”

Dean quiets, seeming to catch onto Castiel’s implication. He shrugs his shoulders and says, “Not always. But, uh. You know. You’re special. So I like it, ‘cause it’s you.”

A combination of his chest filling to bursting and a fresh wave of rut slam into Castiel. He growls again, this time right against Dean’s ear – “Mine. My omega.”

Dean casts a glance over his shoulder and grunts back, “My alpha.”

That tears it.

Castiel manhandles Dean’s legs back, holding them midair as he maneuvers his cock inside him. The press of Dean’s heat and slick around is the most welcome sensation that the world has to offer, sweet relief and adoration pummeling him all at once as he hits home. Dean moans beneath him, fingers white-knuckling at the edge of the kitchen table, which creaks with protestation at its
treatment.

Still, Castiel has no intentions of being gentle. No, now, he gives into rut, holding Dean’s legs up and spreading them out. He draws out and then thrusts back in with a huff, and both he and Dean groan at the explosion of feeling. Dean holds onto the kitchen table for dear life as it groans and shifts beneath them with each push and pull of Castiel’s body.

He fucks Dean, and he fucks him hard. Castiel’s mind is a blank slate of *rut* and *fuck* and *mate*.

“Look at you,” Castiel says, and if his voice is full of wonder, it’s because the sight before him, is, in fact, a wonder. Forget the Hanging Gardens, the most timeless wonder of this world must be this – Dean’s ass in the air, legs spread wide and gripped by Castiel’s fist while his tight little hole takes all the girth of the alpha cock pounding into it.

And Lord, save Castiel from the way the man moans and grinds back up into him.

“You are so gorgeous,” Castiel tells him, “So gorgeous that I wish you could see this. See how good you are for me, my perfect omega. See how well you take my cock, how nicely your body is preparing for my knot. You… are marvelous.”

Castiel knows that Dean does not agree with him, and that in itself is why he must say the words out loud. Dean is beautiful and Dean must hear that he is, though Dean’s beauty is not merely limited to the physical. Below him, as Castiel drives without relenting into Dean’s body, one of Dean’s hands closes into a fist.

Dean makes a noise like he’s trying to say something, but as Castiel propels forward in a particularly well-aimed thrust of his body, hits the sweet spot inside Dean and makes the words melt from his mouth into a long, helpless whine. Dean uses his hands to leverage himself and starts moving back on his cock.

“Ho – *fuck*,” Dean manages, and without a single touch to his cock, Castiel’s sweet omega comes all over the poor kitchen table, legs shaking from the force of his orgasm. He goes a little limp as Castiel continues to take him, and then in his sex-wrecked voice says, “Can feel that knot, Cas,” and clenches around him, tight, “Come for me, little alpha.”

That is all the encouragement that Castiel needs. He hunches over Dean and clamps his mouth over the still-fresh mating mark on the skin of his neck as he fills Dean up with come, marking the second wave of his rut with the single most powerful orgasm that Castiel has ever had in his life – and that includes when he discovered what touching his damn knot did to him in the first place.

Carefully, Castiel arranges Dean onto his side so that no weight falls onto the pup, and they collapse, panting on the kitchen table and spooned together.

“We are definitely doing that again,” Dean says.

“Agreed.”

After they catch their breath, Castiel starts in on giving Dean the proper care an omega deserves after being so good for his alpha. He runs his fingernails against Dean’s scalp and kisses him all over. Once he’s satisfied with the kisses he has given Dean, Castiel massages Dean’s shoulders, pressing his knuckles into the quivering muscles and teasing new moans from Dean’s lips, making his ass clench again and again around Cas’ sensitive knot when his fingers find a favored place on Dean’s back.

When Castiel has gathered together enough pieces of his mind to speak entire sentences, he finds
the first one being, “The kitchen table held up surprisingly well.”

Dean laughs. He laughs so hard that his whole body shakes, so hard that it teases a chuckle from Cas, and has him leaning over to kiss the laughter right out of Dean’s lungs. Dean kisses back, and smiles when they have to stop again to breathe.

“My mate,” Castiel pants.

Dean nods and whispers back, his voice hoarse, “My little alpha.”

X

Sam arrives back to Castiel’s home in time for dinner, by which time Castiel and Dean have moved onto abusing other available surfaces in the house, including (but not limited to) the couch, coffee table, master bathroom floor and shower, and the armchair upstairs in the study that Dean says is ugly and therefore deserved its defilement.

“Oh my God,” Sam says, when he steps into the house, “It smells like shit in here.”

“There’s food, though,” Dean says, before Castiel can get a word in edgewise, cheerful despite the clear awkwardness to his gait and the unfortunate mess that is his hair.

“What do we got – aw, the table? Are you guys fucking serious? I’m eating in the guest room,” Sam complains.

Castiel turns, and can’t help the alpha smirk that tickles his lips from quirkling up, “That’s acceptable,” and checks the clock on the microwave before he says, “I think I only have another thirty minutes or so before my next rut.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Sam says. He seems appeased a few minutes later when the spaghetti sauce is finished cooking, however, and when they all sit down to dinner at the thrice-sanitized kitchen table, he questions Cas, “How long do your ruts last?”

“Three or four days,” Castiel answers, “Most likely three with Dean.”

Sam makes a face at both of them and says, “…Great. I’m just gonna stay out of your hair for the next few days, then.”

“S’only two more,” Dean says, cheeks full of spaghetti, “Thought you were the smart one.”

“Shut up,” Sam says.

“Bitch,” Dean says back.

Sam makes another, slightly different face, and replies, “Jerk.”

Dean smiles over at Sam in a way that Castiel hasn’t seen before. It’s a gentle smile, almost hesitant, a gesture enough for Castiel to gather that there’s a joke between the two that he isn’t understanding. He doesn’t question it, though. Instead, Castiel twirls a bite of spaghetti around his fork, ignores the beginning of his next rut prickling at the base of his neck and between his legs, and smiles back at the both of them.

X

Castiel only has Dean once more before they’re too tired to deal in ruts and decide that sleep is the
best option. They opt to dump the sheets in the laundry while they have the wits in them to do it, and so Dean plays Zeppelin II on one side of the basement and loiters while Castiel pours detergent into his washing machine and stuffs the rut-come-Dean-and-Castiel bed extravaganza inside.

They listen to the music while they wait, sprawled out together on the basement floor. Dean’s eyelids droop and his head falls to Castiel’s shoulder as he drifts.

He did, after all, work very hard today.

Castiel takes in the sight and smell of him while he sleeps – his disheveled hair, rumpled clothing...the smell of being well-fucked and sated. And the smell of being pregnant. Castiel’s eyes drop from Dean’s face to the swell of the pup underneath his wrinkled AC/DC t-shirt. He lifts his hand, careful to be gentle, and runs the backs of his knuckles over that bump.

The pup thumps against his hand through cotton and flesh, and Castiel can’t help the smile that touches his face. Dean’s pup – *his* pup – makes him inexplicably happy.

“What’re you smilin’ about?” Dean mumbles.

Cas looks back up and sees Dean’s eyes barely open, a fond, lopsided grin on his face. He says, “The pup. I’m smilin’ about the pup.”

“…Yeah?” Dean says. He opens his eyes a little more, and sits up straighter at that, moving his head off of Castiel’s shoulder. He licks his chapped lips and clears his throat before he speaks again, “How come?”

“How come? Dean, you and the pup are my family,” he says.

“Well, yeah. I guess – I mean...jeez, Cas,” Dean says, and scratches the back of his neck, “Don’t most alphas hate it if you got a pup that ain’t theirs? Biologically, I mean.”

“What, in all our time together, indicated to you that I am among ‘most alphas’?” asks Castiel.

He knows that Dean, for the most part, is right. The pups belonging to one alpha have been known to stay with that alpha if the omega parent leaves to seek romance or life elsewhere. Widowed and omega parents with pups the result of rape – like Dean – complicate things. Though equality laws prevent single parent omegas from discrimination on paper, what happens in reality is that most omegas with a pup and no alpha are left destitute, stared at in public by curious onlookers that smell the absence of mate on them, and slapped with a proverbial red letter on their chest by the conservative and hyper-religious.

It’s instinct, most say, for an alpha to be uncomfortable with the pup of a different alpha.

Castiel, meanwhile, thinks that while instinct may guide, it does not *lead* – they are human, not monsters.

“I think every part of you is magnificent,” Castiel settles upon adding to fill the silence, “and your pup is a part of you. Therefore, magnificent.”

A tinge of red touches Dean’s cheeks and he looks pointedly to the floor.

“Well, fuck, Cas,” he says, “You just say the damnedest shit, don’t you?”

“That I do,” he agrees.
After that, the conversation fades from serious, and Dean enthuses about the record. He babbles about musical history that Castiel has never bothered looking into in spite of his penchant for the genre, and then talks about how ‘he has to teach the important crap to the pup’ and how Dean ‘doesn’t even know what stuff plays on the Top 40 these days, but it probably sucks.’

They break briefly so that Castiel can transfer the bedding from the washing machine to the dryer, and so Dean can use the bathroom and find the bag of jalapeño potato chips that Dean has stashed someplace, because according to Dean, the pup makes him ‘crave the spicy shit.’

A fondness falls over Castiel after the sheets are straight from the dryer and fitted over the bed. When they crawl in together, he can hardly believe that any of this is reality. He doesn’t know what person – or people, as it probably came to be – decided that happiness is so unbelievable. So, unable to trust the source, he embraces being happy and wraps his arms around the pregnant belly of his mate, contented.

X

It comes crashing down when the sound of Dean screaming rips Cas from his sleep with a vengeance. He shoots up in bed and sees Dean beside him, twisted in the sheets, red-faced and sweating and crying out. Horrified, Castiel places his hand on Dean’s shoulder – but this only makes it worse. Dean starts moaning to stop, please stop, stop, stop, stop, and so Castiel removes his hand again.

Omega in distress is a potent enough smell on its own. Mate in distress is twenty times worse. Pregnant mate in distress is at least a hundred times more than that. It makes Castiel want to tear up the room and cry and scream and bellow and rip the bodies of Dean’s abusers to tiny, bloody shreds.

In the maelstrom of panic and protectprotectprotect, Castiel grips Dean by each of his shoulders and jostles him. He begs, “Dean, please wake up. It’s just a dream. You’re having a nightmare. Please wake up.”

Dean wakes up in the same moment that Sam Winchester slams through the bedroom door and, on the tail end of a growl, demands, “What the hell is going on here?”

Dean cowers away from both of them. He curls into a ball on the mattress and tries to make himself as small as he can. Out of his own selfish need, Castiel places a palm on his back. Dean flinches at the touch, but as Cas begins to rub in small circles, he seems to ease, if only by the smallest amount.

“He was having a nightmare,” Castiel explains, and does not stop the movement of his hand, “Please don’t shout. You’re scaring him.”

This doesn’t do much, but Sam does back off, stepping a foot or so back from the bed.

It takes a while for Dean to come to. He doesn’t stop shivering, but he uncurls his body and stares from his pregnant belly to Cas, to Sam, and back again. He’s crying, but it isn’t bawling – the tears are silent, the kind of tears that one learns to cry when they know the noise of weeping will only make all their pain worse. He wipes the tears away with his fists.

After a long second, Dean avoids the gaze of both Castiel and his brother and says to his hands, “They had this…this thing. He just called it The Chair.”

The gravity with which Dean speaks those last two words is enough to prompt Castiel to say,
desperate curiosity aside, “You don’t have to tell us about this if you’re not ready, Dean.”

Dean swallows. He holds his arms over the pup as if to shield it from harm and continues with a shake of the head, “The Chair. Most times that’s where you went if you couldn’t hold still for alphas trying to stick their knot in you. Where you go when you don’t do your job. Other times you got put there ‘cause alphas liked you there, liked their omegas all trussed up and tied down. You got your wrists cuffed down on either side of your head. Your ankles, too. Spread apart real wide so it hurts to move. And then one on your neck. Gotta keep you down so you can present. Sometimes if you made noise, they smacked the shit outta you. Other times if you kept quiet, they did the same thing. Always depends on what the alpha wants.”

Castiel makes eye contact with Sam while he rubs Dean’s back. His heart looks like it’s breaking in his face. Involved as Sam is in omega rights, surely he’s had to have heard of cases like this before – but to hear the account firsthand, and from the lips of his own brother, is pain that Castiel cannot imagine.

He can however imagine the pain of hearing it from the mouth of your pregnant mate. His mate. His Dean was locked into a device that made him present so that he could be fucked by alpha clients, was beaten and tortured in that device.

His mate has nightmares about that device.

“Who’s ‘he,’ Dean?” asks Sam, voice quiet, but deadly, “Who are ‘they’?”

“I can’t…shit, Sammy, I can’t,” Dean just says.

“And why the hell not, Dean?” demands Sam, “They fucking tortured you, and you can’t tell me who they are so I can make sure they never fucking see the light of goddamn day again? I have the power to make sure that they never leave a fucking jail cell once for the rest of their lives, and you’re what? Protecting them?”

“Sam, stop,” Castiel says. He’s just as angry, if not more angry at the perpetrators as Sam is, but from the new flood of noiseless tears tracking down Dean’s face, talking about the torture he was subjected to has been enough for the night.

The alpha tone in Castiel’s voice clearly makes Sam bristle, though the tension in his shoulders shifts when he sees the blatant fear and pain written across his older brother’s face.

“What do you want me to do?” Sam asks. The helplessness in his voice echoes everything that Castiel feels.

“Just don’t make me talk about it,” Dean rasps, “At least not yet.”

“Okay,” Sam says, “But. You know. You can tell me. When you’re ready. And I’ll help you take them out, Dean,” he makes eye contact with Castiel and adds, “Me and Cas both will.”

X

The following morning finds Castiel and Dean alone with a note from Sam to contact him on his cellphone if they need anything from him – and also with another bout of his rut. Cas doesn’t have it in him to wake Dean to relieve himself, so he slips out of bed and masturbates under the stream of the shower. It doesn’t feel nearly as satisfying as having Dean’s hot, wonderful body to fuck into, but after last night’s events he isn’t going to do that without making sure that Dean is okay.

When Castiel emerges from the bathroom with his towel slung low around his waist, Dean is
sitting up in bed, sleepy-eyed. He gives Cas a frown and asks, “Hey, how come you got the party started without me?”

“I didn’t want to, um,” Castiel considers this for a moment, “impose.”

Dean rolls his eyes. He says, “I’m fine, Cas. Same as I was yesterday. So let’s get crackin’, dude. We’ve got an alpha in a rut and my ass is a-waiting.”

Castiel shakes his head and says, “I’m fine for now. Come on – you need a bath.” It took a shower for Castiel to realize that Dean reeks of sex. Omega slick, alpha come, spit and sweat and all the trappings of having an excellent time.

Dean makes a face but pads across the carpet and follows Cas into the bathroom. Castiel helps him strip off his t-shirt and sleep pants. While they wait for the tub to fill, he kisses Dean, making sure to get his eyelids and cheeks and jaw and earlobes and all the places that he has not kissed nearly enough.

A soft noise makes it out of Dean’s throat as Castiel tends to him, kissing him all over and stroking his hair and back.

“What are you up to?” Dean asks, tone teasing.

“Taking care of you,” Castiel says, and applies a final kiss to the center of Dean’s forehead before he ducks aside to shut off the flow of water. He helps Dean into the bathtub, holding him steady as he sinks down with a long, satiated sigh.

“That is the shit right there,” Dean says.

Castiel kneels at the side of the tub and rubs a bar of soap between his palms. He lathers the suds over Dean’s back and works on some of the knots there, scrubbing in between to erase that aroma of stale, day-old sex. Dean makes pleasured noises when Castiel hits a good spot with his fingers. He finds himself absently tracing the scars on Dean’s back in between, and without thinking, he asks, “Is that how you got these? The Chair?”

Dean tenses under Castiel’s hands. Just as Cas begins to regret asking, Dean answers, “Some of them.”

Cas leans forward over the edge of the bathtub and places a kiss on the damp, soapy back of Dean’s neck.

“You are so beautiful,” he tells him.

Dean snorts and mutters, “Yeah, okay.”

“I wish sometimes that you could see yourself as I do.”

“I’m a scarred-up, knocked up piece of omega shit,” Dean says, “What the fuck else is there to see?”

“I’m a scarred-up, knocked up piece of omega shit,” Dean says, “What the fuck else is there to see?”

“Yes I can,” Cas defends, “You wear it on your sleeve. It is impossible to miss.”

“Whatever.”
“You are so gentle with your pup when you think nobody is looking,” Castiel says, “you are devoted and you are good and you are intelligent, so much so of all of these that I am always amazed by it.”

“That’s great, Cas. It doesn’t change any of the shit I already said.”

Castiel reaches for the shampoo and squeezes some into the center of his palm. He lathers it into Dean’s hair and scrubs out the dirt and oil, massaging his scalp before he says, “Maybe not, but I think we’ll have to agree to disagree on your physical appearance because I find it remarkable. I love your scars. They’re a part of you. I told you that, remember? I love what is a part of you. I know you don’t believe me, but,” – he places a kiss to Dean’s unshaven cheek – “It’s true.”

“Maybe to you.”

“To me, yes,” Castiel agrees.

They don’t talk after that. Castiel helps scrub and rinse Dean off, and when they pull the plug and the murky bathwater begins to drain, he helps Dean up and over the lip of the tub again, offering a towel before they step out into the bedroom.

Castiel feels another round of rut coming on, and Dean must smell it, because he says, “Hey, let’s take care of business, huh?”

“It’s okay, we don’t –”

“Oh, stick a cork in it, Cas,” Dean says.

A tiny grin grows on his omega’s face, and Dean herds Castiel back onto the mattress. He crawls over him with heat in those green eyes. When they kiss, the kiss is deep and thorough. The taste of Dean is quickly becoming one Castiel’s favorite tastes, of his skin and saliva and himself, that perfect, potent combination that makes Castiel a little dizzy every time that his tongue touches it.

“Don’t worry about me, okay, little alpha?” Dean says.

Castiel opens his mouth to protest, but before he can, Dean takes Cas’ cock in hand and sinks down on it in one fluid motion.

This time when they fuck, it’s slow and steady. They kiss and shudder and softly moan against their matching mating marks, nipping and licking and scenting as Dean rides back on Castiel in long rolls of his hips.

Castiel comes with Dean’s name on his lips, and when he reaches between Dean to wrap his fingers around him, Dean follows a minute later. They come down from it all knotted together and chests heaving, both of them chuckling though nothing in particular is funny.

“Hey, when your knot goes down, I could make us some grilled cheeses,” Dean suggests.

“Dean,” Cas starts.

“Dude, shh,” Dean says, with a peck to Cas’ lips for emphasis, “You take care of me, and I take care of you. Got that, hotshot?”
When Castiel’s rut tides over, he and Dean shower together to scrub off the remnants of the scents of fucking, worshipping each other’s bodies with aroma-neutral soap and Cas’ expensive shampoo. They still get a little handsy under the pressure of warm water on their backs, Dean kissing over the mating bite on Cas’ neck. And goddamn, it’s another time that Dean can’t really believe that this is for real, that Cas is his mate and wants to be his mate, that it isn’t some brain malfunction or fucked up trick or hallucination. He's here, with Cas' bite on his neck and his bite on Cas' neck.

It's something that Dean came to accept that he would never have, but here it is, and it's real.

Cas does so much strange crap that Dean can’t help but love – he rubs Dean’s shoulders and the places on Dean’s back that hurt because of the pup weight, scents Dean’s neck while they’re knotted together like he might forget that smell in a moment, nuzzles along Dean’s skin with his scratchy jaw and soft lips.

And he says that he loves the pup.

Dean worries that morning, as he worries whenever he has space to think, that Cas is just saying that to appease Dean, and that when the pup is born that Dean’ll be expected to give it up so Cas can breed him up with pups that are his own. He feels ill when he thinks that he might have to leave here, but he would if he had to. If Dean had to choose between his pup and Cas, he’d choose the pup. His whole life has been choosing one crappy choice or another, and it wouldn't surprise him if he had to start making that choice for two.

“What’s on your mind?” asks Castiel, as they scrub down the kitchen together, having called Sam on his cellphone and, bad reception aside, informed him that the coast was clear and he could come back to Cas’ place.

Dean glances up from the spray bottle of green cleaner in his grip and to Cas, on whose face is written a fondness that Dean didn’t ever think he’d see aimed at him. He feels kind of sloshy inside at the sight, half-smiles at the counter under his hand, and shakes his head.

“Not important,” Dean says.

Cas seems annoyed with the answer, but if he is, he doesn’t voice that annoyance aloud.

Truth is, Dean is scared fucking shitless. But how the hell are you supposed to tell your alpha that sure, yeah, he makes you feel good and safe and all that shit rom-com alphas are supposed to make you feel, but he also kind of sets you on edge. Well, maybe not Cas in particular, but the idea that this - the great sex and nuzzling and scenting and home - can’t last forever.

Because when does anything good last for Dean? The longest lasting experiences of his life have all been terrible. After mom kicked the bucket, dad moved them around a lot and never liked to settle. Dean didn’t make friends. After he presented as omega, it got worse. People in the towns they moved to liked the idea of him as some knot-swelling new guy, reeking of sweet omega and
slick ass.

The longest place that Dean ever lived was Alastair’s brothel. Seven whole years of shame and heat and pain so great that he doubts he’ll ever forget: that’s the longest period of his life. In a fucked up kind of way, the brothel became his home. By the end, right before the pup, even when he’d accepted that dying didn’t sound so bad, the place had its moments. Downstairs where the omegas got kept was a shithole, sure. If you were lucky, though, you’d get a client that wanted to pretend to be your mate, wanted you upstairs in the nice rooms reserved for Alastair’s wealthiest clientele. Yeah, you had to have strange arms around you and a nose breathing in your scent all night, but you’d get to sleep in a real bed and sometimes eat real food.

And here, with Cas – Dean hasn’t even been here for three months.

Within those three months, Cas has challenged everything that Dean has come to know about normalcy, about omegas and alphas and how they treat one another and everything in between. There’s no consistency. Sometimes it’s awesome. Sometimes Dean likes learning something new about his mate every day. Other times it’s terrifying.

Because at least Alastair was constant, was unchanging. He wanted Dean to put out and do well. If Dean failed to meet those requirements, he was disappointed. If Dean did what needed to be done, Alastair was proud.

And damn does it make him feel dirty to think it, but in a life where you got nothing, nada, zip to look forward to, Dean fucking enjoyed making Alastair proud.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Castiel asks.

Then there’s that thing.

The questions.

Cas always asks him if he likes things, if he wants this, prefers that, is okay with this other thing.

It’s weird, but fuck, it’s the nicest thing anyone has ever bothered to do for him in his entire life. His whole existence is plagued by people thinking they know what Dean wants, forcing open his legs and telling him he likes it even when he wants it desperately to stop. You got politicians on the TV saying that young omegas shouldn’t have the right to heat suppressants over the counter, ‘cause that encourages them to have sex.

Never-fucking-mind that alphas prowl the streets thinking a nice smell and a sweet ass means an omega needs their knot, and they take that without bothering to fucking question it. Doesn't matter how young they are. If an omega's dressed the wrong way, smells a certain way, walks home alone or drinks too much, it's their damn fault what happens to 'em.

But Cas doesn't think any of that.

Cas always asks. He doesn't take without getting Dean's go on something, and doesn't think that Dean must want something just because Dean's an omega and Castiel is an alpha.

Dean gives his alpha a goofy, lopsided grin, and leans over to brush his lips against Cas’ stubble. He says, “I’m all good, little alpha. ‘Preciate it, though.”

Castiel smiles back, and loops Dean in for a side hug. This is how Sam finds them when he comes clunking through the front door. They turn around at the sound and see him with a gentle smile on his face and a few cloth bags in his hands. Sam scents the air and says, “Nice cleanup job.”
“We try,” Dean replies, as Sam kicks off his shoes and sets the bags down on the kitchen table. He says, “What’s in there?”

“Well,” Sam says, and unloads a few things, “I know I missed the puppy shower and all, but I figured I should get you some stuff anyway. Here.” He hands Dean a box, which Dean turns over in his hands for a few measly seconds before Cas pulls it from his grip.

“This is wonderful,” Cas says. He scrutinizes something on the label, reading features of whatever the crap it is. The name _Magic Bullet_ sounds like some kind of sex toy, though.

“What…is it?” asks Dean. He glances between Cas and Sammy and can’t help but feel like he’s missing something.

“A food processor,” Castiel says.

“You know, so you guys could make your own food for the pup and stuff, none of that crap with preservatives,” Sam says, “And this too.”

Sam passes the second gift to Dean. At least he knows what this one is. It’s a little fruity, but hey, Sam can’t help it. He’s always kind of been that way. Dean loops the plaid-patterned sling over his head and says, “Hey, that’s awesome, Sammy. Thanks.”

Sam brightens, “You think so?”

“Yeah, dude,” Dean answers. He gives Sam a playful sock in the shoulder, coughs, and rubs the back of his neck before he says, “This way me n’ pup can rock out and not worry about my arms getting tired. It’s cool.”

Sam seems pleased, and that makes Dean feel good, too. He always did like putting a smile on Sammy’s face. Sometimes, even when he knew that Sam would be disappointed in him for where he’d gotten himself, Dean liked to think of Sam when he was stuck at Alastair’s. He always thought of Sam in the quiet moments, times when he was supposed to be asleep on his slick-stained mattress. He wondered where Sam went, and if he’d done well for himself. He hoped that Sammy found someplace nice to settle down away from their dad and did everything that he always talked about wanting to do.

And now Sam’s here, and he’s done all kinds of amazing crap. He’s made something of himself, changed the world, become a household name – and he’s only twenty four. He’s done all the things that Dean knew he could.

If it weren’t for the occasional whiff of sadness leaking off of Sam’s skin, Dean would think that he had it all.

X

“So what’d you get up to in town?” asks Dean, and lifts his glass of OJ to his mouth for a long drink.

Sam, meanwhile, takes pull off of his beer and rolls the bottle between his hands before he answers, “I, um. I met somebody.”

“What?” Dean says, and sits up straighter on the wicker porch furniture. He leans forward and grins, “Sammy, you dog. S’it another alpha? Got a name?”

Sam rubs the back of his neck. He looks like a nervous teenager, all riled up over their first scent of
somebody compatible. At least they’re not in the house – upon going outside, Dean realizes how strongly everything smells of mates and sex, and realizes with a little guilt that he and Cas, in their own, frenzied way, were marking out their territories like teenage kids.

“She’s a beta,” Sam finally says, “Her name, um. Her name is Amelia.”

“Yeah?” Dean says, and smiles, “Go on, dude. Spill the beans. I wanna know.”

Sam leans forward and muses his long hair with his fingers. He says, “I mean, it’s kinda complicated. She’s a librarian.”

“Hot.”

“Dean.”

“Sorry. Go on.”

“She lost her mate too,” Sam says. He gives Dean a look from the corner of his eye and then tips back what remains in his beer bottle.

“Well, crap. That is complicated,” Dean murmurs. Folks that lose their mates tend to never mate again – most times these folks throw themselves into their work, like Sam, or take up a political cause, also like Sam. Other times they adopt parentless pups and raise them up. Almost never do they find another mate. And shit, finding another mate who’s lost her own mate? Sounds dangerous.

“Yeah,” Sam says, “We’re gonna get ice cream later this week. But, you know. We’re taking it slow. All things considered.”

Telling Sam that this is a bad idea is on the tip of Dean’s tongue, but something in his brother’s expression makes him swallow the sentence down. Sam’s twenty four. He’s not a kid anymore. He helps people. He’s lost a mate and a pup. He’s seen some shit, and the least Dean can do for him is to trust him on that experience and let it be.

So Dean nods, finishes off his orange juice, and says, “Good for you, man. Hope it works out.”

“Yeah?”

“Yup.”

Even though they’ve both finished their drinks, they stay out on the porch for a while. It’s a goddamn gorgeous day, the kind of day that makes Dean truly appreciate the locale of Cas’ place. Their place. The temperature sits somewhere around the mid-eighties, hot, but not overbearing. It’s sunny, only wisps of clouds skating across the wide expanse of blue sky. And out here, it’s quiet. Dean loves quiet in a way that he never used to.

Before Alastair, Dean loved the city. Loved how many people surrounded him, the stink and silent synchronization. Small towns made him leery, made him feel like he was being watched. Now, he feels safe in the quiet, among the same few people.

Yeah, it’s nice here.

With a stretch, Dean stands. Sam follows him into the house, where he dips into the garage to throw his beer bottle into Cas’ recycling bin while Dean rinses his OJ glass under the kitchen tap and places it in the dishwasher. Cas is behind him on the couch, intensely focused on his hat-
knitting project. Dean tries to sneak up from behind and peer over Cas’ shoulder, but before he can see what the fucker’s got in his hands, Cas stashes the knitting under his t-shirt.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm,” Castiel says. He turns to squint at Dean as he goes on, “but it’s supposed to be a surprise.”

“But I wanna see it.”

“And you will,” Cas reasons, “When it’s done.”

Dean groans but turns around and accepts his fate. Cas wants the hat that he’s knitting to be a surprise, and so that’s just how it’s going to be: a surprise. The alpha wins this round.

—— X ——

“Am I gonna have to go to a hospital?” Dean asks in bed one evening. They fucked only a half hour earlier, slow and thorough and face to face, and the whole bed smells like them. Dean would love to live in that scent. It makes him feel better when he’s worried about crap.

Like going to the hospital. He’s always hated hospitals, but now it makes him think of when omegas got too injured or sick to work for Alastair, how they strapped them down on gurneys and stuck needles in their arms, fed them drugs and waited for them to heal enough to be fucked again. It makes him tense and shaky thinking about it, being locked up in that big, dark room side by side with other sick omegas, being unable to move and so far gone from the cycle of whatever drugs they fed to him that he couldn’t even string together two thoughts. He could only fall into fitful, short bouts of sleep, and watch other omegas come and go.

Cas senses his distress and pulls Dean closer, nosing into his hair and rubbing his back.

“As long as I have the equipment here to help you birth the pup safely, then we can do a home birth,” Castiel says.

“No hospitals?” Dean says.

“No hospitals,” Castiel promises, and leans forward to brush his lips over the center of Dean’s forehead.

Shit, this is nice. He probably doesn’t deserve it, but it’s really nice. Nice to have somebody that likes being wrapped up in you and around you, likes the smell of you and likes talking to you, and just plain likes you. He shifts closer into Cas, burying his face against his chest.

Dean starts to shake, though, with the weight of the memories. Cas kisses his head and strokes his hair, hushing him and humming. His rough voice is music to Dean’s ears when he says, “You can tell me. I will listen.”

So Dean does tell him, in broken, shaky sentences, about the medical torture and the horror of getting sick. He talks about pretending not to be sick even when he felt his weakest, passing out from dehydration with some alpha still knotted inside him, waking up strapped down and afraid.

Sometimes Dean can hear the rumble of growl beginning in Cas’ throat, but he always shoves the noise down, kissing him and soothing him with soft sounds and touches, little gestures to chase away the roughest, hardest pieces of Dean's life. With Cas, the lade of Alastair and the things that Dean has done doesn't feel as heavy anymore, like his alpha is sharing the hurt. Cas will never go through what Dean did, will never have to remember the things that Dean remembers, but the softness he affords Dean when everyone else has been nothing but stone-hard to him makes the
biggest, stupidest difference. He wonders if he should feel dumb about it all, but just nestles in as close as he can to his alpha and listens to the thump-thump-thump of his heart underneath the cotton of his B-52’s t-shirt.

He feels raw when Cas finally leans over to turn out the light, raw and used. But Dean does have Cas to lean into, and his pup in his belly, and both those knowledges settle his feathers and make him feel as though his life does not have to be a nightmare anymore. He has a family, and a home. And maybe, just maybe, he will get out of all of this okay.

X

Two days after Dean spills his guts about being sick at Alstair's to Cas, Dean stands in the kitchen and pours himself a bowl of Frosted Flakes while cartoons play on the television. Sam is out, having driven down to Buena Vista to meet up with Amelia for their ice cream date. Dean wished him luck before he went and hoped the damn date went well, because crap, Sam deserves to be happy too. He feels kind of shitty having Sammy watch all his domestic bliss with Cas, knowing that he lost that same bliss with the late Jessica.

Just as Dean sets the milk down on the counter, two strong, tanned arms come around his middle from behind, and Castiel presses damp kisses all along the back of his neck.

“Well hello to you too,” Dean chuckles. Cas places a hand over his pregnant belly and ghosts his lips over the bite on Dean’s neck. It makes him shiver, and then laugh. He nudges Cas away with his elbow and says, “All right, all right, I’m tryin’ to eat here. You can have a little something-something after I’m done.”

“I actually brought you something,” Cas says. He pushes back the bowl of dry cereal with one hand, and with the other, places a tiny knitted hat onto the countertop.

A tiny, knitted, Yoda hat, that is.

Dean makes a grab for it and holds it up. The thing has Yoda ears, and the yarn is all soft and it's so neatly made that it looks like Cas bought the thing, for Christ’s sake. He turns around in the box of Cas’ arms and kisses him hard on the mouth. When he pulls back, he grins, “Dude, that is so friggin’ awesome. I can’t believe you made that!”

“Yes. Well. I am glad that you like it,” Castiel says. Color rises high on his cheeks, and Dean realizes – Cas is actually nervous about all this. His big, growly, know-it-all alpha is worried that Dean won’t like the hat that he knitted for the pup.

The opportunity to tease him is just too good to pass up.

“You’re blushing, little alpha,” Dean says. He feels a smirk on his face and tries to push it away, but can’t.

“I am not,” Castiel says, but turns redder.

Dean lets out a full-bellied laugh and wraps his arms around Castiel’s neck to bring him in for a long, satisfying kiss. Cas hoists him up and sets Dean on the counter. With a soft growl and a murmur of the word mine, Cas slides his tongue into Dean’s mouth and languishes attention on him in thorough, happy licks.

And when Cas ushers them back to the bedroom, they kiss more, bodies tangled together as gradually they lose clothing to floor. Dean teases Castiel and Cas teases back, and by the time that Cas finally leverages himself up over Dean and sinks inside him, they’re both laughing and
It’s weird, just making jokes and ragging on each other and laughing in between moans and soft grunts of pleasure, as they move their bodies together. Dean never knew that sex could be like this, just full of goofing off and long, wet kisses. They mess around and play for a long time, until finally each of them comes within minutes of one another, and Dean and Cas collapse, tied together and smiling at one another.

The house makes a transformation over the course of the next few weeks. Sam is sunny-faced and optimistic over this Amelia chick and doesn’t seem to mind when the house reeks of Cas and Dean anymore, but more than that, it’s how everything has changed and made way for the pup.

Dean is fucking huge, for one. He’s the size of a boat and it should maybe bother him, except instead it just makes him more excited for the arrival of his pup. He can still do most shit, except not really bending over so much – but his belly does make a nice shelf for folding clothes, and so he switches from dish duty to laundry duty as the weeks left in his pregnancy dwindle down to nil.

Dean passes the time with TV shows and afternoons out on the hammock with a book in his hands, since Cas insists on him resting up as much as he can, being so close to the approximation of his due date. Cas has a pretty decent scifi collection in his library, and now Dean is reading some yellow-paged pulp novel from the seventies. From the blurb on the back of the novel it seemed like it could be kind of sketchy as far as the depiction of omegas goes (One of those “planet full of omegas in charge and alphas living under their rule,” blah, blah, blah), but Dean figured if Cas had it on his bookshelf, then it’s safe.

And he likes it. It’s all a metaphor for omega rights, which is cool. Weird how crap like this gets written all the way back in the nineteen seventies and you’ve still got the same goddamn problems going on in the world forty years later.

Dean falls asleep with the book open on his chest by accident and drifts back into a dreamless sleep. It’s nice, actually. One of those half-sleeps – he’s still in a trance and dead to the world, but at the edges of his awareness he feels the rope of the hammock stretched beneath him, the sweat trickling between his shoulder blades from the late summer heat, and the shift of his clothing when the breeze kicks up.

Then he feels something weird, almost like a pop, and damp trickling out between his legs.

Dean’s eyes snap open and bolts up to his feet, pulp novel forgotten on the hammock. Between his legs, damp stains his jeans. It’s kind of a gross feeling, and he knows exactly what it is. He’s been reading about this shit on the internet and in the baby books for months now.
Aw, shit.

His water just broke.

Chapter End Notes

Special thank yous to bendoverandbityourgag on tumblr for the ideas for the gifts that Sam gives Cas & Dean, and shinzz1/mimibee for this lovely banner, which I've added to the front of the first chapter. I love you all and thank you for your support!
Childbirth, so some parts may be squicky. I'm intentionally vague in the actual infant-coming-out parts, but in my head omegas have a separate channel for birth. But you can picture it however you please.

Chapter Track: Walking on a Dream – Empire of the Sun

Castiel knows something is wrong a handful of seconds before Dean comes banging into the study. He smells panic and then something sharp and distinct:

He smells omega in labor.

His book is set aside and Cas is on his feet at the same moment that Dean throws open the door and pants, “Crap.”

“You’ll be fine, Dean,” Castiel says, and sweeps across the study to plant a kiss on Dean’s forehead. He kneads his knuckles into Dean’s shoulder and threads his fingers through Dean’s hair before he says, “The pup won’t be coming immediately. We need to get you comfortable and relaxed. Would you like me to set you up on the couch while I get our bedroom ready?”

Castiel feels the panic die down in his omega as he wraps his arms around Dean and steers him down the stairs. He goes through the motions of making Dean as comfortable as possible – setting up one of the pillows from their bed on the couch so his neck will be supported and he’ll be surrounded by a familiar scent. He tucks Dean up under a blanket, makes him tea, and sets out a collection of snacks within reach. He turns on Star Wars Episode IV to get everything started – who knows how long he’ll be in the early stages of labor. It’s known to last longer for the birth of an omega’s first pup.

It hurts to leave his omega alone while he preps the bed for a sanitary, safe birth. He has to think like a doctor and not like an alpha about to become a father, and it gives him a headache enough that he leaves the bedroom to down some Advil, a glass of water, and scent Dean a little to get himself back on his feet.

Castiel strips the sheets and replaces them with a plastic undersheet and clean, crisp linens purchased solely for the purpose of ruining on this occasion. He retrieves the equipment from his closet – including what he’s ordered online for this purpose alone – and sets everything out as he’ll need it. Then, he calls Sam.

“Hey, Cas. Can I call you back?” he answers. He is likely still with Amelia on their lunch date.

“You may, but you should know that Dean has gone into labor,” Castiel says.

The intake of Sam’s breath is shaky. He mutters, “Crap,” and then, “Hang on,” before there’s muffled noise and the sounds of voices conferring. When Sam gets back on the phone, he’s
panting. He says, “I’m gonna drop Amelia back at her place and then I’ll be there ASAP. You don’t think I’m gonna miss it, do you?”

Castiel replies, “No, I believe at minimum we have several hours. I’ve asked Dean to start timing the contractions.”

“Okay. Okay, cool,” Sam says, “I’m gonna hang up now.”

“All right,” Cas says, “Drive safely.”

He moves to hang up, but hears Sam say, “Hey, wait. Cas?”

“Yes?”

“Take good care of him,” Sam says.

Castiel nods gravely, even though Sam cannot see him, and says, “Of course.”

He hangs up and tucks his cellphone into the back pocket of his jeans. He has his scrubs and clothing for the birth itself laid out in the master bath, but doesn’t need to change into them yet. Instead, he exits the bedroom and goes to Dean, whose face is contorted in pain. He grunts and says, “Man, fuck this.”

“Breathe,” Castiel says. He kneels at the couch beside Dean and orders him to rotate up so he can rub his back. He’ll do anything to make his omega comfortable, anything to make him feel safe. He only switches from alpha to doctor mode when he stands to feel along Dean’s stomach, pressing in to make sure that everything feels right. Dean whines at the sensation and it makes the back of Castiel’s neck prickle, wanting to stop for Dean’s sake, but knowing he needs to be thorough for the same reason.

“Everything feels good,” he says, but moves forward to check Dean’s vitals, just in case, “Good, Dean. You’re doing very well.”

During his next contraction, Dean screws his eyes shut and white-knuckles the blanket over him. He squirms and complains through gritted teeth, “Goddamnit, Cas, this crap fucking hurts.”

“I know,” Castiel says, and stays near in hopes that his scent will grant Dean some kind of comfort. He nuzzles Dean’s neck and peppers kisses over his face, murmuring what reassurances he can while running fingers through Dean’s hair, stroking over the scalp. He says, “It’ll all be worth it when you have your pup in your arms, won’t it?”

Dean huffs and nods, coming down from the pain, and says, “Yeah.”

This is how Sam finds them. He’s shaking and sweating and looks even more terrified than Dean. It sets Dean on edge which in turn sets Castiel on edge. He knows Sam has negative connotations as far as childbirth goes, but a healthy omega birth is much different than a dangerous alpha birth. He doesn’t say as much, if only because Sam might lash out in his vulnerable state, and instead makes Sam useful by ordering him in and out of the living room to get one thing or another.

Hours tick by, the sun sets over the outer crust of mountains beyond Castiel’s windows, and Dean transitions from early labor to active labor. Every time Dean’s contractions come, closer and closer now, both Castiel and Sam leap to comfort him, to do anything they can to make him feel okay. Dean is sweating now, looking more tired and more afraid, though Sam looks at least twice as bad as his brother.
“All right,” Castiel says at last, as another contraction tides over, “It’s time to move to the bedroom. I’ll help you stand.”

Dean wobbles on his feet and Sam hovers close behind them as they make their way back to the master bedroom. Dean outright refused to wear scrubs when he and Castiel discussed what would happen during the birth, so they strip his clothes and he goes nude for the venture. He climbs into the bed and Castiel soothes him through each contraction by rubbing his back.

Dean has stopped complaining as much and mostly just sweats and hiccups and whimpers sometimes when a contraction hits him hard.

This isn’t going to be an easy labor, but then, Castiel doubted that it would be. He makes sure that Dean hydrates and keeps relaxed, murmuring to him to take it one contraction at a time. He’s hurting, and it makes Castiel hurt. The worse it gets for Dean, the worse it gets for him. And Sam is in a state worse than either of them – he paces the bedroom back and forth and shoots a panicked look at Dean every so often, demanding to know how he feels and then asks Castiel what is going on, what has to happen, how long do they have, and so on.

It’s stressing Dean out.

Castiel steers Sam aside and says, “Sam, I need you to calm down.”

“I’m not fucking calming down,” Sam says back, “Do you see how much he’s hurting? It’s not okay, man.”

“He’s about to give birth and he didn’t want anything for the pain because having drugs in his system makes him remember that fucking brothel,” Castiel bites out in response.

“You’re his alpha! You could have told him he had to!”

“Sam,” Castiel says, “That’s it. I am escorting you out. You’re stressing him out and you are suggesting that I exercise power over him that I shouldn’t have. I know you’re saying it because you’re worried, but you’re out of line.”

“But –”

“Out! Sit in the living room,” Castiel commands, “I’ll collect you when it’s over.”

Sam glowers but does obey. Castiel closes the door behind him and locks it for good measure. When he turns back, Dean is shaking from the force of another contraction. Very close, this time. It’s time to change, time to put on a brave face and be a doctor instead of the harried, fragmented mess of an alpha that he really feels like.

Hands washed, scrubs on, gloves snapped on hands and mask spritzed with alpha cologne secured over his face, he goes to tend to Dean. Carefully, he spreads Dean’s legs apart and gives him a play-by-play of what he is doing and what is happening.

Then the pup starts to come.

He tells Dean to push, to remember how to breathe, and in between instructing him like a doctor, he comforts him like an alpha, squeezing his arm and rubbing over his skin.

Dean doesn’t shout or cry or scream, but he does curse a lot – *fuck, fucking damn it, goddamnit Cas, fuckity fuck fuck shit* – as the pup starts to emerge.
But everything seems okay when she comes out wailing into Cas’ arms. He clears her nose and mouth. In an instant, he is in love. Castiel smiles through his mask at her and swiftly moves to sever the umbilical cord. With precision, he goes through the motions, instructs Dean on when to push to rid his body of the placenta. Separated from Dean, Castiel must clean and dry her, carefully wrap a diaper on her tiny bottom, and slide her soft Yoda hat over the fuzz of fine hair over her little head. It’s light-colored, like Dean’s. Then, he places her against Dean’s chest, where she lies squirming and worried – and at last, he sits down at Dean’s side.

Dean looks up at him blearily as Castiel pulls down his mask. He smiles down at the pup and back up to Cas and hoarsely says, “Hey, Cas. Look what I made.”

Castiel chuckles, but his gaze falls to the tiny, pink infant in Dean’s grip. He’s birthed plenty of pups before, but never has he felt such a wash of emotion at the sight of one. She is gorgeous, lovely, perfect, with her round little face and eyes still closed. She’s settled a little, content against her dad’s chest.

“We have to dress her,” Castiel finally says, and Dean’s adoring stare down at his daughter surfaces back up to Cas.

“Yeah, a’course,” Dean says.

Castiel adds, “She needs to stay warm. And I need to check her over.”

“Be careful,” Dean calls. He sounds exhausted, but proud.

The little pup wriggles when Castiel checks her over with tender hands while she cries for her omega father. She’s probably hungry, or maybe she’s still just righteously angry at being expelled from the warmth of the womb. Cas dresses her after in soft clothes, admiring her – a healthy pup, not an issue in sight, and aside from the standard vitamin shot and ointment to her eyes, she needs nothing – and brings her back, suited in her tiny onesie, wrapped up in a blanket, and head kept warm with the hat that he made.

A streak of pride bursts through his chest when he settles her back against Dean’s chest. He strokes fingers through Dean’s sweaty hair and says, “Try and get her to eat, okay? I’m going to get Sam.”

When Castiel unlocks the bedroom door and steps down the hallway, Sam is already on his feet, wringing his hands together. Castiel comes forward and places a hand on Sam’s shoulder. He can’t help but grin as he announces, “You have a niece.”

“A niece,” Sam breathes, “Is everyone okay? How’s Dean doing?”

“They’re both fine,” Castiel assures him, “Pup is in perfect health, and Dean is exhausted, but also looking good. If you’d like, you may go to them now.”

“Cool,” Sam says, and laughs. He repeats, “Cool,” before he adds, “Thanks, Cas,” and takes off toward the bedroom.

Castiel follows a couple paces behind Sam, and enters the room just in time to see Dean light up like a Christmas tree at the sight of his younger brother. His heart hangs heavy with affection in his chest as he watches them both, watches Sam come to Dean’s bedside, and Dean smiling down at his daughter before he passes her up.

“Oh, God, Dean,” Sam says, “She’s fucking amazing. Look at her.”

“Hey,” Dean says back, “Watch your fucking language. There are tender ears here.”
Sam snorts and holds her in his arms, making a sweet picture – an enormous, overwrought alpha with a tiny newborn cradled in his big hands. He rocks his niece a little before he hands her back to Dean, who presses his lips to her head through the knitted Yoda hat before settling her in his arms.

“I think,” Dean says, “I think I’m gonna call her Mary.”

“Oh,” Sam says, “Dean, that’s perfect.”

“Maybe…Mary Grace?” Dean says, “Yeah, I like that. Mary Grace Winchester-Novak.”

Dean looks down at his newborn and kisses her again before he lifts her up and offers a nipple shyly. Mary fumbles a little but seems to get the gist after a moment, happy to be held and fed by her perfect, brave omega father.

“She’s beautiful,” Castiel offers, voice raw.

Dean glances up from the pup to Castiel. A hesitant smile spreads on his face from ear to ear and he asks, “You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Good to know we’re on the same page,” Dean says, “Cause she’s the most beautiful goddamn thing I have ever seen.”

Everything settles after that.

Dean and Mary both need rest and monitoring. Castiel watches over them together for a while, until Dean’s eyes start to droop. Then he takes Mary into his own arms and holds her to his chest, head supported with his palm. She’s calmer now, no longer angry at her unceremonious entry into the world.

“Hello, Mary,” he says softly, and pets a hand over her back.

Mary wiggles a little, but otherwise makes no indication that she has heard Castiel. Carefully, he cradles her to him as he moves her to the safety of the nursery, which he has kept at a nice temperature for her to have her first sleep in.

But before Castiel settles her in her crib, he has the indescribable urge to speak to her. She won’t understand a word, but she should hear her alpha father’s voice.

*Father.*

Good God. He is a father. Months ago he never would have expected this. Castiel had in fact instead expected to lead the rest of his life as a general hermit, quietly reading books until it was time to die. He didn’t mind the idea; it actually sounded like a fair way to live. And now he is mated to a mouthy, wonderful, brilliant omega, and that omega has made the loveliest creature that he’s ever seen in his whole life.

“Mary,” he says, and feels almost giddy as he says it, “I’m your dad. Your alpha dad. Well. You didn’t really come from me, necessarily, but that’s okay. You are my pup, and just look at you. You are already so brilliant and so loved.”

He’s smiling, but his chest feels fit to burst with every heavy emotion in the world. He lifts her up
and cradles her against his neck, right where Dean’s mark sits against his skin, where she can
breathe in his scent, where she can scent that he belongs to her omega father, and that her omega
father belongs to him. He can’t help but scent her as well, gathering in that perfect aroma of
newborn, of family, of home.

“Forgive me,” Castiel tells her, as he rubs a hand over her small back, “I seem to be a little
emotional.”

He snuffles a little and wills his wet eyes dry before he exhales and says, “I’m going to set you in
your crib, now, little pup, but I won’t be very far. I’m going to be keeping an eye on you and your
omega father for a few more hours before I go to sleep. I have to make sure that you’re both
healthy, you know.”

With gentle hands, Castiel places Mary in her crib, on her guitar sheets. He gazes down at her there
and thinks how much she fits, Dean’s perfect daughter.

Lord help him – his perfect daughter. With an exhale of emotion and a last, long look at little Mary
in her blanket and the hat that he knitted, Castiel reaches up and starts the mobile spinning.

As he turns out the door, Ramble On tinkles like a lullaby.

Castiel checks on Dean immediately afterward, finding him fast asleep with the blankets pulled up
to his chest. After he gently cleans everything up between Dean’s legs, Castiel does the necessary
cleanup around the bedroom, disposing of the waste in a plastic biohazard bag that he seals and
tosses into his trash. He takes a brief moment to wash his hands and face, noticing only when he
looks up at his reflection that he is smiling like an idiot and that he can’t stop.

Sam waits for him outside when Castiel comes to brew a pot of coffee that will push him through
the next few hours – and finds that one has already been made.

“I figured you would need it,” Sam says.

“Thank you,” Castiel answers to this, a little bewildered, but grateful.

“I’m sorry,” Sam says, “You know. For getting kind of nuts back there.”

“It’s all right, Sam,” says Castiel, “It can’t have been easy.”

“I thought he was going to die,” Sam says, honestly, and runs the fingers of one hand back through
his hair, “I was scared shitless. I don’t even know. I kind of came to my senses when you gave me
the boot, but man. I’m really glad that’s over.”

“Me too, to be perfectly honest,” Castiel says, “I’ve handled the births of hundreds of pups, but
I’ve never been anxious like that before. She was worth it, though.”

“You love her.”

“Yes,” Castiel says, “I love her very much.”

“I was kinda worried,” Sam says, “That we’d have a problem. You know. ‘Cause she’s not…yours,
really.”

“She is mine,” Castiel replies, “Biologically, perhaps not, but in any other sense I am her alpha
father. I’m not the type to reject a pup like some barbarian.”
“I know that,” Sam says, “But like. Logic kind of went out the window tonight. And I think Dean was worried about it too, even if he never said anything. Stubborn bastard.”

Castiel nods and nurses his coffee before he sets the mug down at the kitchen table and takes the chair beside Sam, melting into it. He didn’t realize how tired is until just this moment, and wishes all at once that he could sleep, while knowing that he cannot. He downs more coffee before he says, “Congratulations on becoming an uncle tonight, Sam.”

Sam lifts his own coffee mug in return and says, “Congrats on becoming a father tonight, Cas.”

When Castiel finishes his coffee, he returns to check on omega father and pup and finds them both asleep. He returns then every twenty minutes like clockwork, and in between checking he plays card games with Sam, who remains too tightly wound to manage any kind of sleep for at least another few hours.

Mary starts to cry partway through a match of gin rummy, and Castiel goes to her. He brings her to Dean immediately, who is already awake and sitting with his back against the headboard. He holds out his arms for her and that ginger, proud smile graces his lips again before he nestles her up against his chest, urging her to latch and nurse.

While Dean feeds Mary, Castiel reaches for his freckled shoulders and presses his thumbs into the muscle, rubbing gently. Dean sighs and relaxes into it. He turns just a little and asks, “Hey, um, Cas?”

“Mm.”

“Can she stay with me a while?”

“Of course,” Castiel answers, “Mary is in perfect health, and beyond being checked in on, you two may be together as long as you need.”

“Aren’t you gonna sleep?” Dean asks.

Castiel’s lips quirk up on one side and he says, “In a couple of hours. I need to keep watch on both of you for a while.”

“Protective little alpha,” yawns Dean.

“It is a medical necessity,” Cas defends, but then admits, “But yes, I suppose every instinct in my body wants me to be awake so that I can ensure that you and our pup are safe.” He leans over and brushes his lips against Dean’s. Dean kisses back, sliding his tongue against Castiel’s before they part, breathless and stupidly happy.

“Our pup, huh?” Dean says.

“Our pup, yes.”

Yes.

Their pup.

Dean’s recovery is steady over the course of the next few days.

The day after Mary’s birth, he’s well enough to get out of bed, and celebrates with an enormous
breakfast of pancakes drenched in syrup, with bacon and eggs and a massive glass of juice. He doesn’t let go of Mary for the entire meal – opting to keep her up against his chest in the sling that Sam purchased for them while he takes enthusiastic bites.

On the second day following Mary’s birth, she opens her eyes. Dean is the first to see it, and calls Castiel in to see her squinting up at both of them, confused and probably a little annoyed at the light that floods the nursery through the small window at the side.

They rest when they can.

Sam’s presence helps. He watches Mary when Dean and Castiel are desperate for sleep, and they often find him talking quietly to her while he reads board books or watches movies, supporting her with one arm while she stares at him. Sam is a good uncle. He knows everything that he should know about a newborn, likely leftover knowledge from when he thought that he was going to have a pup of his own. He is gentle with her, caring for her as though she might break at any moment.

And most importantly of all, Sam adores her.

Castiel knows that this period of free childcare will not last – Sam needs to return to California, to his job and his life there. Still, he seems reluctant to do so, and on one afternoon while Dean naps in the master bedroom, Sam admits to Castiel, “I don’t want to go back.”

Castiel shifts Mary where she rests on his chest and raises his brows at Sam.

“Why not?”

“I dunno,” Sam says, and scratches the back of his neck, “I just… I guess I feel like my home is here. I’d find my own place, of course. Probably in town. Set up shop again here.”

“It’s a much smaller area,” Castiel says, “Smaller clientele.”

“I don’t know about that,” Sam says, and sits forward a little further on the couch before he goes on, “Like, my name is out there now. People know they can come to me for help, and I’ve got a decent nest egg going. I could fly out where I’m needed and make here home base. I think – I dunno. I just think I knew as soon as I saw Dean that I wasn’t gonna leave and then there’s Amelia and,” – he makes a vague gesture at Mary – “She kind of sealed the deal. I don’t wanna leave.”

“I think Dean would like it if you stayed,” Castiel says, “And you know you’re welcome here for as long as you need.”

Just then, Dean appears in the living room, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He grumbles, “Uh-oh, alpha gossip.”

“Do you want to tell him?” Castiel asks Sam, casting a sideways glance at him.

“Tell me what?” says Dean. He glances suspiciously at both of them before he holds out his arms for Mary. Cas deposits her into his grip and Dean presses a wet, sloppy kiss to one round cheek, greeting, “Hey, sweetheart.”

“I’m going to stay,” Sam says, “Here. Buena Vista, I mean. I’ll still be here here while I’m looking for a place, but uh. You know. I’m not going back to California. Except maybe to grab my stuff. My lease is about to be up back there, anyway.”

A slow grin fills out Dean’s face and he asks, “You serious?”
“As a heart attack, dude,” Sam says back.

“Hell yeah, man,” Dean beams, “That’s awesome news, Sammy. Right, Mary?” Mary, obviously, does not respond to this, but that doesn’t stop Dean from using his finger to open and close her tiny mouth and, miming speaking, he says in a mock, high-pitched voice, “Yay Uncle Sammy!”

Sam laughs and says, “Cut it out, Dean.”

Dean continues to open and close Mary’s mouth and replies in his mock-voice, “You don’t tell me what to do, Uncle Sam.”

Sam smiles and shakes his head. He stands and stretches his arms over his head before he retreats to the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water from the tap. He comes back with it and steps close to Dean and Mary, smiling at both of them with warm, happy eyes.

“Damn, Dean. She’s perfect.”

“Yeah,” Dean agrees, “She is.”

X

Castiel is wrapped up in Dean, arms thrown over him, nose against the back of his neck, covers tucked up all around them, when Mary starts to cry. Dean doesn’t respond to the noise right away – still sacked out from a pretty tiring day of crying infant dissatisfied with everything that they tried to do to calm her. Castiel extracts his arm from underneath Dean and brushes his lips over Dean’s cheek before he stumbles up and across the hallway to the nursery.

Carefully, he reaches into the crib and pulls Mary up against him, hushing her and soothing her with rubs over her back. She’s so tiny, just a fragile little thing, and Castiel can’t help but feel like he engulfs her.

He rocks her, and even though his singing voice isn’t anything remarkable, he lets out a few low notes and lets out a lullaby to her, finding that without thinking he’s started to sing the first verse of Stairway to Heaven. He continues to sing while he sets her onto the changing table, swapping her dirty diaper for dry and clean before he picks her back up again.

Castiel sits in the rocking chair and lets it roll down and up and back again as he sings to her.

“And as we wind on down the road, our shadows taller than our soul, there walks a lady we all know…”

This tiny little thing in his arms…this is his daughter. Cas’ chest fills up to the brim as he soothes her. Her crying starts to settle, just a little, into quieter whining and little hiccups of frustration. He feels strange as he looks at her, strange as he thinks that he is bone tired and more exhausted than he thinks he’s ever been in his entire life, even thinking back to working double shifts at the hospital and being on call for insane, long hours.

But this is also the happiest that he has ever been.

Here, in his little house in the middle of the Rocky Mountains, in a nursery he didn’t know that he would ever have in this home, with a tiny, bleary-eyed pup tucked against him. She’s the most wonderful thing that he has ever laid eyes on, even as she fusses.

Castiel clears his throat and interrupts his song to stroke his fingers through her light hair and say, “Mary, you are remarkable. I didn’t know it was possible to love somebody so much, but here we
are. You are a tiny little human and you have me wrapped around your finger. How did you manage that, hm?"

Mary squints at him and seems to cock her head, as if to say, *Dad, I have no idea what you are trying to talk to me about.*

“That’s okay,” Castiel replies, “You’ll learn. It probably won’t be easy, but you’re smart. Soon you’ll be telling entire stories to me right back. Although, I suppose you may start with ‘daddy.’ Your daddy Dean is the one that did all the hard work, though, so make sure that you say it to him first.”

At last, Mary starts to quiet. She wraps her little fist around the forefinger on Castiel’s right hand but still blinks up at him, expression one of a person trying to puzzle something out. He doesn’t blame her. There is a lot to puzzle out when you’re only a handful of days old.

“There’s my girl,” he says, “Maybe you could sleep again now? I will live without sleep, but your daddy Dean needs to rest so that he can heal up.”

Just as Castiel thinks that she intends to cooperate, he stands, and Mary starts to wail again. He returns to rocking her in his arms, and picks up where he left off in singing *Stairway to Heaven,* in hopes that that maybe helped before, and might help again.

“*Who shines white light and wants to show…how everything still turns to gold;*” he sings.

As a doctor, pups seem simple. You feed them, you clothe them, you change them when they soil themselves. You tend to their basic needs. As a father, this is entirely different, and if Castiel is being honest with himself, he is actually scared out of his wits. A seven pound infant terrifies him, because he isn’t going to solely care for Mary in a clinical manner. He’s meant to nurture and love her, and those needs are far more complex than the base needs of wellness.

There’s so much that he can screw up in the matters of raising a pup, so many things that could go terribly wrong and end with Mary telling her friends as an adult that if only her parents hadn’t messed her up, she might have made it out okay.

But that terror mixes with warmth and a blast of affection as Mary reaches for Castiel’s t-shirt and closes her tiny fist around a section of cotton. She’s hushing again, winding back down, though she wiggles a little in his hands.

“And if you listen very hard, the tune will come to you at last. When all are one and one is all…”

Castiel kisses Mary and places her in her crib as he stumbles over the last verses of the song. She shakes her hand at him but doesn’t take up crying again. With a smile, he turns back, and sees Dean behind him, shoulder leaning up against the doorframe, and a hazy, happy smile on his face.

“…To be a rock and not to roll,” Castiel finishes.

Dean steps forward and kisses him.
The peace doesn’t last.

Dean suspected that it wouldn’t. The last weeks have been the most exhausting, incredible, worthwhile weeks of his entire life – but sometimes, he would look at his daughter and realize that maybe it really all was just too good to be true.

He’s never felt this good in his life. When Dean feels good, something is inevitably around the corner to ruin it all.

So in between holding Mary and loving on her, singing to her and playing with her, feeding her and changing her and doing everything in between, Dean worries. He feels so full, and so scared that the fullness will be taken away, snatched right out from under his nose. So, okay, fine. He maybe
clings a little when he can. Mary has chubby cheeks and light, soft hair and sweet little hands and tiny toes and Christ – when he looks at her, everything in the world feels so right, and so terrifying all at once.

Dean is playing with her when the curtain closes on his stretch of untarnished happiness. Mary lays back on a little plaid baby blanket on the living room floor, shaking her fists up at him while he jangles some plastic doodad up above her. He’s wearing one of Cas’ button-ups, which he’s had to take to most of the time, since he never knows when Mary might get hungry and t-shirts can kind of fuck all that up.

Besides, the shirt smells like Cas, and Dean wants to rub himself all over that scent.

And then somebody knocks on the door.

“Maybe that’s Auntie Charlie,” Dean says to Mary, and leans over to scoop her up before he gets to his feet and answer.

It is not Auntie Charlie.

“Ah, there she is,” Naomi says, and she and Zachariah step inside the house.

Immediate discomfort flushes through Dean. Naomi steps briskly forward and holds out her arms to take Mary from him. Dean reacts on daddy-instinct and clutches Mary closer, stumbling back. That lady is trouble with a capital T – he doesn’t care if she’s Cas’ mom, nothing in the world could convince Dean that it’s a grand fucking idea to pass over his baby girl to her.

“Excuse you,” Naomi says, and folds her arms over her expensively-dressed chest, “I know my son spoils you, but you can’t deny me time with my own granddaughter.”

Cas chooses then to appear, and relief washes over Dean. He knows he smells to high heaven of fear and caution, a scent that must have rolled through the house as soon as Naomi stepped over the threshold with Zachariah in tow. His hair is messy from his midday nap, though he’s in jeans and a faded band t-shirt.

“Mother?” Cas manages, and Dean starts to edge closer to him. Dean has no grip on wherever this train wreck is going, so Cas has got to take the wheel on this one – see? He’s combining his damn vehicle metaphors.

Naomi exhales and says, “Castiel, why did I have to hear of the birth of my own granddaughter from your sister and not from you? Surely I am owed at least notification. And your omega won’t allow me to hold her.”

A growl rumbles in Cas’ chest, and for once, Dean feels it entirely justified. Cas knows his shit. This is the kind of shit that you keep an alpha dope around for: growling at their scary moms. Naomi has the audacity to look offended, and Cas barks out at her, “I didn’t tell you because it’s none of your business. You don’t want anything to do with me, and you still expect me to cater to your needs? You’re not going to hold Mary.”

“Castiel,” Naomi says. She speaks in the same tone that one uses to scold a disobedient child, and that – *that* – really pisses Dean off.

This time, he growls.

Cas blinks over at him, surprised.
“Hey!” Dean snaps, “Look, lady. You can shit-talk me all you want, but don’t pull that crap with Cas. He’s a way better alpha then you’ll ever be, and you’re in his house. Our house. This ain’t your territory, so you sit your ass down and respect the people in charge here.”

Gobsmacked – that’s the look on Naomi’s face. Dean’s outburst has her wires crossed enough that she glances from Dean to Castiel to her ugly husband and back again, in quick succession. Cas, meanwhile, lifts a brow at Dean and looks smug.

“Dean’s right,” Castiel voices at last, “You’ll be tolerated for as long as you behave, and not a second more. Now, does anyone care for coffee?”

Watching this shit unfold is almost better than TV. Almost. Naomi appears to battle with herself for a moment. Pride straightens her spine – or rather, there’s a stick shoved so far up her ass that it’s forced her vertebra to stack one on top of the other without one even a hair’s breadth out of place.

She lets out a small, ginger cough and says, “Tea will be fine.”

“Uncle Zach?” Castiel says. The deadliness of alpha lingers in his voice like the resonance of just-plucked guitar in an empty room. It’s enough to make Dean have to tamp down a smile, though he does still lean over and nose at Castiel’s rough cheek before pressing a kiss to the same patch of skin.

“Coffee,” Zachariah says with a tight nod.

Appeased for the time being, Castiel steps into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee and fill the kettle to heat water for Naomi’s tea. The air between them all is awkward, stilted – Dean finds himself wishing that Sammy weren’t down in town on another round of his house hunt, apparently revisiting the promising places that he’d narrowed his options down to with Amelia as his backup. He could use Sam here, if only to have a non-douchebag family member in the vicinity.

Dean lays Mary back on her blanket and smiles at her fondly. He does have her, at least, as far as non-douchebag family members go. Absently, he plays with Mary’s toes. She squints up at him, and irritably wiggles. At least Dean can pretend he's paying attention to something while he makes a pointed effort to avoid the gazes of Zachariah and Naomi on the couch above him. It’s uncomfortable, but the smell of Cas nearby acts as a balm. It’s still better when Cas is out of the kitchen and among them. He sets mugs of coffee on the coffee table for Zachariah and Dean and places the tea in front of his mother.

Then, he sits on the floor beside Dean.

It’s a small gesture, but Dean can tell it means a great deal to Naomi, if the lift of her brows is anything to go by.

“So,” she says with a little sip of her tea, “You named her Mary.”

“Dean named her,” Castiel replies, “for his mother.”

“I see,” Naomi says.

It occurs to Dean that Naomi could be offended that Mary’s name comes from the omega’s mother and is not her own name. Dean enjoys pissing her off – especially when she can’t kvetch back at him – so he says, “Her full name is Mary Grace Winchester-Novak,” and continues to play with her tiny feet.
Cas nudges him with the edge of his elbow.

“Oh, Castiel,” Naomi sighs, with an air of disappointment, “You hyphenated? And his surname is first? That’s so…” she pauses at Castiel’s glare and exhales, “unconventional of you.”

Cas rolls his eyes heavenward and sucks his lower lip into his mouth. Dean tries not to smirk. Instead, he aims his eyes at Mary. She’s so tiny, with itty-bitty everything. He holds out his finger and Mary grabs onto it, her grip light but so, so heavy to him. For such a small human, he sure does love her a whole hell of a lot.

“How is it that you two met again?” Zachariah asks, when the silence becomes too much.

Dean looks up and sees Naomi gazing at Mary. Instead of a look of disdain, like the expressions that she affords him, her eyes are almost – soft. It weirds him out, so he flicks his eyes back down and keeps playing with Mary’s little hands and feet.

Castiel hums and says, “We met in town at Kay’s ice cream. I accidentally knocked over Dean’s sundae and offered to buy him another. The rest is history.” Cas runs his fingers through Dean’s hair and combs through it a few times, while Dean stores away that story for the archives, so he doesn’t fuck up and tell a different little white lie to another crappy Novak family member.

“Can’t believe it hasn’t even been six months.”

A beat later, Dean realizes what he’s said.

“Excuse me?” Naomi manages. She sets her tea onto the coffee table, mug clattering, and stands, “Are you implying that – that is not my grandchild?”

Cas stiffens. He says lowly, “Mary may not biologically be –”

Naomi throws her hands up and interjects, “I’ve heard enough. Castiel, this family tolerates many things. We tolerated your strange choice in mate because we thought you were doing right by the bitch, but – for God’s sake, you weren’t even mated at the wedding, were you? You said you’d chosen elsewhere to mark him, but you have marks on your neck now! Good Lord, what will Lilith’s family do if they find out? You’ll destroy Lucifer’s chances with their other omegas. Do you never think of anyone but yourself?”

And then she rounds on Dean.

Alpha rolls off of her, potent and furious. The aggression sends Dean reeling, head going dizzy and heart palpitating. He remembers being knotted like this, by dangerous, violent alphas angry at a world they saw unwilling to cater to their needs. Alastair cooed over them – poor alphas, can’t knot an omega whenever you want, we have omegas here for you, just for you, all for you.

“You money-grubbing shit,” she growls, “You use my son and force him to care for some – some bastard pup!”

“ENOUGH.”

Cas is on his feet, fists clenched and knuckles white. His teeth are clenched, face red, and he’s growling again, more angry than Dean has ever seen him before. He shouts, “I will not hear you speak like that to mate! I chose Dean, and was lucky enough to have Dean choose me. Mary is my pup and if you alienate her because of your stupid, prejudiced, back-asswards so called ‘traditional’ values, I am actually going to rip you apart. What do your ‘values’ say about threatening an alpha’s family in his own home?”
Instead of backing down, Naomi revs up even more. She steps closer and yells back, “This is unbelievable, Castiel James. This is not the alpha that I raised you to be – you’re some filthy liberal-minded idiot. How is it that you can’t see how much this is all ruining you? You’re not an alpha, you’re an omega-whipped moron.”

Dean reaches for Mary when he sees Cas’ body language shift from defensive to downright livid. Cas makes a grab for his mother’s half-finished mug of tea and hurls it at the wall before he enunciates clearly: “Get. Out.”

“I will not,” Naomi bites back, and puts both hands against Cas’ shoulders, shoving him back as she speaks, “I am trying to talk to you about your own good –”

As soon as Cas surges forward again with a louder snarl, Dean gathers Mary into his arms and makes a run for the nursery. She starts to cry in his arms, sensing the anger but also Dean’s distress. Dean locks the nursery door behind him. Beyond the door, he hears Cas shouting and Naomi barking back, a few interjections breaking them apart in Zachariah’s cold, calculating voice.

Heart beating rapidly, Dean feels himself slipping back into Alastair-mode, wanting to curl up into himself and make himself as small and unassuming as possible.

But he can’t.

This crap isn’t just about him anymore, it’s about Mary, too. So he sucks back the panic, forces himself to breathe, and rocks Mary back and forth, pacing around the perimeter of the nursery. He murmurs song lyrics under his breath to her, just a little out of tune until he gets the hang of the song.

“Don’t listen to them, sweetheart,” Dean tells her, and pecks a kiss to her forehead, “Daddy’s spent his whole life not listening to people when they say crap about him, and you’re probably gonna have to do that, too. Sometimes people just suck. Mostly dad’s in-laws.”

Mary hiccups, red-faced, and continues to wail out her frustration.

“I know it’s not fair, baby girl,” he says, “and some folks’ll give you that ‘life isn’t fair’ bullshit, but don’t listen to that, okay? If life ain’t fair, we make it fair. S’why we got people like Uncle Sammy in the world.”

Dean finds that as he talks to Mary, he calms down himself, heartbeat slowing to a steady rate. And the calmer that he becomes, the calmer Mary becomes, wails winding down to irritated noises and little whines. Dean holds her close and pushes another kiss into her soft hair before he says, “Besides, if alpha daddy’s dumb mom can’t see that you’re the most gorgeous pup on the planet, we don’t stinkin’ need her anyway.”

Mary turns her head against Dean’s chest and mouths aimlessly at the borrowed cotton shirt. Dean chuckles and pets a palm over her tiny head. He smiles, “Hungry, huh? Looks like you got my appetite.”

He retreats back to the rocking chair and settles Mary comfortably against his arm while fumbles one-handed with the buttons, moving aside one side so that she can nurse. It’s as Mary eats that the shouting and crashing and sounds of alpha fury die down outside and go silent. For a long moment, Dean is afraid for Cas, afraid he’s hurt.

Then he hears that familiar gruff voice on the other side of the nursery door.

“Dean, are you two all right?” Cas asks.
“Okay,” Dean settles on saying, “Nursing.”

“Are you going to come out?”

Not yet. Dean likes it in the nursery. This is something that anger doesn’t touch. Sure, he’s been in here tired out of his mind and interrupted from sleep, but the nursery is good. It’s home. It’s a place that he and Cas built together, and the place that Mary lives when she’s not with one of her dads.

“I think we’ll feel better in here for a while,” Dean says, honestly.

“I’m so sorry,” Castiel says.

“Wasn’t your fault,” Dean murmurs, eyes on Mary at his chest, “I messed up, man.”

“Dean,” Castiel says. It’s that tone of voice that he uses when he’s sad, when he’s hurt that Dean would accept any kind of responsibility for crap that is, in fact, his own idiot fault.

“What? I was the one that screwed up.”

“Dean, my mother and uncle are awful and their bullshit has nothing to do with you,” Castiel says back, “My mother has always been enthusiastic about the idea of grandchildren, but she’s a – purist, you know. I’ve made it clear that she isn’t welcome back. I won’t expose our pup to that.”

He doesn’t know if he really believes all that, but Dean still smiles at Cas’ effort. When Mary finishes and her eyelids droop, he buttons his shirt back up with the same single, clumsy hand. He knows that Cas is just outside the door and that knowledge makes him feel improved, even if he’s edgy enough to need to stay behind the locked nursery door.

“Dean?”

“Mm.”

“I would like to remind you that no matter what anyone says, you are wonderful,” Castiel says. He pauses and adds, “I am embarrassed for anybody that is unable to see what I do when I look at you,” another beat of silence passes, and then: “Will you please come out now?”

Dean should put Mary down in her crib, but he’s comforted by the gentle weight of her in his arms, so he continues to clutch Mary against him as he stands. When he unlocks the door, he hears Cas rustle on the other side. He looks like even more of a wreck than he was when he woke, hair rucked up and face weary.

So Dean greets him with a kiss.

Castiel kisses him back, hard, and slides his tongue into Dean’s mouth. It’s a silly alpha display, a claiming display, but Dean relaxes into it, knowing that Cas needs to comfort himself with Dean as much as Dean needs comfort from Cas. It’s what mates do.

“Too tired to make supper,” Cas finally sighs when they part. He rests his forehead against Dean’s, and then lifts his chin to brush his lips against the same spot before he says, “We could heat up leftovers and watch a movie. Barbarella?”

Dean gives Cas’ shoulder a playful sock and kisses the stretch of skin under his ear before he jests, “You ol’ romantic.”

“Food and science fiction do seem to be a precursor to seduction for you, yes,” Castiel says.
Dean laughs and whacks Cas again. When Mary shifts against him he settles down, though.

The living room is wreck. The coffee table is overturned, coffee and tea everywhere and soaking into the carpet. Even the shoes previously arranged by the front door are scattered. Dean slides a look over at Cas and comments, “Either a tornado went through here, or there was one hell of an alpha throw down.”

“Yes, well,” Castiel tries to reason, sounding petulant, “She wouldn’t leave.”

“So you threw shoes at her?” Dean asks.

“It worked, didn’t it?” Castiel says back.

As long as it keeps working, then Dean has no issue with Castiel hurling shoes at his mother. He shakes his head and pecks another kiss to Castiel’s cheek before parting to get Mary settled on the couch, turn on the movie, and right the furniture while Cas heats up some leftover potato cheese soup for them to split. He brings two steaming bowls just as Dean settles on the couch with Mary settled on a blanket between his legs, arms thrown over her head as she sleeps.

“She’s so small,” Castiel sighs as he sits, holding his bowl in his lap.

Dean hums and spoons thick, cheesy soup into his mouth. Yup, food never fails to make him feel better. There’s almost nothing that could make this whole night any more perfect than it already is. He’s got good food in his belly, a cheesy sci fi flick on the television, his little girl asleep beside him, and his mate on the other end of the couch.

His mate that is currently smiling like a goof.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Dean asks.

Cas sets his empty soup bowl on the righted coffee table and stretches his arms back behind his head before answers, “I just love you.”

Oh.

Dean cocks his head at that. He knows mates are supposed to love each other and all, and yeah, Cas’ scent can do loads for him – get him hot and bothered underneath his clothes, comfort him in the wake of nightmares, lull him to sleep and also wake him up – but love? Jeez, it’s kind of a huge deal. It’s not the kind of shit that you just say.


“Yes,” Castiel replies, “I don’t understand why you’re so taken aback. I love you. I thought it was obvious.”

And maybe it was obvious. Maybe it should have been more obvious to Dean, but Dean’s kind of an idiot. Of course Cas loves him. Why should that knowledge hang so strangely in his ribcage, weigh so oddly on his heart? Cas makes him food and holds him when they go to bed, always asks before he takes, loans him books and gives Dean free range of his LP collection, watches sci fi with him and fucking knits their daughter awesome hats.

Dean opens his mouth to say the words back, but nothing comes out.

With a sad smile, Cas says, “You don’t have to say it back, Dean. I understand.”
“Cas –”

The front door opens and closes, and Sam ducks in with a takeout container in his hands. He starts to push his shoes off, and when he notices that the rest of the shoes are missing, looks around the room. His brow furrows and he asks, “What the hell happened in here?”

Dean places his leftover soup on the table next to Cas’ and reaches for Mary for comfort, taking her up into his arms. She stays dead to the world, little mouth open as she huffs tiny breaths in and out. The warmth and weight of her against him smooths his feathers after Cas’ declaration and in the wake of Sam’s accusing glance.

Slowly, he says, “Uh. Cas’ folks showed up.”

Sam’s nose wrinkles and he looks at Cas, “Your ‘traditional’ family?” he asks, making air quotes around the word traditional.

“Yes,” Cas confirms, one word, and when this is not enough to sate Sam, goes on, “She heard from my sister that Mary had been born, inadvertently found out that I am not Mary’s biological alpha, and flew into a rage. I may have overturned the coffee table. And thrown the shoes at her. Until she left, that was all.”

“Right,” Sam says. Dean can tell that he’s ready to get on the alpha defensive, especially when he adds the question, “Is there any chance of her coming back?”

“I don’t think so,” Castiel says, “I made my position on the matter clear. I don’t think we’ll be seeing my mother or uncle or any other unwelcome relatives any time soon.”

“I hope not,” Dean adds, “God, I am shit sick of bullshit families. This thing we’ve got going here is good on its own, right, Cas? We got us and we got Mary and Sam’s gonna be in town now, and that’s enough for me. Dicks all up in here wanting in on my family just ‘cause I’ve got a pup now. And Mary doesn’t need that crap. I’m gonna raise her up right and love her no matter what.”

Sam doesn’t say anything to that. He’s actually making kind of a weird face, all contemplative as he gnaws on his lower lip.

“You got something you’d like to share with the class, Sammy?” Dean asks.

Sam licks his lips and his eyes fall to the floor.

That’s a yes if Dean has ever seen one.

“Dude, what’s going on?” he asks.

Sam exhales. When he looks Dean in the eye, he says, “Okay, please don’t be mad at me, man.”

That makes Dean’s gut twist. He eyes his brother and asks, “What did you do?”

“Okay, I explain,” Sam says, “I’ve been getting a lot of e-mails from clients about where I’ve been, you know, worrying about me. I have a few people that have got it out for me, angry alphas and stuff. I have this section on my site where I can blog stuff, and I just wanted to keep everybody posted.”

“Oh, okay,” Dean says, finding that he does not like where this is leading.

“Anyway, I put up this picture of you with Mary,” Sam says.
“Oo…kay,” Dean says, “That’s fine, Sam.”

“No, dude, it’s not okay,” he says, and rubs his temples, “’Cause, um. I guess even though he stopped talking to me after Jess and I got mated, dad checks my website to keep tabs on me? Dad e-mailed me. He saw the blog, Dean. He saw you and Mary and he,” – Sam clears his throat – “he wants to meet her.”

All at once, Dean is cold.

“No,” Dean says.

“Dean,” Sam starts, “He was so fucked up when you left. Can you please consider giving it a –”

“No,” Dean repeats, “No. Fuck no. I’m not letting him anywhere near my kid. What if she presents as an omega? Huh? What then? Because dad’s a total shithead when it comes to that. And you know fucking what? Even if Mary turned out alpha, she’d still witness dad being a total douche to me. I was trapped in hell for seven goddamn years of my life! I’d been fucked up by alphas before, but I had no idea how many ways somebody could hurt until that place. I spent a quarter of my life in that hellhole, and you know if dad finds out he’ll put it all on me. God, I’m so stupid.”

“Then don’t tell him,” Sam says, “All he wants is to meet Mary, dude.”

“I said no,” Dean says.

“How am I supposed to tell him that?” Sam asks, “You’re gonna kill him, Dean. He’s a lonely old fuck and he just wants to meet his granddaughter.”

“You know what?” Dean says, and stands with Mary cradled against his chest, “He deserves it.”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t, it’s just…” Sam runs his free hand through his hair, and then desperation sprouts to life on his face, “I already told him he could.”

“What the fuck, Sam?” Dean snaps, all at once in a panic.

Cas finally intervenes and says, “Why did you do that?”

“I don’t know,” Sam says, “I’m sorry. It was stupid, I just thought, I don’t know. I guess maybe I thought that you’d want to. You know. See him again.”

“In what fucking universe?” Dean snaps. Mary is awake now, and makes a soft whining noise. He knows she can tell how angry and afraid he is, but he keeps going, “Son of a bitch. I was just starting to – I thought I might have a chance, you know? A chance at being happy. I know I’m not the smartest cookie, okay? I get that. But maybe after you get cornered in some back alley and have four separate fucking alphas take turns forcing their knots in you, and maybe when you’re scared shitless and come home and tell your dad, maybe instead of telling you it’s your fault for going out so close to your heat – maybe he should stand up for you?” Dean swallows and hugs Mary to him, “Fuck you, dude.”

Dean turns on his heel and starts toward the master bedroom, taking Mary with him. Behind him, he hears Cas say, “You are many things, Sam, but I hadn’t realized astronomically inconsiderate was one of those.”
“Dad –

Please don’t book a ticket for a plane yet. I didn’t speak to Dean when I told you that you could come up to visit, and have since, and Dean has asked that you don’t come. He isn’t comfortable with the idea of your visit. I apologize, but it wasn’t my place to speak on his behalf.

Sam”

“How’s that?” Sam asks after he finishes reading.

Castiel shifts forward to scan the drafted e-mail on Sam’s laptop screen. He reads through it twice before he straightens back up again and says, “Better.” Though Castiel still, frankly, cannot fathom the nerve Sam had, to give permission for a visit without Dean's go-ahead and to dole out Castiel's address without question.

“Look…I’m really sorry,” Sam says.

“I know,” Castiel replies, and folds his arms over his chest. He’s trying to be diplomatic about the entire fiasco, but this proves difficult to do when one is an alpha whose omega feels threatened. His instinct thrums through him like a steady drumbeat, telling him to growl and snarl and throw Sam out of the house on his ass. The only thing louder than that is his logical thought, which, thank God, keeps him in check for the time being.

Castiel lets out a long, pensive breath through his nostrils and pointedly avoids Sam’s cloying gaze. When he speaks again, the words are quiet, controlled, and nothing like the frustration and white-hot anger he feels whirling through his gut, “I feel as though…you are not understanding the trauma that your brother has been through.”

“In what way?” asks Sam.

“In the same way that I did not understand when I invited you here,” Castiel slowly admits. Even now he isn’t sure whether or not he made a mistake when he chose to contact Sam Winchester. He and Dean seem to get along sometimes and other times butt heads like angry animals.

Then, as a man with brothers himself, he supposes that that’s always how it is. He does love his brothers, though whether or not he likes his brothers is a matter consistently up for debate. Castiel supposes the closest he is to actually enjoying a brother’s company is being around Gabriel, and even then, he can’t say that he finds Gabriel amiable with any degree of certainty.

It seems different between Dean and Sam, however. Their emotions run high in a way that they do
not within the Novak siblings. Hostility between them – like Lucifer and Michael, for example – is cold. Furious, yes, but still frigid and unwavering. The conflict between Sam and Dean is nothing of the kind. The humor between them seems always a fire, the default setting a controlled burn. But Dean and Sam are prime environments for a controlled burn to roar out of control into a full-blown firestorm – and what rages between them now is exactly that: a storm.

Castiel goes on, “I know about as much as you do as far as what Dean has been through, but I did know that he feared his family would place blame on him for everything that occurred, and I called you anyway. Though as far as my thought process went, I thought that you could not be as terrible as Dean said you were, being so involved in omega rights. Your father sounds like another beast entirely.”

Sam licks his lips. His brows furrow, and he says, “It’s just – all their fights seemed so stupid. Dad’s an ass, but I didn’t – God, I didn’t think this through at all.”

“I imagine he treated you and Dean very different based on his skewed views of omegas,” Castiel says.

“Yeah – I guess, he had to have, right? I look back and it’s like, I can’t remember the fights,” Sam says, “I remember the fights that I had with dad. But they were usually about us moving around, and school, and the last one was about mating to Jess. I mean…after Dean left, I tried to bring him up a couple of times, but dad just shut down, same way he’d get if I tried to ask about mom. He was – probably still is, I guess – a pretty heavy drinker.”

“To put this in perspective,” Castiel says, “When I found Dean, it was the middle of night and raining buckets. He had no clothes, looked half-starved, and he had - has - scars all over his body. He had a hormone chip in his leg, and when I took him here to dry off, he immediately thought that I’d done it for sex. That is the state he was in, and a state that he believes that your father is going to blame Dean for if he ever finds out what occurred.”

Sam swallows, and his eyes lower to the floor.

“You just…” Sam sighs and rubs his hands over his face, pressing the pads of his fingers against his eyelids. He looks near to tears, and takes a moment to breathe, “You hear all kinds of crap about omega trafficking, and it’s like – like it exists in this other world, you know? You hear all of the horrible shit that happens when they get caught up in that. And, God, fuck. Knowing my brother went through that crap is this whole new level of personal. He’s only told us so much, and it makes me sick, I just…God.”

Castiel hesitates, but after a beat, rests his palm on Sam’s shoulder. Sam’s eyes are wet and it all unsettles Cas to the core, seeing an alpha worn down to tears over his brother’s condition, and knowing that brother is your omega, your mate.

“We’ll get them,” Castiel finally says, “When Dean is ready, we’ll go after the people that did this to him.”

Sam wipes his watering eyes on the sleeve of his flannel and nods.

Cas gives one last, curt nod and says, “Send the e-mail. I should check on Dean.”

He lingers over Sam’s shoulder just long enough to watch him click the ‘send’ button at the bottom of the e-mail screen, and then leaves him to it. Cas strides from the kitchen and back to the master bedroom. He slips in and closes the door behind him, quiet, though Dean and Mary are both awake on the bed, lying face to face.
For a moment, Castiel just watches Dean play with his daughters’ hands. Mary keeps her eyes trained on Dean’s face, her expression equal parts bewildered and adoring. Her nose crinkles when Cas enters the room, and her attention finally breaks from Dean, limbs wiggling.

“Think she wants you,” Dean says. His voice is rough and used.

Cas scoops Mary into his arms, supporting her soft head with his palm, and leans over to kiss her temple. Mary flails a little and burrows her face into Castiel’s t-shirt. She’s scenting him, feeling out her alpha father and seeking comfort in him, the smallest gesture that means the whole world to Castiel.

Cas adjusts where Mary sits so that she’s tucked into the crook of his left arm, and pats the space on the mattress beside him with his free hand. Dean scoots over into the space and leans his head onto Castiel’s shoulder, briefly snuffling at the skin above the collar of his shirt before he applies a chaste kiss to it.

“How are you doing?” Castiel asks. He drapes his arm over Dean’s broad shoulders and tips his head over, resting his ear on the top of Dean’s scalp.

“I’m angry, man, how do you think I’m doing?” Dean snaps.

Mary makes a noise, and Dean’s tone softens, “Sorry, sweetheart. I’m not mad at you.” He extracts Mary from Cas’ arms and noses up her tiny shirt to blow a raspberry on her round tummy. Mary bops him on the head with her tiny fist in response. Dean relaxes as he holds his daughter up against him. It helps that Mary is so calm now, though she seems to put Dean at ease even when she’s red-faced and squalling.

Castiel stays with the two of them for some time, scenting and kissing. For a while, he grooms Dean’s hair, arranging and rearranging it into different positions. They don’t say much, but Dean doesn’t need talk right now. He needs the steady presence of his alpha, and that is something that only Castiel can provide to him. Only when Mary needs a diaper change does Castiel emerge from the bedroom, leaving Dean to sulk by himself underneath the covers.

With Mary in a fresh diaper and a couple of her toys in hand, Castiel pads into the kitchen. Sam still sits at the table with his laptop out, and lifts his eyes when Cas treks in.

“Where’s Dean?” he asks.

“Still upset,” Castiel replies. He pours a glass of juice for Dean and snags a box of Ritz crackers from one of the cabinets, and as he arranges toys, food, juice and baby into a workable position, he inquires, “Has your father e-mailed you back?”

“Uh,” Sam says. He runs his fingers through his hair, “Yeah. Shit, man, it’s not good.”

“What do you mean?”

“As soon as I told him he could come visit – like, this morning – he took off and he’s on his way here,” Sam says. “He told me that he’s about five hours out from Buena Vista and that he’s not turning around, no matter what Dean says. I e-mailed him back and told him that Dean doesn’t want him here, but he said he doesn’t give a shit. He wants to meet Mary and I don’t think that we can stop him.”

Castiel purses his lips.

“He’s going to show no matter what we do, isn’t he?” he asks.
“Now you know where Dean gets his stubbornness from, at least,” Sam sighs, “Look, my dad’s a beta, but he may as well be an alpha. He’s got a serious fucking complex about it and it makes him worse than any alpha I’ve ever come across.”

Mary gurgles from her position against Castiel, and Cas lets out a long exhale. He says, “I know, little one,” before he turns to Sam and says, “Message back and say that he is to find a place to stay in town.”

“Doesn’t the couch pull out?” asks Sam, lifting his brows.

“Sam, having Dean and his father in the same house without reprieve sounds like an awful idea,” Castiel responds, “Whether the couch pulls out or not is irrelevant to that. But yes, it does pull out. John does not need to know that.”

To that, Sam just makes a face and says, “Yeah, you’re right. Go…make sure Dean doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“I will do my best.”

In the bedroom, Castiel deposits the juice and crackers on the bedside table before he settles Mary down on the mattress on her back. He points to Dean and then to the food, explaining lightly, “Food. Now. I know you’re angry, but you still need to eat.”

Dean frowns, but reaches for the box of crackers and says, “Yeesh, okay, Mr. Bossy Alpha.”

Castiel distracts Mary with one of her toys while Dean eats, and waits until he thinks Dean has enough in his stomach to take the news of John’s still-imminent arrival with some degree of grace. With the juice in the glass half-drained and a couple of crackers still stuffed into Dean’s mouth, Cas says, “Your father is still coming.”

Dean sputters. He swallows the crackers and asks, “What? Why?”

“He apparently is already at least halfway between Lawrence and here, and refuses to turn around,” Castiel says.

“Well that certainly sounds like the son of a gun,” Dean mutters.

“He appears determined to meet Mary.”

“Fucking awesome,” Dean says, “Another grandparent up on my nuts. That’s what I need.”

“I can always throw shoes at him,” Castiel offers.

The jest is enough to get Dean to snort as he closes the cracker box and sets it aside. He washes down the food with what remains of his juice and, without ceremony, unbuttons the shirt he’s borrowed from Castiel, and lets it slide down his arms. Topless, Dean is a sight to behold. His chest is soft with milk for the pup, and his belly just barely pudgy from childbirth, the lightning stripes of faded stretch marks poking out from the waistband of his boxers. Over it all, stark scars spiderweb over his skin, golden-tan and freckled from time out in the sun.

Before he can think, Castiel reaches out and brushes his fingertips against one of the longer slashes of pink through Dean’s skin. Dean’s eyes shutter closed, and a shiver wracks his body, but Castiel doesn’t pull away. He draws his fingertips over the marks, tracing each and every one as they crisscross and overlap each other. Some are thin and white, while others are angry, thick marks. Ill stirs up in Castiel’s gut when he thinks how much it must have hurt to have those scars in his skin,
what must have happened to put them there.

“Sometimes they did it for fun,” Dean says, and Cas looks sharply up to see Dean gazing at him through heavy-lidded eyes, expression distant.

“Hurt you?” whispers Castiel.

“Yeah,” he answers, “Alastair – that’s the guy that ran the joint – had all these rooms for alpha kinks, and I can take pain pretty good, so I’d get stuck with alphas that liked carving you up with a whip and makin’ you hurt.”

“Alastair,” Castiel repeats, tasting the name. That’s the name of the man that whose eyes he is going to carve out and feed to him while he still bleeds from the sockets. Yes, that sounds pleasing.

Dean closes his eyes again and nods, resting his head back against the pillows as he speaks, “He was the whole reason I ended up there, y’know. My dad would blame me for being a stupid shithead, and he wouldn’t be wrong, Cas, that’s the kicker. I met the guy in a bar and he said he had a couch I could crash on. Next thing I know I’ve got a needle in my arm and I’m in the back of some truck, going wherever the fuck. He’s got these beefcakes keeping me from makin’ noise, and they…well. They stuck their knots as me same as any alpha. I passed out, though. Don’t remember it all. Point is, I just went along with some strange alpha. He didn’t force me out to his car. I went.”

“That is not your fault.”

“You keep saying that, little alpha,” Dean says, and shakes his head, “Not gonna make it true.”

Omegas blame themselves for many things. It’s engrained into them, not just from the time that they present, but from birth – omegas are weaker, more pliant, built to be subservient. That’s just biology, people say. Omegas should know better than to dress in a way that might provoke an alpha. Omegas should know better than to walk anywhere alone. Omegas should save their virginities for a beta or alpha that will take care of them. Omegas should look this way, or they shouldn’t.

Glossy magazine pages and city billboards are splashed with photoshopped, wide-eyed omegas with tiny frames bent into provocative positions. They advertise to omegas for scents, for makeup, for clothing, for hair products and skin products and surgeries – all to manipulate themselves into an image that fits a standard alpha’s desire.

And without the words being blatantly said, this paradigm trains omegas to apologize for their existence. If the hospital in Denver paid Castiel for each time an omega apologized to him for being a bother, for getting sick or for being injured, he would be a far wealthier man than he is now.

In the few short months that Castiel has come to know Dean, Dean has apologized to him for standing up for himself, for looking the way that he does, has apologized for both having slept with alphas before Castiel and for having alpha knots forced upon him. He apologized for size of his cock, for God’s sake.

Dean lives in a world that treats him as born inadequate. Even thinnest, prettiest omegas can be unsatisfied, feel as though they are never enough. This is not to say that the confident omega does not exist – Castiel has happened upon plenty, although their confidence is hard-earned and often written off by arrogant alphas as a form of vanity.

It makes Castiel’s heart hang heavy in his ribcage, makes his brain buzz with frustration and anger,
and worse – he knows that at times he is a part of the problem. He wets his chapped lips with the
tip of his tongue and leans over to kiss Dean, placing lips against lips, then moving his mouth to
Dean’s nose, to his temples, back down to his jaw and his collarbone. He kisses Dean’s scars and
his soft torso, worships each flaw.

Dean’s body is a map of his life, freckles like starbursts born from the sun, the marks from Mary
growing inside him, the roads, hills, and valleys of Alastair’s cruelty, broad shoulders and big feet
from being alpha-born, the bite along the column of the throat that says Dean is his – Dean’s skin
tells Castiel so many things without Dean uttering a word, and it is beautiful.

Bodies have always fascinated Castiel, but Dean’s by far the most of all.

He wants spill out all his thoughts, tell Dean how perfect each mark on his body, tell him what a
nice shape he is, but none of the words come out. Castiel would not dare to fall among the more
arrogant of alphas, those that believe their omegas were built just for them. Dean was built to be
Dean, and though he fits with Castiel like a puzzle piece that does not entitle Castiel to ownership
of Dean’s body.

So he leaves it at, “Someday I hope that you see your scars the way that I do.”

Dean huffs.

He says, “I like some of them.”

“You do?”

“Yeah,” Dean says, “I like these ones, ‘cause they kind of look like a star.” He points to a section
on his side, marked from brutal beatings, where the lines intersect into a lopsided asterisk. His
finger moves to a jagged white line along the other side, high up, and he says, “And this one. Got it
when I was sixteen. Some dude was backin’ into this omega chick I used to go to school with. I
punched him in his stupid fuckin’ face and he took out a knife.”

Dean would brave a violent alpha for the sake of another.

The spell is broken when a knock sounds at the bedroom door, and Sam’s voice says, “Hey guys,
could I come in?” from the other side.

Castiel glances over to Dean, lifting his brows, a silent question of permission.

“Yeah, get in here,” Dean says. He and Castiel shift apart and Dean reaches for Mary, whose
eyelids droop with sleepiness. He settles her in his lap.

Sam stares at Dean’s chest. Castiel supposes that the only other time that he has seen Dean with
torso exposed was on the night of Mary’s birth, and with Sam’s anxieties regarding childbirth were
certainly enough to distract him from Dean’s scars.

“You done, or do you wanna see the ones on my back, too?” Dean snips, voice burning into the air
like acid eating through a solid.

All over again, Sam looks like he wants to cry. His shoulders slump and he retreats into himself the
same way that an omega in distress might, making his huge frame a fraction of an inch smaller as
he hunches in. He says, “I’m really…Jesus. Dean, I’m so fucking sorry. About the crap you’ve
seen and about dad and just about everything. I just. I want to fix things, I want to make things
good for you, and I just don’t know how I’m supposed to. God, I didn’t mean to fuck up.”
Dean stares at Sam for a long time. He has his hands on Mary’s feet, playing with her toes. Tonight, she may be his security blanket.

“I don’t like being pissed at you, but man, I don’t know how much more shit I can take,” Dean says, “I’m trying to start over here, Sammy. And you’re dragging all this bullshit back, this crap I left behind, and I don’t know how the hell I’m supposed to take it. I don’t want dad anywhere near Mary. I don’t want him to touch her, don’t want him to talk to her, don’t want him to do anything that might hurt her. What do you think’ll happen if she has a granddaddy talkin’ shit about omegas, and she presents as omega? You carry that crap on your shoulders forever. I know you don’t get it, but trust me, you remember it all.”

“I’ve faced discrimination before, Dean. How do you think things worked out for me and Jess?”

“It’s not the same fucking thing,” Dean says, “You and Jess, neither of you guys ever had to worry about being an omega. So sure, you know stares and weird comments, sure, but don’t you fucking dare compare that crap to my crap, you hear me? The day that you get drugged, strapped down and knotted until you bleed almost every day of your life for seven fucking years, we’ll chat. Until then, don’t. Just don’t.”

Sam chews on his lips. When he looks back up, his eyes are wet again.

“Aw, jeez, Sammy,” Dean says, “Didn’t mean to yell.”

“No, no,” Sam says, and runs his fingers through his hair. A mirthless chuckle escapes his lips at the same time as two single, miserable tears fall from each eye and streak down his cheeks. He shakes his head and chuckles again, “Don’t – don’t apologize to me, okay? I’ve been fucking up over and over again with you and the fact that you even still talk to me – shit, Dean. Don’t you hate me?”

“Dude, no,” Dean protests, “You’re – that’s not it at all. You’re my brother, man. I thought, I dunno. I thought that when you found out that I ran off with a dude ‘cause he offered me a couch to crash on and got myself stuck in that joint that you’d think it was on me? And you don’t, but you know dad will. How the hell am I supposed to explain where I was? I don’t want to know how he’s gonna look at me when he finds out that I’ve been knotted hundreds of times by alphas I don’t know, that I’ll never know, that they kept me in a cage like a dog, that Mary won’t ever know her biological alpha father, that he’s some sweaty john that bent me over and just…”

“Raped,” Sam whispers, “The word you’re looking for is ‘raped,’ Dean.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever,” Dean says, “All I wanted was to make dad proud. Spent my whole childhood thinking I’d be such a good alpha for daddy, and then biology has to go and surprise me.” He laughs like Sam did, an empty, unhappy sound. Dean clears his throat, lips twisted into an ugly expression as he stares down at his daughter where she sleeps in his lap, “Changed everything. One day – boom – you’re in heat, and your dad doesn’t think you’re strong anymore. He thinks you’re a waste of space and a liability. And that’s the guy you invited to see my daughter. My pup.”

“I messed up,” Sam says, “Again. And I know it doesn’t change anything, but I’m so damn sorry, Dean. When he shows up, I’ll stick by you, okay? No more siding with him. No more taking his crap. I’ve got your back.”

“Ha,” Dean says, and this time when he smiles, the expression is genuine, “Thanks. That’s, uh.
That means a lot.”

“Yeah,” Sam simply says, “Yeah, dude. So, um. Are we square?”

Dean makes a face and says, “I’m still righteously pissed at you. But okay, we can be square. I’ll get over it,” Cas’ eyes flick down to Dean’s lap, where Mary has her little chubby hand wrapped around one of Dean’s fingers. Dean’s smiling at her as he says, “As much as I’d like to keep talking about our feelings, gentlemen, I should probably put tiny here to bed.”

“Do you need me to come?” asks Castiel.

“Nah,” Dean says. He scoops Mary up again and carefully slides from the mattress, climbing to his feet. Sam and Castiel watch him go. For a while, neither of them says a word to the other – they just stare after Dean, and then stare at each other.

“Thank you,” Castiel finally says.

“For what?”

“For what you said to Dean,” Castiel replies, “He needs you.”

“Sure doesn’t seem that way,” murmurs Sam.

Castiel stands and places a hand on Sam’s arm. He says, “He does. You’re his family. That matters to him.”

Sam gives a thoughtful hum to that but doesn’t speak, so Castiel goes on, “You should probably get some rest before John makes an appearance. I know that Dean and I will need some sleep.”

To this, Sam nods. He starts to chew on his lip again and after an exhale and a slump of his shoulders, he bids Cas a goodnight. Castiel watches him leave and poke his head into the nursery to repeat the same to Dean. Vaguely, Cas hears Dean’s gruff voice murmur back, and the tinkle of *Ramble On* from the mobile.

Castiel peels back the covers on the bed and brushes his teeth while Dean makes rounds through the house to flip the light switches, even though they’ll be on again when John arrives at the house. Dean returns to the bedroom and closes the door behind him, joining Cas in the bathroom to run through a nightly ritual. He scrubs his face and brushes his teeth, flossing and rinsing with fluoride mouthwash.

When Dean and Castiel climb into bed, they leave the lights on for a little. Cas inches up behind Dean and spoons his back. It’s the perfect position for burying his nose into Dean’s neck and scenting to his heart’s content, over Dean’s mating bite and the rest of his perfect skin. He presses damp kisses over Dean’s throat, nipping and licking.

Dean makes an *mm* noise and rotates on the mattress so that they lie face to face. He wraps his arms around Castiel’s neck and pulls him in for an open-mouthed kiss, tender and searing. Dean’s lips are soft and he smells so good, like *mate* and *home* and just *Dean*.

For a long while, they kiss just like that, tongues exploring the insides of each other’s mouths, tasting and testing the places that they’ve only just discovered. Dean’s chest presses up against Castiel as their lips connect and the friction makes sigh into Dean’s mouth. He can feel himself getting hard between his legs, hot and heavy and God, he needs. He needs Dean so much.

Castiel opens his eyes and sees Dean smiling back at him before he leans in for another kiss,
catching Castiel’s lower lip between his teeth. A moan rumbles in Castiel’s chest. He draws Dean in to kiss him harder and Dean meets him halfway.

Dean’s warm palms push up under Castiel’s t-shirt. He strokes over Cas’ chest, over his nipples and down to his tented sleep pants. Castiel makes a soft noise between their kisses when Dean grasps Castiel’s cock, stroking through pajamas and boxer briefs. The grip of Dean’s hand makes his mind hazy with pleasure, and when the scent of omega slick wafts into the air, Castiel knows that he’s done for.

With gentle hands, Castiel pushes Dean onto his back. He kicks off his own clothes before he reaches for Dean’s pajamas, drawing them down over his hips and casting the clothing off of the edge of the mattress. Naked Dean, as always, is a beauty to behold. His large cock sits flushed against his belly, ready and begging for attention.

Castiel leans down and nuzzles over Dean’s erection, applying lazy, wet kisses to the length of it and relishing the soft whines and barely-stifled moans that make it out of Dean’s mouth. He loves the way that Dean tries to contain himself up can’t, how he lifts his hips to press his cock closer to the attentions of Cas’ mouth, how he wants more but won’t say it in words.

But Castiel doesn’t want to rush this. He wants to worship every part of Dean, wants to kiss every patch of skin from the places between his legs to the arches of his feet to each and every scar. So Castiel does just that: He slinks down the mattress and starts with the insides of Dean’s feet. Dean laughs softly above him, but when their eyes meet from across the mattress, the laughter fades. Dean doesn’t look demurely away from Castiel’s gaze, and so Castiel doesn’t stop staring.

He holds Dean’s eyes as he kisses up to the ankle, to the bend of Dean’s knee, to the insides of his thighs. Only when Castiel at least reaches the apex between Dean’s legs does he flick his eyes back down, focusing on that sweet little hole, leaking slick and smelling of heaven. Castiel licks and nuzzles and hums. Dean keens and fists the sheets at his sides, riding back into the touches and kisses that Cas reveres him with.

A broken sort of sob rips through the air, loud enough that Castiel glances up from tongueing at Dean’s hole.

Dean’s cock is now soft against his belly, and come pools on Dean’s hot skin.

Castiel runs the tip of his finger through it and murmurs, “You made a mess.”

Then he presses his finger into his mouth, tasting the salt of Dean’s come. He hums with pleasure and runs the flat of his tongue through the rest, lapping every drop off of Dean’s quivering stomach. He finishes and grins at Dean, but the look that Dean gives him back isn’t lewd – it’s worshipful, and tears into Cas to his very core.

His only solution is to lean back up over Dean and kiss the look right off of his face. He feels so much love for his man, his omega and his mate, that it almost scares him to know that one human being can feel so much. Dean’s hands tangle in Castiel’s hair and he tugs them closer together, kissing harder.

They both pant when Castiel pulls back. Both stares at the other but neither says anything for a long, quiet moment.

“Cas,” Dean says, “Need you, little alpha.”

Castiel nods and hunger consumes his body at the word need. His omega needs him. He nudges
Dean’s legs apart and takes himself in hand. With a careful push, he’s inside Dean’s body. Dean swallows him whole in heat and pressure so wholly that a cracked, strangled noise makes it out of Castiel’s mouth. He squeezes his eyes shut and hangs his head, overcome by the sensation.

Until –

He opens his eyes and sees Dean’s gentle smile.

Castiel’s heart thumps, and he reaches for Dean’s hands, lacing their fingers together on each side. He holds Dean and Dean grips him as Castiel draws back and thrusts back inside. He doesn’t go fast, doesn’t pound Dean into the mattress. He does take his omega hard, but in long, slow rolls of his body – and while Castiel moves in and out of Dean, he leans over to kiss him. He kisses Dean’s lips and nose and forehead, kisses his shoulders and collarbone, kisses that sweet spot behind each of Dean’s ear lobes.

The quiet sound of Dean’s deep breaths keep Castiel going almost as much as the little noises that punctuate it, sweet sounds of pleasure and contentment. Dean looks gorgeous like this, spread out. His brow is knitted with pleasure, lips half-open in a silent groan. A sheen of sweat shine on his head and chest, and it’s all so fucking beautiful. His flushed, perfect omega, needing Castiel just as Castiel needs him.

“I love you,” Castiel murmurs as he rocks his body back and forth.

Dean squeezes Castiel’s fingers with both hands. He leans up and catches Cas’ mouth for a thorough kiss, and when they part, Dean breathes out, “Love you too, little alpha.”

Castiel’s breath catches and his hips stutter. His knot begins to swell inside Dean, so he slows each roll of his body, thrusting inside Dean with swallow movements until he’s done – his entire body shudders as he comes inside Dean. Dean, too, shakes, and he releases his hold on Castiel’s hands to wrap both arms around Castiel’s sweat-damp back, sealing them together.

Dean loves him.

Dean loves him, just as Castiel loves Dean.

He kisses Dean and Dean kisses back. Everything in Castiel’s world is in that kiss – his love and the earth and sky and the hazy future sprawling out in front of him. Every loss and fear that he has had fades to the back of his mind when Dean’s lips are on his, when their bodies are tied together by Castiel’s knot.

For several minutes, they just breathe against each other. Dean starts to try to groom Castiel’s hair into submission, and Castiel chuckles when Dean frowns at his lack of results. He presses a sloppy kiss to Dean’s stubble-rough cheek and says, “Let it be.”

“We should sleep, shouldn’t we?”

“Just a little,” Castiel agrees, “Before your father arrives.”

Dean hums his agreement.

Like that, they drift off, bodies still tied together, naked and sweaty, exhausted and whole.

X

Castiel doesn’t know how long he and Dean sleep, but it’s enough that his knot has gone down by
the time that Mary’s cries from the nursery wake them both. Sleepily, he pulls their bodies apart, though Dean makes a noise of irritation and pulls him back.

“Dean,” Castiel says softly.

“Nghhh.”

“I know,” Castiel soothes.

They both pull pajamas back on, and Dean takes one of Castiel’s flannels down from the closet and throws it over his shoulders, most likely so that he can make himself decent in hurry if he needs to – and he might, since they don’t know John Winchester’s arrival time at Castiel’s Middle-of-Nowhere home. They pad across the hallway and flick on the light in the nursery.

Dean reaches into the crib and pulls Mary out, sticking her diaper right next to his nose. He makes a noise of surprise and says, “Jesus fuck, sweetheart. I know I’m feeding you right, so what the hell is that?”

Castiel laughs. Dean lifts his middle finger, but only after he places Mary on the changing table. Already, Dean knows how to make quick work of this process. He swaps Mary’s soiled pajamas out and makes an efficient diaper change – though his nose crinkles and he mutters complaints throughout it all. Mary still fusses with a fresh diaper and her tiny Batman onesie in place, so Dean snuggles her up to his chest and says, “C’mon, whiny.”

Mary shakes her fist at Dean, but settles as soon as she realizes that she’s being fed, nosing against her omega father before finally latching. Dean shakes his head and says, “Crazy pup.”

Castiel yawns and asks, “Does your father drink coffee? I need coffee.”

Dean awkwardly half-shrugs to avoid jostling Mary too much and says, “Maybe Irish coffee, man.”

“I’ll make some anyway,” Cas murmurs, “I need caffeine. I think I’m dying.”

“You’re not dying,” another voice says, and Sam hovers at the doorway, “You have a newborn.”

“That’s essentially the same,” Castiel mumbles.

Dean chuckles. He follows when Castiel moves to the kitchen, supporting Mary with strong arms as she drinks. It figures, that as Dean stands in the kitchen decked in Castiel’s open flannel with an infant at his breast, at his most vulnerable, that the expected knock on the door would come.

Castiel watches Dean’s expression go from sleepy and amused to flat and nervous, watches him retreat just a little closer to Castiel’s shoulder, as Sam breaks from their group to answer the door. Castiel tries not to let his own reservations show on the surface, if only for Dean’s sake, and continues changing out the coffee filter in his machine, dumping grounds in a fresh flower of paper.

Still, as the front door swings open, he can’t help but lift his head and stare.

A big man trudges into the house and drops a duffel bag onto the ground beside the front door. His eyes land on Castiel first, Dean second. He swings forward and sticks out a hand.

“John Winchester,” he says, “You must be my son’s alpha.”
Dean’s mouth is dry and brain blank as his father extends his hand to Cas instead of him. He
doesn’t know what he expected, if he thought that this would go otherwise – maybe he thought that
his dad would be happy to see him, or that he would be relieved that Dean is alive? Maybe he
thought that his dad would react like Sammy had reacted, with relief and anger and a torrent of
emotions wrapped into a rain of confusion, into rough words and quick anger.

This is none of that. It’s beta-neutral, a deferral to Castiel as the alpha of the house.

Out of ancient instinct and obedience bred into him, Dean straightens his spine. A streak of anger
strikes into the chambers of his heart, hot as a brand. Mary senses the shift in his mood and pulls
away from eating, squinting up at Dean against the bright lights of the kitchen.

Protectprotectprotect.

The needs echoes through his blood like footsteps in an empty hallway – the only noise that Dean
can hear. Even with his spine straight and his childhood at the back of his brain, the demand to
protect his pup beats out every other thought in his head, overriding the wiring of Dean’s insides.

Cas slides a glance at Dean before he replies to John, “A pleasure to meet you,” and shakes John’s
hand, even though the word pleasure drips with insincerity.

Dean wants to say so many things, but what the fuck are you supposed to say to the guy that
blamed you for getting attacked by a bunch of knothead assholes outside a bar, who said that you
should’ve known better than to go out and that alphas work on instinct. After Alastair’s, those
words rang bitter and true in Dean’s ears day after day. It kept rolling through his head that his dad
had been right. There was no other way to explain the alphas that paid Alastair for services at the
brothel, no other way to explain the lick of a whip or the back of a hand striking his face, no other
way to explain strapping him down and forcing him to present, or getting off on chasing him down
and fucking him bloody.

But Cas managed to change that. Cas didn’t act on instinct, he worked with instinct, worked
through it and against it if he needed to. Even that first night that Dean stayed here, Cas kept his
head on straight when Dean probably smelled like fucking sunshine and rainbows to him, being in
heat and pregnant and all those things that draw an alpha to you. He took care of Dean, bought him
vitamins and cooked him meals with leaves and vegetables because even before Mary was born,
Cas was taking care of her, too.

Omegas are the caretakers. That’s what they say. Omegas take care of alphas, work as nurses or
secretaries or kindergarten teachers because that’s what omegas are built to do – take care of
people. They aren’t built to fight or train, aren’t built to learn the way that alphas or betas are.

And alphas are brutes. They can’t control themselves around pretty, sweet-scented omegas. They crave power and dominance, and fear the opinionated omega, the aspirational omega, the omega that loves themselves, the omega that’s good for more than breeding and mating. Dean believed it all from his time in Alastair’s hellhole, didn’t see any other kind of alpha but the kind that wanted to bend an omega over and make them hurt.

Cas proved him wrong, proved them all wrong. He takes care of people. He cooks food. The son of a bitch knits, for Christ’s sake. He sings to Mary and he grooms Dean’s hair, and all these little things that add up to one giant picture of there being at least one alpha that doesn’t entirely suck.

“Dean,” Cas says, and only then does he realize that he’d gone to another place entirely, and that the faces of his mate, his brother, and his father are all staring at him.

“What?” he manages, and his voice doesn’t come out right. It’s too quiet, too submissive – the voice that he used at Alastair’s by the end, the voice that made him a perfect omega.

John lifts his brow and says, “Pass me my granddaughter.”

*Protectprotectprotect.*

Dean presses Mary closer to his chest and takes a step back. Autopilot is off, and submission is out the window.

“No,” Dean says, and shakes his head, “Fuck no. You’re not touching her.”

John’s face changes at that. It’s not alpha, not anger. No, John sighs and rolls his eyes, holding his arms out yet again with the expectation that Mary will be placed in his arms. He says, “Don’t play this game with me, Dean. You’d think as a grown man that you would have grown up just a little fucking bit. Give her to me. I want to see her.”

“I said no, dick-for-brains,” Dean says, and takes another step back, “Like hell you’re getting your paws on my pup. The only reason you’re even here is because of Sam. I told him I didn’t want you here, and I fucking don’t. You were shit to me, and you will have to pry my daughter from my cold, dead hands if you think I’m going to let you be shit to her too.”

John purses his lips, “You’re being a child. I’ve done nothing but teach you how to safely navigate the world as an omega.”

“Yeah, well, as an omega I’m telling you fuck off,” Dean snaps back.

Castiel finally intervenes, holding up a single hand as he says, “John, Dean says that he doesn’t want you to touch the pup, so I suggest that you listen.”

*Then* John is angry.

“Who the hell are you to tell me what I can and can’t do with my son and my granddaughter? I don’t even know who the fuck you are,” John snaps.

Dean can see Castiel bristle, smell the alpha fury. He also watches Cas hold it all back and calmly say, “I am the pup’s father, as Dean is, and as we both are not comfortable with the idea of you barging into our home and demanding to see her, you are not going to be allowed to touch a hair on her head.”
John overflows. He comes at Castiel and shoves him back against the countertop, pressing an accusatory finger into his chest.

“Don’t you fuckin’ speak to me like that,” John starts, “Do not –”

“Hey!” Dean says, and his dad and Cas turn their heads to look at him.

“Don’t touch my mate either. You got that, buddy? You wanna stay here, you’re gonna sit your beta ass down and keep your goddamn hands to yourself,” he barks. He feels his face flush, feels terror seep in at the thought of yelling those words at his dad and the retribution that might come, feels satisfaction that he’s protecting his family, feels sick from disobeying the oldest rules bred into his bones. It's so much that Dean feels unsteady on his feet, and has to reach with his free hand to grip the counter.

Mary fusses and Dean’s out of his trance in an instant. He rubs a hand over her back and reassures her, “Shh, sweetheart. It’s okay.”

John opens his mouth to tear into them again, but Sam rests his palm on their dad’s shoulder and shakes his head. He says, “Dad, stop it. This isn’t your home. This is Cas and Dean and Mary’s home, and if you don’t calm down, you’re not going to be allowed to stay.”

Naturally, John relents at Sam’s request, though a frown sets deep, shadowed lines in his face. He mutters, “Fine. But you got another thing comin’ if you think I’m just gonna let this crap fly.”

No one has to respond, thankfully, because a loud beep beep beep from the coffee maker breaks the silence and has Cas going through the motions of playing host. He opens the cabinet above the machine to reach for mugs, and turns to ask, “John, would you like coffee?”

“S’pose so.”

“Sam?”

“Yeah.”

Castiel doesn’t have to ask for Dean. Dean loves coffee, but all the baby books he’s read say that it’s a bad idea to drink caffeine heavily when you’ve got a nursing newborn. Instead, Cas pulls a glass down for him, and fills it with a generous splash of OJ.

When Cas sets a mug in front of Dean’s dad, John pulls a flask from the inside pocket of his coat and uncaps the lid. He dumps in a healthy dose of liquor, replaces the flask, and tips the concoction back before he stares at all of them. With a brief flick of his eyes to where Mary rests against Dean’s shoulder, and then a scowl at Dean, he asks, “So where the hell’ve you been?”

The first instinct is to obey. On the tip of his tongue rests the truth. Dad, I spent seven years in hell.

But instead, a lie rolls heavily from Dean's tongue. He says, “Moved here a while back. Met Cas in town. We had a pup.” Three short, succinct sentences. It shouldn’t feel as awful as it does to lie to his father as it does, especially since nothing about the bastard appears to have changed.

Under the table, Cas rests his hand on Dean’s knee. Dean casts him a grateful look and reaches for his juice for a drink, if only so he doesn’t have to say anything more.

“So you took off and did everything you always said you weren’t gonna do?” asks John, “You did say you’d never let an alpha breed you. Changed your mind?”
Dean inhales through his nostrils, shifting subtly to scent his daughter for some small comfort. It does ease him, just a little, to have Mary near. He feels at odds having his dad and his pup in the same room, like two parts of his life never meant to clash have careened into each other. He has a new life, a chance to start over, and having dad here is like having somebody track mud all over your freshly mopped floor.

“Yes,” he says softly, “I changed my mind.”

Even though nothing of the sort happened.

Even though Mary’s biological alpha father is almost inevitably an alpha that paid for his body and fucked Dean until everything hurt. The weight of the thought makes Dean’s throat close up, makes his palms sweat and his heart palpitate in his chest, furious thump thump thumps sounding at his string of lies.

John swallows more whiskey-coffee and says, “Hmph. Figured you’d change your mind. Most omegas do. But I didn’t think you’d get a mate out of it, too. Always guessed you’d be one of them omegas that gets knocked up by some irresponsible pup of an alpha and then cries rape, you know?” John laughs. Dean doesn’t say a word, doesn’t move an inch. He can’t look at his dad, so he stares a centimeter just past his eyes and imagines that he’s someplace else. John’s expression softens, and he goes on, “She’s a beauty, though, son. You did a good job.”

The rush of pride and pleasure that he feels at those words makes him feel sick. ’Course his dad would be proud of Dean settling and having a pup. He always talked about his excitement about seeing his boys pair up with an appropriate mate and breed, how Dean would have entire litters of gorgeous grandchildren – usually words spoken after a few cold ones, or one too many sips from his flask.

“And you named her Mary,” John says, “Think your mom would’ve liked that.”

“Yeah?” Dean hoarsely says.

John thumbs along the handle of his coffee mug and says, “Yeah. Especially if your pup turns out to be an alpha just like her grandma. How nice would that be?”

Dean replies, “Mary is going to be awesome no matter how she presents.”

“Eh, you’re all talk,” John tells him, “She presents as an omega, you’ve gotta keep tabs on a fucking million more things, gotta make sure they keep their nose outta trouble, don’t go flauntin’ themselves at alphas and that they ain’t doin’ stupid shit. Not that it makes a difference half the time. Just look at you. You never listened to me.”

Dean doesn’t say anything. How the hell is he supposed to respond to that?

“Sorry I ruined your life? Sorry I was such a fucking liability?

“It’s a shame that you had such trouble raising an omega,” Castiel says, “Dean and I intend to go a different route than you did. We will not be treating her differently based upon her gender presentation.”

John snorts, “Oh, so you’re one of them new age alphas, are you? You’ll see. No one gets it ’til they try raisin’ up pups themselves. You’ll see,” he drains back the rest of the coffee-whiskey, slams the empty mug down on the kitchen table, and asks, “So, where do I put my crap? You got a guest room?”

“You aren’t going to be staying with us,” Castiel says, “and Sam is already in the guest room.”
“The hell I’m not,” John answers, “Figures I’d get a little shit for a son-in-law. I’ve gotta keep an eye on my granddaughter and my idiot son, so I’m gonna be staying right here, thanks. You’ve got a decent couch. I can see it from here. That’s where I’ll sleep.”

“No,” Dean says. He growls a little before he can help it, and swallows the noise back to say, “You are not staying here. If you wanna ‘keep an eye’ on me or Mary, you’re gonna stay in town. I’m fucking serious, dad. I’m not playing games with you.”

John rubs at his temples and looks over at Sam, like he’s gonna back him up instead of Dean and Cas. He says, “Jesus, Sam, how do you even live with this?”

“Dad, I e-mailed and said you weren’t gonna stay here,” Sam says.

“You too, huh?” John says. He just exhales and reaches into his coat to pull his flask out again, taking a swig. He says, “Guess I can’t argue with two alphas and one uppity omega, can I? I’ll find a room down the mountain, but I’m gonna be over here again soon, you hear me?”

“Yeah, we hear you,” Dean says, and forces a tight smile onto his face.

John stands, his chair squealing against the kitchen floor as it skids back, and retreats to where he dropped his duffel bag beside the front door. He heaves it over his shoulder, and they follow suit. It’s chilly outside, which Cas tells him isn’t unusual for late September. Dean pulls one half of Cas’ shirt over Mary to keep her warm. She noses into his chest and scents him – both of them ease a fraction at that.

And just in front of the house, in the dirt drive that leads into the garage, sits one 1967 Chevrolet Impala. Dean’s mouth drops open, and he strides with Mary tucked in his arms to take a better look at it. The vehicle is harder to inspect in the dark, but it looks as nice as the day that Dean left it behind at the house they were renting, and got the hell outta dodge. She’s dusty from driving up the winding mountain roads, but nothing’s cracked or damaged, at least as far as he can tell.

He lets out a low whistle and pats the hood with his free hand.

“See, Mary, this here is a real car, the kind daddy wants to have,” he tells her, “Nothing like alpha daddy’s ugly-ass Prius. We hate the Prius, don’t we? Yes, we do.”

John makes another snorting noise behind Dean and turns to Cas to ask, “You let him talk to you like that all the time?”

“Yeah, he does,” Dean says irritably, “’Cause Cas isn’t a total douchebag.”

“Dean is a free agent,” Castiel agrees, “It’s not up to me to dictate what he can and cannot do.”

“That’s exactly what you’re supposed to do,” John says back, “You’re an alpha, or did that escape your notice, kid? You’re acting more bitch than alpha.”

“Oh-kay,” Sam says, and steps between John and Castiel with his hands lifted up, “I think that’s enough for one night. It’s clear that we’re all pretty tired. I think it’ll be better for everyone if we get some sleep and deal with this all in the morning.”

A slow smile quirks up one half of John’s face, and he says, “That’s my boy,” before he turns to Castiel and says, “Don’t think I don’t got both eyes on you two. If you’re not the alpha my boy needs, we’re gonna have a problem.”

“Goodnight, John,” Castiel says, with restraint that impresses everybody.
John *harumphs* and pulls his keys out of his pocket, opening her up. Dean gives the hood a second and final pat and murmurs, “Good to see you again, baby,” before his dad climbs into the driver’s seat and starts her up. The engine purrs so finely that it stands the hair on the back of Dean’s neck on end. He can’t help but smile at the noise. He’s glad Mary got to hear it at least once.

Only when John turns off of Castiel packet of acres and rolls away, the taillights red and tiny, do they return inside.

“Well, that was fucking awful,” Dean announces when the front door swings closed behind them.

“I am so sorry,” Sam says, “What the hell was that?”

“That was why I left in the first place,” Dean says. He doesn’t really want to talk about it, not now, while he’s still scraped so raw from scrambling for the right words to say to his dad, trying to please him at the same time that he’s trying to get him to back the fuck off from his little girl and his awesome mate. Dean is exhausted out of his skull.

Mary mouths at his chest. Still hungry, then.

“He was always like that?” Sam prods.

Dean runs the fingers of his free hand through his hair and says, “I’m not gonna talk about this crap right now. I’m too beat.”

“Okay, but –”

“Sam, I’m gonna feed my pup and put her back down, and then I’m gonna go the fuck to sleep,” Dean says, “Don’t make me hit you.”

“Sorry,” Sam murmurs.

Dean doesn’t bother responding to that. He adjusts his grip on Mary and treads back to the nursery instead, where he collapses into the rocking chair, spent to the core. He closes his eyes and after a long second, Dean cups Mary’s head and guides her to a nipple. Once she’s finished, he starts her mobile and sings gruff words along to the tune of *Ramble On*, watching her eyelids droop closed.

He leans over the edge of crib and watches her sleep even after he’s set her down with her guitar blanket. She’s so little and so perfect, with her pink skin and button nose and ears that Dean thinks look just like his. He doesn’t know how anyone can look at their kid like this, watch them grow and teach them, and then stop giving a shit when they present as an omega. She’s incredible, and he made her, made his little girl.

“I’m gonna be good,” Dean says to her, and draws the tip of his finger over the soft curve of her round little cheek, “I know I keep sayin’ that, but I just wanted you to know that. I’m gonna do things better that my dad did.”

“Yes, you will.”

Dean jumps and turns to see Cas, still rumpled from sleep and still smelling of sex and coffee. Dean breathes out and whispers, “Jesus, you scared me.”

“I apologize.”

“S’fine,” Dean says, “I should probably let her sleep.”
“You’re a wonderful father,” Castiel says.

Dean sighs. He wants to believe the words, wants to soak them into his skin and keep them pumping forever through his bloodstream. An unhappy chuckle bubbles up from his mouth as he shuts off the nursery light and closes the door halfway, and he shakes his head. He says, “You think everything about me is wonderful.”

“I think you have questionable taste in vehicles,” Castiel says.

“What?” Dean replies, “No way. You’re the one with the wimpy-ass Prius, dude.”

“I rest my case,” says Cas.

“You’re a great dad, dude,” adds Sam as he rounds the corner.

Dean stiffens at the intrusion and says, “Holy hell, can a guy say anything without being descended upon by alphas in this joint? Go to sleep, you assholes.”

Sam gives this a long-suffering roll of his eyes and says, “Fine, Dean. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Dean grudgingly tells his brother to sleep well and slips back into the master bedroom with Cas, who repeats the motions of brushing his teeth and washing his face. Dean watches him and doesn’t bother to join him in the ritual. Cas is so methodical about all this – he spends a precise amount of seconds on each part of his mouth when he brushes his teeth, and is careful not to miss a spot when he scrubs his face or washes his hands.

The sight makes affection bloom low in Dean’s belly. Earlier annoyance forgotten, he pads up behind Cas and wraps his arms around him, burying his nose in Cas’ neck to scent and kiss. When he lifts his eyes and sees their reflection in the mirror, Cas is looking back at him, a small smile on his lips. He catches Dean’s eye in the mirror and ducks to peck a toothpaste-y kiss to Dean’s forehead.

“Gross, dude,” Dean wrinkles his nose and backs off to rub at the toothpaste smear on his skin with the back of his hand.

Cas just smiles, and damn it if that doesn’t make Dean smile, too.

He retreats to bed as Cas finishes up, crawling underneath the blankets and breathing in their scent as warmth falls over him. Like other times he’s alone in bed, he thinks of his mattress at Alastair’s, thinks of the foul stench on it, and the stench of those around him. He thinks of bleeding onto it and wondering if that mattress was going to be the place that he would die.

The thought leads to anxiety like he hasn’t had in months – he thinks of not only mattress, but of his dad knowing that that was where Dean slept, and telling him that seven years sleeping on a piss-stained, bloody mattress was his own fault. He thinks of his dad shaking his head at him and clucking about how he raised him up right and ‘just look what Dean did.’

“Are you all right?”

Dean jerks his attention up, where Cas slips into the bed on his side. He inches up closer to Dean and presses a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“I don’t know,” Dean answers honestly, “I don’t even know what happened back there. He was an ass, and then he was proud of me, and wanting to hold Mary, but mostly I just hated him still. I’m not – I mean, I never was good enough for him. And I’m still not. And I knew that’s how it was
gonna be, but it still…sucks. And I just. I wish I made him proud. I wish I was good enough.”

Cas presses his forehead to Dean’s and brushes their noses together. He gently applies his lips to Dean’s. Breath mingling, he says, “You’re good enough for me. In fact, you’re better than I deserve.”

There’s a sadness there, something that makes Dean coil his arms around Cas’ neck and kiss him hard. Sometimes Cas seems so fucking strong, so infallible, that it surprises him when Cas is suffering, too. Dean licks along the inside of Cas’ mouth and he doesn’t let go until he needs to breathe.


Cas stares at him with brows crunched together. It’s not like the stares that Dean is used to from him, assessing or amused or hungry – this is something different entirely. Maybe it’s because Cas loves him, or maybe it’s that Cas doesn’t believe that he has Dean, the way that Dean doesn’t believe sometimes that he has Cas.

Dean leans up and pecks his lips to that crinkle between Cas’ brow and watches it ease away. He can do that for his alpha. Dean can soothe him, can put him at ease when he’s worried or sad or frightened.

When Cas shifts to trail his lips along Dean’s jaw and back to his lips, he lets himself live in that knowledge. He sure as shit ain’t good enough for his dad, but he’s cobbled together a family that he fits into exactly. He has an alpha and a pup and a dumbass brother. He loves them all to the moon and fucking back, and goddamnit: Dean is good enough for them.
The sheets are cold.

Castiel whines in complaint and rolls over to seek out Dean’s warmth and scent, only to find the bed empty on Dean’s side, sheets cool and bedding rucked up. A seed of panic forms in his chest before he can consider the reasons that the bed might be Dean-less and cold and he’s out of bed in an instant, slippers shoved onto his feet. The house is dark and quiet, dim with dawn’s barest break. Cas finds everything where it is supposed to be, except for Dean – he isn’t in the kitchen or the living room, and when Castiel nudges open the nursery door, he isn’t there, either.

And neither is Mary.

Alpha beating in his veins, Castiel flies to action. He swings open the door to the guest room but only Sam is sprawled across the bed, long legs thick and muscled. He murmurs in his sleep, but otherwise doesn’t move.

Sam is here, but no Dean or Mary.

Maybe Dean decided that Castiel is inadequate. Maybe Dean wanted to seek out an alpha more attuned to his father’s taste, closer to traditional.

But Castiel’s fears are assuaged when he throws open the door to the study and finds Dean curled up in his office chair, Mary tucked against his chest in her plaid sling. The light from the laptop monitor bathes Dean’s concentrated face in a pale glow and emphasizes the shadow made at the catch between his brows. He blinks up briefly when Cas steps inside, but then turns his attention back to the flickering light of the computer.

Castiel circles around the desk and stares at the screen from over Dean’s shoulder. He’s on Youtube, watching a video of a woman weaving a teenager’s hair into an elaborate braid.

“What on earth are you doing?” Castiel finally asks.

Dean pauses the Youtube video and wheels the chair around. His eyes are shadowed from lack of sleep, mouth tight and shoulders drawn up from stress. He says, “Cas, I got a little girl. You gotta know how to do their hair. I don’t want to be the useless omega dude that doesn’t even know how to do a fishtail braid.”

“Dean, she’s three weeks old,” Cas says, “…What’s a fishtail braid?”

“It’s –”

“No, don’t answer that,” Castiel holds up a hand, “Come back to bed. It’s –” he flicks his eyes to the time at the bottom right hand corner of the computer screen and says, “Six in the morning. You and Mary both need your rest.”

Dean makes a face and says, “She’s fine here. Look how fucking cozy she is. She is cozy as hell with omega daddy.”
If only to satisfy Dean, Castiel sneaks a look at Mary tucked into the sling. Her lips are parted and eyes closed, face deviated toward Dean so that she’s nearer to his scent. She looks utterly content, but that doesn’t change the obscene hour of the morning and the fact that his omega is watching Youtube videos on Piscean braiding techniques.

“She can sleep with us,” Castiel says. He can’t help the dribble of alpha into his voice – he’s just as tired and overwrought as Dean is, and he’s trying to be as quiet as possible about it. The whole thing grates on him, and his skin feels itchy with irritation.

Dean fidgets, chewing at the dead skin on his lower lip. He says, “If I can’t do my pup’s hair, I’m a shitty dad.”

“She doesn’t even have hair yet,” Castiel says, “And there is no way that you’re going to be a bad father. We’ve been over this, Dean. Now come to bed.”

“I wanna be good enough for her,” Dean says back, “That means hard work, and lots of it, and I gotta make sure that I never give up on doing that hard work. And she does so have hair.”

He’s stressed. He’s stressed and terrified, and Castiel can’t blame him. Who would after their encounter with John only a matter of hours ago? The man is a wretch. He’s the scum of the earth, and everything that Castiel strives not to be. He can’t imagine how much worse John Winchester would be if he were an alpha.

“You won’t be able to do any work at all if you don’t sleep,” Castiel argues.

“What is your problem?” Dean snips, “Why are you all alpha-angry with me?”

“Because it’s six in the morning,” Castiel says, and just as Dean parts his lips to dive into another argument, he goes on, “because your father was insulting and demeaning to both of us. Because everything that he said to me dredged up old bullshit that my mother used to say to me and I’m sick and tired of being told that just because I like to knit or sew or cook or that I have a calm head on my shoulders that I must not be a real alpha. What does that even mean? Who decides what to dictate as an alpha behavior or not? Well, it sure as hell was not me.”

Heavy breaths fill his lungs in the wake of his outburst, and his cheeks heat. Castiel didn’t even realize how angry he is until just this moment, how furious it makes him to hear John, a neglectful beta father, debate the adequacy of Castiel’s alpha.

“Christ,” Dean says. Guilt flashes across his face and he admits quietly, “I didn’t know you were mad about that.”

“Yes, well, there are a lot of things I am mad about that I don’t discuss.”

Dean cocks his head at this and straightens in the computer chair. He says, “Okay. Then discuss them with me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Tell me,” Dean says, “Tell me why you’re mad. I wanna know.”

“Why?”

“Cause I fucking love you, you dumb fucker,” Dean replies.

An involuntary laugh escapes Castiel and he says, “I don’t know. I don’t want to burden you with
my own insecurities when you already have so much to worry about.”

“Yeah, including you,” Dean says, “That’s what mates do, little alpha. We shoulder each other’s crap, and you know what? I’ve kind of overdrawn my account in that department. So fess up, buddy, ’cause I’m not going to bed until you do.”

Castiel exhales and leans his back against the window behind him, smooth glass cool through the cotton of his t-shirt. When he finds his voice, he explains, “It’s complicated. To cut a long story short, losing my medical license has taken its toll. When I…when we found each other, I was reeling. I still am. My mind has been occupied, and I’m glad about that, but I. I loved my work. And it hurts not to have it anymore. Your father’s jab at me as an alpha did little to help my feelings on the matter.”

He lowers his eyes from Dean’s and studies the pattern on the rug thrown over his study’s hardwood floor. He confesses the heaviest weight underneath the cage of his ribs: “I have a healthy savings account, but I’ve drained so much recently. I’ll have to return to work if we want to remain secure, and if I can’t help people, then what use am I?”

“Cas,” Dean murmurs, “Dude. You’re not your bank account. If we need to, I can work, too. You know, big ol’ workin’ omega daddy. Taking care of my folks and all that. We’ll figure it out, baby.”

On the last note of the word baby, Dean climbs to his feet and in one fluid movement, he wraps his arms around Castiel’s neck and kisses him square on the lips. Between them, Mary still sleeps in her sling. It’s perfect, just what Castiel needed. He has his mate’s lips on his and his little girl tucked up against him. World weary and torn as he is, this breathes new life into him. He doesn’t give a damn about being a traditional alpha, because he has a good man as his mate and a brand new pup to look after.

The stubble on Dean’s jaw scrapes against Cas’s skin as Dean kisses down. The satisfied noise that makes it out of Castiel’s mouth has a smile stretching Dean’s lips.

“Let’s go to bed, little alpha.”

X

No one, not even Mary, wakes until ten o’clock the following morning. Castiel is the first to stir. On Dean’s side of the bed, Dean’s body is curled protectively around Mary, who sleeps with her little arms thrown above her head. Cas leans over and applies a kiss to the temple of both mate and pup before he forces himself out from underneath the blankets and into the kitchen. He tends to prefer to rise early, and it puts him off to be awake only just now.

The first order of business is coffee. Castiel dumps the cold half-pot from last night’s fiasco with John Winchester and restocks it with a clean filter and fresh grounds.

When Sam bumbles into the kitchen, dressed in pajamas and sleepily scratching at the skin of his stomach, Castiel has fresh coffee in a mug on the counter beside him while he throws together some eggs and grits.

“Smells good,” Sam yawns. He takes down a mug from the cabinet and pours his own mug of brew. With a grateful sip, he asks, “How’d you sleep?”

“Not well,” Castiel answers, “I found Dean in the study at six in the morning looking up instructional videos on hair braiding because he’s worried about needing to do Mary’s hair.”
Sam makes a face and says, “She’s not even a month old.”

“That’s what I said.”

From the other room, Mary’s shrill cry sounds, followed by the gruff, muffled sound of Dean’s voice. Only a handful of seconds later, Dean emerges shirtless and in sleep pants with Mary nursing at his chest, fit snugly into the crook of one, strong arm. He offers them both a tired smile, but it’s forced.

“You okay?” Sam asks.

Dean goes for the grits before he speaks, scooping the soft end of a stick of butter off into the bowl at the top. He shakes his head and says, “Nah. But I’ll figure it out.” He dumps the bowl of grits onto the table and lowers himself and Mary down, stirring the butter into the mix before he scoops a bite into his mouth.

“He’s coming over at noon,” Sam says, “I’m sorry.”

“S’not your fault,” Dean mutters.

“Dean, I-I know I asked this before, but…” Sam trails off when Dean sends him a scathing look.

When Dean swallows, he huffs, “But what, Sammy? If you’re gonna say it, just say it.”

Sam pushes around the eggs on his plate with the prongs of his fork and says, “Dad. Was he always like that? Even when we were just pups?”

Dean shrugs his shoulders and says, “Pretty much. I mean, before I presented, it was always ‘You gotta take care of Sammy, Dean’ and ‘You have to look after your little brother, ‘cause you’re gonna be a big alpha before he is.’ And then after I presented, you know. It just changed,” Dean lets out a bitter laugh and tucks into more of his breakfast before he goes on, “You know, first heat I had – thought I was sick. You feel like you’re dying that first time. I was all hot in my skin and sweating and my whole body felt all kinds of weird. Didn’t even consider it could be heat, ‘cause I grew up hearing the old man tell me that I was gonna pop a knot. When he found out…”

“What?” Sam says, when Dean trails off, “What did he do?”

“He looked so disappointed,” Dean says, “I’m like, ‘Dad, I think I’m sick,’ and he just. He just looked so angry, so pissed off. He told me no, I wasn’t sick. I was in heat. I told him that wasn’t possible, ‘cause I was an alpha. That’s all he’d ever taught me to be, you know? Then he yelled at me, started freaking out. He told me that I should have been an alpha and he wasn’t happy either but I was in heat and that was that. I asked him what to do. He just says that I need to stay in my room. Hour later I’ve got slick everywhere and he throws this – this fucking Walgreen’s bag at me. He bought me some cheap nine ninety-nine plastic knot and I was so lost I had to read the fucking instructions on the back of the box before I knew what to do with it.”

“Why didn’t you just go on suppressants, dude?” Sam asks, “Why go through that?”

Dean looks sharply up from the grits in front of him. The open pain in his face strikes at Castiel’s heart, makes pain shudder through his body. His omega is in pain. His omega is hurt and afraid and upset, and after only a few seconds, he has to reach over and knead his fingers into Dean’s shoulder just so he can give Dean something, some kind of comfort.

“Why didn’t I just – are you fucking kidding me? I asked dad for suppressants and he told me no,” Dean says.
Sam looks at Dean like he’s grown a new appendage and says, “What do you mean he told you no?”

“I mean exactly what I said, stupid,” Dean shoots back, “When I asked for ‘em he told me no son of his was gonna take suppressants. Told me suppressants just make omegas want to run around and have sex willy-nilly. Suppressants are for whores, or whatever. And you know you can’t get those things by yourself when you’re fourteen. There’s a goddamn age limit.”

Castiel couldn’t be more relieved when Dean leans into him for comfort out of instinct, pushing his nose into Cas’ neck before he brushes his lips over the curve of Castiel’s cheek. Cas scoots his chair closer so that he can groom Dean’s bedhead, pushing it into place.

A faint trace of a smile lifts at Dean’s lips and he says, “Thanks, little alpha.”

Mary unlatches from Dean’s chest to whine and fuss. Dean rocks her and hushes her. It doesn’t do much to comfort her, and it’s no wonder why. The distress is seeping from Dean’s skin, potent and metallic. It’s an awful scent, leaving the entire room with a feeling of dirtiness. And despite the rake of Cas’ fingers over Dean’s scalp and through his hair, the scent just won’t go away.

Sam clutches at his head. He stares at the table for a long, uncomfortable stretch and then drains the rest of his coffee mug. Without speaking, he stands and crosses the kitchen to refill the mug with more coffee. There, not looking at Dean, he says, “I am so fucking sorry.”

“Told you that you didn’t do anything,” Dean says, and then to Mary, “Shh, sweetheart. Daddy’s got you. I got you.”

“That’s exactly it, though,” Sam says, “I never did anything. This crap was going on and I never even noticed. I never stood up for you, never…God, fuck. Dad always used to tell me that we had to look after you, had to make sure you didn’t do anything stupid. But that was what he said to you before you presented, like being an omega fucking changes who you are. I’m just. I’m so mad. I’m mad at dad and I’m mad at myself for letting this happen.”

Dean doesn’t say anything to that. The air of anger and discomfort crackles over them, even as Castiel tends to the breakfast dishes and Sam retreats to the guest bedroom and brings out his laptop. Mary fusses on and off, and is on when John bangs his fist against the front door and Castiel lets him in.

John whistles at the tension and says, “Jesus, what happened here? Trouble in paradise?”

“Don’t, dad,” Sam says.

“Okay, okay,” John says, and holds up a hand, “Hey, can I get some coffee over here?”

Castiel almost tells John to get the coffee himself, but before he can, Dean is on his feet with Mary is over his shoulder in her sling. He pours the coffee and slides it to his father with his shoulders slumped, body small, and a soft, “Sir.”

John looks appeased by Dean’s behavior, while Castiel can’t believe what he’s seeing. It’s like he’s jumped into a time machine and landed in his house several months ago, back when he and Dean barely knew one another. Dean is submissive and quiet, though with his dad he’s one more thing than that: he’s soldier-like.

“Good boy,” John says, “How’s my little grandpup today?”

Dean doesn’t say anything, so Castiel jumps in with, “She’s been a mixed bag this morning.”
John sips his coffee and says, “Maybe it’s ‘cause her dang omega dad was such a goddamn pain in
the ass last night. Pups can sense that shit, you know. Aw, don’t look at me like that, Dean. It’s a
joke. Lighten up.”

“John, I ask that you please be respectful of Dean in this home,” Castiel says. He barely catches the
grateful look that Dean gives him. The submission and fear in his mate has him completely askew,
thrown off from the rhythm that they’ve built together. Dean is an omega but he isn’t weak. He
isn’t idle or petty. He’s strong and good and he speaks his mind, and even if that speech involves
Dean’s dislike of Castiel’s beloved Prius, it doesn’t mean that he loves Dean any less.

Castiel never wanted a silent omega at his heels, willing to do whatever he asks of them. He has
Dean, and to see Dean so far from himself, so crunched down into something that he isn’t, breaks
his heart. He feels ill. Dizzy.

When John finally leaves a little less than two hours later on the excuse that he wanted to try a bar
that he saw in town, Dean finally asks Castiel, “Are you all right?”

“No,” Castiel says, “I am very far from all right. How can you let him treat you like that?”

“Because it’s easier,” Dean says, and there’s no denying that.

“I need to go,” Castiel finally says.

“What?” Sam says, “Where?”

“Out,” Castiel answers, “Just…away. I’ll be back.”

He doesn’t give them time to consider it or tell him that he can’t leave, just laces his shoes onto his
feet and grabs his car keys. The radio station in the Prius is set to Dean’s favorite classic rock
station, and instead of the sound of the guitar acting as a balm, it is an irritant. It reminds him of
Dean’s vibrant personality being squashed like a bug under John’s boot.

Castiel switches off the radio entirely.

As he drives, Castiel doesn’t pay attention to where he’s going. He navigates down the mountain
over winding roads, cracking the windows to let in autumn air and breathe in the many scents of
the Rockies, the plantlife and the promise of later rain.

Maybe it’s instinct, or maybe it’s habit – Castiel ends up in Salida, close to home by mountain
standards but far by anybody else’s. There, he finds the craft store. He feels a prickle of anger that
this makes him feel better, that parking in the lot of the store and drowning himself in yarns and
fabrics comforts him in his time of need, but stomps it all down. An employee stares at him with
wide eyes when he snatches a plastic basket off of the shelf near the front doors. Castiel scowls.

Mary could use a new blanket, couldn’t she? And with cold around the corner, Dean will be
needing hats and scarves and most likely gloves, too. Alpaca. That makes magnificent yarn. Yes,
he’ll purchase some lovely alpaca yarn, and make Dean and Mary beautiful new things and Castiel
will feel better.

There’s Star Wars fabric on clearance.

Castiel takes that, too, as well as a couple of yards some baby-soft fabrics that aren’t in pastels,
because Dean does not like pastels.

“Hello, sir,” chirps the beta behind the cash register, when he dumps his basket of yarn and fabric
and also a car model kit that he thinks Dean might like onto the counter. She smiles at his items and her gaze drifts to the mating mark on his neck. “Did you find everything you needed today?”

“Yes.”

“Your mate is one lucky mate,” she smiles, “Such a good alpha to go out and bring back all these nice things. Do you know what your mate is planning on making?”

“I,” Castiel says, “am going to make my pup a blanket. Or three.”

“Oh!” she says, “You know, if you live nearby, we have an alpha knitting group that meets on Wednesdays. Here, take one of these.” She hands him a leaflet printed on neon printer paper. It includes not only a description of the alpha knitting class and several other classes (some gender-specific while others are mixed).

It’s nice.

“…Thank you,” Castiel says.

Only then does he realize how tense the beta was. And why shouldn’t she have been? He’s an angry, distressed, temperamental alpha in the middle of a typically peaceful store. Castiel sighs and lets out the guilt that hits him. He says, “I apologize for my behavior. I was out of line.”

The beta smiles sympathetically and says, “You know, we all have those days.” She gives Castiel the total of the purchase – too much, but he doesn’t care – and he pays, embarrassed at the way that he’s acted, stomping around a craft store like some run-of-the-mill knothead.

By the time that Castiel reaches the house again, he feels drained. Dean is in the garage when Castiel pulls the Prius inside, furiously sanding down a spare piece of wood. He doesn’t acknowledge Castiel when he gets out of the car, just keeps working.

“Dean?”

Doesn’t look up.

“Dean.”

“Mm.”

“Where’s Mary?”

“Nursery,” Dean responds, “Sam’s keeping an eye on her.”

“Okay,” Castiel awkwardly replies, “Thank you.”

Sam, as it turns out, is at the kitchen table with his laptop propped in front of him. He lifts a hand in greeting when Cas dumps his bags of craft store haul onto the table, and Cas hums a non-committal greeting back. He slips out and to the nursery to check on his pup. As advertised, Mary sleeps in her crib, kept warm by her Yoda hat and her little guitar blanket. Castiel strokes the back of one of Mary’s tiny hands with a knuckle.

Mary’s scent and presence is peaceful to him. He feels the torrent in his gut start to settle by a modicum, such a small amount that it shouldn’t matter – but it does. He feels better in the nursery with his pup, and so he leaves only long enough to bring back his new yarn and his favorite pair of needles from the master bedroom. He has alpaca yarn in a rich red color that will match with
Mary’s crib bedding, and so that’s what he starts with.

Knitting needles click furiously over the sound of Mary’s soft breath as she sleeps. Loops form and slowly material gathers in his hands. It isn’t much, but the repetition is meditative in his mind. It strokes his feathers, so to speak, and helps Castiel drain the tense fury out of him.

He is so damn mad. So angry at John Winchester for mistreating his mate, for sending Dean reeling backward into fear, for insulting their family and still feeling entitled to time with Mary Grace, for all of the poison that that man brings into this home.

As if sensing Castiel’s frustration, Mary starts to cry in her crib. He sets aside the bare bones progress that he has made on her new blanket and goes to her, reaching into the crib and bringing her into his arms. She’s put on weight since the birth. It amazes him as a father that already she’s growing, though as a doctor he knows that there is nothing more normal.

He changes her diaper and she quiets a little, but still fusses enough that he doesn’t want to let her go. Castiel rubs his palm over her back and murmurs, “Shh, beautiful. You’re okay. No need to cry.”

Mary doesn’t seem to trust his logic, because she keeps weeping. Strangely, Castiel doesn’t mind. His pup needs him, needs his scent and comfort and care, and that brings him out of the anxiety of the day.

No matter how imperfect the world is –

Mary, his little girl, is perfect.
Dean spreads out a towel over Cas’ underused worktable and props his creation up to dry. The materials he had to work with are a few months old, back from when Cas’ house was being built. Their house – whatever. It doesn’t feel like home right now. When he thinks of his dad sitting in the kitchen, sipping coffee like he’s never been more comfortable, Dean starts to feel out of place in his skin. His throat starts to close up and his breath comes short. It feels like his ribcage is collapsing in on itself, edges of the bone piercing his lungs. He has to lean the heels of his hands on the worktable and force himself to breathe.

It helps that it’s cold in the garage, chilly air prickling his skin and setting his hair on end. It keeps him grounded, keeps him here.

*You’re not there You’re not there You’re not there You’re not there.*

The chant rolls over and over in his mind but does little to help. All at once he’s back in his cell, sweating from the endless heat plaguing him and nothing but his fingers to bring brief relief. At first Dean didn’t touch himself with the other omegas’ eyes on him. He was a lot of things, but he wasn’t going to be the kind of omega that his dad accused him of being – a whore, a waste of space, a brainless knotslut.
But he gave up.

The other omegas did it sometimes, when they were desperate. And Dean was desperate. He rode his fingers on the mattress that reeked like his slick and his blood and he didn’t care that helpless, broken moans tore from his throat between panting, heavy breaths.

When he came he felt better, only barely, and the sweat from his heat started to cool a little on his skin.

That was when they brought Kevin in and threw him in the cell across from Dean’s. He was drugged out of his mind, just like Dean had been when they brought him there. He smelled like alpha come and blood, but not distress as much as confusion. Dean could tell he was young, though probably not much younger than Dean himself was when Alastair nabbed him.

It took until the next day for Kevin to be lucid, and even then it was only enough to have the kid murmur, “Where am I?”

“You’re in hell, kid,” Dean had told him.

Dean didn’t really talk to the other omegas, never had, but something about Kevin – his youth, his fear, his openness – felt different. He felt like somebody that Dean needed to look after. So he did that, and after the first few weeks of Kevin living under the brothel, they formed some kind of friendship, a tentative alliance that meant cleaning each other up after rough fucks or visits to one of the playrooms, or sometimes swapping food and stories. He never did tell Kevin his name, but maybe he should have.

Maybe he shouldn’t have left Kevin behind.

After several long, painstaking minutes of rattling, horrible breathing, Dean comes out of it, shoulders tense. It still takes longer than that to realize wholly that he is no place near Alastair’s hellhole or Kevin. Kevin, who didn’t deserve to be there with the rest of them, who should have been starting college and going on coffee dates with his high school sweetheart.

But he’s back at Alastair’s, where Dean left him behind. Like an asshole.

“Dean?”

He whirls around and sees Cas in the doorway between the garage and house, framed in a halo of yellow light from the kitchen.

“Yeah.”

“You’ve been out here for hours,” Castiel slowly says, “I was starting to worry.”

“M’fine.”

“You don’t smell fine.”

“I said I’m fine, Cas,” Dean bites out.

He wonders if Kevin would like Mary, or if Mary would like Kevin. They’d probably get along, he thinks.

Cas hesitates before he steps down into the garage and closer to Dean. He doesn’t reach out to groom or scent him, just stands a few awkward feet away, assessing Dean with that fucking *stare*. 
When Cas’ eyes finally drift away, Dean relaxes, just a little. He doesn’t want to disappoint his mate with the pain he can’t shoulder on his own, disappoint him by being so broken and not getting better. He’s a fucking mess, and Cas deserves better than some washed-up mental case omega.

“What’s this?” Cas asks, and points to where the little set of shelves is drying on the worktable.

“Spice rack.”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t organize your crap for shit and it pisses me off,” Dean bites out.

Dean waits for alpha anger, waits to be shouted at or shoved back or told off for being a dick.

None of those things come.

Instead, Castiel says, “I apologize for running out earlier. I shouldn’t have left you.”

“S’okay,” Dean says lowly, “I get it. I don’t blame you, man. I’m a train wreck. I mean, God, fuck. I have a shitty dad that you have to deal with and years of fucking baggage on me that you’ve been so damn good about, and I’m not even pretty. I’ve got nothing to offer you, so I get it. You got stuck with me ‘cause your rut had your teeth in my neck.”

“That is the single most ridiculous thing that I have ever heard in my life, Dean Winchester,” Castiel heatedly says.

“Yeah, okay, but it’s not,” Dean goes on, “I’m so messed up, I just – I’m leaving you behind and you’ve got your own crap. I am world’s shittiest mate.”

“You are not,” Cas replies, “You are strong and you are incredible and you’re beautiful and I hate it – hate it – when you speak so poorly of yourself,” he steps forward and cups one side of Dean’s face with his palm, stroking over Dean’s cheekbone with the pad of his thumb. Dean shouldn’t want to lean into it, shouldn’t let himself cave in and be spoiled with attention that he doesn’t deserve, but before he can tell himself to stop it, he presses into the touch, eyes shuttering closed, breath catching.

“You changed my life,” Cas says, “That night I found you, the night we found each other, everything changed. I ran away from everything that happened in Denver, at the hospital and with all the omegas that I tried to help and I…I’d given up. I built my house here and decided to live alone and quietly and I spent every day so – so sad, so miserable,” he pauses, exhales, and brings Dean in closer to him, rubbing his hand over Dean’s back in a way that makes Dean think that this is less for his own benefit and more for Cas’ alpha needs.

He noses at Dean’s forehead and pecks a kiss to it before he goes on, “I thought a lot about death. It wasn’t – active. I didn’t plan out my death or intend to execute it. But I kept thinking, would it really be that bad if I swerved by car off of the road and hit a tree? If I drank enough to poison my body? I wondered if my family would care and I decided that they probably wouldn’t. I decided that if I died, I would be okay with that.”

“Cas –”

But Cas hushes Dean and says, “You changed that. It’s not that you made me believe that life is worth living – I’m still not convinced of that – but you did show me that there are people in this world that still need my help, and that I have a purpose on this earth. You showed me that there are people that I love and people that love me. And maybe that doesn’t make life worth living, but it
means something. Life isn’t always good but it – but it –” Cas’ voice cracks and Dean looks up in alarm as his alpha presses his fingers into his eyes, tears squeezing out and rolling over his cheeks, “but there are good things in it, good things like you and Mary, and that makes all the difference.”

A wide, gaping hole opens in Dean’s chest at the thought of his mate just sitting around waiting to die. And son of a bitch, this is what Cas must feel like every time that Dean says that he’s not good enough, isn’t it? There’s just this – this fucking chasm inside of him, echoing and empty at the thought of Cas being gone.

“So…you may not think much of yourself,” Cas concludes, “but you should know you are enough to make a difference to me.”

And Jesus, Dean isn’t good with words. He wants to tell Cas yeah, life is sometimes shitty. Sometimes it tortures you with nightmares of what you’ve been through. Sometimes you’re scared and you hurt, but that’s not all that there is. He didn’t know. He didn’t know that, and he has trouble remembering it even though he’s just learned. He wants to tell Cas that he’s sorry that he has trouble remembering that things can be good, and that he’ll try to do better.

Maybe he won’t succeed, but Dean will give it his all. He’s never been one for doing things halfway, anyway.

Dean doesn’t say these things. Instead, he pushes his lips to Castiel’s and tries to say them that way.

He hopes Cas gets the message.

X

“I made you this.”

A piece of knitting lands in Dean’s lap. He picks it up – it’s a scarf, a deep black-blue color and soft to the touch. Dean picks it up and smells Cas on it. He can’t help but press it to his face and breathe that scent in. He grins at Cas before he wraps it around his throat and asks, “When did you even have time to make that, dude?”

“About the same time you had time to build a spice rack yesterday,” Castiel shrugs and reaches for a separate project, something several rows long already and red. The needles start to click as he works, and he says, “I started this blanket for Mary first, but sometimes when I’m angry it’s easier to work on a smaller project. I’m glad that you like it.”

At the mention of Mary, Dean’s attention flicks to the floor, where his little pup is settled on a plaid blanket on the floor. He smiles at her and waves, even though it probably doesn’t make a difference to her. She’s half-asleep, eyelids drooping, though it looks like she’s fighting to stay awake – that she wants to be in on the action.

Not that they’re doing much but sitting on the couch watching old Tom & Jerry reruns while breakfast settles in their stomachs and they wait for John to make another appearance. Dean feels like he should be more tense about his dad’s imminent arrival, but after last night with Cas…well, he feels kind of okay. Yeah, he’s nervous as hell, but he’s got a snippy alpha on the couch next to him, knitting like his life depends on it.

An abrupt wash of affection warms Dean from the gut. He scoots over the couch cushions and pushes his fingers through Cas’ messy, dark hair before guiding his attention away from the knitting his lap and into a kiss. Castiel chuckles against Dean’s mouth, and that’s when John’s
typical knock sounds at the door in loud, succinct raps.

“Here we go,” Dean says, and rises to his feet to answer it.

Before he can, John lets himself in. He trudges in and greets, “Dean.”

Dean doesn’t say anything back.

“Less of a crapshoot in here than it was yesterday, huh?” John asks, and scents the air, “Doesn’t smell like sex in here, though.”

“Just a wholesome family evening,” Dean replies, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“That’s new for you, then,” John jokes, and claps Dean on the shoulder. Dean flinches.

John doesn’t linger. He moves onto Cas and says, “Mornin’, kid,” even though Cas is in his mid-thirties and has not been kid for a long time. At least John didn’t call him ‘pup.’ They can thank Christ for the little blessings.

“The fuck are you doing?” John asks.

“Knitting,” Castiel replies, “A blanket for Mary.”

“Knitting?” echoes John, “Some weird kind a’ alpha you are. The hell are you knitting for?”

“I find it therapeutic,” Castiel replies, “Especially when my mate’s father is so insistent upon being a jackass.”

Dean snorts.

“You find something funny, boy?”

Dean opens his mouth to snap something back, but before he can, Castiel throws his knitting back in its basket and stands. He says, “You know what, John? I’ve given you plenty of chances to stop treating Dean like some kind of disobedient child. He is a grown man, and you are on my last nerve.”

“Who the hell you think you are, talkin’ to me like that?” John asks.

“He’s my mate,” Dean jumps in, “and he’s better to me than you ever were. So you shut the hell up and stop treating us like crap.”

“Are you freaking kidding me, Dean?” John says, and rounds on him, “I’ve been nothing but good to you. Other guys? They’d have left you out on your ass the second that you presented. Me? I keep you, I protect you, I teach you. And did you ever think to thank me for everything that I have done? No, because you are ungrateful. You keep acting like a disobedient child, so I will treat you like one.”

“That’s it!” Castiel moves past Dean and inserts himself between either Winchester. He shoves John back and growls, low and deep, “You have been nothing but terrible to your son. He has been to hell and back, has been through more than you can even imagine, and you mistreat him, you demean him, you laugh at him. You protected no one but yourself, and I have had it, John. I wanted to give you a chance. Sam wanted to give you a chance. But we should have known better. We should have listened to Dean.”

“What do you mean, you should have listened to Dean?”
“I mean that when he told us that he didn’t want to see you, when he told us how awful you were to him – we should have listened to that,” Castiel says, “I want you out of my home and I want you out of my town.”

“No,” John says, “To hell with that. You may be in charge a’ my son but you ain’t freaking in charge of me. If you don’t want me here, I want to hear it from Dean.”

Cas turns around at that, looking at Dean with questioning eyes. He rubs Dean’s arm and asks, “Do you want that, or would you like me to throw shoes?”

Dean cracks a smile at that. He rests his hand on Cas’ shoulder and says, “I’ll be fine,” before he turns his attention to his dad. John looks like shit – mostly, he looks like he did before Dean took off and ended up in hell. Sure, his face is carved with new lines and there’s more white in his hair, but he looks just as miserable as he did before.

It occurs to Dean that his dad doesn’t have anybody. He lost their mom, and with that, John lost himself. He turned to drink to keep him warm and forgot his sons in the process, and now he wants forgiveness without bothering to make a single goddamn change in himself.

The look on his dad’s face can only be described as pleading. Like he’s begging to stick around just so that he can still use his older son as a punching bag.

But it’s not gonna fly. Not anymore.

*Life isn’t always good, but there are good things in it, and that makes all the difference.*

Cas is right. There are good things, and Dean should worry about keeping the good things good and not trying to fix a person that is always going to be broken. John isn’t going anywhere, isn’t getting any better, isn’t trying to do better by Dean or by Sam. He’s a man out for himself, and Dean can’t believe that it’s taken this fucking long to figure that crap out.

Thing is, he always wanted to believe in his dad. Always wanted to do right by the old man and never give up on him the way that Sam gave up on him. But believing in folks doesn’t mean that they’ll ever believe in themselves, and that’s just something that you gotta accept.

Dean shakes his head and watches his dad’s face fall from pleading to disbelief.

“You’re not welcome here, dad,” he says.

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me,” John says, “You’re choosing what? Some nobody? Over me. I’m your damn dad. I raised you.”

“Yeah, and you did a real shit job of doing it,” Dean says, “I said you’re not welcome here. You said you wanted to hear that from me, so you friggin’ hear me. Life is too damn short for me to be spending it trying to make you happy. You’re a wreck, and you’re never gonna be happy. But I’ve got a shot at it, and I’m gonna take that shot. You get out of my goddamn house and you don’t ever come back again, you hear me?”

John clenches and unclenches his fists. Cas steps forward, making to protect Dean if need be, even though Dean is pretty damn sure that he could handle it himself if he needed to. He places his palm between Cas’ shoulder blades and shakes his head.

“I hear you,” John finally says, “Yeah, I hear you.”

Dean expects another string of insults, another jab at Cas, but instead, John leaves with those words
lingering on all their tongues to taste. His gaze shifts to where Mary is still comfortable on her blanket on the floor, and there he stands for several seconds before he affords Castiel and Dean a single, curt nod.

Then, John walks out the door.

For the first time, Dean thinks that maybe, his dad really did hear him.

X

After the bittersweet sound of the Impala’s engine fades, Sam wraps his arms around Dean and says he’s sorry, like he’s been saying his sorry for the last few days. Dean just hugs him back, scents his brother and says that it’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay. He took care of it, and he’s not going to worry about their dad anymore. He’s got Cas and he’s got Mary, and that’s all that Dean needs.

That night, Dean and Cas make dinner together while Sam keeps Mary company, cradling her on the couch and talking to her in a soft voice that Dean can barely hear over the noise of the television. They throw together spaghetti noodles with some sauce from scratch, and use Sam’s food processor for the first time to handle it. They top it off with some fancy sweet cheddar.

Supper is awesome, one of the best dinners that Dean has ever had. He enjoys it with enthusiasm and feeds Mary directly after – and then tries not to think of Kevin and the other omegas still with Alastair, and how hungry they must be while he eats like a king.

The anxiety over the thought washes away when he puts Mary down in her crib for the night, murmuring a lullaby and kissing her goodnight. Seeing his daughter’s sweet little face blinking up at him makes Dean’s heart clench.

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” he tells her, and smiles as he switches the light off and pads out of the room.

When Cas climbs into bed with Dean that night, Dean pulls his clothes off and kisses him. He pushes Cas back on the mattress and tells him just to sit back and enjoy, and gives into giving everything he can to his alpha, his mate. He leaves little bruises on Castiel’s neck and collarbone, licking down over his nipples as he settles back on Cas’ cock.

Dean rocks back and rides his alpha hard and slow and thorough. They kiss and nip at each other’s skin, and when Cas is knotted deep inside Dean, he reaches down between them and brings Dean off, too. Tied together, they nose at one another and murmur that they love each other.

And Dean feels full, and good.

The good mood lasts into the following morning, even though Mary woke the entire household up at just past three in the morning with a tantrum to rule them all. She whimpered and whined even after she was changed and fed and loved on, and so Dean brought her to the master bedroom and curled his body in a C around her and went back to sleep.

The scent of Cas and Sam’s coffee hangs in the air as Dean pours himself a bowl of cereal. He has Mary tucked against him in her sling, and he smiles down at her as he sticks his spoon into the awesome sugary crap and eats to his fill.

And then there’s a knock.

Dean exchanges glances with Cas and then looks to Sam and asks, “You planning on having somebody over, Sammy?”
Sam shakes his head and replies, “I would have told you, dude.”

“Shit,” Dean says.

“I’ll answer it,” Castiel says, “If it’s your father again, I can deal with it.”

Still, Dean sets aside his half-eaten bowl of cereal and follows a couple steps behind Cas. He peers over Cas’ shoulder as the door swings open. Sure enough, on the front porch of Cas’ house, stands John Winchester. An immediate twist of fear clenches around Dean’s heart, but only in the instants before he realizes that his father doesn’t look angry, doesn’t smell aggressive, doesn’t seem ready to fight them at all.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, and nudges Cas to the side, “I told you that you’re not welcome here anymore.”

“I know that,” John snaps. Castiel growls, and John backs down. He repeats more quietly, “I know that. I was just…just comin’ by to say goodbye.” His eyes sink to Mary in her sling, and then lift back up to meet Dean’s.

Dean moves to shut the door, but John jerks his foot forward and wedges his boot between the front door and the frame. He says, “Wait. I wanted to – to give you something before I took off back home.”

Dean opens the door a little wider.

John pats down his coat and then fishes in one of the pockets. With a swear, he pries out something that makes Dean’s heart jump to warp speed: the keys to the Impala. Dean’s lips part, but John speaks before he can, in a gruff, careful voice, “I bought me a plane ticket back to Kansas. Thought you might want this.”

John drops the keys into Dean’s outstretched hand. Dean swallows the lump in his throat and manages, “Why?”

“She always was yours, son,” John shrugs, “Need me a ride to the airport, though.”

Sam comes to Dean’s side and announces, “I can do it. I have to return my rental anyway – how about I follow you there and drive the Impala back?”

“Yeah,” John nods, “That’s…thank you, Sam.”

“It’s cool.”

“Well,” John awkwardly shuffles, “Guess I’ll be seeing you boys. You keep your crap in line and don’t you go screwing up your pup.” The words like I screwed up with you hang in the thick air between them, but neither John nor Dean acknowledges that they should be said.

Dean just says, “All right, dad,” and watches as Sam pulls his jacket down and throws it over his shoulders, tucking his feet into his shoes and grabbing for the keys to his rental vehicle. He stares after Sam as he and John walk side by side with a couple safe feet between them toward their respective vehicles.

He waits until the cars are out of sight to snatch Cas’ phone and text to Sam I owe you one.

“I’m not sorry to see him go,” Castiel says, when Dean returns his phone to him.
Dean spares a glance at the front door. So many people have come through it in the past months, people from his past and new people that he’s started to consider his friends, like Charlie and Jo and Ellen and Bobby. The hardest one of those people to let inside was his dad, bitter old bastard that he is.

A shift from Mary in her sling snaps Dean from the daydream and he looks back at his mate. A strange-feeling half-smile lifts one side of his mouth and he agrees, “Me neither.”
Holding Onto a Straw

Chapter Track: I’m Not Done – Fever Ray

Holding Onto a Straw

The first time that Castiel sees Dean behind the wheel of his ’67 Impala, he glimpses what Dean must have been like before his encounter with ‘Alastair’ and the last terrible years of his life. Driving the car seems to take a blade to space-time and extract a younger version of Dean, one that can’t help the wide, boyish grin that Castiel has come to think of as rare and wonderful.

A week after John leaves, peace returns to the house, and Castiel and Dean set aside a day to head out and enjoy the last, lingering warmth of summer as a family before winter chill seizes and snow takes over the mountains. They move Mary’s car seat from Castiel’s Prius and buckle it into the back of the Impala, where Castiel sits as Dean takes his place in the driver’s seat.

Dean’s contentment radiates off of him as they fly over the snaking dirt roads, tires kicking up dust and gravel as the melodic sounds of classic rock drift through the car. It smells like leather and sweat and the road inside, a scent that Dean loves so much that Castiel finds it difficult not to partake as well.

They stop and park alongside an old, rusty metal windmill nestled inside a pocket of coniferous trees. The weather is perfect to be outside – sunny, as it so often is here, but mild enough that Castiel doesn’t sweat underneath his thin zip-up hoodie.

Affection twists at him as he watches Dean open the back door on Mary’s side of the Impala, and the tender way that he unbuckles her carrier from the seat and heaves her up. He speaks to her as Castiel opens the trunk and removes their supplies from the back – a folded, sturdy wool blanket, a cooler with their food tucked inside, and Mary’s diaper bag – and Cas can’t help but listen.

“Who’s omega daddy’s favorite, huh?” he says.

Castiel smiles and calls, “I thought I was your favorite.”

Dean looks up at Cas from the other side of the car and brandishes his middle finger before he returns his attention the pup and says, “Alpha dad’s a smartass. Yes he is.”

Cas spreads the blanket over the short mountain brush, situating it so that half rests beneath the shade afforded by trees and the old windmill and the other half keeps warm in the glow of the early afternoon sun. Dean places Mary in the shade and kneels beside her seat to unhitch the buckles and pull her up into his arms.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he says, and kisses her cheek. Mary’s begun to fill out just a little in places, taking on chubbier hands and legs and rounder, fuller cheeks. Castiel doesn’t even realize that he’s staring until Dean meets his eyes and cocks a brow. He asks, “What, do I got something on my face?”

“No,” Cas answers, “I just love you.”

“Oh,” Dean says. Blood rushes to his face, tinging the tips of his ears red. He lowers his eyes to the blanket and murmurs, “I…yeah. Same. I love you too. You big alpha sap.”

To this, Castiel laughs, and opens the lid of the cooler to pull out their lunchtime spread. He
brought a bottle of water for Dean and a beer for himself, some well-crafted sub sandwiches on the bread that he baked two nights before to accompany their fettuccine and chicken dinner, some potato chips for Dean and a bag of apple chips for himself. And naturally at the bottom are two slices of strawberry rhubarb pie in a Tupperware to enjoy for dessert.

Dean licks his lips when Castiel sets the food out on the blanket, and makes a grab for his sandwich first with his free hand, the other supporting Mary while she grabs at his hair. The way that Dean smiles at her has Castiel’s insides twisting all over again.

He can’t help but pull his phone out of the pocket of his jeans and snap a picture. It’s a perfect moment: a still of Dean with a sandwich in one hand and a baby in the other, grinning at her like she’s his whole world. Because she is. She is his whole world.

Maybe Castiel will print this photo and frame it.

“Dean,” Castiel says.

“Mmph,” Dean says, and then swallows his bite of sandwich, “What’s up?”

“We should take a ‘selfie,’” Castiel says, though he puts the word ‘selfie’ in air quotes, mainly because he doesn’t know how he feels about it.

“A what now? What the hell is a ‘selfie’?” Dean says, and echoes Castiel’s air quotes right back to him.

“A picture that we take of ourselves,” Castiel says. He scoots across the blanket to Dean and Mary and swaps his phone’s camera to the front camera, holding it out in front of them until the frame holds Dean, Mary and Castiel all in one package. Dean smiles, but just as Castiel snaps the picture, he makes a face.

Castiel frowns.

Dean rolls his eyes and says, “Oh, whatever. Get another one, little alpha.”

For the second picture, Dean really does smile, though it isn’t the same smile as the one he wears when he drives his Impala. It’s a quieter, softer smile, more subdued and self-conscious. It’s still a good picture, enough that when Castiel shifts back to his place across the blanket, he toggles his settings and swaps his wallpaper (a picture of Mary in her Yoda hat) to the new photo.

Eating together isn’t a practice that is new to them, but something about this idyllic, early-October indulgence sets itself apart from the others. Maybe it’s the great outdoors, the smell of the sun baking the soil and sap sticking in trees. Perhaps it’s that they’re alone, no more relatives hovering or demanding to see the pup. It’s just them.

Castiel eats his sandwich contentedly and keeps a watchful eye on Mary and Dean and the surroundings as he does. There’s hardly anything out here, he knows, but instinct keeps him vigilant. Dean chuckles at him, and crawls across the blanket to nose at him. Castiel wraps an arm around Dean’s shoulders and kisses his head. That’s how they sit when they break out the pie.

“I wonder if you could make baby food out of this in Sam’s fancy food processor,” Dean remarks.

Castiel makes a face at him and says, “You had better not attempt to make pie into baby food.”

“Why not? It sounds awesome,” Dean says.
“Because you’ll break your brother’s gift to us,” Castiel says, “And you shouldn’t feed the pup pie, in any case.”

“Whatever, man. Pie is essential to pup growth.”

“No it is n – oh. You’re joking.”

Dean smirks and Castiel plucks Mary out of his grip, placing her back in her seat at the corner of the blanket before he rounds on his mate and pounces on him. Dean laughs underneath him and squirms as Castiel kisses and nips at his neck and jaw, though the laughter dissolves into soft panting when Cas pushes the flat of his tongue against the mating mark on Dean’s neck.

That’s when Castiel lifts off of Dean.

“Hey, what the hell?” Dean says, “That’s not fair, you alpha pain in the ass. You can’t just –”

Cas leans over and pecks a chaste kiss to Dean’s lips before he says, “Yes I can. I’m not going to knot you with our pup right here. Although there is a sort of appeal to knotting you out in the open, isn’t there?”

Dean goes a little pink in the face. He grabs at the back of his neck and mutters, “Kinky alpha bastard.”

With a kiss to the top of Dean’s head, Castiel remarks, “You don’t know the half of it.”

Dean asks him what he means, but Castiel just winks at him and starts collecting their trash and the remains of their meal, packing it back into the cooler. Dean sighs, loudly enough that Castiel can hear it, but pulls Mary from her seat to change her before they pile back into the Impala.

In the back seat beside his dozing pup, Castiel flips through the photos on his phone. He knows that often not all is well, but looking at these pictures of Dean and Mary and himself, he knows that there is a fixed point in time where everything was perfect. This is the family that he dreamed of as a child, not the family that admonished him for his quiet, introverted nature, or the people that sent him to a psychologist when Castiel announced that his studies were of more interest to him than chasing omega tail in high school.

This is the family that smiles at Castiel and that eases smiles out of him back. He has a sweet, round-faced pup to love and protect, and a mate that balances Castiel in all that they do, a warrior where Castiel is a caretaker, a man unafraid for Castiel to watch over.

When he looks back up and hears Dean humming along to the riff of the guitar, a grin wide on his face, Castiel almost blurts again that he loves Dean. But Dean is so content behind the wheel of the car, so happy to hum with his music and drive with his family, that Castiel just smiles and shakes his head.

He’ll tell Dean again another time.

X

The house smells like coffee when they shoulder their way inside, and the culprit turns out to be Sam, laughing and smiling with a dark-haired beta at the kitchen table. Castiel sets down the cooler and opens the cabinet under the sink to throw away the remains and clean out the Tupperware. Behind him, Dean sets Mary’s carrier on the table before unbuckling her and lifting her out.

“You must be Dean,” the woman says, and offers a slender hand to him, “I’m Amelia.”
“Yeah?” Dean says, and he takes the offered hand to shake it, “Nice to finally meet my brother’s main squeeze.” Dean winks, Amelia laughs, and Castiel watches.

She turns and offers a smile to Castiel, but Cas is too concentrated on keeping an eye for his mate and his pup. He folds his arms over his chest, and Amelia chuckles. She remarks, “Such an alpha, hm?”

Castiel snorts and says, “Perhaps.”

Logically he knows that Amelia is not a threat. She’s a beta, and she is half his size. But the last weeks have Castiel on edge, as do the continuing nightmares that Dean wakes up from, sweating and crying until Castiel can bring him down to earth with his scent and reminders to breathe. With the last few days to rest the tension has eased, but not enough to keep Castiel calm in the presence of strangers.

“So, I uh,” Sam starts, “I have some news.”

Castiel takes down a mug and fills it with coffee before he takes a seat at the kitchen table, beside Dean and Mary. Mary is awake now, grabbing at her omega father’s face with tiny fists. Dean smiles at her and then at Castiel. Cas reaches over and strokes the tips of his fingers over the back of Dean’s neck.

“I found a place in town,” Sam says, “It’s just a little condo, right up near the river. Anyway, I’m gonna be flying back to California to pack up my things, and then I’ll driving back here so I can start moving in. Isn’t that great?”

A grin splits Dean’s face, wide and pleased. He reaches over with his free hand and claps Sam on the shoulder before remarking, “Dude, that’s freaking awesome.” Dean bounces Mary a little and says to her, “Hear that, sweetheart? Uncle Sammy’s gonna be just a drive down the mountain and we can visit him any time that we want.”

Sam laughs and holds out his arms to take Mary from Dean. He cradles her against his chest, still so impressively huge against her tiny frame. She reaches up and grabs a fist of Sam’s long hair, tugging down. Sam chuckles. He bounces her and rubs her back, and doesn’t mind when she keeps her little fingers tangled up against his head.

Amelia pulls her phone out of her pocket and says, “Sam, I’m gonna have to head out to work soon.”

“Ah,” Sam says, and then disentangles himself from Mary and passes her back to Dean. He announces, “I’m going to go ahead and drive Amelia back to town, but I’ve got some stuff I need to ask you about.”

Castiel sends a sharp look to Sam and Sam regards him seriously in return. Whatever he has to ask Dean, he can’t do it in front of Amelia. Castiel watches Amelia shrug a jacket over her shoulders and Sam take the keys to Castiel’s Prius, brandishing them until Castiel gives a nod of permission. Soon Sam won’t need to borrow his Prius or Dean’s Impala – he’ll be driving back in his own car, setting up things in his own house.

It will be good for Dean, he thinks, to have his brother so nearby. In spite of their initial tension, Cas doubts that Dean could be far apart from Sam for long. Being so alone for so many years made Dean strong and quiet, but it also made him need in a way that he will never admit. The need is steady and it is frightened, and the thought of it makes Castiel lean over to apply a kiss to his bite on Dean’s neck.
Dean casts a curious look at Cas, but he doesn’t say anything – his attention breaks when Mary whines in his arms, and he excuses himself to feed her in the nursery.

Castiel seizes the moment of quiet to finish rinsing the Tupperware from their picnic and tidying the kitchen. He savors the moment of peace, a rare thing to occur in the house since Sam’s arrival and Mary’s after his. He’s used to bickering between brothers or Mary fussing or the television running while somebody does one thing or another, cooking or working or lounging.

When Mary finishes eating, Dean brings her back out and joins Castiel. They turn on the television and Dean plays with Mary on the floor while Castiel makes slow progress on knitting Mary’s blanket. He works far more gradually now that he isn’t fueled by alpha rage at Dean’s father, though he doesn’t need the blanket to be terribly big anyway – just big enough for his little girl.

Sam arrives back at the house a little over an hour later, after Dean has selected Princess Mononoke to watch. They’re only about twenty-odd minutes into the movie, though Dean seems reluctant to pause it when Sam toes off his shoes and reminds them that he has something that needs to be discussed.

“I got a call,” Sam says, and lowers his body onto the couch beside Castiel and above where Dean plays with Mary on the floor, “a couple days ago, from this reporter back in California. I’ve done some work with her before, especially after I won the Goodman case last year. She wants to interview me again.”

“So what? Do your interview thing,” Dean says, “Why do I give a shit?”

“Because it has to do with you,” Sam says.

Dean narrows his eyes at his brother, and Castiel stops knitting. He looks between the Winchesters as Dean asks, “What the hell does an interview with you have to do with me?”

“I mean, I kept crap vague when I said on my blog that I’d found you and was staying with you for an indefinite amount of time,” Sam says, “and she wants to know about it. I was thinking…I dunno, that we could tell the truth. That we could talk about what happened to you.”

“What, like a publicity stunt?” asks Dean, “I’m not a fucking party trick, Sam.”

“No, no, I know that,” Sam replies, “It’s not that at all. People are gonna want to know what was up, why I left in such a hurry, why you never contacted me. I owe it to my clients to tell at least some of the truth, but. I just. I just wanted to ask about telling other people. I won’t talk about anything that you don’t want me to.”

“Jesus,” Dean says. He starts to shrink again and out of instinct curls closer to Mary. She wiggles a fist at him and Dean reaches out a single finger for her to latch onto. With Mary holding onto him, Dean says, “Fuck, dude. That’s – that’s a lot.”

“I know,” says Sam.

“Can I think about it?” Dean asks, voice smaller than it should be.

Sam nods, “I’m not gonna do anything that you don’t want me to. It’s not my life. I already messed that up once, and I don’t want to do it again.”

“All right, Sam,” Dean says, and something about the way that he speaks it makes it sound like he’ll do whatever he thinks is best for Sam, whether or not it is also what is best for Dean.
Mary is down for the night in her crib, a task that happened to be production tonight – she didn’t want Dean to leave her and fussed if he went, and Dean kept complaining that he just wanted to shower after having been spit up on by their child and having no time to change or do anything but a rudimentary cleaning with a paper towel.

Dinner made up for most of the stress of the day. Castiel and Dean tag-teamed making burgers and caring for Mary while she cried and made a to-do over just about everything. The silence that comes with her sleep is gratifying, as is the relief that rolls off of Dean in droves as he treks from the nursery and to the master bath, leaving a trail of clothing behind him.

“Do you mind if I join you?” Castiel queries. He tries very hard not to stare pointedly at the curve of Dean’s ass as he pushes back the shower curtain and turns the knob for hot water.

At Castiel’s question, a thread of a omega arousal curls in his nostrils. Dean throws a saucy look over his shoulders and bounces his brows with a, “Well, you did leave me hanging earlier today, little alpha.”

“Only because I didn’t want to knot you in front of our daughter.”

“Well, you’re not knotting me in the shower, either,” Dean says, and when Castiel makes an indignant noise, he adds, “Dude, have you ever tried it? It’s slippery and uncomfortable as all hell. We’ll wash up fast and then have a quickie before bed.”

The alpha in Cas objects to the term ‘quickie.’ He’d much rather bide his time and take his omega apart piece by piece, show Dean how much he needs Cas and slide into him slow and hard, but Dean’s probably thinking that they won’t have much time, considering Mary’s foul temper throughout the second half of the day.

By the time that Castiel sheds his clothing and joins Dean in the shower, his omega has already soaped up his skin and has his hands in his hair. He’s humming the tune to *Kashmir*, but the casual attitude makes Castiel frown. Dean’s freckled, golden-brown shoulders are tense and hunched up around his ears.

“Dean…”

Dean eyes him but doesn’t stop scrubbing his hair.

It’s his job to take care of Dean, and today Castiel has not done a respectable job of that. He noses at Dean’s damp, sudsy neck and pecks a kiss to the warm skin, loving the smell of *omega* and *Dean* and *mate* underneath the scents of *clean* and *worry*. Only a modicum of the tenseness melts from Dean’s shoulders, and so Castiel tries a different tactic. He presses his thumbs into Dean’s shoulders and starts to rub over the skin, massaging over clear, unbroken constellations of freckles and the stretched scar tissue below that.

Dean moans at the sensation and his fingers pause in his hair. He rubs himself back against Cas, and it doesn’t matter if it’s out of instinct or with full knowledge of what he’s doing – Castiel’s body responds in an instant, cock moving up to attention. He grinds forward into Dean as he massages the knotted muscles, erection sliding with the hot water and soap suds over the crack of Dean’s ass.

“Damn it,” Dean murmurs.

“Hm.”
“You know exactly what you’re doing,” Dean goes on.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Castiel breathes against Dean’s neck, and punctuates the statement with roll of his hips into Dean’s backside.

Dean growls.

At the sound, the teasing is over. They scrub themselves and each other clean and hurriedly, barely bothering to rinse themselves off and towel dry before Castiel chases – *chases* – Dean into bed and tackles him like something right out of an alpha-omega romcom. He bites at Dean and kisses over the pink marks left by his teeth as he parts Dean’s legs.

The smell of slick is so strong that Castiel whines. No one should have the right to smell this good. Dean is a wonderful, wonderful drug and Cas cannot wait to partake of him again and again and again. He runs his tongue over Dean’s shining-slick, needy hole, just to taste a little bit. But he doesn’t bother with ceremony. No, as soon as Castiel has had his taste, he **needs**, a feeling burning through him like rapid fire.

With a few twists of their bodies, Castiel manhandles Dean into lying face-down in the mattress and pins him there as the head of his cock brushes Dean’s entrance. Dean mewls and pushes his ass back up against Castiel, and that’s it. He’s done for. He thrusts into Dean, hard, and takes him with everything he’s got.

Sometimes he likes to be sweet and gentle with Dean, take him slow and easy and make him sob with need for a knot before Castiel with give it to him, but tonight isn’t one of those occasions. Dean claws at the bed sheets and barks back at Cas to give it harder, fuck him better –

“Is that all you got, little alpha?”

“Mouthy omega,” Castiel mutters, and snaps his hips forward so hard that a shudder wracks through Dean’s whole body.

The way that Dean’s body gets so wet to make way for Castiel’s knot, opens up just for him, makes his alpha instinct go wild, flaring like fireworks across a night sky. It takes all of Castiel’s remaining brainpower to reach underneath Dean and wrap his fingers around his cock, jerking his palm across the hot skin as he propels himself forward.

When Castiel’s knot begins to swell, Dean comes onto the sheets with a broken cry. Castiel sinks his teeth into Dean’s shoulder and kisses him everywhere. He runs a palm over Dean’s arm and whispers, “My sweet omega. So good for me. Love you.”

Dean makes a soft noise, clenching around Cas’ knot as if his body is trying to take all the come from him, breed Dean up all over again with another perfect, sweet-faced pup. Maybe an entire litter. How lovely would his omega look all fat with an entire litter? Castiel feels a pleased smile stretch his lips at the thought, and he pecks a final kiss to the back of Dean’s neck.

“Hey, Cas.”

“Yes?”

“I’m thinking maybe I should let Sam talk about what happened,” Dean says, “On TV. I’m scared shitless but I think I should let him.”

Castiel licks his lips. His heart clenches, and for a long time, he doesn’t know what to say. This is exactly what he feared would happen, that Dean would think that he **should** do as Sam asks, but not
know why, only that he’s doing it because his brother asked it of him.

“Is this just because you want to please Sam?” Castiel finally asks.

“I…” Dean starts, and stops. Perhaps he hadn’t stopped to consider that. Then Dean heaves a breath out of his lungs. Castiel tangles their legs together and mouths along the side of Dean’s jaw, trying to put his scent on Dean, trying to comfort him.

“No,” Dean finally says, “It’s. It wasn’t just me. There were lots of omegas. I left them there. I left them behind and they need my help,” he looks back at Castiel, brows knitted together and eyes stony, “I thought…when I left, I thought that it would be over. Things got better. I got you and I got Sammy and Mary. But the thing is, it ain’t over. Alastair’s still out there, and he’s got my friends. And while I’ve been sitting pretty, they’ve been in hell. I can’t let it keep going on. I can’t do it.”

“This sounds enormous,” Castiel replies, “This sounds like something bigger than a smalltime interview.”

Dean considers this and says, “If Sammy spills the beans on national television, then Alastair will have time to book it and get the hell out of dodge.”

“Most likely.”

“I’ve gotta tell him no then,” Dean says, “He can’t tell anybody anything.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Dean swallows and meets Castiel’s eyes.

“I’m going to tell them.”
Dean spends the morning gathering his thoughts. He muddles through his typical early routine: collecting Mary from her crib to feed and change her, tucking her in the sling so that he has both hands free to start a pot of coffee for Sam and Cas, and flipping on the TV while he waits for his lazy-ass alphas to wake up.

Mary gazes up at him through curious eyes, eyes that don’t quite look like Dean’s. She shakes her fists at him and he can’t help but smile, even with the anxiety thrumming through his veins. Before he can tell anybody else about the crap that he’s been through, the shit that he’s seen and the pain that he’s felt, he needs to tell Cas. And he needs to tell Sam. They deserve to hear his story before anybody else does, and they deserve to know the shitstorm that’s about to hit.

Sam emerges from his room before Cas does. He narrows his eyes at Dean when he spots him on the couch and says, “Do you think you two could at least try to be quiet? Would that kill you?”

Dean lifts his brows and says, “Maybe. Maybe the whole world’s gotta know how nice Cas’ knot is.”

Sam crinkles his nose and protests, “Dean, ew.”

“I made coffee,” Dean replies, as a sort of peace offering, something to calm Sam down before Dean opens the can of worms containing everything that he’s been trying to hide and put behind him. Part of him wants to keep it that way, to keep his lips zipped and the past stowed safely behind him. He doesn’t have to go back. He knows that Cas and Sam won’t force him.

And maybe that makes some of the difference – nobody is forcing him to speak about what he’s been through. They want him to, but they’re not going to squeeze it out of Dean if he doesn’t want to discuss it. But the thing is – he needs to talk about it. He can’t just shut up and forget about it, because there are people stuck back there, people that he’s known for years. There are omegas that need his help and he can’t just let them rot out of some kind of stupid self-indulgence.

Dean would love to be selfish and forget it all.

But he won’t be.

“What’s on your mind?”

Dean glances up and sees Sam rounding the couch with mug in hand. He sets it on the coffee table and stirs it with his spoon, clouds of creamer filling out to the outside rim. Dean doesn’t realize that he’s staring until he jerks his attention up and sees Sam gazing at him. The look is intense, brows drawn, a frown deep on his face.
“What?” Dean says irritably.

“You’re acting really weird,” Sam responds, “Is this about the interview? Because you can tell me no, Dean. I swear, dude, if you don’t want me to say anything, then I –”

“It’s not that,” Dean jumps to say, “Well, it’s kind of that. It’s…”

Just then, the door to the master bedroom swings open and Cas pads out, looking rumpled and reeking of sex, even though he’s thrown a clean set of pajamas on. He glances from Sam to Dean and back again before he cocks his head and asks, “Is everything all right?”

Dean gives a halfhearted shrug that ends in jostling Mary, who makes a gurgle of protest from the sling. Sam and Cas both stare at him, all alpha and concern and protectiveness. It makes the hair on the back of Dean’s neck stand on end.

“Somebody pour me some scotch,” Dean finally says.

Cas treads to the kitchen and takes down a bottle, something mostly untouched and an inviting golden-brown.

“Whoa, are you sure that’s wise?” Sam asks, and sends a sharp look at Dean and Mary, “Aren’t you breastfeeding?”

“As long as Dean doesn’t overindulge, there’s nothing wrong with a drink,” Castiel replies, “Restricting caffeine is more important than restricting alcohol. And I think we might allow Dean some space on this.”

Dean accepts the glass of scotch from Cas’ grip and stares into the liquid. He tips back a swallow, eyes shuttering closed at the familiar burn of liquor flowing down in his throat, and warmth pooling underneath his collarbone and in his belly. He inhales a deep breath and drums his fingers on the arm of the couch before he works up the stones to look at his mate and his brother again.

“Sammy,” he says, “You can’t do that interview.”

“That’s fine,” Sam says, “I told you that. You’re more important than some interview.”

“Let me finish,” Dean snips, and holds up a hand. Sam backs down, and Dean goes on, “You can’t do that interview, because…’cause I’ve gotta do something. About what happened to me. There are – there are other omegas still there, and. And. A-And we’ve got to get them out. I’ve been so fucking stupid and so selfish and there are people back there that need me. I got out and I just left them.”

Dean glances down at Mary. He’s afraid to tell them everything, scared shitless of filling in the gaps between what he’s already revealed to Sam and Cas – but more than he’s afraid for himself, he’s afraid for Mary. Dean doesn’t give a crap about himself. It was never about him. Leaving Alastair’s wasn’t about him. It was all about her, his pup, his Mary Grace. If Dean is in danger, that’s fine. But he doesn’t want Mary in the line of fire.

But Dean swallows his fear with a mouthful of whiskey.

He starts at the beginning, speaking in quiet, hard words and clipped sentences. He knows that Cas and Sam have heard some of this but he doesn’t bother skipping over any hairy detail, not the needle in his arm or his bleeding ass when he came to behind bars. The glass of whiskey drains without even a quarter of the bullshit tale being told, but Dean doesn’t dare go for another drink, just lets his hands shake and the shame burn on his face.
“There was this kid,” Dean says, and thumbs along the rim of his empty whiskey glass, “named Kevin. He was just a fucking pup, and he risked his hide to bust me outta there. Clawed the shit outta some meathead’s face and gave me just enough time to book it. Never ran so hard in my life. I was okay with being there after a while. I was the boss’s favorite. Sometimes I thought he even liked me, and that was more than I could say for dad, you know? But uh, Mary made it different. Overheard a couple a’ the guys saying that Alastair was gonna kill her, and I couldn’t let him.”

“Oh, Dean,” Sam breathes.

“I never even told Kevin my name,” Dean says, and shakes his head. He smears his hands over his eyes and goes on, “He didn’t even know who the fuck I was and he helped me anyway. He’s still back there. If he’s even alive anymore. S’my fault.”

“No,” Cas says, voice firm. A thread of alpha command hardens the word, and remains as he repeats, “No. None of this was your fault, Dean.”

“All of it was my fault, little alpha,” Dean says. His voice cracks on the pet name little alpha, and God, he feels so fucking selfish. While there are omegas taking so many knots that they bleed, omegas getting chased down and whipped, Dean is here with an alpha all his own, one that loves him and takes care of Dean and the pup.

“I don’t want you to talk like that,” Castiel replies, “Stop. You were abducted. What happened to you is the fault of a sick man and a faulty system.”

“And a shitty family,” Sam murmurs.

“Sammy,” Dean starts.

But Sam just shakes his head and replies, “I have to make a call. I’ll be back.”

Dean watches his brother’s back retreat, hair yet uncombed and half-drunk coffee left behind on the coffee table. That’s exactly how this whole crapfest feels: like a cold cup of coffee. It’s bitter, but there’s no pleasant warmth or touch of ice to back it up, just lukewarm, disappointed liquid to choke on and sputter up.

“Do you think he thinks it’s my fault?” Dean asks. The words come out hoarse and used, the way he’d sound after an alpha paid to knot his mouth. His tongue feels heavy and uncomfortable in his mouth, but when he tries to swallow to fix it, he just feels worse.

“Oh, no,” Castiel says. He moves from his place on the armchair and to the couch, where he gathers Dean into his arms and holds him close. Dean doesn’t deserve this, doesn’t deserve the strong arms holding him together, doesn’t deserve to press his nose into the collar of Cas’ t-shirt and scent the place where sweat has gathered.

“How do you think he thinks it’s my fault?” Dean asks. The words come out hoarse and used, the way he’d sound after an alpha paid to knot his mouth. His tongue feels heavy and uncomfortable in his mouth, but when he tries to swallow to fix it, he just feels worse.

“Oh, no,” Castiel says. He moves from his place on the armchair and to the couch, where he gathers Dean into his arms and holds him close. Dean doesn’t deserve this, doesn’t deserve the strong arms holding him together, doesn’t deserve to press his nose into the collar of Cas’ t-shirt and scent the place where sweat has gathered.

“Dean,” Cas says, and tips Dean’s chin up with his hand. The urge to lower his eyes pricks Dean’s skin like hundreds of tiny needles, but when he tries, Cas shakes his head and keeps Dean’s chin level. He presses a kiss against Dean’s forehead and says, “Sam does not place the blame on you. I do not place the blame on you. I’m...horrified at what has happened, but I would never blame you. I’m just so relieved that you made it out alive, and that you and Mary are alive and safe.”

At the mention of her name, Dean lowers his gaze to the pup nestled against him. She still watches him. Dean reaches into the sling and pets a hand over her soft, light-colored hair. He’s happy that she’s safe, too. His sweet pup deserves everything in the world.

But Kevin and the other omegas deserve everything in the world, too. If nothing else, they deserve
a fighting chance – and they can’t do that without Dean’s help.

Dean shifts and presses his lips against Castiel’s. Cas kisses back. It’s sweet and tender, everything that Dean wants and nothing that he deserves.

“Ahem.”

Dean breaks away from Cas and sees Sam standing a safe distance away from the couch, hair now combed and a somber expression on his face.

“I canceled my flight,” he says, “and the interview. But Dean, we have to tell everything you just told us to the police as soon as possible. The sooner that we get them involved, the sooner we can help your friends.”

They weren’t really his friends, but Dean doesn’t bother making the correction. He’s tense and clammy at the prospect of relating the whole sordid suckfest to another person right away, especially a complete stranger, but he knows that Sam is right. This isn’t just about him. This is about every omega trapped under Alastair’s thumb. He can’t let them suffer because he can’t keep it together for a couple hours.

“Okay,” Dean says.

Cas looks surprised, and asks, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, well, I’m worried about two lives in particular,” Castiel says. He brushes the backs of his knuckles over the sling, where Mary’s head rests.

“I’m sure,” Dean says. He catches Cas’ hand in his and squeezes his fingers, “I just have to…uh. Get dressed, and stuff.”

In truth, Dean needs a breather more than anything. He undoes the sling and passes Mary off to Castiel, and relocates to the bathroom. He showers to rid himself of the smells of last night, and redresses in some of Cas’ jeans and a black band t-shirt. Once he brushes he teeth, Dean feels a little like he can face this crap. He doesn’t reek like sex and liquor, so at least he smells credible, right?

Dean cuddles Mary to his chest as he waits for Cas and Sam to be ready. Scenting the soft crop of hair on her tiny head gives him an edge of readiness. Hell, this isn’t even just about bailing out the other omegas. This is about caring for his own, and looking after Mary. He has a duty to his family to take care of them, and sitting on his ass isn’t going to cut it.

Right?

Right.

X

In the police station parking lot, Dean almost considers turning back. Being at the wheel of his baby gave him courage, but only as long as her wheels rolled along the road. Now that she’s stationary, reality seeps in all over again. He shoots a look over at Castiel in the passenger seat.

Cas rests a hand on Dean’s shoulder and says, “You don’t have to do it.”
Dean sighs.

“Yes, I do.”

They climb out of the car, but before they file into the police station, Dean takes Mary from Sam’s grip and presses her tight against him.

The station is plain on the inside. The lobby smells like lemon floor polish and paper, and the walls are painted a dated butter yellow. At the end of the narrow room is a window reinforced with bullet proof glass and, a round speaker in the middle. Behind that window sits a bored-looking, familiar face.

“Dean!” Jo exclaims, face brightening, but only for a moment. She frowns and says, “What’s wrong? I’m guessing that you didn’t just come here to visit me.”

Dean shakes his head. He glances back at where Sam and Cas stand behind him. Neither of them make a move to speak for Dean, and maybe that’s for the best. This isn’t their battle. This is his battle. He inhales and explains, “I guess…I need to talk to somebody.”

“About a crime?” Jo ventures, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Dean says, “Well, no. Kind of. I don’t know what to call it but it’s kind of time sensitive. I think. I don’t know. Um. Seven – I guess almost eight – years ago, I was…drugged by this guy,” – Jo opens her mouth to say something, but Dean stops her with a lift of his hand – “Before you say anything, I know, um. Omega rapes. Are practically unsolvable. Especially since that amount of time has passed. But it’s not just that. He took me to this place, and…”

Dean’s voice dies in his throat.

“And what?” Jo urges, “What, Dean? God, we need you to fill out a report. I’m so, so sorry.”

Dean licks his lip and lowers his eyes. He fingers the hem of his t-shirt with his free hand and then lifts his eyes to meet Jo’s, just before he pulls the fabric up. He only peels enough of the t-shirt away so that Jo can see a cluster of ugly scars. He drops the cotton back down and mutters, “Anyway, that’s what happened if you didn’t let them do what they wanted. I managed to bail ’round six months ago. For Mary, y’know. What?”

Jo’s gaze remains fixed on where Dean’s scars lay under the t-shirt. He shifts uncomfortably and says, “Stop it. I’m already screwed up enough over the damn scars as is.”

“It’s not that,” Jo jumps to say, sympathy filling her features, “It’s that we’ve seen scars like that before. On a body. A John Doe. I’m gonna need to bring you upstairs to Vic. Here, go through the door to your right, and I’ll get you some visitors’ passes.”

They loop around to the other side of the desk through the indicated door, and this time there’s no glass between them and Jo. Jo takes down plastic passes strung over tacks on a corkboard and passes them three before she says to the other cop in the space, “Rufus, I’m gonna take them up to see Victor. I’ll be back down a few.”

Rufus answers this with a mere, “Hm.”

In the elevator, Dean finds himself wishing for another dose of whiskey, but instead just hugging his daughter closer. He’s got to do this, and hey, the police station isn’t nearly as creepy as the ones on TV, so that’s something, right? The level that Jo takes them to looks like a regular office space with cubicles and paperwork-covered desks. The only difference is that the people parked in
rolling chairs are in navy blue police officer uniforms.

Jo leads them straight through all of the cubes and to an office with a door. She raps twice and then opens it to a serious-faced beta officer bent over a manila folder of paperwork covered in cramped, neat letters written in ballpoint pen. He looks up when the door swings ajar and says, “Harvelle. This better be important.”

“It is, sir,” she replies, and ushers Dean forward. The officer cocks a brow and Jo says, “This is Dean. Dean, show Victor what you showed me.”

Dean swallows the ugly wash of self-loathing he feels at the idea of showing his scars again and does as instructed. Victor’s eyes go wide at the sight, and he says, “Well, shit, kid,” and stands up. He closes cover of the folder on his desk and says, “Come with me. You two,” he points between Sam and Cas, “I don’t know if you’re witnesses or moral support but you’re gonna sit tight here while I take your friend back for questioning.”

“Questioning?” Sam says, at the same time as Cas growls out, “He is my mate.”

“All right, all right,” Victor says, “You cut the alpha shit with me, you hear? You’re in my office, and in my office, nobody got time for alpha shit. Dean, leave the pup with your mate, please.”

“But –”

“But.”

Dean bites his lip and flicks his gaze to Mary. He presses a kiss on top of her head and murmurs, “Be good for omega daddy, ‘kay, sweetheart?” and passes her to Cas’ arms.

Now Dean doesn’t even have his daughter to comfort him. He’s got nothing but his own scarred-up, sorry hide, and he knows from experience that his skin ain’t that thick. Everyone thinks they’re made of stronger stuff until a whip cracks down on their backs, and he’s got a feeling that Victor can give a hell of a beating. When they enter a room for questioning, Dean sits down and wraps his arms around himself.

“You cold?” Victor asks. The commanding voice from a handful of seconds before has vanished, instead replaced with something softer. He offers, “I could get you some coffee, or maybe some cocoa?”

“I’m okay,” Dean says.

“I’m gonna ask you to sit tight for a few,” Victor says, “I need to pull some files.”

Dean doesn’t want to be left in this tiny, fluorescent hellhole with his own thoughts, but that’s exactly what happens. It takes everything in him to keep his breathing in order, to throw logic into the whirring cogs of panic in his mind. Thing is, it’s hard to think of the good stuff, of Mary and Cas and Sam and home, when he knows he’s going to relive the bad shit, and he’s gonna have to do it over and over and over again.

But shit, somebody has to do it. Most omegas don’t bother to report the crimes committed against them. The small crap – the microaggressions, the fuckers that say crude shit to you when you walk by them, your buddies making an omega joke and telling you lighten the fuck up like that joke ain’t your life – that flies. Because sometimes you have to let it fly. Sometimes it happens so much that it’s too much effort to bother to fight back.

The big stuff, that’s the same way, but on a scale far worse than some drunk dude asking you if
you’re needy for his knot. You got cops that don’t believe you got hurt, you got alphas crowing
that omegas are a bunch of attention-seeking liars, and you got folks telling you that you’re lucky
somebody wanted your ugly ass enough to stick their knot in it.

All at once Dean thinks, shit. If this Victor guy is one of those cops, the kind that blame you for the
shit that was done to you, then what’s he gonna do? How’s he gonna help Kevin? Holy shit, what
if the body that they found belongs to Kevin?

Fuck.

Victor returns to the room with more manila folders in his hands and sits down across from Dean.
He frowns and asks, “You all right? You smell pretty spooked.”

“Honestly?” Dean says, “I am the furthest fuckin’ thing from okay right now, but I gotta do this.”

Victor awards this an assessing look and then opens one of the folders. He explains, “We found an
omega’s body a couple months ago dumped in the woods, marked up real bad just like you. As of
now, he’s still a John Doe. I’m gonna need you to look at a picture and tell me if you can place
him, okay?”

Nausea swamps Dean’s gut as Victor plucks a photograph from the folder and slides it across the
table. Immediately, Dean grimaces. The guy’s mostly rotted, been exposed to the elements for God
only knows how long. But still, there’s no doubt who the omega is.

“His name’s Gordon,” Dean says, and hands the picture back.

“Gordon,” Victor says, “Gordon got a last name?”

“I’m sure he does, but hell if I know it,” Dean says, “None of the others knew my name. We didn’t
like to talk a lot.”

“The others?” echoes Victor, “I’m gonna need you to elaborate on that.”

So Dean does. He tells Victor about it all the same way that he told Cas and Sammy this morning.
He tells Victor about meeting Alastair in Colorado Springs and taking a needle, about waking up
locked up, bleeding and hurting. He tells Victor about The Chair and the chasing playroom and he
even tells Victor about Kevin.

“I don’t wanna talk about this crap, man,” Dean says, and stares down at where his hands are
folded in his lap, “but I got to. At least for Kevin. Kid didn’t do shit to deserve being there.”

To this, Victor says, “Dean, I need you to look at me.”

Dean does.

“You didn’t do anything to deserve it either, do you understand me?” Victor says, “We have been
chasing after Alastair Locke for some time. Man’s been busted before but he just keeps slipping
through our fingers. I knew he was bad news, but I had no idea it went this far. I just need to ask
one more favor of you, Dean.”

Victor pauses, lifts his brows.

Dean clenches his fists and says, “Yeah?”

“I need you to try and show us where this brothel is.”
“On…a map?”

“Could you find it on a map?”

“Probably not,” Dean mutters.

“Can you lead me and a few other officers to the location?”

Dean gnaws on his cracked and bleeding lips and thinks. When he bailed out of there, it was dark. The sun had set and it was raining, and he didn’t have a flying freaking clue what way to run, so he just ran. A lot of it is a blur of panic and pain, but he remembers thinking things, remembers a weird, lightning-struck tree and the dilapidated ruins of somebody’s log cabin where he ducked to catch his breath.

“My, um. My mate might have to take us partway,” Dean says.

Victor makes a face and asks, “Why’s that?”

“He was the one that found me,” Dean quietly answers.


Dean shoves his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket and nods, following after Victor back down the hall and to his office. As soon as Cas and Sam see them, they stand. Dean reaches out for Mary and Castiel hands her to him. Without an ounce of shame, Dean buries his nose against Mary’s head and breathes in deep. Everything may be fucked up, but his pup is healthy and smells sweet and perfect.

“What’s going on?” Sam asks.

“Dean has agreed to take us to the compound where he was held,” Victor says, and turns his attention to Castiel, “He says that you can help us get to a ballpark area and he’ll guide from there.”

“I can do that,” Cas nods.

The following minutes are a blur of motion, of cops suiting up and readying at Victor’s orders. Protests aside, Jo presses a styrofoam cup of cocoa into Dean's hands while phone calls are made and warrants obtained. Dean entrusts the keys to the Impala in Castiel’s hands so that he can lead the convoy to the stretch of road where he found Dean that first night, naked and bleeding and freezing his ass off. Instead of taking the front seat, Dean ducks into the back, so he can sit with Mary. His heart beats wildly in his chest and Mary starts to cry when they peel out of the parking lot with a trail of cop cars flashing lights behind them. He pets his hand over her hair to soothe her, but she can smell something off on her omega dad.

At first, it’s just like a drive up from town and back to the house. Dean doesn’t usually pay attention to the trees whipping by, just enjoys the music and the ride. But a little over twenty minutes into their journey, Cas slows to a stop at the side of the road, and Dean remembers.

The road looks different in daylight, much less like the muddy horror movie it was all those months ago. The trees out here all look the same, slender, white-bark aspens and crooked firs, but Dean can at least walk along the road and retrace his steps.

“Stay with Mary,” Dean says, when Cas starts to climb out of the car.
“But Dean,” Cas protests.

“Stay with our pup,” Dean commands, “She’s not going anywhere near that place. You have to protect her.”

“They said they’d leave an officer –”

“Cas, stay with the damn pup,” Dean says.

Something in Cas seems to crumble, and he concedes, “Okay.”

“All right, kid,” Victor says, when Dean steps out of the Impala and into the brisk October air, “Let’s do this.”

It feels weird to have a tail of cops trailing after him as Dean walks along the dirt road, past clumps and clumps of trees that all look like each other. How long did he walk along the side of the road? It hadn’t been long, had it? Maybe five, ten minutes? He knows there’s a smaller, more secluded road that leads directly to Alastair’s joint, but Dean would bet a pretty penny that it’s wired up nice and tight. Better to go through the woods, like he did when he ran.

A glimmer of something in the dirt gives Dean pause. He stops.

It’s an old, smashed up bottle. Something with blue glass. He ducks down and picks a piece out of the dirt.

He cut his foot on this. The blood from the incident is long washed away by rain and the elements, but he’s sure of it. Dean was too pumped full of adrenaline to care. His brain registered that he was hurt, but it was only an echo.

Dean climbs back to his feet and cocks his head to the trees and says, “This way.”

“You sure?” Victor asks.

“Positive.”

Dried-out pine needles and gravel crunch under Dean’s boots as he leads them through the trees. Most of it doesn’t look familiar. It was all too dark, too quick to take anything in. He didn’t have anything on his mind but getting away, and he sure as hell never thought that he’d be coming back on purpose. But here he is. Maybe he’s a sucker, but he’s a sucker trying to do something right for goddamn once.

_The cabin._

“Fuck,” Dean lets slip.

“What?” Victor asks, “What is it?”

“I hid here to catch my breath,” he says, and points at the square of sagging, rotting logs, “The joint is just a little further up northeast from here, right up the hill. I’ll bet my left nut he’s got cameras, so only chance you got is if you keep off the beaten path.”

“Right,” Victor says, “Thank you, Dean. That’s all I needed. You go back to your mate and pup, and I’ll handle it from here.”

Dean has never been more relieved to hear a sentence in his life.
Dean makes Cas wait. He doesn’t want to linger at home and hear about Kevin in the news; he has to know that he’s safe now. Kevin is the whole friggin’ reason that Mary and Dean are both alive, and he knows that should mean a hell of a lot to Cas. It sure as fuck means a lot to Dean. Looking at Mary in his arms...Christ, she’s his whole world. He’s never felt the kind of thing that he feels when he looks at his pup, and he thinks that feeling is the feeling that changed everything for the better.

Trouble is, waiting is the worst part. The world is eerily quiet, like their surroundings know that something big is on the cusp of occurring, something beyond soft winds rustling patches of trees and the dregs of summer’s mountain wildflowers clinging to life. Dean holds onto Mary the entire time. He feeds her once, and whether it’s to soothe Mary to soothe himself, he can’t say.

But he waits. He waits with Sam and with Cas.

In the rearview mirror, Dean watches a whole bunch of emergency vehicles kick up dust. They drive without sirens on, fire trucks and ambulances and a whole slew of police cars, definitely more than the small county police force.

“Dean,” Sam says, and he points out the window.

In the sky, black splotches grow and grow – helicopters.

“Yes, Dean,” Sam says, “This is huge. Fuck.” He opens the door and climbs out, and Dean can’t help but follow, clutching Mary close to him. They watch the helicopters edge closer and closer until they’re directly overhead, low enough to kick up wind and dirt and send Mary into another crying fit. Dean reaches down and covers her eyes with his hand, hushing her.

Behind him, he feels Cas edge near, feels the warmth of his body and the touch of his fingers to Dean’s waist.

Even if the mountains weren’t empty and echoing, the explosion of noise would be unmistakable. From up the hill, Dean hears BANG pop pop pop pop, watches SWAT officers leak from the helicopters like water droplets from a faucet and drop past the points of fir trees and disappear.

The first responders and paramedics swing into motion, opening up ambulances. It’s chaos, and Dean thinks that he hears Cas yell over the helicopters’ racket that they should leave, but he can’t. He won’t leave without knowing how Kevin is. He won’t leave without knowing what the hell kind of mess that he left behind.

Dean doesn’t see Kevin first.

His heart leaps into his throat, thumping out of control. Dean takes a step back as a cloud of officers emerges down the road and careens back into Cas’ chest. Cas steadies him with a hand, but the touch and the scent of his alpha does nothing to calm the panic panic panic panic and run run run run that speed through Dean’s brain.

Alastair, though he is handcuffed and surrounded by an entourage of body-armored police officers, turns his head calmly. His gaze falls directly on Dean. Dean expects a shout, a curse, a threat – anything.

Instead, Alastair’s lips stretch into an ugly smile, and he waves.
“Oh my God,” Sam says, “That’s him, isn’t it? That fucker. I’m going to kill him for what he did to you, I fucking swear, Dean.”

At Dean’s back, a long, vicious growl tears out of Castiel.

More officers file down the hill, many with Alastair’s men in tow. There’s shouting and chaos and paramedics scattering like ants to rush to the scene. The people emerge in waves – cops, criminals…and then the omegas. Paramedics carry them in stretchers rather than attempt to roll gurneys on the uneven ground.

Dean runs forward without thinking, Mary in his arms.

“Dean!” he hears Cas shout, but he doesn’t turn back.

Dean scans the stretchers, sees familiar faces and faces that he doesn’t recognize at all. Skinny, filthy bleeding omegas, dozens of them, seize the scent in the air. It reeks of terror. It reeks of heat. It reeks of blood.

Overhead, more helicopters join the others. The new ones look like news teams.

That’s when, at the end of the caravan of emergency vehicles, Dean sees him – sees Kevin, small and pale. He bolts for the ambulance with Mary tight in his arms, dodging people like bullets. They’re loading him into an ambulance, hooking an oxygen mask around his head, closing the doors –

“Wait!”

“Are you family?” one of the paramedics asks, a stocky beta woman with her brown hair tied back into a bun. Beside her, Kevin looks so frail. He smells like blood and like fear, and he isn’t awake.

“Technically –”

“Sorry, son,” she says. The doors close, the sirens and lights spring to life, and the ambulance jets down the road.

Only a moment later, Cas manages to catch up with him. Breathing heavily, he demands, “Dean, what were you thinking? You could have been hurt. Mary could have been hurt.”

“That was Kevin,” Dean says back, “We gotta follow them. Where would they take him? What’s the nearest hospital?”

“Heart of the Rockies Regional,” Cas answers without hesitation, “I’ll drive.”

Dean kisses Cas on the cheek in thanks, and they jog back to the Impala together. Dean loads Mary into her seat and ignores every question Sam asks. He doesn’t have time to answer questions. He’s just got to know that Kevin is okay. That’s all he wants. Kid did something amazing for Dean, somebody he didn’t really even know. He needs to be alive. Needs to.

Cas starts the car, but he waits to each ambulance and fire truck to head out before him. Dean wants to argue, but he doesn’t, just holds his daughter’s tiny hand and sits in stony, anxious silence before the Impala rumbles down the road and follows the string of red and blue.

It doesn’t take long to reach the hospital, but it takes too long. By the time that Dean, Sam and Castiel pile out of the car with Mary in tow, reporters have swamped the front of the hospital. When they spot them running inside, they leap to action.
“What’s your relation to this case?”

“What are you family of one of the victims?”

Dean turns and aims a glare at the nearest reporter.

“No,” he says, “I’m one of them.”

The barrage of questions avalanches in at this declaration.

“Can you explain what you mean?”

“Are you implying that you were one of the omegas at the compound?”

Castiel growls and shouts, “Stand back! He’s been through enough.” He makes a swat for the nearest reporter, and many of them scatter, most of them betas and omegas unwilling to stand in the path of an alpha coming to the defense of his mate.

But some persist.

“How long were you trapped at the compound?”

“Do you know the other victims?”

Finally, a growl of his own rips out of him, and Dean yells, “Leave me the hell alone! I’m trying to see my friend.”
Vanish With a Sunrise Spark

Chapter Track: 1940 – The Submarines

Vanish With the Sunrise Spark

The thrum of the hospital is quick, frantic. They’re understaffed, and why shouldn’t they be? This is a small medical center catering to thirty-some omegas with conditions ranging from critical to simple dehydration and mental trauma, all with unique and immediate needs. Castiel watches as the hospital staff work and remembers old wounds. Not long ago, he was one of them. Nurses shout orders across the hall at one another and harried doctors skate from room to room.

There aren’t enough.

“Excuse me,” Castiel says, and holds out a hand to stop a slender alpha nurse in powder blue scrubs.

“Buddy, not to be rude, but we’re overworked and I don’t have time to answer questions right now,” she says. She ducks to the side and starts to walk past, striding down the hallway.

“Wait,” he says, and jogs to catch up to her, “I’m a doctor. I used to work in Denver. My mate is an omega that escaped the compound, and I found and treated him.”

The nurse eyes him. Castiel knows that she won’t scent deception on his skin, though he edits out the loss of his license. He’ll only help as long as he’s needed. Legality be damned – the hospital is in the middle of nowhere and it will be hours before any other volunteer doctors make it up into the mountains, or before the omegas most in need can be airlifted to a better-equipped medical facility.

“Wait a minute,” she says, “Are you that doctor from Denver that –”

“Lost his license for helping battered omegas leave their abusive mates? Yes, I am,” Castiel says, and holds out his hand, “Castiel Novak, pleased to meet you.”

“Pam Barnes,” the nurse says, and shakes his hand with an admirable grip, “Follow me, we’ll scrounge up some scrubs to fit you. I’ll let the docs know that you’re helping out.”

Only a handful of minutes later, Castiel has swapped out his sweaty t-shirt and wrinkled jeans for a stiff set of scrubs slightly too small for him in the leg and a mask over his nose and mouth, moderately scented with a neutral chemical to keep the smell of heat at bay. Pam brings him to one of the doctors, a man named Sonny, who looks him over with brows raised and then recites a stern set of instructions to start working with the omegas roomed in the center of the hall while he and his colleague work from one end and the other inward, the most critical cases having already been seen.

Understaffed as they are, the employees of the hospital are efficient. When Castiel sweeps into the room of the first omega, he pulls a clipboard of information on the vitals from the front of the door and flips through it. The omega has been sedated and has a line of saline pumping into her through an IV at the crook of her elbow.

A quick examination reveals that she too has a hormone chip in her ankle, approximately in the area of Dean’s and a wound sliced over her shoulder, not day-fresh but recent enough to need attention. He requests betadine and the tools necessary to extract the hormone chip and tend to the incision and the shoulder injury.
For a time, there is nothing but work on his mind. He cuts open the omega’s ankle and removes the chip, stitches it closed and moves onto the shoulder wound. He cleans and sews it closed and after another once-over of this omega’s condition, he moves onto the next room to his left.

Adrenaline fills him and an old, familiar feeling rushes through Castiel’s veins. This is his love, his work. He’s helping those that need help, omegas that have been hurt and enslaved. It endows Castiel with the feeling ofrightness, of belonging, of knowing that he is in the right place in this moment.

Time fails to be a factor as he moves from omega to omega, removing hormone implant one after another and healing a variety of wounds not only on their backs and shoulders and chests and legs, but the internal trauma caused by nonconsensual knotting and gross neglect of health. He puts four omegas on antibiotics for infections.

Only when Castiel crashes into Sonny in the hallway does he realize that they’ve at last attended to the immediate need of all the omegas in the hospital. He wipes the sweat beaded on his forehead with his arm and turns to check the plastic clock ticking on the ER wall.

Castiel has been working for over four hours.

He should check on Dean and the pup.

Cas learns from Pamela that Dean and Mary are, unsurprisingly, in a recovery room with an omega named Kevin. There, he finds Dean at the side of a small, underfed omega with dark hair and a long, jagged scar segmenting his right eye. He is unconscious, though he appears stable. Dean holds Mary against his shoulder and a board book open in his lap. He’s reading, though Mary looks half-asleep and doesn’t appear to care.

“How is he?” Castiel asks. Dean jerks his head up. When he sees Cas at the doorway in scrubs with a mask around his neck, he cocks his head, but a touch of a smile lifts his lips, just barely.

“Oh, I think,” Dean says, and glances over at the omega in question before he goes on, “Doc took his chip out and took care of some crap on his back. He’s breathing easier. Assholes fucked up his eye, though. Wasn’t like that when I bailed.” The worry in Dean’s scent is evident, almost overpowering mate and love and favorite.

Of the omegas, Kevin certainly isn’t in the worst shape. Like many of the others, he is being hydrated with an IV hooked up to a bag of saline. The aroma of his induced heat lingers, though it is subdued underneath the scents of sanitization – iodine and alcohol. He is in poor condition, a condition similar to Dean’s when Castiel found him wandering along the side of the road in the midst of a torrential downpour.

Castiel steps into the room and treads across the linoleum to stand behind Dean’s chair. He rests his hand on the shoulder without a pup draped over it and works his thumb into the stiff, knotted muscle. With his other hand, he strokes through Dean’s hair, moving aggravated bunches of hair back into place. Beneath the touch, Dean lets out a sigh of relief.

The relaxation in her omega father alerts Mary that something is different. Her eyes open a little more and she looks up at Castiel. At the sight of her alpha father, she shakes a fist, and Cas smiles. He drops his hand from Dean’s hair to the head of his sweet pup and strokes the soft fuzz on her scalp before offering his knuckles under her nose so that she can scent.

Kevin’s heart monitor goes haywire.
Both Dean and Castiel shift their attention to Kevin. His eyes are open – one is brown, but the other is a pupil-less, murky, gray-blue. His good eye is wide and the scent of fear permeates the room. He stares at Castiel: it is the smell of Castiel that terrifies him.

“Hey, hey,” Dean says, and directs Kevin’s attention to him, “It’s okay. That’s Cas. He’s not a bad alpha. He’s a doctor. You’re safe and he’s just here to take care of you. I asked the other doc not to drug you up ‘cause I didn’t think you’d like it, but Cas can give some stuff to you if you want.”

Kevin’s brows draw together and he gives a rapid shake of his head. Then he rasps out, “You.”

“Me, yeah,” Dean says, “I’m Dean. Should’ve told you that.”

Kevin goes quiet and glances from Dean to Cas. At last his eyes fall to where Mary lies draped on Dean’s broad shoulder. Kevin lowers his hand to his belly and points, “Your pup?”

A grin breaks out on Dean’s face. He answers softly, “Yeah. Uh, her name’s Mary. Mary Grace,” he pauses and licks his lips before he continues, “She, ah. Kevin, she’s got you to thank for her life. Me too, probably. You – you wanna hold her?”

Kevin swallows and gazes at Mary’s back for a long stretch before he nods and answers, “Yeah.”

Dean shifts Mary off of his shoulder and into his arms, rising to his feet. He moves Kevin’s IV-free arm into the right shape to support Mary’s head and then sets her there, letting Mary curiously nestle and press her nose against the breast of Kevin’s dotted hospital gown. His eyes go watery as he stares at her. Kevin exhales a shaky breath. He seems reluctant to speak, the same way Dean used to hesitate to use his voice, even when he wanted to.

“She’s pretty awesome,” Dean says, “Got my appetite. And my ears, I think.”

Kevin huffs.

Castiel clears his throat, “I hate to interrupt, but I should check your vitals, Kevin.”

Kevin casts a nervous look at Dean as he collects Mary, and Dean says, “S’all right, man. Cas ain’t gonna hurt you. He’s nothing but a giant alpha teddy bear. Here, check it out,” Dean transfers Mary to his other arm and then tugs down the collar of his leather jacket down far enough for Kevin to be able to see the mating bite on the skin of Dean’s neck. Dean goes on, “He’s my alpha. I trust him.”

And so Kevin relents, though his nervousness only barely subsides. Castiel ducks in to do his job and makes note of each action on the clipboard dangling at the end of Kevin’s hospital bed. He’s improved, though only just, from his condition when he was admitted to the hospital.

“You’re doing a wonderful job,” Castiel assures him, though the sentence doesn’t seem to help much. Castiel is glad that at least Dean can provide some small comfort, and wonders what an omega ally could have done for Dean’s own healing process – what it might do even now. It could be good for the both of them.

After he finishes his tasks, Castiel murmurs a soft, “Excuse me,” and ducks out of Kevin’s room to locate Sonny and report to him that Kevin is awake.

He finds Sonny at the side of one of the younger victims, a boy that can’t be any older than twenty. He appears just as nervous as Dean was and Kevin is, so Castiel hovers in the doorway and says, “Sonny, Kevin is awake. The omega in one-oh-two. His vitals look good for now.”
“Good, good,” Sonny says, “Why don’t you take a break? Get something from the cafeteria, maybe some coffee or something.”

Castiel nods and thanks Sonny. He uses a couple of crumpled bills to buy a package of chips from a vending machine and some coffee from an espresso vendor. The chips are stale and the coffee is watery, but both give him an edge of clarity to his mind that he hadn’t realized had dulled. The fear in the omegas troubles him, not just as a doctor but as an alpha. Omega fear is an awful scent, and Castiel can’t fathom how it is possible that so many alphas get off on it.

He supposes that is why the compound came to be in the first place. It was not a place to indulge in sex; it was a place to indulge in fear. Consensual sex work is one thing – omega trafficking is entirely another. Castiel finds it is hard for him to believe that anyone would patronize Alastair’s brothel that just wanted a tumble between the sheets and to get their knot off.

Dean and Kevin and the dozens of other victims lived in hell. Castiel just prays that some of them will be pulled out.

X

By the time that the sun has set, volunteer physicians from across the state arrive at the hospital. Castiel is no longer needed, and the feeling of that knowledge is bittersweet. More bitter than sweet, perhaps – the knowledge that he may never work like this again hangs heavy in his ribcage and lends a somber air to the space between Castiel and Dean as they wait for Sam to return from Amelia’s, where he drove the Impala and stayed so that he would be out of the way.

When the Impala pulls up to the front of the hospital, Dean buckles Mary into her seat and climbs into the back with her. It’s a true testament to Dean’s exhaustion that he doesn’t bother to remark upon the distinct scent of knotting on Sam’s skin, just rests his head against the plastic car seat and closes his eyes.

Sam and Castiel don’t speak at first, just let the road rumble beneath them and the radio crackle. When Dean begins to snore softly in the backseat, Sam asks, “How’s Kevin?”

“He’s all right,” Castiel answers, “His recovery may take a while. He’s about in the same state that I found Dean in.”

“Dean okay?”

Castiel glances to the backseat of the Impala, where Dean is slumped over Mary’s seat asleep, one arm slung across the front as if to protect, though likely it’s more about seeking comfort. He turns back to Sam and replies, “I think so. Or he will be. He’s worn himself down.”

“Yeah,” Sam says, and exhales.

Castiel rolls his neck and gazes out the window. The cover of night camouflages the landscape, making all dark blue and shadow. Then, as they round a bend in the dirt road, the repetition is broken by bright yellow crime scene tape marring the trees and subtle gateway entrance to the road that leads up to the omega compound.

Beside Castiel, Sam stiffens up in the driver’s seat. He says, “I’m gonna fucking kill that guy.”

Castiel hums, “Yes, I’d like that.”

“I don’t like the way that he looked at Dean and Mary.”
“Nor did I,” agrees Castiel, “If he gets near them, I’ll rip his throat out.”

Sam casts a sidelong glance to him and says, “Good.”

By the time that Sam pulls the Impala into the dirt driveway in front of the house thirty minutes later, Castiel’s limbs are heavy with sleepiness. He lets out a long breath as he unbuckles his seatbelt and says to Sam, “Could you bring Mary in? I’m going to carry Dean inside. Don’t want to wake him.”

Sam nods, and as he opens one door to collect his niece from her seat, Castiel opens the other. He reaches across Dean’s lap and unbuckles his seatbelt before gathering Dean up in both arms. Alpha strength, sometimes, is useful, especially when one’s omega is particularly tall and heavy. Dean murmurs something in his sleep and buries his nose against Castiel’s neck, nuzzling.

Sam unlocks the front door for them and flicks on the light. He offers, “I can put Mary to bed, if you want.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Cas half-smiles, “I have an omega to tuck in.”

Sam chuckles quietly and in the hallway he and Castiel part ways. Cas lowers Dean onto their bed and unties his boots for him, pulling his shoes off and lining them up alongside the bedroom door before he returns to the bed and pulls the covers over Dean’s body.

Just as he pulls himself up and turns, he hears a muddled, “Cas?”

Through heavy-lidded eyes, Dean looks at him. He lifts his arms and gestures for Castiel to come back. Cas can’t deny his mate anything – he steps back to the bed and leans over to apply a kiss to Dean’s forehead. Dean makes a noise of complaint and slurs, “Wanna kiss.”

Castiel chuckles and leans back in to capture Dean’s mouth in his own. Dean’s lips are warm and pliant, tender and sleepy, and the embrace intoxicates Castiel into climbing up onto the bed and boxing Dean in with his limbs as they press their tongues together. He strokes his fingers through Dean’s hair and Dean makes a noise against his mouth.

But Castiel pushes back and says, “If we keep this up, we’re going to end up knotted together.”

“Sounds nice,” Dean mumbles.

Castiel pecks a final kiss to Dean’s cheek and says, “You need sleep, and I need a shower.”

Dean makes another noise, but as soon as Castiel lifts up and off of him, he’s already back to sleeping soundly. Castiel sheds the clothes from the day and leaves them behind on the bathroom floor as he steps into the shower. He uses the moment of privacy to stroke his cock to life and watches his knot grow before coming in droves over the tile wall of the shower. In the aftermath he’s pliant and relaxed but also worn to the bone, and so he finishes scrubbing his skin and shampooing his hair quickly and shuts off the water, stumbling out to towel himself dry.

Castiel returns to bed redressed in sleep pants. He crawls in beside Dean, who shifts into him and says, “Sneaky alpha bastard,” in a sleep-heavy voice, “havin’ fun without me.”

“Sounds nice,” Dean mumbles.

“We can have fun later,” Cas replies, and snuggles in to scent Dean as he closes his eyes and drifts off to sleep.

It feels like a blink later that Castiel rolls over to find Dean’s side of the bed empty and the sheets cool, but when he plucks his cellphone from the bedside table and swipes across the screen to
check the time. He squints at the bright screen through the darkness of the bedroom – 2:19AM. With a groan, Castiel slips out from underneath the covers and pads out to the hallway. He expects the nursery door to be ajar and for Dean to be feeding Mary or sitting with her – but instead sees the soft, bluish flicker of the television from the living room.

There, he finds Dean wrapped up in a blanket with a bowl of leftovers in his lap. His hair sticks up in all directions and shadows mark the undersides of his eyes.

“Dean?” Castiel says.

He glances over, and an exhausted smile tugs up his mouth on one side. He says, “Hey, little alpha.”

“Why aren’t you in bed?” Castiel asks. He means for it to sound curious, but instead he just sounds like he’s whining. He collapses onto the couch beside Dean and nuzzles into his neck, kissing and nipping at the mating mark.

Dean shifts his head to meet Cas’ lips with his own, but the kiss is light, barely there. It’s the kind of kiss he gives when he has a weight in his chest and thoughts reeling through his head. Castiel drapes his arm across the breadth of Dean’s shoulders and pulls him in close, maneuvering them both around so that he can join his omega underneath the warmth of the blanket.

“Did you have a nightmare?” Castiel asks.

Dean shakes his head, “For once, no. I was thinking about Kevin.”

“What about him?” asks Cas.

“He doesn’t have anywhere to go,” Dean says, staring into the half-eaten bowl in his lap, “We used to talk sometimes when he was real messed up. He told me he grew up with just his mom, and that she got sick when he was fifteen and kicked it a year later. Spent the next two years in foster care and aged out. He was living in an omega shelter in Salida when Alastair got him. He just…we have to give him a home, baby. We can’t just leave him out there. Right?”

Castiel presses his nose against Dean’s temple and says, “Sam will be moving to his new place soon. We could put Kevin up in the guest room.”

Dean’s face melts from anxious exhaustion to stark relief and he says, “Yeah?”

“I’d never leave somebody without a home, Dean, let alone one of your friends,” Castiel replies, “and this is your home, too. You can make decisions regarding it.”

Dean studies Cas’ face with soft, serious eyes. He shakes his head and says, “Sometimes I get to thinking that you ain’t real and I’m dreamin’ this whole place up. You sure you’re real?”

“I promise that I am real,” Castiel says.

Dean kisses the corner of Cas’ mouth and says, “Good.”

X

Religiously, Dean drives the Impala into town every day and visits Kevin. Sometimes he brings Mary along with him and other times he leaves her with Castiel, who will tote her around the house with the sling fastened over his shoulder and regale her with stories of Gabriel’s antics or improvised fairy tales that feature Mary as a dashing lady knight. He knows that she doesn’t yet
understand him, but hearing the voice of one’s parent can’t hurt.

Sam takes his rescheduled flight back to California, and when he arrives in Buena Vista three and a half days later, he enlists Dean and Castiel’s help in moving the boxes from the trailer hitched to the back of the car and into the condo. It’s a nice, cozy place to live, painted a deep turquoise that Dean voices his hatred of immediately and Castiel thinks is attractive.

To celebrate when they’re done transporting Sam’s belongings, all of them – Sam, Amelia, Castiel, Dean and Mary – sit down to a picnic on Sam’s living room floor, eating sandwiches and a pre-packaged pie that Dean insisted upon bringing from the grocery store.

While they’re in town, they purchase jeans of the non-pregnancy variety for Dean and a solid few sets of clothing and toiletries for Kevin. Dean insists upon arranging them all in the guest bedroom himself.

With Sam cleared out entirely of the house, it feels empty. Dean spends an evening after visiting Kevin scrubbing down the guest bathroom and cleaning every inch of the bedroom, using a neutral-scent carpet cleaner before he vacuums, and an omega-preferred detergent for laundering the sheets. When Dean finishes the project, the guest room smells model home clean to Castiel, and looks just as polished.

And then, a week and a half after the infiltration of the omega compound, Dean arrives home from the hospital and announces, “Pam told me that Kevin’s gonna be ready to be released tomorrow.”

Castiel glances up from his now nearly-finished blanket for Mary and lifts his brows, “Oh?”

“Yeah,” Dean replies, and scratches the back of his neck, “I think everything’s ready, but uh. Y’know. He’s skittish ‘round alphas still. So you be careful, you hear?”

“Of course,” Castiel says, and he has every intention of abiding by that promise. An alpha that does not understand an omega’s fear of them, especially the fear of an omega that has seen more suffering than most ever witness in their lifetime, is a sorry alpha indeed. Castiel does not care to count himself among their numbers.

The following day, Dean leaves in the late morning to collect Kevin and leaves Mary to Castiel’s care. He knows that they’ve arrived when the familiar rumble of the Impala sounds outside the house. Cas plucks Mary off of her blanket on the floor and stands to greet them. The doorknob on the front door turns, and the smell of omega blows into the house with the brisk breeze.

Kevin walks in a step behind Dean, using Dean as a shield as an omega in a clichéd romcom might use an alpha. He wears some of the new clothes that they purchased him, although he carries a suitcase of belongings donated to the omega victims by good Samaritans across the whole of the United States.

“Welcome, Kevin,” Castiel says. Against his chest, Mary gurgles a greeting of her own.

Kevin balks at his voice and steps back a little further behind Dean.

“It’s okay, buddy,” Dean says, and touches the tips of his fingers to Kevin’s forearm, “Let me show you your room, all right?”

Castiel backs off and lets them pass by him, although he follows just a few steps after. It would be rude to hover, but he still overhears a little of the conversation as Dean gives Kevin the nickel tour of his new home.
“You got some more clothes in here —”

“I didn’t know what kind a’ toothpaste you like so I got the kind with Han Solo on the tube —”

“You need anything, you holler, got it?”

“Smells like alpha in here,” are the first words that Castiel hears in Kevin’s more reserved voice.

Dean goes silent, the enthusiasm of showing Kevin the bedroom wearing off in an instant. He clears his throat and says, “Shit. I’m sorry. I tried really hard to get the smell out. My brother Sammy was staying here for a while and stunk the place up and I…I got some a’ those omega-scent wall things. You know, like the freshener crap you plug in? You want me to grab those for you?”

“Yes,” Kevin says, and adds as an afterthought, “Please.”

“You’re safe here,” Dean says after a beat, “You got a lock on the door so you can keep us out if you need to. I’ll go grab that thing for you. You gonna be all right for a couple minutes?”

“Yeah.”

“Awesome,” Dean says without conviction, and heads into the hallway. As soon as he sees Cas only a handful of paces away, he narrows his eyes and asks, “You listening, little alpha?”

“I apologize,” Castiel immediately jumps to say, “I shouldn’t have eavesdropped.”

“Nah, you’re good,” Dean answers, “Just. You know. Be good, okay? No alpha voice, no posturing, no growling, you capisce? He’s freaked out and…”

“And?”

Dean frowns and motions for Castiel to pass Mary to him. Before he speaks again, Dean smacks a wet kiss to Mary’s forehead and says, “I’m kinda freaked out too. I mean…Alastair. I know they’re holding him for now, but what about after that? What if they just – just say fuck it and let him loose? He knows my name now, ´cause of the news.”

Castiel leans forward and gives a fierce kiss to Dean, a protective kiss. He admits, “I don’t know what’s going to happen, Dean. But know this: I will never, ever let that son of a bitch anywhere near you. He will die a painful death if he thinks of getting within ten miles. Painful and slow.”

The truth is, the system is not consistent with convictions for omega traffickers. Some are convicted and others are not, and the decision often lies solely with the power of the individual responsible. Castiel does not know how much stock he puts in the system with that knowledge in his pocket – that, and the knowledge that Alastair Locke is a very, very powerful man.
The Dice Are Loaded

Chapter Notes

BIG GIANT ALL-CAPS WARNING, I AM SO SERIOUS. There are very, very intense descriptions of Dean's past and what occurred at Alastair's compound. If you'd rather not read that, it's fairly easy to identify where you need to stop reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Track: Everybody Knows (cover) – Elizabeth & the Catapult

The Dice Are Loaded

Kevin’s presence dredges up reminders of the way that Dean was when Cas first urged him into his Prius and out of the rain, and took him here. Dean remembers how overwhelming the scent of alpha was in the house: not as bad as the playrooms at the brothel, but enough to tell Dean that no one lived in the home but a single, lonely alpha. The key difference is that from the beginning, Cas emanated the aroma of mate. His brand of alpha smelled like comfort and safety and home, not like the sharp, testosterone-infused scents that soaked every inch of Alastair’s compound.

It makes Dean wonder what would have happened if Cas was any other alpha on the planet. A low, sick feeling deep in his gut tells him that instead of having a hormone implant removed from his leg and a hot meal, he would be on his knees sucking knot, or taking it just like he had in the brothel. That must be what Kevin smells – another threat and a promise of pain. That’s what alpha says to Kevin. It says danger.

At this epiphany, Dean resolves to make Kevin as comfortable as possible. He wakes early on the day after Kevin’s arrival, collects Mary from her crib in the nursery to feed and change her, and loops the sling around his shoulder to hold her against him while he whips up an awesome breakfast. For a few minutes, he fiddles with Castiel’s stereo and pulls up some music application on his iPad. It took at least three tries for Cas to show him how the damn thing worked, but he thinks he’s got the hang of it now. Dean maintains that they should move the record player up here so he can listen to music with some real quality to it, but the iPad isn’t terrible. He likes having all the songs that he wants right at the tips of his fingers.

Man, he missed a lot of tech stuff in his seven years in the basement of Alastair’s compound.

Sometimes he feels kind of shitty with that knowledge, but today he’s determined not to fall back into that crap. He’s gotta show Kevin that shit can be okay, that it’ll get better over time. Hell, Dean isn’t in great shape some days, but seeing Kevin…how he hangs his head, how he stands with his shoulders hunched in and his arms ready to defend – it reminds Dean of how he was.

And he has gotten somewhere, even if that somewhere is only a short distance down the road from where he was.

Dean picks out some AC/DC to get the day started on and glances down affectionately at Mary. She peers back up at him with her sweet little eyes.

“You like AC/DC, sweetheart?” he asks, and grins, “Good. Daddy’ll show you all the good stuff,
don’t you worry.’’

Mary wiggles her legs a little and kneads her tiny feet into Dean’s stomach. He chuckles and shuffles into the kitchen to get something goddamn delicious started. He begins by setting up the coffee pot with some fresh grounds for Cas and grabs the stuff he’ll need for sizzling up some chocolate chip pancakes from the cabinets, making inventory of the ingredients before he starts.

Dean used to make chocolate chip pancakes for Sammy all the time before he took off outta Kansas. Cooking seemed like the only thing his dad didn’t get on his case for. John Winchester wasn’t exactly complimentary of it, either, but he didn’t nitpick about Dean getting injured or inviting trouble, just ate what Dean produced. So making grub used to be what made him the most happy.

Now Mary and Cas make him happy more than anything else can, but he still likes cooking up the good stuff.

The song shaking through the stereo fades from You Shook Me All Night Long to T.N.T., and Dean can’t help the grin that rises on his face as he starts mixing up the ingredients for breakfast. He dips his head along to the beat and pauses whisking to slide across the kitchen floor in his socks, pretending that Mary in her sling is his electric guitar.

Mary presses her feet into his belly again as he moves, and Dean lets out a long, loud bark of laughter before patting her bottom through plaid cotton and returning to get cracking on pancakes.

When the smell of batter sizzling, chocolate chips melting, and fresh coffee brewing clouds air of the kitchen, Kevin peers around the corner. His cloudy eye scintillates guilt deep in Dean’s gut, but he still pastes a smile on his face and says, “Makin’ some breakfast, dude. You want a drink while I finish cranking out these pancakes?”

Kevin finally rounds the corner and toes into the kitchen nervously. He asks, voice hardly audible over the sound of the guitar riff rolling from the speakers in the living room, “Do I smell coffee?”

“Yeah, man, let me grab you a mug,” Dean says. He reaches over to pat Kevin’s arm, but doesn’t even make contact before Kevin flinches back from the touch. Dean lowers his hand and casts an apologetic smile at Kevin before shifting and pouring some steaming joe into a mug. Dean places the coffee at the kitchen table and beside it places the sugar shaker and half-used carton of half-and-half from the fridge.

Kevin ignores the sugar but pours a conservative helping of cream into it.

“You’re different,” Kevin says, “than you used to be, I mean.”

That is all too true. Dean at the compound was an entirely different entity. Fuck, aside from the fact that Dean is happy now, he doesn’t feel like he has to be on the defensive all the damn time. He’s relaxed. He’s at home, literally. The smells here are the scents that make Dean’s muscles relax and a smile grow on his face.

“Well, yeah,” Dean agrees, and moves the skillet from the stove. He forks two pancakes onto Kevin’s plate and sets it in front of him with both synthetic and genuine maple syrup options. Kevin goes for the real stuff as Dean grabs at the back of his neck and says, “I mean, things are different.”

At Alastair’s, he was another man. Dean didn’t speak to most of the omegas, and when he did he snapped at them, shouted curses or bit out insults. They knew he was scared. You could smell fear
on every omega’s skin. Worse than that, by the end, the other omegas were afraid of Dean just like they were afraid of Alastair and his alpha clients. Dean was a favorite, and that made Dean just as bad as the alphas that tortured them.

Dean never snapped at Kevin. He seemed too vulnerable, too good natured to deserve Dean’s wrath and general venom. Dean at Alastair’s was a snake, complicit in the schemes of pain and power that reigned in Alastair’s compound. He’ll spend his whole life paying for the shit that he did, that he said.

At the thought, Dean shifts his gaze to his daughter. Ugly, all-consuming self-hatred twists over him like a dozen slimy limbs. He doesn’t deserve Mary, doesn’t deserve the comfort and warmth that he’s basked in these past months with Cas and now with his pup. As if in protest of Dean's sweeping change in mood, Mary shakes a fist at him and kicks her legs out.

For a long while, Dean and Kevin don’t talk. Disheartened, Dean retreats to the living room and switches off the music. When he returns to the kitchen, he takes a seat at the table and leaves a chair of space between himself and Kevin. He says, “I guess I don’t deserve any of this. I know that.”

Kevin pauses, swallows his pancakes, and sets his fork down with a soft clink against the plate.

“That’s…not it,” Kevin says. He studies Dean with his good eye and goes on, “You did what you had to, to get by. I get that. I’m just wondering if this is more of that. This alpha thing. Are you sure about him?”

“Dude, yeah,” Dean says, “Right from the start, Cas has been good to me. First thing he did was get me dry and give me food and take that damn hormone crap outta my leg. And he left me alone when I needed it, you know? Never pushed me, never treated me bad. Not that we always get along. We argue about crap…but. He loves me, you know?” Dean feels his face flush at that. His chest feels all sorts of weird at the words being said aloud, even though he knows it’s true. He coughs and adds, “And, uh. I love him too.”

Kevin shakes his head. He takes a drink of his coffee and says, “I just don’t understand how you can trust an alpha.”

Before Dean can respond, Cas shuffles into the kitchen, dark hair sticking up every which way. He yawns and offers Dean and Kevin a smile. Dean smiles back, but Kevin focuses his attention on his pancakes, chewing carefully. Cas makes his way to the pot of coffee, but Dean stands and stops him with a hand. He says, “Sit. I’ll get it.”

Castiel hums and scratches his fingers over his rumpled t-shirt before he obeys Dean’s command and sits at the other end of the kitchen table from Kevin, as far as he can manage. Dean sets a mug of hot, black coffee in front of Cas and serves him some pancakes. When he takes a step back, Cas coils an arm around Dean’s waist and reels him back in. Sleepily, Cas nuzzles into Dean’s side and murmurs, “Thank you, Dean.”

“Nothin’ to it, little alpha,” Dean says back, and makes off to grab his own meal.

Cas doesn’t say much at first, just drizzles maple syrup over his pancakes and downs his coffee in generous, sloppy gulps. He starts to look a little more alive when the caffeine hits, and asks, “How are you feeling, Kevin?”

Kevin glances up, a panicked expression on his face. He looks at Dean, and then back to Cas again. After a beat, the only response that Kevin musters up is a tight, forced shrug. Then, he dips
into his breakfast with renewed vigor and finishes every last bite on the plate until it is completely clean.

Without a word, Kevin stands, and bustles out of the kitchen. The sound of the guest bedroom door swinging open and being locked behind him echoes in the wake of his absence.

Dean sighs and strokes his fingers over Mary’s head before he says, “I’m working on it. He’s real scared of alphas, worse off than me, ‘cause you just smelled like my mate, even when I was freaked out by you.”

“It’s a process,” Castiel agrees, “I’m not offended by it.”

Dean rubs an aggravated hand over his face and says, “Yeah, I get that. But, Cas. He said to me this morning that I act different here than I did back in the joint. I was a real piece a’ work over there. Not to him, really, but to the others? I was terrible, I was fucking poison. I just keep wondering if somebody like that really deserves something as good as…this.” Dean makes a vague gesture toward Cas and out to their surroundings.

Cas frowns.

“I just ain’t that great a person,” Dean says quietly.

“Dean,” Castiel says, voice all alpha reason and eerie calm, “You did what you had to survive. You did what you thought was right. No one blames you for that.”

“I do,” Dean says, “I blame me for that.” With that bitter note, Dean leaves his breakfast half-untouched and stands. He makes a hasty exit and goes for the first place he can think of – downstairs, to Cas’ LP collection.

In her sling, Mary fusses. Dean hushes her as he thumbs through the faded and creased sleeves that make up the selection of records, and pulls out Zep II. Nothing like a good old classic to keep his head on straight. After the soft crackle-pop of static of the needle on vinyl, Whole Lotta Love starts to play. Dean maneuvers Mary out of her sling as the music plays. Red-faced, she bats at him.

Dean presses a soft kiss to her forehead and apologizes, “Sorry things have been so scary, pup.” He rubs his palm over her back, and her heartbeat against his shoulder threads a string of peace through him.

Maybe he doesn’t deserve that small peace, but it settles warmly in the chambers of his heart anyway. And as his pulse slows to steady, Mary stops crying. She presses her tiny nose into Dean’s neck and huffs as she scents.

Dean may not have done many things right in his life, but at least he can say that cookin’ up his sweet pup counts among the best.

X

Later in the afternoon, after Dean finishes recuperating via getting the Led out, he knocks on Kevin’s bedroom door and says, “Hey, it’s me. I brought Mary. Thought maybe you could use some company.”

A long roll of silence has Dean about to turn away, but just as he starts to back off, the noise of the lock clicking undone sounds from the other side of the door, and it cracks open to reveal Kevin’s tired, stress-lined face. He studies Dean and Mary for a moment before he ushers them in, and closes the door behind them, locking it once more.
“I brought her blanket and some toys and crap,” Dean says, “It okay if I set her up on the bed?”

“That’s fine,” answers Kevin. He hugs his arms around himself like it’s cold, even though Cas keeps the house at a comfortable seventy degrees at all times.

Dean places Mary on the bedspread and rolls out her guitar blanket. He transfers her there and parks himself on the edge of the mattress, dangling a rope of plastic, rainbow-colored chain links above her head. He explains, “She’s kind of too little to really appreciate toys, but she’s a big fan of colorful crap and shit that makes a lot of noise.”

Kevin sits on the mattress and scoots up beside Mary, crisscrossing his legs. He stares at Dean’s pup for a good, long while before he finally reaches out. Mary seems entertained enough by Kevin, scenting the air with her nose all scrunched up. Kevin touches the tip of his finger to her fat cheek. Mary reacts by reaching up and closing her itty-bitty fist around Kevin’s finger.

“You ever worry about her alpha dad?” asks Kevin, “Her real one.”

“Not really,” Dean answers, “I mean, you and I both know that plenty of alphas paid extra to knot us raw. There are a baker’s dozen dudes it could be and I don’t think any one of them would give a shit that an omega he paid to screw over birthed a pup.”

“Yeah,” Kevin says, and holds out his hand for Mary’s chain link toy. Dean passes it to him, and Kevin jangles it a little over Mary’s head. She doesn’t let go over his finger, but does stare with fascination as the plastic bounces.

“Hey,” Dean says, and Kevin looks up, “Look, I’m real sorry about breakfast. I trust Cas, but that doesn’t mean you have to. And I get it. If you want, I can bring your food here. You won’t have to come outta this room, just have to unlock the door long enough for me to get your meals inside.”

Kevin licks his lips. A dent forms between his brows as he thinks it over, and remains as he gives Dean a nod. He says, “That’s…probably best. Thanks.”

“No problem, man,” Dean says, “and hey, Cas has got this massive collection of books if you want me to bring you some. I’ve read a bunch now if you wanna check out the ones I liked. You like Star Wars? He’s got a lot of Star Wars books.”

“That sounds nice.”

Dean leaves it at that, and he and Kevin spend the next half-hour talking about inane crap, the kind of stuff they used to talk about when one or the other of them was in ugly shape and needed a pick-me-up. Dean tells him that he’ll snag Cas’ VCR and the Star Wars tapes so that Kevin can rewatch them, and Kevin seems cheered by the prospect.

Mary’s presence, too, does some good. She bats at Kevin and holds onto him, and even though his little sweetheart is so young, she’s a smart fucking cookie. She picks up from Kevin’s scent that he’s tense and afraid, maybe, and in her little pup way wants to make him feel better.

Still, when Dean slips out later, he worries. He feels better, and he knows Kevin feels better – he could smell it on the kid – but he can’t help the itch of concern at Kevin’s distress. Dean wants to help Kevin heal, but he doesn’t know how. He doesn’t have a magic cure-all, just like Cas didn’t have a magic cure-all for Dean. Difference is, Cas had the advantage of an appealing scent. Dean probably just smells like an idiot. But he’s an idiot that’s trying, and that’s the best that he’s got.

X
A handful of days later finds Dean dozing on the couch with Mary on his chest while Cas washes the dishes from that night’s supper. He made black bean soup with red pepper and smoked cheddar, and afterward Dean was so full he could burst – he fed Mary on the couch just after. Now, they’re both about to sleep off respective food comas.

Kevin, as he’s been doing, took his meal from Dean at his bedroom door, and locked it behind himself. Sometime in the middle of the night, Kevin leaves the dishes from the day outside the bedroom door, as well as any books that he’s finished.

The kid is a freaking reading machine. He’s put away more books in the short time that he’s been staying with them than Dean has managed to get through in months. To be fair, his reading time and patience has been limited since Mary arrived on the scene. But before her birth, he was still a slow reader.

Castiel’s ringtone, *London Calling*, blares out from the kitchen, over the sound of the water running in the sink and the white noise of the nine o’clock news on the television. Dean makes a noise of complaint, but Cas is quick to the draw. He hears the rumble of his mate’s voice, and then:

“Yes, just a moment. I think he’s still awake. Dean?”

Dean cracks open one eye to glare at Cas, who’s standing over the couch with his palm over his cell phone’s receiver.

“It’s Victor,” Castiel explains, “He wants to talk to you.”

Dean groans, but extends his hand for the phone and presses it against the shell of his ear, answering, “What’s going on?”

“Hey, Dean,” Victor says, “So, I’ve been talking with the prosecutor that’ll be working with us on this case, and she’s asked me to ask you if you’d be willing to be taped giving us a tour of the compound facility.”

Dean’s mouth goes dry in an instant.

“Well, for starters, there’s only so much that we can glean from physical evidence,” Victor says, “and we’ve got evidence that’ll be a good jumping point for us, but none of that is the emotional ammo that Ms. Talbot says we’re gonna need to take Alastair down. She thinks if we’ve got a victim explaining different parts of Alastair’s compound that we’re far more likely to win a jury over.”

“So it’s going to trial,” Dean says.

“Yeah, Alastair’s arraignment was yesterday. Bail set at two mil.”

Two million. Dean’s toes curl and he wonders if that’s a sum of money that Alastair would be able to make.

Dean doesn’t like this. Dread like ice water fills his veins from his heart out. He wonders if Victor can feel his panic over the phone, if he knows just how heavy the metal weight of his question is as it coils inside Dean’s intestines like a thick, black snake.

“Dean, listen,” Victor goes on after Dean has been silent for too long, “I want you to know that you do not have to do this. We are not going to make you. But we need *everything* to get Alastair.
Bringing him to justice is not going to be cut and dry, and I got a feeling that this is gonna be ugly. We need all we can get on our side to put him away for good.”

“I know,” Dean answers, voice weak. Above him, Cas studies him through serious, concerned eyes. Dean massages his temple and says, “Um. Would it be all right if my mate tagged along for this shit show? For moral support. He wouldn’t be in the video. Just. You know. There.”

“I don’t see why not,” Victor responds.

Dean exhales and says, “Then I guess I’d better do this crap.”

“This means a lot,” Victor says, “For you and for the others. Only reason I’m not askin’ one of them is because none of the other victims have had any time to heal. They’re all terrified.”

“I am too, man.”

“I know, but you got a lot of good people backing you up,” Victor says, “We need to do this as soon as we can. Everything’s kind of chaos over here, but it looks like we could all do late morning on the day after next. How does that sound to you?”

“Yeah, I can make that,” answers Dean.

“Great,” Victor says, “You’re doing some real good, kid. Some real damn good. We all appreciate it. Just know that.”

Dean doesn’t know how to answer that other than with an awkward, stilted, “Yeah, all right,” and then a terse goodbye.

When he hangs up the phone and hands it back to Cas, Castiel asks, “What’s going on?”

“Victor says the prosecutor wants to film me givin’ a tour of Alastair’s joint.”

“Why?” Cas asks. There’s an edge to his voice, something verging on alpha anger and the instinct to protect.

“‘Emotional ammo’ were the words that Victor used,” Dean responds, “and there ain’t no one else that’s gonna do it, so it’s left up to me. We gotta do all we can to get Alastair. He’s not gonna go easy, you know? You’re coming with me, though.”

“What about Mary?”

“I’ll call Sammy,” Dean replies, “He won’t mind some babysitting duty.”

Castiel lets out a long breath and then rounds the couch. He sits on the unoccupied cushion near Dean’s feet, and rests his palm on Dean’s calf. Neither of them says anything, but the gesture is all that either needs. Just a little warmth, a little comfort, before it all goes straight to hell.

X

On the day of the videotaping, Dean checks Mary’s diaper bag at least six times. He’s counted three diapers and two bottles and she has her guitar blanket and some toys, but he’s still worried. He knows he shouldn’t be, that his anxiety is bleeding from one place to another, but he doesn’t care. He counts her things again.

It’s a cold day. Frost covers the hills with a fine, grayish layer of damp, and a chill makes the air sting when Dean and Castiel tread out to the Impala. Dean tucks Mary into her seat and fusses with
the tiny booties that Cas knitted for her a night ago. She needs them for her toes to stay warm, but she seems determined to keep kicking the damn things off.

Dean drives. He keeps one eye on the road at all times and the other at the rearview mirror, where the reflection of a grumpy-faced pup stares back at him. Dean can’t tell if Mary is pissed off because she couldn’t sleep for shit last night, because Dean reeks of stress, or because it’s cold. It’s probably a combination of all three.

He wishes that he and Cas had something to say to break up the silence in the car, but neither of them does. This whole thing is one giant clusterfuck crapfest, and there’s nothing that either of them can say that’ll change that, and certainly nothing that’s going to distract them from the reality of it. So Dean and Castiel keep quiet for the entire forty-five minutes that it takes to get to Sam’s bright blue condo.

When Dean knocks on the door with Mary’s seat in tow, Sam answers with a cup of yogurt in his hand and a spoon in his mouth. His casual attitude swings into concern as soon as he smells the tumult of emotion radiating off of Dean, but Dean ignores his brother’s badgering and shoulders his way into the house. He sets Mary’s carrier on the carpet, and lowers the diaper bag next to it.

“All right,” Dean says, “Just so you know, she’s like, ten kinds of cranky right now. I packed some bottles that you’ll wanna stick in your fridge, and make sure you heat ‘em up a little before you try and feed her. If she’s pissy, just hold her and let her scent you. I think that’s all. Um. I should be good to pick her up in a couple hours, but we’ll call you when we’re on our way.”

“Dean,” Sam says, and sets aside his half-eaten yogurt cup on an unopened box. He crouches down to undo the buckles on Mary’s seat and lifts her out, tucking her into the crook of his arm before he stands. He goes on, “I’m really sorry about all this crap. It’s not fair, and I. I got your back, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean says, and waves Sam off, “Just don’t drop my pup and give her the same brain damage you got, okay?”

Sam rolls his eyes and says, “If by ‘brain damage’ you mean ‘concern,’ then maybe it’ll do her some good.”

Dean rolls his eyes right back and makes for the door.

“And Dean?”

He half-turns, “Yeah?”

“Good luck, okay?”

“Thanks,” Dean manages, and makes his escape from Sam’s condo before the festival of emotions can get any more freaking festive.

Cas doesn’t say anything when Dean climbs back into the driver’s seat of the Impala and turns her out of Sam’s neighborhood. Dean appreciates the hell out of that. He doesn’t say as much.

As they drive back up from town and turn onto the dirt road snaking through the mountains, the tension in the car mounts. The sound of the classic rock station, instead of making Dean feel better, sends his heart pumping so hard that he can hear his blood rush in his ears, and he has to switch it off and leave them to painful quiet.

When they make it to the entrance to Alastair’s compound, a police officer stops them and has to wave them through, up the hidden, twisting road. Dean’s knuckles whiten on the steering wheel as
he drives. He’s never been up this far during the day, and he never saw the outside of the brothel even once. When he ran for it, he didn’t turn to look back. He didn’t want to know.

It’s huge, bigger than he imagined. The place looks like one of those woodland retreats where hunters congregate and folks hold family reunions. The roof is red-tiled and expensive looking, and the outside is built with log cabin style in mind. It doesn’t look anything like the terrible place that Dean knows it to be. It looks like a cozy bed and breakfast that serves food made from scratch for every meal and has handmade quilts on the beds.

It makes him feel sick to his stomach.

Dean parks the Impala alongside a sleek, silver Lexus. He spots Victor on the stoop of the joint, engaged in conversation with a youngish omega woman with well-styled hair and a charcoal-gray pencil skirt on. She’s wearing heels, which seems impractical for this area, but whatever.

Victor waves Dean and Castiel over with a flick of his wrist and says, “Hey, guys. You doing okay this morning?”

“Peachy,” answers Dean.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that,” Victor says. He sounds sincere. He cocks his head at the woman and says, “Dean, this is Bela Talbot. She’s the prosecutor for the case, real good at what she does.”

Bela offers Dean a white-toothed grin and a manicured hand. When Dean shakes, she says, “Pleased to meet you.”

“Same,” Dean grumbles, even though this is one of the least pleasurable things that he has ever had to do in his entire life.

Victor moves on to introduce the police officer that’ll be in charge of handling the camera, some bright-eyed guy named Ash that looks like he tumbled out of the nineteen eighties. Dean shakes his hand and offers a stiff greeting. His only comfort is the scent of Cas a foot behind him.

“Let’s do this shit,” Victor finally says, and he guides the entourage past yellow crime scene tape and into the building.

“There’s a lobby,” Dean says, bewildered. He’s never seen this part of the place. It follows the pattern of hunting lodge décor, with the taxidermy head of a stag on one side of the room, staring down the glass-eyed head of a buffalo on the opposite. Below them erotic paintings of omegas hang, wide-eyed beauties kneeling down and presenting, mouths parted and expressions needy.

“I take it that you’ve never seen this part of the place,” Victor says.

“No,” Dean responds, “I guess when we got herded around, it was through service stairways?” He never saw anything that wasn’t cold, hard concrete unless it was the room belonging to an alpha client.

“Why don’t we start there?” suggests Victor, “We’ve been through that area.”

Dean clenches his jaw and agrees. He has to follow Victor through the plush parts of the compound, since he’s never laid eyes on them before, but once he unlocks a heavy, metal door and they step through to narrow, cold stairs, it’s hell sweet hell all over again.

Dean can’t count how many times he was brought up and down these stairs by Alastair’s muscle. Sometimes if the client fucked him up nice and good, they’d have to carry him up from the
playrooms or down from the nice bedrooms. Dean would bleed all over them and they’d complain about having to bleach out the stains from their shirts.

“Dean?” Victor says, “Can you tell us about this area?”

Dean shakes himself out of the nightmare and says, “These stairs are how Alastair’s muscle took us from our cells to clients. Either upstairs to the bedrooms or down to the playrooms. Um. Sometimes, if you got hurt real bad, they had to carry you.”

“Can you show us the bedrooms?”

Dean marches up the stairs and picks the first level he recognizes as a client floor. They use a key to open up one of the bedrooms. The familiarity of it strikes Dean to the core. The room is comfortable, fitted with a queen-sized bed and television, hardly different than a regular room at your average bed and breakfast, were it not for the collection of complimentary toys displayed on a set of shelves beside the TV stand, each labeled with the price it cost to use them.

“This, uh,” Dean swallows the lump in his throat, “This is the best place you could end up. Alphas that like their omegas here were better than the kind that took you to the playrooms. Usually they just knotted you and wanted to watch TV or something. Sometimes they liked to use the toys, other times they paid extra for you stay and, ah. Cuddle, I guess. And let them talk to you.”

“Can you elaborate on that?” asks Victor.

“Yeah, um. There were alphas that liked to play house, I guess,” Dean says, balling his hands into fists at his side, “That was why Alastair didn’t kill my pup off right away when I got knocked up. There are alphas that’ll pay through the nose to knot a pregnant omega and pretend that they’re yours.”

All bred up with my pup, they’d say, all cloying sweetness, you’ll get fat with my pups and as soon as you birth them I’ll catch you with a litter all over again. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?

When Dean finishes showing them the bedroom, they return to the stairs and venture down into the belly of the beast. He takes them to the omega cells, right to the one that he slept in. He explains the old mattresses and how they shackled you up the wall if you couldn’t behave, how the small space on the sides of the barred doors were so the muscle could slide you food, usually slop or drugged.

Then Dean takes them down further, to the playrooms. He explains the chase room, where omegas were just supposed to run so that an alpha could chase them, tackle them down and knot them.

“Those alphas usually liked it good and bloody,” he says, furious at the weakness in his own voice. He also shows them where alphas could chain you up on a wall or suspend you, gag your mouth and hurt you with whips or knives or toys that hurt when you put them inside. He starts to shake, starts to feel like he might vomit, but he knows there’s one place left that he has to show them.

Dean takes them to The Chair.

Objectively, The Chair looks like a weird wooden piece of crap. There’s no way that he can explain it without visuals – so Dean casts a shaken glance back at the camera and the grave faces of Bela, Victor and Cas, and climbs up on The Chair just like he was born to do it. He legs shake so hard that the restraints on it jostle, and the legs of The Chair scrape against the floor.

“This was…t-this w-was,” Dean pauses, breathes in, and explains, “This was where you ended up if you got a real mean alpha. It’s also where you got put if Alastair thought you needed to be put in
your place. Um. Your…your hands went here,” he splays his arms out, wrists on either side of his head, “legs here,” he rests his ankles against the restraints meant to tug your legs apart, “and then you got your neck put down here, so they make you present.”

Dean climbs off, eyes wet and shame burning through his entire body. He feels dirty, so dirty, so, so, dirty –

Dean throws up.

“Fuck,” he says.

“Dean,” Victor says, “If you need to stop, we can go back upstairs.”

“No,” Dean says, and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, “This is the last place. I’m not feeling too great but I gotta make sure everyone knows.”

He wraps his arms around himself. Instinct makes him retreat into himself, shoulders hunching in and head hanging low, but Dean forces himself to look directly at the camera as he says, “When you got sent to The Chair, you never came back okay. You got beat up so bad it felt like your whole skin was just bruises. Other times, you got whipped,” he pulls up the hem of his shirt and turns his back to say, “That big, thick one? I got that scar on The Chair. Alpha hit me so hard I thought I was gonna die. I was hoping I would die, actually.”

When Dean turns back and stares into the menacing eye of the video camera, he continues, “When I got put in The Chair, alphas knotted me so hard I could feel blood running down my legs by the end of it. Once, I had an alpha rip his knot right out of me when it hadn’t even gone down yet, not even a little. I don’t really remember much of what happened after that.”

Dean takes in a rib-rattling breath and concludes, “That’s what kind of place this is. This place is hell.”

“Ash, shut off the camera,” Victor instructs. His voice is flat with anger.

As soon as Ash obeys, Dean flings himself forward and into Cas’ chest. Cas wraps his arms around Dean’s back and crushes them together. Dean buries his face in Cas’ neck and Cas burrows into his hair. Fearfearfearfearfear clangs around in his head like warfare, but as tears leak out of the corners of Dean’s eyes into Cas’ shirt, mate and safe and Cas leak in at the edges.

Dean trembles all the way back up from The Chair, up the concrete stairs and through the lobby and back outside, where blessedly, Dean has no memories to assault him. He shivers in Cas’ arms and clings to him. Cas holds him close, and doesn’t let him go.

When Dean dares to look up at Cas’ face, his alpha’s eyes are red-rimmed and his cheeks are tearstained. It makes Dean burrow into him all over again, clutching Cas’ cotton t-shirt in handfuls. He’s only vaguely aware that there are others around them watching it all unfold, but he doesn’t care. He hears Victor and Ash’s voices, and the shrill ring of a cellphone going off, but all he wants to hear is the heartbeat of his alpha.

Castiel rocks Dean in his arms and just says, “I love you,” in his deep, rumbling voice.

It’s enough for Dean to find strength to pull away. A few paces from them, Bela flicks her phone into her purse and pulls Victor forward to murmur something in his ear.

“What?” Dean says, “What is it? Tell me.”
The words that spill from Victor’s lips make Dean dizzy with terror.

“Alastair just made bail.”

Chapter End Notes

Also, I should note that what happened to Dean is Not Okay. I don't want what happened to him to be misconstrued as an acceptable way to explore sexual kinks like bondage or BDSM. Dean's experience was nothing but rape. Kinks are great when they're explored in an safe environment between consenting individuals!
Hey guys, just a couple things to note -- I get a lot of questions about the biological alpha father to Mary and this is an announcement here that it has not, does not, and will not matter in the fic. Additionally, Alastair is not the father and never actually forced himself on any of the omegas at his compound. In his mind, they were just business. I hope that makes a few things clearer!

Chapter Track: Hide Me – Winterpills

The Maps to What's Inside Me

The announcement leaves stunned, taut silence between them all. The brisk wind ruffles Castiel’s hair and sends branches rustling against one another. They gray sky overhead seems to darken with the words, though Castiel knows it ridiculous that nature should bow to the heavy emotion of the small people under the hood of the sky.

Dean does not speak. He doesn’t need to speak; the stricken expression on his face says everything that his lips do not. Dean’s drained pallor and still tear-streaked cheeks shove a lightning bolt of fury straight to the core of Castiel’s heart, to the basest piece of his alpha instinct. The desire to protect sweeps over him like a night-sweat, while an all-consuming longing to kill Alastair curls his fingers into tight fists. He imagines slamming Alastair’s head against concrete and watching blood leak from his skull like translucent juice flowing from a cracked coconut.

Before Castiel can do as much as growl, Dean moves back into him. He rubs Cas’ shoulder and says, “Shh, little alpha, shh.”

The aggression melts out of Castiel’s shoulders. He glances down at Dean and brushes his lips against his omega’s forehead. His aroma is so much less Dean than usual and so much more terror, but here he is, trying to comfort Castiel instead of tending to himself.

“I’m so sorry,” Castiel murmurs.

“S’all good,” Dean says back. He squeezes Castiel’s forearm.

Victor clears his throat and says, “Dean, I want you to know that we’re going to be keeping both eyes on Alastair between now and the proceedings. If you hear anything, you get any hint of trouble, you call me, okay?” He dips his hand into the breast pocket of his uniform and brandishes his business card at Dean between two fingers before he adds, “You keep that. Has my direct line.”

Dean doesn’t provide a verbal answer, only a terse nod. Satisfied, Victor bids them goodbye and says that he hopes that they have a better evening than they did morning. Castiel hopes so too. As Victor goes, so does Ash.

Ms. Talbot says, “Thank you for your cooperation. We will put this bastard away. I swear it.” With that, she flips her hair over her shoulder and clicks to her Lexus. Dean and Castiel watch as she starts the car and backs away from the space beside the Impala, turning to roll down the narrow
dirt entrance until the trees swallow the vehicle.

“Would you like me to drive?” Castiel asks, when Dean meets his eyes.

“Yeah,” Dean says, and digs in the pocket of his jeans. He slaps the keys into Castiel’s outstretched palm.

When they climb into the car, Dean pulls his knees up to his chest. Cas’ heart weighs down at the sight of Dean instinctually making himself smaller, of him lowering his head and curling in close with his long limbs. He doesn’t like it – so he reaches over and pulls Dean’s left hand toward him, lacing their fingers together. Castiel squeezes, and Dean glances over.

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean says.

The drive down the mountain to Sam’s condo seems anticlimactic in the aftermath of what counts among the most catastrophic events of Castiel’s thirty-some years of life. Watching Dean climb up on that wooden monstrosity and demonstrate what happened to the omegas bolted into it will endure in Castiel’s mind with a more powerful reverberation than the loss of his medical license. His only anchor to serenity is Dean’s hand in his.

When they pull up to Sam’s condo, Castiel parks the Impala and heads to the front with Dean in lieu of waiting for him to bring Mary outside. Sam answers the door with a crying Mary in his arms and a bottle in the other. Exasperation fades to relief on his face and he says, “Thank God. She was pissed the second you left, man. I tried everything.”

Dean lifts Mary out of Sam’s grip with big, gentle hands and cradles her up against his chest. He greets, “Hey, sweetheart. Heard you were a pain in the butt for Uncle Sammy.”

As if in protest, Mary lets out a particularly angry sob, but then buries her nose into Dean’s shirt and scents and then mouths expectantly at the soft fabric. Dean hums and says to Cas, “Hey, shut the door. I’m gonna feed Whiny McFusserson before we head out.” Castiel obeys and accepts Mary when she’s handed to him so that Dean can shrug off his leather jacket and pull his t-shirt up over his head. When Dean sits down on one of Sam’s yet-unpacked boxes and nestles Mary against his chest, she latches immediately.

Dean’s scent remains distressed, but seems to ease as he feeds his pup into something more settled, an anxiety more steady than frantic.

“Dean, you uh. Kinda smell off?” Sam says, like it’s a question, “Are you okay?”

“Nah,” Dean says, but doesn’t look at either Sam or Castiel. He just strokes Mary’s hair and watches her. A trickle of love and affection breaks through the panicked taint of Dean’s aroma. Castiel fails to hide his relief.

“Alastair made bail,” explains Castiel.

“Jesus,” Sam articulates, “I mean, I expected it, but…shit. I’m sorry.”

“Crap day all around,” Dean gruffly adds.

“Yes, it was,” agrees Castiel.

Neither of them elaborates. Sometimes ignorance is bliss, and while Sam knows what occurred at Alastair’s compound from Dean’s verbal recollection, he never had to watch Dean explain it all at the scene of the crime, didn’t have to watch Dean and the playrooms below the omega’s prison-
like bed cells. In this aspect, Sam Winchester is fortunate.

“The prosecutor seemed to be collected, though,” Castiel goes on, trying to maintain optimism if only for Dean’s sake and in turn Mary’s sake as well, “Bela Talbot? She’s a little young, perhaps.”

“Talbot,” Sam echoes, “Yeah, she’s an up-and-comer in omega rights. Pretty outspoken about the abuse of her father. Anyway, she’s won a couple of pretty important cases. I’ve never met her personally, but I think if we had to choose anybody for the job, we’d probably pick her. Hey, you guys want anything to eat, or drinks, maybe? I don’t have a lot yet. Got like…Gatorade and some take-out from a couple nights ago. Still pretty good.”

“I’m all right, but thank you, Sam,” Castiel says.

Dean says, “Yeah, I’m good. Can’t believe you don’t have food in your fucking house yet, man. What kind of alpha are you?”

“A busy one?” suggests Sam.

This garners a chuckle from Dean – more of a huff of breath than anything, but better than tears and vomit. Mary, full and satisfied, pulls her head away from him, but nuzzles a little at Dean’s skin. The sight almost floors Castiel to tears all over again. Mary is just an infant, and yet already so perceptive. Dean moves his hand to wipe her chin, and when he does, she grabs onto his finger.

“Hey there, pup,” Dean says, “Whatcha doin’ with dad’s finger, huh?”

Castiel can’t be certain, but he thinks perhaps that Mary is telling Dean it’s okay and I’m here in the best ways that she can.

But as Dean hands her back off to Castiel to redress, a grimness hangs in the air between them all, even as Dean hugs his brother goodbye, even as Sam brushes his lips over Mary’s forehead after Dean buckles her back into her carrier seat, even as they climb into the car and prepare to go home. In each other, mutual worry rocks them to the marrow.

X

The sound of London Calling sends Castiel into a flurry when he wakes up the following day. He scrambles to unhook his phone from its charger and answers sleepily, “Hello?”

“Heya bro, were you sleeping?”

“Gabriel,” Castiel states flatly, “Why are you calling me so early in the morning?”

“I’m no expert on mornings, but according to my watch it’s half-past noon your time,” Gabriel replies, “Call me crazy, but that’s what people in the biz like to call afternoon.”

Castiel’s brows pinch together and he scans the bedroom. Sure enough, though the curtains are closed over the bedroom window, a streak of bright light escapes through the crack between them. Beside him, Dean’s side of the bed is empty. From outside in the living room, Cas can hear the vague echo of cartoon theme music playing on the television. He heaves a long breath and asks, “What do you want, Gabe?”

“What, I can’t check up on my family from time to time?” Gabriel says with a thread of mock offense in his voice.

“If you did so with any regularity, I would be less suspicious.”
“Right, right. So anyway, you’re on TV.”

“I’m what?” asks Castiel, and he sits up straighter, pulling his comforter up with him when the cool air of the room hits his forearms.

“On the news,” repeats Gabriel, “over this crazy omega brothel thing? You and Pretty Boy both.”

Castiel rubs his face and swings his legs over the edge of the mattress. His head pounds from oversleeping, and his whole body feels like it’s stuffed with cotton. He groans into the receiver and asks, “When?”

“Now,” Gabriel answers, “Last night, too. This whole kerfuffle is big news, kiddo. Luci’s old buddies with this Alastair punk and shit is bananas over here. B-A-N-A-N-A-S. Lucifer’s pissed that your little boyfriend dredged up crap on his homie, and mom’s worried that somebody might find out that we’ve had aforementioned homie at the dinner table.”

“Good Lord,” mutters Castiel. He pulls open the curtains on the bedroom window and squints against the light that pours into the room. It’s gray light, the full power of the sun dimmed by a steel quilt of clouds.

Gabriel says, “I guess it’s nuts on your end too, huh? Sleeping past noon and everything, you little rebel.”

“Sleep hasn’t exactly been regular, no.”

“Riiight, the puppy. How’s that going, alpha daddy?”

Cas snorts at this and replies, “It’s going well. I think. I can’t say that it’s always easy. Mary does tend to keep to her own schedule whether or not it synchronizes with anyone else’s. But…I find it very fulfilling. She makes me happy.”

This silences Gabriel for a few seconds. He clears his throat before he speaks again, but his voice has an odd tone to it, something soft: “Huh. That’s – that’s good. Hey, maybe sometime I can come visit the little squirt. You bet your sweet ass I’d be the coolest uncle.”

Castiel chuckles, “I think Dean’s brother may disagree.”

“Dean has a brother?” Gabriel whistles, “He just as pretty?”

“I’m not certain that I can voice that judgment, as Sam Winchester is an alpha,” Castiel replies, “But as you are not our mother, I feel comfortable in telling you that, yes, Sam is an attractive man.”

“Cas, you dog,” Gabriel says, “You never told me that you could dig getting down with an alpha, you dirty boy.”

“Probably because I expected you to react just as you have,” Castiel sighs, “Anyhow, I need you to tell me about this news story. Dean feels very unsafe as it is and I do not need it to be any worse than it already is.”

“Dude, can you blame him?” asks Gabriel, the note of seriousness in his tone discordant, “I mean, there are like news anchors in this fucking cellblock, and it’s got these suuuper sketchy mattresses and like, actual chains on the wall? Is that real?”

“Yes,” Cas grits out, “I have been there. It is where the omegas slept and where Alastair kept them
between alpha ‘clients.’”

“Well shit,” Gabe says, “How the hell did he bust out?”

“With the help of another omega,” Castiel says, “and I don’t think that Dean would have ever done it for himself. He did it for Mary.”

“Right, right. Mom threw a shit fit over the fact that it wasn’t your seed planted in Eyelashes’ soil, if you know what I mean,” Gabriel laughs a little at his own joke before he goes on, “I told her that it was twenty thirteen and that no one gives a shit but her, and she threw me out of the house for like three days. I had to stay with Balthazar. Do you even know how much that sucked? He doesn’t keep any decent grub around his apartment.”

“That’s tragic,” Castiel says.

“I know, man,” Gabriel says, “So, look. I’m watching this crapshoot on the news and I got to wondering, you need any of us over there? I know we kind of suck at being family, but uh. You know. This all seems ah, pretty intense. Figured maybe you could use some backup.”

Castiel doesn’t know what to say. He scratches the back of his neck and feels a frown settling on his face. Gabriel has never provided consistent support. As a teenager, he often partied and vanished for days at a time – and then, he only cleaned up his act because their mother threatened to sever his inheritance. Castiel never knew him as much more than a fleeting presence, the reason sweets appeared and disappeared with equal frequency in the pantry, and a pain in the ass.

“Jeez,” Gabriel laughs awkwardly, “You really know how to make a guy feel wanted. If you don’t want me around, all you gotta do is say so, Cassie.”

“It’s not that,” Castiel says, “I wouldn’t have a place for you to stay in the house. We have –”

“Whoa, who said I wanted to stay at your house? There’s a puppy in there. Those things are loud, man. And they poop everywhere,” Gabriel says, “I meant like, staying in a hotel or whatever.”

“There aren’t hotels this far into the mountains, Gabriel.”

“A cozy bed and breakfast, then,” Gabriel says, “and it’s not like I’d show up tomorrow or anything, just when this thing goes to court.”

Castiel exhales, “I don’t think our mother would be very happy if you did that.”

A pause.

“Yeah, I know,” Gabriel responds.

The weight on those words doesn’t escape Castiel. Again he is stricken into silence. Finally, he says, “That’s very generous of you. I think I would like that very much.”


Castiel rolls his eyes and replies, “Goodbye, Gabriel.”

He hangs up the phone and rubs at his face, letting out a grumble of complaint at his late start before he pockets the cell in his wrinkled sweatpants and trudges out into the living room. Dean is on the couch with Mary rested on his shoulder, her tiny fist holding a tight handful of Dean’s Led
Zeppelin t-shirt. On the television, Tom & Jerry plays.

Dean grins when he sees Castiel and says, “Look who it is, Mary. It’s sleepy alpha daddy. You have a nice rest there, Cas?”

Cas huffs and leans over to press his lips to Dean’s forehead. At the new scent in the room, Mary shifts and squints up at Castiel, wiggling expectantly. Dean chuckles and says, “Thinks she wants you.”

Cas lifts his daughter from Dean’s body and cuddles her against him, brushing lips against the soft crop of light hair on her little head before he takes them both into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. He needs caffeine before he can address the fact that he and Dean were splashed across televisions everywhere on a nationwide news channel.

“Has Kevin eaten today?” asks Castiel.

“Yeah,” Dean answers. He flicks off the TV and follows Cas to the kitchen, where he wraps his arms around his middle from behind and nuzzles at his shoulder before placing a chaste kiss to it. He goes on, “He’s gettin’ more color in his face, so that’s good. Still nervous about your scent, though.”

“At least there’s been improvement,” Castiel says.

“Dunno, man. I don't get it,” Dean says, “I think you smell fantastic.”

As if to illustrate, Dean presses his nose against the back of Castiel’s neck and inhales. It tickles, enough to elicit a short bark of laughter from Cas’ lips and a soft protest of, “Dean, I’m holding the pup.”

Dean’s hand slips lower down Cas’ body and he makes a grab for Castiel’s ass through his sweatpants. Cas grunts in complaint and Dean cackles before he takes Mary from Cas’ arms and snuggles her to his chest. He rocks her gently, the barest movement, and a fond smile fills Cas’ face. At the kitchen counter, the coffee maker lets out a shrill beep and Castiel pours a mug.

“Dean,” he says.

Dean stops babbling at Mary and lifts his head, “Hm?”

“My brother called,” he says, “Gabriel. He’s informed me that this whole fiasco has in fact made it to television. We’ve been on the news, apparently.”

“Oh,” Dean says, brows knitting, “Does the rest of your family know?”

“Yes,” Castiel sighs, “I’m told my mother is beside herself.”

Dean rubs Mary’s back and glances down at the floor. Castiel watches Dean crumple under automatic instinct, the instinct to hide and make himself smaller, to turn himself into a smaller target. Cas reaches out and cups Dean’s jaw, running his thumb over his stubble before he lifts Dean’s head so that they’re eye to eye.

“What about your other brother? Lucifer?” Dean asks, “He said…that he knows Alastair, remember? Do you think that’s important?”

He hadn’t considered that.
“That is a damn good question,” Castiel replies. He sips at his coffee. Bitter, hot liquid slides down his throat and spreads warmth from his core outward. It helps, just a little. He takes the moment of fresh clarity to think on Dean’s question, and concludes after a handful of quiet seconds between them, “I’ll call Victor and ask if he thinks it’s relevant.”

Before Castiel can even turn around, the concern on Dean’s face slows him. He pads across the floor and sets his coffee mug aside so he can rest his palm on the back of Dean’s head and pull him in for a long, tender kiss. When they break apart, Castiel rests his forehead against Dean’s and says, “Dean. I’ll take care of it. I can take Mary for a while if you’d like, so you can have some time to yourself. Perhaps you could finish the car model I bought you.”

Dean’s face only relaxes a little, but he concedes, “Yeah, all right,” and passes Mary off to Cas. Dean kisses Cas’ cheek and adds, “Thanks, little alpha.”

They part ways, Dean heading for the garage, and Castiel carrying Mary upstairs to the study. He locks the door behind them. One-handed, he fumbles with his cellphone. Victor’s direct line is programmed into the contacts now for the sake of convenience. God only knows how many times they’ll need to use the number in between now and the trial.

Against his ear, the phone rings four times before Victor picks up and answers, “Sergeant Henriksen.”

“Victor, it’s Castiel,” he says, “I wanted to ask you a question that may be relevant to the case.”

“Well then, go ahead and shoot.”

“It’s about my brother,” Castiel says, “Several months ago, Dean and I flew to southern California for my brother Michael’s wedding ceremony. During one of the festivities, my brother Lucifer cornered Dean outside of the restroom and mentioned Alastair. And earlier today, my brother Gabriel called me about this disaster being on the news, and mentioned Lucifer and Alastair again. If he was involved…”

“Let me talk to Dean,” Victor says, “This sounds like it could be pretty important, but I wanna get Dean’s word on it all too.”

“Of course.”

Pup and phone in hand, Castiel struggles with the study door and manages to get it open. He pads down the stairs and shoulders his way out the garage, where Dean sits already with the model in pieces in front of him and a look of intense concentration on his face. He glances up when Castiel comes in and concentration shifts to question.

“Victor wants to speak to you about what happened with Lucifer at the wedding.”

“Son of a bitch,” Dean says, but he takes the phone from Cas anyway, greets, “Hey, Victor,” and shoos Cas away with a motion of his hand.

Castiel slips back inside and takes the opportunity to play with Mary. He sets her up on a blanket on the couch and plays with her feet, shaking a colorful rattle at her. He explains, “I know it isn’t fair that omega dad is so sad. I know it confuses you and makes you sad, too. But you should know that he loves you, little pup. And alpha dad does too. I love you very much.”

Mary stares at him and blows a spit bubble.

“Eloquently put,” Castiel agrees.
Nearly forty-five minutes later, Dean returns with the cellphone call ended and the screen black. He hands the phone back to Castiel, and Cas asks, “What did he say?”

“He said he’d look into it and he’d keep us posted,” Dean shrugs. He dips over the edge of the couch and scoops Mary into his arms with a, “How’s my sweet girl? You hungry? Let’s get you some dinner. Or maybe it’s too early for dinner. Lunch? Nah. Dunch? Linner? Let’s go with ‘linner.’ C’mon, pup.”

With that, Dean vanishes into the nursery. Castiel runs an absent hand through his hair, and decides to seize the moment of quiet and take a shower. Pajamas discarded and water at full-blast, he starts to feel less tense over the day. He considers masturbating but then decides that maybe he’ll ask Dean if he would be up for a tumble between the sheets after they put Mary down.

When Cas finally shuts off the stream of steaming water, he doesn’t dress in clothes for the day, but instead finds a clean set of pajamas to wear instead, comfortable flannel bottoms and an old, shrunken t-shirt from a blood drive that his hospital did. It makes him miss his work again, but he puts that out of his mind and resolves to throw his temper into making supper.

After flipping through his cookbook, he settles on a promising recipe for fettuccine alfredo and marks the page of the cookbook. Castiel turns on music – Nancy Sinatra – for background noise, and breaks into the work. That is how Dean finds him: sweating over a pot of boiling pasta.

“You okay there?” he asks.

“As okay as I can be,” Castiel says, “I hate that I can’t protect you. I hate that this is out of my hands. I hate it, Dean.”

Dean sweeps forward and pulls Castiel into a kiss. It’s a deep kiss, one that sends warmth to the bone and forces a whine from Cas’ throat before they pull apart and the moment clatters to the ground. Dean reaches over and brushes a stray lock of hair from Cas’ forehead. He says, “Baby, you got this big ol’ alpha thing about being in the driver’s seat of life, but I gotta tell you – in my experience, life is driving the damn car, and we’re just along for the ride. This ain’t something that’s in our hands.”

Cas swallows and mutters, “I would like to have sex tonight.”

At that, Dean lets out a sputter of surprised laughter. He claps Cas’ shoulder and says, “Yeah, all right. We can do that.”

“And thank you,” Castiel adds belatedly.

Dean, in his strange way, keeps Castiel sane. He can’t explain how Dean does it. It goes beyond instinct and the delicious smell that infuses a room when Dean walks into it. It’s the brash way that Dean speaks, the way that he makes it sound like he knows exactly what he’s doing even when he knows nothing of the kind. It’s the way that he insists on doing work that he doesn’t have to do, and the way that he doesn’t like sitting still for too long. It’s the way that Dean looks at Castiel when he thinks that Castiel isn’t looking back. It’s the way that he smiles at Mary Grace.

Cas adds, “I love you.”

A crookedly, self-conscious half-smile appears on Dean’s face and he replies, “I love you too, you alpha sap.”

Dinner is a quiet affair that begins with Dean taking the customary meal to Kevin with a glass of juice and returning to the kitchen with that eager expression that graces his face before a meal. Few
things compare to the joy on Dean’s face when he knows he’s about to be fed. Halfway through the
meal, Mary begins to cry from the nursery, and Dean collects her. He feeds her while he eats, and
when all is said and done, they’re too tired to do anything but watch television.

Castiel puts away the leftovers and tosses the dirty dishes into the sink to be taken care of a later
time, when he feels less lethargic. Castiel turns on the TV and cuddles up to Dean and Mary on the
couch, sticking his head on Dean’s lap. He hums with contentment when Dean threads his hands
through his hair and strokes his fingernails over his scalp.

He doesn’t remain that relaxed for long.

“In a new turn of events for the Alastair Locke scandal, a new suspect has been implicated –
Lucifer Novak, one of the heirs of the famous Novak Drugstore estate, was arrested today and
brought in for questioning by the Los Angeles police department. Neither Los Angeles or Chaffee
county police officers have offered any comment at this time, but we will report as updates come.”

One of Lucifer’s old mug shots blips onto the television screen as the anchor delves into a little
background on Castiel’s family. He sits up and rubs his head. How foolish it was to think that they
might have a moment of peace amidst this mess.
Chapter Notes

Warning for slurs and memories of Dean's past.

Chapter Track: Coffins – Misterwives

*Dead When You Hit the Wall*
“Double check Mary’s buckle,” Dean says over the roof of the Impala, and watches Cas stoop down and futz with Mary’s car seat and make sure that she’s secure in her place in the back of the car. He gives Dean a thumbs-up and a crooked smile when he straightens back out, and Dean laughs just a little.

In the midst of this mess, Dean and Cas decided that they needed to keep sane, and so knotted together and sweating under the sheets, they agreed to take a day trip to Denver for pizza and ice cream. Dean could use something to remind him that life isn’t all bullshit, isn’t all nightmares Alastair and stained mattresses and The Chair.

Logically, Dean knows he has it good. The smell of his leather jacket surrounds him and he has a handsome alpha staring at him with eyes crinkled up at the corners, and a smarty-pants pup in the backseat of his gorgeous vehicle. But lately – lately, those things have been hard to remember. With his and Cas’ faces splashed across the news, the home phone blaring with the calls of reporters at all hours, and the nightmares that jolt Dean out of sleep at night, he has trouble keeping his melon on straight, remembering the good stuff.

Today he’s determined to have a damn good freaking day.

Dean starts up the Impala and pulls off of Cas’ property and onto the surrounding dirt road. He wishes that he could have convinced Kevin to come along with them, but Kevin insisted that he had books to read and he would be fine on his own at the house.

Dean adjusts the rearview mirror and flicks his eyes to the reflection of his pup, eyes already half-closed from being rocked to sleep by the motion of the Impala rolling over the road. He says, “Hey
Mary, too bad you ain’t old enough for pizza. I know you’re gonna love that.”

Being a dad is surreal sometimes, and other times, Dean is determined to do a job of it that John couldn’t do: he’s going to teach his daughter that there are good things in this world. The good things go beyond pizza and good music, go all the way to loving the hell out of somebody and having the hell loved out of you back.

And nothing compares to the feeling of having his Mary in his arms. It cures all ills, pulls Dean back when he slips down into the dangerous places within his mind. She’s a fraction of his size and Mary carries Dean when he can’t walk.

John taught Dean how to protect himself, sure. He taught Dean how to handle his firearms, how to wield a knife and what spots on a body will bring a person down. Wrapped within that, Dean learned to fear. He learned to look over his shoulder before he even learned to tie his own shoes – the latter of which he taught himself. And in the end, it was the desire to break free from the lessons that his dad that landed him in hot water.

The drive to Denver is just under three hours long – Dean only stops once to refuel his baby, and despite the insistent growl that his stomach makes at the bouquet of Slim Jims on the gas station counter, he only pays for the gas and tells himself that pizza is in his near future.

Good pizza, Cas promises, though the joint they’re hitting up is called The Walnut Room and that doesn’t exactly sound like it serves the dripping-with-grease kind of pizza that Dean’s been craving.

When they break free from the mountains, Dean lets out a little whoop and stretches one arm behind his head while they blast down the highway. Cas reaches over and squeezes his shoulder, a tiny gesture that has Dean flustered in about ten seconds flat, making images of last night stick out in his head, of Dean scratching at Cas’ back with need and Cas whispering such nice goddamn things against Dean’s neck.

Dean parks his baby on an adjacent street when they finally make it into the heart of town. It’s been so long that Dean has seen a real city that he stands and just enjoys the cars whipping by for a moment before he rounds the Impala to take Mary and her seat out of the back of the car.

The Walnut Room smells heavenly when they walk in and obey the sign near the front that reads Please Seat Yourself. They take one of the booths along the left side of the restaurant, so they’ll have enough room for Mary’s seat. A waitress with a blond pixie cut sidles up to take their drink orders, and Dean seizes the opportunity to get a decent beer. No watered-down, cheap shit. The good crap.

Cas, meanwhile, goes for a glass of water.

“Whoa, hey, can we get cheesy bread?” Dean asks.

“Of course,” Castiel says, “What kind of pizza do you want?”

“Something covered in pepperoni and sausage and maybe some garlic,” Dean says.

“We’ll split in in halves,” Cas says, “I want vegetables.”

“There’s a surprise,” Dean replies, and Castiel rolls his eyes.

In a conspirational whisper, Dean says to Mary, “Alpha dad has terrible taste in pizza toppings.”
Cas rolls his eyes a second time, but Dean can spot a smile on his face, one that he’s trying to bite down.

And goddamn it, the pizza is incredible. It is cheesy-melty-saucy-meaty goodness and Dean dives in with gusto. He liked the cheesy bread, but this is something else. He would dive in a swimming pool of this pizza and probably be the happiest man alive.

At the end of the meal, Dean ducks into the omega bathroom with Mary to change out her diaper. The walls of the bathroom are warm and taupe colored, the space moodily lit, with promotional posters for bands showing at the pizza parlor on coming weekends, slapped with bribes for attendance like "One free beer with 14-inch pizza!" Dean shifts Mary to one arm and sets her down on the designated pup-changing area.

"Who’s my sweetheart?" he asks, and tickles the tips of his fingers over Mary’s feet through her little knitted booties. He shakes his head and says, “Yeah, you know it’s you, look at that smug expression on your little pup face. You’ve got your dads wrapped around your finger and you know it.”

The toilet flushes in one of the stalls behind him, and Dean feels the blood rush to his face. A blond omega guy strides out of the stall just as Dean ditches Mary’s dirty diaper in the trash can. The other omega washes his hands, and as he dries them he peers over Dean’s shoulder.

“How old?"

“Five weeks,” Dean answers, and realizes just how long that really is, “Damn. A month already.”

And how did he not even notice that time fly by? Mary definitely looks different than she did that first, awesome time that he held her. Her cheeks are chubbier and her fingers fatter and her skin a little less pink. Sure, she can’t support her head yet, but already she seems to move a lot more, flailing and grabbing and holding.

“Goes by fast,” hums the blond omega, and he pushes out of the bathroom before Dean can agree hell yeah, it does.

When Dean returns back out to the restaurant, Cas has already paid the bill and left a generous tip.

“Would you like ice cream now, or to let our pizza digest for a little?” Castiel asks when Dean places Mary back in her seat and heaves it up.

“Let’s poke around,” Dean says, “Like what the hell is that across the street? It looks awesome.”

A piece of art splashes across the side of the brick building, twists of color bending together and zigzagging apart. Above the piece, intricate lettering reads ‘Mutiny.’ When they step over the crosswalk, Dean reads books, comics, vinyl painted in red and black on the windows beside an open door. A cart of used books sits out in front of the store with a discount sign taped to the front of it.

“Cool,” he says, “We could grab a book for Kevin or something.”

Castiel murmurs assent, and they step inside. It smells like well-loved, musty books and coffee on the inside, a pleasant smell. It’s the kind of scent that you could wrap yourself up in, that keeps you warm. Dean doesn’t know where to go first. An explosion of color makes up the collection of books, wall-to-wall and freaking sweet. And there, right near the glass cases surrounding the cash register, are rows and rows of vinyl.
“No way,” Dean says. He hasn’t seen something like this in so long. As a teenager, Dean used to hit up this music place near the KU campus and itch to buy LPs that he didn’t really have the money for, but he stopped going when one of the alphas that worked weekdays called him ‘sweetie’ when he asked if Dean needed any help. It was a little thing, but…it sucked. So he stopped.

Cas takes Mary’s carrier and Dean wastes no time in thumbing through the store’s collection of titles. He gets so wrapped up in the excitement that when he pulls out something he thinks that both he and Cas would like – Blondie’s *Parallel Lines* – he realizes that Cas isn’t standing behind him and that he and Mary have in fact disappeared entirely.

Before Dean’s lost-child-heart-attack can hit him, he sees a dark head of messy hair bobbing between shelves near the back of the store, and lets out a sigh of relief. He pads up and hears Castiel say, “What do you think about this one, Mary? Uncle Kevin does seem to like Dune-type books. This one might fall into that category.” A pause. “Yes, I agree. We should get it for him. Although perhaps omega dad should handle the book so that it doesn’t smell like me when he gives it to your uncle.”

Then, Cas lifts his head and scents the air.

“Dean, I know you’re there.”

“Hey,” Dean says, and rounds the shelf, “They have an old *Parallel Lines*, I thought maybe we could, uh. You know. Add it to the collection.”

Cas presses his lips to Dean’s forehead and says, “Perfect. Let’s go pay before I buy the entire store.”

Dean laughs, and they walk to the register together. The cashier loads their books into a plastic bag that Dean takes for now, since Cas has taken over Mary-patrol. They walk back up the block and past the pizza place to Sweet Action Ice Cream, a place that Cas assures him has garnered sterling reviews online. If nothing else, it’s a cute little ice cream parlor that smells like heaven, all kinds of sweets twisting up the air with a thousand different aromas, each as delectable as the last.

A chalkboard menu lists an array of interesting flavors, most of which Dean doesn’t think he wants to get near, but it does not surprise him at all when Cas asks, “May I sample the honeysuckle flavor, please?” because of course his alpha chooses the weirdest thing on the entire list.

When Dean’s asked what he wants, he makes it simple: “Double scoop of salted butterscotch on a sugar cone.”

And the ice cream is a damn revelation. Forget diving into a pool of pizza from The Walnut Room, Dean wants to swim in a pool of ice cream from Sweet Action.

“Dean.”

“Mm.”

“Dean, look.”

“What?” Dean says.

Cas points through the massive front window of the ice cream parlor to across the street. At first all Dean sees is some hipster clothing store, but then he spots what Cas must be talking about – Fancy Tiger Crafts, spelled out in small, neat letters. Dean glances back and sees Castiel’s eyes all
lit up and pleased as he asks, “Could we go see it?” as though Dean would deny his alpha the pleasure of visiting a fancy-ass craft store.

“Dude, duh,” Dean says, and gives Cas a smack to the arm before he returns his attention to the most important issue at hand, his ice cream. Cas, meanwhile, is a slow-as-hell ice cream eater and isn’t even halfway through his double scoop of honeysuckle ice cream in a cup when Dean throws away the sticky napkin leftover from his.

On the floor from her carrier, Mary fusses.

“Oh, sorry pup, you’re probably starving,” Dean says. He reaches down and pulls her out, resting her against his shoulder with one hand while he flicks open the buttons on his plaid shirt with the other. So while Cas eats, Mary does, too.

Bellies full, the three of them make their way over the breadth of the street and past the hipster clothing store. The aroma of happy alpha slams into Dean the second that they walk into Fancy Tiger Crafts. Cas darts forward and feels over a skein of coarse-looking yarn.

“This blue is amazing,” he says, but before Dean can answer, Cas is off like a bullet and feeling every freaking thing of yarn – and there’s an entire damn wall of yarn.

“Why is that kind so thin?” Dean asks.

“It’s sock yarn,” Castiel answers, “Feel it.”

Dean does. He says, “It’s…soft?”

“Yes. I’ve wanted to try this brand for a while. Mary could probably use a few pairs of socks, couldn’t she? Of course she could,” babbles Castiel, and he gathers three different colors of sock yarn into his arms before he moves along the wall again, ooh-ing and aah-ing over different shades and gradient yarns and cashmere yarns and silk yarns and –

Son of a bitch, who the hell knew there was so much yarn in the world? At this rate, they’re going to drown in silk-blend multicolored sequined whatever the fuck before Dean even gets to hear his daughter say her first word.

But Cas just smells so happy that Dean doesn’t bother to say a word.

“Hey Cas, what the hell is a granny square?” Dean finds himself asking, “Is that like your mom or some shit?”

Castiel lets out a musky bark of laughter, but does not bother to answer Dean’s question about what in Christ’s name a granny square is.

Then there’s the fabric.

“You sew?” Dean says.

“I’m rusty, but yes,” Castiel answers, “this robot fabric makes me want to start again. I think Mary would look adorable in a robot dress, don’t you?”

Well, Mary would look cute in anything, so Cas has got him there.

By the time that they make it to the front, Dean has lost count of how much yarn Cas bought, but sees three different kinds of fabric too, which Cas gruffly asks to be measured out in some amount
of yards and blah, blah, blah – Dean doesn’t know shit about crafts. Now ask him to dissect an engine and reassemble the fucker, then he’s got your ass covered.

The Impala buzzes with happy energy when they load themselves back in, yarn and fabric and books and all. Dean leans over and kisses Cas like his life depends on it before he starts his baby back up and pulls onto the street. He feels love-drunk and gooey, and it’s ridiculous, but hey, it’s also pretty great.

Jesus Christ. When Cas’ happy scent is this potent, Dean turns into a goofy kid. He doesn’t know that he’s ever felt like a goofy kid, even when he was a kid and should have felt that way.

It’s nice.

Mary and Cas both nod off on the ride back home, and Dean enjoys a quiet ride with the scents of his favorite people wrapped up around him and good music playing on the classic rock station. He hums and taps along to his favorite songs. The mountains start to close up around them. They’re amazing, Dean realizes, huge and purple-blue and covered in carpets of trees. He feels a weird sort of affection for the place, almost like the kind of affection he feels for the Impala.

But of course it can’t fucking last.

When Dean pulls up onto their property a few hours and a second refuel later, the sun hangs low against the ripple of mountains at the edge of the sky and the world has started to dim. But there’s still enough light to make out one thing for certain.

The house is covered in graffiti.

Dean cuts the engine and stumbles out of the car to look. It’s red and looks like fresh-from-the-body blood, bright and sticky. The first words that Dean reads are L Y I N G O M E G A S L U T.

S I S S Y A L P H A

K N O T W H O R E S M U S T D I E

K I L L T H E B I T C H E S

The words cut through the warmth of the house’s siding like knives. Hard, angry words slash all the way across the front, over the front door and slicing over the garage. Dean’s heart sinks like a stone into his guts, and the desire to shrink down and make himself invisible rolls over him. The words may as well be written on his skin; he feels them so starkly.

“Oh,” Dean hears from behind him.

He turns and sees Cas’ face go from shocked to furious to wounded and smells all of that with ten times the potency. He watches as Castiel digs deep in his pocket and takes out his cell, probably to call the cops and alert Victor and – oh, God. Kevin.

Dean makes a break for the house and shoves his key into the front door. He throws it open and calls, “Kevin? Kevin!”

He’s nowhere in the common areas of the house, though that isn’t unusual. Dean jogs past the couch and up through the kitchen to the guest room. When he lifts his hand to knock, the bedroom door swings open with a shrill creak and that – that – is unusual. Kevin never leaves the door unlocked.
“Kevin?” Dean says. His voice cracks. There’s no one in the bedroom. Dean's heartbeat pounds in his ears.

But he can smell Kevin.

Dean marches from bedroom to bathroom.

“Thank Christ,” he says.

Kevin sits curled up between the toilet and the wall, trembling all over and reeking of fear and distress. Dean can’t smell blood or injuries, but that doesn’t mean that Kevin isn’t suffering. He doesn’t approach Kevin, but does sit close by, lowering his body to the bathroom tile.

“Hey, it’s me,” he says, “It’s Dean. We’re home, and you’re gonna be all right, okay? You’re safe with us.”

Kevin lifts his head just barely from where he’s pressed it into his knees. His eyes are watery and his face stained from tears. It makes Dean want to cry just looking at him. Because God, this is not the home that he wanted for Kevin. He wanted to carve out a safe, warm place, something far, far away from where they slept in cells on grimy mattresses with no clothes and little food.

This is not the home that he wanted for himself, either.

“Dean,” Kevin says, and he leaps forward and wraps his arms around Dean’s neck, burying his face into Dean’s shirt. For a moment, Dean is stunned, but is quick to action. He coils his arms around Kevin back and hugs him tight, rubbing one palm over the curve of Kevin’s back.

“I’m so freaking glad you’re okay,” Dean breathes, “What happened?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Kevin says, voice broken, “I smelled them and I hid in here. I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do.”

“It’s okay,” Dean says, “You did the right thing. We’re gonna fix this, you hear?”

Kevin doesn’t respond to this, just clutches Dean’s shirt tighter in his fists. This is where Castiel finds them when he sweeps into the guest bathroom with Mary in his arms and a grim expression on his face. He says, “Victor’s on his way with a few of his team. Are you all right, Kevin?”

Kevin doesn’t say anything, but he does shake his head. Dean keeps rubbing his back.

Victor and the police arrive a record-setting forty minutes later. While Cas goes out to talk to Victor, Dean stays behind in the house and makes Kevin a cup of tea. He brings Kevin his book with the hot mug and sits with him in the bathroom. They don’t speak, but he can smell Kevin’s panic falling away.

Several minutes later, Cas reappears but this time with Victor at his side. Beside Dean, Kevin clams up and starts to curl into himself. Dean rests a hand on Kevin’s shoulder and says, “Hey, it’s okay. Victor’s cool. He helped bust everyone out of that hellhole. And he’s a beta.”

Victor’s voice when he speaks is all soothing and reason, and he says, “Hi, Kevin. I just wanted to ask you a few questions about what happened today. Is that all right?”

Kevin nods, but pauses. His brows crunch together and he asks, “Can Dean stay?”

Victor casts a glance at Dean and says, “I don’t see why not.”
Victor flips out a notebook and scrawls something on it with a chewed-up ballpoint pen before he asks, “Did you see the suspects?”

Kevin shakes his head.

“Did you smell them?”

Kevin nods.

“Were the smells familiar?”

Another shake of the head.

“Could you please describe the scents for me?” asks Victor.

Kevin shifts and stares down into his mug of half-drunk tea. He affords a glance at Dean, who squeezes his arm. Kevin licks his lips before he answers, “There were two. Kind of…metallic. One of them smelled kind of animal? The other guy had this clean smell, like really clean. Like a grocery store bathroom?”

“Thanks, Kevin,” Victor says, “This will help a lot. Dean, I’m gonna need to talk to you too.”

“Right,” Dean says. He stands and follows Victor from the guest bathroom out to the living room. The front door stands ajar and outside Dean sees the red and blue flash of patrol cars but beyond that he sees other people – and goddamn news vans.

And then he spots Cas striding across the property to them with Mary up against his chest.

Aw, shit. This has alpha bullshit written all over it and Cas is teetering on the edge of full-blown alpha rage with their pup tucked against him. Dean says, “Hang on a second,” to Victor before he charges after Castiel, over the dry brush and remaining summer wildflowers.

He pants behind Cas and catches up just in time to hear Cas snap out, “Leave, right now. Get off of my property and leave my family alone.”

“Cas,” Dean says, and tries to pull him back.

“No, Dean,” Castiel says, “This is a violation of our privacy and I will have you arrested if you do not leave this instant.”

“Mr. Novak,” says one of the reporters, a pretty, middle-aged beta woman with feathered hair, “Please. We just want to hear your side of this story?”

Dean puts his body in between Castiel and the reporter and says, “Cas, I’m serious. Just...breathe, baby,” and turns his attention back to the reporter, “Look, I know this is your job, but you gotta knock this crap off. You want my side of the story? I went through hell. Got knocked up, ran for the sake of my pup and had my ass saved by this guy. After too freaking long, I decided I needed to tell the cops what happened. That’s it. Now you know.”

Dean herds Cas and urges him to start walking toward the house, but the reporter reaches out and grabs Dean’s arm with a, “Wait –”

Cas swings around and lets out a vicious growl, sending the reporter stumbling back. He snaps, “You touch my mate again and it will be the last thing that you do.”

They head back toward the house, but the reporters don’t leave – eventually, they have to send
Victor and the other officers out to shoo them away with threats of arrest for trespassing. Only after the news vans have departed does Victor get the opportunity to speak with Dean, though the conversation is brief. Dean tells him that he doesn’t know what happened or why it did, just that he and Mary and Cas came home to the house covered in hate. It sets his teeth on edge to know that there are people out there comfortable enough to paint SLUT and WHORE and SISSY onto somebody’s home, to come onto their property without knowing if they’re home or not and destroying what semblance of peace that Dean has found here.

"So here's the deal," Victor says to both Dean and Castiel when the dust has settled, "We know Alastair hasn't been anywhere near you 'cause one of my guys is tailing him day and night, 'round the clock. What we don't know is if he orchestrated it - and even if he didn't, I think it's wise to have somebody here to keep an eye on things. If this were a minor incident, I probably wouldn't do this. You can handle yourselves. But the vandals left a death threat at your doorstep and you've got a pup to look after. I'm gonna call up Joanna Beth 'cause I know you know each other and she'll take the first shift. Other faces you'll see are Ash and Rufus. If I send up anyone else, I'll call you. All right?"

"Yeah, all right," Dean says. There isn't much else to say.

Victor is right. KILL THE BITCHES may not be a direct threat to Dean, but it's enough of one. He doesn't want to get killed and leave Mary behind without her omega dad.

The thought unsettles him throughout the night, and when it comes time to go to bed, he finds that he’s tossing and turning and keeping Cas from sleep. So Dean slinks out of the master bedroom at midnight and checks on his pup, whom he finds sleeping soundly with her Colorful Colorado! teddy bear right alongside her.

When he pads out into the common area, Jo sits in a chair in the kitchen, her legs propped up on the table. When she sees Dean, she slides her feet down to the floor and says, "Sorry."

"S'okay."

"Couldn't sleep?" she asks.

"Nah," he says.

Dean ends up curling himself into a blanket on the couch and flipping on the television. He channel surfs mindlessly until he sees his own face on the television screen with Cas glaring behind him with the pup in his arms.

“…After too freaking long, I decided I needed to tell the cops what happened”

The frame freezes on Dean saying those words and zooms out to an anchor with her hands folded on the desk in front of her.

“There you have it. Our attempts to get in contact with the other victims have been widely ignored, and it does leave us with questions. How involved is Alastair Locke in this scandal? And how closely is Lucifer Novak associated with this? We’ll discuss this with Alastair’s lawyer, Ms. Elle Abaddon, on Coffee with Christie tomorrow morning. Thank you, and have a good night.”

X

Dean is in the study internet surfing with Mary in his lap when he feels a prickle at the back of his neck, like he’s getting antsy under his skin. Then he’s kind of dizzy and squirmy. It takes him a second to put together what’s going on, to do the math. It’s been about a month since Mary’s been
around, and that means –

That means he’s due for his heat.

Aw, son of a bitch. Dean exits out of the web browser and as he stands he feels the first gush of slick between his legs. He curses under his breath and clutches Mary to him as he treads down the stairs. Dean knocks on the door of Kevin’s bedroom. It takes a moment for the door to swing open, but the usual sound of it being unlocked doesn’t come.

“Dean?” Kevin says, good eye going wide, “You smell like – oh.

“Yeah,” Dean says, “Can you keep an eye on Mary? I mean, I could call my brother to come take her, but he’s an alpha, and I don’t wanna make things weird for you, you know?” His words come out breathily and he hates the way that it sounds. It reminds him of his broken body at Alastair’s how everything was heat and he could never feel comfortable in his own skin.

“I can take care of her,” Kevin says, and he leans over to scoop Mary out of Dean’s arms.

“Great. Awesome. Thanks,” Dean says, “If you need help or anything Ash is our cop right now. And uh. Between heats I’ll swing by and check on her and feed her and crap.”

“Right,” Kevin says, “Go take care of it. You reek.” And he closes his bedroom door again.

The need starts to creep up all the way to the tips of Dean’s ears and down to his toes. He’s half-hard in his pants and crap, he can even smell himself. It’s strong and sweet and heady, and God, sends a shudder through his body. He runs both hands through his hair and pushes open the master bedroom door, slamming it closed behind him. Inside, Dean finds Cas conked out with some knitting project forgotten on his abdomen, mouth parted as he breathes steadily through his sleep.

Dean moves the project to the basket of yarn on Cas’ beside table and grips his mate’s shoulders, jostling him. Cas grumbles and scratches his stomach before he opens his eyes, and when he meets Dean’s gaze, those eyes go wide.

“You’re…”

“Yeah,” Dean says.

Cas pulls Dean on top of him and runs his palms down Dean’s shoulders and over his spine. He noses at Dean’s cheek, breathing in his scent, and says, “We’ll take care of it,” voice rough and jagged but gentle in that Castiel way that makes warmth pool low in Dean’s belly. He whines and leans down to kiss Cas, toes curling with the raw need that beats through his veins. He wants to rip off his clothes and ride Cas like crazy. He wants Cas to pin him down and go to town. He wants it quick and intense and face to face.

But he can’t help the thrum of memory that slides through his head at the feel of slick between his legs.

“Dean,” Castiel says, and threads his fingers through his hair, “You smell nervous. Are you okay?”

“I,” Dean starts. The heat reminds of him of the seven years he spent in it, half-crazed with need and never satisfied, not even for a moment. But Cas isn’t some power-hungry alpha with knot insecurities. He’s kind and serious and he loves Dean. A wobbly smile stretches Dean’s lips and he leans down to kiss Cas again.

“I’m okay,” Dean says against Cas’ mouth, “Except I’m like, unbearably horny. So help me out
here, will you?"

Castiel laughs and pushes Dean off onto the mattress. As Cas reaches to shed his clothing, Dean tears at his own. He doesn’t have the time or patience to draw this crap out. Typically foreplay is the bomb, but not when he’s got slick making him all wet and his mate just right here and raring to go.

“C’mon,” Dean says, and rolls onto his belly.

Cas understands. He doesn’t bother to tease or lick, just crawls up behind Dean and mounts. In an instant, Dean is filled just like he wants, but he still needs more. Dean fists the sheets underneath him and eggs Cas on, “C’mon, fuck me good. I know this ain’t all you got.”

Cas growls and withdraws, thrusting back inside Dean with vigor. Dean presses his sweating forehead into the mattress and moans. He cants his ass back for more and groans. Cas takes Dean with everything he’s got, pinning Dean down with good ol’ alpha strength and pistoning his hips inside Dean with speed and pressure, hitting Dean all the way up to the core and turning his limbs into jelly.

“So good,” Dean whines. Then he asks, “S’good for you?”

“Yes,” Cas hisses, “Very good. You’re good, Dean. So good. You look so good under me, my sweet omega. I want you to feel this, feel as good as I do.” Cas reaches around and underneath Dean, closing his fist around Dean’s cock in a searing touch.

Dean bursts in an instant, coming all over Cas’ hands and the sheets. His head feels clearer already, the heat retreating for just a while. Only a few more pumps of his hips, and Cas’ knot swells up inside Dean. It’s that perfect fullness that Dean’s body craves, and Dean wriggles back on it, breathing heavily out through his nostrils. He clenches down around Cas and finally his alpha comes, sweet and hot inside Dean.

Together, they melt into the mattress.

“How are you feeling?” Cas gruffly asks.

The weight of the question is not lost on Dean. Cas is taking care of him, making sure that he feels good and isn’t scared. And Dean isn’t scared. He feels loose-limbed and fucked-out but it’s the good kind, the kind that leaves you feeling satisfied and whole.

“I’m awesome,” Dean says, and he means it. He looks over his shoulder and adds, “Love you.”

“I love you very much, Dean,” Castiel replies. He noses down over Dean’s neck and presses his lips to the mating bite. It’s such a small thing, a tiny little alpha gesture that says you’re mine and I’m yours, but it means the damn world to Dean. Damn it, he loves his gentle giant, his soft-hearted alpha.

Cas’ knot goes down around a half hour later, and though Dean can feel another round of heat pinpricking him, he shrugs Cas’ robe over his shoulders and goes to Kevin and Mary. Kevin wrinkles his nose at Dean’s smell but endures it long enough for Dean to feed his pup and kiss her head.

And now he’s got the rest of his heat to take care of.
The heat is the best heat that Dean has ever had. There are no ten dollar drugstore knots that he has to fuck himself on alone in his room or creepy alphas on his tail intoxicated by his scent. Dean's spent years dreading his heats and hating every minute, but he can kind of see the appeal with Cas with him. The sex that he and Cas have is intense sometimes, other times it’s needy and quick, and sometimes slow and sleepy. The bouts of heat grow more and more apart, leaving Dean and Cas more time to love on their pup and make sure that she gets everything that she needs.

Cas makes sure that they both eat and hydrate, making Dean drink glasses of water or juice after a roll between the sheets and rubbing his back as he does.

When it’s over, Dean is almost disappointed. He’s never had somebody pay that much attention to him, asking what he wants and how he likes things and making sure that he stays nice and cool throughout the ordeal.

He trusts Cas in a way he didn’t know that he hadn’t trusted Cas before. The only time that Dean has ever reeked of heat around Cas was right when they first crossed paths, and even then it was only for a couple of hours before Dean went back to smelling like himself. He didn’t trust Cas with the scent of heat then, and didn’t really trust him like that until now.

But it’s fine, ‘cause Cas took care of him real nice. In all likelihood it’s more than Dean deserves, but he feels so full and content that that thought fades into the background.

The benefit to the end of the heat is that Dean gets to see his pup again and doesn’t have to worry over her between heat-fits. As soon as he can, he tucks her into her sling and fastens it around himself so that he can keep her close. He thinks he teases a smile out of grumpy Rufus when he does, but mostly it's just awkward. Having the cops watch as Dean and Cas came and went from Kevin's room to the kitchen for Mary and to pit stop before another wave of the heat hit was a little embarrassing. It shouldn't have been. Ash, Jo and Rufus are all betas and even though they can smell everything that's going on same as anyone, it doesn't affect them.

Or maybe it's just awkward having a constant cop in the house.

Two days after Dean’s heat subsides, Cas throws some chicken together for lunch while they watch *The Twilight Zone* and Mary naps on the couch in her knitted Yoda hat and new socks.

“Should I make a side?” Cas calls from the kitchen, “I could make something with potatoes. Some fries, maybe?”

“Yeah, that sounds –”

Dean quiets. Kevin stands awkwardly at the mouth of the hallway, looking like he wants to join in on the action but like he doesn’t know how. At Dean’s silence, Cas walks over in his apron with his hair all haywire and says, “Dean, do you have an opinion on your potatoes? You – oh.” He stops at the sight of Kevin.

“Hello,” Cas says.

“Hi,” Kevin replies.

That afternoon, Kevin sits down with them to eat.
I'd like to let you all know that I originally had something angsty and upsetting planned for this chapter, but omitted it. There are still mentions here and there of Dean/Kevin's pasts but for the most part this is a giant cushion of fluff to get you all through the coming chapters.

Also -- I apologize for not responding yet to the comments on the last chapter. I was going to write this one tomorrow, but somebody asked me to cover their shift at work. So I'm doing that tomorrow, but I still wanted a chapter out there.

Thank you all for your continued support!

**Important note:** I have edited this chapter and the last chapter to include protection from the police, so if this chapter doesn't make sense, you may want to reread the edited version of 26. (2/21/2014)

---

**Chapter Track: Dreams – The Cranberries**

*In Every Possible Way*

With Alastair’s not guilty plea entered, bail met, and jury selection still up in the air, there’s little that Castiel can do but wait with Dean and Kevin for the impending and yet-unset court date. Some days the looming trial hangs over their heads like thundering storm clouds. Other days, the knowledge that the day that Dean must take to the stand as a witness will take place on some faraway day comes as a relief. Every day, they still have a member of the police department with them, and that in itself is a reminder of the reality of the situation.

A week after Dean’s first heat, he and Castiel drive into town and procure heat suppressants at the pharmacy at Dean’s request.

“I’ve never been on these before,” Dean says, when they arrive back home with suppressants and fresh groceries. He stares at the paper pharmacy bag with instructions and warnings stapled to the front.

Cas replies, “Most new omega parents take them so that their heats don’t disrupt their child rearing.”

“Don’t use the term ‘child rearing,’ Cas,” Dean says.

Castiel makes a face at his mate and asks, “Why not?”

“Because it sounds wrong,” Dean replies, “Are these things gonna make me sick?”

“No,” Castiel replies, “At most you’ll gain some weight and possibly be initially moody, though that wouldn’t be much of a divergence from your typical behavior, would it?”

Dean smacks Cas’ arm and says, “Jackass.”
When they arrive back at home, Castiel takes charge of putting away groceries while Dean takes
down a glass from the dish cabinet and fills it halfway with tap water to down the first pill in his
heat suppressant package. Cas watches out of the corner of his eye as Dean presses the first pill out
of the foil-covered backing of the package, tosses it on his tongue, and downs it.

The pensive expression gracing Dean’s face leads Castiel to ask, “Is there something on your
mind?”

Dean shrugs at first, but then leans back against the counter and exhales. He says, “You know – I
feel like…like this suppressant deal is the first time I’ve got a grip on something in my own damn
life. ‘Least since I presented, anyways. It’s, um. It’s pretty awesome. That’s all.”

Castiel puts away a package of lunch meat in the refrigerator. When he closes the door, he walks
back to Dean’s side, pulls him close against his chest, and pushes his lips up against Dean’s
forehead. There he remains for the next few seconds, breathing in that Dean that makes him feel so
at home and so satisfied. He huffs out a breath there before he pulls back.

“I’m glad,” is all that he says, and all that he believes is necessary. Dean has seized something
important to him for the first time in his life. That slice of power, that inch of room, makes Dean so
happy that it’s difficult for Castiel to feel anything but happiness too.

And if Dean decides that he’d like to stop taking his suppressants in some distant future, maybe in
that distant future they might add a pup or two the family.

Castiel’s alpha curls up contently inside his belly at the notion.

The time starts to fly. Watching Mary grow both fascinates and terrifies Castiel. He knows that
he’s watched infants grow before, but those instances are all under his days as a doctor. Witnessing
his own pup gain mobility and recognize more and more leaves him in a constant, sleepless cycle.
Always, he sits nestled between wonder and exhaustion.

And he is happier than he has been in a very, very long time.

Mary Grace sails past the two-month mark and turns three months old in December. It occurs to
Castiel that it is Christmastime, and he throws himself into making the holiday good for Dean. It is
the first Christmas that Dean has had since his escape, and Castiel is determined to also make it the
best one.

While Dean works one of his projects in the garage and Mary plays with brightly colored toys on
her blanket, Castiel hunts down old boxes from the basement. He finds them stowed beyond his
food storage, dust-covered and labelled CHRISTMAS in large, neat letters. Castiel did not put up
his Christmas decorations last year, being freshly severed from his life’s work and neck-deep in
sticky depression and liquor-lathered nights.

This year will not be that way.

Mary watches in fascination as Castiel winds a plastic garland meant to look like a long pine
branch from the bottom of the stairs up to where the railing stops right alongside the study door.
He hangs a wreath on the front door – freshly painted, graffiti now under a new layer, though still
there.

He should not think of the graffiti incident while he is attempting to be jolly. It sours the mood,
brings to mind the endless string of phone calls from reporters wanting their word on one thing or
another, wanting to cause drama in the Locke case where there is none. From time to time they
reappear at the edge of Castiel’s property, never encroaching the periphery of the land, but shouting at Dean and Castiel when either one of them dares step outside the house.

Jolly. Castiel is attempting to be *jolly*.

"You want any help?" Ash asks.

Cas jumps. Sometimes it can be easy to forget that they have an officer in their house. They're unobtrusive and quiet, but always alert.

"Sorry, dude. Didn't mean to scare you," Ash says.

"That's all right," Castiel assures him, "and you can help if you'd like, I suppose."

Castiel sets up Christmas-themed candle holders and cinnamon candles, puts out a ceramic snowman cookie jar on the kitchen counter and hangs his advent calendar in the living room. Ash puts out Cas' Santa-shaped candy dish, places the fake poinsettias at the center of the kitchen table, and replaces the dish towels with red and green ones. They do not, unfortunately, make it to the intimidating tangle of lights at the bottom of one of the boxes before Dean tromps in through the garage door reeking of sawdust, sap and wood stain.

“What the hell?” Dean says.

“Hello,” Castiel says, not unlike a deer caught in headlights, “I was going to try to put up the lights outside before you came back in, but they’re tied in knots and I cannot fix them.”

“No, I mean, what’s all this?” Dean says, gesturing to the significantly jollier interior of the house.

“Christmas décor?” Castiel suggests.

Dean swallows and his brows knit together. He says, “I’ve, um. I’ve never really done Christmas before.”

“Really?” Castiel says, “Not even as a child?”

Dean shakes his head and then makes a face. He says, “Well. Maybe. I don’t remember it really, but I guess when my mom was alive we must’ve. Sometimes me n’ Sammy tried as kids, but you know. There’s, uh. Not much you can do when you’re just a kid.”

“Oh,” Castiel says, “Do you want to celebrate?”

Dean looks around the house, at every little detail of Castiel’s attempt at jolliness, to Cas again and on to Ash where he has backed out of the situation and stands sentry against the living room wall...and then to where Mary sits on her blanket in the middle of it all, staring at them both, fascinated.

 “…Yeah,” Dean says, “Let’s do it.”

Two nights later, Castiel dresses Mary in socks, booties, hat and sweater and bundles her in a blanket. He wears her in the sling and he and Dean drive a distance down the road from the house, park at the edge, and tread through the woods in search of a suitable tree to place in Castiel’s stand. They shouldn’t cut a tree that isn’t theirs, he knows...but Dean seemed so enthusiastic by the idea of chopping down a tree himself that Castiel found it difficult to refuse.

The fact that Jo follows them in her patrol car just makes it interesting.
They find the tree on the outskirts of a clump of conifers, where younger trees surround trees that have lived longer than the town of Buena Vista.

“Crap, look at how nice this one is,” Dean says.

“I like it,” Castiel agrees, “What do you think, Mary?”

Mary just stares from her bundle as if to say *I am an infant, alpha dad, and cannot voice my opinion.*

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Castiel decides, “Majority decides that we should bring this tree home.”

From the road, Jo calls to them, "You know this is illegal, right?"

Dean makes a face back at her, even though the distance between the road and the proposed Christmas tree is too large for her to really see it. Dean shoots back through the trees, "What are you gonna do, tell on me?"

"You're a dick!" Jo calls back.

"Are you gonna arrest me?" Dean says, "Because I need to know before I take a swing at the thing."

An exasperated groan meets Dean's question, and then Jo replies from the road, "Go ahead and cut down your tree," and pauses before she adds, "but this is our secret! No one knows I let you do this."

Dean delightedly takes to the tree with the axe purchased in town for this purpose alone. On swing one, the blade wedges into the trunk and Dean has to pry it loose to swing again. From Castiel’s stance at a safe distance with Mary on him in her sling, the task looks more laborious than Dean thought it would be – he sweats, red-faced, and curses at the tree between swoops of the axe.

Finally, after one, last powerful swing and the words, “Goddamn fucking piece of crap Christmas tree,” through Dean’s gritted teeth, the tree shudders with a *crick-crack-crack*, and falls to the ground.

“Crap,” Dean says.

“Help me fasten the sling so Mary sits on my back and I’ll help you lift it,” Castiel says.

“We didn’t think this through.”

“Perhaps not.”

Dean trudges around Cas and grasps the sling. They struggle for a few minutes with safely retrieving Mary, adjusting the sling, and depositing her back in her place, and she seems entirely unamused by the whole ordeal and bats at Dean while they move her and starts to cry.

“I know, sweetheart,” Dean soothes. He has a particular way of speaking to her that Castiel finds endearing, his words still gruff and deep, but strangely gentle. He goes on to assure her, “We’ll be back home soon. We just need to bring you back a Christmas tree. Trust me. You definitely want a Christmas tree.”

Surely Dean has photographs of himself as a pup in front of the Christmas trees?

But Castiel doesn’t ask. Instead, he and Dean march to the tree and debate over what way they
intend to carry it back to Cas’ Prius, which they were forced to use because Cas has a bike rack attachment on the roof of the damn car. Mary continues to fuss on Cas’ back while they lift the tree with Dean grasping the middle and Cas at the end with the heaviest part. They only have to make it down the hill, but it proves an arduous task that takes an entire, painful fifteen minutes.

They use twine to secure the tree to the bike rack, but only do so after they’ve pulled Mary from the sling. Dean soothes her for a moment before he replaces her in her carrier in the backseat of the Prius. Mary frowns at them both.

It all seems worth it as soon as they reach the house, though they don’t pull the Prius into the garage with the tree fastened on top of it. Dean brings Mary inside while Castiel undoes the knots of twine – and finds he can’t.

“Dean!” Castiel calls, “Dean, I can’t undo your knots.”

Dean pops his head out of the front door and snarks back, “I don’t have any knot.”

Jo laughs from where she leans against her car.

“Ha ha,” Castiel replies, “Very funny. Help me fix it.”

Dean answers his plea a minute later, wielding a kitchen knife that he uses to slice through the twine instead of bothering to attempt to undo his handiwork. Together, Dean and Castiel manage to maneuver the tree off of the car, through the front door, and into the Christmas tree stand, which Castiel situated in the corner of the living room by the front window.

Castiel paces back to admire a job well done. Pride gushes over him, and he shoots a grin at Dean. Dean grins back.

Behind them, a door squeaks open. Both of them pivot and see Kevin curiously treading from his bedroom as he’s taken to doing from time to time. When he sees the Christmas tree, his lips part. He says, “Are we – I mean – do I, um.” And stops, face flushing and shoulders hunched in.

Before Dean can get a word in edgewise, Castiel plucks his ornament box from the coffee table and brandishes it as he says, “You’re welcome to help us decorate, Kevin. It’s your tree too, after all.”

Kevin glances from Castiel to Dean, and at the eye contact Dean adds, “Yeah, man. You’re family. Get over here.”

That evening, they string lights and tinsel onto the branches of their contraband Christmas tree, hang ornaments from low branches to the very highest. The finished product is the finest Christmas tree that Castiel has ever had the pleasure of seeing. True, it’s festooned with his old, familiar Christmas decorations used for holidays spent alone, but perhaps that is what makes them special this year: Castiel does not drive to a tree lot and purchase one alone, does not string the lights and tinsel by himself, and he does not hang the ornaments an empty apartment stories above downtown Denver.

This Christmas, Castiel decorates the tree with his family.

Dean only invites Sam and Amelia to spend the holiday with them at the house after he gets the go-ahead from Kevin. The conversation is had while Castiel holds Mary in his lap and attempts to start knitting Christmas gifts while she grabs at his yarn, probably because it’s a brilliant ruby red. He pretends not to be listening – but listen he does.
“So, I wanted to ask you – would you be cool if my brother and his girlfriend spent Christmas Eve here on the pull-out bed and celebrated with us? Sam’s an alpha, so I don’t want to fuck shit up for you, you know. But if you want my opinion, he’s a big giant puppy trapped in an alpha body.”

Kevin doesn’t say anything.

Dean’s voice continues, “I mean, it could be a good way to start to get back into the swing of things, you know? There would be new scents – well, kind of, I guess your room smelled like Sam…anyway, sort of new scents to deal with, that I can swear are non-threatening.”

“I don’t know,” Kevin answers.

“Don’t worry about it if it’s not gonna be okay,” Dean says, “I can drive down on Christmas morning with Cas and Mary and you wouldn’t have to have any crap happen to you.”

“Well, wait, doesn’t that mean I’d be alone?” Kevin asks.

“Yeah, but not the whole day,” Dean says, “We’ll still open presents here and stuff.”

For a pregnant stretch of time, both of them are silent.

Then, Kevin says, “I guess it’s okay. If I need to be alone I can just lock my door, right?”

“Dude, duh,” Dean says, “You sure?”

Another pause.

And at last a definitive, “Yes.”

A handful of days following finds Dean again locked in the garage working on his project – which he will not let Castiel see, which leads Cas to believe that the secret garage project is either a Christmas present or an illegal science experiment, neither of which he would put past Dean.

The benefit to Dean’s garage project is that Castiel gets more time with Mary, whom at the moment is asleep on Castiel’s legs, having given up on trying to grab the yarn out of his hands. He’s almost finished with this particular project and is looking forward to beginning another. He wishes that he had the time to knit a blanket for Sam and Amelia, but with Mary and juggling the preparations for their Christmas extravaganza, Castiel has hardly had time to think.

Watching *A Christmas Story* while his pup sleeps on his lap is indulgent enough, but at least he’s finishing her sweater.

Behind him, Castiel hears a soft noise. He cranes his neck and sees Kevin. Automatically, he says, “Dean is in the garage.”

“That’s all right,” Kevin says, “I just, uh. Dean said you guys were gonna go on a grocery run before Christmas Eve to grab stuff for Christmas dinner. I was wondering if I could – could come?” The tentative way that he says the words splinters something in Castiel, so like Dean used to be all those months ago.

“Of course,” Castiel says, “You’re always welcome.”

Castiel isn’t sure, but he thinks that he sees the smallest flicker of a smile across Kevin’s lips before he says the words, “Thanks, Castiel.”
It’s the first time that Kevin ever says his name.

And so on the twenty third of December, when Dean and Castiel gear up to head to the store in the biting but tragically snow-less cold, Kevin bundles up along with them. He doesn’t have a coat of his own, so he borrows one of Castiel’s, and they promise to find him more things to wear while they’re in town.

Kevin is quiet, but he doesn’t smell afraid. He sits without speaking in the backseat of the Impala, though out of the corner of Castiel’s eye, he sometimes sees Kevin lean over to Mary’s car seat and play with her, letting her grab at his fingers. The tiniest thread of the aroma of omega happiness leaks through to the front of the car, but it’s enough of a scent to have Dean and Castiel glance at one another.

Dean shrugs, and raises the volume of his music.

Behind them, Jo’s patrol car follows silently. Even without the lights and sirens, Castiel can’t help but feel like he has done something wrong with a police car always on his tail when he leaves the house. He hates feeling watched, hates feeling trapped in his own home. Even though it’s been months since the vandalism incident, Victor insists upon having an officer here. Castiel understands. He does. He just wishes that they weren’t in a situation that warranted a police officer with them twenty-four-seven.

They stop to purchase Kevin’s clothes before they make the trip to get food, although clothes shopping turns out to be an in-and-out affair, as Kevin points to a jacket on a rack the moment that they step into the store, Castiel buys it, and they walk out with a bag in hand after being in the store for less than five minutes put together.

In the car, Kevin tugs off the jacket’s tag, sheds Castiel’s coat, and shrugs on his own.

It suits him.

Though Castiel is pleased that Kevin has decided to come along with them on this journey into town, he does worry about being in the grocery store, around hundreds upon hundreds of scents, and dozens of people inside at once. The town of Buena Vista may be comparatively small in contrast with other towns, but everyone and their mother will be at the market to prepare for their respective holiday feasts.

So, as soon as Castiel parks in the swamped lot of the store and Dean climbs out of the car to undo Mary’s carrier, Castiel confiscates the car keys from Dean and holds out to Kevin. He says, “If you feel overwhelmed, come out to car and wait for us, or if it’s easier, sit with Jo in her car.”

Kevin takes the keys and pockets them in his new coat, but he doesn’t say anything.

At the front of the supermarket, Dean heaves Mary’s carrier up onto the proper place on a shopping cart and strolls into the holiday-season chaos. Castiel stands a safe distance behind him, and Kevin sticks near to both of them, seeming wary.

Castiel can’t help but notice the way that some people stare at Kevin, at the slash across his face and his cloudy, sightless eye. It makes the alpha in Castiel bristle – because Kevin is family, he realizes. With laser-like precision, Cas stares down anyone that lingers too long on Kevin’s face and gives them the best barely-contained alpha expression that he can manage.

“All right,” Dean says, and stops the cart to crack his knuckles, “What’s on the list, little alpha?”

Castiel doesn’t even realize that he’s crunched their grocery list in his fist until he looks down and
sees it crinkled into a mess.

Dean cocks a brow and remarks, “Way to go, Cas.”

Castiel makes a face at Dean. To this, Dean presents his middle finger.

“Oh, give me that,” Kevin says, and grabs the list right out of Castiel’s grip. He smooths it out using the handle of the shopping cart and says, “Ham, carrots, green onions, onion-onions, broccoli –”

“The hell are we getting broccoli for?” Dean asks.

“We’re not having this argument, Dean.”

“I’m not gonna eat it.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

“Right,” Kevin says, and directs them to the produce section so that they can collect the necessary goods.

Excitement alights Kevin’s face as they place more things into the cart and wind from aisle to aisle. He’s doing far better than Castiel expected – but then, he recalls Dean’s first trip to the grocery store, how he rode the shopping cart through the aisles and stuck things into the cart in the name of the yet-unborn pup.

Something about the plentiful nature of the supermarket may be the cause, or maybe it’s simply because people smell happy when they know they’re going to partake of delicious food. Dean is also in good spirits, babbling at Mary and laughing when she swats at him from her seat.

“You’re gonna have a killer right hook when you’re older, sweetheart,” Dean laughs, “Cas, did you see that? She tried to sock me in the eye.”

“Perhaps it is what you deserve for insulting the broccoli,” Castiel speculates. Dean rolls his eyes and keeps moving the cart forward.

In the snack aisle, Castiel expects them to breeze through. After all, they’ll be eating home-cooked food for the next couple of days. However, Kevin and Dean each choose snack food to throw in the cart: Cool Ranch Doritos and an unreasonably large bag of licorice for Dean, and cheddar-flavored Sun Chips and a box of Good n’ Plenty for Kevin. If that keeps them content, then all right.

The checkout lines snake back into the aisles by the time that they finish gathering up their Christmas dinner goods and Mary is temperamental, so Dean lifts her out of her seat and makes off to the omega restroom to check her diaper, leaving Kevin and Castiel behind in a cloud of dust and awkward silence. In front of them, the checkout beeps at every item scanned, not unlike the sound of a heart monitor.

“Hey, Castiel?” Kevin says.

Cas blinks over at him, “Yes?”

“I’m sorry,” he says.
“For what?”

“For not trusting you,” he says, “You’re all right.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” Castiel responds softly, “I understand the reason that you don’t – did not? Trust me. It takes time to heal. Dean still struggles, as you know.” Both Castiel and Kevin can smell the fear and distress on Dean the morning after he’s suffered from nightmares, even when Dean has tried to scrub himself clean in the shower or distract himself with his favorite cartoons. The nightmares don’t visit Dean as often as they did, but every so often…

Castiel only wishes he could help more. He doesn’t like struggling from the sidelines to take care of somebody whom he loves, but whose problem is not the kind that you can smooth a Band-Aid over and kiss better. Dean’s wounds cut all the way to the core.

Dean returns just as Castiel and Kevin make it to the front of their line with Mary grabbing at him. Her motor skills have developed so much and she can almost support her own head all the way. Soon she’ll sit up and eat solid foods, crawl and speak her first word –

“Whoa, Cas,” Dean says, “You look spooked. You doin’ okay there?”

“I was just thinking how much Mary has grown,” he admits, “and how much she will grow. I think I’ll miss this sometimes, her being so small.”

Dean chews on his lip and mutters to the linoleum floor, “Not like we can’t have more.”

Castiel’s brows shoot up into his hair and Dean scrambles to add, “Jesus, dude. Not like today. I mean, after Mary grows up some. Maybe we could. Uh. Try for another, or whatever. Don’t look at me like that, you goofy alpha sap.”

But Cas cannot wipe the grin from his face, no matter how hard he tries. He kisses Dean right there in the grocery store, and after their purchases are paid for and bagged, he smiles all the way to the Impala at the back of the parking lot. Dean just shakes his head and makes an odd face.

On the return trip back to the house, Kevin smells deeply content. He isn’t silent like he was on the drive down the mountain, and jangles one of Mary’s toys in front of her, mumbling to her in an English-baby talk hybrid. Mary, in an attempt to snatch her toy, whaps Kevin in the face with her fist like she did to Dean in the grocery store.

That is the first time that Castiel ever hears Kevin laugh.

X

Sam and Amelia arrive midday on Christmas Eve. As soon as his brother is through the door, Dean yanks Sam into a hug and muses his hair, something that leads to a half-wrestling, half-laughing tangle of brothers in the entry way.

“Boys,” Amelia says, “Let’s get in the door.”

Sam coughs and straightens out, to which Dean mutters, “Whipped,” and Sam glowers.

The glower only lasts an instant as Sam spots Mary on her blanket on the floor, aiming a concentrated stare at a set of plastic keys arranged in a rainbow of colors. Sam swoops down and kneels on the floor to bring her into his arms. Diverted, Mary drops her keys and uses her now-free hands to grab her uncle’s nose.
“How’s my favorite niece?” Sam asks.

Mary flails.

“Awesome,” Sam says. He lowers her just a little, tucking her against his broad chest.

That’s when Sam spots the Christmas tree. He looks over at Dean and says, “Dude, we have a Christmas tree!”

“I know,” Dean says, “I chopped it down myself,” he punctuates this with a pantomime of swinging an axe.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” Rufus says from his place in the kitchen.

Dean chuckles.

Then, just at the edge of the hallway, Kevin peers at the excitement. Dean waves him over, and shyly, Kevin toes his way into the living room. He stands a half-step behind Dean and hunches, but he looks Sam in the eye – a wonder on its own.

“Sammy,” Dean says, “This is Kevin. Kevin’s the guy that helped me bust outta…well, you know. Kevin, this is my brother Sam.”

Sam, having dealt now with omega post-trafficking knows not to stick his hand out for a shake or to dive into with a hug. Instead, he offers a polite smile, the aroma of thankfulness, and a genial, “It’s great to meet you, man. Dean tells me you’re part of the family now. Figured it was about time we met, huh?”

Kevin nods, though he doesn’t speak and keeps behind Dean.

“Anyway,” Sam says, “I hate to bust up the moment, but I have some news from Bela.”

Dean stiffens, “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Sam echoes, “So Bela’s gotten into contact with all the victims that she could. Very few wanted to speak to her or to Victor, and only two agreed to make a written statement. And so far, it looks like you’re gonna be the only omega victim that’ll be called to the stand. She was gonna call you, but I told her I’d give you news.”

Dean smears a hand over his face. He says, “Yeah, I figured it was gonna turn out like this. I got more time out here than anybody else, so I don’t blame them. Shit’s fresh in their minds. Not that it isn’t in mine, it’s just. I’ve had some extra months to sort my crap out. And I got a mate and a pup and you and Kevin. I’ll be – fine, I think.”

“It’s just gonna be complicated with only one person willing to speak up,” Sam sighs, “I’ve been working pretty closely with Bela, and Alastair’s been caught doing some pretty shady shit that he’s wiggled out of before. We’re lucky the jury selection is taking so damn long, because we need the time to prepare ourselves. We need all the ammo we can get.”

Dean’s shoulders sag. The open dismay on his face makes Castiel want to comfort him, but he knows that Dean would call him out and tell him not to hover. So he watches, and as he does, feels his heart shrink into itself.

“God, Sammy, what if –”
“If we lose?” Sam whispers.

“Yeah. That.”

“I don’t know,” Sam says honestly, “I…don’t know. We’ve got –”

“Me,” says Kevin.

“Sorry?” Sam says.

“You have me,” Kevin says, “I can testify.”

Agog, Dean looks back over his shoulder and asks, “Holy crap, are you sure? You’re still on mend, man.”

“Maybe, but this is kind of important,” Kevin says.

“You should probably think on it,” Sam says.

Kevin does not take the sentence well. He glares at Sam and says, “Don’t you alpha me. I’m only okay with you because Dean says you’re okay. I will think on it, but only because it’s Christmas Eve and nobody wants to think about this stuff. Okay?”

For some time, they all stare. Dean is the first to melt into action. He grips Kevin’s arm and says, “Right on, kid. We’ve got some holiday cheer to attend to.”

X

That Christmas Eve serves as the best in all of Cas’ memory. They rent a Christmas movie on Amazon Instant called The Ref at Dean’s request and adanimacy that it is “the greatest Christmas movie ever.” And since Dean is in the mood for getting into the spirit of things, Castiel decides that he won’t mind if Mary’s alpha father dresses her in the Christmas sweater he made for her.

“What in Christ’s name is that?” Dean asks, when Castiel brings Mary out from the nursery in her sweater. It is primarily red, with a snowflake pattern on the front.

“It is a Christmas sweater,” Castiel says, affronted, “I made it for her.”

Dean stares at him for a prolonged second and says, “All right. As long as you don’t stuff me into a matching one, all right? Pup sweater, fine. Weasley sweaters, no-go.”

Cas lifts a single brow and says, “Dean, have you finally joined the rest of the world and read Harry Potter?”

Dean flushes a little, freckles standing out across the bridge of his nose. He mutters, “Shut up.”

Later, Castiel, Kevin and Amelia make sugar cookies while Dean and Sam relax on the couch in front of Home Alone, each with beer in hand, and Dean with Mary snuggled up on his chest. From the bustle of the kitchen and over the sound of the movie, Castiel can’t hear what they’re saying, but sometimes he hears Dean bark out loud laughter, and every time he glances over, Dean’s eyes crinkle at the corners with a smile.

They end the night with eggnog, card games, and laughter. By the time that Dean and Cas pull out the couch for Amelia and Sam and retreat to the nursery to put Mary down, it’s already well past midnight. Dean feeds Mary, Castiel sings her to sleep, and in the dark of the house, they fall back onto their own mattress.
Castiel reels Dean in and snakes his limbs around him, nosing at his rough cheek before he says in a throaty, sleepy voice, “Merry Christmas.”

Dean yawns back, “Merry Christmas, little alpha.” He places a kiss on top of Cas’ head. Tangled up in each other, they fall asleep.

X

In an effort to start the day with a filling breakfast, Castiel wakes early Christmas morning and toes past where Sam has his arm slung over Amelia on the pull-out bed, his mouth open and breathing loud. Castiel elects to make cinnamon rolls, and eggs and bacon later in need be. He makes a pot of coffee first, however, and slides a mug to Rufus. Castiel says as Rufus nurses the drink, "I'm sorry that you have to be here on Christmas."

"Ain't nothing," Rufus says, "Don't got folks a' my own, so I usually visit Bobby for a while and spend it alone."

"It still means a lot," Castiel says, "Wait a minute." Castiel steps down into the living room and fishes around under the Christmas tree, where brightly colored packages burst out in a ring around it. He finds what he's looking for after a minute of digging, and brings it back to the kitchen, where he places the package on the table in front of Rufus, alongside his half-emptied coffee mug.

"What's all this?" Rufus asks.

"It's a gift," Castiel replies, "For you."

When Rufus doesn't do anything but stare at the present, Castiel urges, "Open it."

With gentle hands, Rufus tears away the smiling cartoon reindeer printed on the wrapping paper and pulls out the things that Castiel made for him - a scarf, gloves and a hat.

"Hey," Rufus says, "These are in that color I said was nice."

"Yes, they are," Castiel agrees, "Merry Christmas, Rufus."

"Merry Christmas to you too, Castiel."

Sam is the first of the family to wake, and does so just as Cas puts the first cinnamon rolls into the oven.

“Good morning,” Castiel says, “I have a pot of coffee ready.” The second pot of the morning, since he and Rufus collectively drained the first in record time.

“Awesome,” Sam says on the tail of a yawn, and bumbles over to pour himself some. He half-smiles after a sip and says, “Hey, merry Christmas.”

“To you too,” Castiel agrees, “I have cinnamon rolls baking and I intend to make bacon and –”

A familiar wail interrupts them and Cas says, “Be right back.”

Mary is awake and upset in her crib, but calms as soon as Cas lifts her out, swaps out her diaper and dirty pajamas, and brings her out to the common area, where Amelia, too, is now awake. A look of curiosity dawns on Mary’s face as Cas rocks her in the kitchen. She fixates on his face as though he holds some kind of secret, and then just barely he sees her take in a breath through her nose – scenting.
“Do you smell the cinnamon rolls, Mary?” asks Cas. She just blinks at him, but even that sends fizzy warmth like soda pop spreading over Castiel. He leans forward and kisses her head, which earns him a grab of his ear and a lengthy disentanglement from his daughter so that he can hand her off to her uncle Sam and pull the cinnamon rolls out of the oven.

Dean and Kevin show when Cas, Sam and Amelia are seated at the kitchen table over fresh pastries and coffee. Kevin ducks for the coffee pot while Dean nudges the refrigerator open for some juice. When his glass is poured, he says, “Uh, when do we open presents?”

“We were waiting for you,” Castiel says.

“Right,” Dean says.

All together, they migrate from the kitchen to the living room, where Sam heaves up the pull-out bed and pushes it back into its usual couch-form. He and Amelia collapse there and Sam lets his arm rest over the span of Amelia’s shoulders, while Dean plops down onto the carpet and makes a gesture for Castiel to give him Mary. Pup passed down, Castiel joins Dean on the floor, and Kevin curls up in the arm chair.

Castiel is closest to the tree and therefore designated present-passier. The first gift goes to Sam, and is a collection of potholders knitted by Castiel. The next goes to Kevin. He opens the package like he never expected to receive a present, hands reverent as they move over the illustrated wrapping on the outside of the package. Inside is a joint gift from Dean and Castiel: brand new, hardback books, covers embossed in gold and silver.

“We thought you might like to start your own collection,” suggests Castiel.

Kevin holds his books in his lap and doesn’t let them go.

“Ah,” Castiel says, “This one says that it is for Mary. It also says that it is from Santa.”

Dean takes the gift from Cas’ hands and presents it to Mary.

A flash flickers over the living room for a split second, and when Castiel looks up, Sam has his phone out and a grin on his face.

“You’re gonna be doin’ that all day, aren’t you?” asks Dean.

Sam nods, “Yup.”

Mary touches her tiny palm to the outside of the present, but Dean has to tear a little section of the paper and say, “See sweetheart? You take the paper off like this.” Mary just smacks at the present again, so Dean pulls off the remainder of the wrapping paper and reveals some kind of circular sound-making toy with bright colors. Dean presses the center button and the toy makes a happy tinkling noise and lights up all the way.

Mary stares at it with rapt interest.

“Here,” Dean says. He shifts to grab the blanket that Sam and Amelia used the night before where it hangs over the arm of the couch and spreads a section of it out over the floor, where he nestles Mary and sets her toy beside her. She hits it, and it makes another noise, this time the first notes of *Row Row Row Your Boat*.

“Man, you can see the ‘what the fuck’ written all over her face,” Dean laughs.
Castiel says, “If you’re not careful, that may actually be the first thing she says.”

“No way,” Dean says, “Her first word is gonna be ‘daddy.’ Just you assholes wait.”

More gifts are passed around – a new pair of leather boots to Dean from Sam, a coffee pot for Sam from Amelia, an entire pile of gifts for Mary from everybody – until one present remains. Castiel knows which gift this is, and without even looking at the tag, places it in Dean’s palm.

“That is from me,” he says, awkwardly.

Dean gives him a lopsided smile and peels back the snowman-patterned paper. Inside is a box, and beyond that – one shiny new card to Home Depot, and beneath it, the business cards of the local salvage yard, and a junk yard frequented by artists that lies just out of Salida.

“It isn’t very much,” Castiel says, abrupt self-consciousness prickling him when he had felt so confident about this decision before, “I just – I mean. You enjoy building things so much I thought –”

Dean hushes him with a kiss. Without thinking, Castiel relaxes into it. Dean pulls away, pecks his lips to Cas’ forehead and says gruffly, “S’one of the nicest things I’ve ever gotten. Thanks, Cas.”

“I guess that’s it?” Amelia says.

“Wait,” Dean says, “There’s one more present.”

“No, there isn’t,” Castiel says, “There are no more gifts under the tree.”

“This present is on the front porch,” Dean explains, “And it’s for you. From me. You know. Like you do. ‘Cause it’s Christmas.”

So Castiel clambers to his feet, stumbling on one foot since the other decided to conveniently fall asleep, and makes his way to the front door. Everyone else shuffles to follow behind.

On the porch sits a coffee table. Not just a coffee table, but one with oblong edges that smells like old, well-worn lumber. The top surface looks as though three pieces of solid wood were sanded down and fitted together, while the legs are sanded and polished and stained but still look like thick branches off of trees. All throughout the table, labyrinthine markings roam over it.

Castiel doesn’t say anything, but he reaches out to feel along the top. Smooth as butter, and he would put money on it being meticulously level. Castiel looks behind and sees Dean with a worry to his brow, gazing at Cas as he feels along the piece.

“What are those markings?” Castiel asks.

Dean says, “Pine beetle damage. Looks pretty badass, though, doesn’t it?”

“Where did you get the lumber?” Castiel says.

Dean makes a face and a vague gesture, "There are tons of trees that have keeled over out in the woods."

“How did you even get them here?” Castiel asks, bewildered.

"I may have had some help,” Dean says, and casts a sidelong glance at Rufus, who winks.

All at once Castiel is filled with thankfulness. His mate and his friends helped make this for him,
helped build him something new out of something old and forgotten. He runs his fingers over the winding grooves made by hungry pine beetles and breathes, “It’s absolutely gorgeous, though. I knew you could craft…but this is something special, Dean. And now I can get rid of the one from Ikea.”

Dean beams. He full-on radiates pleased, proud omega, which turns Castiel loose-limbed and breathless before Dean lifts Mary to eye level and says, “We hate that cheap piece of shit, don’t we? Yes we do. Omega dad says fuck the Ikea table.”

“I’ll take the Ikea table,” Sam volunteers.

Dean groans, “God, I never want to see it again. Now I have to make you something decent, too. You know how freaking tough it is to get usable material out of fallen trees?”

Sam nods, “What a shame.”

Dean grumbles something under his breath about sneaky alpha brothers, but underneath it, he seems pleased that Sam wants something that Dean created with his own two hands, enough that he’ll endure the Ikea coffee table to finagle Dean into doing it.

After the buzz of gift-giving subsides, Sam helps Castiel move the old table out and the new one in. Dean slouches back on the couch wearily and feeds Mary, and Kevin gathers his new books and clothes and returns to his bedroom. He closes the door, but the sound of the lock never comes.

From the couch, Dean groans and says, “Hey, I think me n’ Mary need a Christmas nap. We’re gonna take the bed, ‘kay Cas?”

“Sleep well,” Castiel says.

The house settles into a comfortable holiday quiet. Sam volunteers to clean up the breakfast dishes while Castiel fastidiously sorts the abandoned wrapping paper and gift packaging into what can be recycled and what cannot before he takes each bundle out to the garage and tosses the waste into their respective receptacles.

When he ducks back inside, Sam stands nearby.

“Hey,” he says, “I wanted to talk to you about something. I can give you the details later, but I thought that you would wanna know before anything gets serious.”

Castiel tilts his head and affords this a wary, “Yes?”

“So I’ve been going over the case file and the reports and write-ups and everything,” Sam says, “and I think I can get your medical license back.”
Important Note: In case you missed the note on my tumblr (scarlettofletters) and on chapter 27, I’ve edited chapters 26 & 27 to incorporate police protection. So when Jo shows up out of nowhere in this chapter, it’s not actually nowhere. It might help to read the edited versions!

Also MEGA WARNING for this chapter as far as Dean's past goes. Several mentions of rape, flashbacks, etc.

Chapter Track: Waves – Blondfire

They Come From the Deep

Dean’s glad that Sammy’s trying to get Cas his medical license back. He’s better than glad, actually. He’s freaking thrilled. Sammy can do anything – hell, his website lists tons of shit that he did for omegas in California. Colorado isn’t a red state; it tends to be purple during election years, so Dean doesn’t think that putting up a fight would be fruitless. They could make real strides here.

Besides, he knows it would make Cas happier than a pig in shit. Back at the hospital, when all those omegas got evacuated out of the compound and they needed Cas’ help, Cas became something – somebody that Dean had never seen before. He had life and energy and vigor and all these things that Dean never witnessed.

Until then, Dean thought of Castiel as a reserved, quiet guy. And he is, most of the time. But working changed that – it sparked fire in Cas’ eyes, put a spring in his step, made him breathless and bright-eyed and raring to go. And goddamnit, Dean wants that for Cas again.

Dean pauses his work on sanding down the lumber for Sam’s coffee table and slouches back, tipping his eyes up toward the ceiling of the garage, where a single light bulb swings back and forth from the support beams. It’s hard not to want good things for Cas, and Cas’ work was his whole life…Dean knows that he says that Dean and Mary are his whole life now, but Dean would have to be a sociopath not to realize that the loss of Cas’ work left a gaping hole in him.

He shakes his head and leans forward to keep on keeping on with his new project. Sammy’s got the stupid Ikea table in his house now, and Dean’s the only one that can get rid of that thing once and for all. He knows Sam is just prodding him into making another table, but there’s a kind of flattery that comes from knowing that Sammy likes the stuff that Dean can do with his hands.

Dean got a power sander with the money on the gift card that Cas gave him for Christmas. It makes the process of prepping the lumber (purchased from a yard this time, where it has been properly seasoned) a whole hell of a lot easier, though he did get a damn good workout sanding their coffee table into shape with nothing to work with but sandpaper. He had a hell of a time making that table with tough, stubborn material and few tools at his disposal, but he's proud every time that he sees it in the living room.

Over the noise, he doesn’t even hear Cas open the garage door and approach from behind until Cas
shouts over the racket of the sander, “Dean!”

Dean flinches with surprise and shuts off the sander. He wipes the sweat from his forehead with his arm and asks, “Yeah, what’s up?”

Cas holds up the home phone and says, “It’s Ms. Talbot.”

Crap. Bela never calls with good news. Dean exhales and says, “Hang on a sec,” before shedding his thick work gloves onto the lumber in front of him. He motions for Cas to hand him the phone and then to skedaddle, which he thankfully does without complaint, though he does pause at the doorway between the garage and the house and sends a pointed look Dean’s way, as if to say, you will tell me what she says.

As if there’s something that Dean hasn’t shared with the class.

“How goes the freedom fighting?” Dean says into the receiver.

“Ha ha,” Bela replies, “Very funny.” Back in the day, Bela would have been exactly his type – omega, curves everywhere, and one heck of a sharp tongue. Now she’s a pain in his ass, though she’s a pain in Dean’s ass that’s trying to help him do something good.

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean replies, “Tell me what’s going on. Must be real special if you decided to call me.”

“Something like that,” Bela says, “Are you sitting down?”

Dean glances down at his legs, where they’re splayed out in front of him, his ass parked firmly on a three-legged stool. He says, “Yup. I checked just for you. Why?”

“Lovely,” she says, “And it’s because you’d probably like to be sitting when I give you this news.”

“Well, shoot,” Dean says, “Go ahead and ruin my day.”

Bela doesn’t bother responding to the last of Dean’s sentence, and just powers into her announcement with, “Alastair’s court date is set.”

Dean’s heart stops beating in his chest. He licks his lips and tries to kick his brain into motion, but this is it. This is what he’s been dreading and craving all in one messy, chaotic package. Dean’s known that the party was gonna get started at one time or another, but this is final. This is real.

“…When?” he finally croaks out.

“March third,” she replies.

Dean worries the peeling skin on his lips and tries to remember what day it is. He ends up having to count back to Christmas to get it, since his little girl keeps him up at odd hours and has him sleeping at even odder ones.

It’s January second. That gives them only two months until the bomb drops, and one of those months is dinky fucking February. He starts to grind his teeth.

“Anyway,” Bela continues, “That isn’t all that’s happened. As of this morning, two of the men working under Alastair have taken a plea deal. They’re going to be testifying at the trials of the other employees to put parole on the table in their future. I doubt they’ll be allowed it, but they’d like to hope.”
“So testifying against their buddies is a done deal,” Dean says.

“Yes,” Bela says.

Dean grabs the back of his neck. He has to breathe for a second before he asks, “What about Alastair? Are they testifying against him?”

Silence meets him on the other line for several seconds. That’s enough. Bela doesn’t have to say anything for Dean to know that the creepy henchmen won’t be ratting out their double-extra-creepy boss.

“Why the fuck not?” he demands.

“They outright refused, Dean,” Bela says, “All of them did. No one wants anything to do with testifying against Alastair, no matter how long we kept at them. We don’t have the evidence, but my guess is that he’s lording something over them, that they’ve been blackmailed into silence.”

“Awesome,” Dean says, the word bitter and ugly against his tongue. Why the fuck should that surprise him at all? Alastair’s got more money than anybody should rightfully have, and from that money comes an insane amount of power. Even worse, he’s got nuts enough to do whatever the fuck he wants with that power. So why did Dean ever think that he could take Alastair on?

“Dean?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve got to run,” Bela says, “Be safe, Dean. Do you still have an officer at your house?”

“Yeah. Jo tonight.”

“Good,” she says, “I’ll call you if anything else comes up.”

When the click of Bela hanging up sounds, Dean starts to shake. His shoulders tremble. He wraps his arms around himself and tries to hold his body together, but it feels like all the bolts and cogs keeping him in one piece are going to unravel and explode. His lungs burn like he’s inhaling smoke from a fire, and his eyes start to water.

This is fear.

Dean lives his life in fear and he knows it. Maybe between nightmares and memories he gets some peace, but that peace only lasts until the next episode.

And he’s just fucking doomed to take it. That’s how it’s always been since he presented. He’s expected to bend over for life and take whatever he can get, because omegas should be grateful for anything that they’re given, any job, any knot, any whistle from some knothead jackass, any hey sweetheart, nice ass you get when you do as little as duck to tie your shoe.

“Fuck that,” Dean says. His arms fall away from his sides and he balls his hands into fists and shouts, “FUCK that!” With a sweep of his arms, he sends his progress on Sam’s table clattering to the cement floor of the garage. The crash of noise sends adrenaline through his veins, and something like satisfaction. He grabs his hammer from the toolset open on his worktable and hurls it against the wall.

“You can’t do that, Dean, you’re an omega,” he shouts, and swipes his hands over his work table. Nails tumble down like metal rain. He throws his drill and heaves his level over Cas’ Prius.
After that, he doesn’t look at what he’s throwing. He just yells and growls and overturns everything that he can get his hands on. Every ounce of rage that he’s ever shoved down for the sake of peace, every snide remark, every bastard that came onto him in music shops and comic book stores when he was just a fourteen year old kid –

But a fourteen year old is still old enough to fuck, his dad would say to him, if you smell right.

And when for once in your goddamn life a stranger treats you with some dignity, doesn’t ask if he can buy you a drink or ask, “Where’s your alpha, sweetie?” – It turns out be the worst decision of your life. Dean forfeit everything the day that his first heat came, all the hope of his dignity or capability being realized, forfeit his chance to make a decent living (“The average omega makes seventy three cents to every alpha’s dollar, and that’s the statistic for white, male omegas,” or so Sam’s website says), forfeit any dream of independence because the day you present as omega, you’re shoved down, kicked around and stuffed into a tiny box that everyone labels as needy, helpless, stupid.

“I’m not stupid,” he says, kicking something on the ground, “I’m not stupid!” Dean makes a grab for his worktable, for anything else that he can throw across the room and get a satisfying crash out of it.

His fingers only close around it for a second, but the brand new, razor-edge of the saw blade slices a clean line across the fingers on Dean’s right hand. He roars out a curse and clutches his it to his chest, blood running over and dripping from the spaces between his fingers and soaking into his shirt, dropping onto the floor. There, Dean falls onto his knees.

The blood running down his hand takes his anger with it.

What’s left is a deep, cavernous hole of hatred. At the bottom of the hole, sadness sloshes black and sticky. He never asked for this. He never asked for biology to do him in, never asked for anything. But he’s got pretty lips and nice eyelashes and a round ass, so they all tell him that he did ask.

“Dean?”

Dean turns his head. Cas rushes to him and exclaims, “Dean! What happened?”

“No — go away,” Dean bites out. What the hell would Cas know about this? He doesn’t know a goddamn thing about being an omega. All he knows is that it’s insulting to be equated with one, and isn’t that just peachy? Being an omega is an insult. Never mind that some of the strongest goddamn people that Dean has ever met have been omegas, omegas that have endured being tracked down streets, held down and knotted even when they begged for it to stop, omegas that suffered through heats alone because it was better than being with anybody else, omegas that spend every day of their lives defending their competence only to be shown up by cool-headed betas and alphas with million-dollar smiles and firm handshakes.

“Dean, please,” Castiel says, voice too gentle and too forgiving, “What happened to your hand? We need to —”

“I said to leave me alone, you fucking alpha shithead,” Dean snaps.

Cas is stunned into silence, but instead of satisfaction, fresh, frothy guilt rushes over Dean in waves. For a second, it’s so quiet that all Dean can hear is his own breath coming out in short, pained pants, and the blood rushing in his ears. Then he hears footsteps and the sound of nails rolling aside.
Maybe Cas is going to leave. That’s probably best.

But Cas doesn’t leave. Instead, he lowers himself to the ground behind Dean and wraps his arms around Dean’s middle. Castiel murmurs, “I’m not going to leave,” and noses over the mark on Dean’s neck before he adds, “I love you. I’ve never met somebody brighter than you.”

“Sure you haven’t,” Dean mutters.

“It’s true,” Castiel replies, “You’re brilliant and boisterous and you speak your mind. You do so many things that I would never have the courage to and you don’t think twice about it. I don’t know what’s going to happen, Dean. I’m not a fortune teller. I do, however, know that you will always have me. I will always come when you call.”

They sit there like that for several minutes without talking. Dean clutches his bleeding hand and Cas rests his forehead against one of Dean’s shoulders. Dean’s breathing slows from harried and wheezing to long and exhausted.

And then Dean says, “Never change, Cas.”

He’s still shaking, but Cas makes the worst of it drift away. His brain leaps to tell him that he doesn’t deserve an alpha like Cas, doesn’t deserve anybody like Cas, that tolerates tantrums like this and instead of yelling back, sits down on the ground and hugs Dean to him. But when Cas brushes his lips over the curve of Dean’s ear, his mind goes blank, blipping out to static like an old TV screen.

Cas’ scent comforts him. It always has. He thinks of when he arrived here, skinny and pale and terrified. Even then, Cas smelled like comfort. Smelled like home. Smelled like mate. Dean lets the smell wrap him up and swaddle him like a baby, leaning back into Cas as his lips ghost over places on the back of Dean’s neck and over his scalp.

“Are you ready to go back inside?” Cas asks.

Dean nods dumbly and Cas helps him to his feet. Dean protests when Cas moves in close, tells him that he’ll get blood on his clothes, but Castiel doesn’t seem to give a fraction of a fuck and lets blood smear across the front of his button-up like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Immediately, when they walk into the house, fireworks of anxiety burst inside Dean. Mary is screaming and crying in Kevin’s arms, and Kevin smells like distress and concern and metallic fear. The noise builds in Dean’s head until he feels like his skull might explode.

When Kevin asks, “What happened?” Dean loses it.

“You wanna know what happened?” Dean barks, “None of Alastair’s men are gonna testify against him, that’s what happened. We’re alone and we’re fucked. I hope you’re ready for hell, kid.” He doesn’t realize that his voice is raised until he quiets and sees the blood drain from Kevin’s face.

Kevin holds Mary out.

Beside him, Cas takes her, rocking her in his arms and whispering to her in that gruff, gentle voice of his. As soon as the pup is free from his arms, Kevin flees back to his bedroom, footsteps light and quiet as they hit hardwood floor and soften on carpet.

“You shouldn’t have shouted at him,” Jo says from her place in the corner of the kitchen, “He’s really vulnerable, Dean. I know it’s hard –”
“You know, huh?” Dean snaps, “You think you know? You’re a goddamn beta. Let me ask you a question. Have you ever been bent over and fucked even when you begged for somebody not to? You ever find out how many knots it takes in one night to bleed? Do you know the answer to that question? No, you don’t. So don’t you fucking tell me that you know anything.”

Mary cries and cries and cries. The sound echoes in Dean’s ears. He feels like his bones are going to break apart if he stands here any longer, and so he turns on his heel and strides back to the master bedroom. He slams the door behind him but still hears Mary screaming at the top of her tiny lungs.

When Dean bolts to the bathroom and slams the door closed, the sound of pup-sobs fades enough for him to think clear thoughts. He stares at his reflection in the mirror – dark-eyed and filthy from the garage, right hand covered in blood up to his elbow. He doesn’t think he sliced far enough to do permanent damage but flexes his fingers just in case. They sting like hell, but it’s nothing debilitating.

Dean runs his cut-up hand under the bathroom tap, watching pink water swirl down the drain until his arm is mostly clean, as clean as it’ll get for now.

He wets his lips and spares a glance at the bathroom door, wondering if he should go back out. Instead, Dean pushes aside the shower curtain and climbs into the fancy claw-foot tub. He scoots all the way to the back and tucks his knees against his chest. It’s always safer if you look smaller. Always safer if you keep your back against the wall. He lets his head slump and presses into his knees, breathing heavily through his nostrils.

Dean tries to control the breathing but fails. It’s erratic, and instead of being in the bathtub at home, he’s spiraling back to a neat guest room at the brothel, sitting on some alpha’s cock while he’s too drugged out of his mind to know what’s happening. The alpha told Dean to ride him, so Dean did.

Dean stopped, lightheaded, and swayed where he sat on top of the guy, a middle-aged alpha whose suit looked expensive when Dean stripped it off of him.

“Did I fucking tell you to stop?”

Dean’s vision swam a little and he tried to move again, but it wasn’t enough. The alpha threw Dean off of him, using more strength than it took to toss an underfed omega across a room. Dean slammed up against the opposite wall, head cracking against it. The alpha pulled him by his hair and it hurt, Christ, it hurt…

No, no, no. He’s at home. Dean’s eyes fly open. His heart beats wildly, even though everything in the master bath is as it’s always been. The walls are a deep slate blue, the shower curtain dark green, and the drawer pulls are made out of stones that Cas found on the property before the build began.

Dean knows all this.

But it’s not enough. The room stretches before him for what seems like forever, dark except for fluorescent lights on the ceiling hung far, far apart. It’s like that for the thrill of the hunt. The chase room is built to visit the way things used to be, before omegas got the vote.

_Run._

Even though Dean knows what happens when he runs here, he never says no. If he doesn’t run,
they take him up to The Chair, and The Chair is worse than the chase room. The Chair is much worse. His bare feet slap against the cold floor, body buzzing with the instinct to flee as it always does when they want him here.

Behind him, he hears a growl, low and vicious, and knows that this alpha’s a bad one. He won’t be like the alphas that like to pretend they’re playing chase like puppies and just want to knot someone sweet-smelling and snuggle up at the end of the game. This is a real hunter, the kind of alphas that are on special maps on the internet so you know where they live and know to keep your pups away.

Dean’s eyes start to sting as he runs, but there’s something…something not right.

He stops dead in his tracks and scents the air. Instead of filth and concrete and furious alpha, he smells family.

Dean snaps his head up.

“Dean,” Castiel says softly. He’s standing in the underneath the door frame that sits between the bathroom and the bedroom. Mary sits in his arms. She’s quiet now, but the stare that she gives Dean indicates to him that she’s far from okay.

Damn it.

Dean holds out his arms for Mary, and Cas deposits her into them.

As soon as Mary wiggles up against him, Dean presses his nose to her hair and breathes in. With each inhale and exhale, his heartbeat slows to sound and steady. Dean kisses her forehead and rasps, “So sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t mean to run from you. I-I should have been there.”

He is an awful father.

Just as the thought rains down on him, Mary bats him in the face. He blinks at her, and she blows a spit bubble.

It’s a little hard not to laugh, though the sound that escapes him is less a laugh and more an exhale.

“Dean?”

Dean looks up and sees Cas watching him with serious, studious eyes. It’s little unnerving being watched like that, like he’s a Sudoku puzzle that Cas is trying to complete. Dean coughs and replies, “Yeah?”

“Could I bandage your hand now?” asks Castiel.

“Huh – oh, yeah,” Dean says, “Here, take the pup for a sec.”

Cas collects Mary from Dean’s arms and Dean unfolds himself from his place in the tub. He stumbles when his feet first touch the tile floor but catches himself against the wall. Cas looks worried but lets Dean work it out on his own, and he walks stiffly into the kitchen behind his mate and pup before he leans one side up against the counter. Dean stretches out his legs and groans.

With one arm, Cas holds Mary. With the other, he sifts through the medicine cabinet until he brings down a couple different things.

“Hold her with your left arm while I fix your hand,” Cas says, and Dean takes her from Cas’ grip.
With a damp paper towel, Cas wipes away the rest of the blood that Dean didn’t get. The slice across his fingers isn’t bleeding much anymore, but it still stings when Cas applies Neosporin. He wraps an individual Band-aid around each finger. When he finishes, Cas tells Dean to wiggle his fingers and see how it feels.

It stings a little still, but feels much better than before.

“So, what’s the prognosis, doc?” Dean asks. He tries to make his tone teasing, but the words come out flat.

Cas answers, “This is serious, Dean.”

“What? It’s just a cut,” Dean says, and wiggles his fingers again to prove it.

“I’m not talking about your hand,” Castiel says, “I’m talking about your flashbacks, your nightmares, about what happened in the garage. You ripped it to shreds.”

“I know,” Dean says, and hangs his head a little, “I’m sorry, Cas, I know I fucked up –”

“You are missing the point entirely,” Castiel tells him, “I’m not upset about the state of the garage.”

“But you just said –”

“I’m upset because you are hurting,” Cas says, “I should have known better than to think that you’d recovered wholly from your experience. You still suffer so much and it hurts me to watch it. I won’t make you if you don’t want to, but I’d like if you would consider seeking out a therapist. They are trained to help people with these things. In fact, there are counselors specifically trained to handle sex crimes, like what happened to you.”

“You want me to see a shrink?” Dean says, “I’m not crazy.”

“No, you’re not,” agrees Castiel, “But you need the kind of help that family alone can’t give. This afternoon proved that to me.”

Dean clenches his jaw. He doesn’t like the idea of talking to some phony shithead that’s only helping him out for their paycheck. He also doesn’t like the idea of spilling his guts to somebody he doesn’t know, even if they’ve probably already seen his guts all over on TV.

But it’s Cas that’s asking him, and Cas doesn’t actually ask for a whole hell of a lot from Dean. So Dean mutters, “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I ask,” replies Cas, and he leans forward to press his lips against Dean’s forehead, where he lets them linger for a few seconds before he pulls back away.

“Thanks,” Dean says, “For, um. I don’t know. For bein’ you, I guess.”

Castiel cocks his head with a bewildered little smile on his lips before he answers, “Thank you for being you too, Dean.”

Dean nods and shifts Mary so that she’s swaddled in his arms. She gazes up at him with that kind of adoration that only pups can muster. He wonders how much longer she’ll look at him like that.

“I…uh,” Dean says, “I’m gonna talk to Kevin.”
At the very least, he owes the kid an apology. Dean takes Mary with him, maybe as a bargaining chip so that Kevin won’t get too upset at him, or maybe because having her near makes Dean feel braver, stronger than he usually is. He knocks on Kevin’s door and gruffly says, “It’s me.”

Kevin doesn’t answer, which means he’s either asleep or ignoring Dean.

Just in case it is the latter, Dean says, “Look, I owe you an apology, dude. I know I’ve been outta that shithole longer than you but it still messed me up real bad. Sometimes I forget how bad, ‘cause I got Cas and Mary and Sammy and you, and then it feels like I’m just a normal omega with a normal family. I guess you gotta know how it feels to want to put all the crap behind you.”

Dean pauses to breathe. He’s never been skilled with words, not the way he needs to be in order to dig himself out of the bull that he’s gotten himself into. But he still tries: “So, I try and figure stuff out on my own, ‘cause other people are fucked up and do fucked up shit and it’s easier if you don’t trust any of ‘em, even the ones that might be good. Sometimes that gets me into trouble and so that’s why I’m here now, standing here like an idiot. You’re one of the good ones.”

Dean hears a shuffle on the other side of the door.

“And the thing is,” he says, “if we’re gonna tackle this crap, then we’ve gotta do it together.”

The door opens at that, and Kevin stares Dean down with his good eye. He says, “You’re an asshole.”

“Yeah,” Dean agrees, “but I try not to be, if that makes it any better.”

“Sort of,” Kevin says, and frowns. He folds his arms over his chest and then goes on, “So I guess it’s us against pretty much everyone else.”

“Pretty much.”
Lost Sight of Who You Are

Chapter Notes

Warning for some brief discussion of Dean's past, the usual.

Chapter Track: Fantasy – MS MR

Lost Sight of Who You Are

Dean’s nightmares roar back into their life at full force. They avalanche from once or twice in a week to every night without question. Some nights are worse than others, but Castiel always wakes up when Dean does, the smell of fear and distress in his omega too potent to ignore even in sleep. Sometimes Dean just sweats and shakes and Castiel rubs his back and grips him tight.

Other times, Dean wakes up shouting, leaps from sleep believing that he’s trapped in Alastair’s compound. Castiel doesn’t want to know what parts of the compound Dean dreams of, but he wonders anyway. Does he think of the never-ending heat forced upon him? Or maybe he thinks of the torture rooms on the floor beneath where the omegas slept, the rooms that Dean called playrooms.

Or maybe Dean dreams of that medieval piece of equipment that upset him so much that he vomited on himself and cried when he saw it again.

Castiel urges Dean to agree to therapy, but Dean always says the same thing: I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know.

In part, Castiel blames John’s influence over Dean, and the backwards lessons that he taught his sons. Getting help is equivalent to weakness in Dean’s mind. Weakness is an omega trait, or so is generally accepted among the majority. Dean doesn’t want to slip into a stereotype.

He hopes to heaven that they can put that creature Alastair behind bars where he belongs.

Because if Alastair isn’t jailed, Castiel will kill him. He will make Alastair hurt just as much as Dean hurt, and he will smile as he does it.

Castiel tries not to dwell on that too much. It makes him smell aggressive, makes Kevin more timid and Dean irritable.

On one particular afternoon, Castiel sets aside a slice of time to himself in the study and realizes that he should call Gabriel, since his brother did say that he wanted to be in Colorado and at their side when the trial began.

Gabriel picks up on the third ring.

“Ahoy-hoy, what’s up in casa de Castiel?” he answers.

Castiel tries to suppress a roll of his eyes and fails. He replies, “Alastair’s court date is set. The third of March.”
“Well, shit,” Gabriel says, “Is everything okay your way?”

“It…could be better,” admits Castiel, “Dean is feeling poorly. He’s having nightmares every night again, and he hasn’t suffered like that in months. It’s almost like when I first brought him here. And he’s anxious overall. He tries not to be, I think. He also doesn’t like discussing it.”

“Can you blame the dude?” Gabriel says, “I mean, the crap I saw on the news. That’s heavy, Cassie. And I was just looking at it on my TV. When do you want me on your turf?”

Cas paces the perimeter of the study and pauses alongside one of his bookshelves. He absently strokes the spine of a fantasy pulp and says, “I think we should allow for some time between your arrival and the trial, just so that Dean and Kevin and Mary can get used to your scent.”

“Who in the flippity flying fuck is Kevin?”

“Kevin is the omega that helped Dean break out of the compound,” Castiel replies, “He doesn’t have any family, so we took him under our wing. He’s often skittish around new people.”

“No freaking kidding,” Gabriel says, “So, what, I should cruise in a week ahead of the big shebang?”

“A week sounds good, yes,” Castiel agrees.

“Cool,” Gabriel says, “So now that you’ve won the Grammy for Most Depressing Phone Call, how about you tell me how my niece is doing?”

Castiel snorts and again fails to stop himself from rolling his eyes, but he responds in turn, “She can already hold her head up by herself, for the most part. Dean is proud. He’s anxious to start her on solid foods, even though I’ve told him that we need to wait until she’s at least four months. Although I am pleased –”

“Hang on,” Gabriel interrupts. There’s some noise from the other end, raised voices, even though Castiel can tell that Gabriel has his palm over the receiver. Only a few seconds later, Gabriel puts the phone back against his ear and says, “I’ve gotta run, Castiel. I’ll ring you up when I know when I’ll be gracing you with my fine presence.”

“Of course,” Castiel says, “Goodbye.”

“Don’t do anything that I wouldn’t do,” Gabriel says back, and there’s an annoyed voice behind him that gets cut off when his line goes dead.

Castiel lets out a soft sigh and tucks his cellphone into the pocket of his jeans. He pads back behind his desk and to the wide window behind it, pressing his forehead against the glass. Outside, it’s snowing for the second day in a row. The flakes are soft and dry, gentle as they fall, but the news report says that it will turn to flurries and heavy snowfall come nighttime.

Dean is excited to dress Mary up in her winter gear and take her out to play in it, although Castiel thinks that’s more because Dean wants to play in the snow and not because their three month old daughter does.

With Gabriel committed to supporting them, an overwhelming sense of doom hangs over Castiel’s head. Gabriel has never been enthusiastic about supporting anybody through anything – unless you count himself. Maybe his brother has changed fundamentally, but perhaps his behavior is the barometer reading for the biggest shitstorm that Castiel has ever faced in his lifetime.
Considering their mother, they are well acquainted with shitstorms.

The study door swings open and Castiel turns to see Dean poking his head into the room. He gives Castiel a lazy grin and says, “Hope I wasn’t interrupting.”

“You weren’t.”

“Awesome,” Dean says, “Me n’ Kevin are gonna watch the original Flash Gordon serial. You in? I am making cocoa.” Dean says the word ‘cocoa’ with an air of snobbishness, and the voice makes Castiel chuckle.

“I’d love to,” he replies.

Castiel and Dean tread downstairs together, where Dean treks into the kitchen to put together the promised cups of hot chocolate. He does whine at Cas, just a little, when Castiel wraps his arms around Dean’s middle and sticks his nose directly against the skin of Dean’s neck, soaking in the scent of sweat and something more acidic – pup spit-up? Yes, that’s what that is. But under the aromas of their day-to-day lives, Castiel drinks in mate and Dean, and calm takes over where stress clenched him before.

When they wander back to the couch with three mugs of hot chocolate, Kevin passes Mary to Castiel. Cas cuddles her to him and leans against Dean. Despite Ash in his blue uniform only meters away from them, when Flash Gordon starts and cocoa settles in his stomach, he feels like the world might sort itself out.

X

A fist to the face jerks Castiel from sleep and into their dark bedroom. On his side of the bed, Dean thrashes and cries out. He clutches at the sheets and whimpers, the smell of fear so strong that it overpowers anything else and leaves Castiel feeling sick to his stomach. He leans over to his bedside table and flicks on the lamp there, rubbing his face with one hand while he rests the other on Dean.

At the touch, Dean lets out a scream, and Castiel can’t take it anymore. He wraps his hands around Dean’s shoulders and shakes. He calls, “Dean! Dean, wake up.”

Dean gasps out of his nightmare. From the wild look in his eyes, Castiel knows that this is a bad one. It takes Dean several seconds to process that he isn’t being tortured in Alastair’s compound but instead is in his own home, in his own bed, with his mate above him and his pup just down the hall.

“Cas,” he says hoarsely, and buries his face into Castiel’s bare chest. He burrows into him and clutches to Cas with vice-like hands, shaking and sweating.

Castiel lowers them both back onto the bed and gathers Dean against him. There, he rubs his back in slow circles and murmurs lowly, “Shh, Dean. You aren’t there anymore. You’re at home. You’re with me and you’re with our pup. You’re safe here.”

Dean shudders and Cas feels dampness against his skin. A lump forms in his throat when he realizes that Dean is crying, and moreover that Dean is trying to do it quietly and unobtrusively. Castiel shifts one hand to cup Dean’s cheek and draws him back just enough to look him in the eye.

“Don’t,” Dean says, and he tries to hide again with his face pressed to Castiel’s collarbone.

Cas holds Dean’s face steady and brushes the tears back with the pads of his thumbs. He touches
his lips to his forehead and nuzzles against his sleep-mussed hair.

They lie there like that for some time, Dean with his nails digging into the skin of Castiel’s back and Castiel stroking his palms down the curve of Dean’s spine while he kisses the top of his head and urges Dean to lean in and scent him so that his body will start to realize that he’s far from that awful place and that he’s home tucked in his mate’s arms.

Eventually, Dean’s muscles stop feeling like steel under Castiel’s touch, and Dean stops pressing his fingers so deeply into Cas’ back. He pulls away a little, but only enough so that they lie against each other without Dean suctioned like a barnacle to Castiel’s chest.

Cas kisses Dean’s cheek and noses over his jaw before he suggests, “Perhaps we should go back to sleep.”

“I don’t wanna,” Dean says. His voice is cutting but underneath it is that old fear. Dean would love to sleep, but only if he got the kind of rest that he craves, free from demons and the shadows that held him captive for seven years of his life.

Castiel wants to urge Dean to try to sleep anyway, but it isn’t fair to ask that of him when he relives such vivid, evil memories and Castiel can sleep without a peep from his own subconscious. He runs his fingers back through Dean’s hair and hums, “You need a haircut.”

“You’re one to talk,” Dean mutters back.

“Would you like it if I brought you some food?” Castiel tries. He wants to do anything that he can to bring Dean out of this while he knows that truly he can do nothing. The helplessness that comes with that knowledge makes him angry, but he has to reign it in, if only for Dean’s sake.

“Yeah,” Dean answers, and adds belatedly, “Please.”

So Castiel slips out from under the covers, pecking a kiss to Dean’s lips before he shrugs his robe over his shoulders and stuffs his feet into slippers and shuffles out to the kitchen. He flips the light on and startles when he sees Ash at the kitchen table with his feet up, eyes wide open.

“’Nother bad dream?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Castiel replies. He opens the door to the refrigerator and picks through the Tupperware containers of leftovers stacked on top of one another before he settles on the tomato basil soup he made to accompany pork chops two nights before.

“He said anything about goin’ to the doctor like you told him to?” Ash asks.

“No,” Castiel shakes his head. He pops the soup into the microwave, sets the timer, and reaches for the kettle to fill it. Some herbal tea might help both of them settle, though Dean will probably protest at drinking it (“I’m not knocked up anymore, Cas. I can drink stuff besides your leaf water crap and juice.”). He exhales and leans back against the counter before he continues, “and it never feels right to bring it up after he’s just had another nightmare.”

“Tough situation,” Ash murmurs. The way that he pronounces the word ‘situation’ sounds more like ‘sitchy-ation.’

“Mm,” Castiel agrees, and the conversation dies there. Ash stretches and pops his neck, the sound echoing over the simmering kettle and the buzzing microwave.

Castiel stops the microwave before it can sound the alarm that it’s finished. Mary is a light sleeper,
and he knows that that would wake her up in an instant. He pulls out the soup and stirs it with a spoon before preparing two mugs of tea – loose leaf, not bagged. He thinks this kind called *Lavender Dreams* that he purchased in town may help Dean relax.

He also pulls the kettle from its hot burner before it can whistle and fills each mug with water, allowing it to steep for an awkward pair of minutes before he pulls out the tea baskets and dumps them into his sink. He’ll rinse them out tomorrow – or later today, rather.

Cas returns to the bedroom with the soup first, bringing two spoons so that he and Dean can share. He kisses Dean and lowers the Tupperware container into his hands before he says, “I’ll be right back,” and retrieves the mugs of tea. Ash tells him that he can turn the kitchen lights off again, so Castiel does. He closes the door.

“What the hell is this?” Dean asks, when Castiel passes him his mug. Dean sniffs at the steam curling over the rim and says, “It smells like an old lady’s perfume.”

“It’s tea,” Castiel says primly, “At least try it. It might help.”

“Blech.”

“I know.”

“Fucking leaf water crap.”

“You’ve mentioned.”

Castiel places his own mug on his bedside table before shucking his robe and slippers and crawling back underneath the covers, gravitating toward Dean’s body heat. Dean offers him the clean spoon and Castiel dunkes it into the soup. He tries not to slurp but ends up with tomato basil all down his chin.

Dean laughs at him. Even though it’s at his expense, Cas is relieved to hear the sound.

Dean mops up Castiel’s face with the heel of his hand and smears the mess onto his pajama pants. From there, they eat and drink in silence. They hover close to each other, and when the Tupperware of soup is drained, Dean leans against Cas’ shoulder.

“You haven’t tried the tea.”

“It smells like my grandma.”

“You have a grandmother?” Cas lifts a brow.

“No, but if I did, she’d smell like that shit,” Dean grumbles. He takes up the mug anyway and takes an experimental sip. Dean wrinkles his nose at the taste and says, “How can you drink that crap?”

“I like it,” Castiel reasons.

Dean scoots over a fraction of an inch to scent and kiss at Cas’ neck, over the mating bite. He smiles at the little show of omega claim and turns his head to meet Dean’s lips when he starts to duck in again. Dean melts into the kiss and reaches over to clutch at the short hairs at the base of Cas’ skull, tangling his fingers there.

“Dean…” Castiel finally says, “I think, ah.”
“That I should see a therapist,” Dean flatly finishes, “Yeah, I know.”

Castiel raises his brows.

“You, um,” Dean swallows and brings his knees up to his chest, circling them with his arms. When he sits like this he looks so much more like a child, afraid and curling up to protect himself. He avoids looking at Castiel at first, instead staring straight ahead at the double doors into their bedroom. Then he sighs, glances over and says, “Okay.”

“Oh okay?”

“Oh, I’ll…try, or whatever,” Dean says.

Relief and happiness and a slew of other emotions jolt to Castiel’s marrow. He scoops Dean into his arms and kisses over his unshaven jaw and forehead and nose and back down to his lips, tomato basil breath be damned. He says, “I’m so happy. We’ll start looking as soon as we can.”

“Jesus Christ,” Dean says and bats affectionately at Cas’ shoulder, “If I’d known it was gonna make you this happy, I would a’ said yes forever ago.”

Cas ignores the tone in Dean’s voice and nuzzles his nose into the meat of Dean’s shoulder, where he kisses. Dean strokes his fingers through Cas’ hair and says, “All right, all right. I get it. You’re happy.”

“I am,” Cas replies, and leans in to kiss Dean again before he emphasizes, “I am.”

X

“That fucking sucked,” Dean gripes. Castiel can tell from his posture that he wishes he could sink further down into the driver’s seat, and would slump into himself if he was not the one at the wheel. He scowls and complains, “She was so perky, Cas. And she assigned me homework! She told me to draw a chart of my feelings. What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I’m sure that Dr. Rosen meant well,” Castiel soothes, reaching over to knead some of the tension from Dean’s shoulder.

Dean casts Castiel a panicked look and says, “I don’t have to go back, do I?”

“No,” Castiel says.

“Awesome. Cool. So, we tried therapists and it didn’t work,” Dean says.

“That is not at all what I meant, Dean Winchester,” Castiel says back, “Sometimes it takes time to find a therapist. It’s not always an instant process. We may go through a few more before we find somebody that’s a match for you.”

“Or,” Dean says, bitter anger rolling from his skin, “I’m just fucking broken. Maybe we should just give up, because it’s a goddamn waste of –”

A shrill ring sounds from Castiel’s pocket. He dips in to check who it is and announces, “It’s your brother. Should I answer or let it go to voicemail so that we can talk about how you’re absolutely wrong about yourself and how your self-worth issues are an indicator that yes, we should keep looking for a therapist?”

“Just answer it,” Dean mutters.
Castiel makes sure to cast a pointed we are going to discuss this later look at Dean before he holds his cellphone to his ear and says, “Sam, we’re just about to go out of cellphone range, so talk fast.”

“Oh yeah, Dean went to his thing today,” Sam says, “You’ll have to have him call me when you guys get back, ’cause this news really can’t wait.”

“Go on.”

“I’ve got you hearing,” Sam says, “for your license! The board agreed to see us to discuss whether or not they’ll give their recommendation to the full Board on whether or not your license will be restored.”

Castiel blinks, heart palpitating in his chest. He licks his lips and asks, “What – what do I have to do? What do I have to know?”

“Well, usually, crap like this happens when a doctor’s done something alcohol or drug related, sometimes fraud. In that case, you’d have to show remorse and maybe present some character witnesses that knew you before and after your license being revoked. But your case is different, probably the most unique that I’ve ever seen. I mean, this isn’t what I typically specialize in, but I’ve been doing a lot of reading to get us ready for this,” Sam takes a breath, “In your case, it’s basically all politics. The report of the incident with the enraged alpha and his shotgun reads like you started the attack, but all the witnesses that I’ve called maintain that you held him off and tried to get him to calm down.”

“They…blamed me?” Castiel says, stunned. He knew that the circumstances of his license being taken away were not sterling and crystal clear, but this – this is a surprise.

“I guessed you didn’t know that,” Sam says, “because if you had, you’d probably have fought tooth and nail, right? Right. So like I said, this was politics. Obviously there was somebody in your workplace that didn’t like you, didn’t like the advocacy work that you did for omegas –”

“I thought that was why they revoked my license,” Castiel says, “because I harbored mated omegas illegally at my apartment and helped them get to safe places elsewhere.”

“There’s that, yeah. But that would probably get you a slap on the wrist and a fine these days,” Sam replies, “It’s twenty fourteen, man. A lot of laws are still backwards but they’re not that backwards.”

“So I was – was a scapegoat?”

“Oh yeah,” Sam says, “This whole thing is bullshit of the highest degree.”

His voice starts to fizzle out as the Impala rolls further out of town, so Castiel says, “Talk fast, Sam. You’re going in and out.”

“Okay, okay. The hearing is in a week and half. You’ll have me there, and I have a couple people from your hospital that are going to serve as witnesses to the alpha incident,” Sam says, “I can give you more details when you guys get back home. This is it, man.”

“I have to go,” Castiel says, “We’ll call you.”

“Right. Talk to you later.”

Castiel hangs up to see Dean staring curiously over at him. He asks, “What was that all about?”
Castiel gnaws on his lower lip, trying to keep his excitement at bay so that he doesn’t get his hopes up. It doesn’t work as well as he’d like, and his voice is light with emotion when he replies, “Your brother has secured a hearing to get my license restored.”

A wide grin splits Dean’s face. The happiness that Cas smells from him is genuine and thick, and it’s all happiness on Castiel’s behalf. Dean reaches over to clap Castiel on the shoulder and says, “Fuck yeah. You get ‘em, little alpha.”

X

Castiel adjusts his tie in the alpha restroom. He was so nervous getting dressed this morning that he put it on backwards and Dean had to grab him by the shoulder and redo it for him before he allowed them out of the house. Even now his hands shake, despite Dean soothing him all the way to Salida, where his hearing will take place. He runs his hands under the bathroom tap and splashes water onto his face, before finally turning to dry his hands.

Outside the restroom, Dean waits with Sam. Both of them are in suits, though Dean isn’t supposed to be in the room while the hearing takes place. Mary is dressed up in the dress that Castiel sewed her from the robot fabric that he purchased at Fancy Tiger Crafts, and has a tiny green bow clipped in the tuft of light hair on top of her head.

When she smells Castiel, she makes a grab for him, and Sam and Dean turn their attention toward him.

Castiel gathers Mary into his arms and says, “You think I can do this, don’t you, pup?”

“She knows you can, dude,” Dean says, “Look at that face.”

Mary’s face is indeed encouraging, bright-eyed and chubby-cheeked, her scent sweet and the perfect comfort. Castiel can’t help the crooked smile that he gives to her before he cradles her up against him and kisses her face. She in reply articulates a loud, “Oooh-wahh.”

Dean presses a chaste kiss to Castiel’s cheek and says, “I think that means ‘alpha daddy can do it’ in puppy.”

“I hope so,” Castiel says back. He’s a bundle of nerves, fidgeting and worrying, grinding his teeth. He knows that the entire building must be able to smell it, but surely he’s not the only one brought before a panel reeking of anxiety. He knows the scent and tension throws off his family, but it’s hard to keep himself under control. Castiel hates when he cannot keep himself under control.

“Don’t worry, man,” Sam says, “We’ve got this covered. I’ve got everything we need on this crap.”

“I know,” Castiel says, “It’s not you that I doubt, Sam. It’s me. What if I say something wrong?”

“I don’t think there’s much that you can have a ‘wrong’ answer to,” Sam replies, “They’re gonna ask questions, sure. But we’ve been over this, and you have it covered.”

“They’ll ask me about the alpha with the shotgun,” Castiel says, perhaps to no one but himself, “and about the omegas that I brought back to my apartment. And why I want my medical license back? Right?”

“Right,” Sam nods.

When they call Castiel in, he hands Mary back to Dean with a final kiss to her chubby cheek and a
quick touch of the lips to his omega. He and Sam slip into the hearing room, where a panel of several professionals sit at a huge, half-moon mahogany desk at the forefront of the room. Before them is a smaller, matching table with two rolling chairs – one for himself and one for Sam.

They take their seats. This position makes the panel far more intimidating than they were standing at the doors. They tower above him, serious-faced. He wonders how much they’ve been briefed on the circumstances surrounding the revocation of his licensure.

The Medical Board begins with introductions, and asks if any member of the board has a conflict of interest in Castiel’s case, and at their silence the hearing proceeds. Sam stands to make an opening statement. Prior to this moment, he expected Sam to be curt and professional, but as he speaks his words are impassioned, detailing the good that Castiel did in Denver and the good that could continue to be done if they recommended the restoration of his license.

They cross-examine Castiel, questioning him on the final incident. As he answers, his hands shake but his voice remains remarkably steady. Sam sends him a reassuring look.

Then Sam displays evidence, records that he believes are fudged into placing false blame onto Castiel. To illustrate his point, Sam’s witnesses from the hospital are brought in. Castiel recognizes two as nurses and one as a patient.

“Can you describe the events that occurred on June fifth, 2012?” they ask the first witness, a young beta nurse named Andy.

Andy answers, “It was like any other day. I was working under Dr. Novak in the ER. We had a couple of asthma attacks and a pup that swallowed some cleaner, but nothing serious. We’d just gotten in an alpha lady that was mugged for her wallet. Her injuries weren’t too serious, just needed some stitches and to watch for a concussion. I was filling in Dr. Novak when the alpha busted in through the ER doors. It was chaos, and everyone was panicking. He had a gun and nobody knew what to do. He went straight for Dr. Novak, but he didn’t back down. It was something about this alpha’s omega, about Dr. Novak ‘helping her escape’ or something.”

Andy goes on to describe Castiel talking the alpha down from his fury and another nurse contacting the police. Instead of arresting only the alpha with the shotgun, Castiel was arrested and taken to the station as well.

The questions keep coming, on and on at each witness. When the witnesses are dismissed, the board turns on Castiel to question him again.

“Mr. Novak,” one says, a sharp-eyed beta woman, “What will you do if you medical licensure is restored? Why pursue this now? It has been nearly three years since the loss of your license.”

Castiel licks his lips and tries not to bite at them. Sam rests a hand on his shoulder. He says, “After my arrest and the subsequent loss of my license, I fell into a depression. I moved from Denver to build a house in an area of the mountains outside of Buena Vista, and I intended to remain there alone and live from my savings as long as I could. I didn’t know that the hospital blamed me for the incident, at least as far as it went.”

He pauses to take a breath, and continues, “Several months ago, I was driving home from a run into town for food, when I came across an omega. He was pregnant and in heat, and was stumbling naked along the side of the road. I urged him to come to my home and I discovered there that he was malnourished, traumatized, and had an illegal hormone implant in his ankle. As you may have seen on the news, that omega is one of nearly forty omegas found at Alastair Locke’s compound, all of whom were in serious need of medical attention. Since I met Dean, I realized how much my
work as a surgeon meant to me.”

Castiel glances at Sam, seeing some of Dean in his face and feeling a little courage at the thought. He says, “If my medical license was restored, I would like to open a private practice to cater to all genders, but to focus on omega advocacy. It would be the first of its kind in this area of the mountains.”

The members of the panel seem to communicate something silently where they sit above Castiel and Sam. Then, they call for a fifteen minute recess.

Castiel sighs as he and Sam stand to take a couple minutes outside of the room with Dean. They find him slumped in a chair just outside the room with his big hands holding Mary up and wiggling her in the air. She swats at him and makes soft noises, but as soon as both pup and mate smell Cas and Sam, they turn their heads.

“Well?” Dean says, eyes frantic and searching.

“We’re on a fifteen minute recess,” says Sam, “I think they’re taking some time to discuss this. But overall this is one of the quickest hearings I’ve ever heard of. That was what? A few hours?”

“Like three,” Dean says, “I think me n’ Mary know the entire layout of this joint now. Did you know there’s a fancy ‘nursing area’ in the omega bathroom? It has like, couches. And a rug. And a vase of flowers. But all the couches face each other so you have to look at every other omega with a hungry pup and it’s so fucking awkward.”

Castiel laughs. He pulls Dean into a half-hug and kisses him, only to have Mary reach up and grab his mouth. It’s Dean’s turn to laugh at that, and his eyes light up at the sight of Mary curling her tiny fingers over Cas’ lower lip.

“We should grab some water and break for the bathroom before we go back in,” Sam says.

Castiel sighs and says, “Right.”

Dean helps disentangle their daughter’s hand from Castiel’s mouth and says, “Have fun taking a piss!”

To which Castiel lifts his middle finger.

After relieving and refreshing themselves, they return to sit before the panel again.

“Dr. Novak,” the sharp-eyed beta says, “After reviewing the circumstances of the revocation of your license, we are both saddened and apologetic that your politics and the politics of others in your workplace brought on the expulsion of a notable and worthy surgeon. We intend to recommend to the full Board that your license be restored without restrictions or stipulations. This hearing is concluded.”

“I told you!” Sam says, and they stand to wrap their arms around one another.

Castiel bolts out of his chair and throws open the doors, flying to Dean and Mary, where they wait outside the hearing room on a bench, Dean making faces at the pup. He pants when he exclaims, “They’re recommending that my license be restored!”

Dean leaps to his feet and says, “Fuck yeah. How could they say no to the best doctor in the world? I’m so damn proud, Cas. C’mere and kiss me, jackass.”
Castiel laughs and kisses his omega as instructed. Even though his license has yet to be approved by the full Colorado Medical Board, excitement and exhilaration fills his veins. All the good that he could do with a practice in town has him laughing, even though nothing funny has been said. He has his mate and his pup in his arms, and more than that, he may have his career again. He wants to laugh or cry or scream or fucking yodel, but for now - he'll just kiss Dean.
“You can schedule another appointment with the secretary, darling,” says Dean’s second therapist in the Never-ending Parade of Weird Therapists, some weird bug-eyed dude that insists upon being referred to his surname, a stark contrast to Dr. Rosen, who exclaimed *Call me Becky!* before Dean could say a goddamn thing.

Dean scratches the back of his neck and says, “Right.”

Crowley steeps his fingers and goes on, “I also suggest you make an appointment with the psychiatrist. His name is Dr. Cain.”

“Psychiatrist?” Dean echoes.

“He can write prescriptions,” Crowley replies.

Dean shifts uncomfortably on the stiff couch in Crowley’s office and fidgets as he says, “I dunno if I want meds.”

“I highly recommend it,” Crowley says, “You are unstable, Dean. What you described in the intake papers was a violent episode, and I’d like to prevent something like that from happening again.”

Dean gets the feeling that he’s being talked down to. A prickle at the back of his neck makes him wonder if it’s because he’s an omega. Even though Dr. Crowley is a beta, he could think that Dean doesn’t know how to take care of himself just because he’s a dumbass omega. Cas warned him that Crowley doesn’t specialize in sex crimes against omegas as Becky had, that he handles general conditions like depression and anxiety – both of which Dean experiences regularly, Castiel told him.

Dean can’t decide if it makes him feel better or worse to have names to put to the crap going on in his noggin.

Crowley’s eyes flick down to his heavy, expensive-looking wristwatch, and he says, “We have five minutes remaining in the session. Is there anything else that you’d like to discuss before I let you leave?”

“I’m okay,” Dean says.

“It’s your money,” Crowley shrugs, “See you next week, Dean.”

Dean can’t get out of the office fast enough. Cas frowns when Dean comes out to the lobby smelling like irritation and frustration. He stands and lifts Mary’s carrier, where she’s out like a
light and tucked underneath one of the several baby blankets that Cas has made for her, alternating magenta and yellow in a zigzag pattern. Dean wishes she was awake, because he’d love nothing more than to hold his little girl, breathe in her scent and forget that the last hour and a half ever happened.

“Mr. Winchester, would you like to schedule your next appointment?” asks the secretary, a brunette in thick-framed glasses.

“Nah, I’m good,” Dean says.

“Would you like to take Dr. Crowley’s card?”

“I’m solid,” Dean says, though this comes out like bubbling acid. The secretary raises her brows and shrugs, and Dean takes that as the signal to get the hell out of this place. He lets Cas take the carrier and strides out ahead of him, anxious to drive and slough off some of the gross-ass feeling crawling all over him like little bugs.

It isn’t until Cas has buckled Mary into the backseat of the Impala and slid inside the car that Dean says, “I don’t want to go back there.”

“You don’t have to,” Cas says, all soothing alpha.

Against his better judgment, he lets that smell of mate curl into his nostrils and dissolve inside him, sending warm down to the tips of his fingers. He relaxes just a fraction and says, “Dude was creepy as all get out, man. He wanted to unload me on some other doc that would dope me up or whatever, and I told him I didn’t know about meds. He was a total douchebag.”

“We’ll keep looking,” Cas reassures him, and rests a palm on Dean’s arm as he winds out of town and back toward the belly of the mountains.

“This blows.”

“I know,” Castiel says, “this can take time, Dean.”

“Or I’m just too fucked up.”

“Not getting along with a therapist is not a reflection on you,” Castiel tells him, “Please believe me.”

“I’ll try,” Dean says, like he’s been telling Cas for days now. And he’ll keep saying that, and he’ll keep doing that until he can’t anymore. Dean’s been making things hard for his mate, and he knows that. Worse, he’s been making crap tough on Mary. His pup isn’t even four months old; she never asked to suffer Dean’s routine bullshit.

So for the sake of his family, he’s just going to keep trying.

To bring himself out of his funk, Dean invites Charlie to come up the next day, her day off. He makes popcorn for them both and pours caramel sauce over it to enjoy while they watch *Battlestar Galactica* – or rewatch, in Charlie’s case.

“So what’s up?” she asks, criss-crossing her legs up on the couch, “I mean, besides the obvious. Or maybe it is the obvious. You look like you just read about Fred Weasley dying.”

“Fred dies?” Dean says, “But the twins are the best part!”

Dean runs his fingers through his hair and blows all of the air out of his lungs. He says, “Me n’ Cas have been tryin’ to find me somebody to gab to about my feelings or whatever. It’s going pretty shitty so far. I dunno. I’m bummed out, dude. Mary’s only been out and about for a couple months and I’m already screwing her up ’cause I can’t figure out my own crap.”

Charlie’s quiet for a long second before she says, “Dang. That’s heavy, Dean. You know…you’re not screwing up your pup. But you do have to take care of yourself.”

“I know. I get that,” Dean says, “But it’s fucking hard when everyone you try paying to talk to you is a family-sized bag of crazy chips.”

Charlie laughs a little, but sobers soon enough. She nudges Dean’s arm and says, “Hey, look at me.” Dean does, and doesn’t like the glint in Charlie’s blue eyes.

“What the hell are you up to?” Dean asks.

“I have an idea,” Charlie says. When Dean opens his mouth with a retort on the tip of his tongue, Charlie holds up a hand and continues, “I cut this guy’s hair every three weeks. He’s super cool. And he’s a therapist.”

“His name isn’t Crowley, is it?” Dean asks.

Charlie makes a face, “No. His name’s Benny.”

“So what’s the catch? It sounds like there’s a catch.”

“Well,” Charlie says, rolling the tip of her tongue between her teeth, “He doesn’t usually take in omega patients. Don’t look at me like that! It’s not because of some weird discrimination thing. It’s because he’s an alpha. A lot of omegas aren’t into alpha therapists for obvious reasons, but I dunno, you’re one heck of a weirdo omega.”

“Thanks, Charlie.”

“Hey, stick it to the man, I’m all for it,” she says, “He works with beta and alpha victims of assault most of the time. I mean, because of the whole doc-patient thing it’s not like he shares specifics with me, but he says he’s worked with a couple omegas before. He’s a good dude. I think it would be worth checking out.”

Dean studies Charlie. Her expression is open and earnest. And damn it, it’s hard to say no to somebody wearing a shirt that says *Trek yourself before you wreck yourself* and has a giant grin on her face. Charlie’s one of the realest people that he’s ever met. Not that there are fake people or anything. It’s just that Charlie is so open, and damn it, she’s kind of his best friend.

“All right,” Dean says, “I’ll give him a shot.”

“Awesome!” Charlie says, and claps her hands together, “I’ll give you his cell number.”

Dean shakes his head, but a smile creeps to his lips at Charlie’s enthusiasm. They finish the caramel sauce popcorn and Dean makes a fresh batch, although before he can even get his hands sticky, Cas appears with a hungry, fussy Mary in his arms. In front of *Battlestar Galactica* (which Charlie keeps a running commentary on: “Starbuck is such a badass, Dean. You’ll love her.”),
Dean feeds his pup and thinks how damn nice it is to have friends.

Dean’s been through hell, so making a phone call shouldn’t make him sweat, shouldn’t being the operative word. He sweats bullets as he dials Benny’s cellphone number and considers hanging up before it even starts ringing, but before he can, there’s a click.

A low, accented voice answers, “You got Benny. Who the hell is this?”

Dean can’t help but laugh. He says, “I, uh. My name’s Dean. Charlie gave me your number. I’m looking for…a therapist, I guess. Haven’t had much luck.”

“Well, hell. Sure, I can set you up,” Benny says, his voice a warm drawl, “Hang on just a minute. Gonna check my calendar for you. The noise of clicking computer keys sounds from the other side, and Benny hums something under his breath. Dean realizes after a moment that Benny is humming Kashmir.

Maybe Charlie was right. Maybe this guy is somebody that Dean would get along with.

“All right. I got a slot free at one o’clock next Wednesday. How’s that work for you, Dean?”

“Perfect. Great. Good,” Dean says. He thinks about leaving the big reveal that he’s not Benny’s regular kind of patient to when they meet, but that doesn’t seem right. So he sighs and adds, “Full disclosure, dude. I’m an omega.”

“Y’are, huh? I s’pose you know that you’re not my usual kind of patient, then,” Benny says.

“Yeah, I know,” Dean replies, “But the people I’ve talked to so far sucked ass and Charlie says I’m a weirdo omega and maybe I’ll get along better with you than another doctor, anyway.”

“Charlie’s a nice gal,” Benny says, “and she does tend to know what she’s talking about, even if it’s wrapped up in all that chit-chat. We’ll see how everything pans out on Wednesday. If you ever feel uncomfortable, you tell me and we’ll get you out of there. And if it doesn’t work out, I got some other doctors I could refer you to.”

“Awesome,” Dean says, “I guess…I’ll see you Wednesday then.”

“You need directions to the office?” asks Benny.

“Yeah, probably,” says Dean.

After Benny relays the route to take to get to his office in the heart of tiny Buena Vista and they hang up, Dean feels a little lighter. He supposes he won’t know how he’ll like Benny until he goes for his first visit, but this phone call is far more promising than the prior two were.

When Dean imparts the news to Cas over the dinner table that night, he says that he’s proud of Dean for making the call and that hopefully Charlie is right about Benny.

But that next week, just in case, Castiel comes along with Dean and brings Mary, as he has with the other appointments. In the aftermath of his visits with both Dr. Rosen and Dr. Crowley, Dean needed the smell of his sweet pup and his mate, needed to feel it around him as he drove them back home, disappointed.

Benny’s office sits in the very middle of Buena Vista above the arcade, and they have to take stairs
along the side of the brick building to reach it. The lobby of the joint looks just like any other doctor’s office, the walls painted a boring taupe color and decorated with standard issue Bed, Bath & Beyond artwork. It smells like some kind of neutral air freshener, which is nice. It’s better than Dr. Rosen’s office, where underneath the scents of carpet shampoo and an unhappy vacuum cleaner, he could smell every damn person that had been in the office.

Cas sets Mary’s carrier down beside the chair next to a magazine rack, where he sits, extracts a beaten copy of Alpha Health, and grimaces at the oiled-up, photoshopped alpha on the front cover. Dean shakes his head and approaches the desk, where a pretty young beta sits in a rolling chair.

“Hi,” he says awkwardly, “I’m here to see, um. Benny?” He belatedly realizes that no one has told him Benny’s surname.

“Dr. Lafitte,” nods the beta, and her fingers fly across the computer keyboard, “Dean Winchester for one o’clock?”

“That’s me,” he says.

“Good. Since this is your first time here, I need you to fill out the intake packet,” she says, and rotates her chair to sift in the filing cabinet behind her. She extracts a manila folder, licks her thumb, and pulls out the biggest stack of paper that Dean has ever seen in his life. She attaches this to a clipboard and slaps it onto the counter before she continues, “Most of this is just disclosures, but the important things are the health insurance info, medical history…you get the deal. When you’re finished, you can bring it to me. I’m Sarah, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you,” Dean says automatically, and takes the clipboard. He sits next to Cas to fill it in and tries not to get distracted by his goddamn adorable daughter, who’s swatting at the plastic toy clipped to the handle of her carrier and blowing spit bubbles in her excitement.

The forms take the better part of a half-hour to fill out. Some of the questions Dean doesn’t have the answer to. How the hell is he supposed to know if his father has high blood pressure? Why does that even matter? But he answers what he can and answers honestly, even if eighty percent of the questions make him uncomfortable. His doctor’s gotta know about this stuff, he guesses.

He crosses the waiting room and announces, “Finished,” to Sarah, who smiles at Dean.

“Great,” she says, “I’ll take these to Dr. Lafitte and he’ll call you in in a few minutes.”

Dean sits back down and taps his foot on the carpet. Cas gives him a pointed look, but Dean glares back and continues his tapping. As promised, only a few minutes pass before the same smooth, reassuring voice that Dean spoke with on the phone calls, “Dean, I’m ready for you.”

Curling his hands into nervous fists, Dean rises to his feet and follows the voice to the hallway beyond the front desk, where an absolutely huge man stands and smiles at him, offering a bear paw of a hand for Dean to shake.

“Dr. Lafitte,” Dean says, voice stilted, and takes the offered hand.

“Aw, just call me Benny,” he says, “Sarah always calls me Dr. Lafitte no matter how many times I tell her that she doesn’t have to. How’re you doin’ today?”

“Okay, I guess,” Dean says, and follows when Benny holds open a door.

Benny’s office is much better than Dr. Rosen’s colorful, drawing-splattered office that made him feel like he was in a kindergarten classroom, and also better than Crowley’s utilitarian, white-
walled office that made him feel like he was in a police interrogation room. Benny’s has the same taupe walls as the waiting room, but he has awesome things tacked up to it – a couple of framed comic books, a movie poster for some old scifi film that Dean hasn’t seen, a drawing marked clearly with crayon letters spelling out “FOR DADDY”, and his diplomas, framed.

“Why just okay?” asks Benny, and before Dean can answer, he holds out a Styrofoam cup and says, “You want some hot cocoa?”

“Sure,” Dean says, and takes it.

This is already weird, but good weird. There’s no denying that Benny smells one hundred percent like an alpha. Dean can even smell alpha soap and shampoo on his skin, but it doesn’t intimidate. He also smells like cigarettes, cocoa mix, and a non-threat.

He isn’t dressed like the other therapists, either. Instead of business casual (Dr. Rosen) or a slick suit (Dr. Crowley), Benny wears khaki-colored slacks, a wrinkled button-down with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, suspenders, and a hat crooked on his head.

“You mind if I kick off my shoes?” Benny asks.

“Go for it,” Dean replies, and then asks, “…Can I take off my shoes?”

“Go right on ahead, brother,” Benny tells him. He slips off his shoes and Dean does the same, while Benny explains, “My mate bought me these new ones and they pinch my toes. It’s killin’ me.”

Dean laughs and says, “I just wanted to take my shoes off.”

Benny laughs too and leans back in his rolling chair. Some of the forms from Dean’s intake packet are in his hands. He flips through them and says, “So, you’re one of the compound omegas.”

His shoulders tense and Dean soberes. He replies, “Yeah.”

“Don’t you worry none,” Benny says, “We don’t need to talk about all that today. If you stay on board, I’d like to discuss it later on, but for now I just want to get a feel for what I can do for you. Says here that you’re mated and you have a pup. You wanna tell me about them?”

At the suggestion, Dean relaxes a little and says, “Yeah, sure. Cas is my mate. He likes to knit and read and cook and has the best LP collection in the Rockies.”

“Heard it all before,” Benny says. “I bet I could give him a run for his money.”

“Okay, listen, I lived on the compound for a few months before I found Cas,” Dean says. “I was the omega that busted out. Did it ‘cause I had a bun in the oven and Alastair told me he was gonna cut her out of me. I guess I didn’t know she was a she then. But…uh. Cas found me. He lives a couple dozen miles from the compound and was driving up from town with some groceries. Saw me butt naked and walkin’ along the side of the road, and he took me in.”

Benny nods to that and scribbles something onto Dean’s intake papers. He says, “So how’d you two end up mated?”

Dean smiles crookedly and thumbs along the rim of his cocoa cup before taking a sip. He says, “Cas is a doctor, y’know. Real good at it, too. He pulled that hormone bullshit out of my leg and sewed me up, rustled up a toy for the heat and gave me clothes and food and a hot shower. The whole time he never once laid a hand on me unless I gave him the go ahead.”
“Sounds like he’s a good alpha.”

“He’s a fuckin’ spectacular alpha,” Dean says, “Christ, he made me eat leafy greens and take vitamins and he delivered Mary, you know that? But we mated when I was still pregnant. I kind of took up sleeping in his bed with him ’cause he smelled so nice and I didn’t get nightmares as much when I was with him, and I woke up one morning to him just, like, humping the shit out of my leg. I offered to help him through his rut, and he said okay. Next thing you know, his teeth are on my neck and I’m all…hey, this ain’t so bad.”

Benny nods and says, “And your pup?”

Dean brightens up all over again and says, “She’s almost four months old now. Her name’s Mary, like I said, after my mom. And I’m pretty damn sure that Mary’s the cutest fuckin’ pup ever. She’s got these big eyes and tiny little hands and feet – oh, and she can hold her head up all by herself. She has my ears and I think she has my feet too, but they’re pretty little so I can’t really tell yet. Hey, do you have a pup?”

“Sure do,” Benny says, “She’s gonna five next month. Name’s Elizabeth.”

Dean and Benny talk for so long and about so many different things that Dean hardly notices the time pass until Benny announces, “I think the session’s about up. I got another patient comin’ in soon, so you wanna take the rest of the time introducing me to your mate and your pup? That was them that I saw waiting outside, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, sure,” Dean says. Both of them put their shoes back on before they leave the room.

Cas stands when he sees Dean, but cocks his head when he sees Benny. Dean says, “Hey, little alpha. This is Benny. Benny, this is Cas.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Benny says, and they shake hands. Something passes between them, some secret alpha language spoken when their eyes meet. Whatever was said must be good, though, because both of them smile.

Dean lifts Mary out of the carrier and says, “And this is Mary. Mary, say hi to Benny. He’s helping omega daddy get better for you.”

Mary sort of gapes, so Benny offers his hand for her to scent. Whatever she smells, she must like, because she doesn’t hide against Dean, and instead makes a definitive, “Ba!” noise.

They laugh and chat for a few minutes, after which Benny returns to his office and Dean schedules his next appointment with Sarah.

On the drive back home, Dean has to work up some courage to admit, “I think Benny’s pretty cool.”

Castiel casts a sidelong glance at him and says, “What did I tell you? I knew you would find someone.”

“Did you just tell me ‘I told you so’?” Dean asks.

Castiel responds, “To be fair to me, I did in fact tell you so.”

“Whatever. Charlie’s the one that found him for me,” Dean says.

“And I’m the one that told you to keep looking.”
Dean rolls his eyes and complains, “You’re such a pain in the ass.”

“Is that an invitation?” asks Cas.

Dean turns his head sharply and says, “Cas, you naughty motherfucker. There’s a pup in the car.”

“She doesn’t know what I’m talking about,” Castiel replies.

Dean flicks his gaze to the rearview mirror and sees Mary dozing in her chair. He says, “Good thing you’re asleep, or alpha daddy would be getting a butt whooping.”

After a couple more minutes of bickering, they fall silent. The radio fizzes and so Dean switches to his tapes. When guitar flows out into the Impala, he says, “Hey, Cas?”

“Yes?”

“For the record, I’m pretty stoked that you were right.”

Time passes too quickly.

Mary hits four months, and Dean starts her on rice cereal to get her used to solids. She seems to like it, although despite burping her, she spits up rice cereal all over Dean and he ends up giving her a bath and himself a shower.

Meeting with Benny becomes a highlight of his week, even if he has to talk about the bad stuff. Benny lets Dean bring Mary into the room as long as she doesn’t start to stress Dean out, and it’s easier to talk about the awful things that happened to him when he has Mary grabbing at his face or scenting him or sleeping on his chest in her little Batman onesie. Benny calls it scent therapy, and tells him that when Dean talks about his trauma with the smells of home and love close to him that the pain of the memories fractures and doesn’t seize control of Dean the way that he’s used to the agony taking over.

The nightmares ebb and flow. Talking to Benny seems to siphon them off, or at least curb the pain. When Dean wakes up from a nightmare, he sweats and shakes but he doesn’t think he’s there, doesn’t have to have Cas talk him down and whisper in that low voice about how Dean is home and safe and loved.

Cas does that anyway, though.

Dean returns from an appointment with Benny with Mary out like a light against his shoulder, fist curled into his flannel shirt, when the home phone rings. Dean pulls it from the cradle on the kitchen counter and answers, “Novak-Winchester residence, Batman speaking.”

A short burst of laughter answers him, and then, “That you, Freckles? Look, I need to talk to my baby brother ASAP, and he’s not answering his damn cellphone. You know where he might be?”

“Gabriel?”

“The one and only.”

Dean tries not to sigh. He says, “Eh, he probably passed out reading or something. Let me see if I can track him down.” Cas isn’t in their bedroom when Dean nudges the door open, so he treks up to the study. There, Cas is asleep in the ugly armchair in the corner, mouth parted and limbs
relaxed. Dean loves seeing Cas asleep – he’s like a giant puppy more than he is a dangerous alpha.

“Found him,” Dean says. He nudges Cas with his foot, which makes him stir but doesn’t wake him.

So Dean kicks him.

“Jesus, Dean! Why did you kick me?” he demands.

Dean passes him the phone and says, “Don’t yell. You’ll wake Mary. And tell me what the hell he wants when you’re done talking to him.”

When Cas takes the phone and answers it with a cutting greeting, Dean smiles and takes Mary back downstairs to put her in her crib. He’s careful as he lowers her down not to jostle and wake her. Dean strokes over the soft thatch of blond hair on her head, pulls her guitar blanket over her, and murmurs, “Sleep well, sweetheart.”

He thinks about busying himself by putting the finishing touches on Sam’s coffee table (“Why did the first one happen so fast and why is mine taking forever?” “Because the first one was my fucking coffee table, jackass. Patience is a virtue, Sammy.” “I hate you sometimes.”), but the garage is cold and Dean feels more like splaying out on the couch and doing absolutely nothing than being productive in any sort of way.

He chocks it up to the session with Benny being exhausting. They talk about the compound piece by piece and focus on one part of it per appointment, then use the rest of the time to talk about how Dean’s doing now and other mundane shit that makes Dean forget he was just talking about the stuff of his nightmares.

Today they talked about the cells where Dean and the other omegas slept. Dean had Mary playing with a toy on his chest while he spoke, and that made it a little better. He told Benny that it was kind of fucking amazing that the tiny swell to his stomach that he wrapped his arms around and clutched in his cell on his filthy mattress came to be Mary, healthy and sweet pup that she is.

The thought of the session makes him tired all over again, although his lungs don't seize up and his head doesn't start to ache. It's still uncomfortable to think about, but better than it was.

Dean elects to get himself a beer and channel surf. He pops the cap off of the bottle on the edge of the counter – since Cas isn’t here to scold him – and plops down, propping his feet up on their magnificent coffee table.

He doesn’t actually see Cas step into the room, but he sure as hell smells him. It’s not the usual, contented Cas smell, the scent he gets when he’s on neutral. This is angry and frustrated and unhappy alpha. Whatever Gabriel had to say on the phone couldn’t have been good, then.

Dean turns his head and sees Cas with narrowed eyes and scowl slapped onto his face. He walks directly past Dean and into the kitchen, where he slams the home phone back into the cradle and curses under his breath. Dean shifts to look at him and calls from the couch, “What happened, Cas?”

“I – fucking – goddamn Gabriel – he – the rest of my family is showing up,” Cas finally growls out, and slams his hands down on the counter. He knocks down the mason jar of wooden spoons, and the clatter across the granite countertop.

Dean gapes and says, “What the hell do you mean ‘the rest of my family is showing up’?”
“He called to inform me that there was nothing he could do to stop them despite his best efforts,” Castiel says. He rights the jar and slips the spoons back into it, one by one, “and that my mother, stepfather, Michael, Lilith, Anna and Balthazar have all decided to come along for the ride. I am not amused. This is some sort of ploy to patch up the family name since Lucifer’s been arrested.”

“What the fuck,” Dean says, a statement more than a question.

“My sentiments exactly,” Castiel agrees, and steps down from the kitchen to the living room, where he leans over Dean and kisses him. It’s a fierce kiss, solid and frenzied, and it makes Dean go a little dizzy in the head. The pressure of Cas’ mouth on his always does him in. He knows that Cas smells him getting slick when Cas growls against his mouth.

“I would like angry sex,” Castiel states, matter-of-fact.

Dean chuckles. He loves that his alpha gets straight to the point.

That afternoon, Dean pushes Cas back on the mattress, swings his leg over to straddle him, and takes Cas in with a hard thrust back. He grips Cas’ shoulders and rides him at a hectic pace, until some alpha instinct has Cas grabbing Dean’s ass, flipping him onto his back and driving into him faster than Dean can think. He just holds his legs in the air and enjoys the fucking incredible sensation of furious alpha slamming into him while he whispers against Dean’s neck about he’s Castiel’s good, sweet omega and how gorgeous you look taking my cock.

Dean comes underneath Cas with a silent scream, his eyes squeezed closed. Inside him, Cas’ knot keeps them together, pulsing come inside Dean while they both pant and try to regain their senses.

As they settle and their heartbeats slow, even with bodies tied together for the next thirty or so, Dean knows he’ll need a round two. He’s angry and he’s scared and he’s worried and about a million other emotions, the only positives being the satisfaction of being filled up by his mate and the buzz of his orgasm.

He’ll need like twenty kajillion orgasms to make this clusterfuck tolerable.

X

Mary seems to sense that her fathers are crabby, or so Dean thinks as they round DIA to pull the Impala into short-term parking. She’s been on her best behavior throughout the car ride, only fussing once when she needed Dean to feed her – they pulled over to take care of that, and with a full stomach Mary promptly fell asleep for the next several dozen miles out of the mountains.

She does, however, seem relieved when Dean lifts her up out of her seat. He kisses her on top of her head and says, "You're being so good today."

“Should we bring the carrier?” asks Castiel.

“Nah,” Dean says, “I’ve got her sling in the bag if we need it. Also, the closer she is to me, the safer she is from your mother.”

“I hope you’re right about that,” Castiel replies.

Mary rests her head against Dean’s shoulder as they stride into the airport. The place is a tangle of people and smells, foreign and familiar alike. Mary makes an interested noise, and then pulls her hand from her mouth to smear the spit across Dean’s unshaven jaw.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” he says, “That’s...awesome.”
“Awwwah,” she announces.

At the heart of the airport lie some strange art pieces, but they’re no stranger than the gigantic bronco sculpture outside that has glowing eyes. Personally, Dean thinks that it’s badass. Castiel informs him that the sculpture killed its own artist and his children finished it.

They wait for the parade of fools behind a section of silver railing and watch the other arrivals pour into the belly of the building, some bright-eyed with the prospect of arriving home or in a new city, others travel weary and poised to collapse. For the most part, Mary keeps her face against Dean’s neck and hides, curling into his scent for shelter from strangers.

Dean rubs her back and murmurs, “You and me both, sweet girl.”

“Lord give me strength,” Castiel murmurs.

“Didn’t know you were religious,” Dean says. He soon sees the cause of Castiel’s impromptu prayer: the Novak clan in its entirety, just visible on the escalators up to the arrivals.

“If I’ve ever needed a god, the time is now.”

“Amen, dude.”

Naomi and Zachariah lead the pack, closely followed by Michael and a heavily pregnant Lilth. (“Man, they got on the fuck bus pretty fast, didn’t they?” “Shh, Dean, they’ll hear you.”)

Gabriel, Anna and Balthazar meander at the end of the procession. Gabriel is uncharacteristically serious-looking, while Balthazar animatedly waves his hands as he tells a story. Anna, meanwhile, seems tired of both of them and ready to turn in.

“Castiel,” Michael says, and holds out his arms for an embrace.

Cas folds his arms over his chest and says, “Do not play games with me, Michael. I did not invite you here. The only person that is welcome here is Gabriel, as he is the only one that my invitation was extended to.”

The polite expression on Michael’s handsome face drops to displeasure, lips twisting into an unhappy smile. He says, “We are here to support you in your time of need. You should be grateful. After the way that you have treated us, it’s incredible that we would still come to you.”

Alpha fury hovers around Cas like a black aura. He says through gritted teeth, “Do not toy with me. You are here to save face. Fine. Do so. Do not involve me.”

Dean wants to listen to the rest of the exchange, but a hand on his arm interrupts him. He jumps about a foot in the air when he sees that the hand belongs to none other than Castiel’s mother. Mary, previously un-hiding and scoping out the new arrivals, sticks her face back into Dean’s neck at the sight of Naomi.

“Dean,” she says, “I know that things haven’t been ideal between us, but I’d like to apologize. I hadn’t realized that you had been through such a trauma. I wanted to offer to fund plastic surgery. You know, to fix your scars. You could look so much prettier.”

Dean feels one eyebrow skyrocket up on his forehead. He says, “Lady, my scars aren’t ugly. They’re a badge of fucking courage. Maybe you should use that money to buy yourself a human heart, ‘cause whatever you’ve got in there isn’t doin’ its job.”
“Oo-kay!”

Dean glances over and sees Gabriel, who claps his hands and says, “I only brought me a carry-on, so you suckers can get going to the baggage claim while we get going to Cassie’s place. Behave yourselves while I’m gone.” He winks and Zachariah starts in on a lecture not to speak to them in “such a tone”, but Gabriel puts his hand on Cas’ arm and drags them off away from the arrivals.

“Jesus,” Gabriel sighs, adjusting the strap of his duffel, “Let’s get this show on the road, gentlemen. If you don’t mind, I’d like to put as much distance as possible between myself and the Fellowship of Crazy. They’re staying at my fucking motel, but at least we’re not all crammed into one room.”

They take an escalator back down to the level that Dean parked on and push out into the garage, where the chilly air smells like motor oil and concrete. When they arrive at the Impala, Gabriel doesn’t talk to Dean and Cas, but does go straight for Mary after she’s buckled into her seat, dangling one of her toys in front of her with an enthusiastic, “Who’s my little bald alien? You are.”

“Hey,” Dean barks, “She has hair, asshat.”

But then Mary bursts into a fit of laughter when Gabriel makes some weird noise with his mouth, and Dean can’t be mad at the dude anymore for calling his daughter bald. Mary is fucking losing it back there to Gabriel making noises and faces, and if there’s one thing Dean loves more than almost anything, it’s the sound of his pup laughing.

Mary tires herself out around forty five minutes into the journey from DIA to Buena Vista and falls asleep with her head flopped to one side in her carrier seat. That’s when Gabriel finally addresses Dean and Castiel. He says, “Hey guys, look. I’m sorry about the family fiasco. You know what happened? Mom has her freaking tentacles everywhere. That’s what happened. Apparently she checks up on my bank bills ‘cause she knew about the goddamn plane ticket and here we freaking are. I guess that’s what I get for taking the trust fund over my own sanity.”

“Well, yes. That is what you get,” Castiel says, “but to be honest, I doubt this could be avoided.”

“Mom’s pretty wounded over the fact that you’ve basically lived your life choosing to do everything that pisses her off,” Gabriel shrugs, “Eyelashes and the little alien were the final straw, and man, what a finale! You should have seen the temper tantrum she threw when you tossed her out on her ass. I wish I coulda seen that shit. Popcorn worthy, I’d bet my left nut on it.”

“It was,” Dean says, even though he spent most of the visit locked in the nursery with Mary because he freaked out. He doesn’t mention that, and instead says, “Cas threw shoes at her.”

“Oh-ho, no way,” Gabriel cackles, “That is rich. I don’t think I’ve seen Castiel lose his temper even once.”

“Maybe you’ll change that during this visit,” Castiel says.

“Yeah, maybe,” Gabriel says.

They opt to eat dinner in town instead of driving all the way to the house and then all the way back into Buena Vista to drop Gabriel at his bed & breakfast. The food is pretty good and Gabriel entertains Mary throughout, but Dean can’t help but notice how much liquor Cas is putting back.

When dinner ends, Gabriel has to help Castiel into the car while Dean buckles Mary into her seat. He follows Gabriel’s instructions to the place that he’s booked to stay during this circus and drops him at the front. Mary seems disappointed at the loss of her uncle.
When they arrive home, all three collapse into bed immediately.

The following days are mixed bag. Sometimes Dean is so fucking anxious about facing Alastair in court that he locks himself in the bathroom and curls up in the bathtub until the feeling goes away. Other days, it’s like they have nothing but clear skies ahead, filled with Gabriel making Mary laugh and Cas venting his stress through the preparation of elaborate meals. Hell, even Kevin likes Gabriel.

The dude’s still kind of a dick, but maybe less of one than Dean initially suspected.

Dean copes with the swings in temper by procuring twenty kajillion orgasms from Cas.

X

But it occurs to him in bed, anxiety having jolted him from sleep, that today marks the first day of the trial of Alastair Locke.
Breakfast that morning is quiet. Castiel puts together something elaborate that'll sit on their stomachs throughout the duration of the long trial: Blueberry pancakes, hash browns (with a healthy dose of tabasco sauce for Dean and butter for Kevin), cheesy bacon biscuits, and a spread of juices and coffee to top it all off.

Dean eats heartily but doesn’t speak. His eyes flick up to meet Castiel’s once, and he thinks they’ll break the ice cold tension between them. But no – Dean lowers his eyes back to his loaded plate and takes a particularly generous bite so that he has a reason not to talk. Castiel would ask what is on his mind, only he knows the answer already. The trial is on all of their minds, looming like thick, black smoke trapped underneath a ceiling.

Castiel rinses dishes after they finish their meal and leaves them to soak in the sink, too lazy to bother filing them away in the dishwasher. He retreats to their bedroom to hear the shower already running, and strips his clothes to join Dean before he can think the better of it.

“Hey, little alpha,” Dean says, voice rough, when Castiel peels a section of the shower curtain back and steps inside.

Castiel edges forward and applies a kiss to Dean’s forehead, tasting shower water and scent-neutral shampoo. It’s nice to share a bath that isn’t sexual, even if it is only because both of them are too worked up about the trial to have sex on their minds. Instead, Castiel just worships Dean’s body with a bar of soap, running it over his scars and his muscles, now much bigger from working on his projects in the garage.

“We should build you a real workshop,” Castiel murmurs distractedly, scrubbing suds to life on Dean’s bicep.

Dean hums. He lets his forehead fall to Cas’ shoulder, hot water rolling over their bare skin. Castiel tries to rub as many of the kinks out of Dean’s back as he can, but Dean’s muscles are tied up like a fishing net from shoulder to sacrum. To take care of the tension in his omega he’d need at least a few hours, and they don’t have that time.

No, they need to be at the courthouse.

They finish bathing without much talk and dry off in the bathroom before they step out to where Castiel hung their suits, pressed and whistle-clean from their trip to the dry cleaner’s. At the time of the suits’ purchase, Dean expressed his relief and anticipation of having a suit that “wasn’t from some omega mommy store” and “made him look slick as hell.” Castiel told Dean not to use the
word ‘slick’ like that, and Dean hit him.

Now, Dean takes the suit down from the door like a death sentence. He lays it out on the bed with gentle hands and pulls off the plastic. He dresses with his back to Castiel, buttoning his white dress shirt over his omega-atypical broad chest. He smells divine even having just showered, his aroma that masculine *something* that makes warmth bloom in the pit of Cas’ stomach and tell his brain *mate*.

Before he realizes what he’s doing, he has his nose pressed into Dean’s neck, and Dean’s calloused fingers have paused buttoning. He casts Castiel a sidelong glance and says, “If you keep this up, we’re never gonna get there.”

“You smell good,” Castiel says petulantly.

“I know I do,” Dean says, “and so do you. But I’ll smell just as good when we get back home, when you’ll fuck me into forgetting I have to do this crap.”

It’s hard to argue with that assertion.

Castiel sighs and reaches for his own suit, tailored for alpha shoulders and his long legs. As usual, he struggles knotting his tie correctly, and Dean steps forward to assist him, knocking Castiel’s hands away where he ties it efficiently and straightens the collar of his shirt.

“There,” Dean says.

Dean looks suave in his own suit, simply trimmed and solid black. His tie, too, is black, although beneath the buttons of his suit jacket at the tip of the silk tie, sits a screen-printed Batman insignia. In Dean’s words “I could get the boring tie, or the tie that everything thinks is boring but is actually totally badass.” Castiel thinks having a little piece of one of his favorite superheroes on his person makes Dean feel brave.

Kevin, too, looks handsome in his formal trappings, a stark contrast to the thin, skittish omega that came to live here only months ago. His blind eye may still garner stares, but his body has filled out from food and his hair has none of the brittle, dry quality to it that accompanies malnutrition.

Mary, meanwhile, is angry to have been woken before she is ready, and fusses through Dean changing and dressing her, loading her into her carrier in the backseat of the Impala, and throughout the journey down the mountain and into town, where they pull up in front of Charlie’s cottage-like house to drop the pup off for the duration of the trial.

“Hey, puppy,” Charlie says when she opens the door, and smiles down at Mary, who remains red-faced and frustrated in her carrier seat.

Dean gives Charlie a quick list of instructions on Mary’s care and says to text him if she needs anything. Charlie salutes, but then pulls Dean into a hug. Dean seems surprised, but he responds and wraps his arms around her, patting her shoulder before they part.

“Good luck,” she says, “and may the Force be with you.”

A reluctant smile rises to Dean’s lips and he splits his right hand into the sign for ‘Live Long and Prosper.’

Charlie returns the hand signal. It’s a small gesture, but the smile that flickers on Dean’s face makes Castiel infinitely grateful for it.
By the time that they swing around in front of the bed and breakfast where Gabriel is staying, Castiel’s brother is already outside, looking uncomfortable in a suit. Dean pulls up and Gabriel opens the door to climb in beside Kevin in the backseat, taking the place where Mary’s carrier was only a handful of minutes ago. His suit looks several years old and not cut to fit his older frame, although the Dr. Seuss tie gives it some personality.

“Well, you guys are a hoot,” Gabriel says.

The attempt to lighten the mood falls flat and Gabriel turns his head to gaze at the window as Dean pulls away from the bed and breakfast. The Chaffee County courthouse lies around a half-hour south from Buena Vista, in Salida. Dean blasts his music throughout the entire journey, but he doesn’t sing along like he might if Dean alone were in the car, or if it was just the two of them, Dean and Castiel.

Sam’s car is already parked in the lot alongside the courthouse when they arrive, as are the news vans. Alpha instinct immediately kicks in, and Castiel stands in front of Dean as they walk toward the front steps of the courthouse. They blurt questions and shove at Castiel to get to Dean, but back down at the timbre of his growl and the aggressive set of his shoulders. Kevin grabs onto the sleeve of Dean’s suit and clings close to him, but Gabriel takes the brunt of reporters trying to get them from the back, shooing them away with not alpha aggression but with cool beta temper.

The moment they burst into the lobby Castiel breathes a fresh inhale of air. It smells of cleaner and several brands of laundry detergent on several different trim suits and fashionably-cut dresses. Though the odor is far better than that of the crowd of reporters and the cameras shoved into their faces, it is no more comforting.

“God, this place is dull,” Dean remarks, “Shoulda brought a book or somethin’.”

“You can play that candy game you’ve been so obsessed with,” suggests Castiel.

“Man, if I play Candy Crush, I’m just gonna get madder,” Dean says.

“You should try Flappy Bird,” Gabriel suggests.

At this, Kevin smacks Gabriel’s arm and says, “Don’t listen. Do not play Flappy Bird.”

“I’m not sure how the topic of conversation arrived at flapping birds, but your brother’s found us,” Castiel says.

Sam strides to them from across the room. At the sight Castiel finds it no wonder that Sam has won so many cases regarding omega rights: with his height and broad shoulders tucked into a suit, he looks put together and handsome, the very portrait of the all-American alpha boy.

It figures that, as always, the public is far more likely to listen to cries from the omegas when it’s translated by a sunshine-faced alpha, and not from the omegas themselves.

“Dean,” he says, and draws his brother into a hug. Dean, for the second time that day within somebody’s arms, looks confused. He blinks and hugs back, and when Sam lets go, he goes on, “How’re you doing?”

“Peachy,” Dean says.

Sam frowns.

“What?” Dean snips, “Don’t make that face. How do you think I feel? I get to spread out a
sordid fucking seven years for a bunch of strangers like they’re a goddamn picnic. I am not fine, and I will not be fine, so just…cut it out.”

Sam opens his mouth, but at twin glares from Castiel and Dean, closes it again. He sighs and then offers a weak smile, “We’ll get him, dude.”

“Or try to get him, anyway,” Dean says back. He coughs and sticks his thumb toward Gabriel, “Hey, you haven’t met Cas’ douchebag brother yet. That’s Gabe.”

“To be fair, I’d like to think of myself as slightly less douchey than the rest of ‘em,” Gabriel says, and shakes Sam’s hand.

Dean says, “Eh, you’re okay.”

“I’ll take it,” Gabriel says, “he hated me ‘til it turned out the pup likes me.”

“Christ only knows why,” says Dean, “You’re irritating as fuck, but apparently in a pup’s book that’s the funny shit. I’m not saying aliens, but aliens.”

Kevin is the only one that laughs at that. Castiel figures that it must be a reference to something on the internet, as that’s how Kevin and Dean seem to communicate. He doesn’t blame either of them for spending so much time on the computer. It’s easier to deal with things in a virtual reality over the tangible world more than it should be. Dean tells him that that’s why he spent so many days of being a teenager with his nose in a comic book and a Walkman in his pocket than going out and trying to meet people that didn’t suck. John always asked him why he wouldn’t run around like a ‘normal teenager’ – whatever that means.

Castiel didn’t like going out either, although his parents found that doubly strange in light of Castiel’s alpha status.

He should have known better than to think of his family. Just as he turns his head, he sees the Novak clan, well-dressed in designer clothing.

“The idiom ‘Speak of the devil, and he shall appear,’ comes to mind,” he murmurs.

“Huh? Oh, Jesus,” Dean says, when he spots the Novaks.

“Dean,” Michael greets, “You clean up well. Did Castiel choose your suit?”

“Nah, I picked it out all by my big-boy self,” Dean says, and to Castiel’s amusement, he adds, “and under it I’m even more of a big boy.”

The look on Michael’s face is absolutely scandalized, but before his lips can even form a retort, Gabriel and Castiel burst into laughter, Sam shakes his head and chuckles, and Kevin cracks a smile. Balthazar smothers laughter into his hand. Even reserved Anna affords a snort. A smirk crosses Dean’s face and he throws in a wink at Michael, who bristles at the behavior.

But the Novaks are nothing if not crowd-pleasers, though, and with the majority of the party finding Dean funny, they keep their mouths closed.

The light mood drains when it comes time to start filing into the court room. Dean, being a witness, has to stay quarantined in a waiting room with Kevin while the rest of them watch the proceedings, and nobody’s supposed to discuss the case with each other, even though Castiel is fully aware of the events that led up to Dean being roped into the compound, what happened inside it, and how he escaped.
Sam, Castiel and Gabriel sit on the same bench in a middling place in the courtroom. Castiel is flanked on either side with the other two, and that’s good. If he gets overwhelmed, one or the other can ground him. Typically he wouldn’t be so moved by a case, so righteously angry, but he’s learning more and more that when one’s mate is involved, some rules cease to apply.

Gabriel notices the tension and asks, “You gonna be able to handle it when Eyelashes takes the stand, kiddo?"

“I don’t know,” Castiel replies sullenly, “I…already know everything that he is going to say, but that doesn’t change the weight of it. And it certainly doesn’t change that he’s retelling this all to a crowd of people that includes our parents.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Castiel sees Sam swallow the lump in his throat and shift uncomfortably. He says, “Dean still hasn’t told me all the things that happened,” in a voice so quiet that he seems ashamed, as though it’s his fault that Dean wouldn’t want to discuss the goriest and most terrifying time of his life with his little brother. Despite Sam’s successes, Castiel knows full well that Dean still thinks of his brother as a pup at times.

“I’m worried,” Sam says again, “that this isn’t going to go the way that we want it. The alphas I’ve taken on…they’re just people, just average working alphas. Alastair…he’s. Well. He’s powerful, you know? He’s got money coming out his ears and a household name. That’s so much bigger than anything I’ve ever done.”

“I wouldn’t say that the things you’ve done are smaller than this,” Castiel says, “but I do think that more people are watching what happens here. Ms. Talbot is a formidable woman, though. She’ll at least put up a worthy fight.”

Gabriel peers over at the two of them and says, “So what happens if we lose this shit? It’s not like you two can go alpha-psycho in public.”

No matter how tempting that would be in the case of a loss, Gabriel is correct.

“We will take care of Dean, in that case,” Castiel says, “Sam and I both will. It should be a pact.”

Castiel offers his hand to Sam and as Sam takes it, he says, “Dean would be pissed if he knew we were talking about taking care of him. He’d think we’re treating him like a pup because he’s an omega.”

“Everyone needs to be taken care of,” reasons Castiel, “Even Dean…especially Dean.”

They have little time to dwell on the agreement, as the double doors to the courtroom swing open as if hit by a formidable wind. At the center of them stands Alastair, dressed for court in a fine suit with hair oiled, though his hands are held behind him in cuffs and police officers surround him on all sides. Flashes of cameras click and explode from all corners of the room, and the audience murmurs.

More cameras follow as Alastair is walked down the aisle that splits the audience into halves. His eyes are cold, but not hard. He seems unconcerned at any of the hubbub, marching forward with what dignity he can and a blank, neutral expression on his face.

A chill shoots down Castiel’s spine, followed by the sensation of needing to vomit swirling in the pit of his stomach. The face of that man sends him reeling into thoughts of the terrible things that have been done to Dean, to the medieval device in the basement, to the mattresses that reeked of piss and slick and despair, to the way that Dean cries out when his subconscious sends him back to
the compound in sleep. His clenches his fists and the alpha thirst to defend his mate overwhelms him. Castiel is hot under his skin with fury.

“Cassie,” Gabriel murmurs.

Castiel snaps out of it and sees several other audiences members with their heads turned to stare at him. A few flashes go off in his direction, of course. They know who he is, and his rage within the courtroom is something sensational to splash across television screens and online newspapers.

“We’ll get thrown out of the courtroom if you don’t keep it together,” Sam says.

“I know,” Castiel replies through gritted teeth, and scrambles to find the leash that he’s used his entire life to keep emotions in check. It seems a weak tether today, but it will have to do.

Castiel is as reigned in as he can manage by the time that the bailiff asks that they rise and announces the judge’s arrival. The man that sits at the judge’s bench is on the later side of middle-aged, surprisingly unkempt for a man with his title. His hair curls tightly to his scalp and his frown is framed by a double-chinned, unshaven jaw.

“Do you know anything about this judge?” Castiel whispers, leaning into Sam.

“Metatron?” Sam murmurs, and shakes his head, “Haven’t heard of him. I have no idea where he leans in omega rights.”

They hush as Bela stands to make her opening statement for the prosecution. She looks every bit the kind of person to be feared as she stares directly into the face of Alastair to begin speaking. Sharply dressed and armed with a tongue equally as sharp. She details personal interactions with the omega victims and their fear, the cruelty that they faced and the death that one unfortunate man suffered.

It takes all of Castiel’s will to detach himself from her words and disassociate Dean with the monstrosities that she describes – beatings, rape, medical torture, unrelenting cruelty in every aspect of the concept. He closes his eyes and wonders if this was a terrible idea, if he should have stayed home with Mary Grace and left this to Sam and Dean.

But he wouldn’t do that to his mate.

Bela seems to speak for a long time, but when Castiel glances to where the jurors are seated, they remain attentive.

Good. Bela’s words have power, and that is a point in their favor.

When the prosecution’s opening statement winds down to the end, Castiel’s entire body buzzes with barely-contained emotion, most of it wily, instinctual rage and anguish that he’s so seldom dealt with before that it could escape its cage at any given moment.

Alastair’s lawyer rises to make her statement. She has instant charisma, casting a spell over the audience without saying a single word. Her striking hair is arranged artfully to look equal parts stunning and professional. Every ounce of her screams alpha. It makes Castiel want to gag.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” she greets, “My name is Elle Abaddon, and it is my privilege to represent Alastair Locke in this case before you today. Already you have heard the allegations that Ms. Talbot would like to be proven to you today, but she has failed to give you a holistic view of the facts.
“The prosecution would have you believe that the blame in this tragedy falls entirely onto the shoulders of Mr. Locke, when in fact an operation so elaborate could not possibly be upheld by a single man. The employees of the Buena Vista trafficking compound have escaped with little repercussion, and the prosecutor failed to mention a key player in this case: Lucifer Novak. Mr. Novak awaits his own trial but only after reaching a bail significantly lower than that assigned to Mr. Locke, despite Mr. Novak’s numerous financial resources and clearly recorded ‘donations’ to the omega compound.

“Furthermore, despite attempted coercion from the police force, Mr. Locke never confessed to the crime. Interviewed omegas recount Mr. Locke never laying a finger on them, that only the employees of the compound and the alpha clients of the establishment caused them bodily harm.

“I do not deny that Mr. Locke ran this establishment, but this was only under the behest of his partner, Lucifer Novak. Lucifer Novak was the mind behind the Buena Vista compound, while my client only handled management and numbers. The true villain remains in Los Angeles, while Alastair Locke bears the brunt of the blame.

“I ask today that you keep an open mind throughout the trial and hear the evidence that each side has to offer, and that from it you return a verdict of ‘not guilty.’ Thank you.”

Castiel and Gabriel trade a meaningful look, but say nothing. They did not know that their brother would be dragged into the stew, but Castiel sure as hell hopes that Ms. Talbot prepared for the possibility. By all accounts, Lucifer could be the operator behind Alastair, but why should that garner Alastair Locke his freedom?

Bela stands again. She begins with photos of the places in the compound, of the lobby with its provocative décor, to the comfortable and sexually equipped guest rooms, location after location. She begins at the decadent and presses into the shocking. Members from the CSI team that collected the evidence from the compound are called room by room.

“We collected samples from every mattress,” one officer says, when Bela clicks to a series of photos of the omega’s sleeping arrangements, the filthy concrete floors, the stained mattresses, the shackles on the bare walls, “Every sample returned positive for blood, urine, and omega secretions.”

Castiel feels Sam tense up more and more as Bela goes through the photos and officers and expert witnesses lay out everything that they know. He knows that Sam heard Dean retell some of these things, but the visual and the whole of it hold a power separate from a story.

Sam senses Castiel staring and turns his head to meet his eyes. Cas hesitates, but after a beat, he moves his hand to rest on top of Sam’s. Sam just nods, but doesn’t move his hand from the touch.

And Castiel, too, needs the comfort when Bela shifts to the next piece of evidence: the video taken of Dean leading the police through the compound. His throat goes dry and he feels ever sicker, but he makes himself sit still if for no one else’s sake but Sam’s, because he will need somebody here as he watches.

“The omega that escaped the compound and alerted the police to its existence is Dean Winchester,” Bela says, “He was helped in his escape by a second omega, Kevin Tran, when Alastair Locke threatened to cut out the child that he was some months into carrying. Mr. Winchester has had more recovery time than the other omegas at the compound, and so we asked him to lead us through the facility. This is the recording of that event.”

The video comes to life in the dim, dank service stairway that they climbed to reach each floor.
Dean’s serious face switches from glancing at the camera to staring at his feet to looking around wide-eyed at the surroundings.

“These stairs are how Alastair’s muscle took us from cells to clients. Either upstairs to the bedrooms or down to the playrooms. Um, sometimes, if you got hurt real bad, they had to carry you.”

Victor’s voice echoes from someplace beyond the camera, asking Dean to take them up to one of the bedrooms. The frame follows Dean’s back leading them up the stairs and to one of the bedrooms, where he explains that the bedrooms were the best place to land in the compound.

When Dean leads them to the cells, Sam’s hand tightens into a fist underneath Castiel’s palm.

“I slept in this one,” Dean says in the video, resting his hand on one of the bars and staring into a cell at the far end of the cellblock. “This was my bed for seven years. First few months… I spent those all locked up, ‘cause I kept trying to fight my way out, no matter how sick or fucked up I was. That gap down there is where the muscle passed you your food. Usually it was drugged, I guess ‘cause if we were lucid, we’d fight more. But I stopped. Fighting, I mean. I didn’t have to be chained up after that most times. When you got hurt so bad you couldn’t bleed it out on your mattress and sleep it off… that was worse.”

Sam’s fist shakes. Castiel leans in and says, “Sam, you’re starting to smell threatening.”

Sam casts Castiel a helpless, pained look. Of course he smells threatening. He’s watching his older brother recount the torture that he suffered at the compound, seeing the places Dean slept and lived and existed for seven entire years.

Video-Dean explains that he isn’t really sure where they were taken when they were sick, just that it was a big, dark room. Victor says from behind the camera that they found a room lined with gurneys in the level below the cells, and Dean blanches, but nods.

“Sounds like… that’s the place. If you got sick or injured, you woke up there. Couldn’t – couldn’t breathe at first, ‘cause you’re strap down. It’s dark, but you can smell other omegas, smell their heat and blood and fear. When I started throwing up ‘cause of my pup, that’s where they took me. Had me tied down and a doctor poke around inside. Hurt.”

Castiel knows that the footage of The Chair is coming as soon as Dean has finished explaining the playrooms, but it doesn’t prepare him to witness it all over again. Horrified, Castiel watches Dean stammer about what happened here before he climbs up onto that horrible wooden thing and demonstrates the way that it worked.

Everything that Sam has held back unleashes when they watch Dean climb back down with wet eyes and hunch over, vomiting onto the floor and the front of his t-shirt. The entire courtroom reeks of fear and horror and sorrow and no one can contain it.

“When I got put in The Chair, alphas knotted me so hard I could feel blood running down my legs by the end of it. Once, I had an alpha rip his knot right out of me when it hadn’t even gone down yet, not even a little. I don’t really remember much of what happened after that.”

When the screen blips to black, the judge calls a recess, and Castiel has never been more grateful. Leaving the courtroom does little to relieve the heady, stressful scents of dozens of people’s pity and shame and disgust and sickness, but at least out here the air is more open.

Sam runs a hand through his hair. His eyes are glassy and red-rimmed. He opens and closes his
mouth several times as he searches for the words to say. He stumbles over them when he finally does speak: “I-I can’t believe – *Dean.*”

“I know,” Castiel says lowly.

Without warning, Sam throws his arms around Castiel. Castiel hugs back. He closes his eyes and rubs Sam’s back.

When Sam pulls back, he says, “Thank you.”

“What are you thanking me for?” asks Castiel.

“For everything,” Sam says, “For pulling over to pick him up that night. For taking care of him and giving him a home when you didn’t need to. For bringing him back. I didn’t – didn’t realize. Thank you.”

Castiel has to close his eyes and will them not to water. He nods and says, “I would do it again a hundred times.”

Only when a flash strikes like lightning does Castiel realize that a small crowd has formed around them, of reporters and photographers and other curious onlookers, the Novak family included. Castiel tries to read the expressions on their faces since he can’t pick their smells out of the throng, but all he sees are the same tight-lipped expressions that he’s known his entire life, save for Anna, whose face is tearstained, and Balthazar, whose expression is grim in a way that Castiel has never seen before on his cousin.

Castiel shakes his head and pushes out of the crowd to use the restroom before they’re called back into the courtroom. He has to wait in a long line of suited-up alphas, and there his shoulders sag with weight of yearning for Dean to be here beside him. Selfishly, he wants Dean here so that he can feel comforted, and not because he wants to comfort Dean.

When he emerges, an unexpected pair of arms coils around him and yanks him forward. Gabriel’s sweet, odd beta scent fills his nostrils. It has a metallic tint to it, the smell of *wrongness.*

“Are you okay?” asks Castiel.

A humorless smile flashes across Gabriel’s face and he looks down at the ground with a huff. He says, “I didn’t know – well, I knew – jeez. Your boy’s got some steel ones. That’s all. And you too, kiddo. I don’t do serious, you know? God, the way we grew up, joking was the only way that I knew how to deal with anything. I can’t ride with that here. I’m supposed to be the older brother. I’m supposed to teach you ‘bout everything, the good and the bad. I was trying to make things right here, fix up all the shit I screwed up, maybe teach one of those lessons. But, uh. You taught me, instead.”

Castiel is stricken into silence.

“I’m gonna move out outta mom’s,” Gabriel finally says.

“She’ll cut you off,” Castiel replies, “You’ll have to find a job.”

“Yeah, I guess I will,” Gabriel says, “and I’ll find one here. Think you might be the best shot at the whole family thing that I got.”

“Gabriel…”
“And that’s enough of that,” Gabriel says, “How about we talk about how the judge is named fucking Metatron. What is the guy, a Transformer?”

Castiel snorts and rolls his eyes. He says, “Your inability to be serious for more than five minutes put together is always refreshing, Gabriel.”

“I cope any way I can,” Gabriel says.

On that note, people begin to file back into the courtroom. Castiel, Gabriel and Sam return to their same seats. A headache niggles at the edges of Cas’ skull, the result of unchecked distress on behalf of his mate. He wishes sometimes that law didn’t override instinct, that he could seek Dean out and kiss him just to feel his lips again between court sessions.

There is no time to breathe when the double doors of the courtroom seal closed behind them all. Bela takes the floor again, but this time she is equipped with images of the damages done to the omegas’ bodies. She prefaces, “I feel I should warn that the images I am about to show are graphic and may disturb some.”

The first picture is the rotted body of the murdered omega, Gordon. Castiel doesn’t know if the police ever located Gordon’s family, and he doesn’t know whether or not he should hope that they did. The marks on Gordon’s skin look too similar to the marks on Dean, and it makes Castiel’s gut churn once again.

An expert witness takes the stand to testify that the scars on the murdered omega are consistent with the scars on the bodies of the rescued omega victims.

Castiel is not prepared for what he sees.

Photographs of open wounds and terrifying scars flood the courtroom, malnourished bodies with ribs pressing against the skin and spine ridging out. There are bruises and stitches, aftermaths of surgeries, beaten, familiar faces – when Kevin’s face flashes across the screen, Castiel winces. His cheeks are still hollow in the photo, expression void of hope. The scar that splits his clouded eye seems ten times as prominent as it is now. Faces upon faces slide by, weary, scared and beaten men and women, one by one.

Castiel can’t tell if it’s the faces that are the worst, or the photos of the damage done to their channels. Some omegas have had alpha knots ripped right out of them, and with it have a bloody mess between their legs. This is something that Dean suffered, even if the evidence has long healed. The image of Dean strapped down to one of the gurneys pictured in the photograph, bleeding and terrified, plagues his brain. He puts his face in his hands and massages his temple, willing it away, but no matter how hard he wishes it, the pictures won’t leave.

This is how Dean feels every single night.

He will never suffer as his omega has suffered.

By the time that the court lets out for the night, Castiel is beyond the pale. He is distraught. He thinks that Sam might be speaking to him but he doesn’t hear a word, just blindly pushes through the crowd, desperate to find Dean, hold him tight and never let him go.

Just barely, a thread of Dean’s scent breaks through the miasma.

There.

Castiel shoves a man aside and charges to the end of the room, where Dean stands with hands in
the pockets of his slacks. He scoops Dean into his arms and Dean swears, “Shit, you scared me.”

That marks the final blow. Castiel shatters into pieces and all at once he’s a weeping mess, pressing his face into Dean’s shoulder as he shakes and cries. Dean doesn’t ask him what happened, doesn’t ask him how it went. He just strokes his rough fingers through Castiel’s hair and over his back, hushing him with soft noises and the faint sound of humming.

“I-I’m supposed to take care of you,” Castiel says into Dean’s neck, “I’m supposed to take care of my family. I am a terrible alpha.”

“Hey, none of that,” Dean says, but doesn’t stop rubbing Cas’ back, “We take care of each other, remember?”

It’s everything that Castiel needed to hear. They take care of each other. Especially now, when Castiel feels like Atlas and his back starts to buckle with the weight of the earth, he and Dean must take care of each other.
All Signs of Mad Mankind

Chapter Notes

BIG, BIG, BIG warning for Dean's past and intense descriptions of the omega compound. Proceed at your own risk!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Track: Have to Drive – Amanda Palmer

All Signs of Mad Mankind

By the time that Dean and Cas make it back home after picking up Mary from Charlie’s, their pup is angry and fussy, a state that Charlie said Mary was in for most of the day. Kevin keeps quiet and drifts back to his bedroom without even a ‘goodnight.’ Dean feels ready to keel over from exhaustion, and judging by the shadows bruising the skin underneath Cas’ eyes, his alpha’s in a similar state.

Dean isn’t used to seeing alphas dissolve into tears like Cas did in the courthouse, inconsolable against Dean’s shoulder and shaking all over. The scent of distress alone was enough to send Dean’s omega biology into comfort mode – the rest of it just made him want to fix it all faster. He’s pretty sure there’s nothing worse than the scent of your mate beside himself with pain.

Even though the courthouse staff brought Dean and Kevin food to keep them going throughout the day while they wasted away in the waiting room, his stomach growls in complaint. Just another thing that Dean needs to fix before he can even think about going to sleep, he thinks.

Cas murmurs, “I’ll heat up some leftovers. I’m too tired to cook.”

“Don’t blame you,” Dean replies, “I’mma change outta these duds and feed Fussy McFusserson. Don’t think I’m gonna be able to fall asleep, though.”

“Me neither,” sighs Castiel.

Dean parts ways with Cas and brings Mary to the master bedroom, where he sets her down on top of the blankets. The scent of her parents calms her down just long enough for Dean to swap out his suit for sweatpants, and an AC/DC t-shirt that he sets aside long enough to sit down and get Mary to eat. Charlie reports that Mary didn’t really go for the bottles that they left for her.

Poor pup. She didn’t ask for any of this.

Then, neither did Dean.

When Mary finishes up, Dean slides the t-shirt on over his head and tucks her into the crook of one arm. The living room and kitchen smell like the chili that Cas threw together for them a few nights ago, reheated. Cas puts a weak smile on his face when he sees Dean and Mary and asks, “Would you like the chili too? If not, I could put something else in the microwave for you.”

“Chili’s fine,” Dean says, “Gonna turn the TV on.”
“Okay.”

Dean sticks the disk in for *Battlestar Galactica*, which he decided to borrow from Charlie after they watched the pilot together. She’s right about Starbuck – Dean fucking loves her, mostly because she’s a badass *and* an omega.

When the menu appears on the TV screen, Dean brings Mary back to the couch to swaddle them both in some blankets before he hits play. Both he and his pup need the comfort of the closeness of one another after the rough days that they’ve both had, and when Cas joins them with two bowls of chili, it seems he feels no differently. He curls up and rests his head up against Dean’s calves, where he’s bent them up to make room on the sofa.

The chili settles on Dean’s stomach enough to make him sleepy. He’s relieved; Dean thought that he’d be up all night with his intestines in knots over the prospect of being called to the stand. He can’t decide if it’s better or worse that he doesn’t have a definitive answer on when that’ll be, just knows that a testimony is in his future.

He doesn’t know when he falls asleep, just that it’s to the sounds of the TV rolling with Mary’s weight on his chest and Cas draped over his legs.

When Dean wakes, the weights are gone and the television is silent. He sits up and rubs at his face, the blanket tucked around his shoulders falling down to his waist. The phone in the kitchen rings and he realizes that that must be what woke him.

Dean swings his legs over the couch and pads into the kitchen. He spares a glance at the microwave, where glowing green letters read that the time is past three in the morning. Who the hell calls at this freaking hour?

Still, Dean picks up the phone from its cradle and answers with a sleep-rough, “Hello?”

“That you, Dean?”

Dean frowns, “…Dad?”

“How come – why s’it that you never said a damn thing ‘bout being hurt?” John’s words are soft at the edges and slurred together. Jesus. Dean massages his temples.

“Are you honestly calling me at three AM, drunk off your ass?”

The question goes ignored, and John goes on, “No, you don’t tell me anything, even when I’m at your door. How’s you think it feel to find out your grandpup ain’t son-in-law’s, but some sick sonuvabitch that – that –”

Dean closes his eyes and leans his elbow on the kitchen counter, resting his head in his free hand. He says, “Raped? That the word you’re lookin’ for?”

“Yeah, *that,*” John spits, venom in every word, “You – Y’got fucked up, y’got hurt real good and you don’t say a damn word to your own father? I gotta watch it on the fucking TV? I got to see my own damn son ‘splaining where the fuck he was for seven years to a bunch a’ strangers, but he doesn’t even tell his own father. What’s wrong with you, boy?”

A surge of anger pours through Dean’s limbs like liquid steel. He snaps, “Why didn’t I tell you? Really? Are you that fucking dumb? I didn’t tell you because the second that I did you would’ve blamed me for everything that happened to me, just like you always did. You’d call me some dumbass omega for getting myself in that mess. You would’ve put it all on my shoulders. So that’s
why I didn’t bother saying a damn word, ‘cause I knew you wouldn’t listen anyway."

On the other end of the phone, John breathes heavy, uneven breaths, like he’s about to cry. He says, “I’d never do that. I woulda protected you, woulda looked out for you. You’re my son. That’s my job, to look out for you when you get hurt,” there’s a pause for breath, and fuzzy noise that Dean guesses is his dad tipping back some more of whatever god-awful liquor he’s drinking, before John starts up again, “But you know, you never listen to me. Never did. If you listened t’ me before you hightailed it outta Kansas, none a’ that ever would have happened to you.”

That pushes Dean right over the edge. He barks, “Are you fucking kidding me? That right there – that’s blaming me. Like it’s my fuckin’ fault that some crazy douchebag set up a fucking rape factory and that other douchebags paid to use it. Maybe if alphas fucking learned not to be assholes for two seconds put together, I could’ve skipped that fuckfest. And hey, maybe if you hadn’t been such a shitty dad, I wouldn’t have wanted to bust out anyway.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” John says, “I’ve done my best with you boys. I tried to keep you safe, ‘cause that was my job. Keepin’ my omega son safe. But no, you’re a mouthy fuck with a disobedient streak a mile wide. I’m no shitty father; you’re a no-good, insubordinate omega piece of ass.”

“You think so, huh?” Dean says through gritted teeth, seething, “Then why the hell were me n’ Sammy so friggin’ desperate to get away from you? Why the hell do you think that is? It’s because you’re a rotten son of a bitch with a drinking habit and a beta complex.”

John starts to argue, but Dean pulls the phone away from his ear and hangs up, slamming it back into its cradle. Fury like thick molasses covers him from head to toe. His hands clench into fists and start to shake and he feels like he might vomit or scream, or maybe both.

Would have protected you, Dean’s left nut. The only things his dad gave half a damn about were his dead mate and the disappointment of having an omega son. After that, it was all a blur of whiskey and hanging onto life to make it miserable for others.

It takes several minutes for Dean to come down from his rage. His body still buzzes with anger when he starts walking toward the double doors to the master bedroom, but at least he doesn’t feel like rustling up a shotgun and tracking down his dad just so he can shoot him in his sorry fucking face.

He’s angry enough that when he slips into the room, the lump of Cas under the covers rolls over and sits up with a low, raspy, “Dean?” he reaches over to click the lamp on his bedside table to life, “You smell upset. Did you have a nightmare?”

Dean pulls his t-shirt up over his head and tosses it into their wicker laundry basket as he talks, “No. My fucking dad called.”

“You father called?” Cas echoes.

Dean slides his sweatpants off and throws them in with his t-shirt before he climbs into bed in his boxers, sidling up to Cas’ body heat underneath the covers. He says, “He was drunk off his ass. Guess he’s been watching the news. Asked me why I never told him what happened, and when I said that he would’ve just put everything on me, he says he wouldn’t have and then does exactly that in the same goddamn breath.”

Cas’ arms come around Dean’s shoulders and he wrangles him in. He doesn’t say anything at first, just tangles their limbs up together and noses at him, cuddling close. Then Cas’ lips brush against
the skin below Dean’s ear and he murmurs, “Don’t give your father any thought. He underestimates you because you are an omega, and then overestimates the power that you have in this world for the same reason. He fails to recognize that alphas should be held accountable for their actions just like everyone else. If the mere presence of an omega is enough to bring an alpha to their knees, perhaps alphas lack the strength that society assigns them.”

Dean sighs against Cas’ chest and says, “That sounds a lot better than the ‘fuck those guys’ that I was thinkin’.”

“It equates to the same thing,” Castiel says softly, eyes heavy-lidded with his exhaustion.

“Sorry,” Dean awkwardly says, “I woke you up and saddled you with all this bullshit.”

“I’m your mate,” Castiel says back, eyes falling closed, “I’m supposed to be there when you need me. I love you, my sweet omega.”

X

The proceeding days follow a pattern: Dean, Castiel and Kevin wake up. They have breakfast. Dean feeds Mary, and they dress in their courtroom finest. After they drop Mary off at Charlie’s, they grab Gabriel from the bed and breakfast, and they drive to the courthouse in Salida. Dean and Castiel part ways after they arrive, Cas going to sit in the courtroom with Sam and Gabriel while Dean and Kevin get relegated to waiting again.

“Why is this taking so fucking long?” Dean says on the fifth day of the trial. He slouches in his chair and props his feet up on the table in the center of the room.

“Trials can go on for months,” Kevin says back, without looking up from the screen of his phone. He’s playing Flappy Bird, while simultaneously warning Dean away from downloading it himself. He curses under his breath when he loses another round and finally meets Dean’s eyes, “But I guess this could mean something good. The more evidence that we have on our side, the more likely the jury is to convict, right?”

“Dunno, man,” Dean says, “Sam kinda seems freaked out, and Sammy’s pretty smart.”

Kevin worries his lower lip with his teeth, and after a stretch of silence he asks, “What are we gonna do if they let him go, Dean?”

Dean doesn’t know the answer to that. The thought of the possibility leaves him feeling strange and vacant, not filled with dread or rage, just empty. There’s just this big, dark chasm there, sucking in everything like a black hole. He runs his hands over his face and answers honestly, “I don’t know, man. I don’t know.”

When they leave for the night on the fifth day of the trial, Dean white-knuckles the steering wheel all the way to Charlie’s and Gabriel’s bed and breakfast, and then all the way back up the mountain to home. Anxiety prickles at the back of his neck and it feels like he’s being bitten by hundreds of insects – a gross sensation that leaves Dean feeling like he has an itch that he needs to scratch.

Cas whips up a quick dinner when they arrive back home. With the weight of trial shoving down on all of their shoulders, the past few days have been nothing but leftovers at night and cold cereal in the mornings. The fact that Cas is too preoccupied to enjoy cooking just makes Dean feel worse about the entire situation.

If Cas never picked Dean up off the side of the road that night, he’d never be dealing with all this.
Just as the thought crosses his mind, Cas sets a bowl of piping hot mac n' cheese in front of Dean with a plastic package of bacon bits on the side. He runs his fingers through Dean’s hair and kisses his forehead. Even though Kevin is watching this all unfold, Dean can’t find it in him to be embarrassed. Cas doesn’t mind that he’s in this sinkhole because he loves Dean. He knows that, and right now, that knowledge gives him just the kind of warmth that he needs to keep going.

“I think we should drop your suit at the dry cleaner’s,” Castiel mentions as he sets his own macaroni bowl on the space at the table beside Dean.

Come to think of it, this kitchen table is kind of plain. It’s not ugly like the Ikea coffee table was, but it’s simple and doesn’t go with their new coffee table. Dean could make them a new one, let out all his frustration on some lumber.

“I keep sweating through the damn thing ‘cause I’m fucking nervous,” Dean mutters, “and it’s the only one I have. What am I supposed to wear if my only suit’s at the dry cleaner’s?”

“You could borrow one of mine,” Castiel replies.

“I’m too big.”

“It won’t be for long,” Castiel replies, “but your suit smells like anxiety even without you in it, so we should probably snuff that out before you’re asked to take the stand.”

“…Yeah,” Dean reluctantly agrees, and dips his fork into his bowl of macaroni, spearing a particularly bacon-y piece and stuffing it in his mouth so that he doesn’t have to say anything else.

“I’m tired of it too,” Castiel says more quietly, his gaze at his dinner and not at Dean.

It’s true that the wear of the trial has not been limited only to Dean. Cas has permanent bags under his eyes and a grim set to his mouth, and even after coffee or playtime with Mary he still looks exhausted, like nothing will bring him relief.

When Castiel finishes his supper, his bowl is only half-empty. He scrapes the remains down the garbage disposal and the leftovers into a Tupperware container before silently starting on the dishes. Kevin doesn’t linger after dinner. He disappears in his bedroom, as he’s taken to doing after he eats when they arrive back from the courthouse.

That night, after Dean puts Mary down for the night in her crib, kissing her and tucking her in, he finds Cas knitting on their bed with a dazed look on his face. He glances up when Dean closes the door behind himself. Dean pulls off his shirt and crawls over Cas. He cups Cas’ face with both of his hands and draws him in for a hard kiss. Castiel makes a soft noise of surprise at the contact but kisses back, hands dropping his needles and sailing to thread through Dean’s hair and pull him closer.

Somewhere in the mix, Cas’ knitting project gets thrown into its basket and they lose their clothes one item by one. Dean wants it to be for Cas, to make it good for him and shoulder some of the exhaustion and pain, but Cas flips Dean onto his back and sucks down his cock like he’s been thinking about it all day.

There’s something fucking incredible about watching an alpha suck a dick so far down that you can see the outline of it in his throat. Dean loses it only a few minutes in and Cas swallows every drop, pulling Dean down the mattress by his legs to kiss with the salty-bitter taste still on his tongue.

Cas doesn’t stop there and take what he wants, what he as an alpha is entitled to. Instead, he
manhandles Dean onto his belly and spreads his cheeks apart to bury his face against Dean’s hole and lick him wide open, into a quivering, whining mess of an omega with a second erection in the space of no more than twenty minutes. He uses his tongue to pay reverent tribute to Dean's body, and there’s little he can do but enjoy it, riding back against Cas' mouth and fisting the sheets.

When Cas finally mounts him, they’re face to face, and he pulls Dean up to sit in his lap. Dean takes the opportunity to worship Castiel’s skin with kisses while he moves himself up and down, using the position to take control and let Cas relax. He feels Castiel’s knot start to swell hardly any time at all into the sex and kisses Cas through coming.

They fall back against the mattress tied together and panting, and no less anxious about the promise of the next day at court than they were before.

-X-

It’s just past two in the afternoon on the sixth day of Alastair’s trial when one of Bela’s aides comes through the door where Dean and Kevin are both slouched back with feet propped up on the table, playing games on their phones.

“Dean,” he says, “It’s time to go. You’re up.”

There’s no way he could have felt any more unprepared than he does now. He and Kevin have been swept off to this room for what feels like ages, and what started to feel like would be forever. He’s gotten used to the routine of being brought lunch while he plugs his phone into the wall and plays games on it for hours at a time. He’s gotten used to missing his pup. He’s gotten used to being stuffed into a suit.

And he would be called to the stand when he’s in one of Cas’ suits. It’s too tight in the shoulders and too short in the leg, making it difficult to breath and highly uncomfortable for his crotch. He starts sweating bullets when the aide opens the door that leads into the courtroom.

Immediately, a hundred smells assault Dean at once. He can pick out Alastair’s scent among them and it makes his toes curl in his dress shoes. There’s distress, disgust, disbelief and trained neutrality from face to face as he tries to avoid looking at the man that he can smell. Alastair knows his name now, the one thing that Dean would never give him. That’s one thing you learn from being a bar-hopping omega: always use an alias. That way, if some knothead comes after you, they head in the wrong direction.

You learn that lesson hard, being an omega – one way another, you always learn your lesson.

They have Dean swear with his hand on the Bible to tell the truth, and Dean swears. He doesn’t have anything to lie about, though he supposes there’ll be people that’ll say that he’s full of shit no matter what he does. He tries not to fidget when he sits down, but moving his hands is the only thing that’s keeping him from staring directly down and not at Bela in her pencil skirt, looking all-business.

“Mr. Winchester, is it true that you are one of the thirty seven omegas held in the Buena Vista compound?” she asks.

Dean wets his lips. He knows that this is how it was going to go. Bela told him what to expect, but rivulets of sweat still pour down between his shoulder blades, soaking the button-up borrowed from Cas. With each droplet of sweat, the getup smells more and more like Dean and less and less like Cas, and it sets his teeth on edge to have the scent of mate disappear.
“Yes ma’am,” he remembers to answer, only after he also remembers that he has the eyes of dozens of people on him.

“And how long were you trapped in the Buena Vista compound?” she asks.

Dean starts chewing on his lip now. He tastes blood right before he replies, “Seven years. Ma’am.”

There’s a soft intake of breath from the spectators at the confession as several people make the same noise of disbelief. Dean digs his nails into his palms and lets the sting of pain ground him and keeping him from being thrown headlong into a panic. The courthouse doesn’t have a bathtub that he can hide in, doesn’t have familiar scents to wrap around him like a quilt.

Bela’s high-heeled shoes click as she shifts on the floor and asks, “I’d like you to tell me, Mr. Winchester, how you came to be at the Buena Vista compound.”

He clears his throat and says, “I-I, uh. I got into an argument with dad and left home.”

“What was the argument about?”

Aw, Jesus.

“I went out at the end of my heat and got cornered by a bunch of alphas outside a bar,” Dean says, “and when I came home reekin’ like alpha come and blood and distress, my dad told me that if I’d listened to him when he told me not to go out, that maybe that wouldn’t have happened to me. That wasn’t so bad, ‘cause he said crap like that to me all the time. But when I went upstairs to my bedroom, my brother said the same thing, that maybe I should have listened to our dad.

“I guess I felt like I didn’t have anything left to hang onto there, so I decided to get the hell outta dodge and start fresh someplace. So I walked out and hitchhiked west to Colorado, figured it was far enough away but maybe not so different that I wouldn’t feel outta my element.

“Gettin’ there wasn’t really easy. You don’t really come across that many nice folks willing to give you a ride, mostly alpha truckers lookin’ to get something in return,” Dean does look down at that, cheeks burning, “and I was so desperate to get out that I’d do anything. Last guy took me as far as Colorado Springs, which was his stop. I just wanted to forget the last couple of days, so I find a bar.

“I order a drink, and some guy at the end of the bar offers to buy another for me. I tell him to fuck off and he gets pissed, and that’s when I met Alastair. He steps in and tells this dude to back down, and he does. I say thanks and we get to talking ‘bout what I’m doing in the Springs. I say I’m looking for a change of scenery, but that I don’t got anyplace to stay. Alastair says he’s got a couch I could crash on, and I say sure. He seemed okay, taking care of that jerk that wouldn’t leave me alone.

“But when we walk out back to the parking lot, this big guy jumps on me and I feel a needle. It’s, uh. Real fuzzy after that. I don’t remember any of the ride there, just woke up on some slick-stained mattress in a creepy basement.”

“Do you remember your first days at the compound?” asks Bela.

“Parts of them,” Dean says, “But not that much, ma’am.”

“Could you describe what you do remember for us?” she asks.

Dean nods and presses his nails deeper into his palms. Remembering the early days at the brothel
is a strain, most of it being clouded by being heavily dosed with drugs and feeling pain that he wasn’t even sure was real.

Dean takes a breath before he says, “I came to on a mattress, like I said. My head was... heavy, and my ankle hurt like hell. I thought maybe I twisted it or something, still thought maybe I was on somebody’s couch. And then I was in heat, even though I just finished the cycle and wasn’t due for another month. The omega in the cell next to me told me his name was Gordon, and he told me that when they came for me that I shouldn’t bother to fight. I didn’t know what he meant, and I faded back out before I could ask.”

“And what’s the next thing that you remember?”

“I remember the first alpha that had me there,” Dean says, “Some of Alastair’s guys came to get me. I was real out of it and pretty hungry, but soon as I saw them I remembered the bar, and I knew I was in trouble. I didn’t listen to Gordon and I fought anyway. I took out one of them and tried to make a run for it, but I was too drugged up to put up a fight when backup came. I... yelled some stuff at them, asked what was going on. One of the guys grabbed my face and told me to ‘shut my pretty mouth.’ That I remember for sure. Never – ah. Never forgot that.

“And then they took me upstairs to this room with a bunch of couches, and there was Alastair. He had some guy with a beard sitting next to him and he said to him, ‘This is our newest merchandise.’ And then I realize – I’m naked. I panick all over again and try to fight my way out but the muscle held me still while this guy looked me over. This alpha says he likes it ‘when they’ve got a little fight in them’ and that ‘he’ll take it,’ like I’m some kind of thing.

“So they walk me upstairs and my brain isn’t really working, it’s just sputtering like a dying engine. It’s only when they drag me into a bedroom and force me belly-down on the bed that I realize what’s going on. I keep trying to get away, but this alpha pins me down and he – ah.” Dean stops. He thinks he’s going to be sick.

And Christ, no, he can see Sammy in the audience. He’s crying and Cas doesn’t look much better, all pale like he feels just as ill as Dean does. The testimony part suddenly isn’t so bad – it’s watching his mate and brother break that’s the worst. Sam keeps trying to wipe off his face and keep it together, especially now that Dean has seen him.

“And he does what, Mr. Winchester?” Bela says. Her tone is cool and impassive, but behind the severe look he can read it on her face: that she knows what he’s talking about.

Somehow, that’s what pushes him into using his voice again. He says, “And he pushed into me. It didn’t hurt as much as it might if I hadn’t been in heat, but he wasn’t nice. He was rough. I remember the bruises…” Dean trails off and realizes that he’s started massaging his right wrist, where the bearded alpha gripped him with hands like vices and left purple bruises that never seemed to go away.

Bela continues her line of questioning. Most of the things that she asks him are limited to the first days at the compound, and she has Dean take her step by step through each time he experienced something first. He doesn’t even get through half of the crap he went through before Judge Metatron instructs Bela to conclude her final point for the night, and they’re sent home.

Sam grabs onto Dean in the courthouse parking lot and doesn’t let go for several minutes. It’s the second crying alpha incident that he’s had within only days of each other, and it makes Dean feel worse, oozing self-hatred and humiliation slowly slipping into his gut like parasites.

“M’ fine, Sammy,” Dean says.
Sam says, “I wish I hadn’t given up on looking for you.”

Dean tells him it’s okay, but he has to wonder if Sam would have found him if he hadn’t settled on the conclusion that Dean must have died. But Mary came out of being trapped in Alastair’s joint, and even knowing he could’ve avoided so much fucking pain, he wouldn’t take anything back if it meant not having Mary.

X

The days that follow count among the most exhausting days of Dean’s life. At court he’s drilled with question after question, and even when he doesn’t want to, he answers Bela and lays it all out for the courtroom, for his brother and his mate, for his mate’s family, and for the reporters and their cameras.

Strangers sit on their couches at home and get to watch Dean cut himself open and spill everything out for everyone to see, all the gore and bloody guts.

It takes a toll. Dean’s nightmares come back at full force, even with his visits to Benny on Sundays, when court isn’t in session. He feels like he’s missing watching his pup grow up because he’s in court every day. The mark for Mary reaching five months comes and goes, and when she starts to teethe, Charlie’s the one that buys the first toy that soothes the pearly whites poking through Mary’s gums.

It feels like an eternity before Dean’s sitting up in the stand (in his own suit, now) and Bela says, “Can you please describe the events that led up to your escape?”

Dean fusses with the edge of his suit jacket instead of pressing into his palms again. When Cas saw the bloody, half-moon marks of Dean’s anxiety on his palms, he bandaged and kissed the wounds and asks Dean not to do it again.

He still can’t stop fidgeting.

“When the doctor told Alastair that I was pregnant, I didn’t – I guess I thought that they’d nip it early and that would be that, but there were alphas that liked it if they could have a pregnant omega, it turned out. I started seeing alphas that liked to pretend my pup was theirs. They always told me things like…that they’d bred me up good and wouldn’t we make such a pretty family?

“Maybe the clientele wasn’t enough, because after one alpha left, I was lying face down and exhausted on one of the guest beds and Alastair walks in. He tells me that I did a good job, but that the pup’s a liability now, that they need to put a stop to it before grows anymore.

“And I…just panic. For the first time in years, I wanna fight again. I’m thinkin’, that pup didn’t do anything, and that pup is my family. When they brought me back to my cell that night, I just let it all out, told Kevin everything. I was desperate to get out of there on a level I’d never felt before. I don’t know what I did that made him do it, but Kevin says he’ll help me. He says we’ll wait for the right moment and that he’ll get me out.

“A couple nights later, Kevin’s back from upstairs and he’s messed up real bad. But by chance, just as they’re pulling him back down, they’re grabbing me to take me out. Alastair didn’t use as much security for me by then, I guess ‘cause I’d given up for so long. So Kevin sinks his teeth into the guy holding him steady and then just jumps onto him and starts clawing at his eyes. He yells at me to run, so I kick my guy in the nuts and I run.

“I run harder than I’ve ever run in my life. I barely even know the layout of the place, but I do
know there’s a door that goes outside on the second level of service stairs, ‘cause I’ve seen some of the muscle use the door to go out and smoke. My feet start to bleed ‘cause I’m running through brush and sticks and thorns but all I don’t give a damn. All I think is, I’ve gotta make it out for the pup. I make it as far as the road and have to stop to breathe. From there I start walking. I don’t know where I’m going, just that I’ve got to put as much distance as I can between Alastair’s joint and me.

“And then, there’s light from behind me. First I think they found me and I’m going back,” Dean lifts his eyes and locks his gaze to Castiel’s, “but I turn around, and this little Prius pulls up next to me. Guy inside rolls down his window. He says hello of all the things first, and then tells me to get in the car. I can smell alpha on him and wonder if I’m just going from one hellhole to another, but he also smelled nice, real nice.

“The alpha that picked me up off the side of the road that night was Castiel Novak,” Dean says, “and he turned out to be my mate.”

Bela thanks him and tells him that those are all the questions that she has for him. The first emotion that Dean feels is relief, but in an instant that vanishes when he sees Alastair’s lawyer stand up. The woman is terrifying, straight-up alpha with power in her every stride.

“Mr. Winchester,” she says, and where Bela’s voice felt like an encouragement to go on, Abaddon’s is pure oil slick, and Dean has to wonder if he’s going to slip on it. She says, “You told the court that you do not remember a great deal of the early days spent at the compound. Is this correct?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, and digs his fingers into the bandages across his palms.

“So if there were another party involved in your abduction, do you think that you would recall it?” she asks.

Dean swallows the lump in his throat and says, “I-I guess not.”

“And herein lies the crack in what the prosecution would have you believe about my client,” Abaddon says, eyes trained on the members of the jury. “If, say, Lucifer Novak was the driving force behind Mr. Winchester’s abduction, then he could not remember it,” she turns and faces Dean again, “Mr. Winchester, if Alastair was, in fact, the brains and money behind this tragedy, why do think that he would personally abduct the omegas? Would he not hire somebody to do his dirty work?”

“I,” Dean says, and finds himself at a loss for words. Jesus Christ. He doesn’t have an answer for this, doesn’t have any reason not to believe that shit that Abaddon is spoon-feeding him.

“Mr. Winchester,” Metatron says, “Please answer the question.”

“I don’t know,” he finally says.

And he really doesn’t freaking know.

Abaddon smiles at him, this twisted smile that makes Dean want to curl up in the bathtub at home and cover his head with his arms. She keeps on with her line of questioning, hammering out every weak spot that she’s found and putting nail after nail into the proverbial coffin.

For the first time, the empty feeling at the possibility that Alastair could walk free fills up with feeling: Fear.
The day that Abaddon’s cross-examination of Dean ends, Dean curls up in the bathtub at home. He buries his face between his knees, still in his suit and fully aware that his daughter is outside the master bedroom and probably needs attention. He can’t find anything inside him beyond nightmarish black, though, and so he doesn’t climb out of the tub, even when Castiel knocks on the door and asks if he can come in.

“Okay,” Dean says.

Instead of Castiel entering the bathroom with Mary on his hip, he has the home phone in his hand. He holds it out for Dean to take and says, “It’s Benny.”

“Not gonna talk to Benny,” Dean says to the bathtub.

“Please,” Castiel says. The word hits Dean like a battering ram, Castiel’s worry and desire to help splintering the black sea inside and making him look up and realize, Christ, he’s in the bathtub again, and he never wants to get out.

Dean takes the phone and answers, “Hi.”

“Hey, brother,” Benny says, “Your mate’s pretty worried about you. You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

“Alastair’s gonna walk,” Dean rasps.

“Maybe he will, and maybe he won’t,” Benny replies, “But I’m not worried about Alastair. I’m worried about you. What happened today that triggered this?"

Dean gnaws on his lip and replies, “Abaddon.”

“Alastair’s lawyer,” Benny says, “All right. So you talked about your experience at the compound with her, I take it.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Benny says, “I don’t wanna talk about that. I want you to tell me about a good memory that you got, the best one that you can think of.”

“Am I conjuring a patronus?” mutters Dean.

“No, you’re tellin’ me about something that makes you happy when you think about it.”

The first place that Dean’s mind jumps to is the night that Mary arrived kicking and screaming into his life, but being in labor is actually awful and he’d rather not think about that. Instead, he decides that he’ll tell Benny all about Christmas, one of the first real Christmasses that Dean has ever had. He coughs and says, “Christmastime was nice.”

“What was nice about Christmas? I wanna hear all about it,” Benny says, “You tell me what food you had to eat for Christmas dinner, you tell me about the presents under the tree. Everything, brother.”

Dean launches into recounting Christmas for Benny. He tells him how Sam and Amelia came to stay on the pull-out bed and how awesome it was to spend a decent Christmas with his brother. He tells Benny about cutting down the Christmas tree even though it wasn’t legal, and how Jo let them
do it even though she shouldn’t have. He starts to laugh when he tells Benny that they watched *The Ref*, and laughs even harder when he tells Benny about the tiny Christmas sweater that Cas knitted for Mary.

He still thinks the sweater was fuck-ugly, but it’s kinda sweet that Cas cared enough to make it.

The timbre of Benny’s voice calms Dean into limbs loosening and sprawling out in front of him in the bathtub.

“How’re you feeling now, Dean?” Benny asks.

Dean comes back into himself at that one question and blinks at his surroundings. He says, “Better.”

“That’s good. What else?”

“Kinda fuckin’ confused,” he replies, “I’m in the fucking bathtub again.”

Benny’s deep laugh sounds from the other side and he says, “Yeah, that’s why your mate called me. If I let you go, are you okay to get out of the bathtub and make sure your mate knows you’re all right?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Dean says.

“You think so, or you know so?” Benny asks.

Dean exhales, “I know so.”

When Dean and Benny say their goodbyes and hang up, Dean climbs out over the edge of the tub and treads out to the living room, where Cas sits on the couch with Mary balanced on his leg. Both mate and pup turn their heads when he approaches, and Mary lifts her arms, greeting, “Ahh-bahh.”

“If that’s a reference to your love of ABBA, then we’re gonna have to have a serious chat about your taste in music, sweet girl,” Dean says, and takes her into his arms. She lets out an impressive burp once passed to him, and Dean chuckles, “That’s my girl.”

X

When Kevin takes the stand, Dean stays home. He can’t take any more of that courthouse. He also didn’t want to be away from his pup anymore. Besides, Charlie had to go back to work at the salon eventually – pro-bono babysitting didn’t exactly pay the bills.

Dean spends the days away from the courthouse trying to make himself useful for when Kevin and Cas come home at night, keeping house and cooking dinner. When he isn’t busying himself, he sits on the couch with Mary and starts working through *Battlestar Galactica* episodes, more than happy to stick a scifi world in his head in place of the real one, since the real one sucks a giant fat one at the moment.

Partway through his foray into season two, he hears the sound of the garage door earlier than usual and pauses the episode, flipping off the television and gathering Mary up to greet Cas and Kevin.

When they warily march through the door, Dean leans in to kiss Cas and pass him Mary. Kevin speaks up first and says, “The jury’s out.”

“No shit,” Dean says, “That only took ten million fucking years.”
“Yeah,” Kevin agrees, voice tired all the way down to the core, “I’m gonna…shower. And sleep, probably. Don’t wake me up for dinner if I’m still out.”

“Yeah, sure,” Dean says, “Everything okay?”

“About as okay as it’s going to be,” Kevin says, and shakes his head.

“You need anything, you tell us, all right?” Dean says, but he knows that Kevin isn’t going to ask for help. When the sound of Kevin’s door closing punctuates the end of a silence, Dean says, “Sorry I didn’t do dinner. You guys are back early.”

“You never had to make dinner in the first place,” Castiel says pointedly. He lifts Mary in the air and greets, “Hello, little one. Were you good for omega dad? I hope you were. I don’t want to have to ground you for being churlish.”

Dean laughs. Some of the burden leaks away at the knowledge that he won’t be called back to court, though the heaviness is replaced by a new feeling, a whole different brand of impatience and concern. If Alastair walks free, he could hurt another set of omegas in another town, and he’d probably get away with it at least as long as he did here. On the other hand, Dean’s not sure that watching Alastair being led away in cuffs to be sentenced to a prison term would be any more satisfying.

He just…wants closure. Dean’s not quite sure where he’s supposed to find that, though.

At the end of the first day of the deliberation, the home phone rings and Dean answers to hear Bela’s voice.

“What is it? Have they decided?” Dean says.

“A ‘hello’ would have sufficed,” Bela says, “and no. You’d know if they had. I just wanted to let you know that the jury has officially been sequestered. They won’t be leaving their hotel or the courthouse until a decision is made.”

“How long does this shit take?” Dean asks.

“The longest jury deliberation recorded went for about four and a half months,” Bela says, “but a lot of that has to do with discretion of the judge. Sometimes juries only take minutes or hours to reach a verdict, but I figured this one would be trickier.”

“Couldn’t be open and shut, could it?” Dean sighs.

“No, Alastair’s lawyer fucked that one where the sun don’t shine,” Bela says, “She’s good, Dean. I legitimately do not know what that jury will come up with.”

“Well, fuck,” says Dean.

“Well, fuck, indeed,” agrees Bela.

And it goes on for days.

They wake up and have breakfast, happy to settle into a routine that doesn’t involve suits, intense mental preparation, and curling into Cas’ scent at night just so he knows he has a reason to survive another day. Things aren’t relaxed and nor are they good, but they’re all right. Even though the trial isn’t really at an end, part of it is, and that’s good enough to be a minor improvement.
“This is good, isn’t it?” Dean asks, “They’re talking about it, so it’s good.”

“I don’t know, Dean,” answers Cas, and Dean falls into hating this situation all over again.

Later on the same night, Dean brings Mary to the nursery to swap out her diaper. He grins down at her when she’s fresh as daisy all over again, grabbing at her tiny feet and bicycling her legs to make her cackle with laughter.

“Who’s daddy’s sweet pup?” he says, “Yeah, you know it’s you. You’ve got that look in your eye.”

Dean lifts her and spins her around for some more delighted pup laughter before he nestles her against his chest and says, “You wanna watch more Battlestar? I think you do. We should put you in jammies first, though, huh?”

Outside, the home phone rings and Dean sticks his head out of the nursery door to call, “Cas, can you grab that?”

Cas’ voice replies that he will, and Dean takes back to playing with Mary. He says, “My mom used to do this thing with my toes,” he says, “Something about piggies. I think one of them goes to the market? I’m not sure on that, though, so don’t quote me on it. Maybe I should google that so I can play with your little toes, too.”

Dean shakes his head and puts Mary back down on the changing table to procure some pajamas. He pulls a pair of footie pajamas patterned in sheep over her chubby legs and pokes her hands through the arms, zipping up the front of it.

When he walks out to the common area, Cas is leaning into the kitchen counter with the phone pressed against his ear. Dean makes a move to turn the TV on but Cas waves his hand at Dean and shakes his head.

“Alpha daddy’s doing something important,” Dean whispers to Mary, and she grabs his nose.

When Cas hangs up the phone, he looks haunted. Dean’s stomach drops at the expression. He tucks Mary closer against him and says, “Cas? What is it?”

“The jury is hung. Metatron declared a mistrial. Alastair – he’s free.”

Chapter End Notes

*A hung jury is a jury that can't agree to a verdict - it's up to the judge whether or not to declare a mistrial. A mistrial is usually determined when the jury members say something to the effect of "we're never going to agree on this."
Chapter Notes

Enormous, planet-sized warning for graphic gore (nobody you love is getting hurt), as well as Alastair being his usual self.

This chapter breaks the Cas/Dean/Cas/Dean chapter pattern and has a split POV about halfway through.

And also, a great big thanks to everybody for the support -- IYH only has a chapter left! What a crazy journey.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Track: Fight With Tools - Flobots

*The Battlefield is Everywhere*
“Ha,” Dean huffs, “Figures.”

Castiel doesn’t like the air of calm that Dean has in light of what he’s just said. Dean’s face is on a trained neutral setting, void of any sign of emotion, anything for Cas to get a read on – not that Castiel is particularly skilled in that area in the first place. He thinks about reaching out to bring Dean into an embrace, but feels as though Dean might flinch away from the touch.

“It doesn’t mean that he’s free forever, necessarily,” Castiel says, “Bela says that if she has the resources that she will be pursuing a retrial.”

“I’m not going through a second trial,” Dean deadpans, voice flat and dead.

“But –”

“I’m not putting our family through that again,” Dean snaps, “I’d rather just let the sick fuck go free than put you and Mary and Sammy through that whole freaking dog and pony show again.
You think I didn’t see you when I was up there? Sammy cried. Hell, you cried.”

“Your brother and I being moved by the horror of what you have been through does not negate our willingness to stand by your side –”

“No,” Dean interrupts, “Stop. Drop it, Cas. It’s not happening.”

Castiel watches helplessly as Dean passes Mary to his grip and then marches past them and to the front door, which he pries open and slams shut behind him. The silence that he leaves in his wake feels like frost creeping from Cas’ toes upward, making his limbs heavy and his tongue useless and his mind slow.

Mary casts Castiel a bewildered, wide-eyed look and grabs at his ear, babbling, “Mamamama.”

“Ah, little one,” Castiel says, and holds her close to him, nosing at the soft thatch of hair on her head. He rubs her back and she rests her head against his shoulder, forehead pressed up against his neck. She sticks her fist in her mouth and Castiel reaches to remove it.

“You’ll wreck your teeth if you keep doing that,” Castiel advises her, “Let’s find one of your pacifiers, hm?”

Cas walks Mary to the nursery and stoops to collect one of her pacifiers from the cabinet beneath the changing table, offering it against her tiny mouth. Mary eyes him for a moment before she takes it, but catches on quickly enough.

Out of the corner of his eye, Castiel sees movement from the nursery window and treads across the room to look. Out on the hammock, Dean is on his back with his hands folded over his stomach, rocking back and forth, a distant, pensive look on his face so clear that Castiel can see it even from the window.

How peculiar that Castiel used to watch a quiet, pregnant Dean resting on the hammock, and now, while he is no longer pregnant, he is quiet again. The weight of Mary against him reminds him just how long that he and Dean have existed as an entity together – when they met, Dean’s pregnancy was fewer months along than Mary is old now. The night that Castiel pulled over to usher a sopping-wet, naked omega into the passenger seat of his Prius took place only days under a year ago.

That year ago, Castiel submitted to the thought of life alone. He’d dreamed of pups before his life in Denver was whisked away from him. Truth be told, Castiel seldom met people in Denver, rarely dated. Being a surgeon at a high-volume hospital swallowed up most of his time and what little he had left he dedicated to helping omegas in need, a dangerous pastime deeply intertwined with his job.

He had sex, sometimes. Castiel never did when an omega was staying with him, only when he was alone. None of his bedmates clicked. Some smelled better than others, but in the end, it wasn’t right. He had to wonder at the truth of one’s mate smelling best…and here he is now, comfortable in a home as he has never been comfortable before. Because here, with Dean and Mary, does smell right. He feels safe, which perhaps an alpha shouldn’t desire feeling – but then, he’s never been quite a within-the-lines kind of alpha, has he?

“Agah?” Mary articulates, pronouncing the nonsense like a question.

“Omega daddy is okay,” Castiel says, “I think. And if he isn’t, we’ll help him be okay.”

Only then does Castiel notice the droop to Mary’s eyelids and the sleepy heave of her breathing as
she sucks on her pacifier. He pets his palm over the back of her head and says, “Of course. You must be exhausted. It’s been a long day for everybody, pups included.”

He rocks her back and forth, pacing the perimeter of the nursery before he lets out a low note, “When I find myself in times of trouble, mother – no, wait – baby Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom: let it be…let it be…”

Castiel sings through the song, stumbling a little over the verses as he tries not to smell terribly upset and jerk Mary from her sleep. He cradles her, humming and stroking over her soft hair with the pads of his fingers. Her eyes fall closed just as he sings, “And when the night is cloudy, there is still a light that shines on in me. Shine on until tomorrow; let it be.”

He ends the lullaby prematurely and lowers sleeping Mary into her crib, wrapping her up in a blanket and placing her bear closer beside her before he eases up. Castiel spares a last glance at her tiny form snuggled up in her cozy crib, little fists thrown up over her head.

“I love you, little one,” Castiel murmurs, and turns to leave the room, quietly pulling the door closed behind him.

Dean doesn’t return to the house for another half hour, and when he does, he’s chilled straight to the bone. April weather is fair during the day, but the temperature drops at night and leaves the need for blankets and one’s mate’s body heat clinging to them. Castiel doesn’t even realize that Dean has returned until a pair of arms slips around his waist from behind as he lifts a plate from the kitchen sink to transfer to the dishwasher. Dean’s hand grips his wrist and the other pulls the plate out of his clutch, sticking it back into the pile of dirty dishes below.

“Your hands are freezing,” Castiel remarks.

“Sorry,” Dean mumbles to the back of Cas’ neck, and then peppers light kisses over the skin there before he asks, “Where’s the pup?”

“Out like a light,” Castiel says, “I sang to her and replaced ‘mother’ with ‘baby’ in Let It Be. You would have been very impressed, had you been there.”

“I’m sure,” Dean dryly responds, “Hey, I’m kinda hungry. We have anything sitting around?”

“I can make some quesadillas,” suggests Castiel.

“Nah, man,” Dean says, “I don’t want you to expend the effort.”

“You’re my mate and I will expend effort wheresoever I please,” Castiel tartly replies, “Now sit down. I’m going to make you a quesadilla and you are going to enjoy it.”

Dean chuckles and lifts his hands up in defeat. He says, “All right, all right, if you insist.”

“I do insist.”

So Castiel grates cheese and arranges it with onions and jalapeños in the fold of a tortilla, cranking up the stove. The quesadilla only takes a few minutes to cook through on both sides, and the pleased look when Dean bites into it makes the small amount of effort expended entirely worth it – a sentiment that he shares with Dean, who only rolls his eyes and calls him you big alpha sap again.

They forgo the planned showing of Battlestar Galactica, weary to the bone and too tired to so much as press buttons on the DVD remote. They bumble through the steps of their nightly routine,
changing into sleep clothes, brushing teeth and washing faces before they clamber into bed and fuse to each other’s sides underneath the covers.

Despite his exhaustion, Castiel’s mind whirs on a loop of Alastair’s freedom, however temporary it may be. He fears for Dean’s safety, both physical and mental, and it makes his insides squirm like a pit of snakes.

“Cas, for fuck’s sake,” Dean says, voice sleep-heavy, “I can’t fall asleep when you smell so upset. What the hell is going on?”

Castiel exhales and replies, “It’s just – Alastair –”

“Really? Just leave it, Cas. It’s done,” Dean says. On that word, Dean pushes himself out of Castiel’s arms and onto his side of the bed, back to Cas. It feels wrong, and Castiel feels wrong, but he tries to close his eyes and make himself sleep anyway.

X

The mood of the household shifts into a heavy melancholy, in sync with the sky clouding over and rain fizzing over the quilt of mountain landscape, bathing everything in gray. When the news of the mistrial reaches Kevin, he sequesters himself in his bedroom again, and Castiel places his meals outside of his door like Dean used to when Kevin first arrived.

Mary senses the change and reacts no differently than her fathers or uncle Kevin, and fusses on a loop for hours on end, hardly sleeping and not comforted even by her bear or teething toys.

Castiel’s family reacts to the mistrial as expected: they leave. Balthazar offers sympathies and Anna hugs Castiel goodbye and instructs him to keep texting her pictures of Mary, saying that they’re the highlights of her days. Gabriel, too, leaves, although with the promise of a swift return in a week or so, along with his belongings. The prospect of Gabriel occupying the pull-out bed while he apartment hunts for a place in Denver agitates Dean even more, shifting Dean’s moroseness into irritability.

It takes days for Dean to discuss Alastair aloud again, and he only does so briefly to inform Castiel that Bela called again.

“She says the retrial can’t happen for a while, I guess,” Dean says flatly, and wraps his arms around himself despite the space heater on full blast only a few feet away, “Something about biased jurors or something. I dunno.”

On the day that the bout of rain at last lets up, Castiel takes the sun as a sign. He spends his early morning comforting his fussing pup and sipping coffee while Dean snores away for at least another couple of hours. Something about his hopeful attitude quiets Mary, and she sits well-behaved in Castiel’s lap as he browses through Yelp reviews for restaurants in Salida.

An outing will do them good, and trying something new will be even better.

“You know, the saying is that the way to an alpha’s heart is through their stomach, but I personally feel that the sentiment applies much more to omega daddy,” Castiel informs his daughter as he clicks through to the review page of a pizza place. Mary responds by waving her teething toy at Castiel and then promptly dropping it on the floor. Cas scoots the desk chair back to retrieve it and places it in Mary’s lap before he returns to scanning webpages.

“This one sounds nice,” Castiel relays to Mary, “It says ‘Excellent microbrews and delicious wood-fired pizza.’ That sounds right up omega dad’s alley, don’t you think? Perhaps Uncle Kevin
might be up for pizza, too. Why don’t we ask him?”

Cas hoists Mary up and with the movement her half-frozen teething ring falls – again – to the floor. Castiel stoops to gather it and says, “I’m told that when I give this back to you that you are learning object permanence.”

Mary swats at his face.

Cas descends the stairs and knocks at Kevin’s bedroom door.

“Who is it?” his voice calls from the other side, faint.

“Castiel and Mary,” Cas replies.

As if in agreement, Mary says, “Awah.”

A shuffle of movement later, and Kevin opens his door just a sliver. Castiel says, “It’s sunny again and I thought perhaps it might be nice to visit town and get food. There’s a pizza place in Salida –”

“Pizza?” Kevin interrupts.

“Yes,” Castiel says, “The reviewers seem fond of the ‘delicious wood-fired pizza.’”

“That sounds amazing,” Kevin says, and the door creaks open all the way. A brief smile flits to his face when he sees Mary, though her method of greeting is dropping her toy yet again. Kevin collects it this time, and places it back in her clutch.

“All right, what’s with the family meeting in the hallway?”

Cas swings around and sees Dean in the frame of their own bedroom door, hair sticking out on one side. It makes him smile.

“I was just discussing with Kevin that since the weather is nice and we all need cheering up that we should get some pizza,” Castiel says.

Dean licks his lips and gives Castiel an intense, studious look. It’s the kind of look that one has on their face before they utter a definitive no, so Cas jumps to add, “I thought we might invite Sam and Amelia.”

At that, Dean’s expression changes. They haven’t seen Sam in some time. A half-smile flickers on his face and he grabs at the back of his neck as he says, “All right…sure. I don’t wanna be pizza Scrooge.”

Dean calls Sam to extend the invitation, and from the half of the conversation that Castiel hears while hepretends not to eavesdrop suggests that Sam is relieved to hear from his brother, and even more relieved that Dean wants to get out of the house. Dean repeats several times for Sam not to worry, and Sam must assure Dean that they’ll have a good time, because Dean replies, “Yeah, it’ll be great.”

They agree to meet at five thirty at Amicas Pizza & Microbrewery, and while Kevin and Castiel are cheerful at the prospect, Dean seems still unsure. Cas kisses him and hopes that the affection will do something to help. The results are unclear.

When early evening comes around, Castiel dresses Mary in a pair of miniscule jeans over a onesie that reads Awesome Like Daddy. Dean likes it because the onesie does not specify a particular
daddy, and Castiel likes it because Dean’s okay with her spilling sauce onto it.

By the time that they arrive (pulling into the lot right up against the curb just as another car is backing out, with Dean’s subsequent, “Ha! Fuck yeah.”), Sam and Amelia are already waiting just outside of the restaurant. Sam grins when he sees them, and immediately says, “Give me my niece.”

“Jesus Christ, Sammy,” Dean laughs, “Way to make a guy feel loved,” but passes Mary over anyway.

Sam blows a raspberry at her, and Mary responds by breaking into hysterical giggles.

“Hey, you guys go in ahead,” Dean says, after a beat, “Wanna talk to Cas about something.”

Sam gives Dean a look but says, “Okay. Don’t take too long. I’m starving.”

“You’ll survive, you big baby,” Dean quips back, and Sam shifts Mary to the crook of his left arm so that he can brandish the middle finger on his right hand.

As soon as the rest of the party disappears inside Amicas, Cas asks, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothin’,” Dean replies. He leans over, pressing his nose to Castiel’s cheek, and then brushes his lips across the same space of skin before he says, “Thanks, little alpha.”

“I am not sure what I did, but you’re welcome,” Castiel responds.

They procure a large, accommodating table, where Sam already has requested a high chair and deposited Mary in it. He makes faces at her as Castiel finds his seat and scoots in to look at his menu while Dean uses the restroom. Sam drapes an arm across the back of Amelia’s chair, and she sends him a fond look before ordering a beer from their waitress.

The pizza is a revelation. Castiel silently thanks the internet for being correct, and basks in the warmth of the table, not only the physical from the hot-from-the-oven pizzas, but the warmth beyond that – the warmth in the way that Dean’s eyes crease at the corner when he smiles or laughs, or the concentrated expression Mary gives the small piece of melted cheese that Dean put in her palm.

Apparently, Mary takes the cheese as an invitation to smear grease and sauce all over her face, instead of its intended purpose.

The heaviness of the past few days seems to evaporate, and in its wake are jokes and good beer and the best company on this side of the Rockies. Even with bellies full, the dinner wouldn’t be complete without a round of dessert, which proves possibly better than the meal itself, although Dean says that they should try eating at Amicas again just to be sure. Castiel shares peanut butter mousse with Dean and dips the tip of his finger in when it’s almost gone, pressing it against Mary’s mouth.

Mary looks at Castiel as though she has seen God, and it seems cruel not to let her help finish the remains of the mousse.

“Christ, I feel like I’m about to explode,” Dean says happily, when the plates are cleared and the bill is returned with both Sam and Castiel’s credit cards (following a battle over which of them would be paying, Dean yanked the cards out of their hands, passed them to the waitress, and told her to split it before anyone could argue).
“I think I should use the restroom before we leave,” Castiel says as he tucks his credit card back into his wallet.

“Me too,” Sam says, at the same time that Kevin replies, “Same here.”

“Ehhh,” Dean says, “I’m gonna go out to the car to feed-feed Mary. I’d do it in the omega bathroom, but the joint smells like beans. Do they even serve beans here?”

Castiel shrugs and applies a kiss to Dean’s temple as they stand. He says, “Meet you in a few.”

Dean wipes what grease he can off of Mary’s face with the bottom edge of his t-shirt before he hefts her up into his arms and tells her, “We’ll just give you a bath tomorrow,” when she’s greasy even after his efforts.

He and Mary walk out with Amelia. She looks…kinda happier than she did when they first met, and the realization makes Dean feel weird – because Sammy looks a little brighter too, and he thinks that they might have done that to each other.

“So,” Dean says, when they pass through the restaurant doors, “You and Sam seem, uh. Good.”

Amelia laughs a little and nods, “We are. You know, I never – I guess, I just didn’t think I’d ever feel good again after my mate died. But surprise, I guess I do feel good. It’s weird. But it’s nice.”

“Yeah,” Dean says, “Just don’t bust him up, ’cause then I’ll have to break your nose or whatever.”

Amelia elbows him in the side and says, “Very funny. You go feed your pup before she starves to death. I’m gonna wait for the guys right here.”

Dean shakes his head and parts to round the corner of the building. He pauses to lift Mary up above his head and spin her around for some laughs before he brings her back down. This thing that Cas did – the pizza and the beer and the family – it was real nice, real good. He’s spent the days since the mistrial vacillating between feeling hollow and feeling afraid, and he can’t decide which of those was worse.

But this – this helped. The hollowness is filled with a deep sense of contentment and like five slices of pizza and some beer, and the fear feels less important. Dean knows now that his focus should be elsewhere, be on Mary and Cas and building more shit in the garage instead of lying around in bed and robotically watching episodes of *Battlestar Galactica* (which was only making him feel ever-crappier when he wasn’t enjoying them as much).

Dean hums *Ramble On* and fishes in the pocket of his jeans for his car keys.

Just as the tips of his fingers hit cool metal, he smells something strange.

Dean looks to Mary, scents the air, and frowns. The smell is metallic, sharp, and drenched in designer alpha cologne. His heart skips a beat and he looks up.

There, against the Impala, his baby, is Alastair.

This can’t be real.

Automatically, Dean pulls his hand from his pocket and curls his arm protectively around Mary, an action that only seems to pique Alastair’s interest instead of deter it. He cocks his head, leaning
casually against the side of the car and smiles directly at Mary.

“So, this is the little bastard pup.”

“Don’t call her that,” snaps Dean, “She has an alpha father.”

This is bad. This is extremely fucking insane mega-bad. Every parental instinct in his body is telling him to protect his pup, his own well-being be damned. Protectprotectprotect pumps through Dean’s body in a way that it never has before, thick and rich and torn between flight and bloodthirst.

“Ah, yes. Your mate. That’s so…quaint. Strange is the alpha that chooses damaged goods.”

“I’m not damaged!” Dean barks, “Okay, fuck. I am. But I’m not goods, you asshole. I’m a damaged fucking human being, and just because I’m an omega doesn’t make me some kind of merchandise. My worth isn’t friggin’ based on my lips or my eyelashes or my ass or whatever crazy-ass, messed-up alphas get off on. I’m worth something because I’m me.”

Alastair laughs, and the sound spears right to Dean’s core. That laughter is the same laughter that he heard in the beginning, when he tried to fight. It’s the same laughter he heard when some alpha left him broken and bleeding in a heap somewhere, right before Alastair told him, you should try harder next time.

“Your activist alpha really has done a number on you,” he remarks, “I wonder what he’d think if he saw the way that you went belly-up to please me, the way you’d present at the snap of my fingers. It was a pity to lose you, you know. A real shame you had to leave for, well. That.” he flicks his eyes to Mary, who makes a soft noise.

Dean takes a step back and says, “You fucking touch her and you’re dead. I will rip your fucking balls out and feed them to you.”

“In that case, you would have learned from the best,” Alastair jests.

Before Dean can snap back, there’s a whoosh of movement and a thunderous growl, something so deep and angry that it would terrify him if he didn’t know who the growl belonged to.

“Cas –”

Castiel bolts in front of Dean and tackles Alastair. Their bodies collapse, tangled, into the empty parking space alongside the Impala. Castiel slams Alastair’s head back on the tarmac and his skull connects with a crack only instants before Cas slams his fist into Alastair’s face.

“You son of a bitch,” he shouts, voice echoing in the space of the lot, “Don’t you fucking threaten my mate, and don’t you lay a goddamn finger on my pup.”

“Oh, she’s your pup now –”

Castiel sends his fist up into Alastair’s jaw. He bites out, “The law won’t deal with you? Fine. Then I will. You caused my mate more pain than anybody should see in a hundred lifetimes and I swear I will make you feel every last thing that he did.”

Mary begins to sob, rattled by the states of her fathers. Dean clutches her closer to him and stumbles back, watching Cas typical iron grasp on his self-control shatter into a billion pieces in the name of protecting his family. It's an alpha instinct, they say, but as Dean watches Alastair and Cas tangled on the tarmac, he feels a prickle up against his neck - raw, powerful need to defend.
That is his mate, and Alastair insulted his pup, against his car. This is beyond a past between them. It’s personal.

“Holy crap.”

Dean turns and sees Sam and Amelia, and Kevin, who hides behind Amelia’s shoulder, good eye wide with terror. It’s terror that Dean hasn’t seen since he and Kevin were locked up together, since they watched each other being yanked from their mattresses to take whatever was dealt to them and since they watched each other being tossed back behind bars like garbage.

Behind him, Cas makes a strangled noise. Dean shifts again and sees Cas on the ground and Alastair kneeling beside him, blood running from his nose and forehead. Dean’s lungs seize when Alastair surges to grab at Cas – only a second growl rumbles along and in a blink Sam throws Alastair off of Castiel. Something in Alastair’s body breaks, but Dean can’t see past his brother to figure out what it is.

Alastair laughs. It’s a blood-garbled, ugly noise.

And then Dean feels it.

He feels fury. He doesn’t feel empty or scared, but enraged. His whole body feels like it’s filled with lightning, hot and snapping through him in jagged, splitting cracks. He turns to Amelia and Kevin and says –

“Take her someplace safe.”

– and deposits Mary into Kevin’s arms before he steps forward, off of the curb and into the parking space with three furious, growling, spitting alphas.

“Cas, Sammy,” Dean says, “Back off.”

Both of them stop immediately. Sam sports a split lip and Castiel looks like he’ll have a hell of a shiner on him tomorrow, but neither of them is in the broken shape that Alastair is in. He sits crumpled and laughing at Dean’s boots, blood pouring from his head, slithering over his neck and soaking into the ground.

“My little protégé,” Alastair grins, his white teeth bright red with blood, “I came here to thank you. I never did get a chance at the trial – ugly business, you know – but thank you. Your ass raked in tens of thousands – no, hundreds of thousands of dollars and my God, you were beautiful at the end. So willing, so broken –”

Dean surges forward and hauls Alastair up by the red-soaked collar of his shirt, yanking him so hard that that they stumble together an entire one hundred and eighty degrees, Dean facing his brother and his mate. He throws Alastair’s head against the curb, and again there is a crack, a crunch.

Dean rests his boot on Alastair’s skull.

Alastair just chuckles, “A bitch like you couldn’t hurt me.”

Everything goes white as manic, volatile feeling flows like liquid lava in his veins.

He lifts his foot, and he stomps down. Dean stomps down on Alastair’s head as hard as he can, pouring every ounce of fear, of pain, of hatred – every last terror that he felt – into the power of his leg. At the contact, Alastair’s bones make a brittle, wet splintering noise.
“Well, this bitch just did,” he says.

The lump of blood and bone at Dean’s feet makes him sway on his feet. Sam steps forward to steady him with a hand on Dean’s shoulder. Cas ducks down and takes Alastair’s wrist in hand, as though his state isn’t obvious from the fucking brain on Dean’s shoe.

“He has no pulse,” Castiel states, uselessly.

Dean sets his jaw and says, “Good.”

It takes several minutes for Dean to come down from the soaring adrenaline. When the inferno of energy starts to ebb, he sees that they aren’t alone. A crowd has formed around them, people with hands to their mouths or phones out, recording it all. Anxiety washes over him in waves. What did he do? He feels sick to his stomach and weak in the legs and goddamnit, he isn't supposed to be this pathetic. He was protecting his family, protecting himself.

When red and blue light flashes in Dean’s vision, he thinks he’s hallucinating. It’s only when he sees Jo rushing toward him that it strikes him – he just killed a man. He killed Alastair Locke, and he doesn’t feel a goddamn thing. He shivers and curls into himself, wrapping his arms around his body. He barely registers Cas standing at his side.

“Dean, what happened?” Jo asks, “God, are you okay?”

“He was on my freaking car,” Dean says, “He called my pup a bastard. He told me I was damaged goods, except he’s the fucking one that damaged me for seven years and nobody wanted to do a goddamn thing about –”

“Dean, Dean,” She says, stopping him with a hand on his chest, “It’s okay. Well, no, it's kind of not. But we'll make it okay.”

Dean watches as Victor appears from behind Jo and surveys the mess of blood and flesh dead against the curb. Victor remarks, “Well, that’s unfortunate.”

“What?” Dean manages.

“He threatened your pup, didn’t he?” Victor says, lifting a single brow at Dean.

“…Yeah,” Dean says.

Victor turns his attention to Cas and says, “And he threatened your mate, right?”

“Yes, he did, because nobody in this goddamn county does their job and I am absolutely –”

“Cas, baby,” Dean says softly.

Castiel cuts off.

“Seems to me like you two were well within your rights,” Victor goes on, “Truth be told, I don’t think anybody gives a damn. I should probably still write you a ticket, but I’ll note what happened and have a word with the ADA. And I’ll wanna ask you a couple questions now, but we'll get your statements tomorrow.”

“That’s it?” Dean says. He's shaking as he tucks himself against Castiel, leaning into his warmth. His head starts to swim, and he only barely registers Victor’s words as he speaks.

Victor shrugs, “You know, I like abiding the law. I follow it to the letter. But the thing is,
sometimes folks slip between the cracks, folks that’re usually old, white alphas stirrin’ up trouble ‘cause they’re scared that the world ain’t the same as it was in 1956. Those alphas piss me off. This one – I don’t know that I have the words to describe this one. The system’s supposed to work, but I’m not stupid. It didn’t work for you. Doesn’t work for a lot of folks, because the damn thing’s tilted on its axis. From preliminary scenting of the area, we think that Alastair’s been following you.”

"He - what?" A deep, reverberating growl rumbles low in Castiel's chest.

"Easy there, alpha," Victor says, "I have a couple of guys following the scent trail back. They said they'd call me if anything stands out, and they haven't called yet. Could just be that he saw your car and thought he'd antagonize you, but your scents and his scent follow the same path almost exactly. We'll let you know what we find. In any case, I think this is gonna turn out to be a classic pup protection case. Can you describe what happened?"

"I smelled Dean when I was in the restroom," Castiel says, "he was afraid and on the defense so I just - ran to him. I didn't think. I just attacked. Sam followed me and I didn't...I didn't...I couldn't think. It was like..."

"A haze?" suggests Victor.

"Yes," Castiel says.

"That's not surprising," he replies, "A lot of alphas report feeling clouded and focused only on the threat to their family. What about you, Dean? You can be brief. We'll get your official statements on paper tomorrow."

Dean doesn't register the question until Castiel says, "Dean?"

"Uh," he says, "I was gonna take Mary out the car to feed her, and Alastair was right there. I-I don't know. Son of a bitch had his eyes on Mary and I, uh. I froze up. I'm kinda dazed." The words feel heavy as they roll off his tongue and his muscles feel like he just ran a marathon. Even surrounded by Cas' scent and body heat he feels wrong, like he's a damn action figure in Barbie's Dreamhouse, like he doesn't match. Like nothing matches.

"All right," Victor says, "That's good enough for now. I'll be in touch."

“What about our clothes?” Castiel asks, “Aren’t they evidence?”

“I think we’ve pretty much covered what happened here,” Victor says, “This one slithered out of our grip and right into the wolf’s mouth.”

After that, everything starts to blur and blend and twist together. Dean knows that Cas wraps his arm around his shoulders, and that he pulls Dean against him and kisses his head, and he knows somewhere along the line they acquired a blanket from a firefighter. Victor hands Cas a slip of yellow paper, and Dean hands Cas the keys to the Impala. Sam touches his hand to Dean's shoulder and says that he'll be there if Dean needs it. Dean tells him to go home.

He snaps back to reality like a rubber band in the Impala. They’re not in town anymore, but on the dirt road that crawls through the mountains to their home. God, home. That’s just what Dean needs. He thinks that he’s probably tired, but instead of weariness he feels a buzz of energy. His brain stutters and doesn't seem to work right, doesn't register that he should be exhausted, or maybe guilty, or maybe relieved. Dean is none of those things.

He doesn't know what he is.
“Fuck,” he states.

“Yes,” agrees Castiel.

When Cas pulls up to their house, they have to wake Kevin, who’s fallen asleep against Mary’s seat, and extract Mary where she has fallen asleep in the seat, worn out from the chaos. Dean carries her inside and tucks her directly into her crib, swaddled in blankets.

Castiel waits for him just outside the door.

“I don’t think I can sleep,” Dean says.

“Hm,” Cas says, “We should shower.”

So they end up under the spray of the shower nozzle, washing until the water runs from pink to clear and they no longer reek so heavily of anger and gore and alpha. Instead of toweling dry, Dean backs Cas against the bed, wet and slippery and naked, and climbs on top of him. They kiss like that, up against one another in a heated mass of limbs, tongues pressing together, teeth nipping and moans falling out from their lips.

But when Dean moves back to grasp Cas’ erection and sink back on it, Cas says, “Wait,” and stops Dean with a palm to the shoulder.

“What?”

“There’s something I wanted to ask you. I’ve been meaning to for a while, now.”

“Well, shoot.”

“I wondered if you would fuck me,” Castiel says, plainly.

He can’t mean – but he does, doesn’t he? Dean’s brows sweep together and he tries to collect himself, managing only an ineloquent, “You want me inside you.” It comes out as a statement instead of the question that he intends it to be.

“Yes.”

“You sure? I’ve never done that with an alpha – only other omegas –”

“Shh,” Castiel says. He scoots back on the mattress and pulls open the drawer on his nightstand. He throws something at Dean and Dean catches it, one-handed.

A bottle of synthetic slick.

Dean glances from the bottle to Cas, and from there, they’re through with questions. Cas isn’t a creature of impulse as alphas are portrayed to be – he’s methodical and thoughtful and level-headed, and he wouldn’t suggest something like this if he hadn’t thought all the way through it.

“I’ve had another alpha do this,” Castiel whispers.

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” Cas says, “You have to coat your fingers – and don’t be stingy – and you have to open me up. I don’t ease open like you.”

Cas smiles at that, and Dean smiles back. He pops open the cap of the synthetic slick and pours it
out over his hand. It smells a little odd, sweet, but rubbery. Dean puts it out of his mind as he edges up toward Cas, who licks his lips and spreads his legs apart. Cas doesn’t actually look that different than an omega at first glance, just that he doesn’t have slick leaking over his ass and thighs like Dean has right now. Dean reaches to brush his fingers over Cas’ hole, the ring of puckered, pink muscle, and Cas lets out a groan.

Dean presses in a single finger up to the first knuckle, and Cas complains, “I’m not that delicate, Dean.”

“Everyone’s a critic,” Dean says, and pushes the rest of his finger inside Castiel. In slow, unpracticed strokes, Dean works his finger in and out. But then, he brushes against something that makes Cas arch right off the mattress and let out a gasp, and he realizes –

“Hey, I thought that was an omega thing,” he says.

“No,” Cas snarks back, “The prostate is universal across males.”

“Man, if I had known that earlier, I woulda done this ages ago,” Dean says, and presses into it again.

Castiel whimpers. That’s when Dean starts to pick up on the rhythm of things, strumming his fingers inside Cas, working him open one digit at a time until he looks like he could take Dean inside him with ease.

But when Dean bites his tongue and moves up to mount him, Cas says, “Slick your cock.”

Dean makes a face and replies, “Bossy fuckin’ alpha,” although it’s in good humor. He reaches for the bottle and makes himself as slippery as he thinks he’ll need to be, careful not to be stingy, as Cas warned. Then, at last, Dean cups his hands under Cas’ knees and pushes them apart, spread wide enough for Dean to wedge into the space between them. He grips his cock in his hand and Cas’ thigh with his other.

When he starts to press in, Cas lets out an inhuman whine. He begs, “Please.”

There is something so sexy about this, about an alpha spread out and slicked up and flushed with need, ready to take Dean into him – this is the actual nexus of sexy, everything that every debauched dream should feature. When Dean finally presses in to the hilt, Castiel throws his head back against the pillows.

“Yes,” he says, “Yes, good. More, please.”

“That is the politest request to be fucked that I have ever heard.”

Cas levels narrowed eyes at Dean and says, “Damn it, Dean, will you move your omega ass and fuck me already?”

Dean laughs, loud and lust-drunk, and says, “Yes, sir.”

He draws out of Cas and then thrusts back in, picking up an old beat that his body hasn’t quite forgotten. Having Cas tight around him has Dean’s head spinning, his limbs melting into butter and his breath coming quick and heavy. He wants more, and starts driving into Cas at a faster pace, taking him harder, rougher.

Cas is lost to it. He’s groaning and pleading and clawing at the sheets, lifting his hips to meet each roll of Dean’s hips.
Dean watches in fascination as he sees Cas’ knot swell against his belly, almost purple with the need for release. He should – yeah, he should touch it. Dean reaches between them and grips Cas’ cock, an action that earns him a keening sound and an immediate, desperate thrust of Cas’ erection into his fist.

Dean thinks he might be smiling as he fucks into Cas and works his hand over Cas’ knot and up to the head of his cock, thumbing along the tip.

Something about that must work, because Cas spears himself onto Dean like a man possessed and then comes fucking fireworks all over his abdomen. Jesus Christ, how do teenage alphas ever clean up after jerking off? Because that is a lot of –

“Oh, shit,” Dean says, and he goes marvelously limp in Cas’ arms as he comes inside his alpha. He pulls Cas into a bruising kiss, which Cas takes as an invitation to coil his arms around Dean and press their tongues together as Dean softens inside him.

It’s weird how easily they pull apart. If Cas hadn’t asked Dean to do this, they’d probably end up falling asleep tied together, too beat to stay up until Cas’ knot goes down. Cas curls his arm around Dean and brings him in to kiss his forehead, nuzzling lazily before he says, “I liked that very much.”

“Oh?” Dean says, “We should do it again sometime.”

The weight of sleep starts to cloud Dean’s head as he pants against Cas’ side. Vaguely, he’s aware of his own voice mumbling, “Love you.”

And Cas’ voice saying back, “I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

In this ‘verse, there are laws in place that protect people protecting their mates and their pups. Sometimes that works out for the good, and sometimes it helps out shitty people. In this case, it did some good.

***also Alastair’s death is supposed to be morally ambiguous, so if you don't feel quite right about it, don't worry. It will be addressed!
Where Do We Begin?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ending Credits: One Foot in Front of the Other – Emilie Autumn

Where Do We Begin?

“The cops have been in and out of the house for a few days,” Dean says, and presses the edge of his fingernail into the customary Styrofoam cup of hot cocoa that Benny offers at their appointments. He shifts on Benny’s loveseat, feet kicked up over the arm, and goes on, “Victor had to get our statements. He says we’re not getting arrested but it just feels like the possibility’s still there, you know?”

“And about what happened,” Benny says, “Alastair’s death. That’s not something light, Dean. You took a man’s life. I’m not saying it wasn’t absolutely justified, but I am saying that it’s not something that you can just move past. There are emotions rooted in what happened, and I want you to tell me about them.”

Dean doesn’t answer right away. He tips what remains of the cocoa down his throat. It burns like acid in his stomach, and he keeps fiddling with the cup, tearing at the rim. Benny’s right. A tangle of emotions squirms through him, but hell if he knows what he’s supposed to make of it.

“Thing is,” Dean finally says, “I don’t know what I’m feeling about what happened. I’m a mess, man, even if I know that son of a bitch isn’t around to fuck me up anymore. Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad he’s gone…but for a long-ass time, Alastair was the only person that spoke to me. I guess outside of the alpha clients. Not that they said much.”

Dean shifts to sit up, uncomfortable now in his own skin. He thinks about throwing the cup away, but it’s the only thing keeping him from biting up his fingernails the way he’s been doing since he stomped Alastair’s head into the curb outside of the pizza parlor.

“Alastair was a mean son of a gun,” Dean says, “but sometimes he was all I had.”

Dean isn’t sure when that changed. Maybe it started in earnest when Kevin came and got locked up in the compound, and maybe getting knocked up with Mary catalyzed it.

“And brother, that’s okay. It ain’t easy to fight that.”

The Styrofoam cup crumples in Dean’s clenched fist. He stares down at the floor and asks, “I have a mate, a pup. Why aren’t they enough to fix me?”

“Because love don’t fix everything,” Benny replies, “and that’s okay, too. You think about it – you’ve only known your mate for a year. Alastair, you knew the man for seven years. Finding a mate and starting a family isn’t a magic cure-all for the suffering that you’ve done. It takes real work to dig yourself outta the place you’ve been for so dang long.”

“What if I don’t have it in me to do any digging?”

Benny levels a stare at Dean and folds his hands in his lap. He says, “I think you know that’s a pail and a half of crap. Hell, look at how far you’ve come already. You told me that when Castiel picked you up off the side of the road, you were scared so straight that you didn’t even talk, and
that you just guessed that he wanted you around just to knot you. And how do you think Cas feels about you now?"

“He loves me,” Dean gruffly says.

“Exactly. And just in the time that we’ve been talking, you’ve kept so steady. Through all a’ the bullshit that you’ve been going through these past couple of months, you stuck it out,” Benny says, and then glances up at the clock, “Looks like our time is up, but I want you to keep practicing the breathing exercises we discussed when you feel an episode coming on. All right?”

“Yeah, all right,” Dean says, and stands up. He tosses the crushed cup into the plastic trashcan beside the door to Benny’s office, and lets Benny walk him out to the lobby.

There, Benny gives him a hearty pat on the back and says, “You take care, brother.”

“Same to you, man,” Dean replies.

The drive home by himself is cathartic, the soft roll of guitar riffs stringed together filling the interior of the Impala while gentle rainfall crawls over the windshield. With each stroke of the windshield wipers he can see that the mountains are getting greener again, that the wildflowers will start to come in droves the way that they did just after Cas brought him home for the first time.

Benny’s right. Things are way friggin’ different than they used to be. Hell, even breaking outdoors was a shock initially; the scents surrounded Dean on every side, old scents that he knew but hadn’t smelled in years. Rain. Wet soil. Tree sap.

Home…that was even stranger. He remembers how weird he felt about feeling safe enveloped in Cas’ scent and being scared that Cas would throw him and Mary out on their asses when Dean stopped being amusing.

All that strangeness, all that fear, all the anger and all of the nightmares – they all happened because of one man. And Dean killed that man. He’s gone. Forever. There’s no more Alastair, no more looking over his shoulder and praying that he wouldn’t be found and pulled back into the compound just as he found something like happiness.

Talking to Benny lifted the heaviness on his shoulders, though only by a little. As soon as Dean woke on the morning after Alastair’s death, what he had done sunk in. Without adrenaline and impulse and the instinct to protect his family flushing through his body, he wondered if he’d done something terrible that he’d come to regret. Wondering shifted to fear when Victor knocked on the door and asked for a statement, but a statement was all that happened.

He feels like he’s standing on the edge of some cliff with one big question pounding through his brain.

Well now what?

He’s spent so much time fighting that he doesn’t know another way to live.

Dean tries to shake the cycle of thoughts from his mind as he drives along the dirt road up to the house, but fails miserably. By the time that he parks the Impala outside of the house, he feels weird all over again – not good or bad, just kind of itchy all over and like something just isn’t quite right.

When Dean opens the door, damp from the drizzle, he sees Cas and Mary sprawled out on the living room floor, furniture pushed back to make way for some kind of nest of blankets and pillows. It looks damn nice, cozy and inviting. Dean kicks off his boots and sheds his coat, leaving
both on the floor, and crawls up alongside his mate and little Mary, where Cas is speaking to her as though she’s an adult instead of puppy-talking like most normal-ass parents do.

Castiel turns his head and brings Dean in for a kiss.

“How did it go?”

“Good, I think,” Dean says.

Cas lowers Mary so that she rests belly-down on his chest. She babbles something at them and Castiel says, “Yes, I see your perspective now. Very insightful,” but then turns his face to Dean, with his old, narrow-eyed stare that makes Dean feel like he’s being looked at through a microscope. Cas asks, “How are you feeling?”

Dean breaks his gaze and stares up at the ceiling before he answers: “Honestly, I don’t know.”

X

“Dean!” Kevin says.

Dean blinks back from the television and says, “What?”

“Your pup is trying to go up the stairs again,” Kevin says.

“Aw, Jesus,” Dean mutters, and gets up off of the couch.

He finds Mary two steps up on her way to the study. At a mobile nine months, she’s more trouble than she’s ever been before. The crawling makes it easy for her to get into shit everywhere, the first event having been Mary’s daring escape from her blanket in the living room to the master bathroom, where she unrolled an entire thing of toilet paper and played in it with unadulterated glee. Who knew that toilet paper and unloading the DVD shelves to chew on the cases could be so fun?

“Hey, you,” Dean says, and plucks her off of the stairs. She makes a whining noise, to which he responds, “Yeah, no. Remember last time you crawled up there?” Mary managed to make it halfway through the second section of the staircase, only to realize that she didn’t know how to crawl back down, and promptly started to cry.

Dean leans down to kiss her chubby cheek and hefts her back over to the living room, where he swears he heard the news anchor on TV the name Lucifer Novak.

Turns out avoiding his work on the table that Bobby and Ellen asked him to build for them to channel surf may have been a good decision. He parks his ass back down on the couch, this time with Mary in his arms so that she’s snuggled against him and out of trouble. She reaches up to grab at him with her tiny, fat hands, but Dean is occupied.

“Up Next: Remember Lucifer Novak? He’s free again! More after the commercial break.”

Dean twists around to call to Cas up in the kitchen, “Hey, you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Castiel says back, but doesn’t turn around. He has his heart set on making some kind of elaborate meal that they’ve never tried in one of his weirder-looking cookbooks. It has freaking squash in it.

“Your brother’s on the news,” Dean says back.
Cas does pay attention then, putting down his kitchen knife and wiping his hands on the front of his t-shirt before he steps down into the living room and hovers over Dean’s shoulder. He says, “This is an advertisement for shaving cream, and I don’t see any of my brothers anywhere.”

“It’s a commercial break, dummy,” Dean says, “Just wait a second.”

The TV cycles through a couple more ads before the made-up face of the news anchor splashes across the screen. She says, “Today we received confirmation that Lucifer Novak, after being arrested and charged with solicitation of a prostitute, is back out on the street again. Just months ago, the allegations that lawyer Elle Abaddon made in the courtroom during Alastair Locke’s trial could not be confirmed due to insufficient evidence, and all charges were dropped but one. Almost four months later, and prison staff and police say that Novak is a model prisoner.”

A police man appears on screen and says, “He’s done his time. We have him on parole and under watch, but honestly, I don’t think the man is dangerous.”

Dean glances back. A blank expression graces Cas’ face, one that has Dean asking, “Hey, what’s on your mind?”

“Lucifer is skilled at slipping out of trouble,” is all that Cas replies at first, but then adds, “but I don’t think that he isn’t going to bother us. He’s out for himself, not cruel for the fun of it, like Alastair. You should put on a movie.”

Dean takes the hint and picks out Earth Girls Are Easy, because he’s in the mood for something lighthearted that doesn’t require him to think. He lets Mary back down on the ground but keeps a trained eye on her this time around, until it’s time for them to flick the television off and move to the kitchen table for Cas’ experimental dinner.

Dean slides Mary into her highchair and rummages in the cabinet drawers to find her a clean bib, fastening it around her neck. She casts him an offended look and pulls at the bib with a chubby hand, unable to undo the velcro and take it off.

Cas serves Mary first, doling out some soft-looking cooked vegetables onto her highchair tray. She picks up a piece of squash and stares at it before sticking it in her mouth.

The food doesn’t turn out to be as crappy as Dean thought it was gonna be. It’s not his ideal meal. He still much prefers the meat and potatoes kind of dinner, the type of food that’ll sit on your stomach and make you feel full and sleepy and satisfied. But it doesn’t taste half-bad, and he thinks it makes Cas happy to see Dean eat it. And if there’s one thing that Dean likes, it’s making Cas happy.

“It’s really good,” Kevin says, after swallowing a bite, “Thanks for cooking, Cas.”

“My pleasure.”

Kevin shifts the food around on his plate with his fork. He has a look on his face, the one he gets when he has something weighing on his mind. Sometimes Dean asks about it, but Kevin doesn’t really like to speak up when he’s feeling something – he just likes to work it out for himself.

“I’ve been thinking,” Kevin says. He scratches the back of his neck.

“Yeah? ‘Bout what?” asks Dean.

“I mean…it’s just that I’m kind of cooped up in the house all day and I guess maybe I would have to borrow somebody’s car but I thought – I thought maybe I could get a job.”
“No shit,” Dean says. He sets his fork down and asks, “You really good on doing that?”

“I think so,” Kevin says, “Maybe not someplace loud. Or like. That one restaurant where the omegas wear booty shorts and serve chicken wings to greasy alphas.” Wet Willy’s. Classy establishment.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea for you to have a job,” Castiel says, “And I’d like to extend an offer for a job at the clinic. I know it won’t be running for another month, but –”

“You’d let me work at the clinic?” Kevin says.

“Well, it would be mainly administrative work,” Castiel replies, “Data entry and possibly front desk attendance for the first few weeks.”

Kevin is quiet for a moment. He slides his gaze from Cas to Dean and back again, folding his hands in his lap before he says, “I’d love that.”

“I don’t want you to feel pressured if you don’t think that you would like the job,” Castiel says.

“No, no,” responds Kevin, “I think it would be perfect. I can’t believe – just. Thank you, Cas. This, uh. It means a lot to me, you know? I think maybe someday I’ll get a place of my own and everything and I know I’d need a job for that too. I mean, I don’t want to leave now. I like it here. It’s safe. But I think maybe I could get used to being out more on my own.”

“And you would always have me there while you work,” Castiel mentions.

A ghost of a smile touches Kevin’s lips and he agrees, “Yeah. That’ll be good.”

From her highchair, Mary makes some kind of unholy screeching noise and bangs her fists on the highchair tray, smearing some of the squash around on it. Dean laughs and reaches over to ruffle up her soft hair and say, “Let Uncle Kevin have his moment, sweet girl,” before he leans over and kisses her forehead, where she has another smear of a different, unidentified vegetable on her skin.

Man, things are really looking up around here. The look that Cas got on his face when the restoration of his medical license was officially approved will count among Dean’s favorite memories for the rest of his life. Castiel had hugged him so tight that he almost couldn’t breathe from the vice grip of overjoyed alpha strength. The victory sex later will also count in favorite memories, although perhaps in a more private file in Dean’s mind.

Cas has done so much to get his career up and running again. They took out a loan to renovate the empty unit next to Benny’s office, making a convenient location for medical care both mental and physical. It’s been a hell of an effort, especially since Dean didn’t want to hire any damn contractors and just wanted to do it himself (though he did enlist the help of trusted-friends-but-also-Gabriel). It looks amazing on the inside now, just needs the finishing touches and they’ll be ready to go.

“You look like you’re thinking about something,” remarks Cas, “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothin’,” Dean says, “Just proud of you, is all.”

Cas tilts his head and smiles a crooked, flattered smile. He replies, “I am proud of you, too.”

Dean’s not sure why Castiel is proud of him. He’s still a hot mess, and he still has to see Benny to keep himself together, although their appointments have gone down to one every two weeks instead of weekly visits. Sometimes, he still has nightmares. Sometimes he has to go out to the
hammock and sit by himself so he doesn’t get so angry that he blows a gasket. There are days that he feels like he's in a sinking rowboat in the middle of sea with no way to bail himself out, and there are days he has to drag himself through the hours and count the things that matter, has to think of his little girl and his mate, to him just so he'll make it to the next dawn alive. He has to remind himself sometimes that he isn't living a nightmare anymore, even if he'll never forget that he did.

But then, he’s not all bad. Hell, after he made that damn desk for Sammy’s new fancy lawyer office, Dean’s got money coming out of his ears from people wanting furniture made by his hand. He was good before, but all this practice has made him even better. He actually likes what he can make, and it’s crazy.

Then again – maybe Cas’ pride isn’t because of any of that. Maybe Cas is proud of him just because he’s Dean. He’s himself, and maybe that is good enough.

X

“You're taking too damn long,” complains Dean. Christ, he knows this is a big moment for Cas, but he also knows that no matter what Cas does, his hair just isn’t going to sit right. He has chronic bedhead, and he should come to accept that.

“Just another minute,” Castiel calls back from the bathroom, “Take Mary out to the car. I’ll be there shortly.”

“If you say so,” mutters Dean, but he heaves Mary up and heads for the front door. If Cas doesn’t freaking get on it, then they’re going to be late for their own clinic opening, and wouldn’t that be just like them?

At least Mary looks like a million bucks. Cas brought home some superhero fabric from the craft store in Salida, some pink stuff with lady superheroes splashed across it – Wonder Woman, Supergirl, Batgirl – and made Mary’s dress for the official clinic opening. How Cas has time to sew is kind of baffling, since he pulls shit like picking over his appearance about two seconds before they need to leave. Hell, Kevin’s already waiting out by the car.

“All right, sweetheart,” Dean says, and opens the back door on the Impala, “Let’s get you into the car.”

“Car!”

Dean snaps his attention back from the car seat to his daughter.

“Wait. What? Say it again. What’s this?” he taps his finger against the Impala.

“Car,” she replies, with the kind of expression on her face that says duh, Dad.

“Holy crap,” Dean says, “We’ve gotta get alpha daddy out here to hear this. Watch the car, Kevin.”

“Car,” says Mary.

Dean jogs back to the front door and says, “Come on, Cas! Mary just said her first word and you missed it because you’re preening in the mirror.”

Cas pokes his head out of the master bedroom and scowls, “I am not preening. And Mary did not say her first word.”
“She sure as shit did,” Dean says, “Come on. Get your alpha ass out here.”

Cas finally gets his butt in gear and follows Dean outside, locking the front door behind himself. At the side of the Impala, Dean stops Cas with a jerk of his hand and bounces Mary in the crook of his arm before he asks, “What’s this, Mary?” and runs his fingers across the top of the Impala.

Mary smiles and says, “Car.”

“See,” Dean says.

When he turns around, Cas has a silly smile on his face. He says, “Her first word is ‘car.’ And here I had been thinking that it would be ‘fuck’ or ‘pie.’”

Dean shoves at Cas and says, “Ha ha, you’re hilarious.”

“Car!”

“That’s right, sweetheart, we do need to get in the car,” Dean says.

At last, he loads her into her car seat beside Kevin and buckles her in before rounding the Impala to the driver’s seat. He tells Cas that he can pick the music – but only for today, since it’s a big day for him. Castiel chooses the classic rock station anyway, and Dean settles into the seat for the drive, pleased.

When they arrive at the clinic, pretty much everyone they invited already loiters in the parking lot – Sam and Amelia, Benny with his mate and pup, Jo and Charlie (reportedly considering getting mated), Bobby and Ellen, and damn, even Gabriel is there, in his dinky little beater car that he bought at a used lot a month or so back.

“Your brother’s on time,” Dean says, “That’s weird.”

Gabriel’s transition from spoiled trust fund child to self-sufficient adult has gone more smoothly than Dean expected it would. He only ended up crashing on their couch for a handful of weeks before he secured a job as a cook at the Hammond’s Candy Factory, and shortly thereafter found a tiny apartment that he shares with a couple of sketchy roommates.

Cas says Gabriel is happier than he’s ever been, though, so that’s gotta count for something.

“No, I told him that the opening was an hour earlier than it actually was,” Castiel replies, “and it appears that it worked out exactly as I meant it to.”

Dean parks the car and they pile out, Mary immediately reaching for Gabriel, who makes an ugly face that has her shrieking with laughter. Organizing themselves outside is a task, with the clinic on the second floor of the building. Dean stands next to Cas and can’t wipe the grin off of his face when Cas dips into his suit pocket and extracts a crumpled sheet of notebook paper.

He frowns at the scribble of his handwriting on it, and then sticks the paper back in his pocket. He says, “Thank you all for coming. I had some words prepared but they seem silly now, so I’ll just say that the past year and a half has been a rollercoaster of a ride. Meeting Dean changed my life, and when I thought that I would never again work in my field, we’re standing now in front of the brand new Novak-Winchester Clinic, where I’ll be able to help serve people as I served before. I am flattered that so many people came to be here with us for this. So, ah. Let’s…go see it.”

Dean give a little huff of laughter before they lead the party through the building’s back door and up the familiar set of stairs. Now beside Benny’s office, the door with the blank, faded space from
an old nameplate has a shiny new one: Novak-Winchester Clinic: Quality Medical Care.

Inside, the joint is fucking gorgeous. They painted the interior deep gray-blue, and Dean made the front desk and artwork himself – the latter being meticulously carved wood pieces inlaid with metal and found items. He wouldn’t call himself an artist, but he does think that the things he made look pretty damn good.

There’s a waiting area with a corner set up for kids, stacked with toys and painted to look like the Denver skyline (Gabriel’s doing). Hell, it actually looks like the real McCoy, like a place that people might actually go to get treatment.

Shit. It’s awesome.

Dean glances over at Cas and his heart skips a beat. His alpha is watery-eyed and stricken-looking, even though he’s seen the finished product before. Maybe it’s ‘cause it’s open now, ‘cause they made his dream real. He reaches over and rubs between Cas’ shoulder blades, asking, “Hey, you feelin’ okay, little alpha?”

“I am… I am very good,” Cas answers, but his watery eyes go straight to leaking eyes, “I apologize. I just didn’t know that it could be like this. I am so happy.”

Cas wipes his face on the sleeve of his suit coat. In Dean’s arms, Mary reaches out, looking bewildered, and says, “Da?”

A grin splits Cas’ face wide open and he holds out his arms to take her. He lifts Mary up in the air. Mary squirms and laughs, and Dean laughs, too.

“You know what?” Dean says, a sensation like fizzy champagne bubbles crackling in his gut and head and limbs, “Me too…I’m happy too.”

X

Two Years Later

His sore ass wakes him up. Dean shifts with a moan of complaint, and finds his entire right side cold. Freaking Cas, always rolling off to the edge of the mattress. Dean scoots forward to curl into Castiel’s warmth, pressing himself up against his back as he sleeps, his chest moving up and down with contented, long breaths.

That’s when Dean notices it: A weird, sweet smell.

Did they – nah, it couldn’t be.

But still.

Dean pushes back away from Cas, who grunts, and presses his nose against his arm. It could be him. Just in case, he lifts his arm up and gives the pit the ol’ smell test.

“Dean, stop moving around,” Castiel groans, “I am trying to sleep.”

“Cas,” Dean says.

“I am not kidding –”

“Cas, shut up,” Dean says, and grabs Castiel’s shoulder, shaking him, “You smell that?”
Cas makes another frustrated noise, but pushes himself up into a sitting position. His hair is everywhere, sticking straight up on one half of his head, and he’s got that scowl on his face that he’ll get if he thinks he’s been disturbed without a good reason.

But then his expression shifts, jaw going slack and lips parting. He stammers out, “You – you smell wonderful. You – you’re?”

Dean chuckles and rubs at his belly, “Looks like last night worked out, huh? Say hello to pup number two.”

Cas’ eyes crinkle at the corners and he shifts back down to wrap his arms around Dean and press his nose into his stomach.

Castiel applies a tiny kiss there and says, “Hello.”

The End

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everybody so much for your support while I wrote this. I had no idea that it would end up being such a hit, and I’m amazed that so many people commented/gave kudos/read this fic in the first place. Though this is the last chapter in the fic, I’ll have some timestamps eventually for the ’verse.

If you’re interested, my tumblr is scarlettofletters.tumblr.

And thank you all again, so much. This wouldn’t have been the same without you!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!